

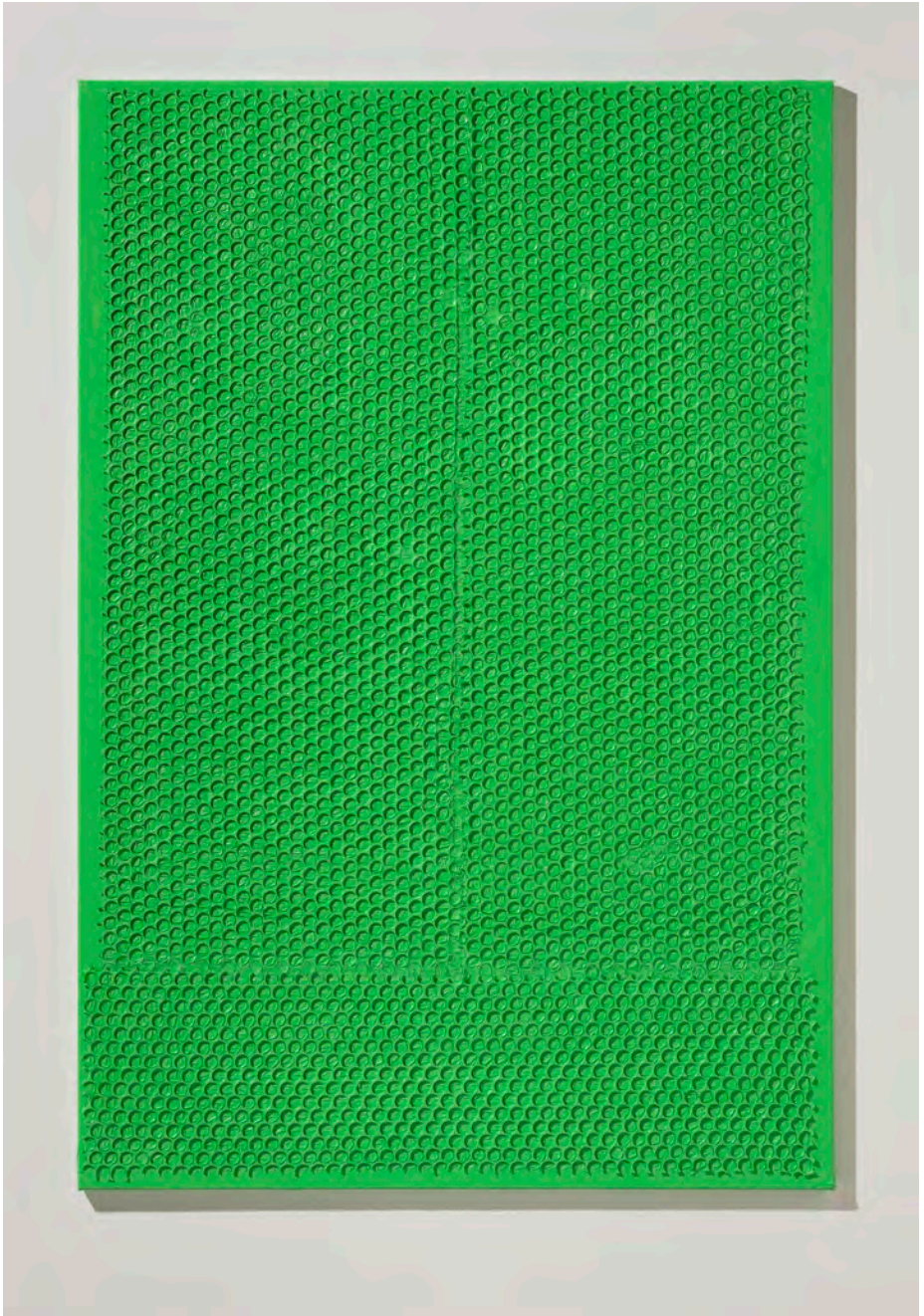
ACTS OF REVERSAL REVERSAL

SUN WENGUAN (CHINA)
DANICA CHAPPELL (AUST)
SIMON MORRIS (NZ)
JOYCE HUANG (CHINA)
PJ HICKMAN (AUST/NZ)
LI NU (CHINA)
ANDREW LESLIE (AUST)
ALEXANDRA KENNEDY (NZ)
QU FENGGUO (CHINA)
JOSEPHINE MEAD (AUST)
CRAIG EASTON (AUST/NZ)
LIU TONGBIN (CHINA)
LOUISE WEAVER (AUST)

