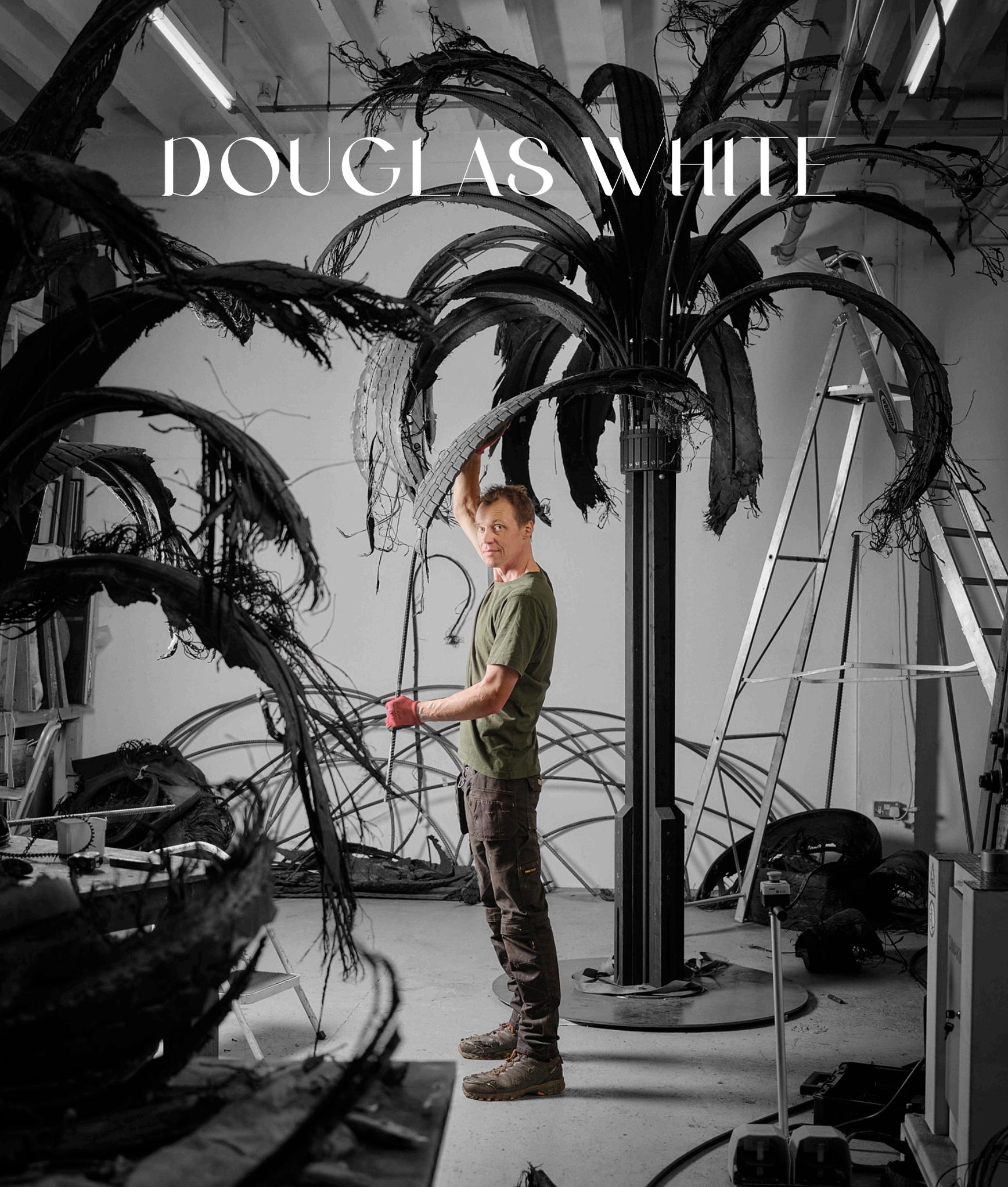


# DOUGLAS WHITE





DOUGLAS WHITE  
*The Great Wave*



# Douglas White

Known for his evocative use of found objects and materials, Douglas White (b. 1977, UK) culls the detritus of our society to transform them, compulsively, into uncanny and often monumental sculptures. Driven by a fascination with discarded and overlooked materials, White finds something magical within the everyday. His practice is intuitive, assembling elements as diverse as blown-out truck tyres, half-decayed cactus and vandalised recycling bins. These materials have often been the subject of violent transformations, revealing inner or unexpected surfaces and structures.

Douglas White (b. 1977, UK) graduated from the Ruskin School of Art (2000) and Royal College of Art (2005), and has exhibited throughout the UK, Europe, the US and South America. His work is held in collections around the world including the Donum Estate, David Roberts Art Foundation, Saatchi Collection, Frank Cohen and Cass Sculpture Foundation.



# We Are All Under The Great Wave Now

On Douglas White's: *The Great Wave* (After Hokusai)

by Nick Hackworth



*The Great Wave off Kanagawa, 1830/31, Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849)*

The Great Wave, as it is popularly known, has suffered the fate of all artworks that become global icons; to be mostly and often diminished, misseen, and misread. Its image is reproduced and reiterated almost endlessly; across countless bits of museum merch, on billions of Japan's new ¥1,000 notes, and even in the form of Apple's Water Wave emoji (🌊). In the popular imagination, Hokusai's passage of graphic brilliance is a universal, visual shorthand for the power of the ocean and natural force.

The meanings of the original work are darker and nuanced. Under the Great Wave off Kanagawa is its actual title, being an accurate translation of the Japanese kanji characters (神奈川冲浪裏) in the top left-hand corner of the print. Following this cue, we find, in the composition, three, often overlooked, low-slung fishing boats caught beneath the claw-like crest of the towering wave that is about to crash down upon them. Their crews are huddled, clinging on for their lives. Framed by the hollow of the crest, sits Mount Fuji, the quintessential symbol in Japanese culture representing beauty, immortality, and spiritual serenity. Notably, from both the viewer's perspective and certainly those of the fishermen, Mount Fuji, and whatever spiritual succour and hope of life it may offer, is far away and out of reach. Within the work, the great wave is an imminent threat. It is depicted, almost cruelly, at its point of maximum, gathered, kinetic energy. If the great wave must be a universal symbol it would be more accurately appropriated as a harbinger of massive threat or disruptive change, the scale of which dwarfs human agency.

We have no records of contemporary Japanese reactions to Under the Great Wave, but we do know it was one of the most popular prints of its time, with an estimated print run of up to 8,000. The dramatic content was unusual, possibly influenced by Dutch paintings of maritime disasters — so perhaps for its audience, the work had the dark thrill equivalent to a doom-laden, cliff hanger scene from a disaster movie. The first accounts we have of the work are from Europeans who encountered Hokusai's prints during the Japonisme craze that swept Western Europe in the 1880s. One of the earliest was from Vincent Van Gogh, who in a letter to his brother Theo in September 1888 wrote:

*'When Paul Mantz saw Delacroix's violent and exalted sketch, Christ's boat, at the exhibition that we saw in the Champs-Élysées, he turned away from it and cried out in his article, 'I did not know that one could be so terrifying with blue and green'... Hokusai makes you cry out the same thing — but in his case with his lines, his drawing, since in your letter you say to*

yourself: these waves are claws, the boat is caught in them, you can feel it. Ah well, if we made the colour very correct or the drawing very correct, we wouldn't create those emotions.'

