

ALEX  
SETON

ROUGHING  
OUT

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Hazelhurst Regional Gallery & Arts Centre





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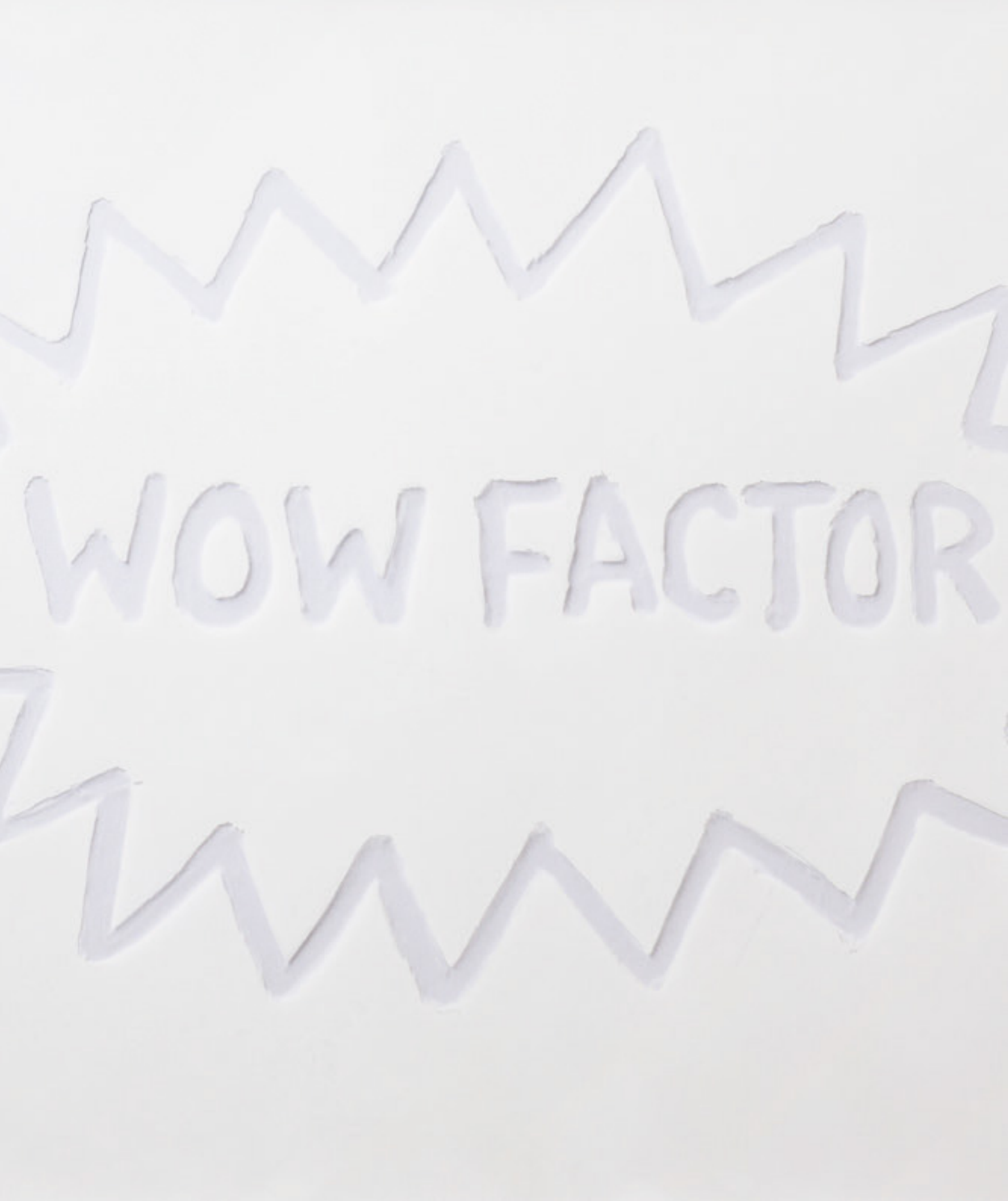
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Dust Hinterglasmaerei 2013 (detail)

## FOREWORD

EDMUND CAPON

A sensibility for the peculiarities, qualities and opportunities of materials is a hallmark of the creative artist or craftsman. It is a sensibility of distinction in the work of Alex Seton. His preferred material has been marble, a stone of subtle possibilities and profound aesthetic fulfilment. He has explored marble with infinite skill and finesse, transforming that hard but often soft-of-texture stone into objects of daily familiarity: a pile of folded cloths, a tent, a hanging T-shirt – soft and pliable items given unexpected status through the firm permanence of marble. Seton has mastered the art of elegant deception in such finely conceived and crafted works. Like Christo wrapping a stone bridge and thereby transforming it into something light and ethereal, Seton has done the reverse, changing our perceptions and enlightening our imaginations about the world around us and all those pedestrian and ordinary things that clutter our lives. There is something very refreshing about seeing the most familiar of things in an entirely new way.

In his recent practice Seton has moved on from the sheer sublimity of such sculptural works to further explore and expand both the opportunities of materials and his own vocabulary. The sense of process, rather than the finished finite object, is now revealed; the contradiction that he formerly presented to us transferred to the real and imagined worlds. Strangely, the ambiguities with which he so clearly loves to challenge and delight us are heightened in these revelations. This, indeed, is the journey of the artist: the artist as the explorer and manipulator of materials, the visualiser of ideas and imagination, and the challenger to the norm. Here we can detect evolution, the journeys of experiment, change and partial resolution, for these new works seem to be less capable of the sublime certainty of those familiar sculptures of the past.

That, however, is the artist's lot, to constantly embark on new journeys that inevitably involve an element of risk and uncertainty. Having long admired the work of Seton and the consummate finality of those familiar sculptures, one is left to ponder: What next? *Roughing Out* is a step forwards in going back to the origins and thus charting the advance of the artistic process and the articulation and revelation of ideas.

My special thanks to Alex Seton for the immense satisfaction and intrigue that his works bring. My thanks also to Belinda Hanrahan for so ably bringing such life and interest to the Hazelhurst Regional Gallery & Arts Centre and, indeed, for inviting me to serve as the Gallery's Patron. While unsure of just what a Patron does, I do it with the greatest pleasure.



01 *The Accursed White Whale*  
2010

02 *RTW I* 2005  
from *We Gotta Get Out of This Place*

## SUBVERTED REALITY

a clothes rack in Seton's 2005 exhibition *We Gotta Get Out of This Place* [02]? Seton offers a suggestion through the exhibition's title, but also through the very materiality of the meticulously re-created T-shirt: the synthetic material of CaesarStone®. Seton stacks pun upon pun, loading the banal with conceptual rigour and elevating it to marble's historic position of esteem.

## GINA FAIRLEY

Growing up in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales, Seton's fascination with marble was seeded by a quarry located down the road from his childhood home, which had the effect of situating the material within the realm of the everyday rather than the revered. It is this foundation of familiarity, paired with his degree in art history and theory (1998), which places Seton's practice foremost in the realm of the conceptual, his phenomenal skill translating his ideas.

Is marble dead? While the success of Alex Seton's practice over the past decade is testament that it is not, in his hands the question is alluring bait for consideration. Our collective perceptions assign marble to the hallowed halls of art history: Greek and Roman classical sculpture and architecture as endowments of wealth, establishment and refined taste. Mythology even sells us the idea that marble, so pure and flesh-like, can steal a man's heart – as described in the Roman poet Ovid's tale of transformation *Metamorphoses X* (AD 8), more commonly known as *Pygmalion*.

