

What if the Sun Didn't Rise: A photographic research creation on light, color and time

by

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Abstract

This thesis presents the results of the research that led to the exhibition *What if the Sun Didn't Rise*, presented at the School of Art Gallery of the University of Manitoba from May 17 to June 21, 2024. Drawing on sociological research on the social acceleration of contemporary societies, my research-creation led me to reduce the photographic medium in such a way as to challenge current photographic norms in relation to the multiplication of images and the installation of images in a white cube, proposing a space of resonance fostered by slowing down and an unusual phenomenological engagement. The work seeks to revisit the landscape photography tradition by the use of cameraless techniques where the landscape creates the photograph, rather than is photographed. The work of art is in dialogue with the history of photography, but also with the history of painting with an esthetic that tends toward the concept of sublime, as it was experienced in romanticist paintings aesthetic (Friedrich, Turner) and abstract expressionism (Rothko).

What If the Sun Didn't Rise traces the evolution of the desire to slow down and deepen my relationship with the world. By simply using sheets of photosensitive paper layered with natural plant material and exposing them to sunlight and the elements for extended hours, I develop a long-form conversation with the environment in which I find myself. This process contrasts sharply with the rapid consumption and multiplication of digital imagery, advocating for a more contemplative, sustained engagement with our surroundings. In that mindset, I produced a durational video installation in which I present the brief hours of sunshine in my studio while it quietly transform the colours of a photosensitive paper laid over a photograph of the Winnipeg sky.

By addressing those questions and offering a space to slow down, this minimalistic exhibition seeks to offer viewers a potential of resonance, whether directly in relation to the work or in everyday moments, like the sight of a ray of sunshine.

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Prior to my art studies, I completed a B.A. and an M.A. in sociology. My artistic practice therefore combines contemporary art and sociology. Social norms and social acceleration are two sociological subjects that I am interested in. My MFA project has therefore been thought through and developed with these two themes in mind. Before getting into the heart of this project, it's important to be clear about what is meant by these two theoretical elements.

Social Norms

Social norms, also known as social conventions, are one of the pillars on which society rests. They consist of a series of codes, behaviors and values that are agreed upon and accepted by individuals in a given culture and are bound to evolve and change with the passing of generations and innovations, forming part of a dynamic of continuous transformation (ROCHER, 1969).

Fine art is a social subculture that responds to the same imperatives. Every artistic movement has developed in relation - not to say opposition - to the state of art at a given time in history. Duchamp's ready-mades sought to remove the body from the work of art and integrate the idea. This was obviously counter-cultural in the art world. Indeed, it was under a pseudonym that Duchamp had to present his now-famous "Fountain." Every artistic movement has its own set of standards that successful artists, or those who want to be successful, have to live up to. At the same time, the art world is looking for innovation, and artists must continually renew themselves. It is in this context that artists often strive to go against the norms proposed by the dominant currents - societal and artistic - of a certain era.

Norms and Photography

Photography itself can be considered a subculture of fine arts, even though it was long excluded from them. Considered "easy" or too faithful a representation of the subject, unlike paintings which included the painter's imagination, photography was seen more as an object of science and a business opportunity. The first photographic standards concerned landscape photography and portraiture - a fact that is no doubt related to the label given to the two types of possible photographic orientations. Since then, photography has developed and distinguished itself in a series of niches, each representing a particular subculture (Instagram, Wedding, Corporate, Event, Tourism, etc.) with

its own standards and codes. Today, photography occupies a place of its own among the mediums of fine arts and contemporary arts (WELLS, 2022). Geneviève Cadieux, specifically used photography to represent Canada at the Venice Biennale. Wolfgang Tillmans, a German photographer, has just had a retrospective that has toured some of the world's greatest art museums. The most important art galleries all have photographic artists in their representations. Portraits and landscapes are still popular, but other types of photography, such as self-portraits, masquerades, documentation and abstraction, also find their way into fine arts. Several types of photographic installation are possible: grids, clouds, sculptural installations, tabletop installations, etc.. The possibilities are manifold, but generally speaking, exhibitions will honour the white cube: framed photos displayed on the wall. Different schools of photography may also favour certain aesthetics: straight, poetic, material, documentary and so on. Generally though, fine art photography seems to be rather uniform.

If social norms interest me, it's not so much because of their objective characteristics as explained in sociology, but in a much more personal way: in every sphere of my life, I like to do things differently. I don't claim to be a rebel or a revolutionary. In a much more modest way, I simply question the limits and explore the possibilities of the medium. In my BFA - photography major, I was already removing the lens from my camera, then built my own pinhole cameras out of beer cans that I left in trees for months, producing images that were both experimental and abstract. From the outset, I wanted to rediscover the material magic of photography and conceptually inscribe myself in a different temporality by favouring long exposures lasting several months. In doing so, I was going against the increasing pace of contemporary society and the multiplication of photographic images, facilitated by digital cameras and smartphones.

Social acceleration

The German philosopher and sociologist Hartmut Rosa has developed a social critique of time in which he demonstrates that contemporary societies are accelerating in three dimensions: technical acceleration (production, transport, communication), acceleration of social change where the pace of cultural and structural change becomes greater than that of generational succession, and finally, the acceleration of the "rhythm of life" (ROSA, 2013). Rosa describes the latter as "a shortening or densification of episodes of action", and subjectively as "an upsurge in the sense of urgency, stress-inducing time pressure, and the fear of not being able to keep up". With this, Rosa points out that free time is lost time: we are accelerating our pace of life, favouring fast-paced activities and abandoning

long-term investments. Everything is going faster, and thus our relationship with the world is more disembodied than ever.

Those questions are not new to art and were already raised by Moholy-Nagy in the first half of the 20th century. Indeed, "By the mid-1920s, Moholy-Nagy had realized that we are placed in a fundamentally new and ever-intensifying condition, one of sensory saturation, stemming from a number of factors" (BOTAR, 2014 :9) like technical reproduction and the proliferation of information. He was advocating for self-assurance by engaging with technology, in opposition to just being a witness of overspecialized knowledge: "In Moholy-Nagy's scheme, art and artists are accorded the role of educator rather than that of agent provocateur, and it is through this pedagogical prism that art is refracted and projected toward medial experimentation and sensory training/expansion." (BOTAR, 2014 :10) This whole process was meant as a way to reengage the body with the new state of the society.

For Rosa, almost a century after Moholy-Nagy, this fast-paced culture is at the root of a new form of social alienation. He continues his analysis in a subsequent work (ROSA, 2018), in which he contemplates a way out of this impasse, based on our relationship with the world (the natural and material environment, other people, and a form of all-encompassing, transcendent totality - God, nature, art, history, etc.). Acceleration has somehow "disconnected" us from the world and Rosa seeks to construct a sociology of relation to the world that is marked by a "responsive" dimension he calls resonance: Personal moments where we feel in communion with the world. Resonance is specific to one person's experience but I could summarize it by saying that it is an experience that is larger than usual, somehow overwhelming. We have all experienced one of those moment before a piece of art, a landscape, with a lover, at the birth of a child, etc. But resonance can't be predicted and ranges between full availability and total unavailability: there's no guarantee that something will resonate even though it should (or not). However, without a relationship with others, with nature, with art, etc. - in short, without a personal investment in the world - resonance is simply impossible. And to be in a relationship, one needs to invest time in it. In that sense, social acceleration contributes to a certain form of isolation and that consequently reduces the possibility of resonance.