Hokusai produced *Under the Great Wave* around 1830, more than two centuries into Japan's extraordinary Edo period (1601-1868), in which the ruling Tokugawa shogunate enforced a policy of international isolation and within Japan, upheld strictly traditional social and cultural values. It was a time of stability, peace and prosperity that gave rise to a wealthy and urbane merchant class who participated in a sophisticated, artistic and hedonistic culture romantically described as 'ukiyo' or the 'Floating World'. One curious, lyrical, description of this state of cultured isolation comes to us courtesy of Stephen Sondheim's *Pacific Overtures*, his 1976 musical about Japan's enforced opening to the world (arguably an odd choice of subject for a light opera). In his typically comic, condescending lyrics, Sondheim wrote of the Japanese of the Edo period:

*In the middle of the world we float,  
In the middle of the sea.  
The realities remain remote  
In the middle of the sea.  
Kings are burning somewhere,  
Wheels are turning somewhere,  
Trains are being run,  
Wars are being won,  
Things are being done  
Somewhere out there, not here.  
Here we paint screens.*



A contemporary Japanese depiction (c.1853) of a U.S. Navy warship from Commodore Matthew C. Perry flotilla.

This isolation came to an abrupt end in 1853 when Commodore Matthew C. Perry of the United States Navy arrived in the very same bay off Kanagawa (near present-day Tokyo/Yokohama) depicted in *Under the Great Wave*, at the head of a small flotilla of warships. The two main ships were black-painted, iron-clad, steam-powered frigates armed with the latest in seaborne artillery technology. To the Japanese, who had seen no oceangoing vessels save the occasional wooden-hulled Dutch or Chinese trader and had no comparable technologies, they were profoundly alien and ominous. In a classic instance of gunboat diplomacy Commodore Perry delivered an ultimatum to the Shogun's court: open Japan's markets and society to the outside world, or face the consequences.

In Edo culture the sea was a ubiquitous, elemental entity that protectively surrounded Japan. Almost uniquely and with strange serendipity, Hokusai's *Under the Great Wave* anticipated the sea as a source of threat. Indeed it was from the sea that arrived a great wave of disruptive change of incredible magnitude and irresistible force that would irreversibly transform Japanese culture.

## II

Douglas White's *The Great Wave (after Hokusai)* is the monumental centrepiece of his first solo exhibition at Leila Heller Gallery. It stands in the gallery space in dialogue with a towering example of White's celebrated *Black Palm* series, which is steadily propagating itself across major sculpture parks and institutions across the world. Materially the two works are of a piece with each other, both sculpted and assembled from thick lengths and fragments of blown out lorry tyres whose aesthetic and sculptural possibilities, perhaps uniquely seen and mastered by White, inspired the development of the *Black Palm* series. In *The Great Wave (after Hokusai)*, White extraordinarily extends the sculptural possibilities of this strange category of found material to create a work that is at once massive and yet expressively full of energy and movement.

The sculpture comprises one main form of a giant wave cresting and a smaller, emergent wave. The rough, black waves sit on a large base so that the entire work measures four and half meters from floor to the apex. In the gallery space we approach, walk around and ultimately, under the wave. In the right, or wrong place, metaphorically speaking, we stand in the shadow of the crest, and looking up we have a profound sense of the weight of the wave, hanging, suspended above us. The rough, crenelated and in places frayed surfaces of the tyres, become the controlled chaos of a wave's surface and protruding and dangling threads of wire, spits of water and foam.

White cannot now precisely recall exactly when or why Hokusai's *Under the Great Wave* became an insistent presence in his mind. Given the precarity of our historical moment, however, it is not surprising that the work should float prominently in our collective unconscious. White does, however, precisely recall his visceral, imaginative reaction to the sense, in Hokusai's image, of the great wave graphically captured at the apex of its kinetic charge, the feeling of a vast force suspended overhead, massing into inevitability, caught in the precise moment before the energy stored in countless tonnes of moving water is released downward, with crushing force. The word impending, and its etymology, stemming from the Latin *impendere*, to hang over, also persistently accompanied Hokusai's image in White's thoughts.

Similarly, perhaps, to Van Gogh's impulse to imagine how he in his own art could achieve something akin to the sense of the terror of seeing the fishing boats caught in grip of the claw like wave, White felt a compulsion to embody in his own sculptural language, the visceral sense of the power and imminent threat of the great wave. White's *The Great Wave (after Hokusai)* is the resulting, astounding achievement.

Due to the nature and manner of their construction White always personally oversees the final preparation and installation of his monumental works in any show he participates in. White was completing the final elements of *The Great Wave (after Hokusai)* and his *Black Palm* works in a temporary studio in Dubai when the United States and Israel launched strikes on Iran. Naturally the preparatory work for the show was temporarily halted. In the messages we exchanged about this essay images of works in progress became briefly replaced by images of missile intercepts in the skies above the Emirates. A work conceived around the idea of impending release of force, of something immense, kinetic and imminent, found itself suspended inside a moment briefly characterized by these very qualities.

It's a strange feeling when there is some sense of correspondence between an artwork and a historical moment. Thinking about White making his own version of the *Great Wave*, with all its symbolic resonances, in a warehouse on the edge of Dubai, situated underneath a vast aerial battle space contested by drones, missiles and fighter jets, I noticed two, comparatively minor stories amongst the flood of news: One report that several US commanders had told their units that the military action in Iran was part of a divine plan to cause Armageddon and bring Christ's return to Earth. A second report, that Iran was targeting data centres run by Amazon Web Services (AWS) in Gulf states, possibly in retaliation for the Pentagon's use of Anthropic's AI, Claude in its planning of the strikes. Two stories at the heart of which are visions of the possible, imminent transformation of human life, one through religious revelation, the other through a vertiginous acceleration of unstoppable, technological change. Inevitably, thanks to a personal predilection for clichés, W. B. Yeats' *The Second Coming* came to mind:

*"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world..."*

*...And what rough beast, its hour come round at last  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"*

The poem was written by Yeats in the immediate aftermath of the First World War and with the violence of Irish war of independence against the British Empire still fresh, but the poem's seemingly timeless power to speak to us in moments of civilisational vertigo flows from its uncanny sense of understanding the underlying structure of events and turning points in history. It conjures the feeling of forces that had been gathering for decades finally breaking through, of the eternal recurrence of the kinds of visions and beliefs that have always driven human culture. Materially, formally, emotively even, White's works have equivalence of that kind of intelligence that reaches into and connects with the deep foundations of the world.

As an embodiment of an artistic archetype, White is an alchemist par excellence. He has always found in the discarded, the abject, the overlooked - both in terms of material and processes - enchantment and meaning. Few, if any artists have such a facility. His Black Palm series — in which tyre fragments are assembled into palm trees — is exemplary. Its origins lie in the discarded forms of exploded and burst lorry tyres that typically littered the side of the main motorway in Belize. There on a travel bursary, White, became entranced by their long leathery form, momentarily mistaking them for the carcasses of dead animals lying in the dust. White collected them, shipped them back to England, and fashioned them together into the form of monumental palm trees. The Icarus Palm — the first work of the series — stands sixteen feet high in the Goodwood Sculpture Park in West Sussex, its rubber fronds splaying outward from a central trunk with an unlikely, almost convincing vitality where it stands among the trees looking exactly like what it is: an apparition, a colonial joke in reverse - an embodied reversal of the extractive journey, returning the waste to the source of the wealth. Here in Dubai, where palms are native, new, additional meanings arise. Here the Black Palms could be fictionalized artefacts from a distant, post-human future in which the deep global substrate of the waste of our global industrial culture has taken on ersatz-organic force, developed a new organic chemistry and old forms come to life in new material bodies. They are powerful totemic works that carry a host of memories and stories of the future with them.

