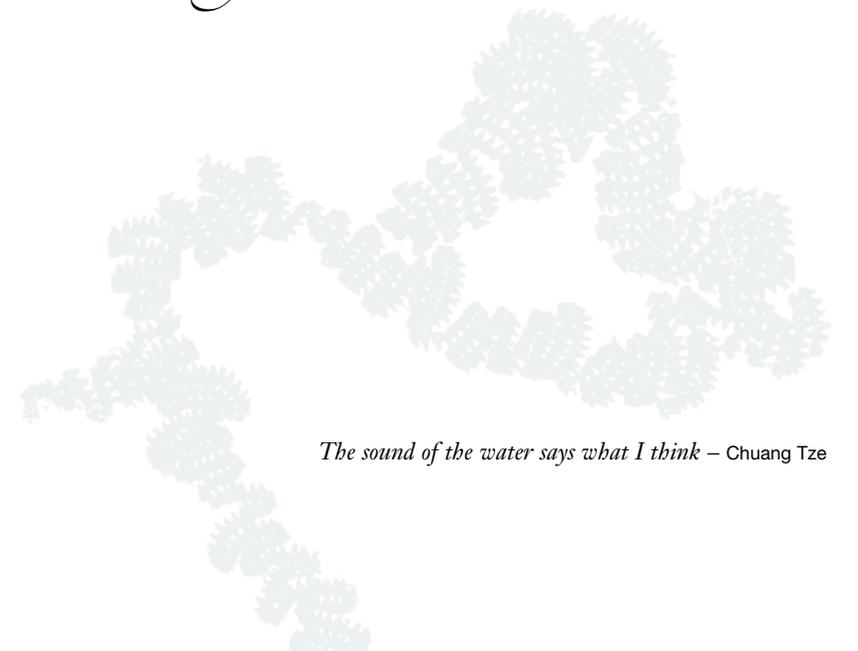
An aerial photograph of a forest path, showing a winding trail of dark green trees and foliage against a lighter green background. The path is composed of several distinct sections, each following a different curve or direction, creating a complex, organic shape. The overall scene is a lush, green landscape with a clear, winding path.

