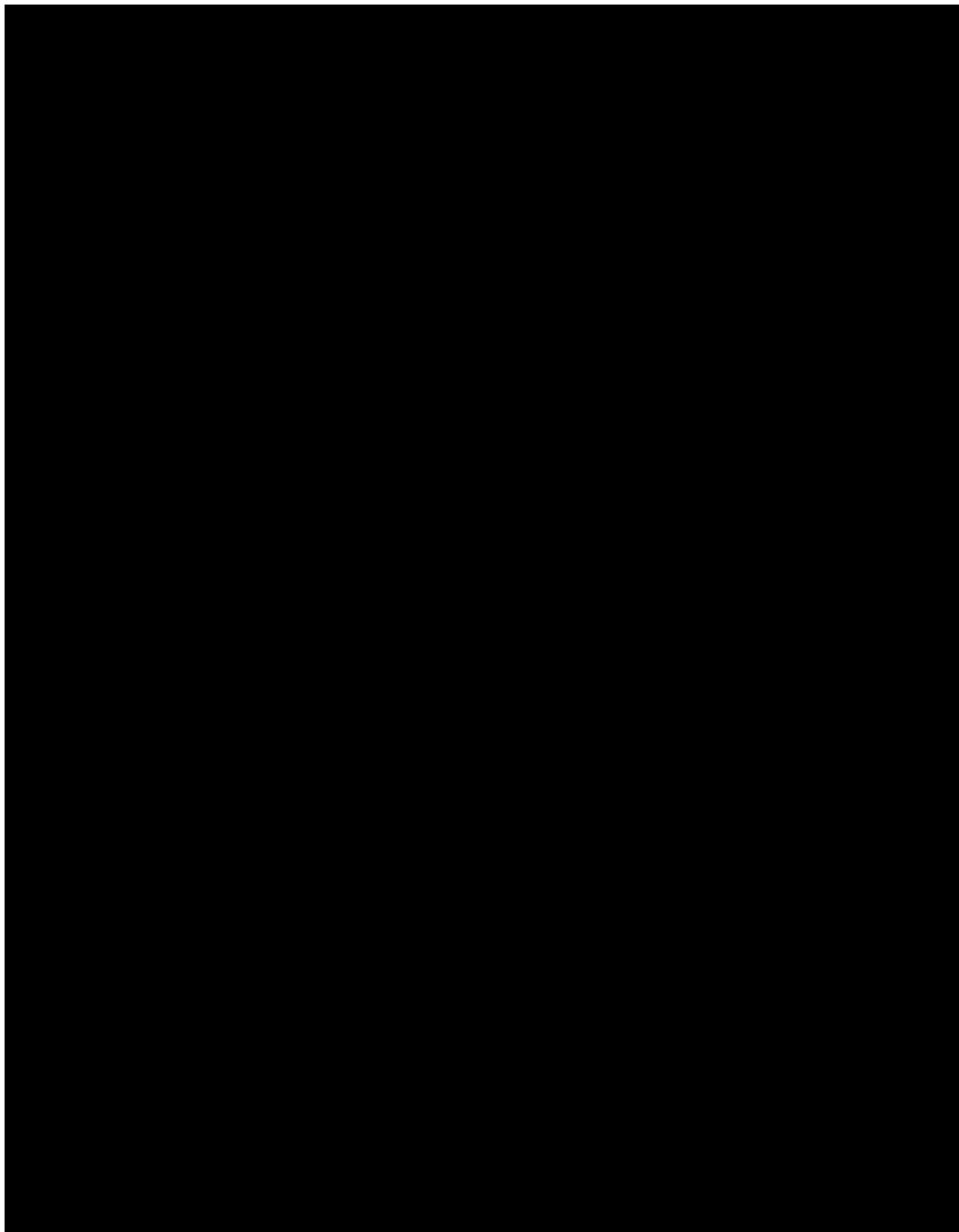