ACTS OF

CURATED BY CRAIG EASTON & PJ HICKMAN

Some abstraction from China, New Zealand and Australia



Louise Weaver *Calyx* 2019 Synthetic polymer emulsion on linen 152 x 106 cm

Ask me no Questions

This exhibition's title is itself an act of reversal. Originally to be *The Language*, the thinking was around those languages of abstraction and how they are somehow in a constant state of translation and mistranslation whether we are situated in China, Australia or New Zealand. This thought remains and even guides *Acts of Reversal*. But in the uncovering of these various (and they are) artists and works, it came to me the thing they most have in common is a general preparedness to upend, to play with oppositions, to break and blend in unexpected ways and to go back into the histories of abstraction, not as a completist venture aiming to tie up loose ends so much as create some entirely new ones. So if you're looking for answers or a b(l)inding thesis, this is not one of those moments.

This is a very small show; the opposite of a grand survey associated with wider international or institutional interests and the ways in which Chinese art in particular often reaches us. There are no big intentions, secrets or national identities to be uncovered. The Chinese artists here are all, to greater or lesser extent, associated with the independent artist GoGo Group; a loose coalition rather than the more prevalent cliques, they represent a spirit of inclusion. Indeed a number of the Australian and New Zealand artists presented also featured in their recent 3CM Museum project for Chi K11 Shenyang, and this exhibition in one part seeks to continue those conversations, create some new networks of exchange.

If we're calling *Acts of Reversal* a painting show it's more a sensibility than an actuality. The same could be said for the approach to abstraction taken. There are images in use here, text and quite possibly some narrative. Nothing is settled. Or at least no one's settling for nothing. *Reverse, rewind, retrace, reconsider, rewrite*. I'm not talking about nullifying. Quite the opposite. It's more like trying to capture all the stuff along the way. Leave nothing and no one behind. Maybe it's a lazy path. A scavenger's path. Or could be it's a reverse attempt at rigor - without the mortis?

So while there's no big story there are still contexts to consider, particularly when reading work out of China. For one, Chinese calligraphy posits an easy confluence between word and image; a possible point of difference if only because for some it means there is not the same binary between form and content, abstraction and representation that twentieth century criticism was so focused on. Historically a large chunk of Modernism wasn't even available to a once closed or emerging China. If this posed a problem it was one many Chinese artists then and now have taken as an opportunity. Free of some of our critical divisions they took to cross-disciplinary and collaborative practices without constraint, and today something about their diverse practices reflects this. Arguably our own part of the world (the distance challenged, pre-internet version) was also in its way curiously both blinkered and

