



Morphia Series  
Helen Herbertson  
2004

Master of Arts (Research)  
School of Human Movement, Recreation and Performance  
Faculty of Human Performance  
Victoria University – Footscray Campus

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Herbertson, Helen  
Morphia series

from  
Morpheus  
son of Hypnos and the god of dreams

Morphe  
allusions to the forms seen in dreams

Presented as a live performance in February 2002  
as the outcome of a Master of Arts (Research)  
School of Human Movement, Recreation and Performance  
Faculty of Human Development  
Victoria University  
Footscray Campus

thanks to:  
Nikki Fletcher; Livia Ruzic; Byron Scullin; Jude Walton;  
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A very special acknowledgement and thank you to Ben Cobham  
for continuing advice, skill, discussion and laughter

“The memories we elude catch up to us,  
overtake us like a shadow, a truth appears suddenly  
in the middle of a thought, a hair on a lens.”

“I long to cleanse my mouth of memory.”

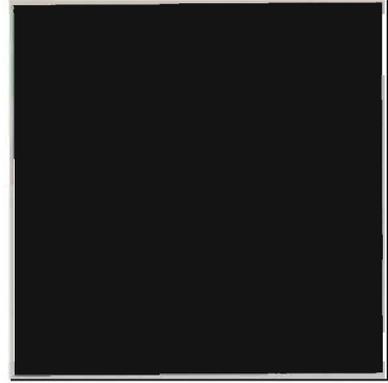
“A man’s experience of war never ends with the war.  
A man’s work like his life is never completed.”  
Anne Michaels, 1997 – Fugitive Pieces

Morphia Series  
continues an examination of the self to the surrounding world,  
working with the notion that life hovers somewhere  
between the ordinary and the metaphysical.

A lone figure and a place the size of an ordinary room contrast  
an on-going sense of seclusion and solitude with the potential  
for action and disturbance.