*Daro Montag*

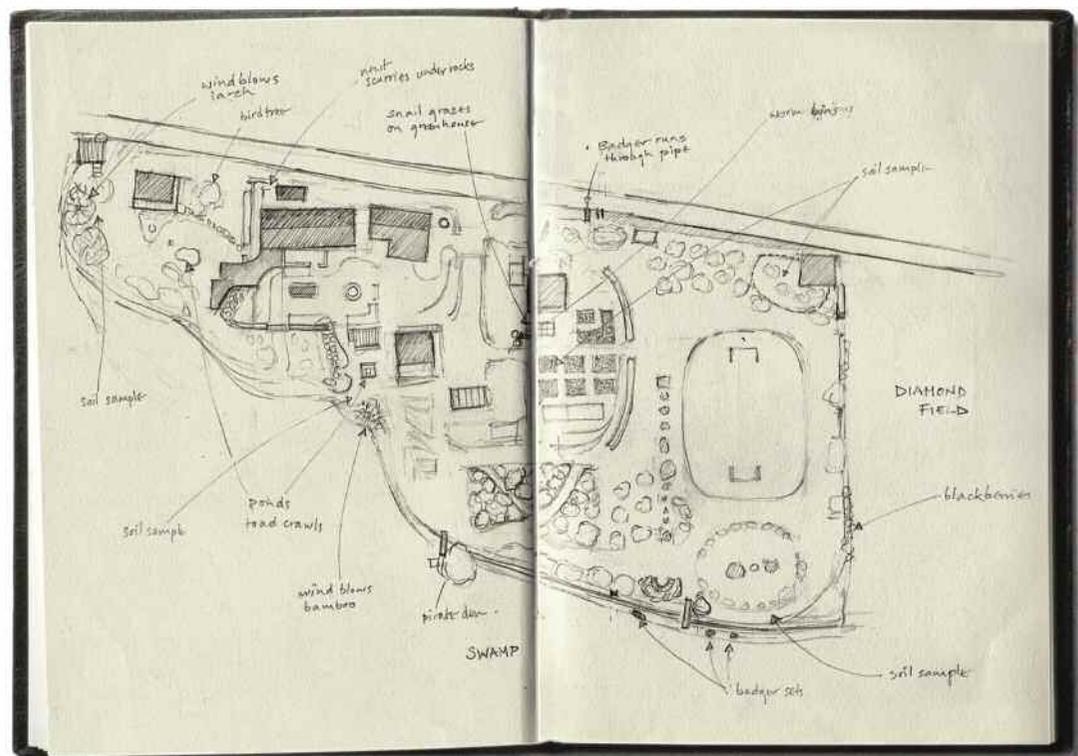
DIALOGUES WITH NATURE

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*Daro Montag* DIALOGUES WITH NATURE



*The sound of the water says what I think – Chuang Tze*



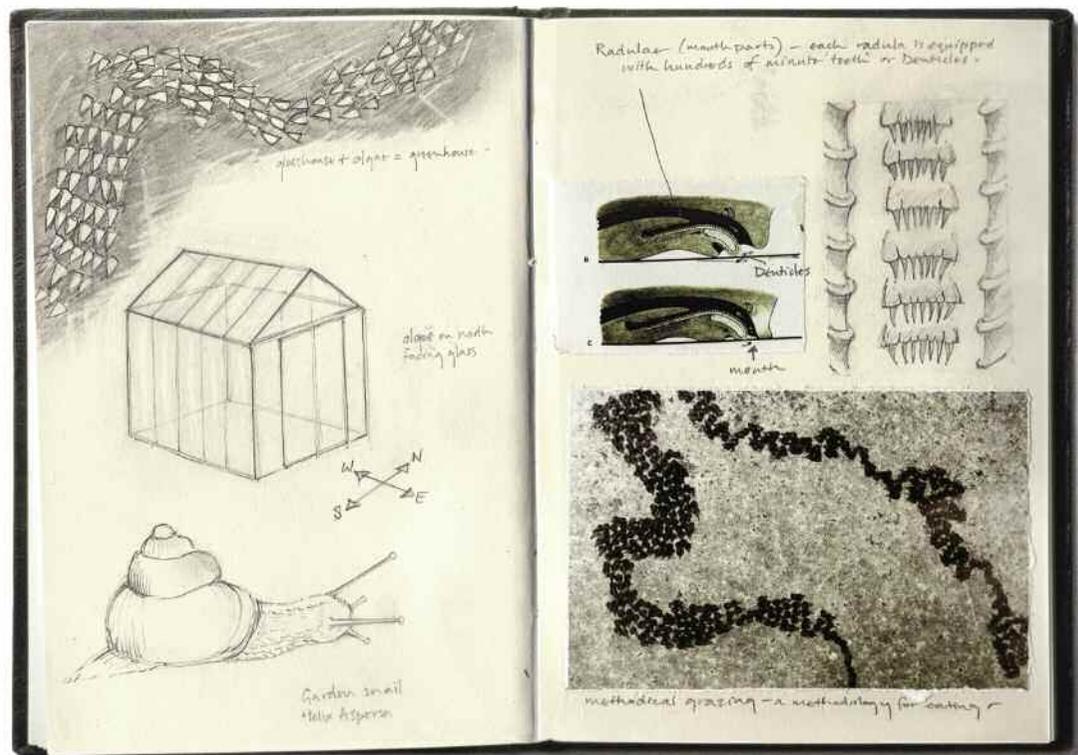
## DIALOGUES WITH NATURE

*Instead of seeing things as relatively independent, static objects, he began to be aware of each thing as a dynamic complex event, closely relating to and interacting with other events [...] Boundaries separating the material, object world from the world of forces and energy, the physical world from the realm of emotions, the world of man from the world of nature melted into fluid pathways joining each to the other [...] Now he understood that while object seeing was an important and fundamental way of organising and relating to the world of stimuli, it represented only a rudimentary level of perception [...] In comparison to object-seeing, 'event-seeing' went beyond an awareness of things in terms of their names and classifications and toward an awareness of their complex identity and being.<sup>1</sup>*

