

BENEATH THE SURFACE

RUSSELL CRAIG: SUBTERRANEAN

TIM MOSELY: HOW DEEP THIS TOUCH

GLEN SKIEN: ARCHIVE OF THE UNFAMILIAR



Beneath the Surface

Russell Craig, Tim Mosely & Glen Skien

Crane International Project Space (gallery 105)

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Beneath the Surface:

*Subterranean and Secret Narratives
in the Work of Russell Craig,
Tim Mosely, and Glen Skien*

Jess Berry

Questions of surface and depth are a central concern for contemporary-art printmakers; a tension exists between the flat spaces and uniformity of the digital print and the perceived enriched surface qualities of traditional printmaking methods. As Ruth Pelzer-Montada argues,¹ this is essentially the dichotomy of contemporary art that Terry Smith² draws out—that of ‘viscerality’ and its emphasis on materiality on the one hand, and of ‘enervation’ and its mechanical or screen-like surface, on the other. In many instances, this duality of surface can equate to the differences between traditional and contemporary modes of production. For purists, digitally produced printed images lack the unique surface quality that are common to traditional printing modes, such as intaglio, etching and lithography. Even screen-printing, once derided for its commercial flatness, is seen to have a more substantial materiality than the digital surface.

In many ways, this discourse of surface and how it relates to the old and the new is superficial for it suggests that surface is only appearance. Yet, if one looks beneath the surface of printmaking as merely elided to its materiality and visual effect, what murky secrets might arise from the subterranean complexity of the contemporary art print? The artists presented in *Beneath the Surface* engage with printmaking as an expanded field of practice, including sculpture, assemblage, installation, and the digital. Although their conceptual concerns and printing techniques use vastly different approaches, through their work, it is not only possible to consider discourses of materiality but also to reflect on more abstract concepts of depth—where the print’s surface is a complex process of history that unfolds through time and space.

Russell Craig: *Subterranean*

Tensions surrounding the digital and its perceived flatness are brought to the surface in Russell Craig's *Subterranean* print series. A Tamarind master printer, Craig's oeuvre of work includes lithographs and monoprints as well as drawings and paintings. Such a technically driven practice might conceivably be guided by the fetishisation of surface appearance and materiality. Yet, Craig overcomes this through a set of processes that, in fact, highlight the relationship between surface and depth through the digital print and its interface with traditional printmaking techniques.

For Craig, the digital is able to break the usual constraints of the printmaking format; as the artist states, "previously, I have searched for a marriage between printmaking and painting with mono-printing; however, this contemporary print medium certainly offers fluency

within a large scale".³ These possibilities are particularly evident in the large-scale prints *From the Depths*, *Unknown Sea*, and *Subterranean* (the largest of which is 5.7 metres/18.7 feet), that, when shown together, submerge the viewer in the strange and exotic underwater world of Craig's creation.

Each of the works in this series is composed from a set of charcoal drawings that are immaculately detailed in their exploration of aquatic sea life. Here, strands of seaweed are rendered with the dexterity of finely woven lace while the cavernous black holes of coral are eerily disorientating in their vastness. Shimmering droplets of water are similarly drafted in exacting realism. These tactile and engaging images are then collaged and layered across the picture plane; their organic shapes are embedded in sharp lacerations that tear through the

undifferentiated flat surface of the print. This process distorts the original images in such a way that their once precise forms become increasingly abstracted and alien. With these strange visceral creatures that float across converging layers of the print, Craig has created a surreal and imaginative space that merges the subconscious with the subterranean—both of which appear mysterious and unfathomable.

By contrasting flattened space with textured surface, foreground and background collide so that the viewer becomes uncertain whether they are looking through or under the image, above or below it, up-close or at distance. This disorientation recalls the hallucinogenic narcosis of the deep-sea diver and serves to enhance the sensation that both sea and subconscious are places of profound ambiguity. Yet, this contrast of surface is also revealing. In juxtaposing

the clearly digital aspects of image (that is, splicing, enlargement, and uniform surface) with more traditional qualities of print (that is, layering, collage, enhanced tone and texture), the artist reveals how both sets of processes can work in tandem—visually represented by the synthesis of the mechanical cut and the fluid line. Thus, the *Subterranean* series achieves a spatial depth that confounds expectations, absorbs the viewer, and overcomes the syntax of materiality as purely appearance.