02



How then do we read a 1970s-style T-shirt emblazoned with the retro text 'marble is dead' and hung on

Seton turns to process itself to offer that shift: material as an expression of ephemerality, material as a meter for time, material as performance. Are these new ideas for Seton? When we remove the element of awe that characterised his earlier works and begin to map his trajectory to this current exhibition there is a persistence of ideas and objects that assure us of a well-considered premise – the use of text, for example, as well as repetition, draped objects and a theatrically in the staging of his sculptures.

Consider the statement *I was here* (2013) [03], strewn graffiti-like across the floor in Carrara marble. Viewers





03



04

03 *Flaubert's Complaint* 2013

04 *My Concerns Will Outlive Yours* 2011

05 *The Modern Panopticon* 2005

06 *Panopticon* 2004  
series of four

07 *Life is Serious Young Man... Harley Davidson* 2008  
from *On Hold*

are forced to alter their perspective, their path physically interrupted and their eyes grounded. Is the work a celebration of irreverent intervention or simply a delight in banality? It is not the image that we immediately conjure when we think of marble sculpture – and nor are the worn mattresses, traffic barricades and blow-up toys that have featured in Seton's oeuvre. Seton gives a 'lightness' to marble that history denies.

This compulsion to tag generic philosophies finds a connection with Seton's new suite of works made from marble dust which he has settled and arranged white-on-white, placard-style, into a series of dust 'ditties'. He flirts with the idea of the permanency and impermanency of a message and is interested in the slow reveal. We are reminded of his 2004 work *The Modern Panopticon* [05], a marble couch situated on a picturesque outcrop on a jogging path at Bondi's *Sculpture by the Sea* exhibition. The worn cushions of the couch were chiselled with the text 'this is no time to sit around' and 'get up and enjoy the day', directives that interrupt our cognitive patterns. While our compulsion is to sit, we are repealed by a sense of guilt or collective adherence to rules.



05



06

*The Modern Panopticon* relates to an earlier piece, *Panopticon* (2003) [06], an elegant designer bench made from Carrara marble with stainless-steel legs, the surface of the bench marked with the impression or weight of an invisible viewer. Here, Seton captures the fleeting transition between stasis and action. While our first instinct is to read Seton's dust series within his lineage of artworks using text, it is this

other layer of his practice exploring the concepts of time and intervention that is a more intriguing leap between the viewer and the material object.

*The Accursed White Whale* (2010) [01] extends this idea, teasing the viewer through contradiction. A deflated pool toy, it leant against the gallery wall in Seton's 2010 exhibition *Infinitely Near* defying any rational explanation of gravity, its rigid 'objectness' working against its soft reality. Like Seton's half-full glass in *Roughing Out*, is *Infinitely Near* about hope (pregnant with life waiting to be inflated) or deflated dreams?



07

This was not the first time Seton worked with the idea of the residual. His *On Hold* series (2008) [07] features marble dustsheets covering such iconic forms as a Harley Davidson and the Shuttle Endeavour, as well as a grand piano, pram and lawnmower. The objects, although covered, are unmistakable and are either strongly gender-based or the embodiment of societal stereotypes. Yet by veiling them Seton charges them with emotion – with personally triggered recognition. It is the residual of an object that is defined, not the object itself.

There was further historical play at work in *On Hold*. The series references both Man Ray's *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse* (1920) – an ambiguous form wrapped in a blanket and twine, its truth in its intrigue – and Seton's own work *My Concerns Will Outlive Yours* (2011) [04], a sculpture of a cadaver poignantly draped in a flag carved from Wombeyan marble, its truth in its concealment. Seton's prowess at carving fabric pulls our memory back to the *Winged Victory of Samothrace* (190 BC) or the lesser known work *The West Wind* (1876) by American artist Thomas R. Gould depicting a young maiden whose skirt billows with life, its fabric clinging to her body and almost lifting her from her feet. The contrast is stark. Where for Man Ray invisibility is a

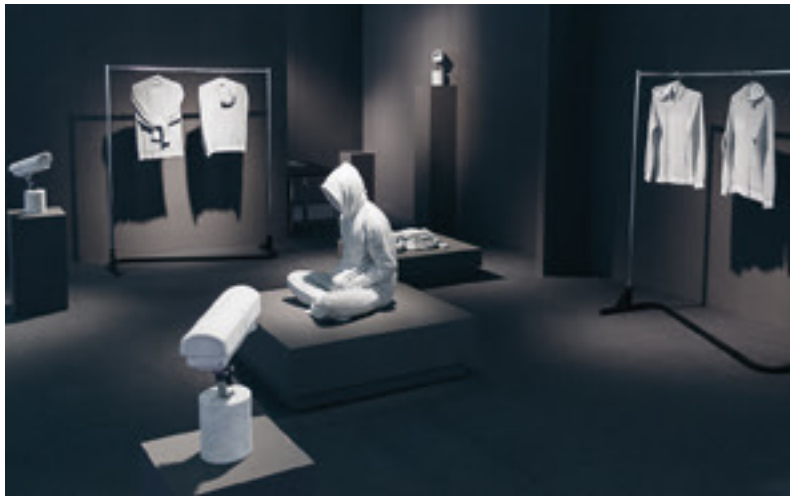




08 *The Bean Bag Suite* 2004  
installation and series of  
6 photographs







09

09 *Elegy on Resistance* 2012  
installation

10 *As of Today* 2011

11 *Soloist* 2012



10

metaphor for ‘enigma’, for Seton it is a malleable tool at once melancholic, political, provocative and playful. He moves marble beyond allegory, using its potency to connect with viewers in their contemporary reality.

Invisibility is a subject Seton approaches with great sensitivity in *As of Today* (2011) [10], an installation of twenty-three folded flags made from marble and tied with rope in ceremonial fashion, and *Six More (since 22/05/2011)* (2011), comprising a further six flags. Carved in Queensland marble subtly toned a skin-like pink, the flags ‘stand in’ for soldiers killed during Australia’s engagement in the war in Afghanistan. Marble has long been the material of gravestones, and through this ongoing critique Seton updates this tradition with a more current reminder.

What is apparent in all of these works is Seton’s use of theatricality and an implied protagonist. Central to *Roughing Out* is *The Recursive Time Machine* (2013), a clear acrylic structure – a hermetically sealed stage if you like – containing a salvaged pantograph machine which makes a marble duplicate of a digital resin print of Seton’s own hand. Indeed, Seton has often described his practice as ‘engaging with the analogue in a digital world’.

Seton has placed the pantograph, an antiquated piece of technology, at the heart of his current work, the idea of banal repetition striking a chord with his past penchant for carving collections of mass-produced objects that garner a presence or sense of monumentality through their replication. The link is best illustrated by his 2004 work *The Bean Bag Suite* [08], an examination of the iconic 1970s beanbag chairs through a trilogy of photography, video and sculpture. For this work Seton sketched a grid on his studio floor – not unlike the Dürer Grid, a 16th-century drawing tool named after Albert Dürer and used by Renaissance artists to replicate compositions. Seton used the grid as a stage upon which he arbitrarily kicked around a beanbag, sending it into flight and then free fall, recording its random sequence of landings in miniature Bianco marble sculptures that are displayed across the gallery floor. The action of the beanbag falling is further suspended in time in a video loop showing the spinning bag seemingly levitating in space, caught between the performative gesture

and the stasis of a photograph. Time is key to this piece.

