NATHANIEL
RACKOWE:
THE SHAPE
OF A CITY
LETTTIA
BEIRUT
27 JUNE–
25 AUGUST
2018

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Each work in *The Shape of a City*, Nathaniel Rackowe's exhibition at Letitia Gallery, has a tangible connection to the city of Beirut. This is not only because some of his sculptures are installed in public spaces throughout the city, but because many of them are made up of pieces of the city. The steel, cement blocks, and corrugated roofing Rackowe has employed have all been sourced from the built-environment of Lebanon, and transformed into works of art that reflect and abstract our urban space. Letitia Gallery is thrilled to be presenting a body of work that examines Beirut with such a clear and innovative eye.

Rackowe first came to Beirut in 2009 and has described *The Shape of a City* as the exhibition he has always wanted to make about this city. The exhibition marks the first presentation of Rackowe's work in Lebanon, adding to his extensive and international exhibition history, which has seen his exquisite illumination of space, material, and form inhabit galleries and public spaces from Dubai to Bogota.

Letitia Gallery is excited to expand our presence beyond the gallery's walls – commissioning work in public spaces across Beirut in order to encourage audiences to see their city in a new light. Rackowe has echoed this goal through two site-specific works installed in Downtown Beirut. We are looking forward to watching the ways in which Beirutis welcome Rackowe's sculptures into their public lives.

Letitia Gallery is grateful to our invaluable team of collaborators, and everyone who has made the public installations for *The Shape of a City* possible, including Rima Abou Rahme, Anne Marie Afeiche, Sami Feghali, and Laure Salloum. We extend our special thanks to Nathaniel Rackowe for illuminating our gallery and the city.

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DIRECTOR
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GALLERY

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NATHANIEL RACKOWE: THE SHAPE OF A CITY

BECCA
PELLY-FRY
2018

Reinforced concrete, corrugated plastic, cement block, fluorescent tubes, galvanised steel; these are the materials of the urban environment, the materials we city-dwellers share our physical space with. They fill our vision as we walk the streets, as we admire the view from a rooftop bar, as we ride a glass elevator to our place of work. Man-made, solid and soulless, these ubiquitous mass-produced objects surround and contain us. The work of Nathaniel Rackowe takes this fabric of urban construction and imbues it with life, light (both literal and metaphorical) and a poetic quality that encourages us to reimagine its potential: what if a cement block could float, suspended in a halo of light? What if a steel I-beam could spin, rotate and flex like a child's handheld windmill?

Throughout his practice, Rackowe broadly addresses the human relationship to urban environment, inspired by fleeting moments, accidents of light and structure, witnessed whilst walking through his hometown of London or other cities visited on global travels. A backlit advertising board, the poster slipped down behind the glass to reveal the fluorescent tubes behind. A darkened alley, lit by a single window, glowing blue through a tarpaulin hastily pinned to the window frame. Sunlight catching the fabric wrapped around a building, mid-construction, as it flaps gently in the breeze. These are the stepping-off points for a practice rooted in the urban and the everyday.

The exhibition at Letitia Gallery represents the culmination of a period of work inspired directly by a two month artist residency in Beirut in 2009, facilitated and supported by Delfina Foundation. Rackowe describes the experience of the residency as deeply inspiring; walking around the unfamiliar city, taking endless photographs, he became fascinated by the clearly visible layers of history within the city's physical structure. Evidence of Beirut's boom times in the mid-twentieth century, when it was known as 'the Paris of the Middle East' and the banking capital of the Arab world, can be seen in the soaring tower blocks and grand hotels, many unfinished before civil war broke out in 1975. Buildings partially destroyed, pock-marked with bullet holes from 15 years of violence, now sit alongside contemporary

structures being developed with new money coming into the region. The city is slowly rebuilding itself, but it is a place of contrast and contradiction. With the large majority of human life on Earth now concentrated in cities and mega-cities, the relationship to our daily surroundings has shifted from symbiotic and responsive to contained and controlled. In a city with a troubled and complex political past, such as Beirut, the shift and its knock-on effects to society are all the more palpable.

Light, space, form and the bodily relationship to physical structure are all brought into question throughout *The Shape of a City*. There are three distinct but overlapping sections to the show: a large scale installation; six smaller sculptures and a series of wall-based works.

Upon entering, the visitor encounters *LP48* (2018), a corrugated plastic fence-like structure cutting across the width of the gallery space, glowing yellow from within, as if some light-emitting life form is hiding behind it. The fence forces the audience to move through a small gap, creating a pinch-point at one side of the gallery space. Mimicking the subconscious corralling of foot traffic through the city's streets, the controlled movement encourages us to consider our relationship to the physical structure, and to each other, as we walk around it. Perhaps we get a little closer to a fellow audience member as we approach; perhaps we have to be careful not to touch the artwork as we pass. This piece sits clearly within the Minimalist lineage, making recognisable aesthetic references to Dan Flavin's iconic neon fence-like 'barriers', made in New York in the 1960s. *LP48* similarly asserts its presence, but in using building materials sourced from Beirut, Rackowe creates a familiarity of form and texture that feels less imposing. He is interested in creating, or recreating, moments of liminality where a form is still recognisable but has lost its original function. The age old discussion, kicked off by Marcel Duchamp's readymades at the beginning of the 20th century, continued with Carl Andre's arrangements of bricks in the 1960s, and yet to be fully resolved, of what constitutes art raises its head here too; at what point does corrugated plastic change from construction material to artwork?

The next phase of the exhibition continues this question with a series of six smaller sculptural works on plinths. Each piece is constructed from cement blocks, hand-selected by the artist from builders' merchants around the city of Beirut, surrounded by a frame of white neon. Sitting at head height, the blocks seem otherworldly, hovering impossibly a few centimetres above the plinths. Activated and transformed by their halos of light, the blocks take on a definite sculptural quality; the scale shifts and they become miniature replicas of the tower blocks and hotels of downtown Beirut. There are references here to the futuristic worlds of sci-fi novels, of the dystopian, neon-infused landscapes of films such as Tron, 2001: A Space Odyssey, Blade Runner and The Fifth Element. I've always thought it strange that the future seems to be lit by neon; flying cars, silver suits, mega-metropolises,

architectural haircuts... all illuminated by various hues of neon light. In the same way that writers and film-makers use science fiction as a way to interrogate the issues of the present, Rackowe's sculptures could be seen to take the current issues of city living to their potential conclusion.