Russell Craig *Subterranean* (2014)
Digital print on Hahnemuhle paper
110 x 160 cm

Tim Mosely: *How Deep This Touch*

Materiality of surface is central to Tim Mosely's conceptual artistic concerns. Like Craig, he manipulates surface for its experiential qualities, though specifically through texture rather than space. His body of work is particularly concerned with the haptic qualities of the print, evoking the confluence of touch with aesthetic experience. Mosely recognises that the art print has a sensual surface that invites the viewer to interact with it closely, a characteristic he emphasises by incorporating sculptural elements into some of his work. For example, his artist book *From the Deep* consists of curved undulations in paper, upon which the artist has printed iconography stemming from his childhood, when he lived with the Semberigi people in Papua New Guinea. This wave of texture and form is embedded in the book's surface, which is made up of thin leaves of paper, richly textured by cross-hatched lines. Shades

of ultramarine, azure, and violet sinuously sweep across the surface, inviting the viewer's touch as they turn the page. Through his approach, Mosely highlights that visual content is only part of the experience of reading a book.

The artist's choice of printing material is conceptually driven; his use of Luan plywood, a medium whose surface combines both the natural patterns of rainforest wood and the mechanical markings of the industrial, is a conduit to express his concerns regarding illegal logging in the Semberigi's rainforests.⁴ This connection between the literal and conceptual surface of the wood is expressed visibly in *A Haptic Touch of the Rainforest*, a set of four relief prints that explore the rainforest as both visual experience and field for haptic perception. In these images, the dense clustering of trees and vegetation is contrasted with

the experience of emersion in colour, texture, and form that Mosely poetically manipulates to create a sense of the rainforest up close.

According to Laura Marks, a criticism of the haptic is that it "tends to rest on the surface of its object rather to plunge into depth, not to distinguish form so much as discern texture. It is a labile, plastic sort of look."⁵ This observation could equally be applied to print's apparent obsession with the material surface through technique; yet, Mosely is able to overcome this by exploring the tensions between these two types of visibility. Through the layering of surface, viewers see the landscape itself contrasted with its form and texture along with barely there impressions of the forest fading into the paper's tooth and grain. As such, the viewer's look flickers between optical vision and haptic experience; they are never really sure as to what is

on the surface and what lies beneath. It is only through absorbing their vision in this texture that viewers can visualise the watermark gestures of canopies and root systems hidden beneath the stratum of the processed wood's grains. This careful construction of surface confronts viewers with Mosely's conceptual concerns of disappearance and decline, the rainforest lost to destructive logging. Moreover, it reveals how the print's depth of surface can move beyond appearance to the experiential.



Tim Mosely *From the Deep* (2014)
artists book / relief prints on awagami kozo,
rainforest ply
65 x 32 cm (open)

Glen Skien: *Archive of the Unfamiliar*

The processes of disappearance, absence, repetition, and trace that underline printmaking as practice are also present in Glen Skien's reflections on history and surface. His installation *Archive of the Unfamiliar* forms part of his mytho-poetic project, an investigation into the fictions of narrative and history. For Skien, the mytho-poetic provides a framework to explore how "meaningful connections between history, memory and place requires an imaginative and poetic searching within the layers of the personal and the collective".⁶

This particular assembled archive consists of a collection of etched images and collage fragments. Fish and birds, maps and diagrams, solitary figures and foreign objects are presented as secret messages from the past, wrapped in muslin shrouds, and then trapped in a layer of beeswax. The emblematic images caught between their folds are at once

evocative of everyday associations and familiar places, yet their lack of discernable narrative makes them appear cryptic and confounding. Like phantoms, these envelopes are veiled apparitions of the disappeared, the lost, and the departed; through the artist's recuperation of them, one senses what is absent in the present—an unfixed and indeterminate history that is only salvageable through memory, poetic association, dreams, and imagination.