## SITES OF KNOWING

*Dialogues with Nature* forms part of a long-term series of engagements with the natural world within Daro Montag's home environment in Cornwall. The artist sees this site as a shared space in which he and his family co-exist equally with an abundance of other life forms. Through collaborations with animals and natural elements, he seeks to know this habitat in a more profound way. This is mani-

fest through a collection of drawings which visualise 'a flux of animal and organic events' such as falling rain, wriggling worms, and grazing snails, that 'help to make and shape the place'.<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically, these animated marks are grounded in a particular site but also represent a passage within and beyond it. Montag conceives of this habitat as 'a frame for thinking about and knowing the world', yet one with permeable borders in which animals, wind and rain negate the fixities of boundaries



and ownership, leaving traces within it while also passing beyond it. He sees the project as 'part of an ongoing training of the imagination in seeking to understand that I am no more significant to this place than the other species that inhabit it.' The resulting images represent an overlay of organic narratives through which Montag expresses an understanding that his own presence is a 'brief point of interference' within this environment and the complex interconnected events that constitute it.

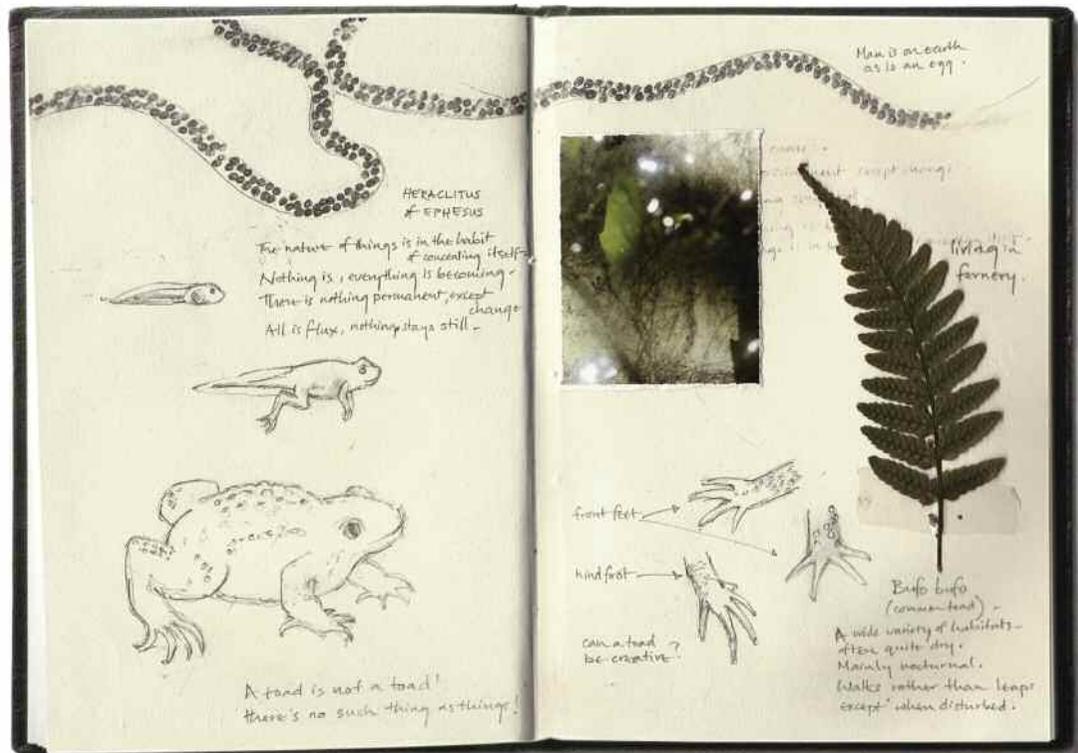
#### COLLABORATIVE PROCESSES

In both practical and conceptual terms, the processes which engender these energised dialogues with nature are underpinned by an ecological perspective which conceives of the artist as interconnected with the environment, rather than existing as a separate entity. Thus, the distinction between what is generated by animals or natural forces and what function as the artist's creative interventions is of little

concern. The collaborative processes of production involve mark making combined with analogue and digital photography. They contribute to a long-term investigation by the artist into the edges of photography and link with other series such as *This Earth* 2006, which visualised biological processes in soil at the same site.

