ALASKA

VOLUME

1

ALASKA

DUVILLE

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THE DRAWING CENTER

Mobile Homes

MARK POLIZZOTTI

The road to imagined landscapes has its tangible signposts. Kafka's Amerika.

Rimbaud's "unbelievable Floridas," through which careened his drunken boat. Raymond Roussel's Africa, the scene of impressions more outlandish than a grade-B adventure flick. To which, in turn, Matías Duville adds his Alaska. Duville's curious project engages with a distinctly postmodern variety of perception, in which the longstanding watchword to "paint what you see"—for centuries a hallmark of authenticity, and therefore of quality—has mutated into relaying the visions that emerge behind closed lids, or from reverie. In early 2008, we are told, the Argentine artist dreamed of the Land of the Midnight Sun, a place he'd never laid eyes on, and over the following year from his home in Buenos Aires he depicted it copiously, insistently, one might say obsessively, seeking to "explore what is beyond the visible and [his] direct base of knowledge"—all the while continuing not to lay eyes on it, even through photographs. In a style that has been likened to Seurat (or perhaps a less comic-booky Raymond Pettibon), Duville brought forth scene after scene of his own private Alaska. "I was trying to find the end of landscape as a genre of imagemaking by working with places not on the map," he commented for a show of these drawings, titled "Future Memories: Mental Trip."

Indeed, Duville's "Alaska" is a place not charted in any atlas, except perhaps in the vast Surrealist inventory of impossible land- and cityscapes. As with the Surrealists' 1933 survey on the "irrational embellishment" of Paris, which offered suggestions for repurposing various sites and monuments, Duville's collisions of fact and fancy render the concrete world a more magical place, less prosaically dull, but also, for those happy with their consistencies, far less comfortable.

Duville's drawings feature thick charcoal lines on opaque white backgrounds. A few employ touches of color or a uniform pink or green support, without sacrificing the starkness of the strict black-and-whites. In one, a guitarlike object lies deflated in a snow bank. In others, stereotypical cabins, the kind one might find in children's cartoons, snake over impossible hills and valleys in a tundra; rivers twist around and through barren tree trunks or out of fishes' mouths; a settlement teeters on the edge of a waterfall; the forest feeds on the putrefying ruins of an automobile, while other cars haphazardly pile on a huge, blue mass like drunken Christmas tree ornaments; and bridges lead (paging Sarah Palin) to nowhere. The overall mood is desolate, forbidding, less dream than nightmare.

In 2009, Duville decided to juxtapose his abstract Alaska with the real thing. He drove through the Last Frontier in a motor home, charcoals at the ready. But even then, his effort to depict what he saw was a hybrid, in which strict observation (such as it is) constantly peeks out beneath a top sheet of invention. Drawings were made solely from within the RV, his vision limited by the confines of the vehicle's windows. For all their inclusion of real-life elements, this second series seems no less hallucinatory than the first—and no less bleak. "In Alaska, nature is morbid," Duville later told an interviewer. "Everything seems apocalyptic."

Apocryphal landscapes seem well suited to apocalyptic visions. Rimbaud, in "The Drunken Boat," lined his fictive Florida river with "howling Redskins" who nailed the vessel's crew "naked to colored stakes." But even Rimbaud's artifice pales in comparison (for both inventiveness and cruelty) with the contrivances of the early twentieth-century novelist and playwright Raymond Roussel, arguably the greatest purveyor of fabulous settings until science fiction hit its stride. As with Duville's Alaska, the landscapes Roussel meticulously concocted for his fictions—particularly in his novel *Impressions of Africa* (1910)—reflected not the world as he found it but the universe as he conjured it. Realism in Roussel's writings dukes it out with the pure products of the author's mind, always finding itself on the losing side: he

once boasted that he "never took anything for [his] books" from lived experience, instead patterning them on pure linguistic sleight of hand.