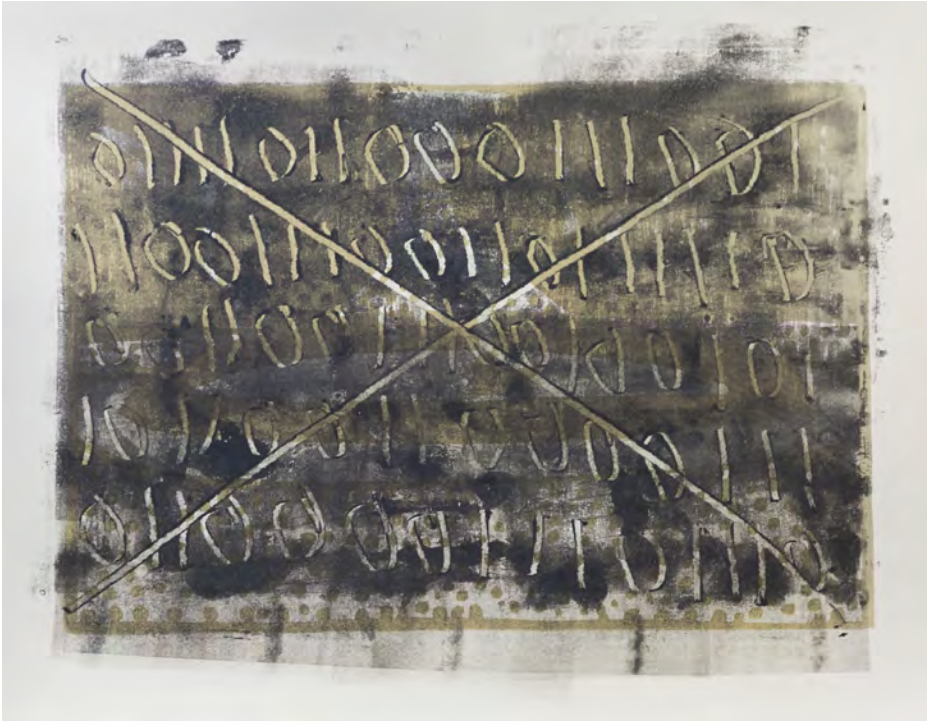
free to run its own race. Whether any of this directly influences the artists in *Acts of Reversal* is up to you.

I look at **Li Nu's** video the *Lonely Library*. If there is an almost brutally modern sensibility at work in the architectural subject, it's balanced by the smoke machine that gradually obliterates all in a misty haze reaching back, intentionally or not, to the masters of Song Dynasty mountain and water painting. It's difficult not to think of ink painting traditions and the value placed on grey as the colour of all things there and not there. Into this I could cast Mies van de Rohe and Caspar David Friedrich caught in a tug of war between absolute materiality and the sublime.

In **Louise Weaver's** paintings this battle between the material, and let's call it essence, is again present. These layered and peeled, reapplied skins are also remnants, a reversal of the usual ground up approach to painting. For sure, in their process driven, imprinted surfaces we witness a capturing of the real. But it's one that operates in an uneasy alliance of the ghostly and the concrete.



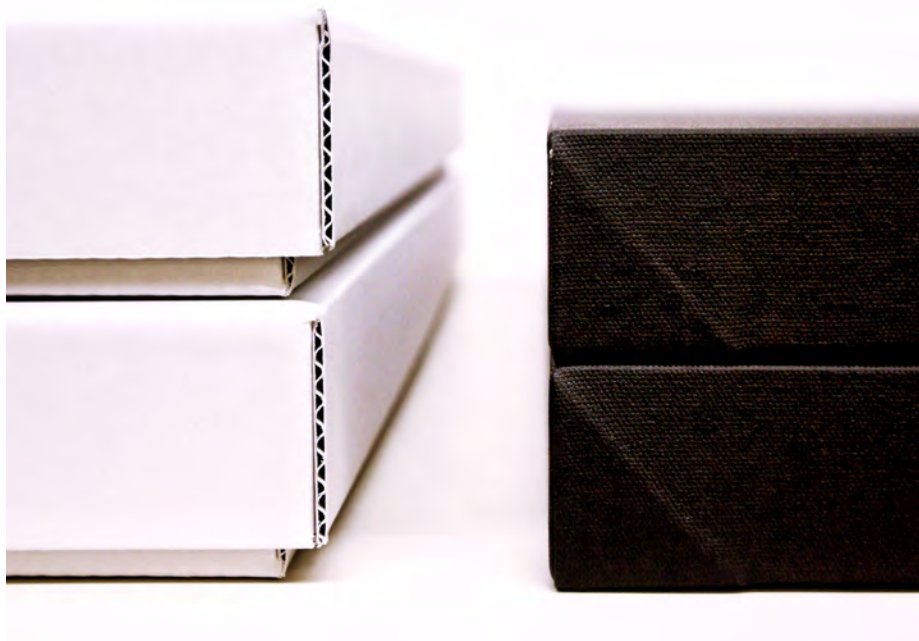
Li Nu *The Lonely Library* 2018 Video with sound 03.51



