thearticle.com.au — August 24, 2017

A Fossilised Future

by Sam Leach

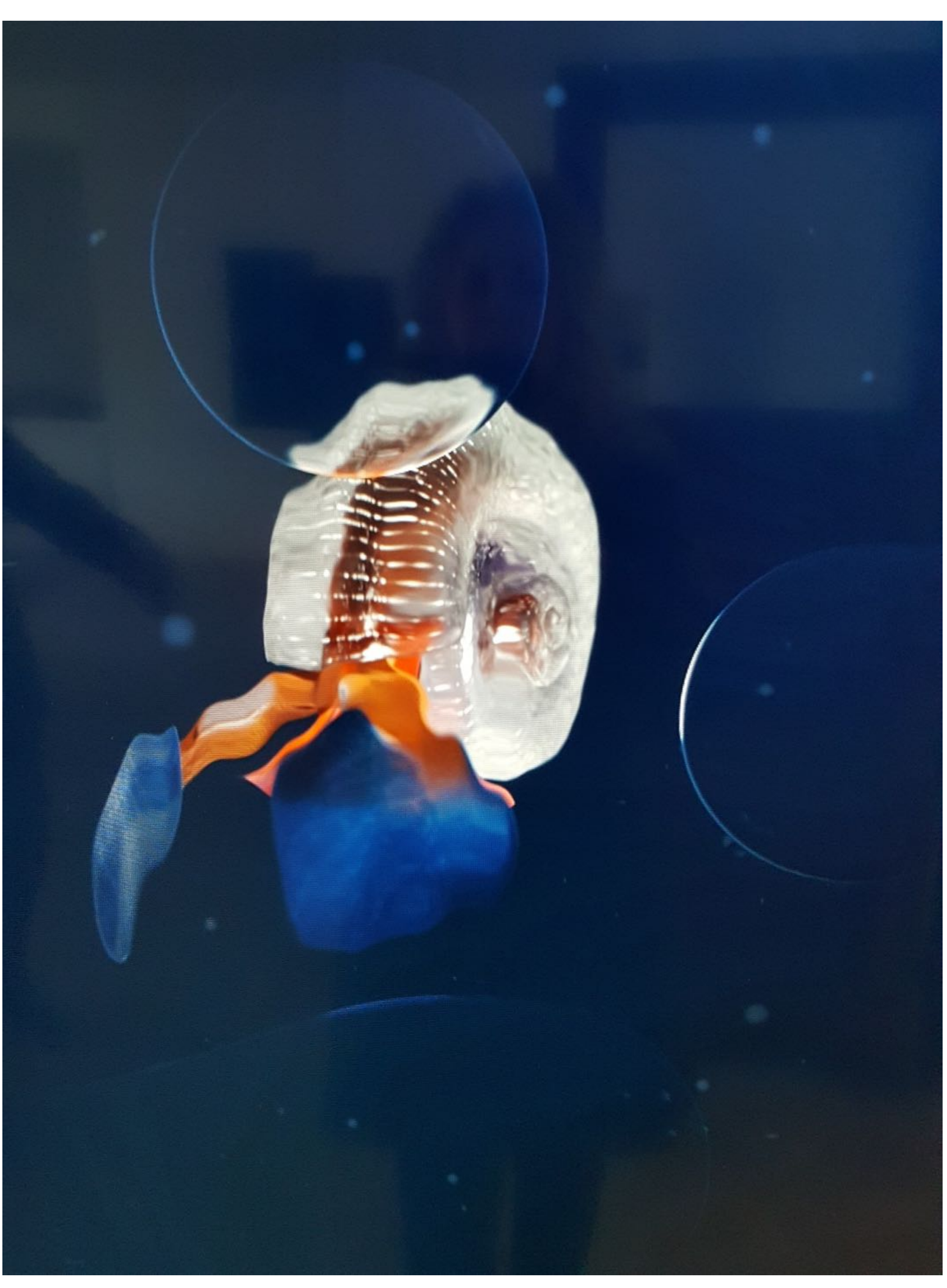
http://thearticle.com.au/2017/08/a-fossilised-future/

Felicity Spear — *Memory Code* (detail)

Cataclysmic events, all but wiping life from the earth, occur again and again over billions of years. At the end of the 18th century fossils were finally understood to be an index of biological disasters, as markers of extinction. The scientist Georges Cuvier expounded this theory to the French Institute, suggesting that the repeated appearance and disappearance of fossils in geological strata were evidence of cataclysmic extinction events. His ideas met resistance from a scientific establishment who preferred to see the world as a place governed by consistent and unchanging laws. Ultimately, refined versions of Cuvier's apocalyptic theory were accepted as the preferred explanation, even as a new comprehension of the depth of geological time was formed.