Which is not to say that Roussel never left his room, in the literal sense, any more than Duville never left his studio. The wealthy, exceptionally spoiled scion of an extremely well-to-do Parisian family, Roussel in fact visited locales ranging from China, Japan, India, Australia, New Zealand, and the South Pacific to North America, Constantinople, Egypt, and, indeed, Africa. But in every case, the country mattered less to him than the unabashedly idiosyncratic preconception that led him there. Whether the Tahiti to which he sailed, motivated by his adored Pierre Loti novels, the Baghdad in which he sought (and fully expected to find) the *Arabian Nights*, or the other exotic latitudes through which he passed as a fidgety phantom presence, what counted was the place's ability to match the image he already had of it. Often he traveled in his *roulotte*, a superbly appointed mobile home *avant la lettre* (and, inadvertently or not, a direct precursor to Duville's RV), whose curtained windows effectively shut out the external world and allowed its occupant to concentrate on his interior voyages. "The outside world never broke through into the universe [Roussel] carried within him," the writer Michel Leiris once noted. "In all the countries he visited, he saw only what he had put there in advance."

The intersection of Roussel and Duville calls up another mad rush to an imaginary Alaska, that of Christopher McCandless, the tragic, true-life hero of *Into the Wild*. McCandless was a young man with an irresistible pull toward "Seward's Folly," who hitched and hiked his way to the 49th State and survived on his own, his sole shelter an abandoned RV (strange how that much-maligned conveyance plays so prominent a role in these narratives). Stripped of all possessions but those on his back, he went head-to-head with the Great North, and at first he seemed to be winning. But the thaw came and he found himself trapped by the rising river; desperate for food, he mistook some toxic berries for the edible ones in his guidebook and died of accidental poisoning. Roussel, whose fanciful landscapes were intended as a roadmap to literary glory, reached a similarly fatal endpoint when that glory proved too elusive: at the age of fifty-six, discouraged by rebuffs and neglect, he traveled to Palermo and ingested an overdose of barbiturates. As these sad tales seem to caution us, we enter our fantasies at our peril.

Perhaps in imagining landscapes, envisioning countries we've never seen (or that don't exist), we are really striking out for a more viable home, one we can carry

with us, one redesigned from the blueprints of our inner necessity. Perhaps it's just one translation of the universal need to belong. McCandless viewed Alaska as an escape from the stifling materialism of his youth, a haven of self-reliance and self-determination, a place where he could finally be his own man. Roussel, who had no such qualms with materialism, projected *his* inner landscapes to enjoy the radiant sunlight of acclaim, a renown he could bask in, until cold reality finally wore through his glorious delusions. Kafka erected a Manhattan that was more Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* than King Vidor's *The Crowd*, in which his hero could play out the dramas of the Old World at a safe remove. In Duville's drawings of Alaska, nature mirrors the harshness of the dense Argentine woods near Mar del Plata, where the artist grew up. Wherever one goes, one never quite leaves one's backyard.

I'm reminded of the photo studios of Yokohama, Japan, that emerged with the boom in Western tourism during the Meiji period (1868-1912). Located on the docks and often frequented immediately after the traveler had checked into his hotel, these studios offered images of prominent local attractions, which customers could pre-select for a souvenir album in advance of the actual visits. Often, the album bore little relation to the tourist's eventual itinerary, or else the itinerary was refitted to match the photos that had already been tipped into the handsome lacquer- or silk-bound volume. Some travelers dispensed with sightseeing altogether, having already secured the memento. As with Duville, who avoided photographs in his search for a true, inner Alaska, the Yokohama images bring home just how resolutely photos can sometimes stand in the way of actual seeing.

Several weeks ago I flew into Kennedy Airport and discovered, spread above the Immigration booths, a 250-foot panoramic pencil rendering of Manhattan's southern tip, drawn from memory by the English artist Stephen Wiltshire after a brief helicopter ride above the island. Wiltshire, an autistic sometimes called the "Human Camera," has become famous for minutely detailed, remarkably exact likenesses of major world capitals, each made after a single viewing. Remarkable as well, in the present context, is the fact that Wiltshire as a child drew imagined landscapes of cities he'd never seen (always post-earthquake: do imagined landscapes *have* to be apocalyptic?). His first adult series of cityscapes from memory was completed in 2009, around the time Duville was lighting out in his camper for geographical Alaska.