Art and resonance

The Korean-Japanese sculptor and painter Lee Ufan also uses the concept of resonance in his artistic practice. Adopting a minimalist approach, certainly influenced by his life in Japan, his installations aim to create a resonance that emerges from the relationship between work, viewer and space (UFAN, 2019). Like Rosa, Ufan's resonance is unavailable: it cannot be explained, but only experienced, in the culminating instant of the work-space-individual relationship. Ufan's work (Figure 1) has a potential of resonance that inspires my own practice.



Figure 1. Ufan Lee, Installation view, Painting and Sculptures, Salzburg Halle, 14 April 2011 to 18 June 2011.

Being able to fill a room with so few elements gives a purified aspect to the installation that I look forward to. You have to engage with the work, you can't escape it, unless you turn around and leave the room. And it is this engagement – body-work-space – that determine the installation. Ufan's use of resonance helps me to bridge sociology and art. In the end, I feel like this type of minimalistic installation is a way to engage with the world in a slower way. Faye Heavyshield's installations are a good example of this slow and soft relationship that is produced in the triad of artwork-space-viewer.

Aapaskaiyaawa (They are Dancing) (Figure 2) is a good example of this relationship: large papers folded in a human-like body are suspended by strings, and move with the air flow produced by the viewer entering the space. Even though the installation takes only part of a larger room, the poetic energy of the relationship gives the viewer a feeling of fullness as if the negative space of the room is actually contributing to this fullness sensation. This minimalistic balance is part of all of Heavysield's installations and creates an atmosphere of calm and serenity that forces the viewer to slow down while encountering the work.



Figure 2. Faye Heavysield, *Aapaskaiyaawa (They are Dancing)*, 2002, acrylic paint, beads, plastic filament on canvas.

Norms and Acceleration

My desire to push back the boundaries of photography is not unrelated to my disenchantment with it. There's never been so much photography, and yet very few photographic works resonate with me. And when they do, it's more in terms of materiality or installation that I find some stimulation. Every type of photograph seems to be a repetition of itself. Photographic norms create a standardization that takes away my interest in photography. Artistic photography is no exception. I too often feel that

a photo exhibition is just an empty room with beautiful frames containing beautiful photos; it doesn't give me any phenomenological experience. Neither the empty room, nor the beautiful frames, or the beautiful photos are issues in themselves, but their relationship, particularly in regards to the viewer's embodied experience, troubles me.

Lee Ufan maintains that, in Japan, a simple flower can be the sole component of a room, but that depending on a series of elements linking the flower, the room and, of course, the individual who enters it, the room will remain empty or, on the contrary, will be filled with the presence of this flower (UFAN, 2019). The combination of these different characteristics will enable the work to be "resolved", as we say in the art world (but the presence of the viewer and his or her subjectivity also makes resonance unavailable). Whether it's the artist's identity, some form of body poetic or the treatment of a particular social issue - climate change, war, colonialism - I don't resonate with the photographic subjects generally addressed in contemporary photography despite their importance. In short, it seems that what would allow this resonance to be available refers to the notion of the sublime – something similar to a religious experience (Rosenblum, 1961) – which seems to be evacuated from contemporary photography. In some respects, you could say that I am cautious, not to say suspicious of photography. As Moholy-Nagy did, I wish to try things out, bring the medium back to its simplest expressions: time, light, sensitivity. But instead of taking advantage of the technology to educate people on the state of the society, I use old technology and photographic processes that puts light on the actual condition of photography and social acceleration. Today, with social medias and digital technology, the accumulation of photographs is easier than ever. Acceleration has the effect of rendering obsolete those things that do not have this accelerating capacity. Analogue photography requires time and money: each print has to be made at a specific pace and at a fixed cost. You can't amortize the value of the camera with the number of photos you take, since these generate fixed costs. In this sense, it's clear that digital cameras encourage (in a subtle way) the accumulation of images in order to reduce costs and "break even", which is theoretically impossible with film photography. Kodak, which controlled the market, now produces only a few films, while only Hermann-Ilford produces black and white papers and Fujifilm colour ones. In all, around ten types of paper are still available today. In short, analogue photography is tending to disappear.

This is not to say that old photographic papers no longer exist. I have a collection of over 100 types of expired papers that are "not good" anymore. But when used outside the darkroom, these papers will change colour in the light. As each company (Kodak, Agfa, Oriental, etc.) has its own emulsion

(photosensitive solution recipe), each paper has its own particular hues and will transform differently. The liquids will also interact with the emulsion and the reaction will offer other color variations. Those material characteristics of the papers are examples of the medium's possibilities that have been explored by numerous photo-based artists like Michael Flomen, Lotus Laurie Kang or Rachelle Bussières. It's not so much about criticizing standards, but simply being driven by this desire to push back the limits of a medium which has preoccupied artists throughout the history of art. But rather than resorting to technology to push forward, I am pushing backward through the use of the basic material - photographic paper. Influenced by Moholy-Nagy, Vilém Flusser suggests in his *Philosophy of Photography* that it's a matter of testing the possibilities of the photographic program (FLUSSER, 2004). In this sense, I'm exploring possibilities that may not have been exploited or have been forgotten. Using photographic paper in a way that wasn't intended opens a field of stimulating possibilities.

I don't reject contemporary society and the possibilities it offers. It's important for me to consider any photographic possibilities. As photographic paper continues to change color until it is developed and fixed, if I were to develop and fix it, I would have a totally different rendering: black if developed and fixed, or yellow if only fixed. I will sometimes digitize my unfixed prints, thus digitally fixing an instant of this perpetual transformation. In such cases, I'll be able to print the resulting images in large format, revealing characteristics of my images that are difficult to observe in the original format. I don't follow specific rules or guidelines. I explore the possibilities of the medium with two things in mind: 1) present an original possibility of the medium and 2) offer a potential for resonance.

MFA Project

The fundamental question that underlies my project in photography is: *What is photography?* A very general question that obviously conceals others: *What is photography's place in society and the arts?* *What is being done in photography?* and therefore *What are we allowed to do?* or in more pragmatic terms: *What could I do differently?*

I began my MFA research with that mindset. I wanted to question the photographic medium, examine its possibilities and go against social acceleration, with the aim of creating a work with a potential of resonance – potential because resonance isn't certain. To achieve this, my aim was to reduce the photographic device and increase the relationship with the world.

The reduction of the photographic device has been at the heart of my practice for some time now. I first removed the lens from my camera, then made pinhole cameras that enabled me to produce exposures lasting several months. Working against the increasing accumulation of digital photographs, I produced works that recorded an entire year in a single photograph. In this way, time and space took on an important dimension in my work, while at the same time inscribing my practice in the history of photography, notably through the use of old and alternative processes, but also through a new reading of landscape photography. By installing a pinhole camera in a tree for up to a year, it was not only the landscape that was imprinted on the sheet of paper, but also the conditions of this landscape, the apparent trajectories of the sun burning the paper, from one solstice to the next, the water that infiltrates the camera, etc., in short, nature that transforms the paper, offering an unsuspected materiality to the image produced (Figure 3). In this regard, Michael Flomen's use of snow, water, and even fireflies have been a huge influence in my practice (FLOMEN, 2022).