Liu Tongbin *No. 15-21* 2016 Woodcut transfer, printers' ink on paper 31 x 47 cm

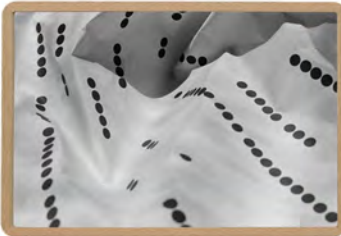
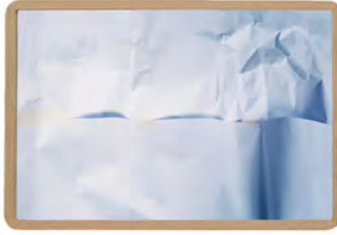
With **Liu Tongbin's** *No. 15-21* the hopeless 0 and 1 games of binary language are struck through / struck-out with the printmaker's 'X'. If it marks the end of that plate in traditional printmaking here it feels more like a positive declaration of intent – an opening up of possibilities to a larger language. As it turns out this work and *No.15-08* are just two from a set of 45 woodcut transfer prints capturing a procedural crisis. Leaving his well established routines behind for hands, chopsticks, scrapers and slabs of ink, master printmaker Liu Tongbin pulls gestural and material physicality into a shared space with the flattened fields of the graphic.

Conversely with **PJ Hickman's** immaculate works any sign of the painterly gesture is completely removed. Stacked paintings, featuring identical pre-primed black canvas, sit alongside boxes made from archival cardboard. There is a consistent removal of the hand and any notion that it might be the conduit of meaning. Instead the artist's trace is read through its very absence in a curious act of negation that ironically signals its own highly critical formal content. At the same time, questions of art as commodity and suitable modes of display are highlighted, albeit within a highly formal and minimalist inspired visual language.