But what most caught my eye was the date inscribed on the JFK mural, April

29, 2011, indicating that it was finished on the exact day, perhaps at the exact hour, that I was experiencing a life-altering, memory-etching event of my own. The exact autobiographical particulars are not what matters. What is significant is the unlikely concordance of my chance presence in that airport terminal while I was writing this essay, the unexpected appearance of a mural that, as I later discovered, extends more than one tendril toward Duville's mental trip, and the improbable specificity of a date that could have been any day, but that just happened to be a day of unique importance to me. One can't help wondering how many such points of connection (akin to what André Breton called "petrifying coincidence") flicker between Duville's imagined drawings of Alaska and the place he ultimately encountered—for such flickers are what put the magic in our experience of art, and what push us, with dizzying insistence, to confront or escape to the wild that is always out there, in there, somewhere.

ALASKA

PLATES

VOLUME

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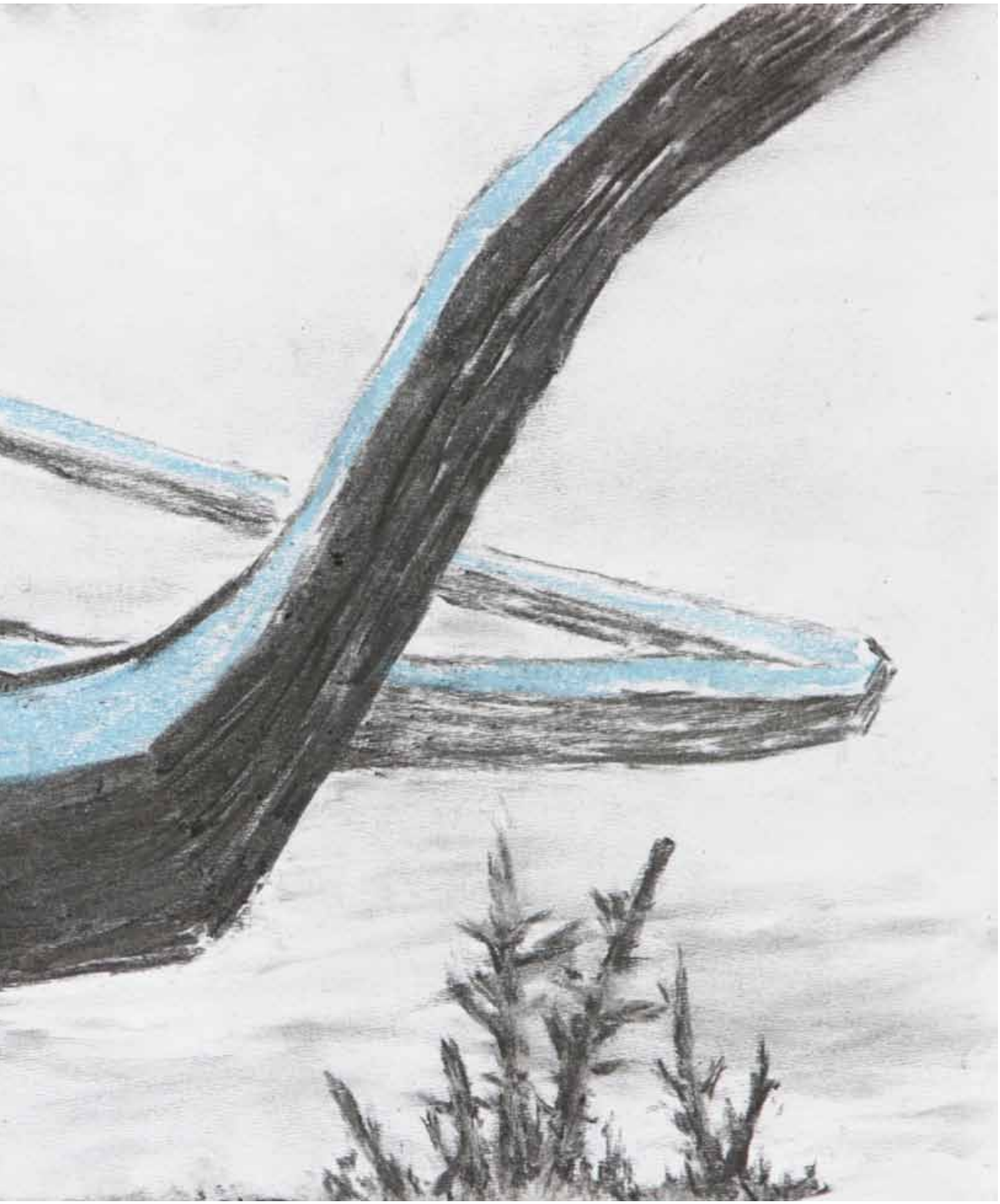