Moving on to the third phase of the exhibition, we encounter several wall-based pieces of varying sizes. Rackowe refers to these as 'flat works', which I think is a reflection of the fact he approaches drawing and painting from a sculptural perspective; these are flat, the others are three dimensional. At the end of 2017 I chaired a panel discussion at the Royal British Society of Sculptors on the relationship between drawing and sculptural practice. Nathaniel was one of the artists invited on to the panel, and it was very revealing for me to learn that he thinks very much in spatial terms, even when working on a two dimensional surface.

The flat works in this exhibition are heavily layered oil paintings on paper, each a variation on an abstracted view of an illuminated petrol station canopy. The elements are pared right back; using only three colours, black, white and acid yellow, Rackowe distils the image to its essential parts. The largest of the flat works, *PSC1* (2018), 170 x 120cm, is unmistakable in its form despite the economy of visual language. In the same way that he makes use of locally sourced commonplace materials to create sculpture, Rackowe here makes reference to an object positioned right outside Letitia Gallery; there is a petrol station next door. By taking something familiar and abstracting it, removing all extraneous elements and reducing it to its bare essentials, he encourages us to reassess our relationship to such an object. There is something so ubiquitous and instantly recognisable about an illuminated petrol station canopy; they are broadly the same wherever you go, all around the world. The iconic shape beams at us with glaring yellow light, beckoning us towards it through the darkness; an oasis in the night, offering shelter, fuel and packets of crisps.

In addition to the works in the main space, Rackowe also includes some older works from his back catalogue in the show, as a way of contextualising the new body of work within the rest of his oeuvre. Wall based works made with layered dichroic glass and fluorescent tubes, held together with a rigid steel frame, are reminiscent of the shiny new corporate buildings of New York's Wall Street, the City of London or, indeed, the thriving business district of Beirut. The glass reflects and refracts light emitting from the fluorescent tubes, held in suspension, giving a sense of endless depth; the seemingly never-ending expanse of glass, steel and light as you look up at the newly erected headquarters of a global bank in an international mega-city.

Alongside the exhibition at Letitia Gallery, Rackowe also has two large scale public sculptures installed in the city. The first, *Black Shed Expanded* (2014), originally commissioned by Le Village Royal in Paris, is an upended garden shed, the walls, floor and roof pushed apart by its internal metal

structure, a yellow light emanating from within. The garden shed is a deeply rooted part of British culture; according to an article in The Telegraph from 2011, "By current estimates, Britons own around 11.5 million domestic sheds, a higher concentration than anywhere else on Earth, and spend more than 60 million hours a week in them" (The rise and rise of the great British shed, William Langley, 2 July 2011, The Telegraph). It is traditionally viewed as a small sanctuary, a place to escape from the troubles and stresses of daily life, often on an allotment or hidden amongst the underbrush at the far end of a suburban garden. One of the British artist Cornelia Parker's most iconic works, *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View* (1991), makes reference to the use of the garden shed as a place to store things, no longer really used and gradually forgotten. As with Rackowe's shed, the structure is no longer solid, no longer a container; instead it radiates light, suggesting an inner life. However, *Black Shed Expanded* takes on a new meaning within the cityscape of Beirut, as opposed to its most recent incarnation outside the Gherkin in the City of London. The shed is perhaps seen here as a simplified, almost cartoon-like image of a house rather than a secret hideaway at the bottom of the garden. It is reminiscent of a glimpse down an alleyway, a shard of light punctuating the darkness from an open window. Whilst in Beirut during the residency, Rackowe became captivated by the myriad temporary structures, lean-tos and shelters he encountered around the city. Often found on flat roofs, they house equipment, unused building materials, old furniture, and frequently people too: those who clean, cook and take care of the larger, affluent households. To Rackowe, these structures have the same status as a shed: temporary, yet often permanently used; flimsy, yet required for protection. These in-between places, that sit beside, above and around the more solid, official architecture of a city are perhaps where its character can really be discovered and understood.

Elsewhere in the city you will find an enormous new piece, *LP46* (2018), constructed from lengths of steel RSJ, or I-beam, formed into three intersecting squares. It towers above the viewer, yet has a surprising fragility and sense of movement. The Rackowe signature golden glow appears here again, created by fluorescent tubes, nestled inside inner cavities painted acid yellow. Asking him about the repeated use of yellow, Rackowe told me he felt the colour to be the most urban of all colours, relating as it does to things like warning signs, construction machinery, hard-hats and back-lit takeaway menus. Artificial, industrial, digitally rendered colour has a particular quality that entranced the Minimalists in New York in the 1960s; David Batchelor in his seminal book, Chromophobia, talks of one outcome of the movement being "the embrace in art of a colour-world which, in one way or another, existed far outside art... A glimpse of another world or, rather, several other worlds: the past-present worlds of minerals and crystals, and the future-present worlds of science fiction".

Whilst Rackowe's work is several steps away from the Minimalists, there is a common language and a shared interest in pulling the rarefied art world and the everyday urban experience closer together. With *LP46*, this literally takes place: the piece is situated in a public space and therefore visible to everyone passing by, and available for anyone to see.

For me, Rackowe's work conjures images of a utopian future, following the trajectory of the great Modernist urban organisers like Le Corbusier and Erno Goldfinger, whilst acknowledging the passing of time, the rise and fall of great civilisations, edifices erected and demolished; all in the name of human progress. It calls to mind a walk through the city at night: shadows flicker, soft yellow lights glow from windows above, giving a glimpse into the after-dark lives of those with whom we share the urban environment, but do not interact. No longer subjugated by the rising and setting sun, we function at all times of the day and night, facilitated by stark fluorescent lights. Yet, as we fast approach the moment of the 'singularity', when our technological inventions overtake us, how do we plan for our future in cities? Who do we provide for – human, humanoid, animal, vegetable? What does the future of urban dwelling look like? Ideally, the urban environment reflects our human needs and provides for them in an equitable way, but it hasn't always worked out that way. The next stage of human progress is in our hands: will our built environments reflect who we want to be, or who someone else wants us to be?

These questions will not be answered, of course, by *The Shape of a City*, but they certainly become front of mind for me when standing in front of the work, and that's at least a good place to start building a future we all want to live in.