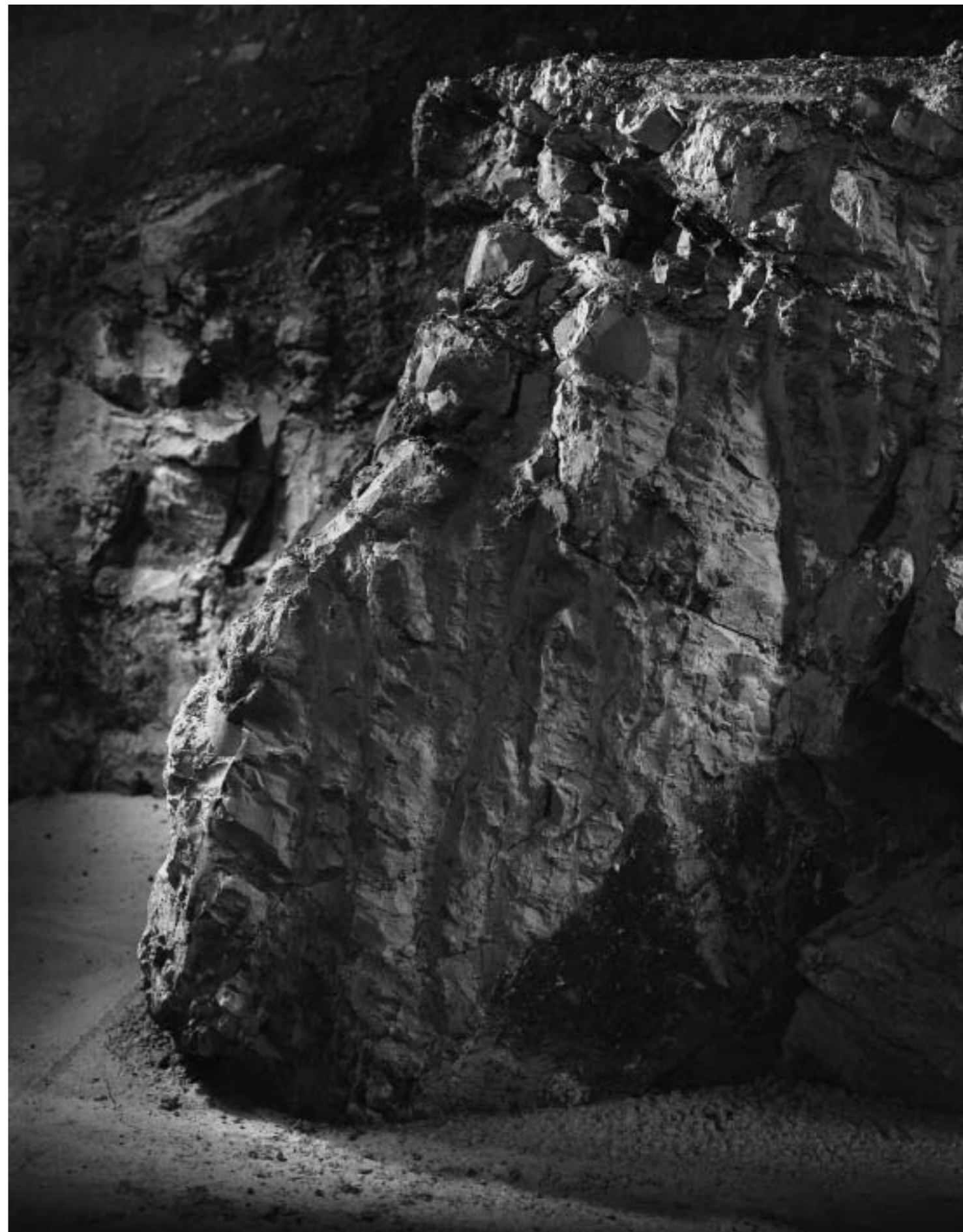