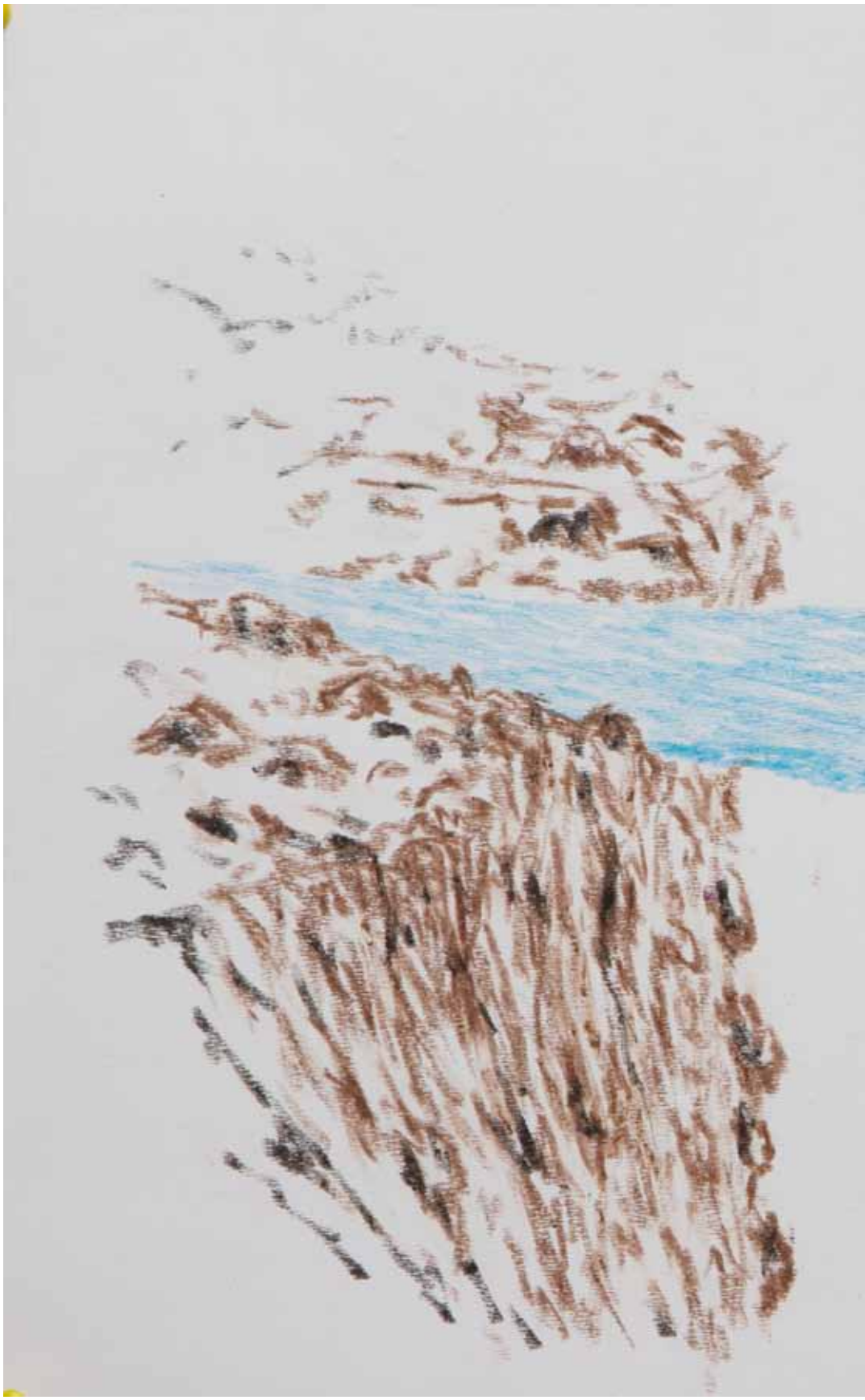