Skien's melancholic and meandering narrative of history has a correspondence with art historian Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*. Warburg's philosophical project involved configuring the canon of art images along with illustrations, advertisements, and photographs into relationships of affinity; here, contemporary athletes, Japanese hari-kiri, and classical sculpture were composed into a symphony of gestures across time. Warburg's overall

purpose was to create a map of images that considers the dynamics of historical memory, challenging the narrative of art history as a progressive system and instead allowing for "new areas to surface from the hidden layer of forgotten facts".⁷ As Martin Warnke explains, "Warburg did not see each individual image as contextually bound, rather he ascribes to each image a new utterance in each new constellation."⁸

Skien's project is similar in its complexity and its reconfiguration over time. The secret intimacies and fugitive relationships he intuits between image, text, and object are repetitively rearranged across the artist's oeuvre. Each of Skien's work is a reminder of previous iconography, fragments, or formations, where each new installation or collage contains a trace of something past or forgotten. This experience is highlighted through the rich layering of surface that makes up any

one of his artworks—whether an artist book, print, or found object fabrication. The surfaces of these works are shrouded in the chronicle of their making; history itself appears represented through one's understanding that the ghostly imprints of inky notations or obliterated texts worn thin through erasure are a result of the artist's process of making, adapting, revealing, and obscuring. Over time and through their continuous reconfiguration, traces of the past are re-presented; in each telling, one learns something new of their depths.

Craig's, Mosely's, and Skien's diverse practices, as presented in this exhibition, offer viewers the opportunity to reflect on where tensions of surface might diverge and connect. For each of these artists, questions of materiality are present and important; as highly skilled technicians, manipulating appearance is integral to

their practice. Their explorations through an expanded mode of printmaking are mediations on a range of spatial concerns—the dichotomies of the visceral and enervated space, the confluence of touch with aesthetic experience, and the thought space that is created through visual poetics are just some of the points of interest that underscore these works. Most notably, this range of practice reveals that, beneath the immediate surface of appearance, the narrative of printmaking as an ongoing process conceived through time, space, and this chronicle is what constitutes depth.



Glen Skien detail *Archive of the Unfamiliar* (2014)
Eyching on muslin envelopes, collage and encaustic
10 x 13 cm

Endnotes

- 1 Ruth Pelzer-Montada, "The Attraction of Print: Notes on the Surface of the (Art) Print," *Art Journal* 67, no. 2 (2008): 74–93.
- 2 Terry Smith, "Enervation, Viscerality, The Fate of the Image in Modernity," in *Impossible Presence, Surface and Screen in the Photogenic Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 1-38.
- 3 Russell Craig, e-mail to the author, 28 January 2014.
- 4 Yulé Somt, *The Confluentes Sea*, catalogue essay (Brisbane: Silverwattle Press, 2014).
- 5 Laura Marks, *Touch Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 8.
- 6 Glen Skien, "Mytho-Poetic: Foreign Correspondence," in *Mytho-Poetic: Print and Assemblage Works by Glen Skien* (Gympie, Qld.: Gympie Regional Gallery 2013), 7.
- 7 Aby Warburg cited in Ernst Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 255.
- 8 Martin Warnke cited in Christopher Johnson, *Memory, Metaphor and Aby Warburg's Atlas of Images* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2002), 15.

RUSSELL CRAIG: SUBTERRANEAN

Russell Craig: *Subterranean*

The inspiration for this new body of work originated from a drawing entitled *Below the waterline* featured in my most recent solo exhibition presented at the Redland Art Gallery, Cleveland from 1 November to 8 December, 2013.

Below the waterline was an interpretation of the real and imagined forces beneath the sea. This concept developed largely because of my involvement with the sea through surfing and swimming in the waters off Stradbroke Island. This island is the second most easterly point in Australia and as such has a great deal of marine life surrounding its shores.

These marine creatures are well documented and often come to mind when swimming and surfing in this environment. Many of the free flowing forms represented in these new works are not meant to show a real representation of these marine creatures but more the imagined beings from our subconscious.

These hybrid forms are designed to trigger the viewer's imagination. They also have certain associations with familiar subjects and symbols. The art of the symbolists in the 1800s delved into the subconscious and deliberately explored the highly charged arena of psychology. During this time, the French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821 – 1867) wrote the following in his most famous work, *Les Fleurs du mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*):

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles; L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.

Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité, Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté, Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.

Nature is a temple in which living pillars Sometimes give voice to confused words; Man passes there through forests of symbols Which look at him with understanding eyes.