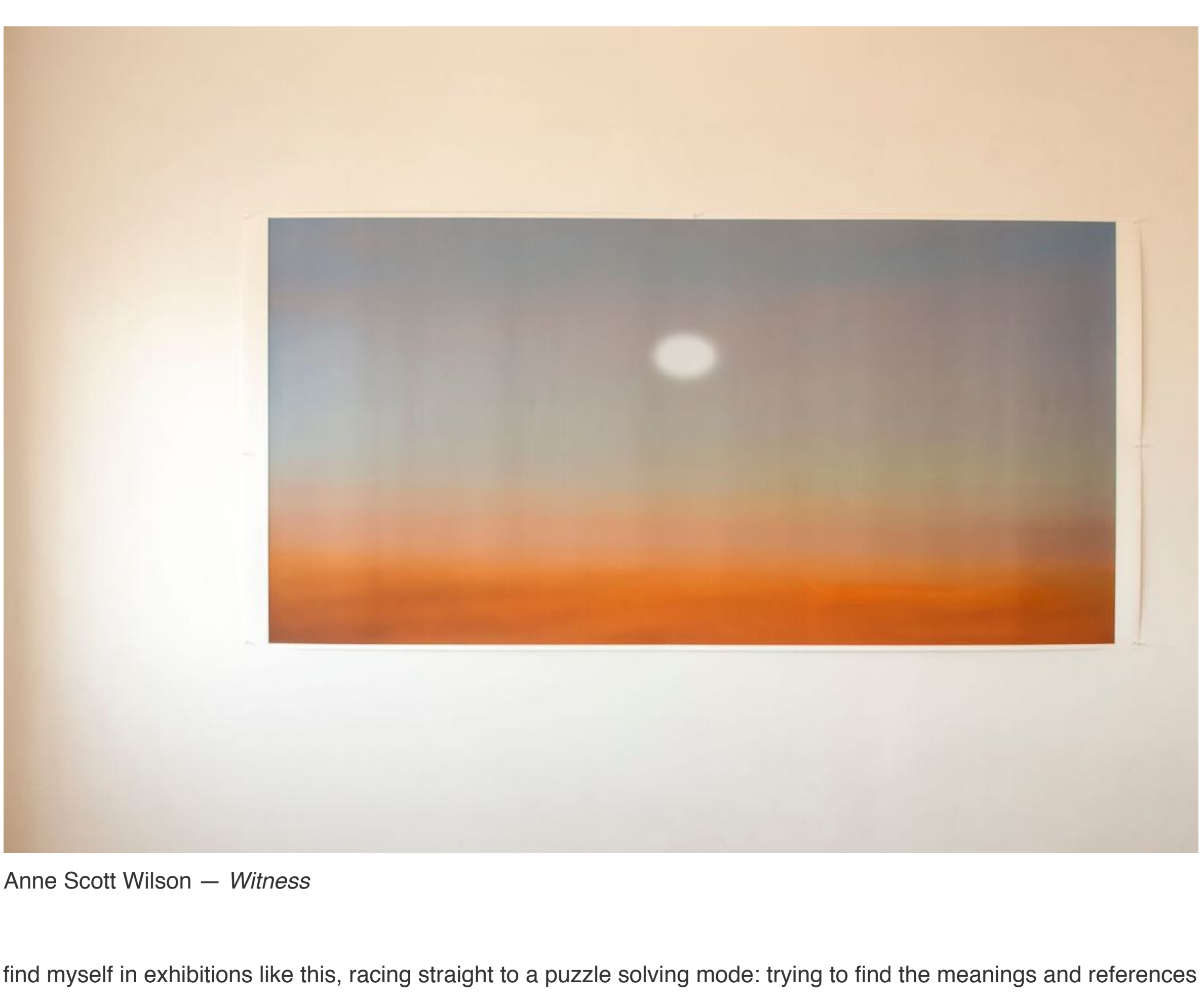
Felicity Spear — *Memory Code*

The difference between geological and biological time is a question of scale so vast it becomes sublime: the mind cannot really grasp the immensity. And yet, we know that our actions have consequences at both scales. Debbie Symons' work, *Limacina Helicina Antarctica – the Butterfly Effect*, refers to the well-known concept in chaos theory, which has by now become a metaphor to describe any unforeseeable large-scale consequence from a small action. In Symons' work an Antarctic sea butterfly flaps its wing-like appendages in a dark sea while viscous blobs seem to run across the screen surface. It is not difficult to imagine that a small invertebrate in the Arctic would be under some ecological pressure caused by human activity. This weird little animal, resembling a fanciful illustration