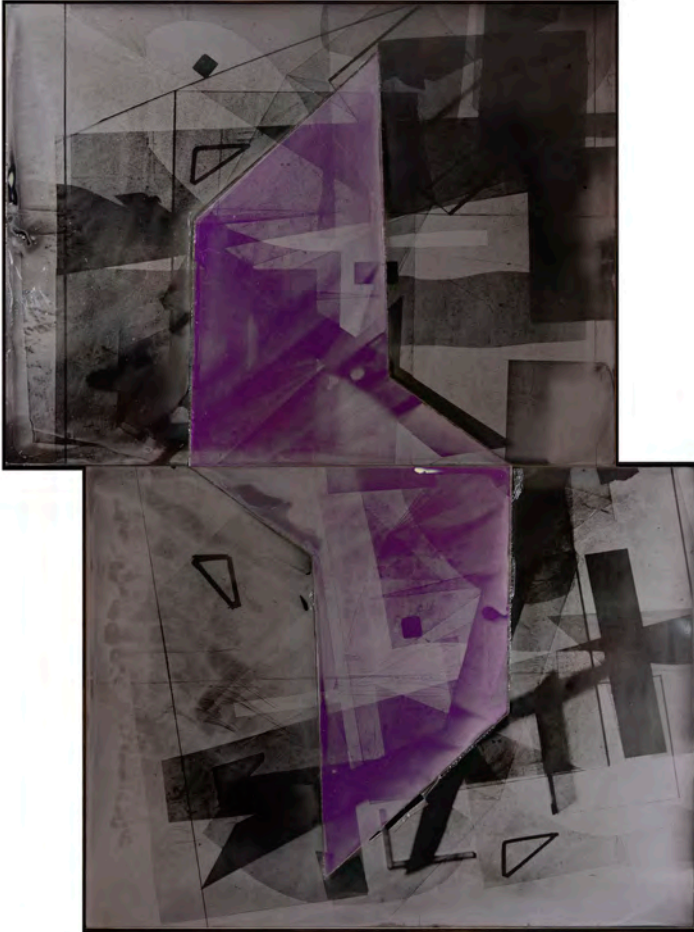


PJ Hickman A 2019 Pre-primed black gesso on Masonite and timber, blue-grey corrugated archival cardboard 61 x 91.5 each canvas and box with custom-made timber tables (installation variable)

Carving out a space between language and image, abstract minimalist concerns also appear in the practice of **Josephine Mead**. Read from one point of view the individual photos of *The Marking* offer a possible sequence of events in an unconfirmed narrative of the body. But as much as the grammar is poetic and filmic, the slightest of shifts sees another type of language in play. Here I'm thinking about the individual subjects becoming almost secondary to the needs of the immaculately framed object and its place as a unit within the group, jump-cutting and stuttering its way up the wall.



Josephine Mead *The Marking*. 2018 Set of inkjet prints on 310gsm Ilford Fibre Gloss paper, created from scanned film photographs, with custom-made Victorian Ash frames 29.5 x 43.2 cm each



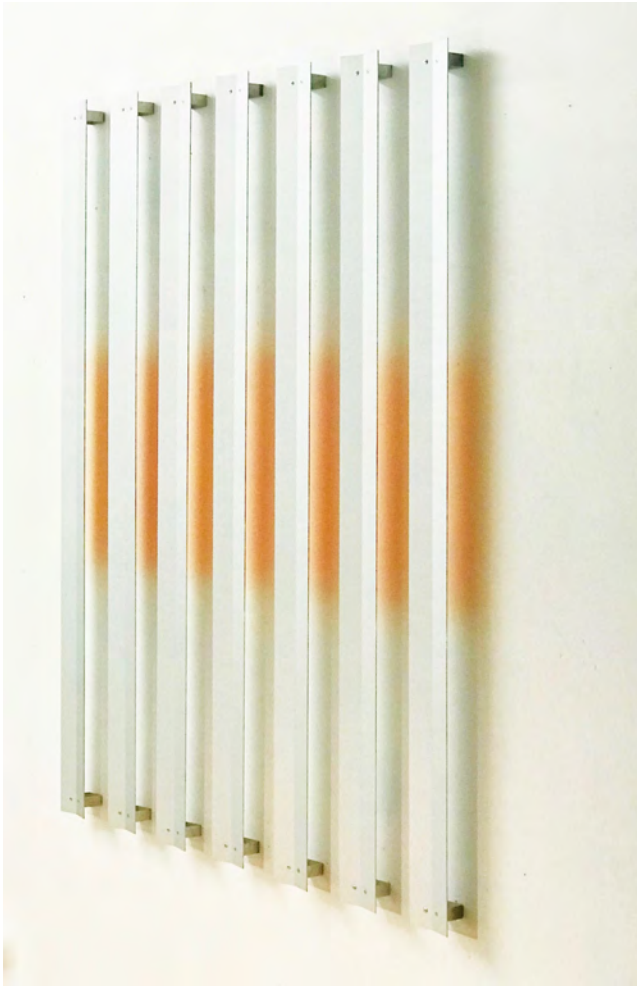
Danica Chappell *Fermata #17* 2016 Tin type, framed 56 x 41 cm

In **Danica Chappell's** photographic works without traditional photography, the resulting images frequently appear to have been built rather than captured. Using almost alchemical combinations of 1850s tintype photo processes, and multiple photogram exposures, there is a consistent layering to the finished works with the thinness and potential emptiness of the traditional photo as 'picture' (silver gelatin or digital) replaced by this idea of it as constructed 'object'. The *Fermata* series offers us something operating not only 'in' but also 'through' time as the photographic medium is made malleable, all via actions and materials as akin to process-driven abstract painting as anything we call 'photography'.