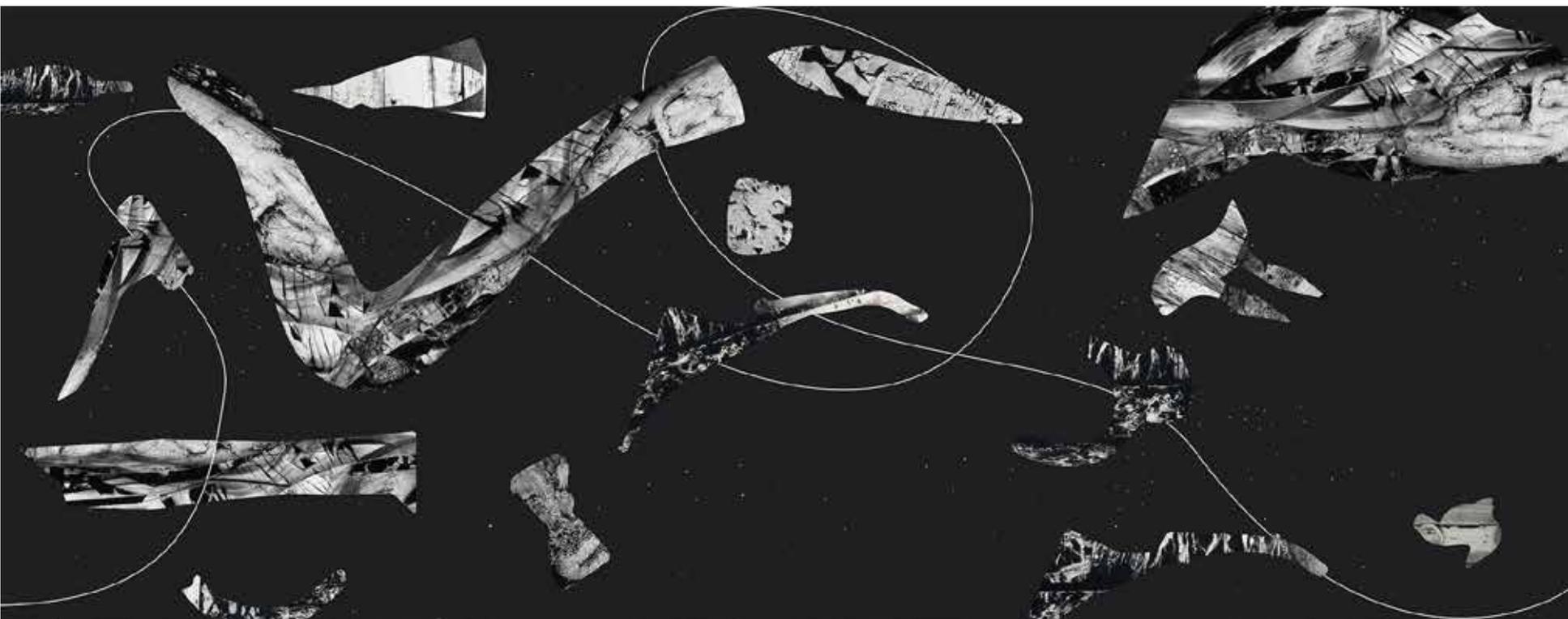
Like prolonged echoes mingling in the distance In a deep and tenebrous unity, Vast as the dark of night and as the light of day, Perfumes, sounds, and colors correspond.

In Baudelaire's poem nature is presented as a sacred place compared to a forest or temple; mine is the subterranean ocean.

In all three works, my original drawings have been orchestrated into specific shapes and then inserted into the vignettes using digital technology. The works are digitally printed on Hahnemuhle paper.