Montag typically uses a sheet of glass, covered in a fine film of carbon, to 'capture' a sense of flux and life force. When carefully placed in a selected location, the passing trails of toads, splatters of rain or leaves wafting in the wind brush away the carbon film to expose the clear glass. This then functions as a form of photographic negative from which a contact print is created. When photographic paper is placed under the glass and exposed to light, a reverse image of the calligraphic traces is produced. The resulting print is digitally scanned and the artist contributes further to the dialogue by introducing colour or increasing the scale of the original drawings.

While Montag's methodology incorporates a degree of planning it also encompasses



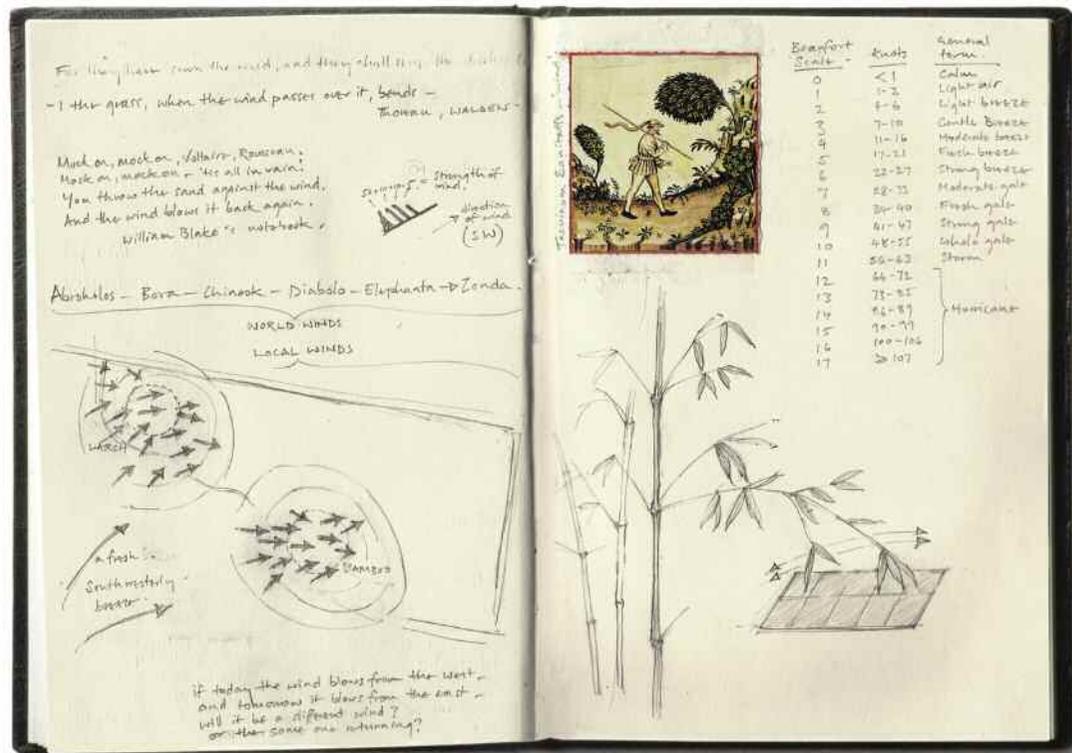
serendipity and chance. A glass plate laid out carefully in a place traversed by toads was instead spattered with soft patterns of rain after an evening shower, resulting in *Rain Drops* 2001. *Snail Grazes* 2006 emerged after glass panes coated in a film of green algae etched with snail trails, were encountered in the greenhouse.