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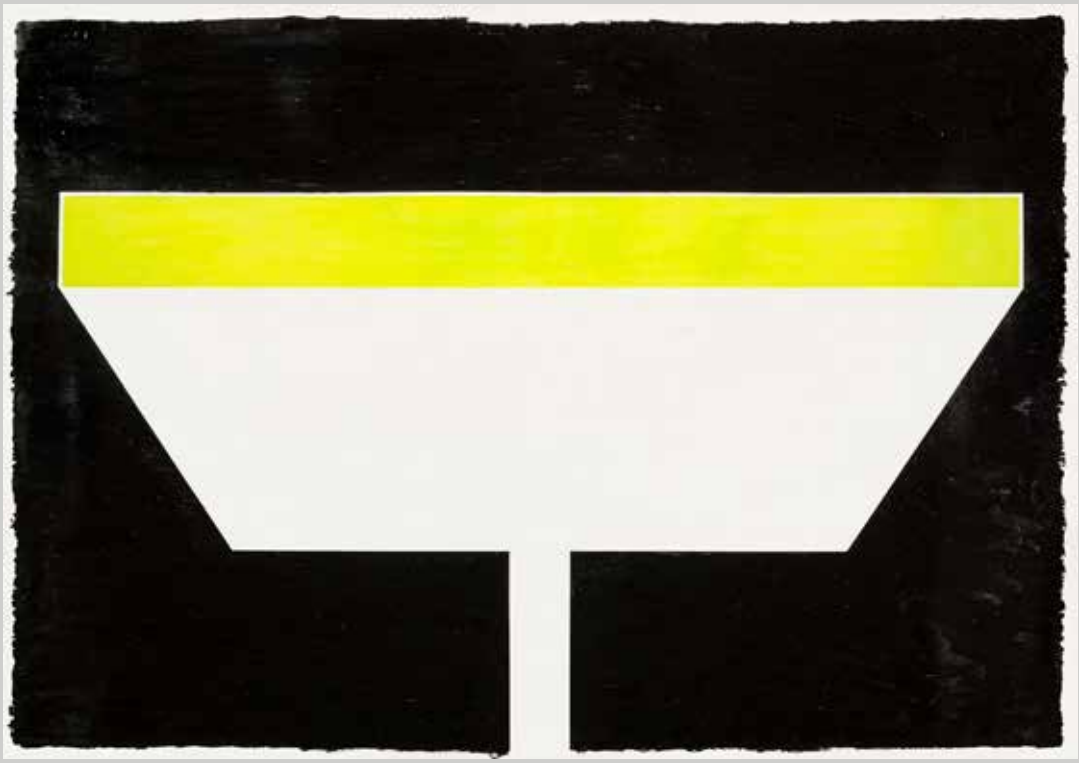
THE SHAPE OF A CITY



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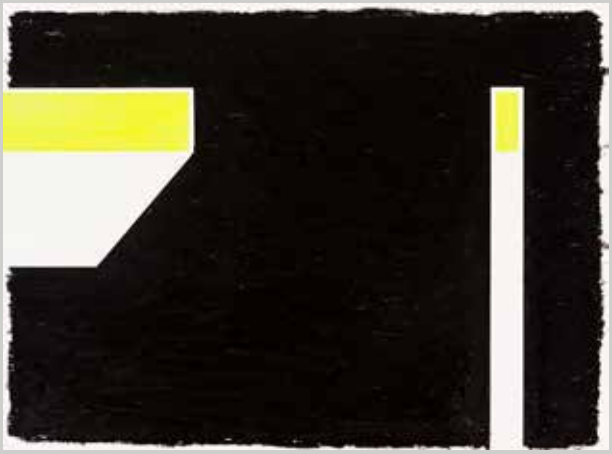

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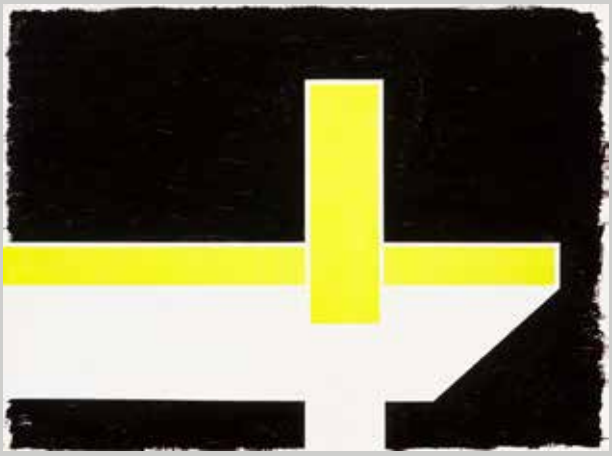

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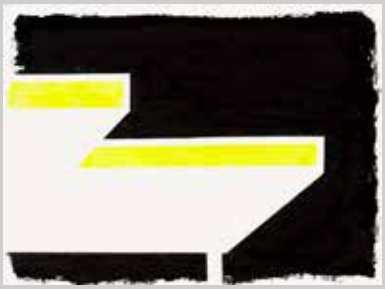

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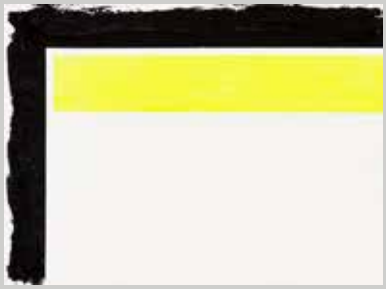