Traditionally, marble removes time, immortalising the object. What, then, was the function and speed of this repetition? Was it an attempt by Seton to slow down how we engage with the world around us? In Seton’s pantograph and beanbag works we only ever see part of the action, part of the narrative. While Seton appears in his photographs as the protagonist of this game, he is rendered invisible in the video and installation, although his ‘hand’ in the action is implied. It is a delightful conundrum and oscillates between the invisibility mentioned earlier and a broader idea of performance within installation art.



11

Repetition and performance are constants in Seton’s work. As he explains: ‘I want to hit the perceptual reset button so I can engage the critical and conceptual faculties that allow concepts to flow back and forth between the art object and its audience.’ Performance predicates the notion of being watched, of surveillance: topics well explored in Seton’s work. His videos and photographs of police containment made during the APEC summit in Sydney in 2007, for example, sporting titles such as *Water Cannon*, *Bus* [12] and *Line Up* [13], move beyond the object to the theatre of the moment. The most recent act in this play was witnessed by Asia’s art-collecting circles at ArtHK12 (Hong Kong), where Seton presented *Elegy on Resistance* [09], an installation of marble CCTV cameras titled *Quartet 1–4* that seemed to survey the crowd gathering around his seated hooded marble figure *Soloist* [11]. The audience was integral to this work.





12  
13

12 *Bus* 2007 (detail)  
13 *Lineup* 2007 (detail)  
14 *Barrier (proceed about your normal routine)* 2007  
15 *Reverse Garbage* 2005



14

15







16 *Security Blanket* 2007  
installation

17 *Unsettled* 2006

18 *Flags* 2011  
installation

19 *Building Blocks* 2005



The foundation of performance is storytelling. The blur between storytelling and reality is a constant in Seton's work and is superbly illustrated in his sculpture *Reverse Garbage* (2005) [15], a garbage bag carved from highly polished black Belgian marble mimicking the plasticity of the mass-produced item. Its plastic yellow polyethylene ties make the scenario more 'real' in the same way that Seton's pantograph replicas or the contents of his oversized bags of marble rubble are testament to reality. Seton challenges our cognitive processes – what we see – and our compulsion to construct meaning, his work moving beyond mere facsimile or technical efficiency.

Seton's outdoor installation *Unsettled* (2006) [17] uses the same confrontational handle. Made for the Helen Lempriere National Sculpture Award and installed in the grounds of the opulent Werribee Mansion Hotel in Melbourne, Seton's anonymous figure in a sleeping bag could be confused with the homeless people who populate city parks by night.

What this exhibition does is provide a kind of 'release valve', reinstating materiality and humour through the unexpected. The tone of *Unsettled* defines a kind of politically alert evolution that was becoming more prominent in Seton's work. *Security Blanket* (2007) [16], and the exhibitions *Panoply* (2007), *Flags* (2011) [18] and *Elegy on Resistance* (2012), engage with the contentious themes of national security, border control, conflict and institutional force. Simply, Seton's work was turning from the wow factor of a soft object drawn from a hard material to the hardline foundation of ideas within the object. While the sedentary block *Glory Hole* (2013) has a direct lineage to Seton's earlier APEC work *Barrier (proceed about your normal routine)* (2007) [14], its scale and physicality, both obstructive and confrontational, is also sexually overt, its orifice at waist height undeniably charged. Like *My Concerns Will Outlive Yours* and *Unsettled* it presents an emotional challenge to those who encounter it, but one that is fed by wry humour rather than moral positioning.

This subtly laced sexuality is not new to Seton's work. One has only to recall his early sculpture of a pair of women's stiletto boots, *Wear Me (Eve)* (2004), or *Building Blocks* (2005) [19], a sculpture of 'humping'

Lego blocks, white on black, the letter 'L' removed from their branding. These works provoke a visual double take. What are we looking at? Seton breaks down the hierarchy attached to marble, demystifying and de-heroicising it through the replication of unexpected objects, by challenging logic and, more recently, by turning to the 'alchemy of video' to document its mystery.

Working with the geological structure of marble, Seton has used its capacity for metamorphosis as the subject of his new video *The Alchemic Cycle* (2013). Part still-life, part documentary, the video shows, in a continuous loop, the breaking down and reconstitution of a block of marble. Here, the very action overrides the object itself. The work recalls Seton's long interest in time as an architect of the object, and his casting of the viewer in the role of witness, as exemplified in *Elegy on Resistance*.

This returns us to this essay's opening proposition: is marble dead? Quite simply, no, the video loop is infinite. Marble, even in its most obscure derivative in the hands of Seton, sustains contemporary dialogue. As he has explained it: 'The transformation of material becomes a fascinating way to engage the audience.' *Roughing Out* presents an opportunity to review and deepen our experience and understanding of Seton's practice and to consider its future. We can only expect to be further surprised.



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Half 2013 (detail)

ALEX SETON:  
THE RAW, THE COOKED  
AND THE PERFORMATIVE

SAUL OSTROW

Alex Seton is known for his carved marble sculpture. Refined yet eclectic, his works draw attention to their materiality, forms and processes, and to the social, political, philosophical and conceptual ideas to which these may be applied. Over the years, Seton has also recorded his greater understanding of the field in which he toils, and the place of his practice within it. In the past, the form and content of his work has referenced pop, minimalist and conceptual art. Now, his confidence in what he does has led him to focus on the 'else-ness' of his work; those qualities that are taken to be givens, or are considered normative – in this case the performativity (the embodied acts of speech, vision, cognition, presence, labour, etcetera) inherent in his practices as a sculptor and a carver.

Seton's exhibition *Roughing Out* is a response to contemporary concepts of specificity, which are less concerned with the intrinsic qualities of particular artistic mediums and more with how artworks reflect aspects of the sites and conditions of their production and/or distribution. Subsequently, this recent group of works seeks to expose the unstated, unintended or unacknowledged conditions through which his works speak for and of the conditions they may come to be understood. Seton addresses this aspect of his work in a paradoxically self-referential manner, using his practice as a carver to interrogate their collective

and individual identities as works of art that are the product of craft, technology and culture that his work explicitly and implicitly depends upon and displays.

*Roughing Out* can be understood as a representation of the expressive actions that Seton psychologically and physically deploys in establishing his work (sculpture) as a definable and recognisable entity relative to other material and immaterial 'things'. The marble sculptures, video installation and performance and its residue presented in this exhibition can therefore be understood as a reaffirmation, in a contemporary context, of the viability of media specificity, traditional skills and their resulting objects. In this way Seton gives expression to and tests Nietzsche's argument that 'things' are inherently self-contradictory in that there is always a conflict between the general defining qualities and the specific manner in which they come to be manifested – as such, the viability of a given thing or act only makes sense if it can be re-evaluated, devalued or re-valued under differing conditions.

The title *Roughing Out*, like many of Seton's titles, signals that we should be aware of the potential vagaries of language – a notion that, in part, underlies his entire project. With its reference to the carver's practice of beginning a work by initially blocking out its broad forms, *Roughing Out* could imply that the works in Seton's exhibition are unfinished. Given that all the works in the show are complete in every detail, the title instead refers to the shift in Seton's oeuvre that the exhibition represents – namely, his first attempt at broadly rendering his interest in the ideas of self-referentiality, language, artistic gesture and technology that inform his practice.