This materiality has become an important part of my project. It's not so much a question of how I can photograph a landscape, but rather how the landscape itself can produce a photograph. The landscape is no longer the subject photographed, it becomes the photographer. In a way, I am the landscape's assistant. The materiality of photosensitive paper, the way it changes color by the emulsion's reaction to light, air, temperature, and other weather conditions, enables me to work more closely with nature. In this mediation between nature and the photosensitive surface of photographic papers, the camera seemed less and less necessary. I therefore reduced the medium once again, removing the camera and using only the paper on which I placed weeds collected from my surroundings to make contact prints called lumen prints.

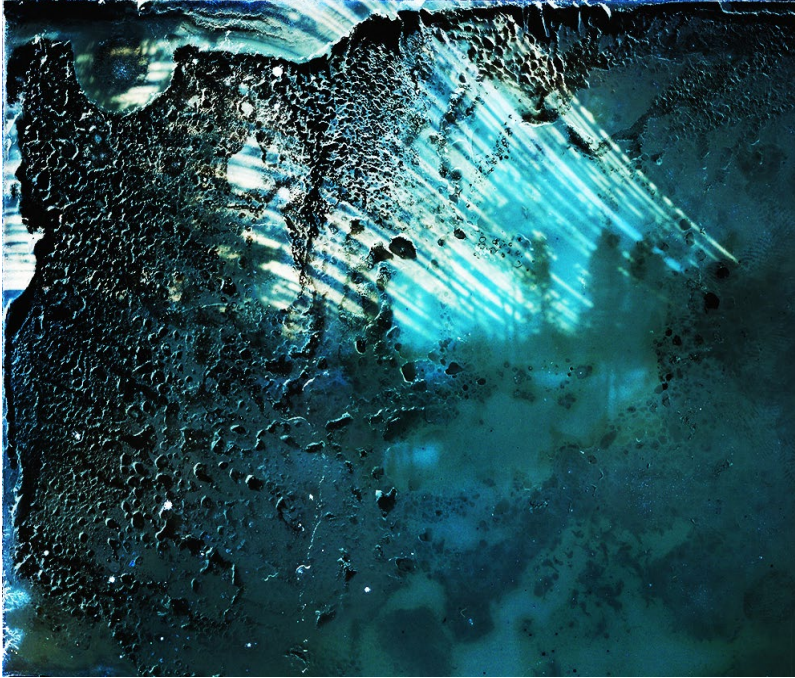


Figure 3. Benjamin Perron, *Lac des XV*, 2020, 8-month beer can pinhole photograph, 110 x 135 cm inkjet print.

Because of this emphasis on the relationship with nature in my work, I first situate my practice in relation to landscape photography. By this, I am revisiting the Canadian tradition of landscape photography, which seeks to control nature through sharp images, rigorous compositions, and a high level of technique in order to represent the territory as a mythical space (PAQUET, 2009). It is through abstract and experimental photographs, rather than realistic and controlled ones, that I wish to contribute to the expansion of the boundaries of landscape photography. Coming back to my general question, I'm now asking "what is landscape photography?"

The first landscape photographers were explorers, adventurers, (and businessmen) that sought beautiful indigenous landscapes to bring back as photographs to the western world. It was exotic, as were the ethnographers' portraits of Indigenous people (WARNER MARIEN, 2021). I wanted to create a distance from this vertical dynamic of domination, and inscribe myself in a horizontal relationship of equity between people and nature. During my years of study in Winnipeg, I was confronted with learning about colonization and its impact on indigenous communities. I also had the opportunity to take a seminar on research methods in Indigenous studies that had a profound impact on me. Although Indigenous studies are developed by and for Indigenous people, the discussions I was able to take part in had a major impact on my own artistic working methods. I helped me to solidify my

position in relation to landscape photography, but also to realize the importance of developing good relationships with the land and the people who inhabit it.

At a time where the environment is being destroyed by consumerism, I try to reduce my ecological footprint - by recovering expired photographic paper, by building my photographic devices from found materials, but above all, by judiciously choosing the plants I collect, not for their aesthetic quality, but rather out of a concern for a respectful relationship with nature. As Wall Kimmerer suggests, I only pick what I need (WALL KIMMERER, 2013). Generally, I prefer to use weeds, not because they have no value, but on the contrary to give them back a value that has been taken away from them. Indeed, the weeds I pick up on the university campus or in my back alley are considered "bad" for what we might call social standards, generally because of their inferior aesthetic qualities, and are removed in favor of exotic, non-indigenous plants. However, in other contexts, these weeds could be appreciated for their medicinal or food value. The use of weeds allows me to re-establish an egalitarian relationship with the nature, firstly by breaking out of a vertical relationship of wildlife management by placing them on an equal footing, but also by offering ignored plants a forgotten beauty.

This respectful relationship to nature and its inhabitants helps me to position myself against the colonial perspective that is central in the tradition of landscape photography. By doing abstract landscape photography, I am not taking away something specific like an exotic artifact. The places are anonymous, as are the plants. From expired photographic paper, weeds and long hours of exposure, I then obtain abstract images that will continue to evolve, either because they have not been developed or fixed, or, on the contrary, because development in chemicals will completely transform the images.

Through this form of anonymity, I restore a fundamental beauty to plants whose shapes and colors on photographic paper resonate with viewers, not because of exoticism, but rather through the organic memories and archetypes that furnish the minds of us all. In addition, except for reprinted images, my lumen prints are 1:1 scale, which gives a direct relationship with the artwork that is part of the viewer's memory and familiarity with the subject. The work itself isn't relational as Nicolas Bourriaud defines it (BOURRIAUD, 2018), but the process is rooted in the relation to the world and the work produced helps to think about that relationship.

Working without a camera, I obviously situate my work in relation with cameraless photographers such as Allison Rossiter, or Michael Flomen, the former for the importance she attaches to photographic papers as an integral part of the work, the latter for his relational work with the environment (ROSSITER, 2017; FLOMEN, 2022). Moholy-Nagy has also been an important reference in my work with the photographic process and the relation between science and art (MOHOLY-NAGY, 2019). His interest in both technology and sciences of the living can also be seen in my own work with regard to the photographic medium and nature, which I seek to capture in a different way.

But it's more in relation to painting, and the concept of the sublime, that I situate my own photographic practice. Without seeking to emulate painting, I am drawn to the experience proposed by the Romantic painters of the 18th century and the Abstract Expressionists of the second half of the 20th century in New York. The selection of the artworks - their format, quantity and installation - all contribute to creating an experience that goes beyond the aesthetic pleasure conveyed by beauty. According to Burke in his influential essay on beauty and the sublime, the sublime implies the power to compel and destroy (BURKE, 2020). Without seeking a destructive power in my works, I do like to present the force of the nature in the materiality of the photographic papers. I let the force of light, of plant liquids, of rain, or the temperature modify over time the appearance of the paper which will produce a compelling artwork. In this way I am drawn toward the existential experience of the sublime, how it reminds us of our place in the world. The relationship that is established between the work, the viewer and the room, seeks to provoke a visceral emotion such as that experienced in front of the canvases of William Turner, Caspar David Friedrich or Mark Rothko (ARNASON, 2004).