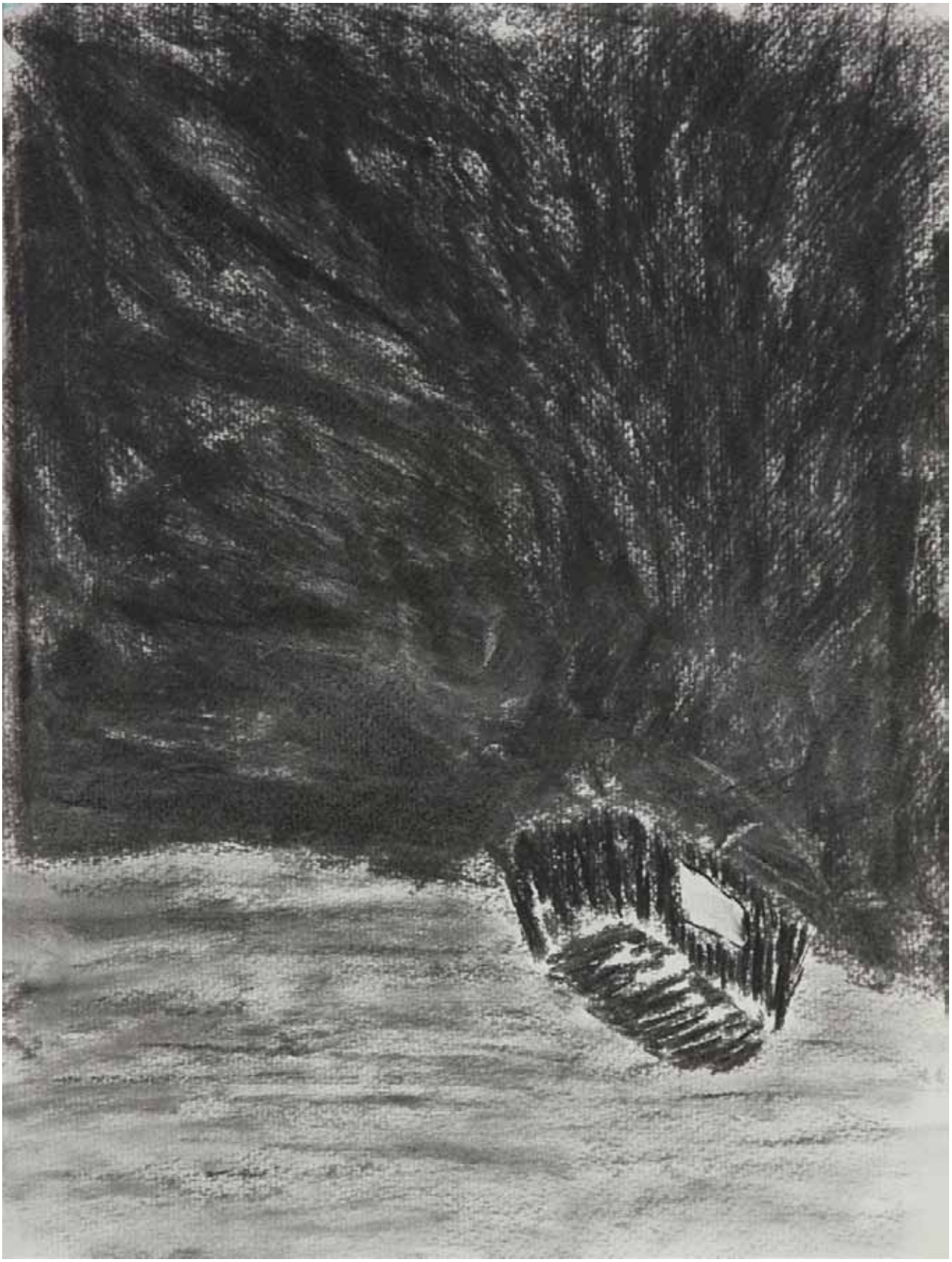

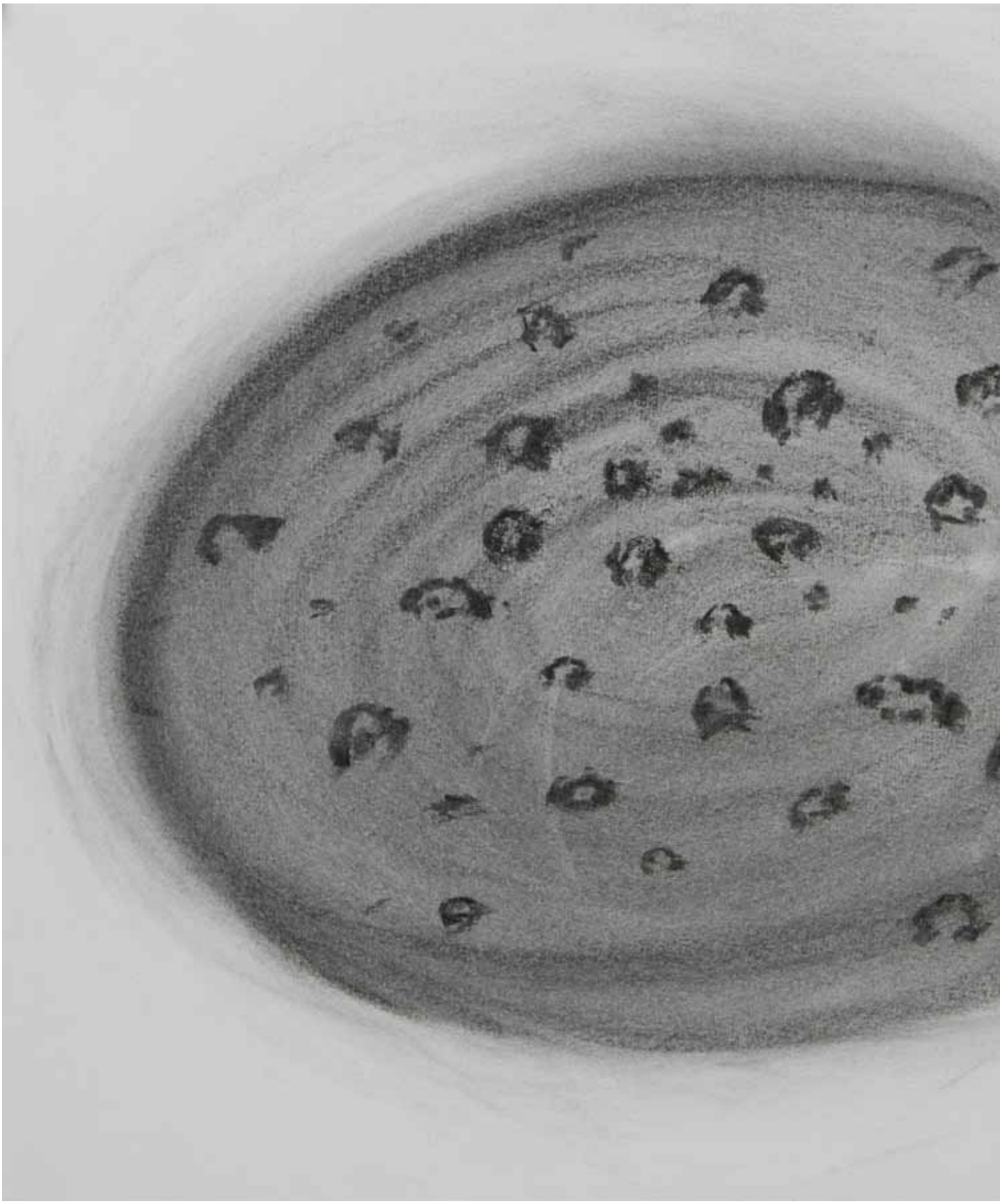