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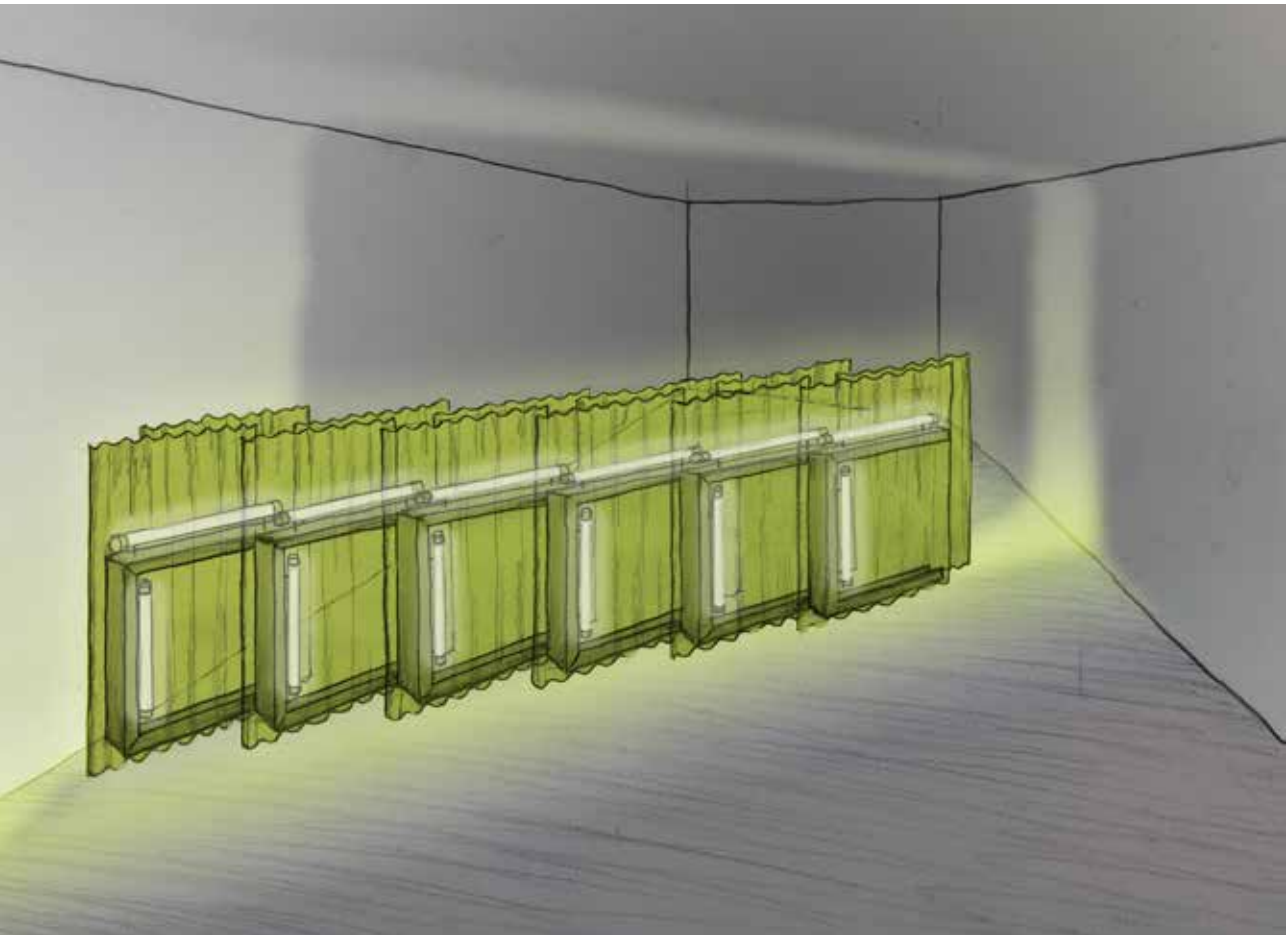

