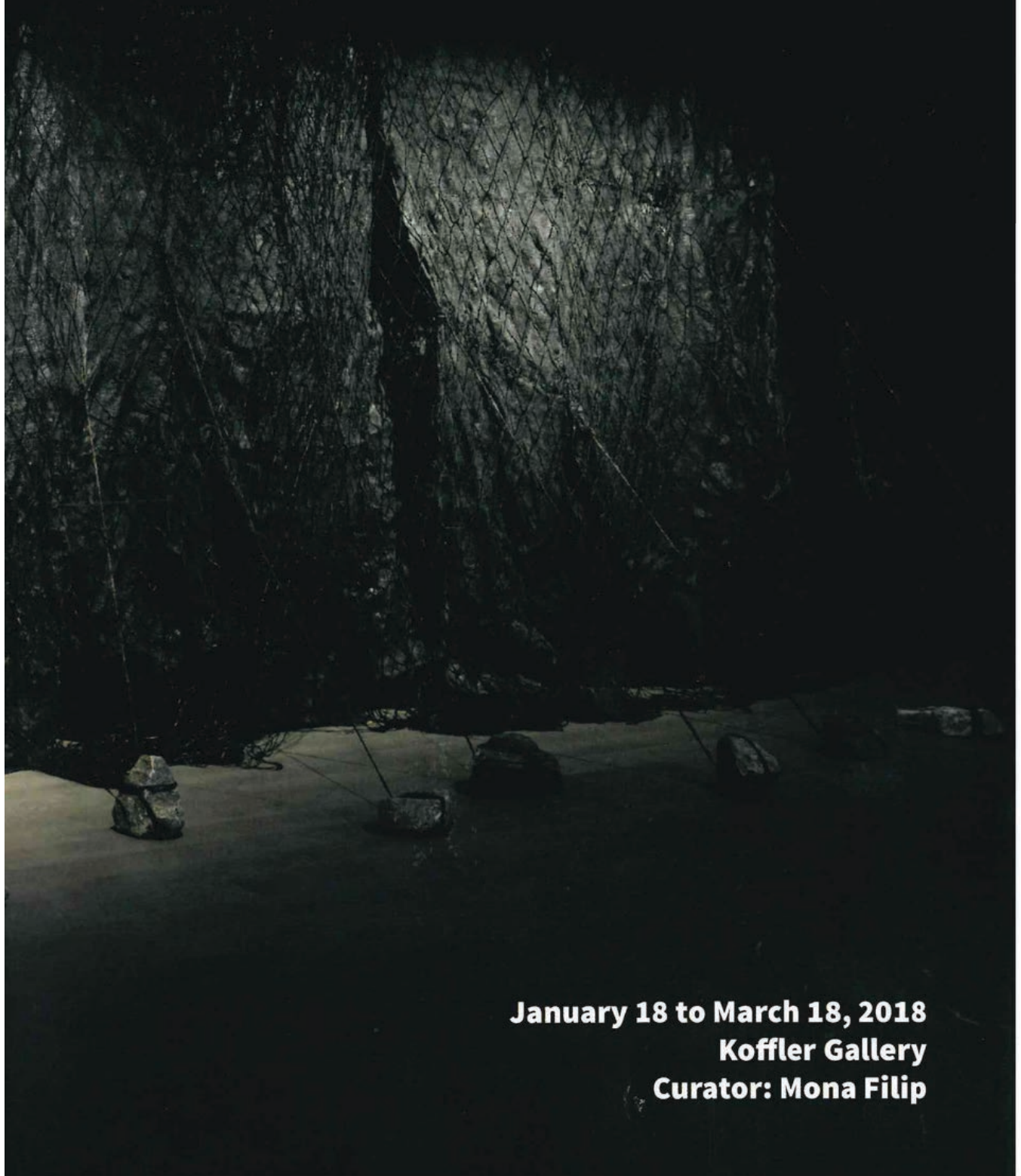


NICOLE COLLINS

FURTHEST BOUNDLESS



January 18 to March 18, 2018
Koffler Gallery
Curator: Mona Filip



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Consider, for example, *Apeiron*, 2018, the boundless, where Collins breaks formal conventions. The title of this expanded painting suggests a movement away from the self as the centre, intimating instead a state of expansive fusion where one substance permeates another and the distance between them is dissolved. It proposes the negation of those