in loving memory of Frank and Lucy

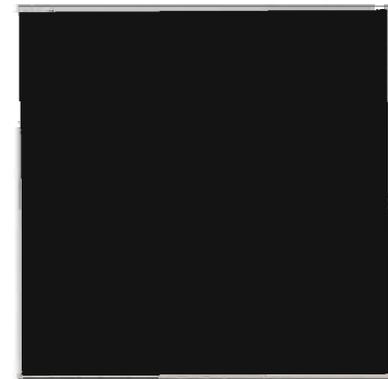
Viewers seated  
Silence  
Darkness



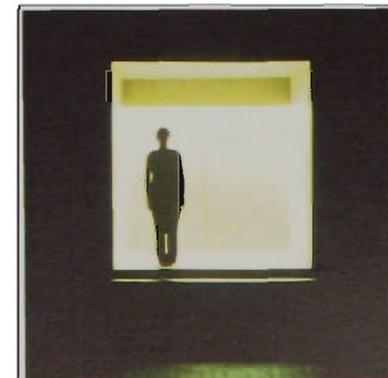
Piano music box



Estonia Dream text



Heat haze



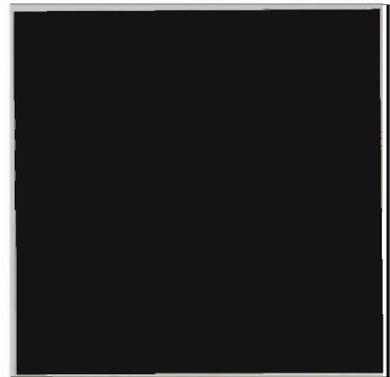
Gunfire ricochet



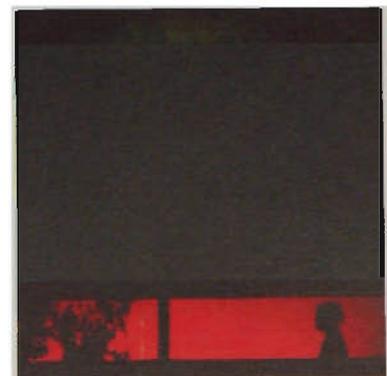
Gunfire ricochet



Into silence



Waves lapping - far



Waves lapping - near



Glass view text



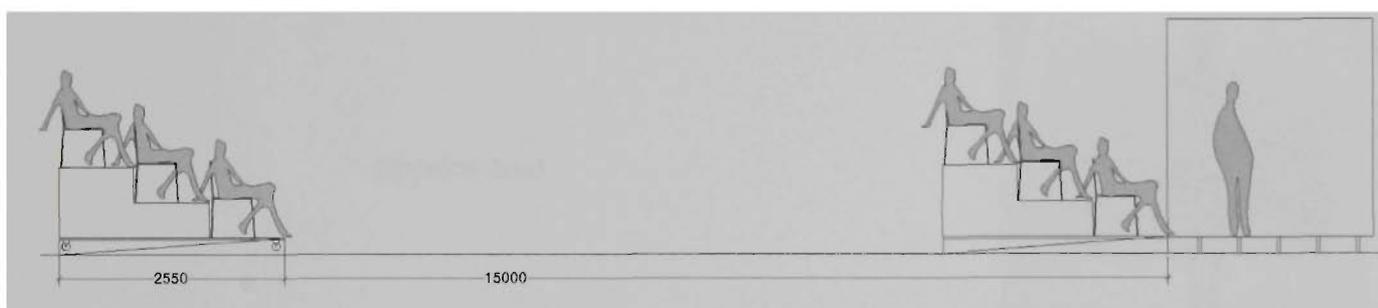
Glass view text



Into silence



Hubbub and laughter



Hubbub and laughter



Imprint text



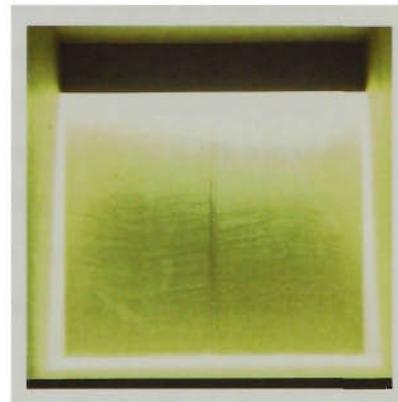
Imprint text



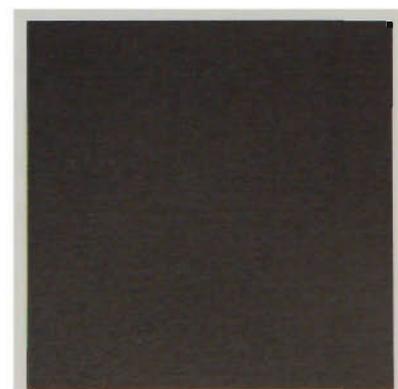
Imprint text



Into silence



Birds



Performance Text – Helen Herbertson

London, 2000

*Estonia dream*

Cold and frozen landscapes  
depth of darkness  
an underbelly of internal dreaming space  
stretching back through centuries  
white stillness

Melbourne, 2000

*Glass view*

She wanted the glass view  
She wanted the clean lines of angle in the place  
She wanted the cold touch of glass and  
marble rectangles filling the space  
She wanted the room to walk around  
with an uninterrupted pathway for 360 degrees,  
to arrive where she began with no bruises  
from bumping into things

She wanted to see the light change  
any time of day or nighttime waking  
She wanted to observe and predict the weather,  
to sense it rolling in from afar  
She wanted to stand in the midst of a mighty storm,  
protected by glass but in the full force of the  
sound and sights of Mother Nature's garden

Performance Text – Helen Herbertson

Singapore, 2000

*Imprint*

The imprint of a body on the ground  
a small indentation where the strong buttocks had come to rest  
broken foliage where the arms splayed out  
an ant rushing by  
a snake  
slithering around what was a mountain of organs and sinews  
flesh and strong bones  
when did the spirit leave?

the imprint of a strong hand  
a boot  
in the sand  
jumbled  
life-like slurry  
abandoned to the animals

She paws the ground  
searching  
her hoofs dig in heavily  
again and again  
attending to the down action  
down  
down  
weight and momentum going down into the earth  
soft sand  
scrambled

Response – Jenny Kemp