Completing the exhibition are a series of Lichtenberg Drawings. To create them, White, in full alchemical mode employs the latent energies of the universe to create, using high-voltage electrical discharge to burn branching patterns directly into the surface of engineered wooden boards. The resulting fractal structures are shaped by conductivity and resistance within the material itself. Electrical current seeks pathways through microscopic variations in density, producing marks that resemble lightning strikes, vascular systems, root networks, and neural pathways. The geometry appears organic, yet it is generated through artificial means. In these, authorship is distributed. The artist initiates the process, but the final form emerges through the behaviour of electrical flow. Control and contingency coexist. Electricity becomes both drawing instrument and subject, revealing the shared structural logic that underlies natural and technological systems alike.

III

The 2024 book *The Great Wave: The Era of Radical Disruption and the Rise of the Outsider* by Michiko Kakutani, former chief book critic of the New York Times, employs the great wave as the governing metaphor for the bewildering nature of our present moment. The overwhelming convergence of simultaneous disruptions; artificial intelligence, ecological collapse, rising geopolitical instability, the erosion of a common epistemic reality, and so on, amount to a period of all-encompassing change of a velocity and breadth without modern precedent.

During a formative period for the philosophical underpinnings of modernity in the West, Enlightenment thinkers formulated a conceptual structure for encounters with overwhelming and ungovernable forces: the sublime. The idea of feeling a sense of "delightful terror" as Edmund Burke had it, or "negative pleasure" for Kant, in the face of typically vast, formless and threatening natural phenomena are well known. Less familiar are the qualifications both employed that reduced their sublimity to nothing more than the philosophical and aesthetic equivalent of a bit of light, performatively titillating, S&M. The 'delightful' bit of the "delightful terror" of the sublime could only be experienced from a position of safety. As Burke explained, when danger and pain "press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight". Similarly Kant in his Critique of the Power of Judgment, wrote:

*"Bold, overhanging, as it were, threatening cliffs, thunder clouds towering up into the heavens... make our capacity to resist into an insignificant trifle in comparison with their power. But the sight of them only becomes all the more attractive the more fearful it is, **as long as we find ourselves in safety**, and we gladly call these objects sublime because they elevate the strength of our soul above its usual level, and allow us to discover within ourselves a capacity for resistance of quite another kind..." (my emphasis)*

As it happens, Hokusai's *Under the Great Wave* puts us, the spectators, in precisely the position of privileged safety from which we might observe, with a frisson of 'delightful terror', the terrific and potentially murderous force of the sea that he depicts. But the realities of our times, the Anthropocene, has largely cancelled that privilege. As Heather Davis and Étienne Turpin write in *Art in the Anthropocene* the crisis we are living through is not available for aesthetic contemplation from a safe remove: "the Anthropocene is primarily a sensorial phenomenon: the experience of living in an increasingly diminished and toxic world." There is no shore from which to watch the storm. There is no ledge from which to admire the precipice. That is the visceral, understanding that animates White's *The Great Wave (After Hokusai)*. Materially, physically, emotively his extraordinary, monumental sculpture, literally and figuratively, reminds us that we are all under the great wave now.

Nick Hackworth, New Delhi, March 2026





The Great Wave II (After Hokusai)  
2026  
Tyre Fragments, Steel, Wood  
488 x 244 x 500 cm



The Great Wave II  
2026  
Tyre Fragments, Steel, Wood  
160 x 160 x 45 cm



Study for The Great Wave (small)  
2026  
Tyre fragments, Wood, Brass base  
100 x 35 x 35 cm