Beirut Block 1

Beirut Block 2

Beirut Block 3

Beirut Block 4

Beirut Block 5

Beirut Block 6

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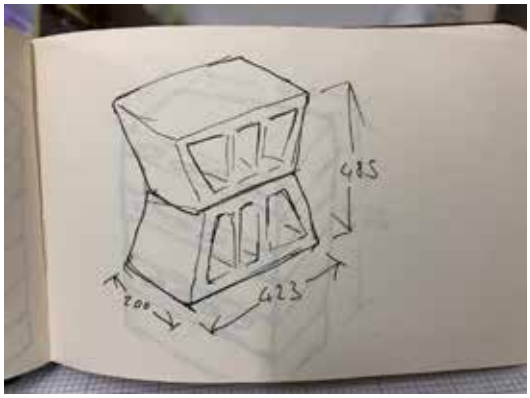
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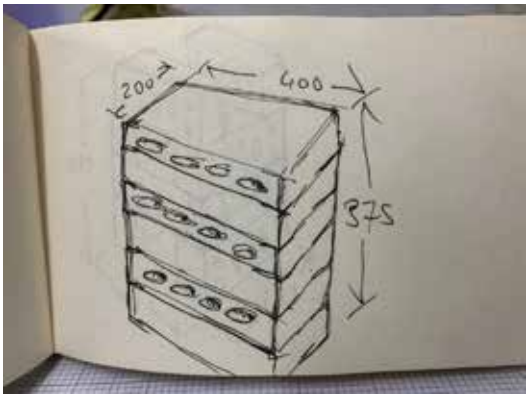
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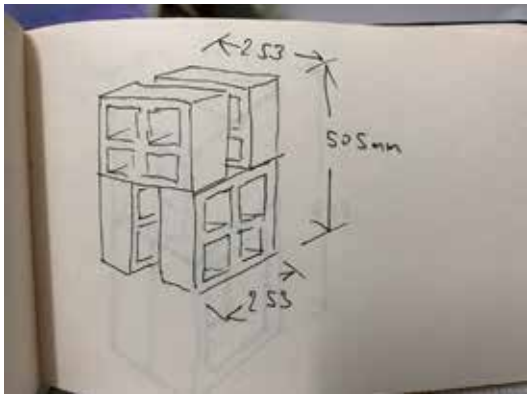
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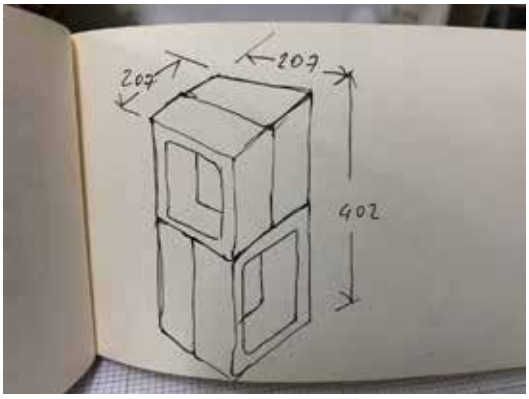
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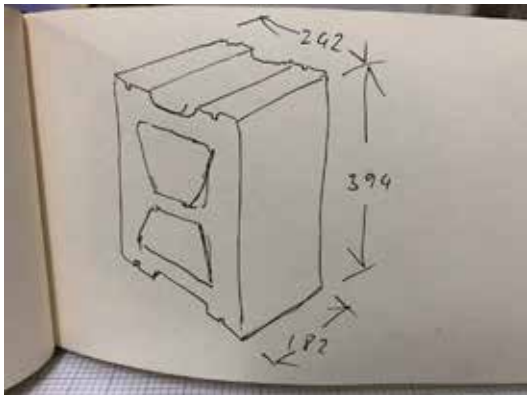
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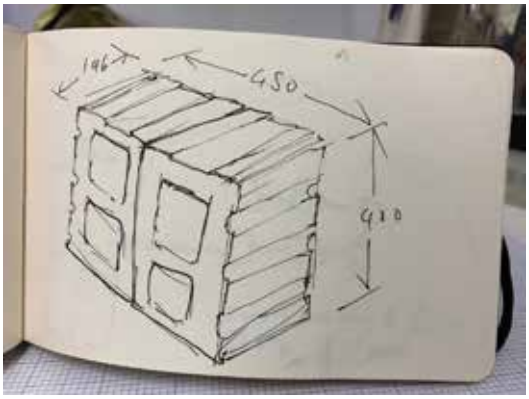
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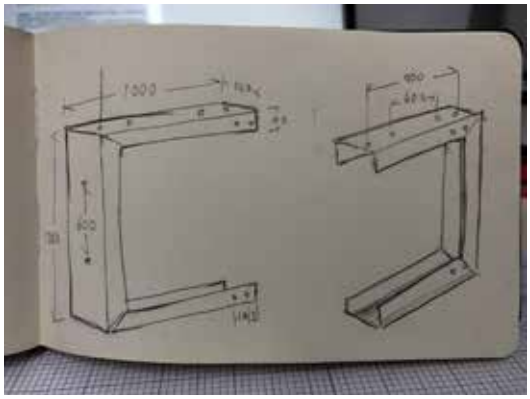
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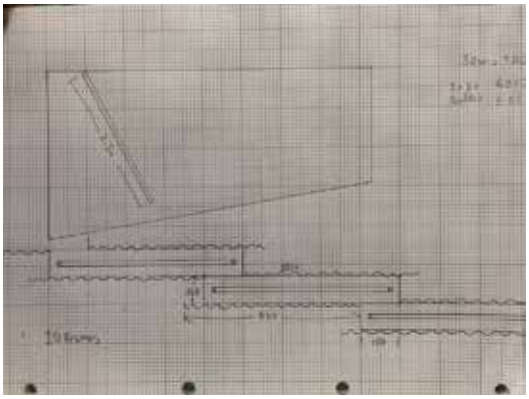
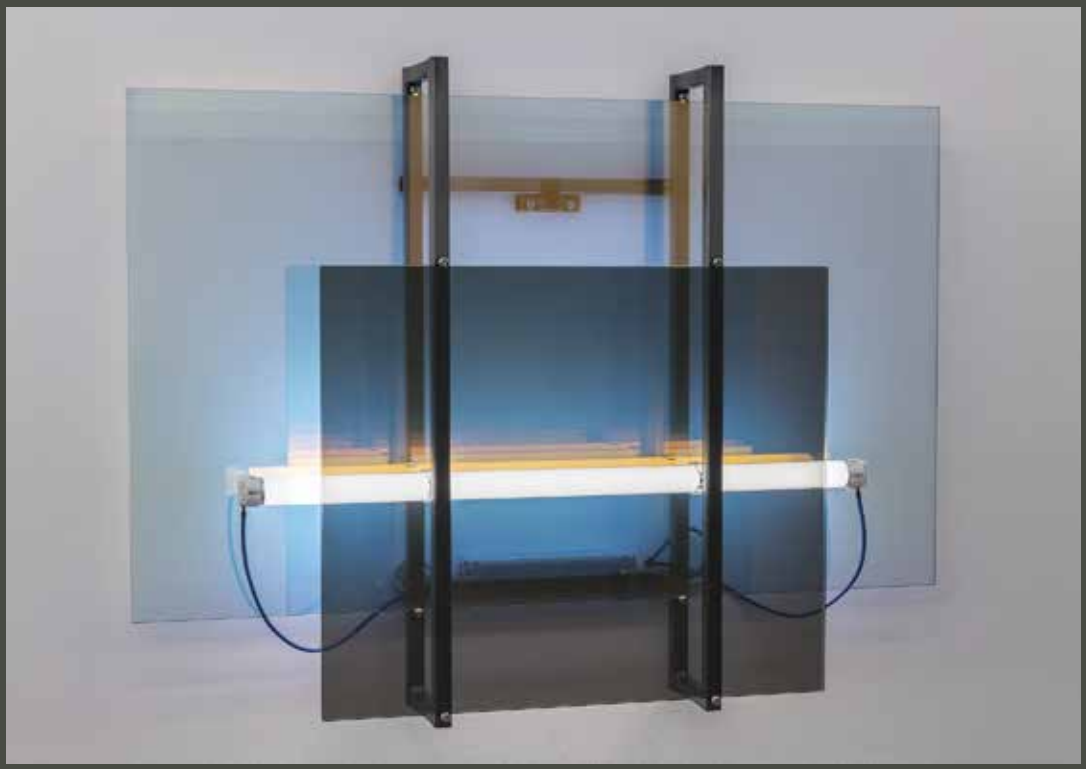