There is something slyly Duchampian about Seton's work. Together, the works (and their titles) in *Roughing Out* form a catalogue of the varied aspects of Seton's practice and its production, and of his sense of identity. This is most apparent in the performance/tableau *The Recursive Time Machine* (2013) in which he seems to identify with a pantograph machine because its manufacturer's name (G. H. Alexander) mirrors his own. Similarly, the austere post-minimalist aesthetics of *Glory Hole*, which given that little traditional skill

has been expended in producing this work combined with its title, might be understood as referencing both the sense of importance Seton derives from what he does, as well as identifying it with an anonymous sexual act.

Like the American illusionists Penn & Teller, who begin their act by explaining the secrets to their tricks, Seton sets out to ‘undo’ the illusion that threatens to make his work a vehicle for deception. By using his skills to incongruous or unforeseen ends, he demonstrates that the trick is in its performance, not in its mechanics. Relative to this notion of making apparent what is operative, Seton uses strategies similar to those used in the late 1960s by the artist Bruce Nauman who, employing ironic, literal and recursive discourses, called attention to the material, phenomenal and linguistic conditions that circumscribe his work. Seton, in *The Recursive Time Machine* and the video work *The Alchemic Cycle*, uses these strategies to demonstrate the innate conflicts that exist between a thing, its production and its content (meaning the various issues or questions it responds to).

In *The Recursive Time Machine* an old pantograph milling machine manufactured, as previously mentioned, by G. H. Alexander and dubbed the ‘Alexander machine’, is placed inside in a plexiglass cube where it mechanically carves marble reproductions of digitally generated, life-size three-dimensional plastic ‘prints’ of Seton’s hands. The machine’s stylus is guided over the plastic forms, the resulting marble carvings half-size and three-quarter-size in scale. In a reverse genealogy this work tells the story of how technology replicates and standardises craft, as well as how more efficient means of production (the mechanical and now the digital) have come to displace the bodily. In a manner similar to the work of artist Jannis Kounellis, *The Recursive Time Machine*, with its use of the antique, explores the notion that art does not proceed merely from the artist’s practice and skills, but rather is instantiated by the object’s engagement with the varied networks of symbolic play, speech acts and art’s institutional history.

*The Alchemic Cycle* comprises looped video footage of the destruction and reconstitution of

a block of marble. The video’s production standards are a cross between an industrial how-to video and an artist’s video documenting a process-based work. The destruction of the marble block begins with Seton using a hammer to smash the block into dust (debris), which is then collected and baked in a kiln. The resulting powder (lime) is mixed with more debris and slaked with water to make white cement, which is poured into a mould made from the original block. The result is a casting of what appears to be a block of marble. Put simply, the work seems to document Seton destroying a block of marble only to make what appears to be a similar block of marble; a process that negates the labour, resources and technology he has utilised. The video (and the marble block Seton produces) focus our attention on the value of the labour and skill expended by some anonymous quarry worker in the production of the artist’s raw materials; on the idea that the sculpture is already contained within the block, à la Michelangelo; and on the possibility that the original marble block is always already a sculpture. But if we take the title of the work into account, Seton suggests that what the artist brings to the table is their search for the philosopher’s stone, which will turn base material (marble) into gold (art).

If we understand *The Recursive Time Machine* and *The Alchemic Cycle* to be parenthetical, then the other works presented in *Roughing Out* come to sit within the boundaries of the endless loop of production and reiteration, and the search for the transformative. These in their aspiration to Brechtian transparency permit him to extrapolate the varied conditions, terms and practices by which he constructs his diverse narratives and commentaries. Accordingly, rather than being ends in themselves, the objects he produces are revealed to be a medium – literally, a means of conveyance. In this context *Half* (2013) and *Recycle Bags* (2013), exist simultaneously as a representation of his virtuosity as well as a deceptive staging of Seton’s ideas concerning the interplay between mimetic representation, metaphor (symbolic signification) and analogy (analytic comparison).

*Half* is made from a single block of marble that has a natural fault running through it. Seton has carved a glass of milk from one half the block and,



from the other, a milk container whose surface displays the sheen of condensation. The rubble generated from carving these objects has been used to fill a stack of identical milk glasses that are installed in proximity to the carvings. A complementary work is *Half Full* (2013), which consists of a form carved in white marble that corresponds to the volume of the top portion of a standard tapered drinking glass. When placed in the glass, the form resembles milk levitating, making the glass half-full. Correspondingly, we might imagine the glasses in *Half* to be half-empty. There is a similar play between the real and the illusionary in the work *Recycle Bags*, a marble carving of a large recycling bag accompanied by an actual recyclable bag, which contains the leftover rubble from making the carving.

By juxtaposing the actual and its representation these works may be considered as constituting a critique of trompe l’oeil by operatively permitting us to see the realness of the sculpture rather than merely what it images. Subsequently, one is left with the sense that each of these works is haunted by the liminal specter of the others, as well as each having a doppelganger (an unapproachable duplicate self) in the real world. As such, these apparitions and real-world others put into question the identity of each work.

In *Dust Hinterglasmalerei* (2013) Seton again recycles the byproduct generated by his carving technique. In this case he uses it to produce a series of word-images comparable to the word paintings of artist Ed Ruscha in that their graphic (and material) appearance is as important as their meaning or message. In *Dust Hinterglasmalerei* the words, written in dust, are held in place by a sheet of plexiglass; it makes explicit the playfulness underlying Seton’s practice. The phrases Seton uses are readymade and often clichéd expressions, such as song lyrics, and include: ‘Time is on my side’, ‘Making it up as I go along’, ‘I’m concerned these words will not last’, ‘I just need a little more time’ and ‘I was here’. Many of these phrases have their origins in random notes Seton has scrawled on his studio whiteboard since 2004.

In the context of *Roughing Out*, the phrases in *Dust Hinterglasmalerei* ostensibly appear as if they are meant

to give us access to the artist’s random thoughts and musings, drawing out the words that come to his mind as his body is preoccupied (trapped) in the task of producing. Therefore the works constitute an act of ventriloquism, as though they were spoken by the artist and project his cynicism, doubt, vanity and bravado. This question of attitude brings us to *Glory Hole*, in which Seton implies that what he derives from the act of creation is sexual pleasure experienced as an act of self-gratification and validation. The work – in which a drilled out, dust-covered phallic core lies on the floor beside a rough block of marble with a hole carved into it at crotch height – conjures up images of masculine singularity, as well as the notion of the artist engaged, through his work, in illicit acts of promiscuity.

Although many of the themes articulated in *Roughing Out* concerning process, representation and language have been embedded in Seton’s previous practice, his present exploration of the performative nature of his work and processes conveys how each quality he articulates contains essential information as to the character of the whole, with the whole, in turn, having a character of its own. This results in this group of works that index relative to his media the corpus of his sculptural work by metaphorically and analogously re-presenting the freedom, challenges and limits he faces. Subsequently, Seton’s works set in motion a vast game of accessible and esoteric quotes and appropriations that reference the complex self-reflexivity of their conception and realisation as objects of self-expression, experience and knowledge.

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Saul Ostrow is an independent critic and curator based in New York. In 2011 he founded 21STPROJECTS to sponsor viewings of artists’ works and, in 2012, LaTableRonde, which organises unmoderated roundtable discussions on cultural issues. Since 1987 has been the art editor for *BOMB* magazine and was the editor of the book series *Critical Voices in Art, Theory and Culture*, as well as co-editor of *Lusitania Press* (1996–2004). He has curated more than 70 exhibitions in the United States and abroad.