Nicole Collins' paintings are filled with black surfaces reminiscent of inkblots, which invite the viewer to confront the undecipherable mysteries of one's own inner experience. Regardless of how much time we spend contemplating the gradual unfolding of her *assemblages* – a term often employed by the painter Jean Dubuffet to describe his own work – the mystery remains intact.² Her trajectory over the years, marked by the recurrence of obscure abstractions and the use of materials such as fishing net, burlap, knotted string, charcoal or wax embedded in pigment that she uses as paint – “a very embodied, unruly paint,” as she herself explains – remits us to ancestral times, to prehistoric art, to the enigmas that these early artistic practices have encrypted.

It is, to be sure, an enigma, a question: what led the paleolithic artists, twenty thousand years ago, to enter the caves and be moved to paint – with perplexing optical depth – on the irregular surfaces of stone, and with black paint at that? “When we enter the Cave of Lascaux,” wrote Georges Bataille in 1955,

a strong feeling takes hold of us that we do not have when standing before the glass cases displaying the first fossilized remains of men or their stone instruments. It is the same feeling of presence, of clear and burning presence, that works of art of all ages have always excited in us.³

Admittedly, mastery here has its secrets. Nonetheless, as I turn to Collins, the question re-surfaces in my mind in different forms. Why does she paint? When we see her work, what is it that we see exactly? What draws her to black, the most aggressive, vehement colour? Could it be that the plasticity embedded in the black is paralleled by its capacity to traverse the furthest regions of Collins' interior world?

Black can stir our emotions, our memory, and it inhabits us in ways that perhaps other colours do not. Rather than being limited to the realm of visual experience, black – which is nothing less than the absence of all colour – can operate as a state of mind. To paraphrase art historian Teresa del Conde commenting on the painter Pierre Soulages' use of black, blackness here is a symbolic element, in spite of Collins' not explicitly seeking the symbol.⁴ See, for example, *Calcine (Malcolm Island Net)*, 2015: by narrowing the spectrum of her chromatic scale to degree zero, the artist has expanded on her possibilities.

Perhaps like her prehistoric predecessors, it is only from within the darkest enclosures of the cavern – from the Platonic frame of reference – that Collins has been able to access the open field of the spirit. Through their textures, scrambled materiality, and ambiguous, vibrating forms, her paintings reveal themselves to us slowly in waves that approach, then recede from us. All the while the traces of prior stages remain present and absent in them, like smoke that foils materialization. We become aware that something has disappeared. “Each mark has a reason to be there,” wrote Collins in her notes for an earlier exhibition.⁵ These paintings oscillate from one state to another, evoking the systolic and diastolic pulsations of a heart, until almost

waywardly, they take their form in our imagination. As darkness dissolves and finally gives way to an elemental absence, formidably, the paintings open up spaces. They invite us to internalize them.