FG01



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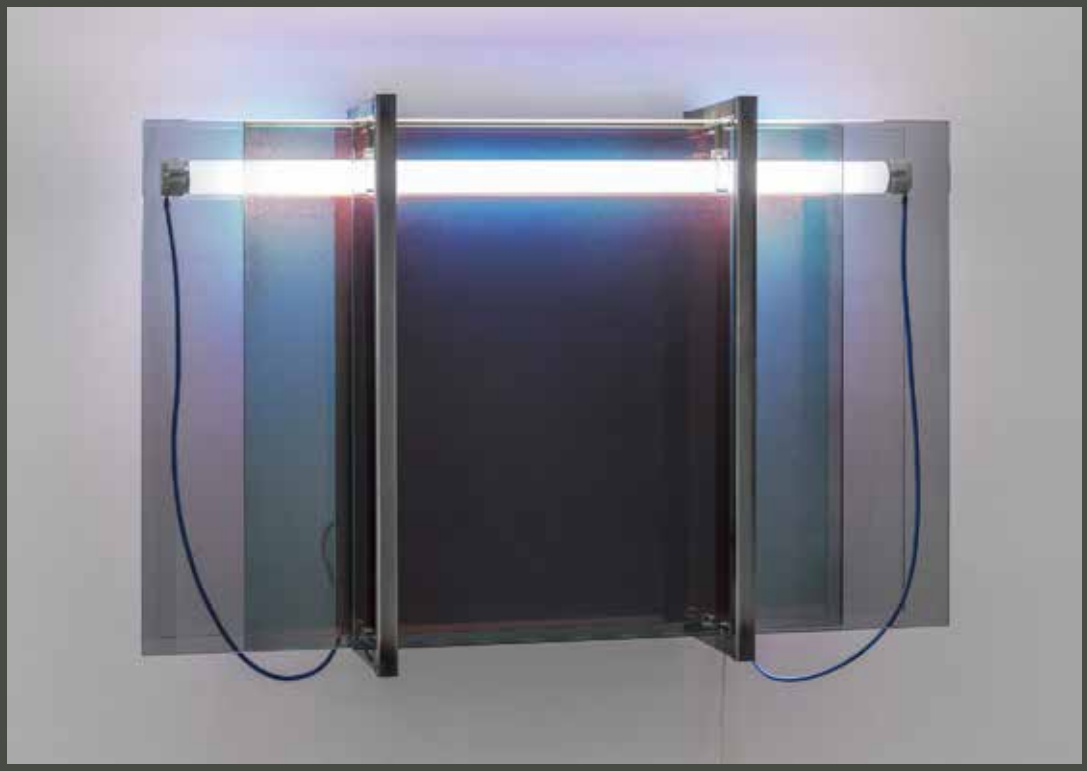
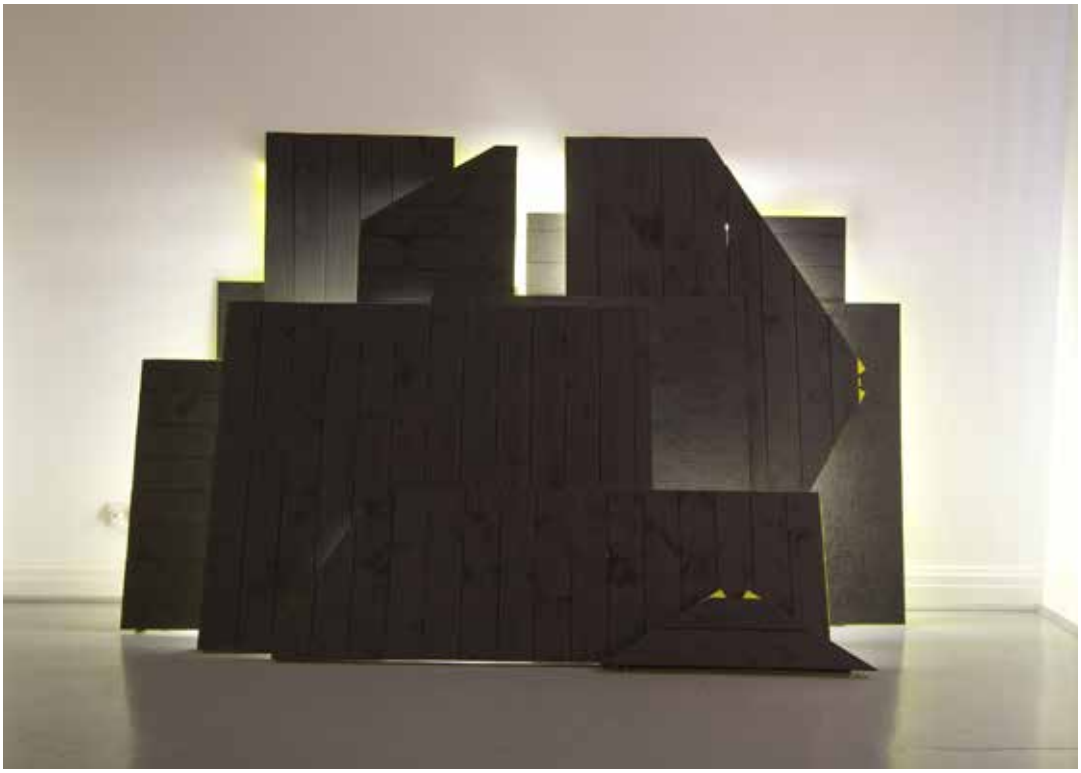
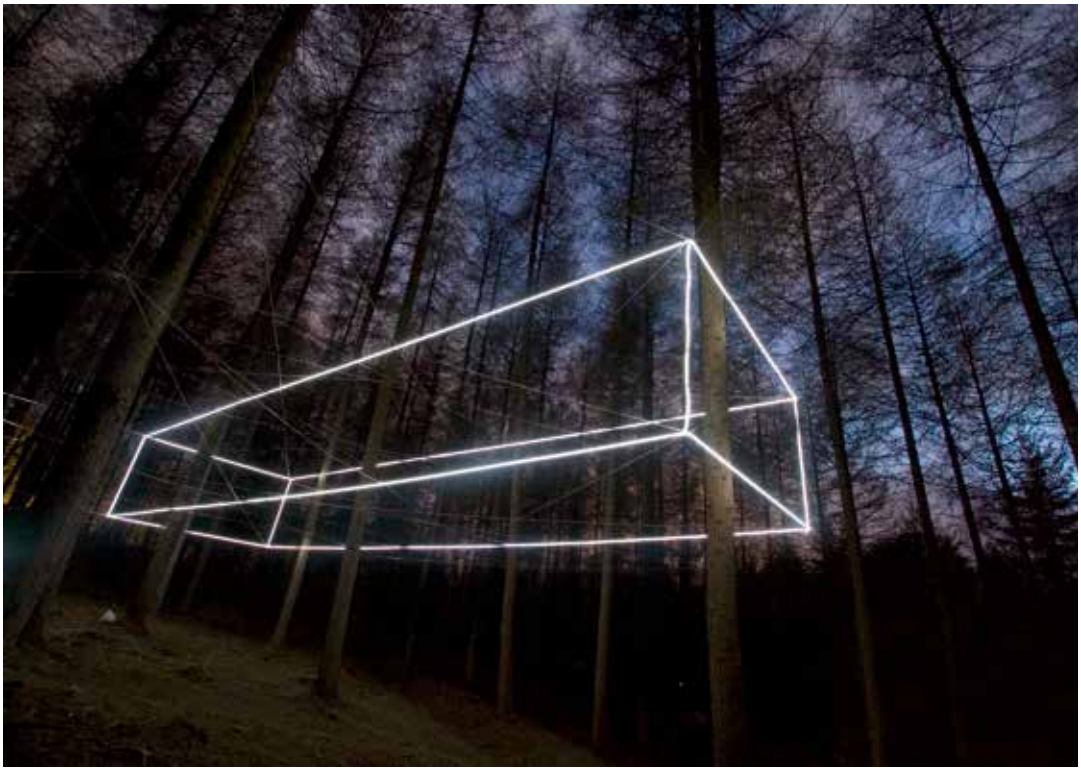