of an ancient ammonite is being affected by our activity. In fact, specifically the viewer's activity. We are doing something to it. We are complicit in a form of incremental violence and we often feel powerless to stop it. These crustacea are struggling to produce their shells due to ocean acidification, disrupting the pelagic fishes' food source and thereby all other creatures in that trophic cascade. Somehow my decision to take the electric lift to this gallery, rather than walk the many flights of stairs, is going to have an impact. Maybe the little snail will flap its fins a bit faster, or a bit less. And that will be the beginning of a cascade of actions as unpredictable as the path followed by the gobs of viscous liquid in this video.



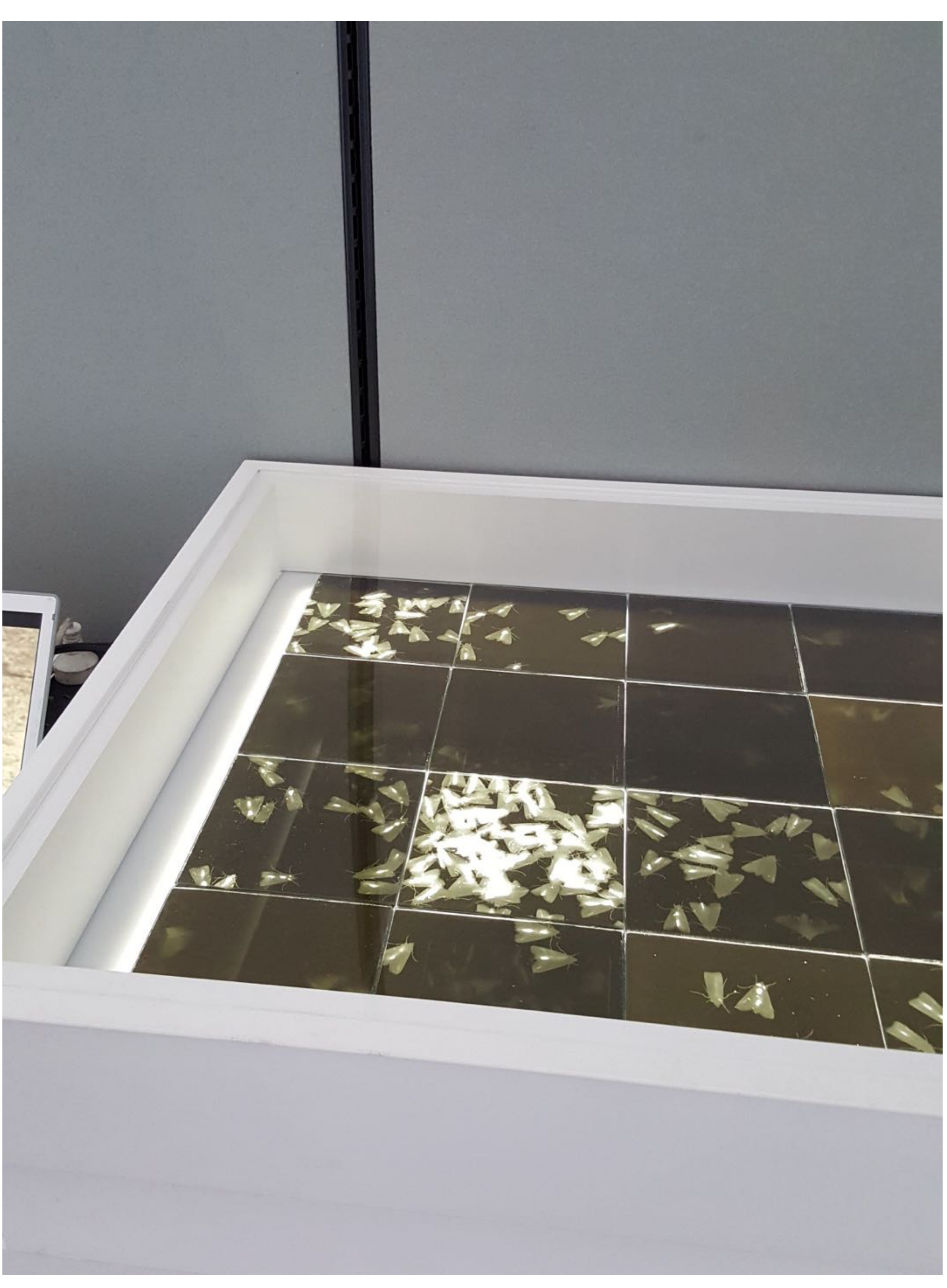
Debbie Symons — *Limacina Helicina Antarctica — The Butterfly Effect*