#### TRACES OF LIFE

The resulting images visualise moments of dynamic movement, reflecting indexical traces of doing and becoming in the world, rather than a fixing of particular forms – snail, toad, worm or wind. *Toad Crawls* 2001, captures the passage of toads through an overlay of calligraphic notations that convey movement through time and space. The curved linear traces of claw marks, combined with the heavier scrapings of soft bellies plopped on the ground, evoke a rhythmic journey comprised of subtle pauses and multiple directional shifts. These irregular diagonal markings, juxtaposed with

the stark formal lines of the grid format in which they are presented, create contrasts between open, organic and structured, bounded forms. Similarly, *Wind Blows – Bamboo* 2004, maps the movement of wind through bamboo leaves, conveying a sense of force and dynamic movement in its tangle of dark gestural lines. In contrast, *Snail Grazes* evokes snails' slow methodical progress as they graze on algae in a series of gentle zig-zag journeys.

The intense blue in *Rain Drops* alludes to luminous water and sky, yet also references the performative practices of Yves Klein and his use of International Klein Blue (IKB) as signifier of the ethereal and infinite. It draws a connection with Klein's recordings of rain, which he captured by driving at high speed in wet weather, with a canvas coated in IKB tied to his car roof. *Worm Squirms* 2010, is the only non-photographic work in this series and represents a direct form of mark making. It was generated after worms were deposited gently in a pool of blackberry juice on paper. The resulting images map their liquid trails radiating outwards beyond the frame.



## FIXING AND FLOW: THE '...ING' OF THINGS

By ascribing titles to the works which refer to what the organism or force does – crawling, grazing, blowing – Montag is deliberately evoking a way of knowing the world which is manifest through its actions. Ultimately this reflects a conception of life as being ‘constituted by a complexity of events,’ rather than being comprised of individual entities. According to Montag, language plays an essential role in conditioning our thinking and separating the world into discrete forms. He observes: ‘Naming things – calling something a toad for example – takes it out of the flow of time. If we live in a space-time continuum the act of separating bits of the world out – literally or conceptually – into discrete entities is useful but it isn’t how the world really is.’

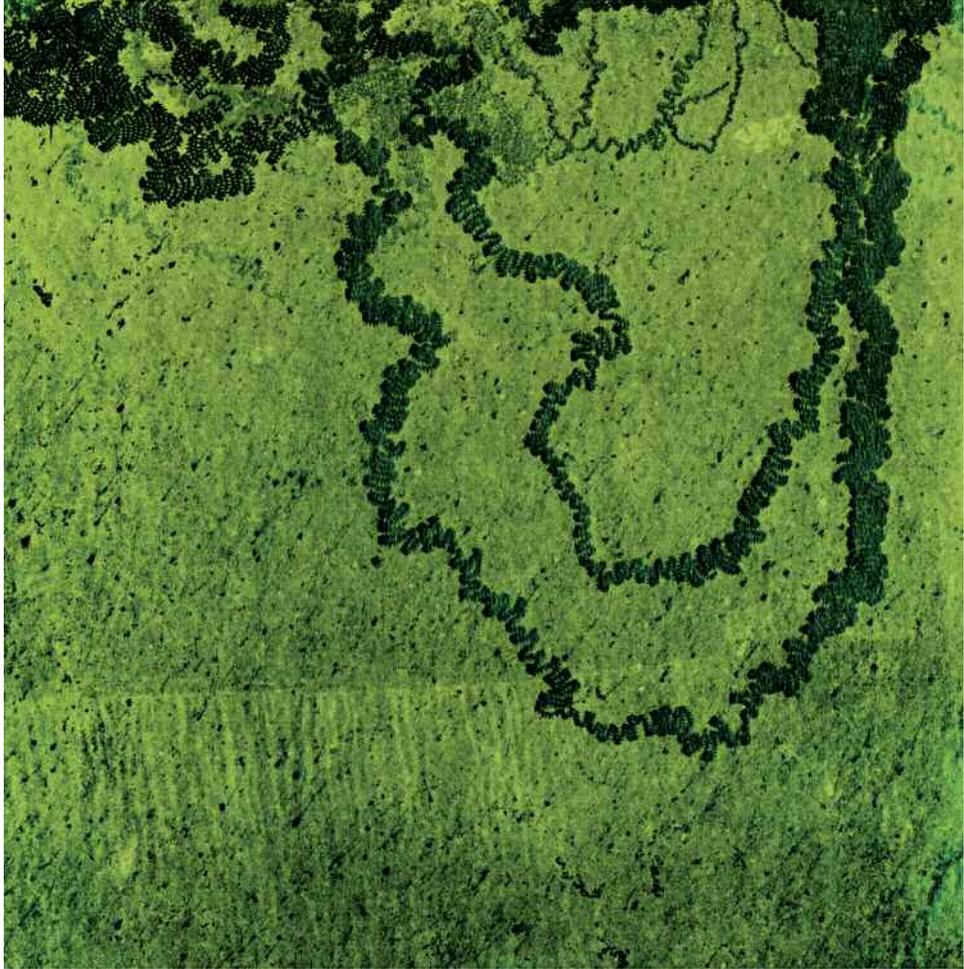
Thus, the work envisages events and presents life as being constituted by dynamic, interconnected processes rather than discrete objects defined by their external appearances.