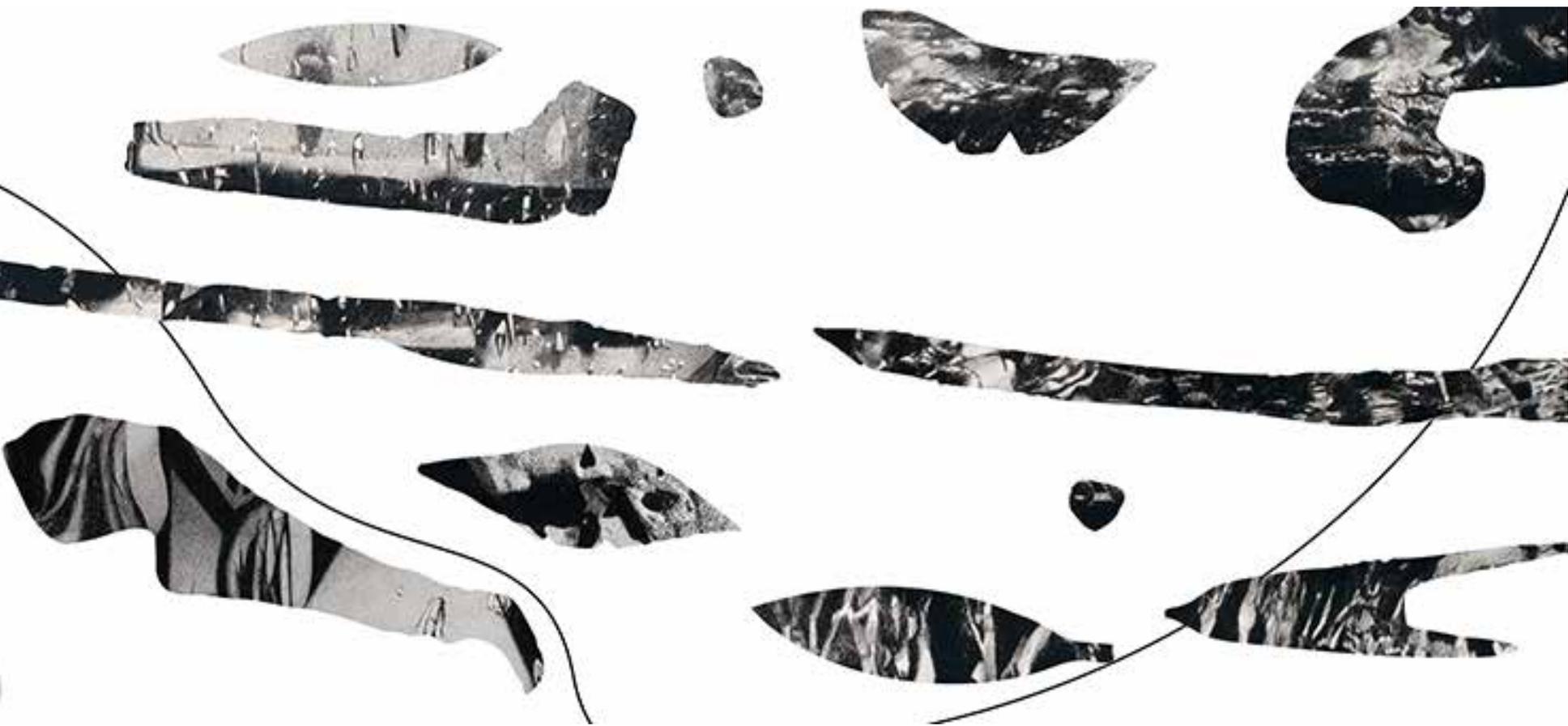
Subterranean 2014
Digital print on Hahnemuhle paper
110 x 160 cm