February 2002

I have come in off the street. I am full of the energy and chaos of my day. I am presented with an unusual looking square of food and a very small glass of what must be I think, magic - 'Alice's drink me potion'. And then I am asked to climb into a small platform, holding my supplies. Darkness.

My day drags away, it takes a while but the darkness is held long enough. My eyes are fixed straight ahead, waiting. But in an unexpected position, off to the side, small rather than large, red rather than light, is a strange scene. It is not explicit it is an image which is incomplete. I am aroused to complete it, to add to it and to work it out. My imagination starts. I am as if dreaming and the image is under my eyelids, red. Something busy is happening, the hands are working. There is a lot of tension, the task is difficult and critical it seems, the image goes.

Then another image now large and light, with a woman standing inside a very square cube. Strangely now this is an explicit image. It seems concrete enough but I know it is not as ordinary as it looks. Now we have gone 'inside'. This is an interior, a psychic image, which alludes or pretends to be quite real. It is now as if an interior and exterior state have merged. Is this synchronicity? I am reminded of the way in to the internal world, the words of a remembered dream. The remaining images now organised into sentences like hieroglyphics to be de coded.

Once again like zones in collision, the body in the cube sparks into contradictory action - dream action. The woman hits her leg. She sounds like a gun or explosion. But where was the impulse, from outside her or inside her? And am I, the audience now outside it or inside it, outside myself or inside myself like in a dream. I seem to be moving from position to position, being asked to consider it from alternative perspectives. Suddenly she has gone and what was under her is revealed – a long red rectangle full of trees in which a woman sits, still. The opposite place exists and is suddenly there. I am plunged into darkness again. The image left in my retina is a dark figure in a blue cube. Then the woman in the cube is back. She now looks as if she is swimming underwater in her cube.