The large format prints and the organic forms of my early work are an echo to neovitalist, neoromantic and postmodernist artistic movements, that Oliver Botar refined in his doctoral thesis under the world-view umbrella of biocentrism (BOTAR, 1998) where the availability of new technologies, such as microscopes and telescopes, inspired painters while enabling photographers to emulate Modernist painters in return. On one hand, parting from technology, I favor simplicity to produce images that are reminiscent of painting, or at the very least that question the viewer about the medium employed. On the other hand, favoring technology, I combine art and science, either by producing my own silver gelatin emulsion or by experimenting in the field of micrography and astrophotography. The infinitely small and infinitely large scale proposed by the microscope and telescope is for me a new space of exploration with the concept of the sublime and the greatness it supposes.

My MFA research trajectory brought me from a biomorphist style, with works featuring highly organic forms, to a biocentrist world view understood as a “[...] series of discourses which, while differing from each other in certain respects, shared a set of themes, attitudes, and topoi relating to nature, biology and epistemology. [...] Stated succinctly, “Biocentrism” is Nature Romanticism updated by the Biologism of the mid- to late-nineteenth century.” (BOTAR and WÜNSCHE, 2016 :2) In my first MFA year, I produced lumen prints that were reminiscent of the biomorphist style, with its curves and sensualism. In my second year, without rejecting the importance of nature, I departed somewhat from the biomorphist style by working with monochromes of photographic papers. The everchanging colour of those papers, while exposed to sunlight, refers to the living, the nature and its vital forces. Ultimately, it's an overall experience, an atmosphere, that should emerge from my project where the work from the first year is rooted in Romanticism, similar to William Turner and Caspar David Friedrich, while the second year's material is related to abstract expressionism, specifically Mark Rothko's work with colour.

Daylilies in my backyard (Figure 4) is a lumen print that was made on expired paper, using daylilies that I exposed for part of the day in my backyard. Although the flower is orange, its liquids, added to the humidity created by the ambient heat, interacted with the emulsion to create organic forms in shades of mauve and pink. Once digitized, I reprinted one of these images in a very large format, 63" x 90", offering a whole new experience. Not only were the shapes and colors reminiscent of painters' gestures, but the relationship between the work and the viewer tends towards the sublime, as in the paintings of the late 19th century. This image, and the emotion it offers to the viewers, wouldn't be possible without the combination of digital and analog photography.

My workflow is based on a DIY/at hand methodology that is not foreign from the acceleration of society where commodities quickly become obsolete, disposed of and replaced by a latest version of a product. My paper collection is composed of expired papers that aren't suitable anymore for the darkroom. My contact print table is made of plywood and a glass sheet that I found in the trash. Most of the material I use is recycled. Since I work from found materials, whether it's expired papers or weeds salvaged from wherever I happen to be, I have to do with what's available. Most of the papers I've been able to put my hands on are 8"x10" and 11"x14", but as my contact print table is approximately 40" x 60", I've made paper grids in order to obtain a larger printing surface.



Figure 4. Benjamin Perron, *Daylilies in my backyard*, 12,7 x 17,8 cm lumen print, undeveloped, unfixed, scanned, 160 x 230 cm inkjet print on matte photo paper.

Grids can be problematic in landscape photography, specifically when one wants to position oneself against colonialism. Indeed, grids were used as an important colonial control system of lands. Grids are also important in the history of photography and painting, so I felt I had to take those facts into account in my project and decided to go beyond the grid. Among other things, I came to stack some of the papers in my grid one on top of the other, allowing for several layers of printing (Figure 5). This allowed me to move away from the usual grid, while at the same time playing with their presentation, as I shifted the alignment of the superimpositions, revealing areas of the first layers of paper.

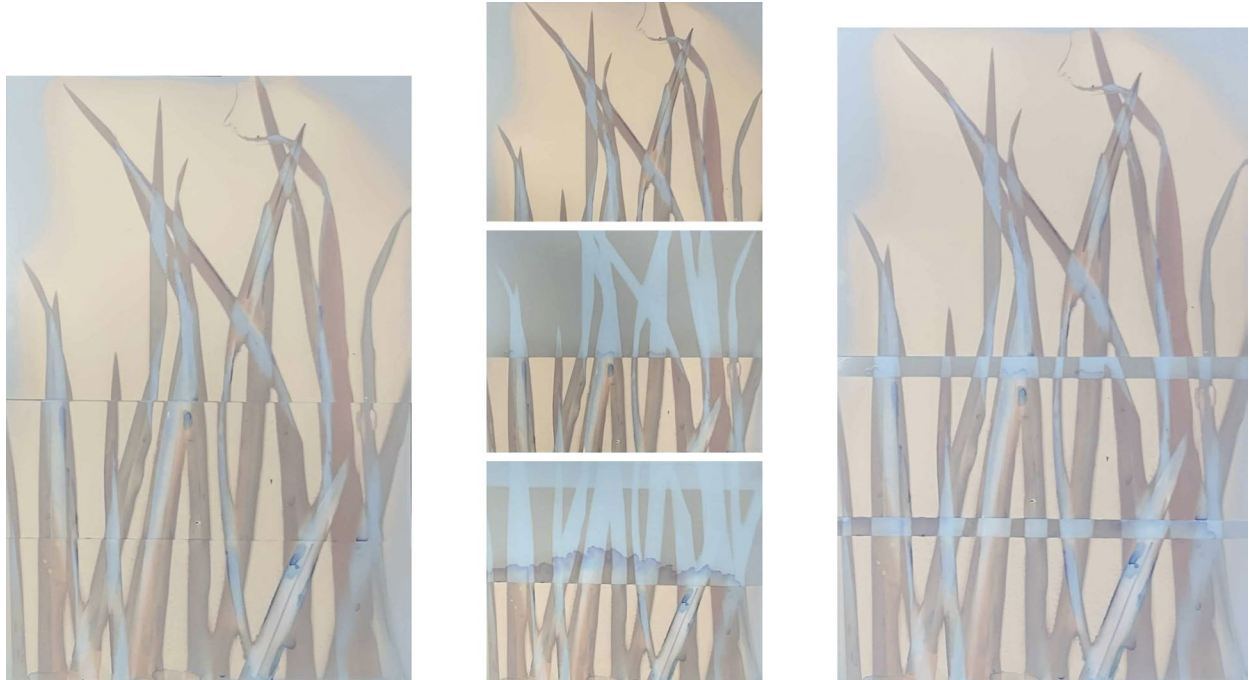


Figure 5. Work documentation. From left to right: Paper stacked for printing exposure; Papers once printed; Papers once rearranged for exhibition.

These lines in different shades create a movement, an almost musical temporality in the complete grid, and the materiality that emerges takes us out of the grid. Other grids were developed and fixed in the darkroom, surprisingly revealing ghostly images on black and white papers, as well as bright, unusual colors on colored papers.

The recomposed grids and the preponderance of color, however, took me back to painting, in particular to Mondrian's paintings and Josef Albers' experiments with colour interaction (ALBERS, 2013). In a renewed desire to reduce and experiment with the possibilities of the photographic process, I decided to remove the plants from my lumens, using only the papers changing colors. Artists like Rachelle Bussi eres and Lotus Laurie Kang use the transformative qualities of the papers by using the light to create shapes and forms, but I haven't encountered artists who use the paper as is, *being* the artwork rather than its media. Only the pure landscape – light (sun/clouds), air (humidity/dryness), temperature (hot/cold) – of a specific environment is used to transform the paper.