Black Palm  
2025  
Tyre fragments, Steel  
750 x 475 x 475 cm



Black Palm II  
2026  
Tyre fragments, Steel  
450 x 250 x 250 cm







Black Palm III  
2026  
Tyre fragments, Steel  
380 x 220 x 180cm



Black Palm IV  
2026  
Tyre fragments, Steel  
240 x 150 x 150 cm







Black Palm Maquette 1  
2025  
Tyre fragments, steel, brass  
38 × 22 × 25 cm

Black Palm Maquette 2  
2025  
Tyre fragments, steel, brass  
62 × 33 × 25 cm



Black Palm Maquette 3  
2025  
Tyre fragments, steel, brass  
70 × 46 × 35 cm



Black Palm Maquette 6  
2025  
Tyre fragments, steel, brass  
55 × 42 × 34 cm



Black Sun I  
2026  
Electroformed Copper  
100 x 50 x 40 cm



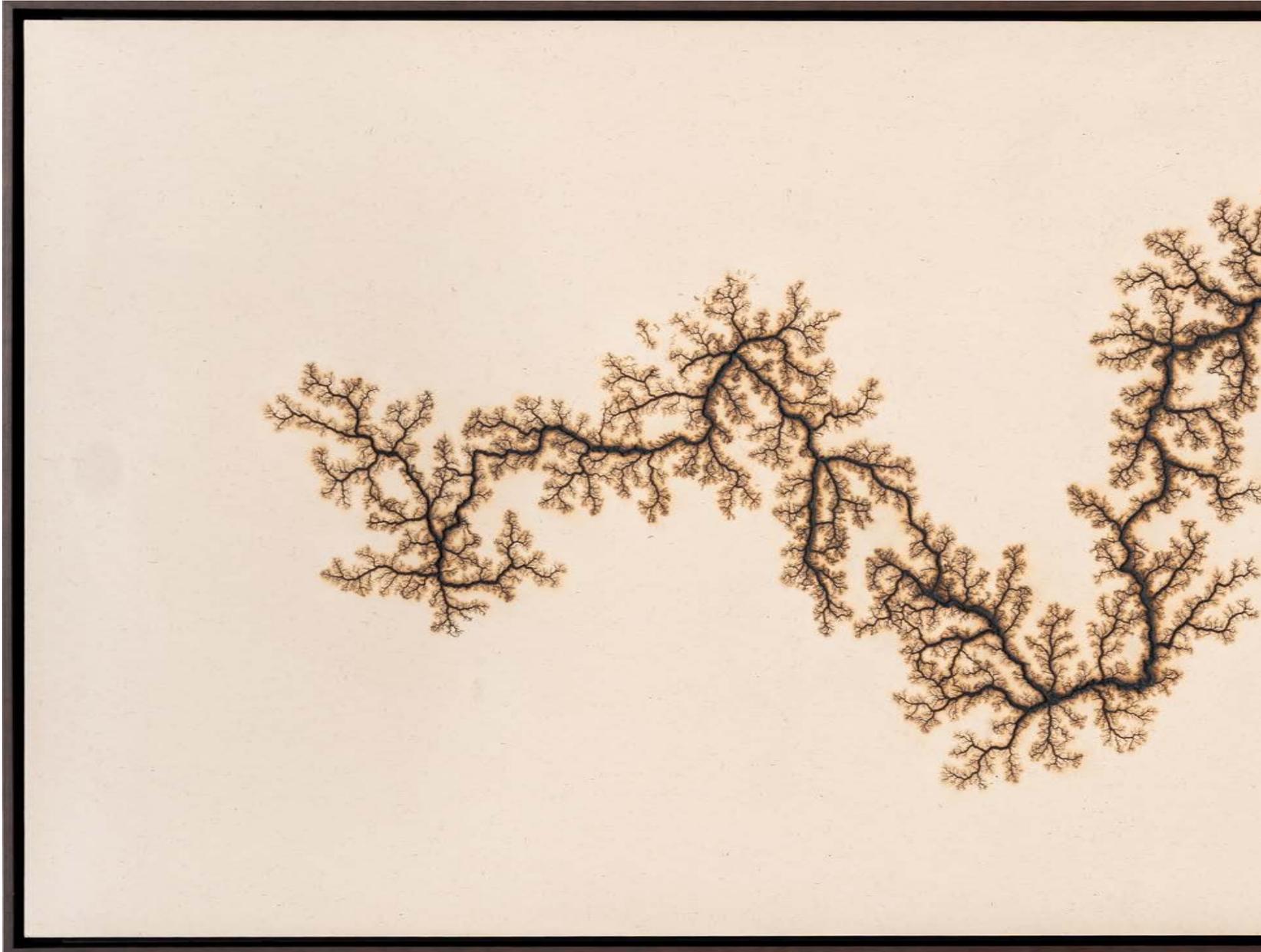


Black Sun II  
2026  
Electroformed Copper  
35 × 27 × 16 cm

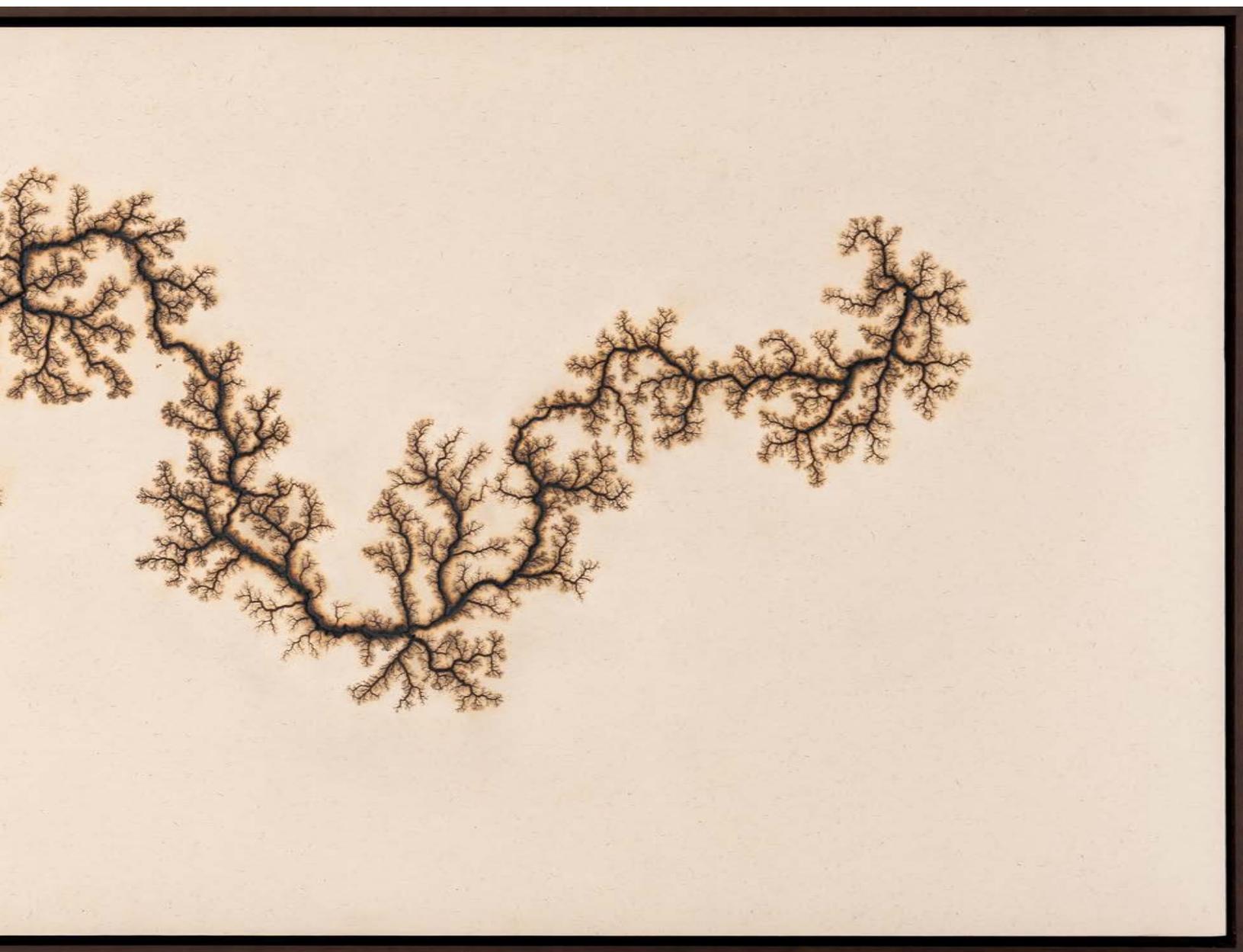








Lichtenberg Drawing 1  
2026  
10,000 Volts on board  
85 x 229 cm







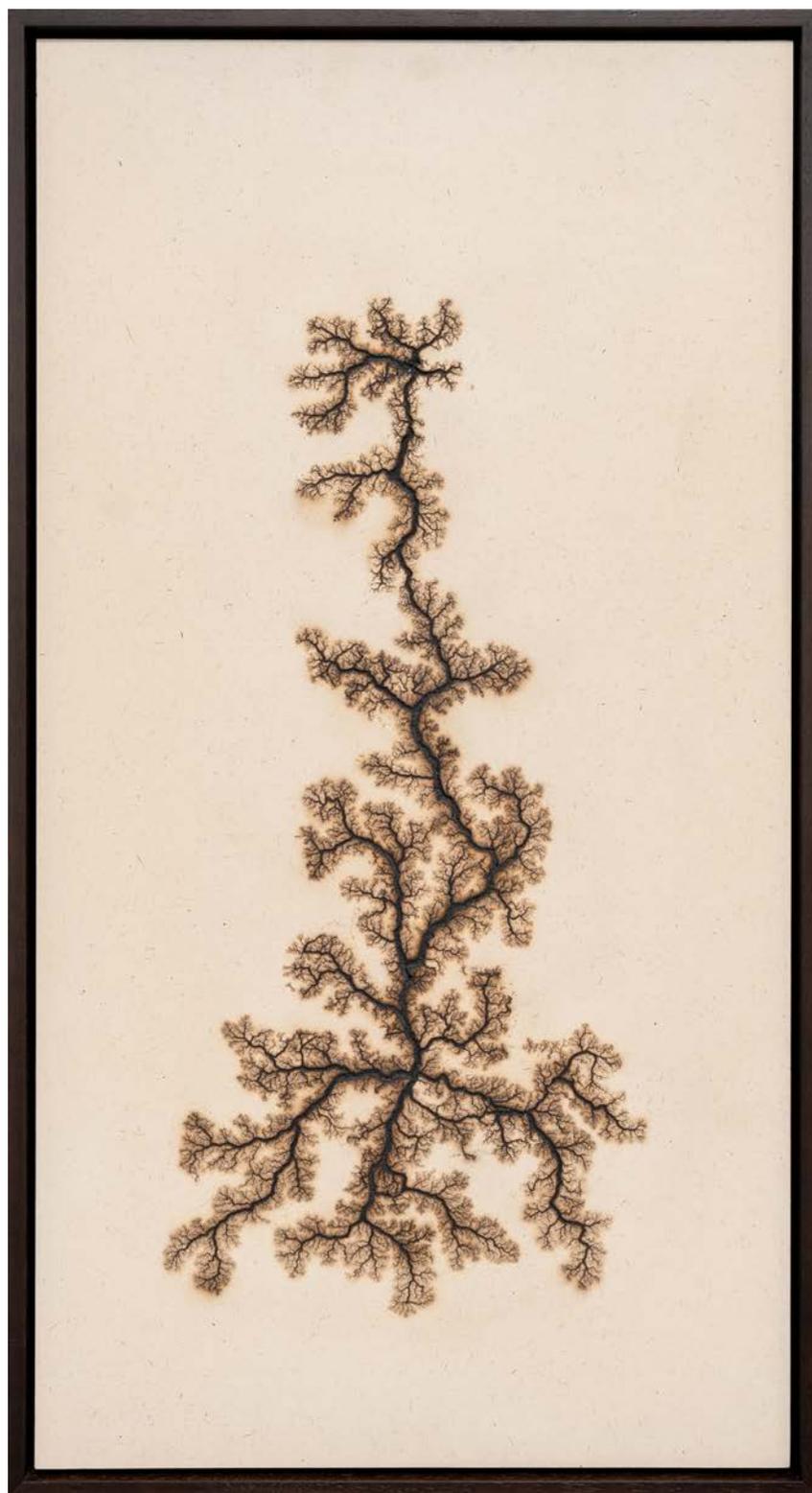
Lichtenberg Drawing 2  
2026  
10,000 Volts on Board  
74 x 233 cm