Then I am looking as if from a great distance at something small and red again - it reminds me of the beginning but now in a different position, a deliberate dislocation, reminding me of the mutability, the illusiveness of our world. It is a torso but it looks strange, perhaps not real, but I'm sure it is.

Then I am looking at both the woman in the cube and the torso, both are naked, but now I see the woman in the cubs as large and very naked. Once again I am asked to take to uncertainty. Something is left undone, but suggested - a riddle or a puzzle like in a dream for me to sort out. I find I am working.

Then suddenly I am moving. The figure in the cube is growing bigger, closer and then my seat is still and I am right in front of her. Her body is very sharp, etched, her movements precise. It is an utterly personal image of a naked body yet her state is something other, so engaged in some deep task that her nakedness is transformed. She turns, we see that the back of her is another world - it shifts our perspective. Such is the state, we have entered we are now viewing with heightened awareness, as if with primal spectacles, placed immovably on our noses.

And whoosh our seats are racing backwards. The figure recedes, then blackness. We are still. Moving, my stomach is left behind. Stillness, lights, and I wake up as if in the morning having had a dream which remains with me, insisting and vivid.

Response – Beth Shelton

February 2002

What I saw: A woman's room. Light from outside renders her every slight movement exquisitely visible. She leans, shifts direction every so slightly. I follow each move. She gives herself up to be seen in a full way, an aware way, a mature way.

It seems sudden, a jolt, when she begins to move with a gestural kind of movement. The movement speaks of a kind of feeling in self, but how is it connected to her stillness and shifting? Is there a connection between her presence and her movement to be explored and understood? Perhaps through her trunk or her breath?

I see what is glowing, in boxes, above and below and I see their separateness and connection. Self with self. Cognitive self with body self. Clothed self with naked self. Person with earth. Body with earth. Older self with younger self. Older body with younger body. I love the space between events, the retreats into darkness and the re-emergence into image. Little births and deaths.

I laugh quietly a couple of times. Once when she grows insistent, her movement seems full of rhetoric, of ballast – having her say in a big way.

I enjoy the layer of words. I want to hear them, but they are too fast for me to grasp, or somewhere uncomfortable between fast and slow. I would have liked to hear each sentence as a whole with space around it for the words to expand into their levels of meaning, as the visual images do.

It's a magic box, this shifting between one glowing image and another. Puts me in mind of different levels of consciousness, parts of self. The doppelganger relationship between her and the other her (or someone else) adds to this sense.

In the end it seems that death and grief have filled the air. Or more specifically, the woman seems to carry a full sense of the predicament of being fully alive and at the same time fully aware of the inevitable coming of aging and death, the gradual changes to body and mind, but also a sense of death as

a snatching thief. Will it be now? At the end the woman flinches. Does she flinch away from her fate or turn to see its approach?

It was new, literally 'being moved', and towards this fully present, fully aware, fully naked her. Where would we stop? How close would we be pushed to her act of presence? How would we meet her? What might be demanded of us up close? Frames of theatre shift in ambiguous ways. I liked it that being moved directly involved our sense of body reality. And compromised us. Moved us from our comfortable distance.

I am left, now, a couple of days later, with a sense of a form that has been developing over the last few years that is fascinating, elegant, particular. It has its own rules, to do with spaces and lights and movements and now words as well. As an observer, I can't predict what space, what state will come up next, and each state is fascinating in its own right and is somehow awakening for me.

Response – Robin Grove

February 2002

In the darkness two hands clasp each other, twist, unlock, knot together. Again and again the action is repeated, while a voice adds words to the apparition that has already become an image of grasping then losing connection, clutching something solid, only for it to break itself out of one's grip. That is what comprehension feels like in the reality of dreams.

The title of the work recalls Morpheus, son of Hypnos, god of dreams – for Helen Herbertson is a choreographer interested less in steps or imagery than in visions. Like her award-winning piece *Delirium*, this new work is richly phantasmal, deploying the space between audience and stage as a magical arena. So, inside the black auditorium, half-a-dozen viewers are invited to seat themselves. The vision of hands appears, then as it fades, a woman is suddenly revealed enclosed in a space so symmetrical and small that her every gesture is magnified in the mind's eye.

With exacting slowness, her body leans against air, gradually re-orienting itself till it faces not front-on but at a tangent to the six of us gathered to watch. We are made to feel that we are not her major preoccupation. Tentatively, yet with a kind of delicate decisiveness, her hands fold, mould, pluck the space around her as other presences seem invisibly to fill it. Ritually, she revolves in her cell. (A cell, we realize, need not be imprisoning; think of brain-cells, or the honeycomb where bees store their future, or electromagnetic cells where power builds up).

Moments of anguish blend into the ground-bass of the dancer's full-bodied confidence in her own powers and in the watchers' attention. So, grave, calm, vulnerable, the work goes on, suspended above a glimpse of other realms, as when the area below stage is lit up, tranquil with silhouetted trees and the goddess-like profile of a woman.