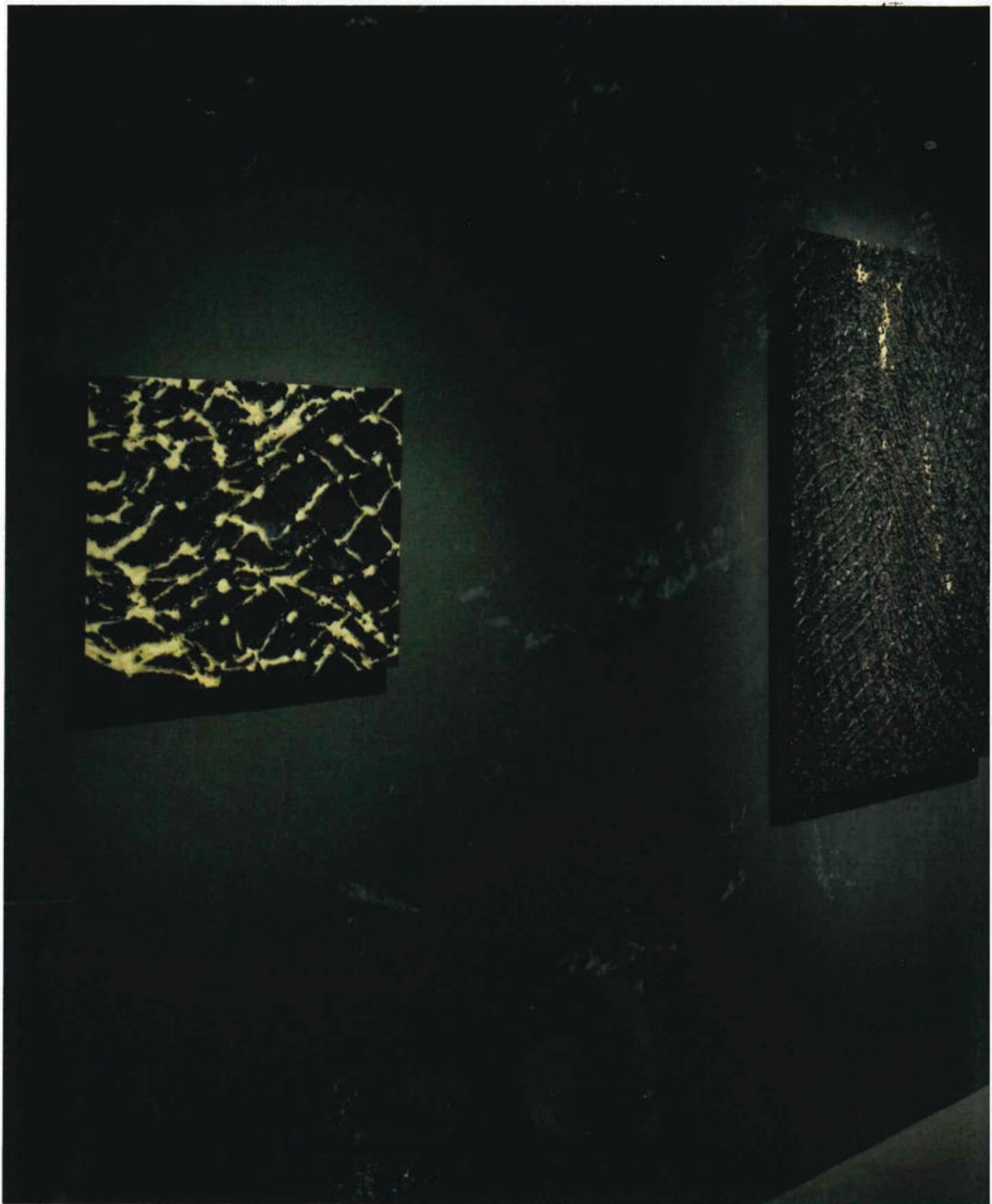
Collins' continuous, repetitive experimentation with rich and varied blacks, along with her infinite search for variants through altering surfaces – until she is able to extract from them a state of mind – gives form to her paintings, but also a presence capable of invoking in the viewer a multiplicity of unanticipated inner responses. After all, as the poet Octavio Paz points out, a painting is essentially a visual phenomenon: what speaks to the viewer is not the thoughts or intentions of the artist but rather the forms. Form is the primary source of meanings.⁶ “If I move closer to the painting, so as to listen to its secret palpitation,” Paz proposes, bringing this experience to light,

it takes the pulse of my fever. It tears down and rebuilds the object that I am contemplating and discovers that what seemed to me a living organism is merely an ingenious artifact...My contemplation has ceased to be passive: I repeat, in the reverse direction, the artist's gestures; I walk backwards, toward the origin of the work, and clumsily feeling my way along; I traverse the same path as the creator.⁷

The risk for the painter, in Collins' case, is constantly foreshadowed by the exceptional exigencies that her practice involves. There are occasions when the surface of the painting abruptly coalesces, then decomposes – both materially and figuratively – effecting the undoing of the composition. The hazard of fragmentation is ever present. Sometimes she has deliberately taken that decomposition to such an extreme that what remains are, as Bataille remarked in reference to Joan Miró's paintings, no more than “*quelques taches informes*,” a few formless stains.⁸ If such partial decomposition, according to Bataille, is similar to that of corpses, it simultaneously acts as a progression to a numinous state of profound mystery corresponding to the sacred. He cites the example of the ghost in its dual aspect: material and immaterial, present and absent.⁹