*The Alchemic Cycle* 2013 (still)

ARTIST'S MARBLE OR  
PHILOSOPHER'S STONE?  
(RECLAIMING ALCHEMY)

KATE BRITTON

THE ALCHEMIC CYCLE

*Roughing Out* is one of Alex Seton's most ambitious exhibitions to date, in both scale and scope. The finely carved objects that have earned him acclaim in the past are represented, sure. But *Roughing Out* sees the artist expansive, embracing a nomadic holism anchored by the materiality of stone.

Marble is no longer merely soft, folded, living or airy. It is also performance, alterity, temporality and waste. One work in particular embodies these new experiential frontiers. The single-channel video work *The Alchemic Cycle* (2013) presents the artist engaged in the seemingly Sisyphean task of transforming a block of marble into a block of cement via (al)chemical processes.

We begin with the raw material – a white cube – and watch as it is pounded into a fine dust, cooked in a kiln, slaked with water, poured into a mould and reset into a second white cube, identical in size and shape to the first and yet materially altered via what is essentially a chemical process. At this point the video loops, creating a visual synapse between the two blocks. It is a simple formula: *pound, cook, slake, pour, set, repeat*.

At first glance this work could be read in relation to the act of art making itself – an endless undertaking laid ambiguously between the original/naturally occurring and

the (re)produced, between creation and representation. But that would be to ignore the complex material and chemical processes being performed, the teasing out of unrealised capacity or potential that the work lays bare.

Marble is metamorphic in its constitution; it comes into being via the metamorphism of sedimentary carbonate rocks undergoing a solid-state change that results in an interlocking mosaic of carbonate crystals commonly referred to as marble. In this light, *The Alchemic Cycle* is in fact a work of undoing, a reversal of its ontogenetic moment. Seton's title, however, hints at significance beyond the physical properties of the stone. In evoking alchemy, he implicates himself.

AS ABOVE SO BELOW

A proto-science that contributed to the development of modern chemistry and other sciences, alchemy was widely practised across three continents for some four millennia. With the emergence of more rigorous experimental methods from the 18th century onwards, it was gradually relegated to esoteric spiritual practices and sugary Paulo Coehlo novels.

Seton's *The Alchemic Cycle* plays this history off against itself; while certainly a traditional alchemic practice, the formal and minimal aesthetic of the video negates the cabbalistic or occult overtones favoured in contemporary portrayals of the alchemist's labour. Instead, we see the craftsman at work, as much an instrument of change as the mallet, the kiln and the water.

For many, alchemy represents a relatively restricted set of goals: the transmutation of common metals into gold; the creation of a panacea; and the discovery of a universal solvent. In the physical realm, gold represented the most perfect of all metals, the attainment of an elevated state through transmutation. This



characterisation of alchemy as a purely physical undertaking, however, eschews a long tradition of Hermetic or spiritual alchemy.

In each of the three distinct branches of alchemic practice (Islamic, Indian and western), a close relation to the spiritual is evident. The 17th-century alchemist Pierre-Jean Fabre describes this spiritual dimension thus: ‘Alchemy is not merely an art or a science to teach metallic transmutation, so much as a true and solid science that teaches how to know the centre of all things; which in the divine language is called the Spirit of Life.’<sup>1</sup>

The implication of Fabre’s assessment is that in learning how to transmute substances such as metal (or marble), we are also able to understand changes in our selves. In other words, material and spiritual changes are closely intertwined, comparable because of their unity. In the 18th-century German Romanticist Novalis’s formulation: ‘We will understand the world when we understand ourselves; for it and we are inseparable halves of one whole.’<sup>2</sup>

The methods for achieving transmutation – either physical or spiritual – are complex and mysterious; the history of alchemy veiled and secretive, full of symbolism and codes. As the practice lost favour, this secrecy was largely dismissed as charlatanism, cheap trickery. But Seton’s work seems to be telling us that perhaps there is still something to be reclaimed from alchemy’s potted history.

Seton’s practice can be interestingly situated within this expanded materialism, in which asking what makes a common metal turn to gold, or marble turn to aerated concrete, is not so different from asking what makes a person achieve spiritual growth, or what makes an artist turn from sculptural to performative practice. In fact, the two questions may share more in common than they appear to, and it is their relation that Seton asks us to attend to. Likewise, the mystery inherent in alchemical texts and teachings could be read as critical to its operations, their deliberate eschewing of linearity, logic and clarity seeking to elicit the break in normal mental operations that attends revelation. Like Zen masters and their koan riddles, alchemic texts seek to trigger understanding through an unbalancing of the intellect or senses. Like the somatic jolt that we experience in the moment of realisation that Seton’s marble beds, sofas and beanbags will not, in fact, accommodate us, thus the koan seek to disturb our expectations.

To what extent does this also ring true with Seton’s *The Alchemic Cycle*? The central question raised by this work seems to be about difference and repetition. It asks us to consider the extent to which the marble has really been altered. Although we watch a physical change taking place over time, the final frame of the video bleeds back into its origins, bringing home just how little the block differs physically despite its alteration. Is this change internal or external? And what exactly is it that is undergoing the change?

Seton, the contemporary alchemist, is classically ambiguous. *Roughing Out* as a whole shares this speculative character, inhabited by works that examine the nature of the artist’s beloved marble and through this the artist himself and, to some extent, his output. The works operate – like alchemy – around thresholds and limits: between mind and matter, artistic object and process, waste and use, performance and its trace, and at each of their limits.

#### ONE HAND CLAPPING

Alchemy’s project of finding unity between the material and the spiritual resonates with contemporary life. Affect theory and, subsequently, the so-called performative turn, have both approached an expanded materialism in which, like alchemy, the world, our bodies and the mind are all made up of the same stuff in different forms and with different functions and relations.

1. S. K. de Rola, *Alchemy: The Secret Art*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1973, p 8.

2. *ibid.* p 14.



PERFORMING ECOLOGIES

Viewed in concert with the rest of *Roughing Out*, the task of *The Alchemic Cycle* seems clearer – to complicate not only our perception of Seton’s marble medium, but also of his artistic practice more generally. What is on display is not an exhibition of artistic objects so much as an artistic ecology, the interrelated and inseparable aspects of a united practice situated in a particular time and place.

The inclusion of waste items (*Recycle Bags* 2013), carving dust (*Dust Hinterglasmalerei* 2013) and incidental marks (*A Thousand Cuts* 2013) speak to the politics of what is visible and invisible in art, and what demarcates the limits of the artistic. The carved glory hole (*Glory Hole* 2013) not only represents a physical threshold, it questions the artist’s motives – is artistic production social or self-gratifying, sublime or base? Likewise, the glasses half-full with milky marble (*Half Full* 2013) seem intent on subverting the age-old aphorism – the glass being visibly both half-empty and half-full.

Ecology is the study of relations, the study not of states but of the interaction of forces that condition states. If *Roughing Out* represents a kind of meta-ecology exploring the conditions of production for Seton’s work more generally, *The Alchemic Cycle* is at the opposite end of the spectrum. It is ecology of the microscopic, in which artist plus mallet plus stone plus force plus water plus kiln plus slaking equals a change imperceptible to the naked eye and yet materially actual. The video’s tight unwavering frame exists to remind us that, in this particular field, each force plays equally and functions in unity to produce the work.