In turn, that vision fades. The solitary figure in her room strikes at herself, at her thigh or knee, not angrily so much as musically - as if the body had become a percussive instrument. And sure enough, the slaps echo off in a ricochet of noise like distant gunfire – answered on Thursday, as luck had it, by the sound of thunder rolling overhead. An invisible orchestra is being conducted; phrases

from the vocabulary of martial arts are momentarily quoted then laid aside. In short, a growing tension is set up between this moving, audible body and the gleaming stillness of the subterranean world of silhouetted forms, now hidden from us but lingering in memory.

Blackout. An instant later, the woman reappears in her bare cell, facing us squarely (for the first time?), immobile, silent, naked. It is the opposite of that bad dream where the dreamer realizes he has no clothes, for her unclothed figure has the authority of a De Chirico composition, a *pittura metafisica* where life is arrested in order that the forces it normally conceals may be able to reveal themselves.

Yet we are not here simply to look. Now, astonishingly, we spectators are made to move, as still in our seats, the six of us are gently swept forward to the brink of the stage - then, just as gently and inexorable, when the ritual is complete, replaced at the end of the auditorium having taken part in visions that remain even when the dream is over.

After note:

De Chirico? One comparison. But also the charged space of a late Beckett play, where Nothing (not nothing) happens, powerfully. Or perhaps the state of mind brought into being as one re-creates in one's understanding the difficult delicacy of Wallace Stevens' 'The Snow Man'.

One must have a mind of winter  
To regard the frost and the boughs  
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time  
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,  
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think  
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,  
In the sound of a few leaves,

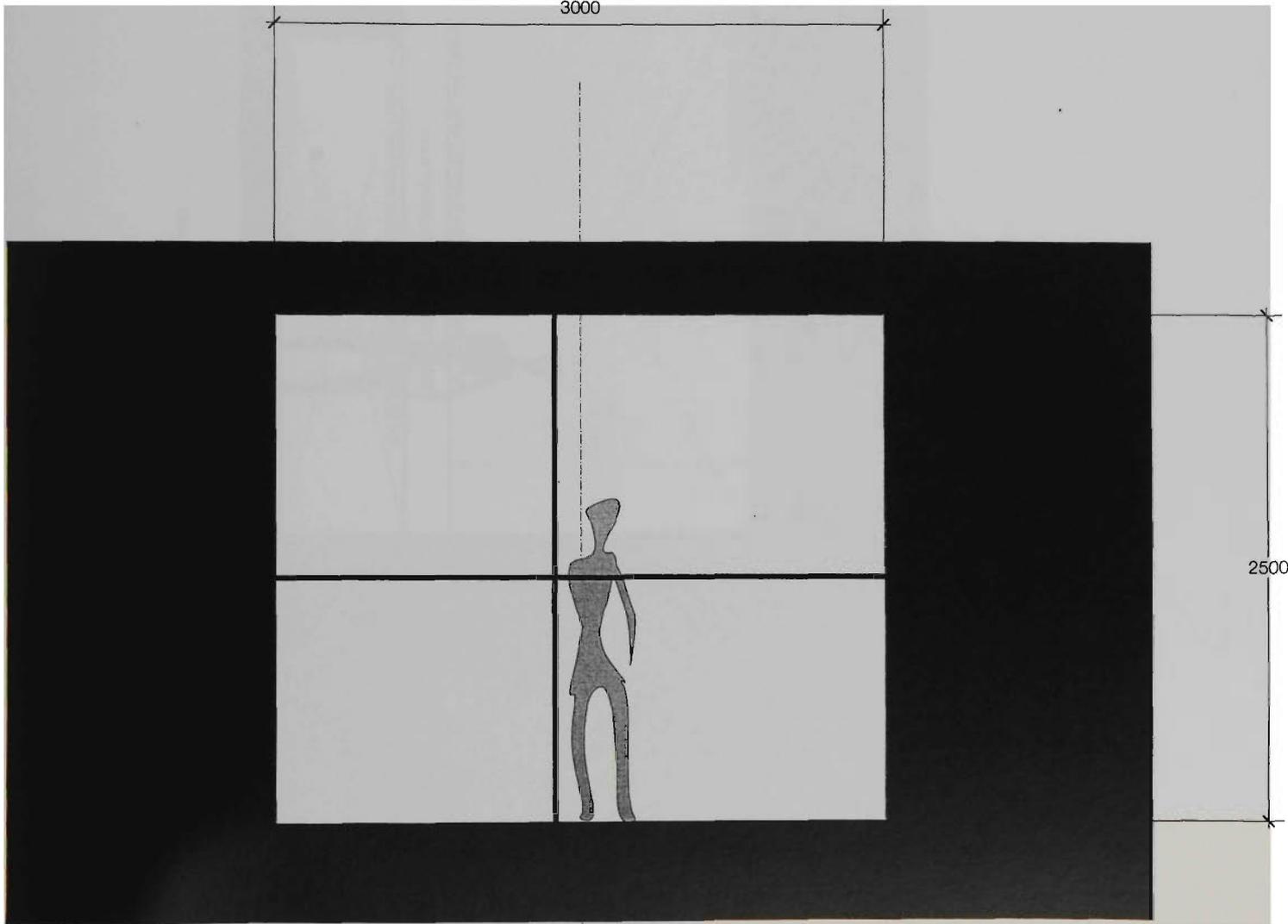
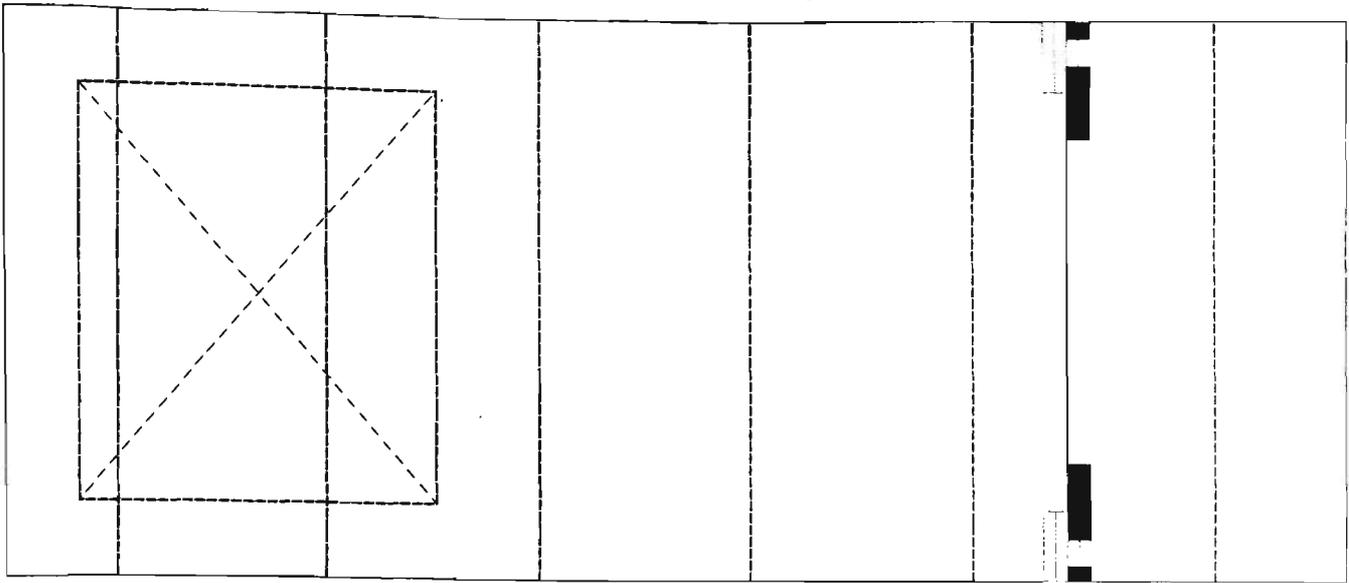
Which is the sound of the land  
Full of the same wind  
That is blowing in the same bare place