Lichtenberg Drawing 3  
2026  
10,000 Volts on Board  
60 x 234 cm

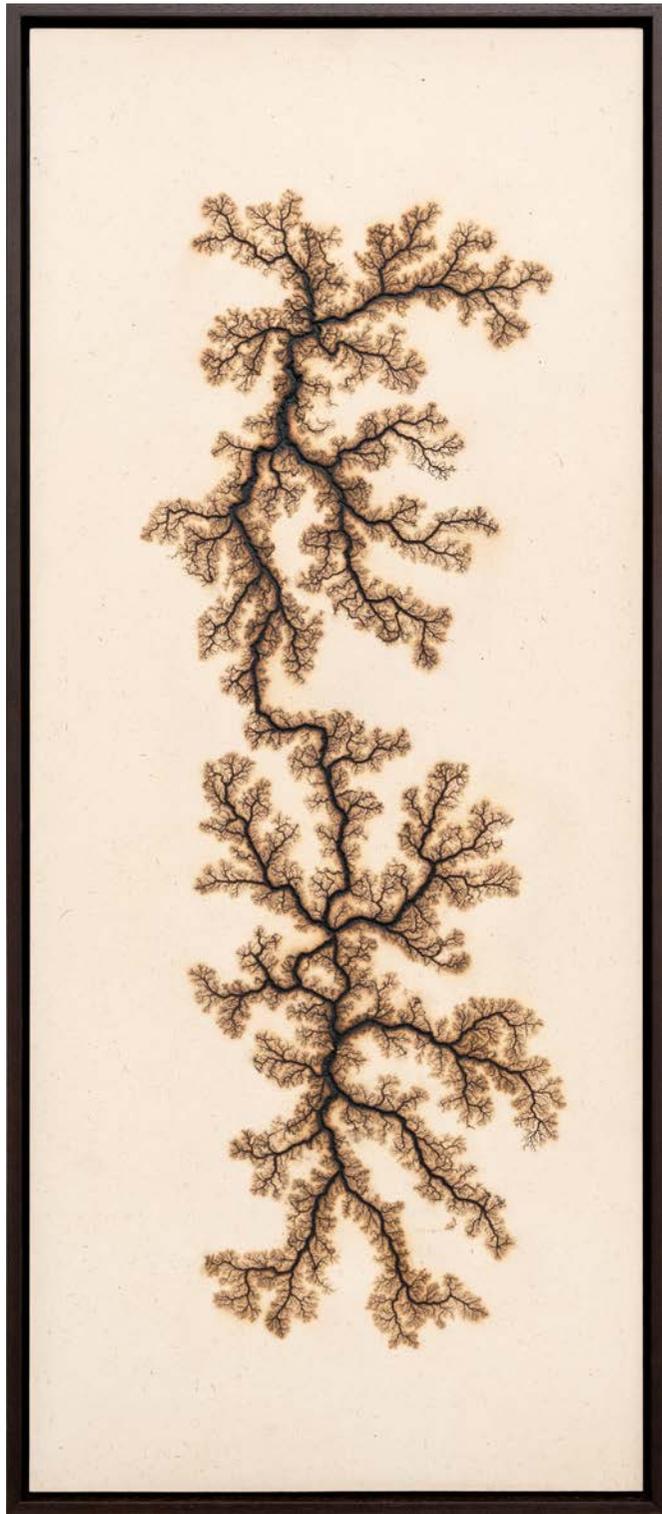


Lichtenberg Drawing 4  
2026  
10,000 Volts on Board  
198 x 50cm

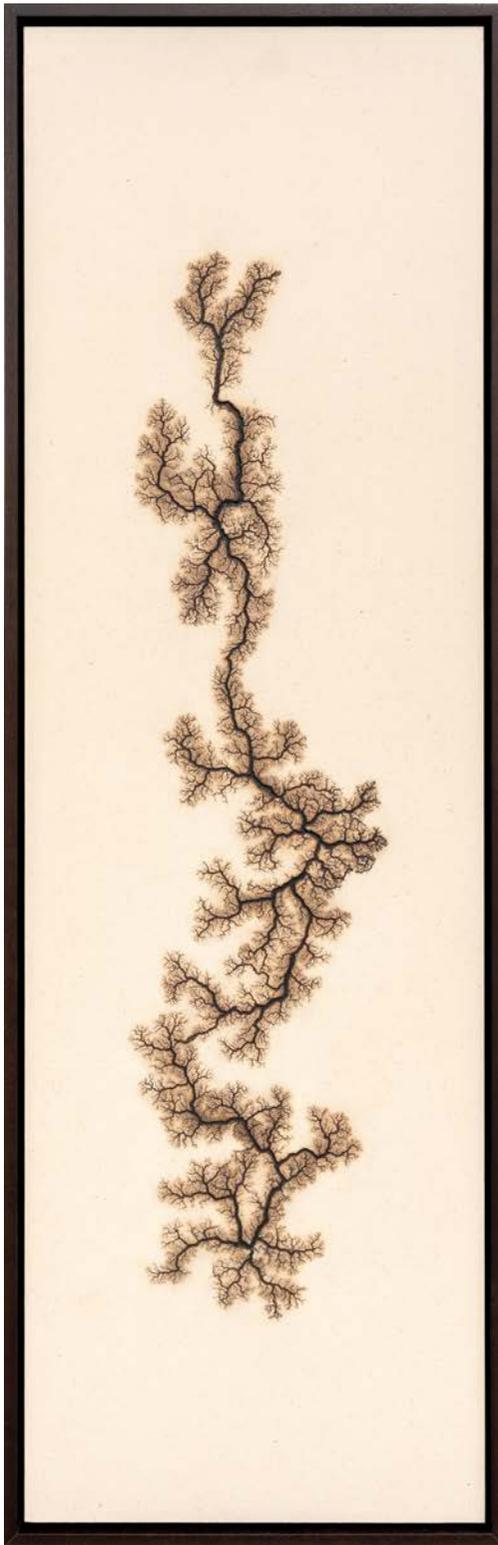


Lichtenberg Drawing 5  
2026  
10,000 Volts on Board  
80 x 43 cm

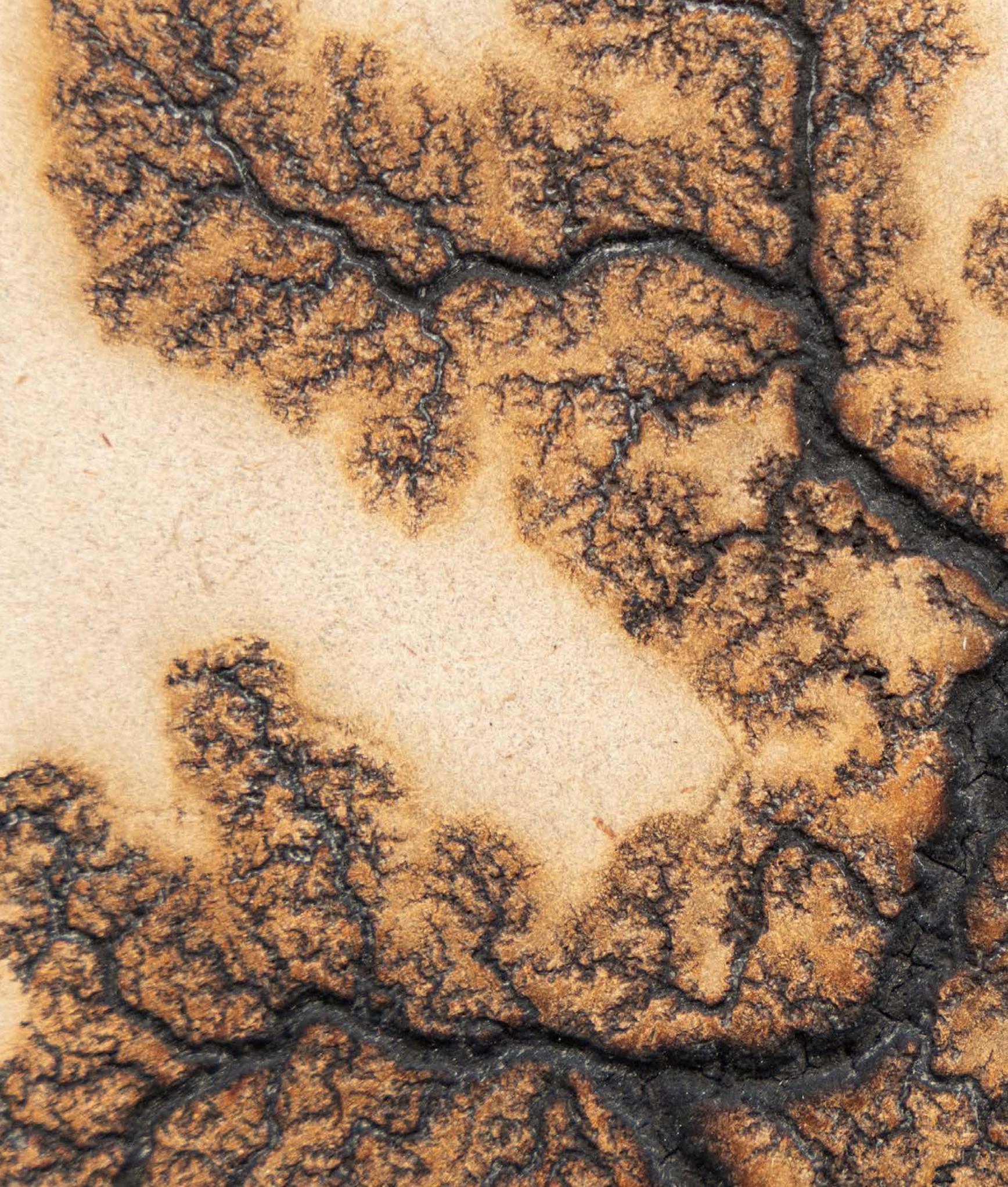




Lichtenberg Drawing 6  
2026  
10,000 Volts on Board  
101 x 43 cm



Lichtenberg Drawing 7  
2026  
10,000 Volts on Board  