Of all the works in *Roughing Out*, *The Alchemic Cycle* is the one that perhaps makes most explicit this project of unity (and ecology). In conditioning the chemical change in the marble, Seton materially demonstrates a potential that was lying dormant in the stone the whole time, a capacity to differ-from-itself while aesthetically repeating. Given the right conditions, a particular ecology or a moment in time, we can witness something as seemingly fixed as marble take on another form, visible to the untrained eye or not.

Positioned among the artistic ephemera of Seton’s practice, *The Alchemic Cycle* is a work that begs the question that perhaps all art is or should be asking: What does it take to induce the moment of transition; the realisation of hidden capacity? Alchemically, this equates to asking: What does it take to change a spirit? In *Roughing Out*, Seton produces a utopian refrain in suggesting that the production of art itself is the answer to this age-old question. Perhaps the philosopher’s stone has been right in front of our eyes the whole time.

—  
Kate Britton is a freelance arts writer, administrator and consultant based in Sydney. She currently works with Kaldor Public Art Projects; Underbelly Arts; Art Month; the College of Fine Arts (COFA), University of New South Wales; and Das Platforms. She is also a PhD candidate at the National Institute for Experimental Art at COFA, and co-founder of Albert Tucker Slow Coffee, a pop-up café project staged in arts spaces.







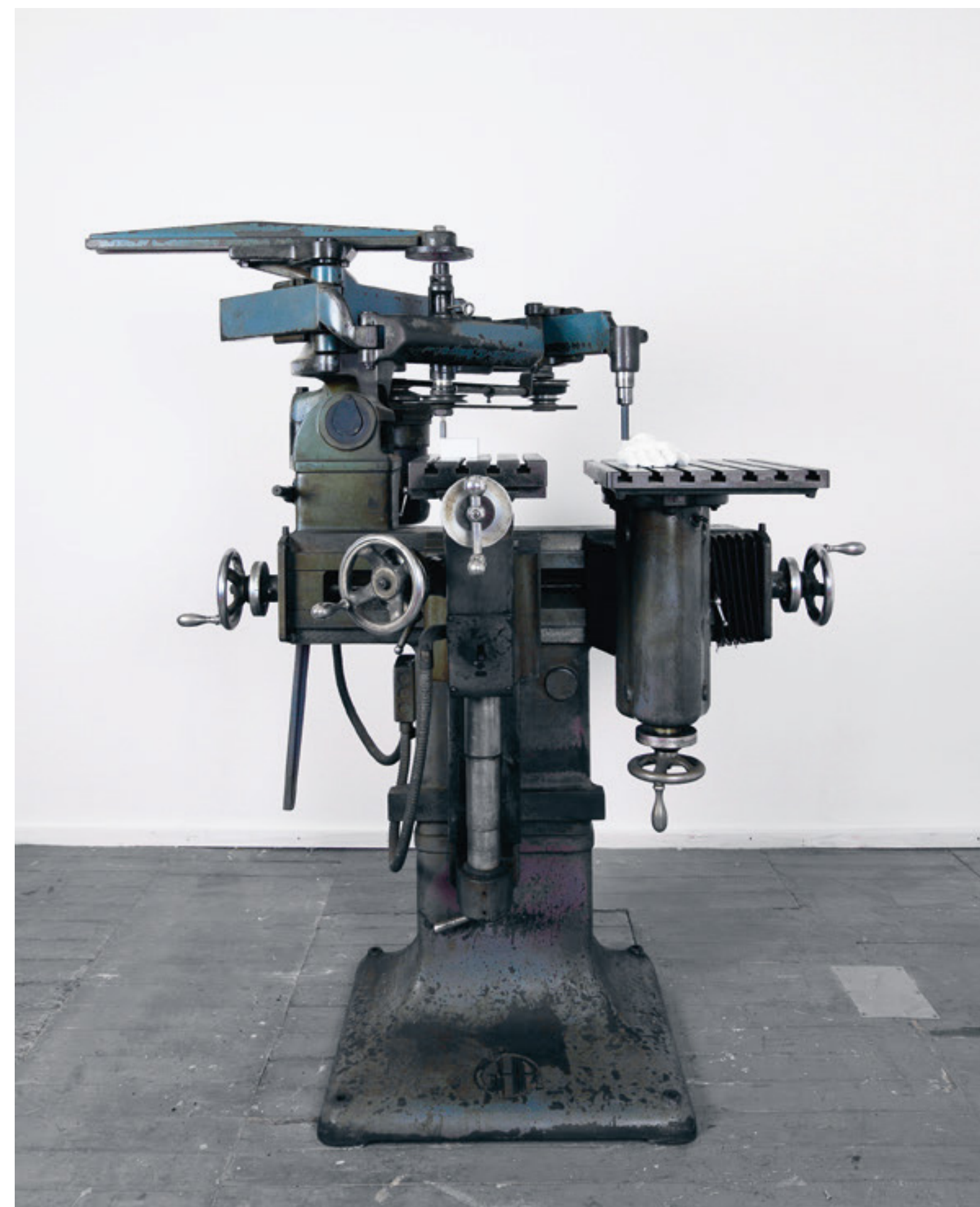
THE RECURSIVE TIME MACHINE  
2013

PERFORMANCE BY THE ARTIST  
REPRODUCING HIS RIGHT HAND  
WITH A PANTOGRAPH MACHINE,  
DIGITAL RESIN PRINTS AND MARBLE  
INSIDE A PLEXIGLASS BOX