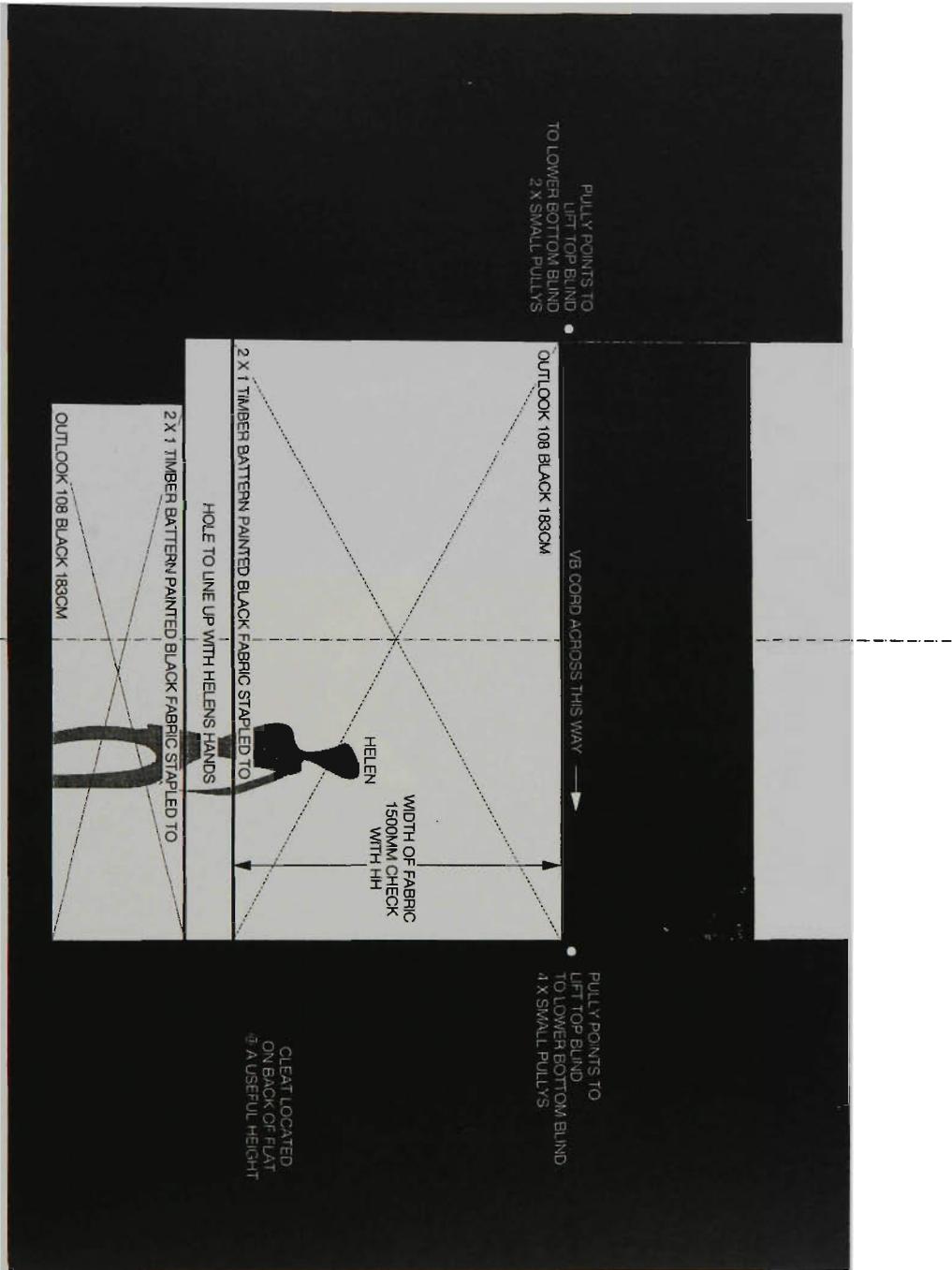
For the listener, who listens in the snow,  
And, nothing himself, beholds  
Nothing that is not there and nothing that is.