RUSSELL CRAIG: SUBTERRANEAN



from the depths 2014
Digital print on Hahnemühle paper
110 x 572 cm



Unknown sea 2014
Digital print on Hahnemühle paper
110 x 473 cm

TIM MOSELY: *HOW DEEP THIS TOUCH*

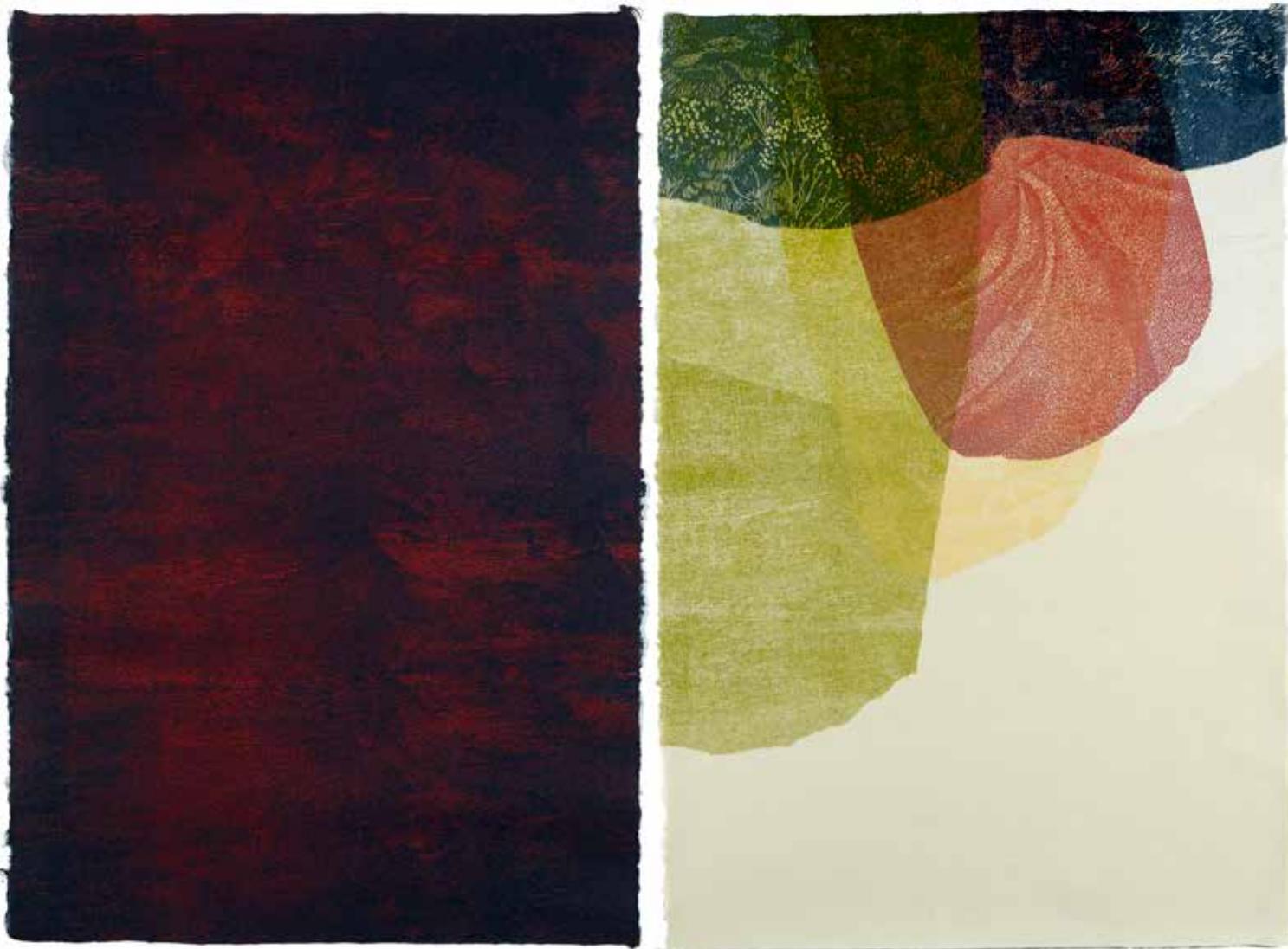


from the deep

Tim Mosely @ the silverwattle bookfoundry, 2014
artists book / relief prints on awagami kozo, rainforest ply
65 x 32 cm (open)



TIM MOSELY: HOW DEEP THIS TOUCH



a haptic touch of the rainforest

Tim Mosely, 2014

quadriptych / relief prints on awagami kozo

280 x 90 cm



Kanage pholu - a

Tim Mosely, 2014

diptych / relief prints on awagami kozo

140 x 90 cm



Kanage pholu - b
Tim Mosely, 2014
diptych / relief prints on awagami kozo
140 x 90 cm

GLEN SKIEN: *ARCHIVE OF THE UNFAMILIAR*



Detail of images from **'Archive of the Unfamiliar'**,
2013-14
Size variable
Etching and collage on muslin envelopes



Detail of images from **'Archive of the Unfamiliar'**,
2013-14
Size variable
Etching and collage on muslin envelopes



Detail of images from **'Archive of the Unfamiliar'**,
2013-14
Size variable
Etching and collage on muslin envelopes



Detail of images from **'Archive of the Unfamiliar'**,

2013-14

Size variable

Etching and collage on muslin envelopes



Detail of images from **'Archive of the Unfamiliar'**,
2013-14
Size variable
Etching and collage on muslin envelopes

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