During my research I was fortunate enough to have a solo show at La Maison des Artistes Visuels Francophones, where I could experiment for my research. I created an 8' x 10' grid from 80 types of

paper cut into squares. Since each type of paper is unique in terms of color when exposed to light, the grid would be transforming throughout the exhibition and offering the viewers a large array of colours (Figure 6). This grid, on which nothing was placed, was intended to highlight the material qualities of the papers and the continuous interplay of colors. Basically, each paper has a specific colour (white, yellow, beige, pink, blue, mauve, green, brown, etc.) that will transform when exposed to light. Black and white paper tends to darken and transform more quickly than colored paper, which tends to fade over time.

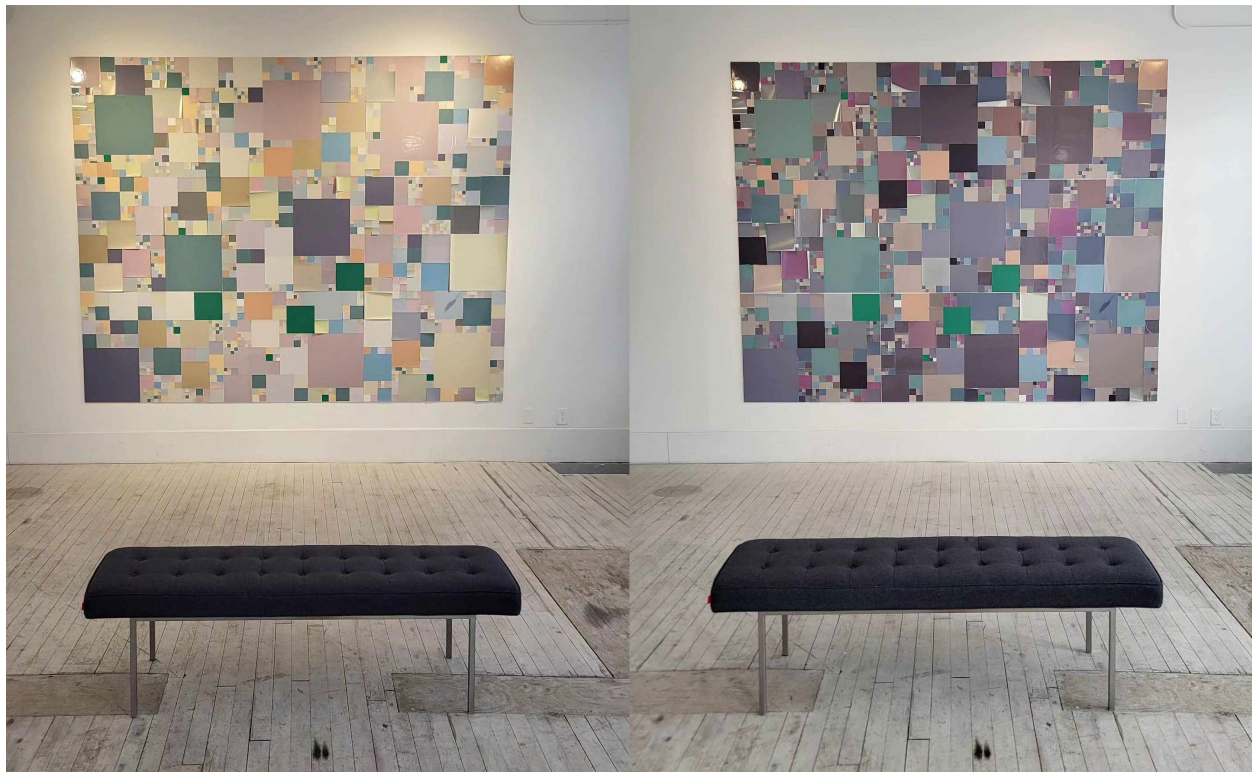


Figure 6. Benjamin Perron, *Les Formes animées de la couleur*, First and Last day view of Installation at La Maison des artistes visuels francophones, 2-25 November 2023.

The entire grid was thus composed of monochromatic colors that were continuously transformed. This transformation engages the viewer in a temporal relationship that stretches over time, inviting them to revisit the work again and again. Questions were added to the simplicity of the work: *Why squares? Why this particular color combination?* which had the unintended effect of intellectualizing the work and complicating the reading. I was also reluctant to document the piece, which would give a workshop aspect to the work or reveal its secrets, while at the same time diluting the work itself by splitting it into two parts (the grid and the documentation). This large paper grid, though conceptually

interesting, didn't resonate, and my interest in solving it dissipated. Instead, I chose to film/videotape the papers directly as they were transforming which led to the video installation *View from my window in Taché* in the final show. My studio experiments led me to record a single sheet of photographic paper laid over a square inkjet print of a color gradient (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Work documentation, 2024.

The rectangle-on-square was an effective composition, as did the color of the photographic paper, which had the potential to blend into the printed gradient. This new avenue gave me the opportunity to reduce the complexity of the grid and the formalism associated with it, while keeping the slow changing color pace of the papers, which is the most important aspect of the work.

Acknowledging the importance of the choice of gradient, I thought of my first day in Winnipeg and how I was struck by the blue sky. I photographed the natural gradient of the sky, blue to white, that would serve as the background for my video, maintaining a link to landscape. From the various photographic papers available, I chose a fibre paper that goes from white to mauve and curves in the open air. The sunshine in my studio seemed ideal for the lighting source: once again, I worked with what I had where I was. In the winter of 2024, my studio had about 3-4 hours of daily direct sunlight, during which a window of light projected onto the floor moved from one side of the space to the other.

I would lay the printed gradient on the floor in the shadows, on which the photographic paper rested, with my camera filming the transformation from above (Figure 8).



Figure 8. *Studio documentation*, 2024.

Slowly, the light revealed the whole composition, transformed the photographic paper, and withdrew to make way for shadow again, the whole process taking about one hour and a half. As the photographic paper curved while drying, shadows appeared on the print and moved to the rhythm of the light's movement in the room. This interplay of color, combined with the movements of light and shadow, gives the overall work a quasi-hypnotic rhythm and temporality that engages us phenomenologically. We feel the work is alive, but since it's not obvious we are captivated by it, searching for evidence that it is changing for real. The extremely slow pace of the piece situates the

artwork between a photograph and a video. Video installations like “The Clock” by Christian Marclay, or Hiroshi Sugimoto’s long exposure photography in his “Theatres” series are good examples of time based art that were influential to my process. Even though the representation of a landscape isn’t obvious in my video, the use of the sky as a background is reminiscent of landscape, and to the particular landscape of Winnipeg, which has left its indelible mark in my mind. The light, air and temperature of a specific environment represents the essence of landscape, its purest expression. The relationship between space and time that is conveyed in my work is another fundamental element of landscape photography. Just imagine everything Ansel Adams had to do to get the perfect shot. The videos I make are unique to the landscape offered through the window of Studio 384 in the Taché Hall of the School of Art at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg somewhere between 11AM and 2 PM. In this use of space, place and time, specifically with the use of light in the creation of the artwork, I relate again to Michael Flomen, but also to artists like James Turrell, Eli Bornstein and Serge Tousignant, and land artists such as Nancy Holt, Walter De Maria and Michael Heizer.

An example of resonance: The Eclipse

As mentioned earlier, resonance is somewhere between availability and unavailability. It can happen in an unsuspected moment and allow us to have a divine and overwhelming experience. I'd like to share one such example that just happened to me and that ties in perfectly with my project and the direction it will take in the next years.