Daro Montag’s collaborative practice engages with both ecological and art historical thinking by focusing on process, posing questions about the connection between artist and subject, exploring the boundaries of photography and drawing, and challenging notions of originality and authorship. Ultimately though, the artist’s dialogues with nature emerge from and engage with the ecology of a specific site and the broader environment, our impact on it, and ongoing processes of becoming and knowing within the world.

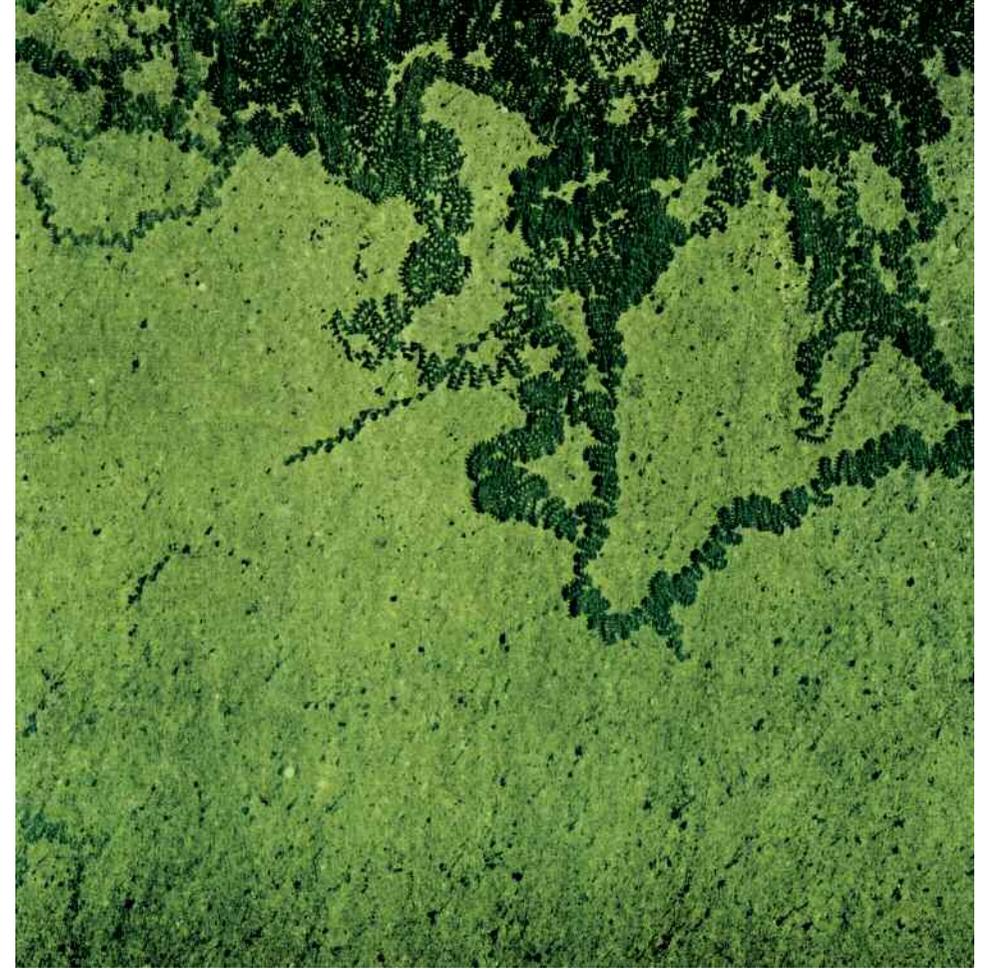
*Dr Lisa Chandler*

*University of the Sunshine Coast*

- 1 Barbara Bullock-Wilson discussing Wynn Bullock in Bullock-Wilson, B. & Bullock, W. 1973, *Photography: A Way of Life*, Morgan & Morgan, New York, pp.16-17.
- 2 Conversation with the artist, 21 March 2013. Unless identified otherwise, all quotes within this essay are taken from this discussion.