By the time the reader gets to that final line, the plain words press so exactly against one another that they make it possible to see reality for a moment in a new way; neither what 'is' there nor what 'is not', but something stranger yet purer than either of those alternatives. The poem challenges its reader to understand at a level beyond the shallow work of interpretation. For me, that's the kind of effect that Morphia has.

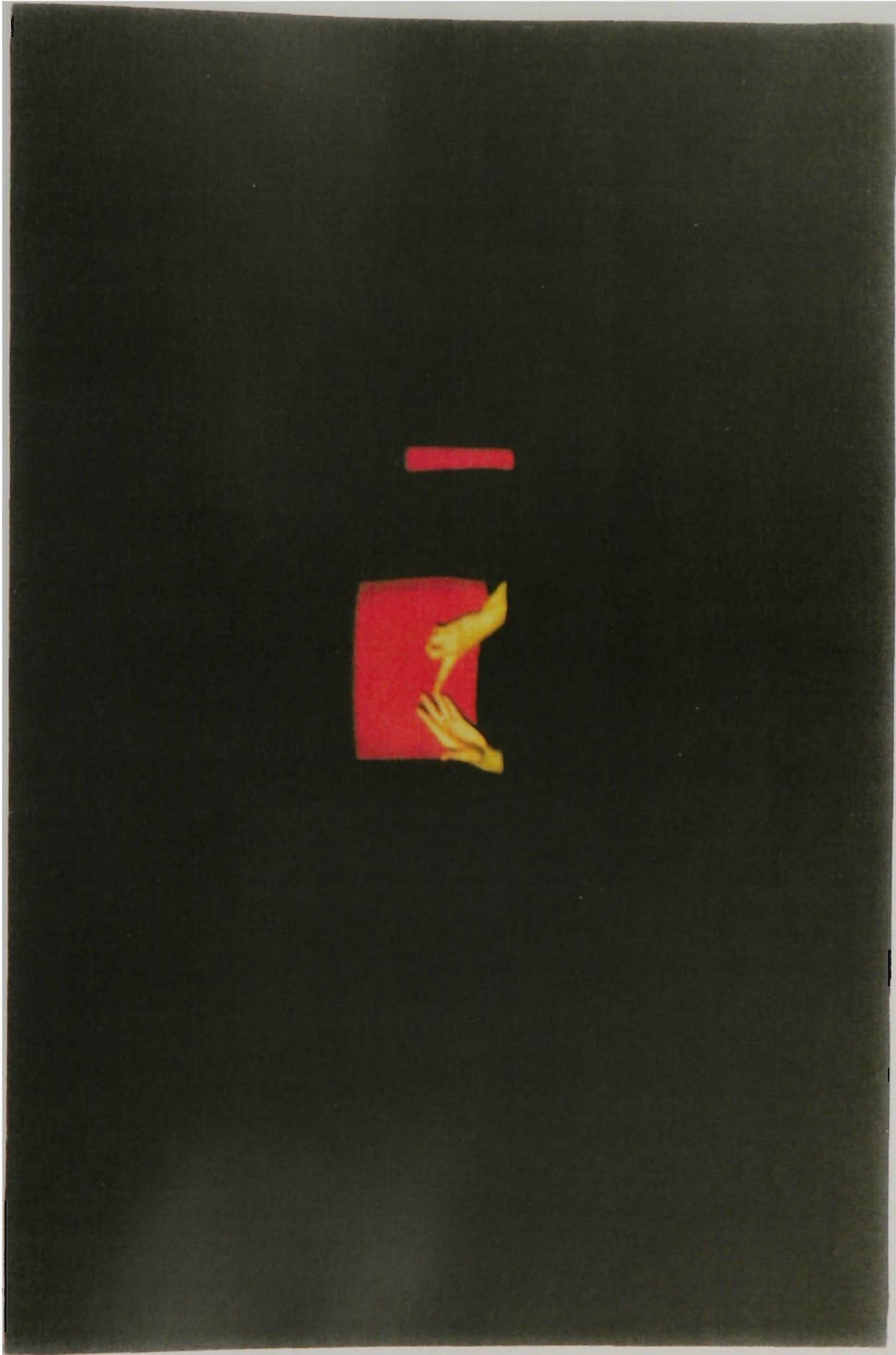
Extracts  
Concept Diary  
Melbourne

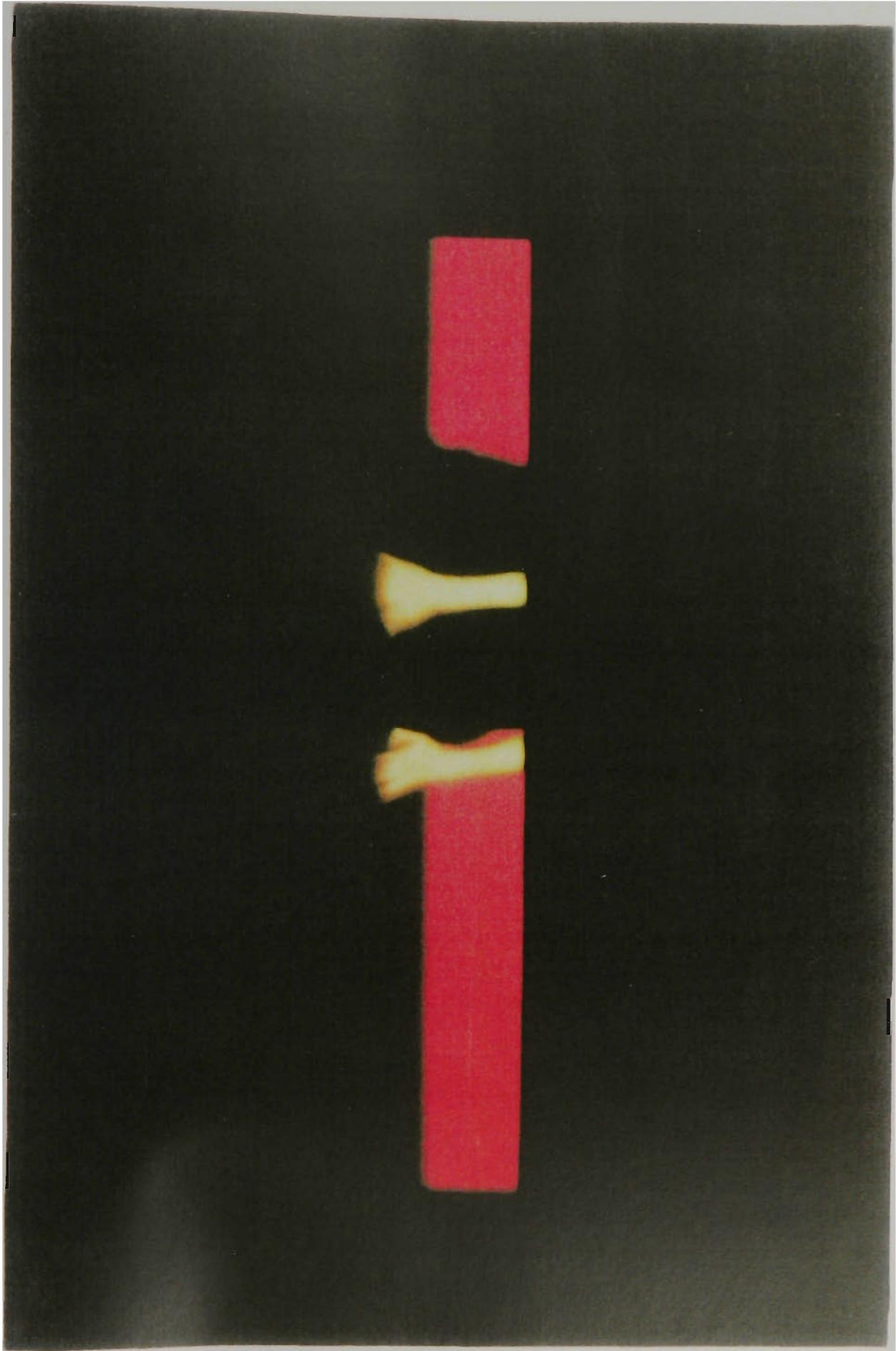






PROS FRONT ELEVATION 1:25





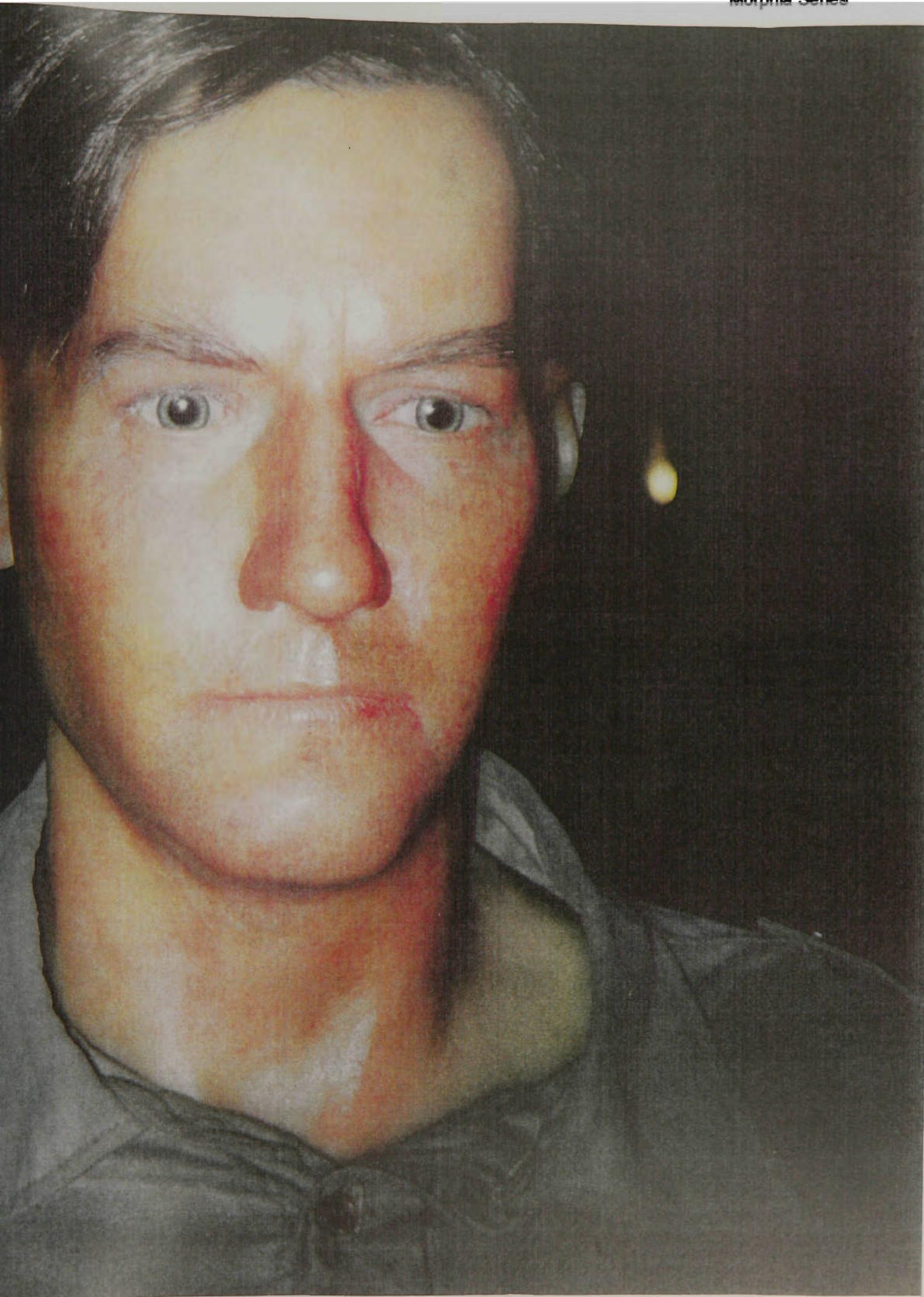


Extracts  
Concept Diary  
Singapore





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# Morphia Series

## Presentation Diary

2002

February  
Master of Arts (Research)  
Examination

October  
Melbourne International Arts Festival  
Venue undisclosed

2003

March  
New Territories Festival  
The Arches, Glasgow

September  
Dublin Fringe  
Arthouse, Dublin

2004

February  
Adelaide Fringe Festival  
Venue undisclosed

June  
Singapore Festival of the Arts  
The Esplanade Studio Theatre

August  
Zurcher Theater Spektacel  
Theater an der Sihl, Zurich

September  
TBA (Time Based Art) Festival  
Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, USA  
Venue undisclosed