114 x 35 cm



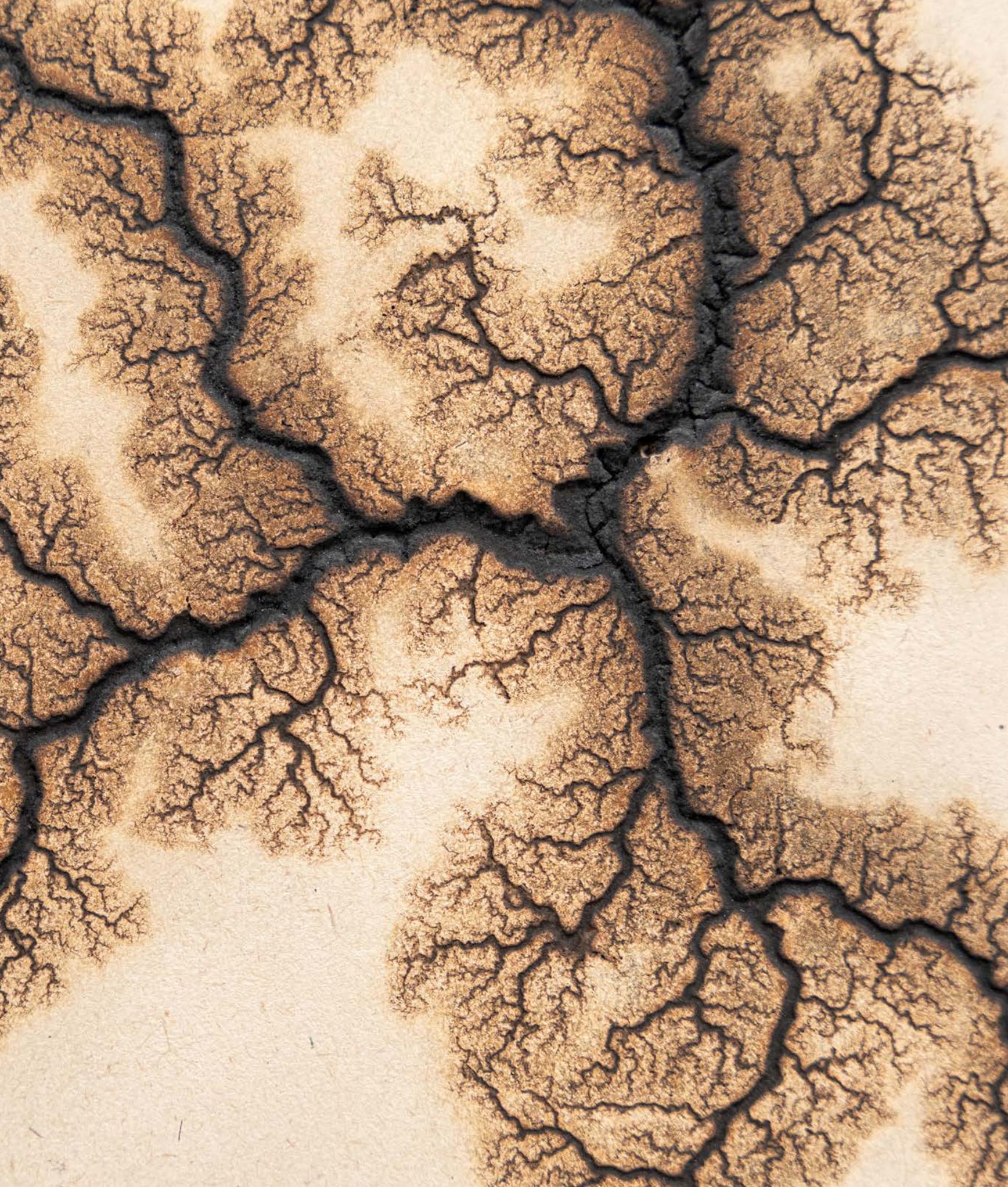




Lichtenberg Drawing 8  
2026  
10,000 Volts on Board  
69 x 32 cm



Lichtenberg Drawing 9  
2026  
10,000 Volts on Board  
22 x 58 cm





Lichtenberg Drawing 10  
2026  
10,000 Volts on Board  
52 x 23 cm



Lichtenberg Drawing 11  
2026  
10,000 Volts on Board  
24 x 46 cm



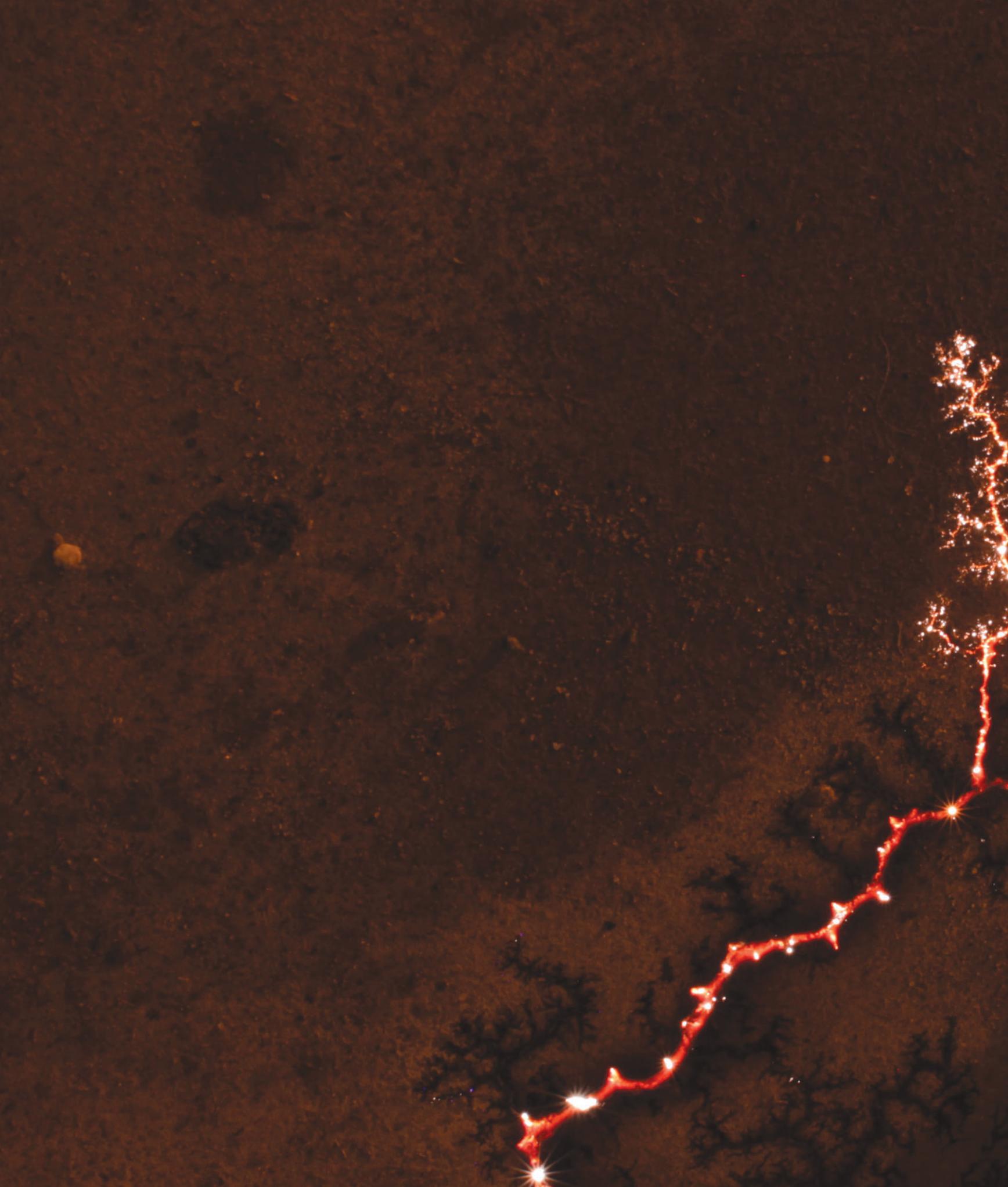
Lichtenberg Drawing 12  
2026  
10,000 Volts on Board  
50 x 24 cm