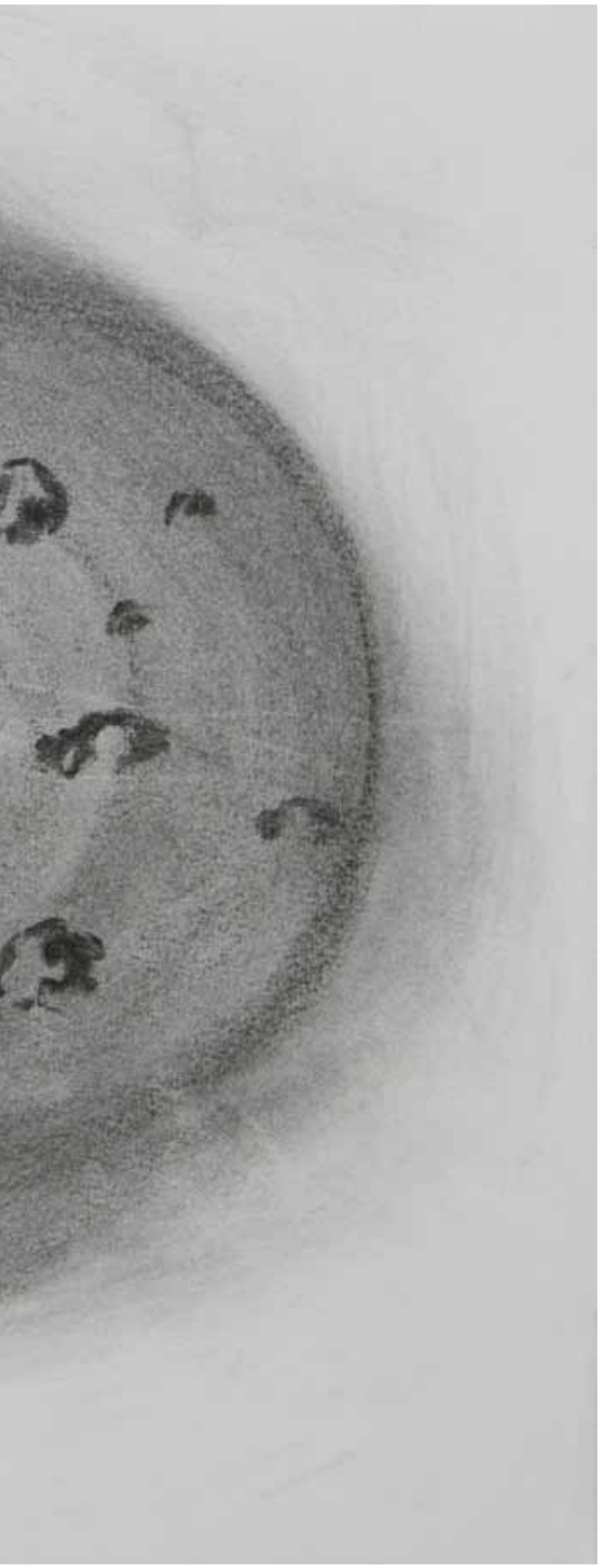