Joyce Huang *Industrial Ink (Black)* 2019 Resin and ink glue 30 x 20 cm (irregular)

If pictures are missing in Danica Chappell's conception of photography, **Joyce Huang** gives us ink painting beyond ink. With *Industrial Ink (BLACK)* 2019 she continues her explorations of literati traditions replacing the meticulously measured use of ink with glacial bodies of resin and pure pigments to create something between sculpture and painting. It's demonstrably free of narrative and yet the aesthetic remains curiously attached to those models of ink, paper, stone and water, no matter the degree to which the pieces in their materials and staging also react to a post-industrial aesthetic. Is she dragging the past forward or is the past dragging her back?



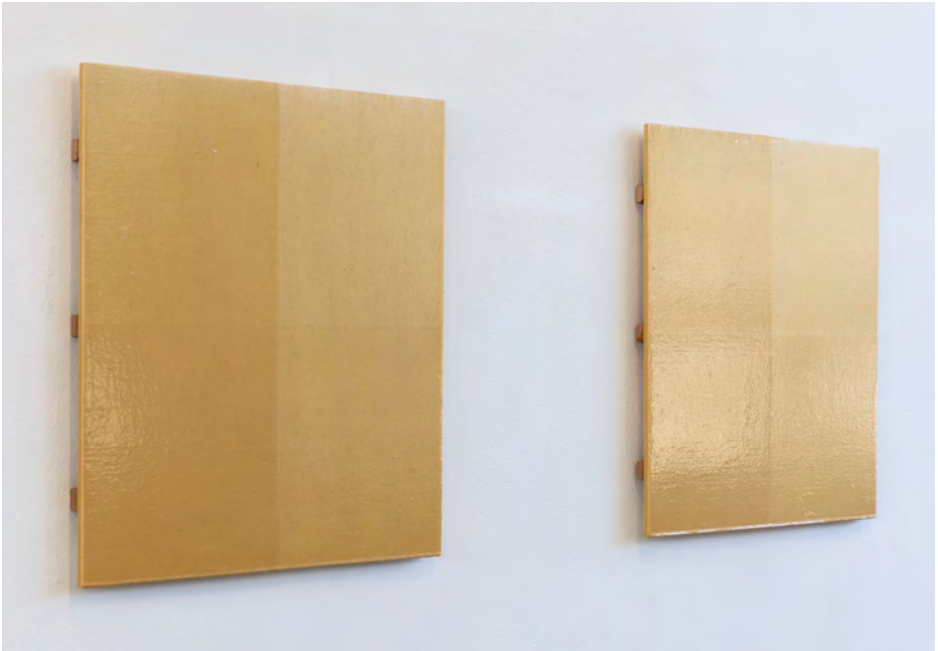
Andrew Leslie *LOOP* 2018 Acrylic polymer on anodized aluminium 120 x 98 cm

For many artists and viewers, geometric abstraction has become associated with the most frontal of painting types in a carefully framed, now historicized, model of itself. Like a number of the artists in this exhibition **Andrew Leslie** takes that potential problem as a catalyst. With his painted objects like *LOOP* 2018 there is an active reversal of any such generic expectations - with the rear of these pieces painted to project abstract form (sometimes text) back onto the supporting wall in real time. In doing so the work becomes larger than itself, embracing the architectural setting, reacting to changing light and viewing angles, so making his *LOOP* very much of this present moment.

The paintings of **Qu Fengguo** typically capture the time of their making in a relentless line-by-line bodily/ocular exercise. The build up of these graphic scaffolds is then allowed to break open via glitches, cuts and bleeds. For *Acts of Reversal* he disassembles the more overtly geometric, hard edge approach of his larger scale canvases, instead making explicit a connection to the organic mark and flow of the calligraphic. Dedication to material and other matters remains with these strokes working with the weft of the paper, creating carefully controlled horizontal fields, within which Qu Fengguo's brush playfully switches between geometric and organic realms.