BLACK SHED EXPANDED





p. 18–23
PSC Series, 2018
Oil paint and oil stick on Arches Huile paper

p. 18
PSC1
120 × 170 cm

p. 19
PSC2, *PSC3*, *PSC4*
65 × 76 cm

p. 20, 21
PSC5, *PSC6*, *PSC7*, *PSC8*, *PSC9*, *PSC10*, *PSC11*
31 × 41 cm

p. 22, 23
PSC12, *PSC13*, *PSC14*, *PSC15*, *PSC16*, *PSC17*, *PSC18*, *PSC19*, *PSC20*, *PSC21*
23 × 31 cm

p. 24, 25
LP48, 2018
Corrugated GRP roofing sheets, galvanised steel, fluorescent light, electronics
120 × 30 × 700 cm (as exhibited)

p. 28, 29
Beirut Block Series, 2018
Cement block, neon, paint, Perspex, plinth

Beirut Block 1
28 × 50 × 56 cm (excluding plinth)

Beirut Block 2
48 × 28 × 46 cm (excluding plinth)

Beirut Block 3
34 × 34 × 59 cm (excluding plinth)

Beirut Block 4
29 × 29 × 48 cm (excluding plinth)

Beirut Block 5
26 × 32 × 48 cm (excluding plinth)

Beirut Block 6
28 × 53 × 48 cm (excluding plinth)

p. 34
FG01, 2017
Fluorescent light, vacuum coated glass, steel
60 × 80 × 14 cm

p. 35
FG03, 2017
Fluorescent light, smoked glass, dichroic glass, steel, spray paint
64 × 43 × 19 cm

p. 36, 37
Black Shed Expanded, 2017
Timber shed, fluorescent lights and fittings, bitumen, paint, steel
240 × 240 × 240 cm

p. 38
LP46, 2018
Steel, neon, paint
3 × 3 × 3 m

p. 40
Black Shed Stacked, 2010
Timber shed, bitumen, paint, fluorescent light
240 × 180 × 40 cm

LP25, 2010
PVC roofing sheets, fluorescent light, steel
120 × 200 × 20 cm

p. 42
Square Prism, 2017
Neon flex, acrylic, electronics
500 × 160 × 160 cm

NLP2, 2008
Neon, sequenced control system
100 × 100 × 200 cm

Spin, 2006
Electroluminescent wire, steel rope, custom control system
15 × 15 × 2 m

p. 43
CS03, 2017
Steel, fluorescent light, Perspex
75 × 30 × 39 cm

Pathfinding, 2008–2017
Cement blocks, fluorescent light, paint
Dimensions variable

Petrol Station Canopy, 2017
Steel, fluorescent light, Perspex, universal beams, electronics
3 × 3 × 2 m

Born 1975, Cambridge, UK
Lives and works in London, UK

EDUCATION

2001 MFA Sculpture, The Slade School of Fine Art, UCL, London
1998 B.A. Honours Fine Art (Sculpture), Sheffield Hallam University
1995 B.T.E.C Diploma, Foundation Studies, Cambridge Regional College

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2018 The Shape of a City, Letitia Gallery, Beirut
2017 Threshold, FOLD Gallery, London
Signs of the City, Galerie Jérôme Pauchant, Paris
2016 Black Shed Expanded, at Parasol Unit, London.
The Luminous City, One Canada Square, Canary Wharf, London
2015 Radient Trajectory, Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai
2014 Edge Lands, Galerie Jérôme Pauchant, Paris
The Consequence of Light, Solo Show, Bodson Gallery, Brussels
2013 NR for F&M, Installation, Covent Garden, London
Reflections on Space, BISCHOFF/WEISS, London
Spin NY, temporary installation for EDUN, New York
2012 Solo Project, Art Cologne
2011 Back Beacon, Calvin Klein Collection, New York
On the Floor: John Gibbons and Nathaniel Rackowe, Gooden Gallery, London
2010 What the City Left Behind, BISCHOFF/WEISS, London
Solo show, The Delfina Foundation, London
2009 Black Shed Expanded, Art Basel Miami Beach, Positions with BISCHOFF/WEISS, Miami, USA
2008 Divisions, Centro Colombo Americano, Bogota, Colombia
Pathfinding, Galerie Almine Rech, Paris
Preverberation, Siobhan Davies Studios, London
2007 Luminous Territories, BISCHOFF/WEISS, London
First Floor, Galerie Almine Rech, Project Space, Paris
2005 Shift, BISCHOFF/WEISS, London
Stanhope Solo Exhibition, Serpentine Pavillon, London
Timebase Gallery, Hull, UK
2004 GardenFresh Gallery, Chicago