I'm from Montréal, and since I have a family there, I spent my MFA going back and forth between Montréal and Winnipeg, working where I could with what I had, in my backyard in Montréal or on campus in Winnipeg. For several months we had been informed that a total eclipse would occur on April 8, 2024. Despite all the media attention attached to this event (perhaps because of all the attention), I had no expectations of this phenomenon. In fact, I didn't even realize that the eclipse would be total in Montréal and only partial in Winnipeg. And considering my low level of enthusiasm for it, I certainly wouldn't have planned my trip accordingly.

As things turned out, I was in Montréal on April 8. I didn't see the point of traveling with many of my fellow citizens to an open park or high up on Mont-Royal; working with pinhole cameras and lumen prints in my backyard I knew that at eclipse time, the sun would be perfectly visible from my alley. A few hours before the eclipse, I decided to document it with pinhole cameras and a 4x5 camera that

would hold a piece of paper. I knew that the sun would burn its path into the paper. My hypothesis was that a line would slowly fade out until the total eclipse and then reappear. This would also allow me to simply leave my cameras in place, without having to manage anything during the total eclipse, allowing me to simply live the moment. In any case, I knew that this moment would already be sufficiently documented by others way better than me in that matter. My family and I met up with a few neighbors in the alley for the start of the eclipse at 2:14. The wait was all fun and play, chatter, and laughter. A moment when everyone allowed themselves to stop and wait. It made me think about my studio video and the hour and a half of light and shadows going over my paper. I'd never made the connection between the eclipse and my work, and although I'd been told about it, I could only see a tenuous, forced link. But watching the moon gradually block out the sun brought me back to my project. The family and neighbors who had been quietly sitting and "waiting" found themselves in the same situation as the viewers of my video would be. I was beginning to resonate.

A few minutes before the total eclipse, there was a sense of excitement among us. Then the temperature dropped. Everyone who had taken off their sweaters put them back on to cope with the unusual temperature change. This wasn't a cloud shadow where the sunlight only filtered through, it was the sunlight itself being blocked. The moon's shadow became increasingly present. Like a crescendo, the energy rose, and at the instant of the total eclipse, when we were able to remove our glasses, despite a few exclamations, a shared silence invaded us. For thirty seconds or so, we were in communion with each other and with the world. This darkness, as unusual as it was cool, reminded us of our place in the cosmos. Then, of course, there was the spectacle of the eclipse itself. This halo of light surrounding a circle of absolute black that we've seen so often, we were actually seeing it for the first time. I had no expectations whatsoever of this spectacle, but it was so grandiose that as soon as it was over, I felt as if I hadn't lived the moment to its full potential? Sadness then overcame me. I turned around and experienced what remains one of the most memorable moments in my life.

The light reappeared like a spot of artificial light. Artificial because I had never seen such a light in the natural world. The shadows of the Japanese lilac in my backyard were projected onto my picnic table in a blue-black hue I'd never experienced before. Then the light returned, and the partial eclipse no longer matched the experience of totality, people returned to their daily lives. I stood in the alley waiting for my exposure to end, a little upset, sad and excited, trying to understand what had just happened to me. I don't think I'll ever really will. Rationality can't explain this experience. I think it's a

striking example of the body's ability to learn: you can't learn everything verbally, and some things have to be experienced through the body (PALLASMAA, 2017). I knew about the phenomenon, but what I realized was that I knew nothing about it. Feeling that coolness on my skin, observing that unique blackness, the light that comes back and the warmth that returns with it, only my body could experience it. I think if I felt like I hadn't enjoyed the moment, it was because it was such a big one that I couldn't realize what was happening to me. And what was happening to me was pure sublime.

I also realized how it was linked to my research. The time, the sun moving, the shadows, the phenomenological experience. This wasn't planned, but it was one of those resonant events I'm seeking. And it was relational. We were a few neighbors in the alley, talking, having fun, living all the same thing with our bodies, together and alone at once.

Once the complete eclipse was over, I retrieved my cameras. And as I removed my 4x5 plate holder I was blown away by another moment of resonance. The magic had worked on my paper. During those 2 hours and 22 minutes, the sun had burnt its way onto my paper, leaving a gap in the center of two lines (Figure 9). That photograph encompasses everything for me. The time, the sun and light, the photographic process, and by the recording of the complete eclipse, reminds me of that whole phenomenon even though it doesn't bring back the instant. It's an indirect representation of the eclipse rather than an attempt at mimesis. Like my mother-in-law told me when seeing the image, I take photographs that others don't.

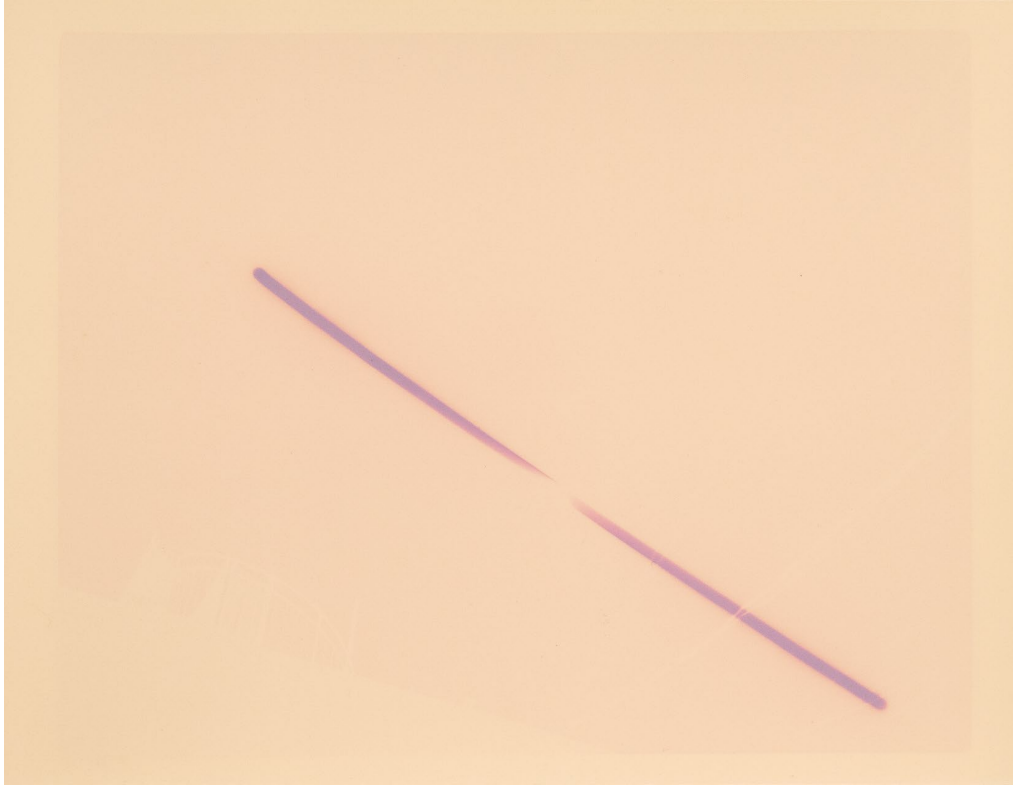


Figure 9. Benjamin Perron, *Complete eclipse from my backyard (2:14-4:36)*, 2024, 10,2 x 12,7 cm undeveloped, unfixed photo paper, scanned, inkjet print, 2024.