On the same wall as Symon's video there is a light responsive video projected onto a digital print by Anne Wilson. Wilson has used a pinhole camera to make a large-scale image. It is difficult to say what the image might be, but it suggests a landscape. During my viewing Wilson was on hand and explained that the image was made by holding the camera and spinning on location to create a blurred impression of the landscape. A sequence of colours and light spots are projected onto this image, subtly changing the perception of the colour in the landscape. The impression is of a landscape in rapid motion and flux. Almost like the blurred surroundings Wells sees flicker past in Pal's 1960 movie. Titled *Witness* it is as though we might put ourselves into the position of the fossil, watching the landscape blur with speed as we move through time.



Anne Scott Wilson — *Witness*

I often find myself in exhibitions like this, racing straight to a puzzle solving mode: trying to find the meanings and references in the work. But ultimately these are artworks and there is also an aesthetic dimension and the treatment of form and colour is certainly as important as any other aspect of the work. In between these works, Felicity Spear's *Atomic – My Carbon Copy* is a hard edge abstract painting and its placing helps to make Wilson's work read as a formal colour field piece. It also resembles a spectrographic analysis. This technique is used to determine, among other things, the chemical composition of stars. The title, "my Carbon Copy," suggests the major chemical component illuminated in this sample. References to carbon are far from neutral now, and its possible to imagine an external observer noting the increase in carbon in Earth shine over time.



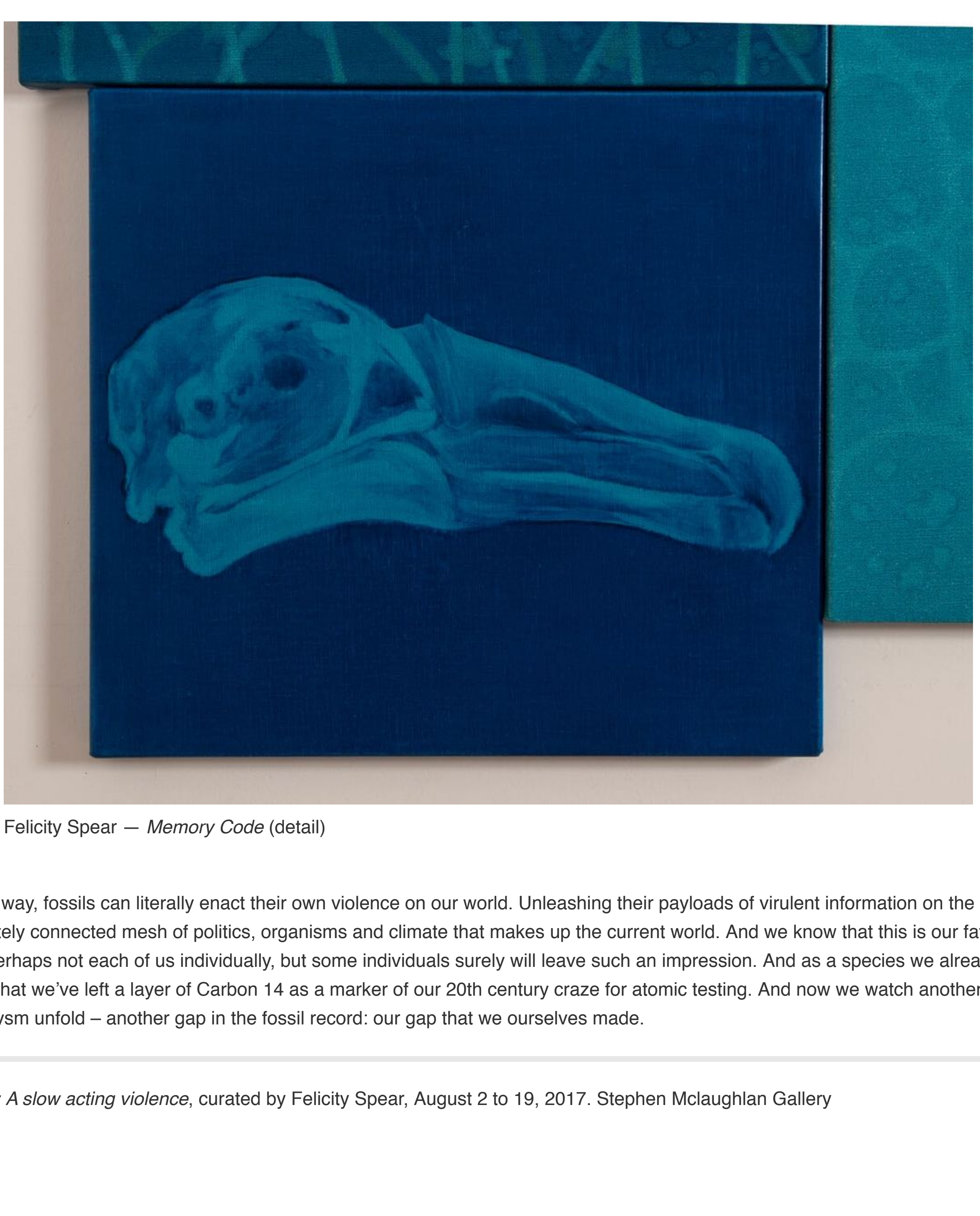
Harry Nankin — *Ekkyklêma (Mount Buffalo)*