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2018 Heavy Metal, Galerie Jérôme Pauchant, Paris
Lumiere London, UK
2017 Occasional Geometries, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, UK
Sculpture in the City, London
The Mood of Space, FA Projects, Paris
Contemporary Sculpture, Fulmer Sculpture Park, Fulmer, UK.
MD4, Mysticism and Insecurity, The Koppel Project, London
Odds, Assembly Point, London
L'Im-matériel , Galerie Épisodique, Paris
2016 The Blue Hour, Curated by Rowena Chiu, Carousel Gallery, London
État Second, L'Hoste Art Contemporain, Arles, France
Green Man Festival, group show, Brecon Beacons, UK
Low Fidelity, Two person show with Ulrik Weck, Etage Projects, Copenhagen
Il suffit d'un grand morceau de ciel, Galerie Jerome Pauchant, Paris, France
Sculpture by the Sea, Perth, Australia
Portals to Fantasy Destinations: Nathaniel Rackowe, Shuster & Moseley
House of St Barnabas, Soho, London
Lumiere London, Regents Place, London
2015 Sculpture by the Sea, Aarhus, Denmark
(Un)touched, version 2 sharing, OXO tower, London
New DG works, Rod Barton, London
2014 Light Fantastic, House of the Nobleman, London
Nathaniel Rackowe & Julien Lombardi: Installation, Drawing, Photography
L'HOSTE Art Contemporain, Arles, France
Monologue/Dialogue, Bangkok Art and Cultual Centre, Bangkok
Géométrie Immatérielle, Un-Spaced, Bordeaux, France
2013 Monologue/Dialogue, group show, Bangkok Cultural Centre
Empty Lines, Galerie Bertrand Grimont, Paris
Platonic Spin, Lumiere, Light Festival of Durham, UK
The Double Illums Bolighus, group exhibition, Copenhagen
Dynamo, Group Show, Grand Palais, Paris
2012 Royal Academy Summer Show, London
21 x 29,7, Group Exhibition. Galerie De Roussan, Paris
2011 Come le lucciole, group show at Nicoletta Rusconi, Milan, Italy
What The Thunder Said, group show at Lu Magnus, New York
2010 Legacy I: Outdoor Sculpture, Formans Smokehouse Gallery, London
2009 The shape of Things, Ferrate Gallery, Tel Aviv
Kaleidoscopic Revolver, British Art, Hanjiyun Contemporary Space, Beijing,China
Natural Wonders: New Art from London, Baibakov Art Projects, Moscow
Superposition, Duve Gallery, Berlin
London Calling, Total Museum of Contemporary Art, Seoul, Korea
2008 Nathaniel Rackowe and Douglas White, Art Vandelay Gallery, London
Constructs for Illumination, Allsopp Contemporary London
Domestic Appliance, Flowers East, London
Art After Dark, Louise Blouin Foundation, London
Walls & Gateways, Existentie, Gent, Belgium
Monologue/Dialogue Part II, Thai/UK Art, BISCHOFF/WEISS, London
Lumiere, Galerie Jan Wentrup, Berlin
2007 Du machinique et du vivant, La Reserve, Pacy-sur-Eure, France

The Body Electric, Truman Brewery, London
All Tomorrows Pictures, ICA, London
Jerwood Sculpture Prize: Short Listed Artist Exhibition, Jerwood Space, London
Time, Burghley Sculpture Garden ,Burghley House, Stamford
2006 Artificial Light, MoCA Miami, USA
Artificial Light, Anderson Gallery, Richmond, USA
Residency followed by Monologue/Dialogue Part I, Bangkok, Thailand
Reveal, Installation for the Sculpture Trail, Forest of Dean, UK
2005 Sine Qua Non, BISCHOFF/WEISS, London
2004 2X2, Dahl Gallery, Luzern, Switzerland
Trackers, PM Gallery, UK
2003 I am a Curator, Chisenhale Gallery, London
Origin, Castlefield Gallery, Manchester
R type and Pests, BLOC, Sheffield, UK
Lost Space, Group Show, Phoenix Gardens, London
2002 Bloomberg New Contemporaries, Static Gallery, Liverpool in September during Biennial and Barbican Center in December, UK
Fame and Promise, Victoria Miro Gallery, London
It Was Bigger Than All of Us, The Prenelle Gallery, South Quay, London
2001 Communicating At an Unknown Rate, Engine Show, Harrow Road, London
Ida Branson Postgraduate Show, Atkinson Gallery, Street
Postgraduate Degree Show, Slade School of Fine Art, London
2000 Slade Engine, Vauxhall, London

PUBLIC SCULPTURE

2018 Origin, permanent public sculpture, Aarhus, Denmark
2017 Square Prism, The Royal British Society of Sculptors, Kensington, London
2017 Black Shed Expanded, Sculpture in the City, London
2016 The Moment of Light, Warehouse 421, Abu Dhabi
2016 Platonic Spin. Lumiere, Light Festival of London
2014 Black Shed Expanded, Village Royal, Paris
2013 Black Cube. DEN FRIE Centre of Contemporary Art, Copenhagen
2013 Platonic Spin. Lumiere, Light Festival of Durham, UK
2010 Spin, Lima, Peru
2008 Government Art Collection commission for 50 Queen Anne's Gate, London
2007 RP3, Economist Plaza with CAS, London
2006 LP4, Victoria, London, UK

GRANTS/AWARDS

2016 Arts Council UK award for development and presentation of (Un)Touched
2009 Delfina Foundation Residency Award
2004 Stanhope Fellowship
2003 Boise Travel Scholarship
2001 Arts and Humanities Research Board award for Postgraduate Study, 1999–2001

RESIDENCIES

2012 DEN FRIE Centre of Contemporary Art/CPH Air Residency in Copenhagen
2009 Artist residency with the Delfina Foundation in Beirut, Lebanon
2006 British Council/Bangkok University residency in Bangkok
2006 Forest of Dean Sculpture Park residency
2005 Hull Time Based Arts residency

SELECTED COLLECTIONS

CIFO (Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation), Miami
Jumex Collection, Mexico
Museum of Modern Art, Lima, Peru
LVMH Collection, Paris
Museum of Old and New Art, Tasmania, Australia
CAPC musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux
David Roberts Collection, London
UK Government Art Collection
Hauser & Wirth Collection, London
Ernst & Young Collection, London
Patricia Marshall, Private collection, Paris
Marc Blondeau, Private collection, Geneva
Almine Rech-Picasso, Private collection, Paris
Rafic Said, Private Collection, Dubai & Switzerland
VR d'Affaux Collection, Paris
Salama Bint Hamdan Foundation, Abu Dhabi
Hussam Otaibi, Private collection, and sculpture park, UK
Vente Privée, Paris.

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