Final Show

In this section, I'd like to reiterate what I'm trying to create for viewers, and what strategies I have deployed to achieve it.

Throughout my project, I have sought to question photographic norms by testing the possibilities of the medium in a culture of acceleration and accumulation, which leads to a kind of disenchantment with the world. By reducing the medium and increasing the viewer's engagement with the work and the space, I want them to have a resonant experience, either with the work itself, or within our daily lives by the questions the work raises.

My installation is an attempt to resist acceleration by engaging the body phenomenologically with the work. As mentioned earlier, minimalism – not as an aesthetic but in terms of the quantity of art forms – is a way to emphasize the experience of the body. Indeed, the number of artworks presented has to be minimal, in order to get the viewer to engage with each piece. I don't want to force the viewer

in a relationship – they can dismiss my works, but if they do engage with my work, I want to reduce the distractions.

The exhibition is presented in the trajectory of my research. The first zone presents a floor installation of two lumen grids and a large format print of a lumen made with daylilies.



Figure 10. Benjamin Perron, *What if the Sun Didn't Rise (Installation view)*, 2024.

Daylilies from my backyard is a large inkjet print of a scanned undeveloped and unfixed lumen that is installed on a wall, creating a triangle with the two floor pieces (Figure 10). The size of *Daylilies from my backyard* (160 x 230 cm) engages the viewer in a body experience where you feel attracted and pushed back from it. As a viewer, the work leads you to get close to it, then to back-up, always forcing you to reengage with it, seeing it and feeling it in different ways, according to your body position in the space. *Trees and sand from Lake Winnipeg*, is a black and white developed lumen grid made out of six sheets of 16"x20" photographic paper. *Weeds from my alley*, is a color developed lumen grid made out of forty-two sheets of 8"x10" photographic papers. Even though both grids were exposed

in daylight for a full day, the development in the darkroom still rendered either grey shades or unexpected colors, bringing into the complete image produced the possibilities of the photoprocess but also the capabilities of the natural world. The two pieces of the floor installations allows viewers to walk around them and look at them from different perspectives. This enables them to discover the grids in different ways, depending on the angle of view and the light reflections. Both grids are slightly tilted upward to give an impression of lightness (Figure 11).

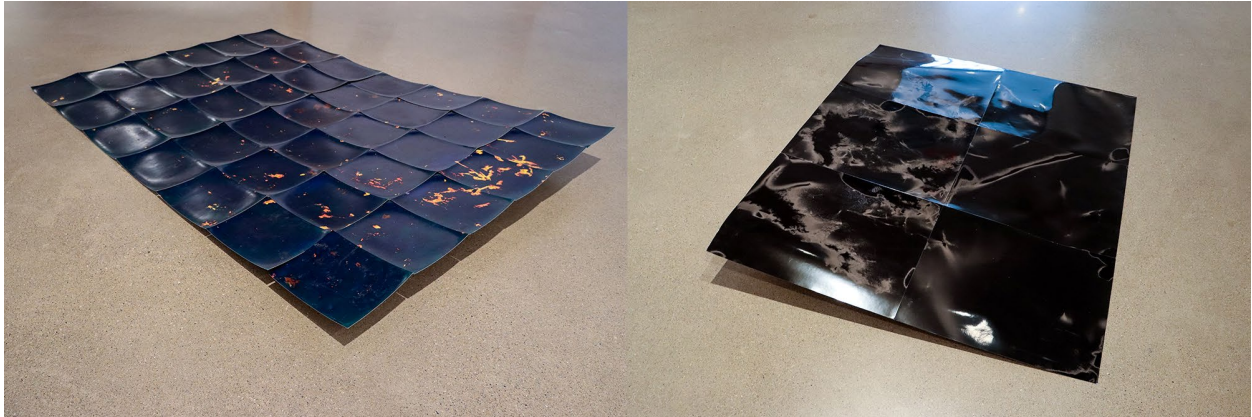


Figure 11. Benjamin Perron, *What if the Sun Didn't Rise (Installation view)*, 2024.

Being tilted also binds the grid together as it becomes a single piece of art rather than a combination of prints. During the install I tried different grids, tilts and configurations, always in relation to the larger print on the wall. The final installation was achieved after different trials, moving the grids a few inches, tilting it a few centimeters higher or lower, going out of the room to walk back in until I felt the relationship between the pieces and my body in the space.

The second zone and the main piece of the exhibition consists of a 11' x 22' room where the video *View from my window at Taché* is projected on the far end wall (Figure 12).

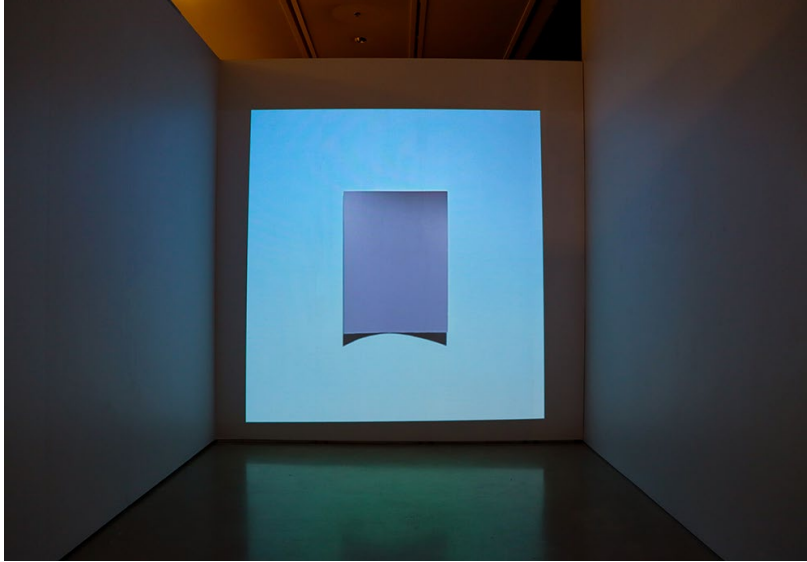


Figure 12. Benjamin Perron, *What if the Sun Didn't Rise* (Installation view), 2024.

Being the only work in the room, it forces the viewers to engage with the work without any distraction. The use of a projector reintroduces the ephemerality of light, while also being reminiscent of photography (the enlarger), with the room itself acting as a gigantic camera. The extremely slow pace of the 1:25:00 video acts as a hybrid between the still image and the video, while engaging the viewer in a contemplative experience that can only be rendered by slowness (Figure 13).