UNDERPIN

ANDREW CURTIS







UNDERPIN

In the opening scene of David Lynch's 1986 film *Blue Velvet*, a suburban dad hosing the garden one sunny morning suddenly has a stroke and collapses to the ground. The atmosphere darkens as we descend to the grass, then further, down into the soil. There in the darkness we soon make out the hideous spectacle of insects buzzing and clambering over each other, a black alien world only just below the surface.

In his new exhibition *Underpin*, Andrew Curtis also reveals an underworld seemingly just below street level: strange caverns of rubble and poisonous water. Working at night amidst the temporary disarray of building sites, he photographs all the usual material of construction, the concrete footings, reinforcing wire and plumbing pipes. But instead of a constructive vision, he sees only ruin, the earth gouged and scraped, the surface all waste and debris. Though they are foundations, with all that word's connotations of strength and permanence, Curtis depicts them as scenes of decay and regression; mysterious, sunless landscapes without nature.

This dark vision contrasts with the hopeful future of the building sites. While Curtis is clearly not working in the genre of architectural photography, he is photographing the foundations for multistorey apartments and offices. These spring from a rationalist culture of engineering and technology, founded on "the belief that an all-encompassing design can order meaning through the logical placing of people and things within a grid-like system.¹" This is the subject of much architectural photography, focussing on the pristine beauty of modern design. The aspirational consumer magazines show interiors styled in elegant minimalism, a white world, cool, sleek and calm. But Curtis shows only mess. At night, under cover of darkness, he reveals its irrational side, a chaos of mud and rock. And he does this by literally shining a light on it.

Underpin is a continuation of Curtis' previous project *Slab*, though in a much darker vein. That was also shot on construction sites at night, but focussed on the giant concrete slabs of prefab architecture. Slab was dark in mood but it had fun with the monolithic shapes (he made references to *2001: a Space Odyssey*) and one could sense the photographer's admiration for the strong geometric forms, even when he shot them in the darkest tones, sometimes hinting at strange rituals.

The new work is a descent from that. The gaze is now directed downward and the subject is at ground level or below. It is a descent in mood and in the psychology behind the work. The ditches, tunnels and waste signify an anal vision, dark, barren and hidden; the airless claustrophobic caverns somehow pagan. *Underpin* is like an excavation into the *sub*-conscious mind, the Freudian id, with its primal motives, eros and, especially here, thanatos – the death-drive. The disordered scenes in these images are uncanny. In the famous essay of that name by Freud, the word is a translation of the German *unheimlich*, meaning unfamiliar, strange and sinister, literally unhomelike. Writing in terms that applied to much of the Surrealist art that was soon to follow, he described an author creating "a kind of uncertainty in us by not letting us know, no doubt purposely, whether he is taking us into the real world or into a purely fantastic one of his own creation."²

This is the natural terrain of photography, anchored as it is in optical reality but always ready to create ambiguity and mis-information. And Curtis, working in a surrealist mode, creates a world of his own invention, making the everyday unfamiliar, removing the distinction between imagination and reality. *Redan Street 3* is really just a hole in the ground, probably ready for some concrete footing. But in the photograph, with its unearthly light coming from below, it seems like a glimpse into a threatening underworld. And *Toorak Road 5*, in reality a bed of rock in recently poured concrete, now looks like a coffin discovered in some secret catacomb.

These transformations are achieved largely through lighting, and over several years Curtis has developed a distinctive approach. Using various sizes of handheld torch (he once used a kangaroo shooter's light!) he is able to pick out details freely, moving the lamp during exposure. Working in darkness he has the photographic equivalent of a blank canvas, though in charcoal black, with his lamps painting in the lighter tones. The result has no equivalent in nature, the eerie artificial glow like something from a dream, or a film. It is all artifice. The setups are intricate and difficult to photograph, the building sites turned into giant still-lives.

He uses a large format camera, the negatives printed onto fibre-based paper, then selenium toned to intensify the blacks. This is a traditional approach, a connection to the honoured traditions of photography, especially that of architecture and industry. However, the admiring upward gaze so typical of those genres is absent here. Curtis concentrates on the detail rather than the whole, reducing our gaze down to fragments of a scene, small areas of mud and rock. The compositions are oblique, skewed, almost a denial of the normal etiquette of good photographic composition. Some have only a few centimetres of sharpness, the rest fading off into blur and shadow.

The photographs in *Underpin* are not documentations of a real place but an interior landscape outside of time, the projection of a personal territory of the mind. The subject is the underpinnings of large architectural structures; they will become, or probably are by now, useful, functioning buildings, part of the ordinary social world of commerce or domesticity. Curtis shows they are not on solid foundations.

Greg Neville

¹ Tim Edensor, *Industrial Ruins: Spaces, Aesthetics and Materiality*, Oxford, Berg, 2005

² Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, from *Collected Papers Vol IV*, New York, Basic Books inc, 1959





ANDREW CURTIS

1966: Born Melbourne, Australia. Lives and works Melbourne, Australia
1985: Graphic Design, Swinburne University of Technology
1988: Diploma of Photography, Australian College of Photography, Art and Communication

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2006: *Underpin*, Criterion Gallery, Hobart
Underpin, Christine Abrahams Gallery, Melbourne
Underpin, Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne
2004: *Slab*, Criterion Gallery, Hobart
2003: *Slab*, Christine Abrahams Gallery, Melbourne
2002: Hawthorn Town Hall, Melbourne
2001: *Volt*, Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney
1999: *Volt*, Christine Abrahams Gallery, Melbourne
1991: *Moving to Florida*, Christine Abrahams Gallery, Melbourne
1990: John Buckley Gallery, Melbourne