200 X 200 X 200 CM

















GLORY HOLE  
2013

WOMBEGAN MARBLE,  
CORE AND DUST FROM DRILLING,  
HARDWOOD

110 X 120 X 50 CM









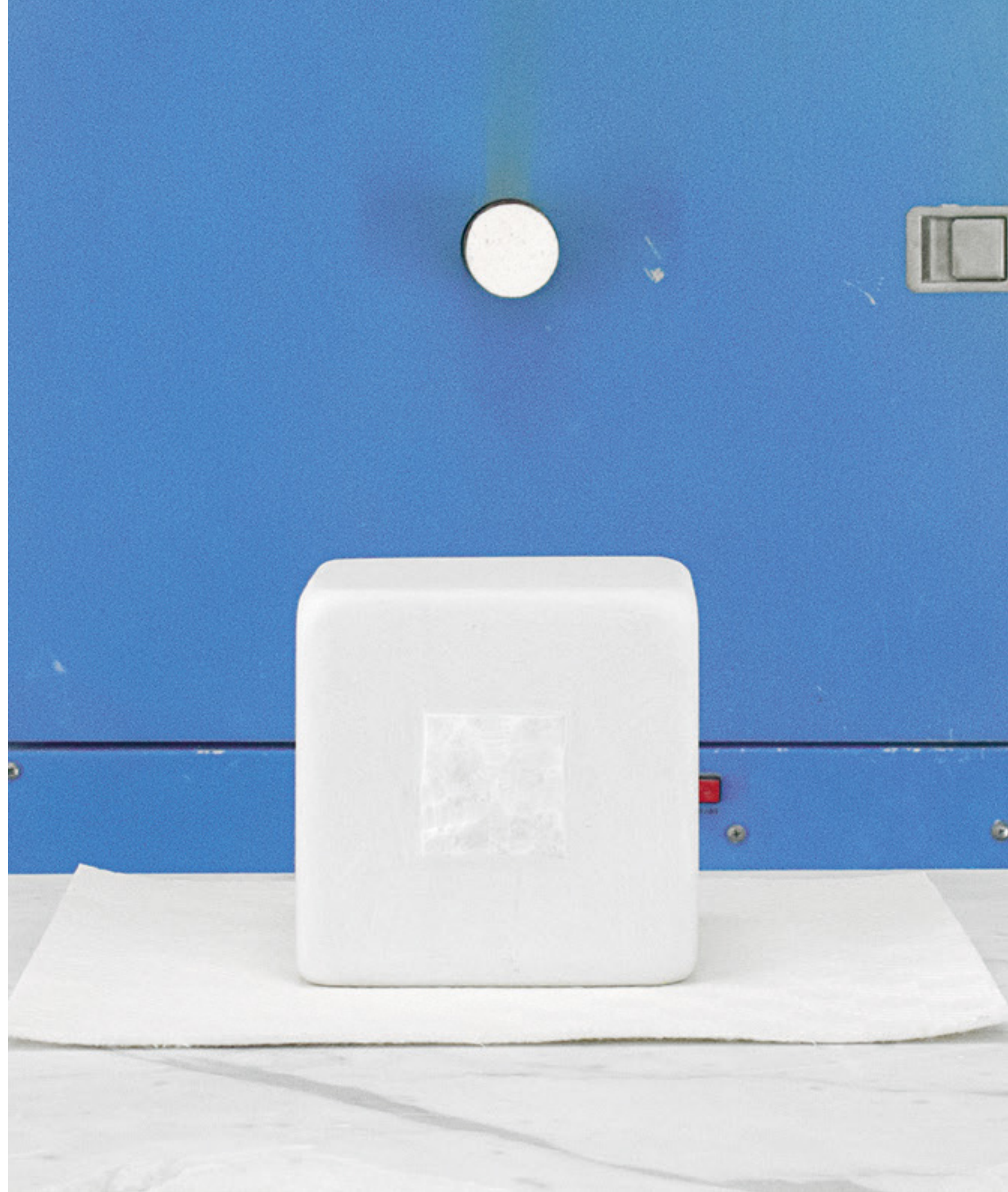






THE ALCHEMIC CYCLE  
2013

HD VIDEO, INFINITELY LOOPED

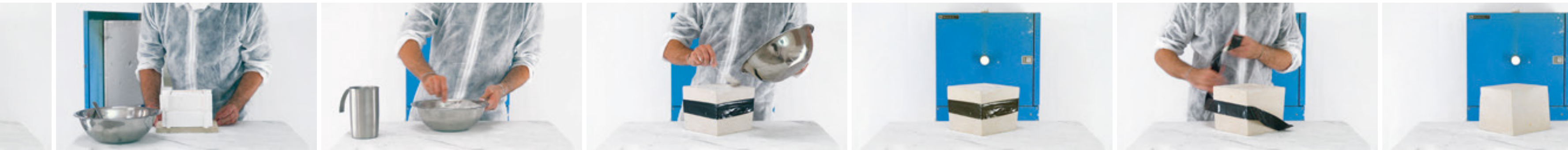


















HALF  
2013

STATUARIO MARBLE,  
315 DURALEX GLASSES AND  
DUST FROM THE CARVING

MARBLE:  
56 X 39 X 55 CM, 73 X 39 X 40 CM  
GLASSES AND DUST:  
DIMENSIONS VARIABLE





















DUST HINTERGLASMALEREI  
2013

12 WORKS  
REVERSE DRAWING IN MARBLE DUST  
ON ACRYLIC

56 X 56 CM EACH





I JUST NEED  
A LITTLE  
MORE TIME

MAKING IT UP  
AS I GO ALONG

DONE.

WASTING TIME..

I'M CONCERNED  
THESE WORDS  
WILL NOT LAST







HALF FULL  
2013

STATUARIO MARBLE AND  
DURALEX GLASS

12.5 X 7.7 X 7.5 CM



















ROUGHING OUT  
LIST OF WORKS

—  
*The Recursive Time Machine* 2013  
Performance by the artist reproducing  
his right hand with a pantograph machine,  
digital resin prints and marble inside a  
plexiglass box  
200 x 200 x 200 cm

*Glory Hole* 2013  
Wombeyan marble, core and dust from  
drilling, hardwood  
110 x 120 x 50 cm

*The Alchemic Cycle* 2013  
HD video, infinitely looped

*Half* 2013  
Statuario marble, 315 Duralex glasses  
and dust from the carving  
marble: 56 x 39 x 55 cm, 73 x 39 x 40 cm  
glasses and dust: dimensions variable

*Dust Hinterglasmalerei* 2013  
suite of 12 individually titled works  
*I was here*  
*I just need a little more time*  
*Making it up as I go along*  
*Done.*  
*Wasting time..*  
*I'm concerned these words will not last*  
*Time is on my side*  
*Can I lick your windows?*  
*It's all G' baby!*  
*Wow factor*  
*Don't sneeze*  
*Recreating the conditions under which*  
*I thrive*  
reverse drawing in marble dust on acrylic  
56 x 56 cm each

*Half Full* 2013  
Statuario marble and Duralex glass  
12.5 x 7.7 x 7.5 cm

*A Thousand Cuts* 2013  
wood (studio tabletop of the artist 2001–11)  
60 x 100 cm

*Recycle Bags* 2013  
Wombeyan marble, nylon bag and rubble  
110 x 100 x 100 cm

ILLUSTRATIONS

—  
Unless stated otherwise the following works  
are held in private collections.

01\_ *The Accursed White Whale* 2010  
Bianca marble, 155 x 68 x 12 cm

02\_ *RTW I* 2005  
from *We Gotta Get Out of This Place*  
CaesarStone® and stainless steel  
85 x 52 x 10 cm

03\_ *Flaubert's Complaint* 2013  
Bianca marble  
25 x 14 x variable cm

04\_ *My Concerns Will Outlive Yours* 2011  
Wombeyan marble, eyelets and halyard  
28 x 75 x 155 cm  
Art Gallery of South Australia

05\_ *The Modern Panopticon* 2005  
Bianca marble  
80 x 100 x 200 cm

06\_ *Panopticon* 2004  
series of four  
Bianco Peak marble  
55 x 50 x 155 cm

07\_ *Life is Serious Young Man\_Harley Davidson* 2008 from *On Hold*  
Bianca marble  
35 x 30 x 72 cm

08\_ *The Bean Bag Suite* 2004  
installation at Maunsell Wickes @ BSG,  
Sydney and series of 6 photographs  
Bianca marble: 55 x 200 x 600 cm  
Giclee prints: 60 x 112 cm (p 12), 30 x 56 cm  
each (p 13)

09\_ *Elegy on Resistance* 2012  
installation at ArHK12

10\_ *As of Today* 2011  
Queensland pearl marble  
dimensions variable

11\_ *Soloist* 2012  
Bianca Carrara marble  
95 x 75 x 70 cm

12\_ *Bus* 2007 (detail)  
Giclee print  
61 x 79 cm  
National Gallery of Australia

13\_ *Lineup* 2007 (detail)  
Giclee print  
61 x 79 cm  
National Gallery of Australia

14\_ *Barrier (proceed about your normal routine)* 2007  
installation at Chalk Horse, Sydney  
Bianca marble  
75 x 56.5 x 925 cm