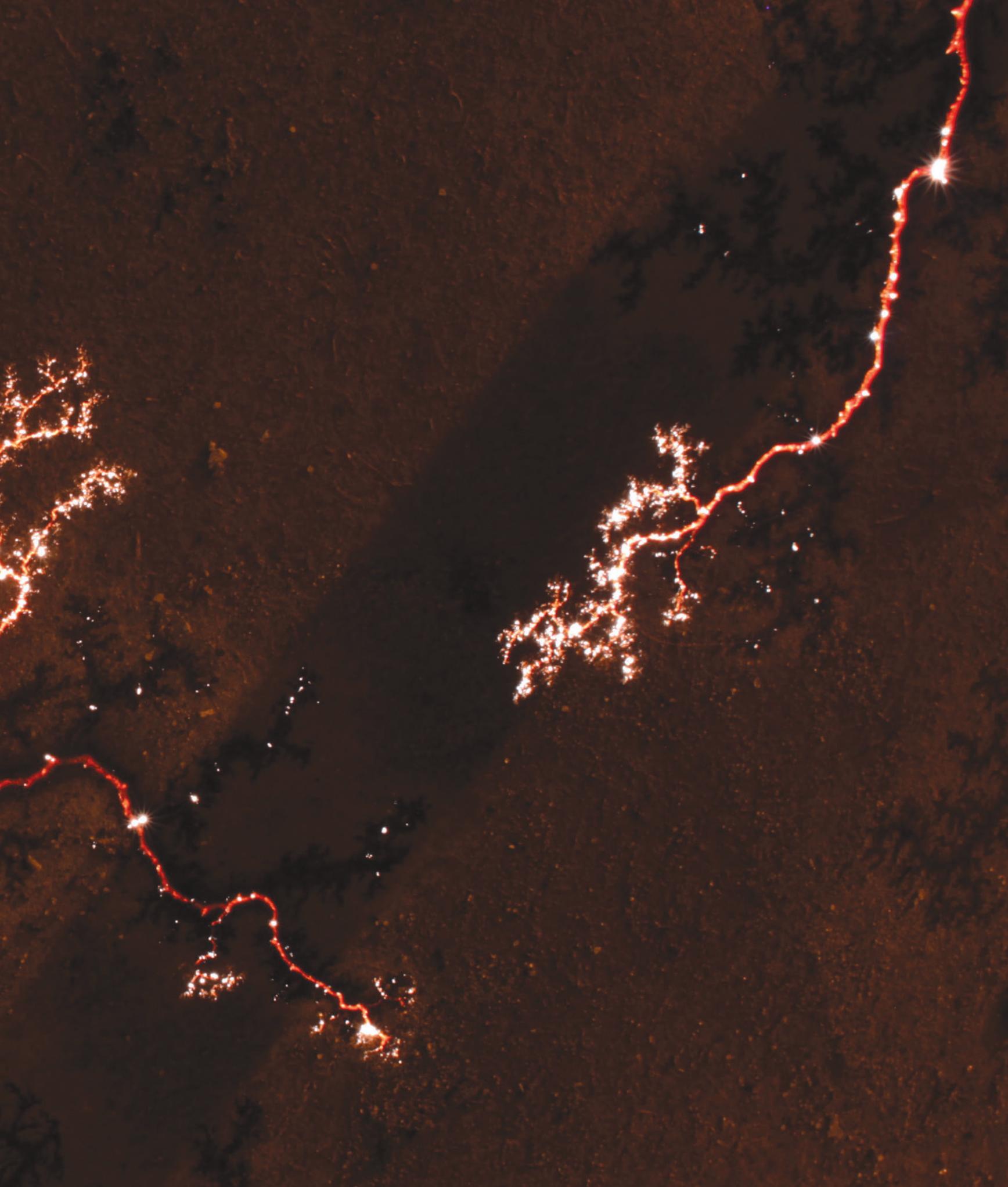


Lichtenberg Drawing 13  
2026  
10,000 Volts on Board  
21 x 42 cm



Lichtenberg Drawing 14  
2026  
10,000 Volts on Board  
31 x 25 cm





# Douglas White

## EDUCATION

2003-2005 ROYAL COLLEGE OF ART, MFA Sculpture  
1997-2000 OXFORD UNIVERSITY, BFA Fine Art

## SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2026 THE GREAT WAVE Leila Heller Gallery, Dubai  
2023 NOTHING IS LOST The Place, London  
2019 MR MAJIDI AND THE ELECTRICITY BOX  
VO Curations, London  
2019 COLLECTED WORKS Modern Forms, London  
2017 PORTRAITS OF MY FATHER AS A HORSESHOE BAT  
Galerie Valerie Bach, Brussels  
2014 SPLENDOR SOLIS Eden Rock Gallery, St Barth  
2013 SONG OF THE ROUSTABOUTS Gabriel Rolt, Amsterdam  
2011 NEW SKIN FOR AN OLD CEREMONY Paradise Row, London  
2010 BLACK SUN Kevin Kavanagh Gallery, Dublin  
2009 MASQUERADE Malta Contemporary Art, Valletta  
2009 ELEPHANT TOTEM SONG Paradise Row, London  
2008 HARTROT Gabriel Rolt, Amsterdam  
2007 BLACK PALM Galerie Nuke, Paris  
2007 LILITH Paradise Row, London

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2025 FOLIA Abdulmecid Efendi Mansion, Istanbul  
2025 NATURE AND FORM Leila Heller Gallery, New York  
2022 SUMMER EXHIBITION 2022 Royal Academy of Art, London  
2022 THE CONFERENCE OF BIRDS Tristan Hoare, London  
2021 (HE)ART STORIES Gallifet Art Centre, France  
2020 MANIFESTA 18, Espace Jouenne, Marseille  
2020 PAYSAGE\_PAYSAGES Musee Dauphinois, Grenoble  
2019 ARVORE! Praca Adolpho Bloch, Sao Paolo  
2019 FUTURS ANTERIEURS Maison Guerlain, Paris  
2019 INNER LIFE Studio BWA, Wroclaw  
2018 SHE SEES THE SHADOWS DRAF at Oriel Mostyn  
2018 WARMINGLAND Hotel de Ville, Paris  
2018 MAGIC AND METHOD Frestonian Gallery, London  
2018 ISLANDS Annelly Juda Fine Art, London  
2017 ICONOCLASTS Saatchi Gallery, London  
2017 FORCE OF NATURE II Art Pavilion, London  
2016 SPARKLING LIKE THE SURFACE OF THE OCEAN AT NIGHT Garage, Rotterdam  
2016 THEATRE DE L'ABSURDE Galerie Gabriel Rolt, Amsterdam  
2016 FORCE OF NATURE Galerie Valerie Bach, Brussels  
2015 FINDING FORM Art First, London

2015	EVOLUTION	Asia House, London
2014	MOON	Art First, London
2014	FEITO POR BRASILIEROS	Cidade Matarazzo, Sao Paolo
2014	BRAND NEW SECOND HAND	Vigo Gallery, London
2014	NETWORK CLAY	Landgoed Anningahof, Zwolle
2013	ISLAND	Dairy Art Centre, London
2012	SPECIMENS	Domaine de Chamarande, Paris
2012	INTERSECTIONS	Weizmann Institute, Tel Aviv
2012	LONDON TWELVE	City of Prague Gallery, Prague
2012	BOUVARD AND PEUCHET'S COMPENDIOUS QUEST FOR BEAUTY	David Roberts Art Foundation, London
2011	THE STATE: The Coming Insurrection	Traffic, Dubai
2011	CON AMORE	ARoS Museum, Denmark
2011	FREIES MATERIAL	Weltraum, Munich
2011	NEXT VISIT	NEXT Visit, Berlin
2011	DUEL...	Christinger De Mayo, Zurich
2010	AIR 6	Oude Kerk, Amsterdam
2010	REHAB	Espace Electra, Fondation EDF, Paris
2009	NATURAL WONDERS: NEW ART FROM LONDON	Baibakov Art Projects, Moscow
2008	NATHANIEL RACKOWE AND DOUGLAS WHITE	The Russian Club, London
2008	FLIGHT OF THE DODO	Project Arts Centre, Dublin
2008	GOTHIC	Fieldgate Gallery, London
2007	UNHOLY TRUTHS	Initial Access, Wolverhampton
2007	ANTICIPATION	One, One, One, London
2007	FORBIDDEN SPECTACLE	Museum of Fine Arts, Malta
2007	WELCOME TO PARADISE	Nuke Gallery, Paris
2006	CANNIBAL FEROX	Paradise Row, London
2006	NEW CONTEMPORARIES 2006	The Coach Shed, Liverpool
2005	PECULIAR ENCOUNTERS	EC Arts Space, London
2005	JERWOOD DRAWING PRIZE	Jerwood Space, London and Tour
2005	JERWOOD SCULPTURE PRIZE 2005	Jerwood Space, London and Tour
2005	MAN DRAWING PRIZE 2005	Royal College of Art, London
2004	NEW CONTEMPORARIES 2004	The Coach Shed, Liverpool

## NOTABLE COLLECTIONS

Ömer Koç Collection (TR)	Simmons and Simmons (UK)
The Donum Estate Collection (USA)	La Societe (FR)
La Commanderie de Peyrassol (FR)	Bob and Renée Drake (NL)
Rothschild Collection (FR)	Leif Djurhuus (DN)
David Roberts Art Foundation (UK)	Marie Taittinger (BE)
Saatchi Collection(UK)	Tom Hall (UK)
Modern Forms (UK)	Ernst and Young (UK)
Cass Sculpture Foundation (UK)	Royal College of Art (UK)
Deutsche Bank (UK)	Christian Liaigre (FR)
Eden Rock (St Barth)	
Vent Privée (FR)	
Cidade Matarazzo (BR)	
Masdar City (UAE)	

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*Study for The Great Wave (small)*

2026

*Tyre fragment, Wood, Brass base*

100 x 35 x 35 cm

Back cover image

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*Tyre fragments, Wood, Brass base*

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