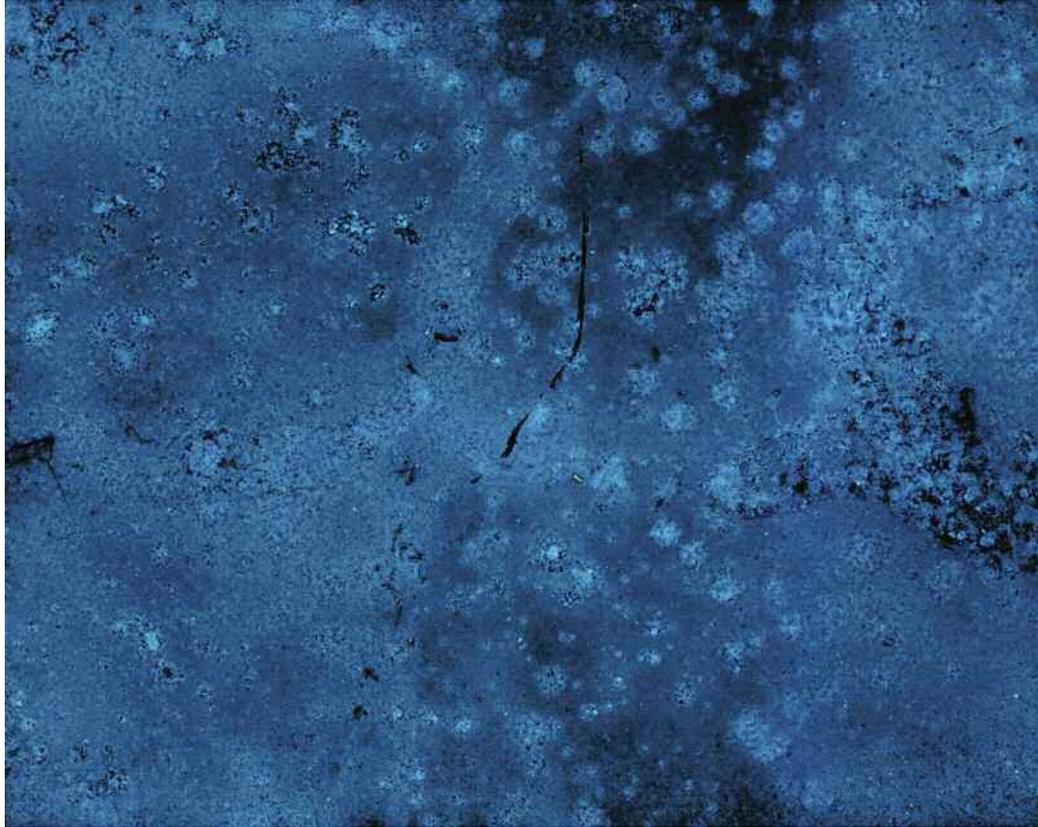
*Snail Grazes 1 & 2, 2006.*



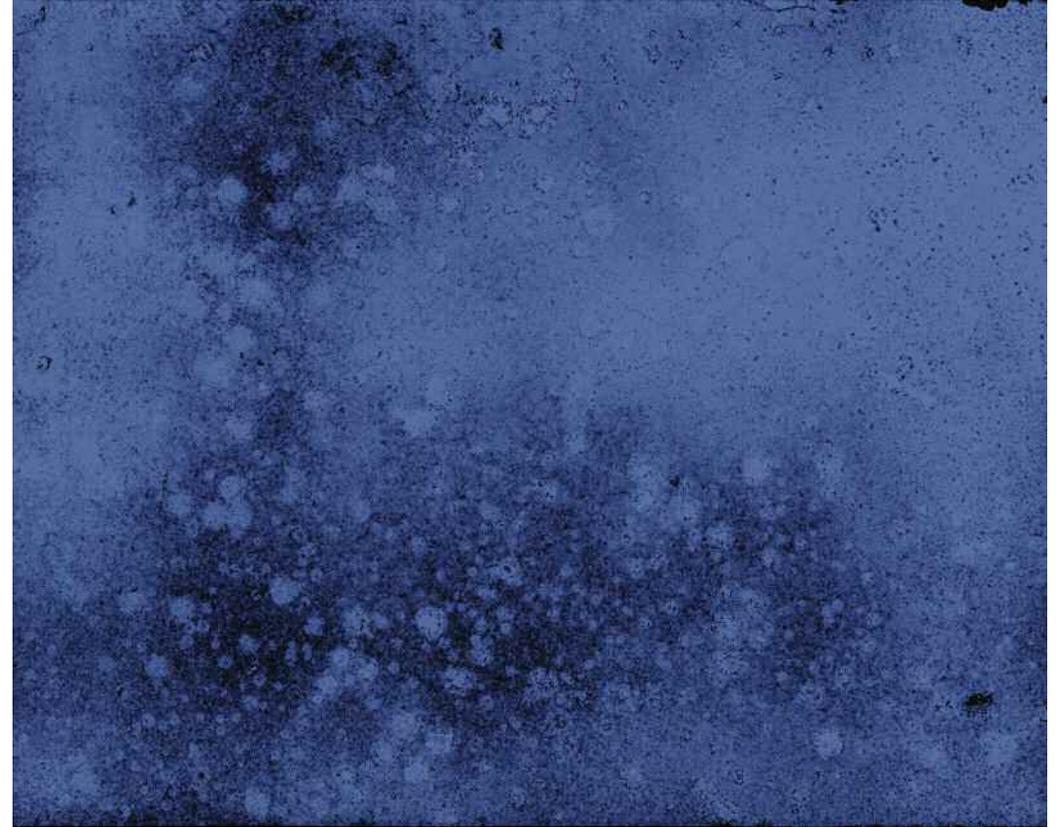


*Toad Crawls 2. Opposite: Toad Crawls 1-9, 2001.*





*Rain Drops 1 & 2, 2001.*





*Wind Blows – Bamboo, 2004.*



*Worm Squirms 1-4, 2010.*



*Dialogues with Nature* exhibited at Sunshine Coast Council's Noosa Regional Gallery, Tewantin, Australia, 30 May – 30 June, 2013 and a contributing event at *Floating Land: Nature's Dialogue*, 31 May – 9 June, 2013.

Dr Lisa Chandler is an artist, educator and curator. She is a Senior Lecturer in Art and Design at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, Australia, and was the foundation director of the University of the Sunshine Coast Gallery.

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