Of course, I am mindful that there are many ways of approaching a painting. Yet these uncanny associations between Collins' work and decomposition, or between the ghost and the otherness of the sacred, were reflections that came to my mind, almost despite myself, as I was writing. They are at the heart of the idea that our unconscious is constituted by forces located outside of ourselves. “For the unconscious,” writes psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas, “there is no difference between a material and a non-material evocative object; both are equally capable of putting the self through a complex inner experience.”¹⁰

The ghostly effect of the pieces, not merely their actuality, speaks to our unconscious with the extraordinary lexicon of the sentient. It is tempting to imagine that the ancestral void of the cave has left an imprint on our unconscious, and that in Collins' paintings we recognize it as the familiar within the unfamiliar. What is at stake here, paradoxically, is not merely the materiality of the paintings and our lived experience of them, but the paintings' own lack as well, their mottled beauty suggestive of an encounter with the unrepresentable. At times,



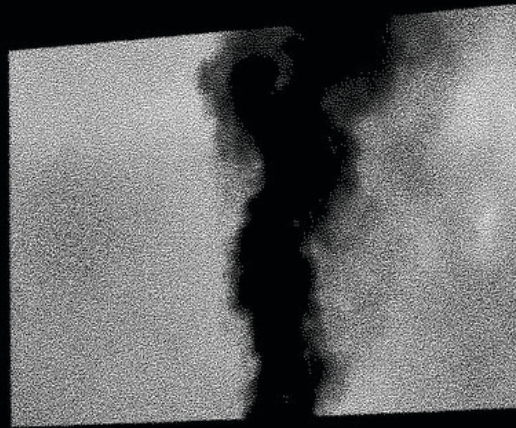
we have the impression of being placed before the aspects of our world that remain unseen, while at others, it's "as if we were looking at death on the surface of the work."¹¹

I can appreciate Collins' vision of space and of matter. More than that, I admire her affinities with artists for whom abstraction and representation are not contraries, artists for whom both modalities have a claim to representing reality. Among them she has mentioned to me Ad Reinhardt, Eva Hesse, her spectral encounter with the latter's *Expanded Expansion* in 2008. These and other artists are concerned with textures and physical properties – optic,



tactual, aural – and treat the physical world as experimental terrain. In the end, space and matter may not be so distant from each other. Matter itself could even be understood as a kind of space, “a slower space.”¹²

Consider, for example, *Apeiron*, 2018, the boundless, where Collins breaks formal conventions. The title of this expanded painting suggests a movement away from the self as the centre, intimating instead a state of expansive fusion where one substance permeates another and the distance between them is dissolved. It proposes the negation of those



limits which configure the individual as separate from its context; one becomes unified with a universe in continuous flow. Any attempt to fix the self at one point in its transformation would have to resist this flow. The video *Aphelion*, 2018, by comparison, presents us with the opposing movement: the furthest point in the orbit away from the concentration of forces around a centre – the sun. In this case, the movement results not in the self's dissipation but in self-cohesiveness. To me, *Apeiron* and *Aphelion* are symbolic of a letting out and taking in, and of a self to be found in the in-between.

In addition, *Signal*, 2018 – the acoustic piece that complements the monumental painting and subtle video in the multimedia installation *Furthest Boundless*, which titles the exhibition at the Koffler Gallery – spreads out in space and establishes a field, a horizon, a dimension of “de-spatialized materiality.”¹³ Collins' use of sonic matter – in the form of shape note music, a cappella – highlights our body's relation to the material world surrounding us; it provides a sense of immersion into her work associated with embodied listening. We get the sense that something significant has been encoded by the medium. Sound overrides form. Rather than dissolving the form, the sound adds amplitude and vibration, creating another idea of space and of time that advances her project beyond the simple visual presence of the paintings. This interface between different media underscores the uncertainty of the correspondences among seeing, listening and remembering.