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2005: *Group Action*, Criterion Gallery, Hobart
2004: *Recent Acquisitions*, Monash Gallery of Art, Melbourne
2003: City of Hobart Art Prize
2002: Melbourne Art Fair
2000: Melbourne Art Fair
17th *McGregor Prize for Photography*, The University of Southern Queensland
1999-2002: *Striking, Photographs from the Monash Gallery of Art Collection*, Regional Touring Exhibition: Campbelltown City Bicentennial Art Gallery, Bendigo Art Gallery, Mildura Arts Centre, Geelong Art Gallery, Monash Gallery of Art, Melbourne
1992: *New Acquisitions*, Waverley City Gallery
1991: *Opening Exhibition*, Stills Gallery, Sydney
Diving for Pearls, Melbourne Theatre Company
1990: Next Wave Festival, The Photographers Gallery, Melbourne
1987: St Kilda Visual Arts Festival, Linden, Melbourne

MUSIC RELEASED UNDER THE NAME

GUM WITH PHILIP SAMARTZIS

2005: *Vinyl Anthology* 2CD, 23FIVE Records, USA
1990: *Testament 7"* single, RRRrecords, USA
Assemblage 2 7" single, Korm Plastics, The Netherlands
1988: *20 Years in Blue Movies and Yet to Fake an Orgasm* 12" LP
1987: *Vinyl* 12" LP

SELECTED COLLECTIONS & AWARDS

National Gallery of Victoria
Artbank
Monash Gallery of Art Collection
Visy Industrial Packaging
City of Boroondara
Australia Council 'New Work' grant, 2004
Arts Victoria 'New Work' grant, 2002

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Keith Moliné, CD review, *The Wire* (UK), #253, March 2005
Stefano Bianchi, Gum, *Blow Up* (Italy), #81, February 2005
Joe Panzer, CD Review, *Grooves* (USA), #17, 2005
Lawrence English, CD review, *Signal To Noise* (USA), #37, Spring 2005
Kyla McFarlane, A little night music, *The Age*, September 18, 2004
Interview, 'The Maker', ABC Radio National, August 3, 2003
Roger Taylor, radio interview on High & Low, 3RRR, July 15, 2003
Stephen Crafti, Finding beauty in the building site, *The Age*, July 1, 2003
Karen Burns, *Slab*, exhibition catalogue essay, June 2003
Jim Haynes, Outer Limits, *The Wire* (UK) #232, CD review, June 2003
Stephen Crafti, *Request. Response. Reaction*. Images Publishing, 2002
Csaba Toth, Variable Resistance, San Francisco MOMA, catalogue essay, September 2002
Robert Nelson, Trade, *Photofile*, issue no. 65, May 2002
Robert McFarlane, Simple pleasures, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 19, 2001
Colin Bisset, The shock of the ordinary, *Sydney Express News*, May 17, 2001
Roger Taylor, radio interview on High & Low, 3RRR, May 9, 2001
Anna Clabburn, *Striking*, exhibition catalogue essay, September 1999
Robert Rooney, One hand makes light work, *The Australian*, August 6, 1999
Greg Neville, *Volt*, exhibition catalogue essay, July 1999
Peter James, Americans, *Black + White*, April 1995
Mary-Lou Jelbart, radio review on Morning Show, 3LO, November, 1991
Maudie Palmer, radio review on Art Rave Today, 3PBS, November, 1991
Greg Neville, Moving To Florida, *The Age*, November 22, 1991
Roger Taylor, radio interview on Gotham City Gossip, 3RRR, November 16, 1991
Greg Neville, The bazaar in two-dimensions & the bizarre, *The Age*, June 1, 1990



Goodwood Street 8, 2005



Lord Street 2, 2005



Lord Street 4, 2005



Redan Street 2, 2004



High Street 1, 2005



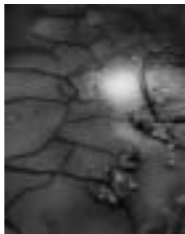
Toorak Road 6, 2002



Goodwood Street 11, 2005



Goodwood Street 12, 2005



Lord Street 5, 2005



Goodwood Street 15, 2005



Goodwood Street 5, 2005



High Street 2, 2005



Lord Street 1, 2005



Redan Street 3, 2004



Goodwood Street 14, 2005



Goodwood Street 13, 2005



Toorak Road 5, 2002



Selenium toned gelatin silver prints
120 x 150 cm or 150 x 120 cm

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