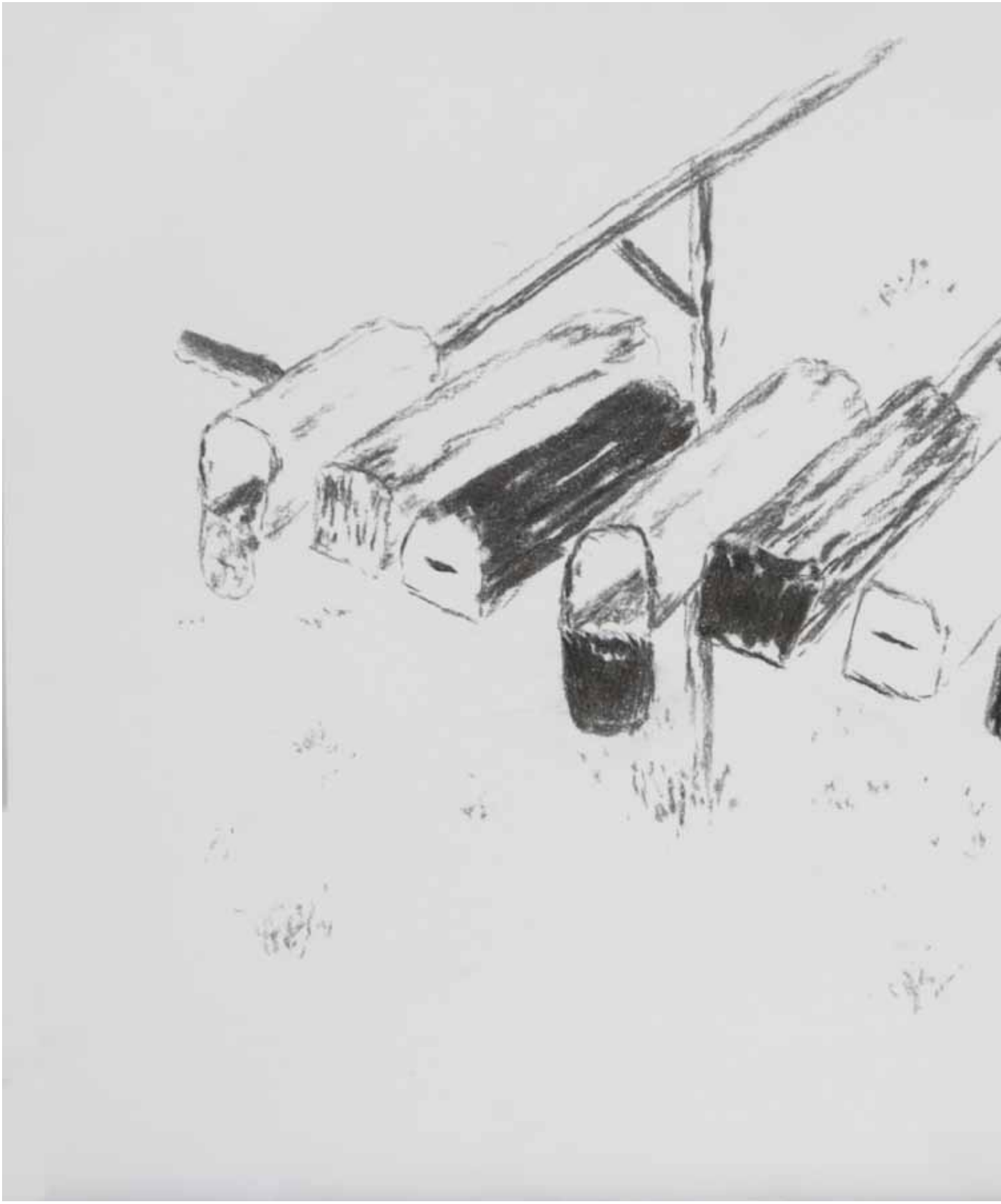

Volume 1: List of Works

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