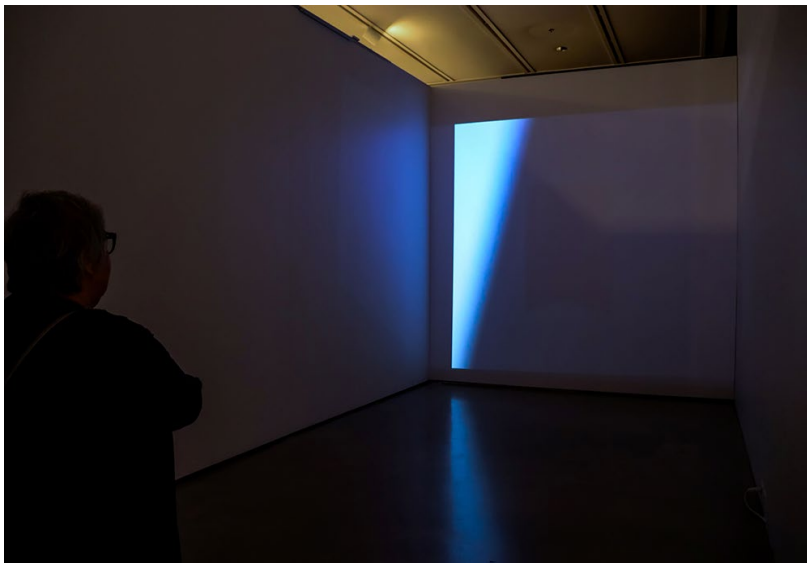


Figure 13. Benjamin Perron, *What if the Sun Didn't Rise* (Installation view), 2024.

While the speed of the video does not make the change of colour obvious, viewers get mesmerized by the subtle transformations produced by the variations of the ambient light in the video – variation that are also reflected on the side walls and the floor – and tends to keep them captive to find proof of those changes. In any case, viewers can go out and come back a few minutes later to observe more easily a new state of the work, but without being totally certain about it since they won't have the documentation of the previous state.

Outside of the room is a small shelf presenting copies of my photograph of the eclipse to be offered to the viewers as a gift, as I received the eclipse as a gift (Figure 14). Those 4"x5" cards, the same size as the original, have been printed and hand-cut by me, a process that repeats my engagement in time and in relationship as I was thinking about all the persons who have been important to me during this MFA project.



Figure 14. Benjamin Perron, *What if the Sun Didn't Rise (Installation view)*, 2024.

Reminding us of the importance of the body as a teacher in our existence, the following text is presented on the back of the print:

we can learn what an eclipse is, but only through our body can we understand it

thirty seconds of silence, coolness, darkness

To keep the exhibition as minimal as possible, no didactics or text are installed. But a program with a statement, biography, plan (figure 15) and descriptive list of works is available to accompany the exhibition.

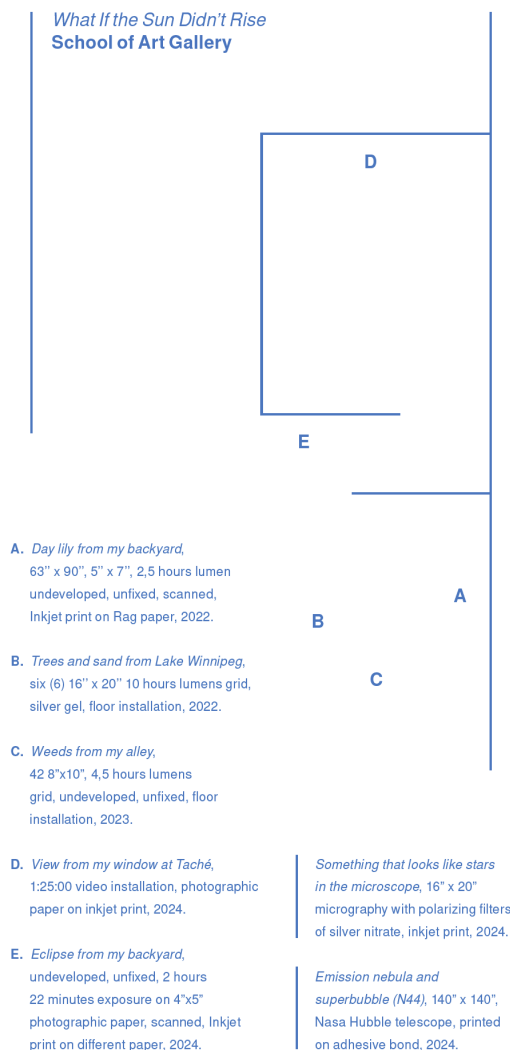


Figure 15. Benjamin Perron, *What if the Sun Didn't Rise*, 2024, Plan and Descriptive list of works in exhibition program.

A third and final zone, which doesn't figure in the program plan can be found in the back of the room. It's not in the plan because I want it to be discovered as something unexpected. This is based on an experience I had at the Vals thermal station in Switzerland where you can't find any indication of the baths or all the different rooms designed by the architect Peter Zumthor. It's a place that can only be discovered with the body. This "secret" space presents a large mural reproduction of the N44 emission nebula as photographed by Hubble Telescope and facing it is a small micrograph of silver nitrate using polarizing filters that resemble a galaxy (Figure 16).

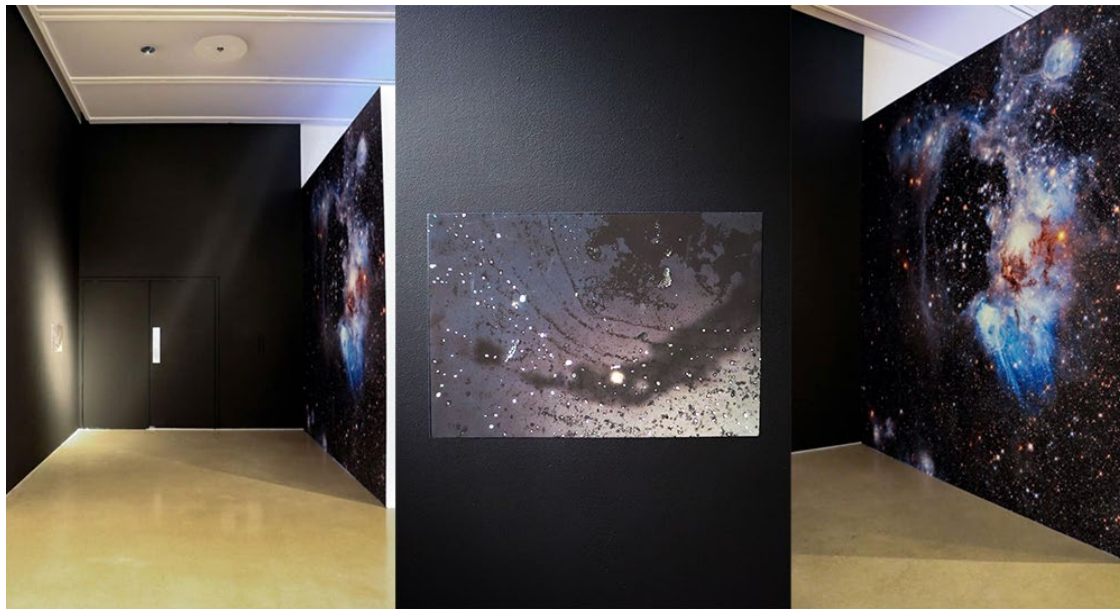


Figure 16. Benjamin Perron, *What if the Sun Didn't Rise (Installation view)*, 2024.

By this I wish to position the body between two scales, reminding the viewer of their place in the world. This zone represents where I am now in relation to my work and my research program regarding the sublime, and is not strange from my experience with the eclipse. While sunlight takes eight minutes to reach Earth, the light of the most distant celestial objects visible through a telescope take 13.5 billion years¹. In contrast, some microscopes allow us to observe specimens that are as small as 0,5 nanometers². Our body is between those infinitely small and infinitely large extremes, two scales that are completely incomprehensible to us, but which are at the origin of life.

¹ 1 light year = 9,5 trillions km.

² There are 10 billion nanometers in 1 meter.

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