Qu Fengguo *Untitled* 2019 Acrylic polymer on paper 56.5 x 75.5 cm



Simon Morris *A whole and two halves, two halves and a whole* 2019 Acrylic polymer, canvas and wood
30 x 30 cm each (2 parts)

Simon Morris' neat reversing of compositional decisions between two exact (therefore necessarily inexact) panels, replaces notions of the finished work with a kind of 'stuck in the middle with you' moment. Rather than a timely, sequential start-to-finish reading of the painting as masterful and mastered object we instead get an experience of constant motion, caught up in a dynamic interchange that takes us into a place closer to the actual making of the piece. This undoing of the end moment is further helped along by the use of surface reflection and mirroring, drawing a moving viewer and the temporalities of time and light into service, ensuring that the artwork (and our own work as viewer) is never quite 'done'.



Craig Easton *Chinese Landscape Painting* 2018/19 (detail) Digital print with fluorescent spray paint and acrylic polymer on silver mirror batons 175 x 38 cm

In **Craig Easton's** case the artwork, as object in the landscape, becomes the object of the photograph which then in its way bleeds back out into becoming a painting. This thing is marked as both painted 'in' and 'on' the landscape, while the means and place of making also become the work. The title *Chinese Landscape Painting* alludes to these dualities, as does the use of a vertical scroll format and batons. The constant switching signals a desire for fluidity with a conflation of languages digital, painterly, abstract, realist and otherwise.



Sun Wenguan *Dragon Lane* 2017 Digital print mounted on aluminium 30 x 40 cm;
The Three Imaginations 2017 Oil on cardboard, 15 x 14 cm (irregular)

Sun Wenguan gives us the humblest of little paintings on card. I was never certain if this was a thought bubble, a flying saucer or cloud and rain. I know the answer now but hold onto the initial thought. It makes sense that this question mark of a painting should sit beside a photo work documenting his mammoth *Dragon Lane* project where he took abstraction out into the fields, suggesting to a poor rural community in Guizhou Province that cash-cropping strawberries was a way to improve their lives, whilst getting a giant outdoor abstract light sculpture as part of the deal. For once it's impossible to disentangle the artwork from its real world functionality.

Where Sun Wenguan uses a painting sensibility to materialize abstract form in the landscape, **Alexandra Kennedy** takes on the full scope of abstract painting – working its possibilities through from the inside out. Here in the *Urban Void* series she considers ideas around the holes in space created by electronic and digital technologies, reworking the concept as a curiously physical aesthetic of the void. We watch on as the paintings joyfully stake out an edge territory seesawing between the procedural, material emphasis of non-objective models and high conceptual practice.

This never-quite-finished state of affairs is a constant running through the works gathered for *Acts of Reversal*. Material and immaterial. Lost somewhere on the shelves of Li Nu's *Lonely Library*, floating in the black pools of Joyce Huang's resin, trapped as a ghosted imprint in one of Louise Weaver's surfaces, or out in the fields constructing with Sun Wenguan, we continue our walk through uncertain spaces.

Backwards. Forwards. Side on.

In the end, the 'acts of reversal' that matter most can simply be read as the daily strategies of the artist; small points of resistance to the easily consumed picture or readily answered question. The unraveling that occurs through these acts shouldn't be taken as an inherently negative gesture, more a thoughtful slipping into the gaps between fixed ways of looking, being, saying and doing. It's the stuff that keeps abstraction moving forwards, even if it sometimes goes into reverse to get there.

China. Australia. New Zealand. Australia, China, New Zealand.

I never promised you clarity. Let's hope an art of abstraction never does either.

I'll tell you no lies.

Craig Easton
Shanghai, May 2019



Alexandra Kennedy *Urban Void* 2019 Oil on canvas 76 x 61 cm

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Five Walls

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