15\_ *Reverse Garbage* 2005  
Belgian marble and polyethylene ribbon  
70 x 50 x 50 cm

16\_ *Security Blanket* 2007  
installation at Jan Murphy Gallery, Brisbane

17\_ *Unsettled* 2006  
Wombeyan marble  
45 x 75 x 200 cm

18\_ *Flags* 2011  
installation at Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney

19\_ *Building Blocks* 2005  
Bianco Peak marble and Portoro marble  
20 x 38 x 11 cm



Recycle Bags 2013  
work in progress at the artist's studio

ALEX SETON

Born 1977 Sydney  
Lives Sydney

–

1998  
Bachelor of Art Theory  
College of Fine Arts  
University of New South Wales, Sydney

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

–

2013  
Wynne Prize, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney  
*Gravity of Sculpture: Part II*, Dorsky Gallery  
Curatorial Programs, New York, USA  
*Speak to Me*, Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney

–

2012  
*Look Closely Now*, Lake Macquarie Regional Gallery, Lake Macquarie  
*Variable Truth*, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney  
SSFA12, Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney

–

2011  
*Arboreal*, Macquarie University Gallery, Sydney  
*Double Vision*, McClelland Gallery and Sculpture Park, Langwarrin  
*Pat Corrigan/Collector*, Maitland Art Gallery, Maitland  
*WATTLE*, Cat Street Gallery, Hong Kong  
SSFA11, Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney  
*Art Stage Singapore*, Sullivan+Strumpf, Marina Bay Sands, Singapore

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

–

2012  
*Six More*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra  
*Elegy on Resistance*, ArHK12, Sullivan+Strumpf, Hong Kong Exhibition and Convention Centre, Hong Kong

–

2011  
*Flags*, Lismore Regional Gallery, Lismore  
*Flags*, Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney  
*Flag*, Jan Murphy Gallery, Brisbane

–

2010  
*Infinitely Near*, Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney

–

2009  
*Assembly*, Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney  
*Supplementary Restraint System*, Jan Murphy Gallery, Brisbane

–

2008  
*On Hold*, Jan Murphy Gallery, Melbourne Art Fair, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne  
*Memeoid*, Chalk Horse, Sydney

–

2007  
*Panoply*, Chalk Horse, Sydney  
*Security Blanket*, Jan Murphy Gallery, Brisbane

–

2005  
*Stay on Message*, Maunsell Wickes @ BSG, Sydney  
*We Gotta Get Out of this Place*, Jan Murphy Gallery, Brisbane

–

2004  
*New Works*, Maunsell Wickes @ BSG, Sydney

–

2010  
*SO Contemporary*, Jackson See Collection: A Snapshot, Praxis Space, Singapore  
*ARTHK10*, Sullivan+Strumpf, Hong Kong Exhibition and Convention Centre, Hong Kong  
SSFA10, Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney  
*Two Degrees of Separation*, Satori Gallery, New York, USA  
*Woollahra Small Sculpture Prize*, 10th anniversary, Manly Regional Art Gallery, Sydney

–

2009  
*Artlive*, Chair and the Maiden Gallery, New York, USA  
*Woollahra Small Sculpture Prize*, Woollahra Council Chambers, Woollahra  
SSFA09, Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney

–

2008  
*Step Right Up!*, Albury Regional Art Gallery, Albury  
*Sculpture 08*, Maunsell Wickes Gallery, Sydney  
*Woollahra Small Sculpture Prize*, Woollahra Council Chambers, Sydney

–

2007  
*Arc Biennale: Art, Design and Craft*, Queensland University of Technology Art Museum, Brisbane  
*Replicotta Warriors*, Chalk Horse, Sydney  
*Sculpture 07*, Maunsell Wickes @ BSG, Sydney

–

2006  
*New Social Commentaries 2006*, Warrnambool Art Gallery, Warrnambool  
*Sculpture by the Sea*, Sydney  
*Flamin' Youth*, Orange Regional Gallery, Orange  
*Helen Lempriere National Sculpture Award*, Werribee  
*Sculpture by the Sea*, Perth  
*Artists Against Sedition Laws*, Casula Powerhouse, Sydney



–

2005  
*McClelland Sculpture Survey and Award*,  
McClelland Gallery and Sculpture Park,  
Langwarrin  
*Woollahra Small Sculpture Prize*, Woollahra  
Council Chambers, Sydney  
*10th Anniversary Exhibition*, Jan Murphy  
Gallery, Brisbane  
*Sculpture 2005*, Maunsell Wickes @ BSG,  
Sydney

–

2004  
*Sculpture by the Sea*, Sydney  
*The Year in Art*, S. H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney  
*Sculpture 2004*, Maunsell Wickes @ BSG,  
Sydney

–

2003  
*Sculpture by the Sea*, Sydney

–

2002  
*Sculpture by the Sea*, Sydney  
*Thursday Plantation East Coast Sculpture  
Exhibition*, Ballina

AWARDS & PRIZES

–

2012  
Art OMI Australia, Art OMI International Artists  
Residency, New York, USA

–

2009  
*Woollahra Small Sculpture Prize*, Sydney  
*Sculpture by the Sea*, Art Gallery of New  
South Wales Director's Choice Award, Sydney  
*Prometheus Visual Arts Award*, The  
Prometheus Foundation, Gold Coast

–

2007  
Hanyu International Sculpture Cup,  
Shenzhen, China

–

2006  
*Helen Lempriere Sculpture Award*,  
People's Choice Award, Melbourne

–

2005  
*Woollahra Small Sculpture Prize*,  
People's Choice Award, Sydney

–

2004  
*Sculpture by the Sea*, Art Gallery of  
New South Wales Director's Choice Award,  
Sydney  
The Riverview Art Prize, Sydney

–

2003  
*Sculpture by the Sea*, Art Gallery of  
New South Wales Director's Choice Award,  
Sydney  
*Sculpture by the Sea*, John Fairfax Young  
Artist's Subsidy, Sydney

–

2002  
*Sculpture by the Sea*, The Australian  
Unrepresented Sculptor Award, Sydney  
*Sculpture by the Sea*, The Young Sculptor's  
Honourable Mention, Sydney  
*The Sculptors Society*, Sydney, second prize

COLLECTIONS

–

Albury Regional Gallery, Albury  
Artbank  
Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide  
Art Gallery Society of New South Wales,  
Sydney  
ARTS ACT, Canberra  
Australian War Memorial, Canberra  
Canberra Civic Collection, Canberra  
Danish Royal Art Collection, Copenhagen,  
Denmark  
Fidelity Worldwide Investment, Hong Kong  
and Sydney  
HBO Collection, New York, USA  
Lane Cove Municipal Council, Sydney  
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra  
Newcastle Art Gallery, Newcastle  
Patrick Corrigan Collection, Sydney  
St Ignatius College Collection, Sydney  
University of Queensland Art Museum, Brisbane  
Private collections, Australia and overseas

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Alex Seton: Roughing Out

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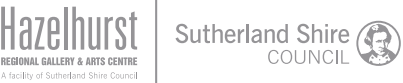
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2013

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**Sam McAdam:** *On Hold* 2008  
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**Silversalt:** *I Was Here* 2013; *The Recursive Time Machine* 2013; *Dust Hinterglasmalerei* 2013; *A Thousand Cuts* 2013; endpapers  
**Matt Torbus:** *Panopticon* 2004

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