Harry Nankin's work , *Ekkykléma (Mount Buffalo*) is another photographic work which eschews the traditional camera. The works Nankin presents here are shadowgrams recorded in the Victorian Alps. The shadows are made by the Bogong moths endemic to the region. The fall of photons on the photographic paper are interrupted by the moths, animals with a brief and hectic life, and an impression is left. It brings to mind the shadows left by victims of the atomic explosions. And in the context of this exhibition, it suggests the impression left by ancient organisms caught in one of the many catastrophes to hit Earth, buried under ash, mud or lava and leaving behind impressions.

Simon Finn's charcoal drawing and video *False Flag*, is a tattered remnant of a banner, which both draws attention to the transience of political power and the temporary nature of any material. Various studies have examined just what will remain of humans in the deep future. Certain plastics, concretes and stone works might remain millions of years after humans are gone. But these will not be enough to reconstitute cultural meanings. The tattered flag – a banner for death – an event that itself only has meaning for biological entities.

Simon Finn — *False Flag*

Felicity Spear also presents a series of six works collectively titled *Memory Code*. Three of the paintings, resembling ultraviolet x-rays, show skulls: an albatross, an early hominid and a bowfin, a species of fish that appears relatively unchanged from the Jurassic era. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* expresses a literal concern for the mistreatment of animals (illustrated by the Mariner's killing of the albatross and his reviling of the sea snakes). Various interpretations of this poem have been deduced and considered, but the meaning was clear enough for Coleridge's contemporaries. Late in 1828, for example, debaters addressed the question of whether the "Rime" would be "effectual in preventing Cruelty to Animals." The skull of an early hominid underscores both the fluidity of the concept of species: when exactly was the first human? It's a meaningless question! The field of palaeoanthropology is contentious, as even the history of hominids millions of years ago can have vexatious contemporary political implications. Are we all African? Did modern humans originate in Asia? Concurrently?



Felicity Spear — *Memory Code* (detail)

In this way, fossils can literally enact their own violence on our world. Unleashing their payloads of virulent information on the intricately connected mesh of politics, organisms and climate that makes up the current world. And we know that this is our fate too. Perhaps not each of us individually, but some individuals surely will leave such an impression. And as a species we already know that we've left a layer of Carbon 14 as a marker of our 20th century craze for atomic testing. And now we watch another cataclysm unfold – another gap in the fossil record: our gap that we ourselves made.

Fossil: A slow acting violence, curated by Felicity Spear, August 2 to 19, 2017. Stephen Mclaughlan Gallery