The sudden eruption of the sound of human voices, *mutatis mutandis*, radically shifts the paintings' centre of gravity – but also the viewer's. One's body is no longer positioned in front of a world but is, instead, enveloped and separated by it. As a result, we find ourselves suspended in an atmosphere where the audible and the inaudible offer a transposition of what is visible and what is not, where seeing becomes a manner of listening. This experience brings to mind philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy's speculation that, “in Plato's cave, there is more than just the shadows of objects being moved about outside: there is also the echo of the voices of those who move them.”¹⁴ He wonders, “what secret is at stake when one truly listens, that is, when one tries to capture or surprise the sonority rather than the message? what secret is yielded – hence also made public – when we listen to a voice, an instrument, or a sound just for itself?”¹⁵

We could say that Collins' exhibition at the Koffler Gallery itself is configured as an assemblage, as if the paintings make themselves. Mona Filip, who made the curatorial decision to structure the exhibition this way, favours the object-quality of Collins' work – its fragile monumentality. However, the organization of the paintings in the space enhances their terrestrial essence. When lit in the gallery against the backdrop of black walls, there are moments when the works become evanescent landscapes, with shadows extending along their surfaces. At the Koffler Gallery the paintings manifest their capacity to affect the space: rather than filling it, the paintings hollow out and transform their setting. There is here an art of rarefaction, to paraphrase French philosopher Alain Badiou, an art of obtaining the subtlest results, not through an aggressive posture with regard to inherited forms, but through arrangements that place these forms at the edge of the void, in a network of cuts and disappearances.¹⁶

- ¹ André Breton, "We Don't EAR It That Way," in *What is Surrealism? Selected Writings*, edited and translated by Franklin Rosemont (London: Pluto Press, 1978), 348 (a reference to Salvador Dalí's painting *The Anti-Matter Ear*).
- ² Peter Selz with texts by the artist, *The Work of Jean Dubuffet* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1962), 103.
- ³ George Bataille, *Prehistoric painting: Lascaux or the Birth of Art*, translated by Austryn Wainhouse (Switzerland: Skira, 1955), 12.
- ⁴ Teresa del Conde, "Soulages en el Museo de Ciudad de México," *La Jornada en línea*, July 16, 2010, <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2010/07/06/opinion/a10a1cul>.
- ⁵ Nicole Collins, catalogue for the exhibition *Sample* (Tokyo: The Embassy of Canada, 2002).
- ⁶ Octavio Paz, "Transfigurations" (1968), in Octavio Paz, *Essays on Mexican Art*, translated by Helen Lane (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993), 220–21.
- ⁷ Octavio Paz, "From Criticism to Offering" (1960), in *Essays on Mexican Art*, 207.
- ⁸ Georges Bataille, "Joan Miró: Peintures récentes" in *Documents 7* (1930), reprinted in *Documents année 1930*, vol. 2 (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1991), 399. Reference from Briony Fer, *On Abstract Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), 82.
- ⁹ Briony Fer, *On Abstract Art*, 82–84.
- ¹⁰ Christopher Bollas, *The Evocative Object World* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 79.
- ¹¹ Briony Fer, *On Abstract Art*, 79.
- ¹² Eduardo Chillida, *Escritos* (Madrid: La Fabrica, 2005), 55.
- ¹³ Jacques Rancière, "Metamorphosis of the Muses," in *Sonic Process*, published in conjunction with the exhibition *Sonic Process: A New Geography of Sounds*, edited by Christine Van Assche, translated by Stephen Wright and Gregory Williams (Barcelona: MACBA/ACTAR, 2002), 26.
- ¹⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, translated by Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 75.
- ¹⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, 5.
- ¹⁶ Alain Badiou, *The Century*, translated by Alberto Toscano (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2007), 132.

Nicole Collins has exhibited extensively since 1994, including solo exhibitions at The University of Waterloo Art Gallery (2013), The Art Gallery of Ontario (2013) and The Embassy of Canada in Tokyo (2001) and group exhibitions in Toronto, Hamilton, St. Johns, New York, Miami, London and Zurich. Her work has been featured online and in magazines, newspapers and books including the major survey *Abstract Painting in Canada* (Roald Nasgaard), the 3rd edition of *A Concise History of Canadian Painting* (Dennis Reid), *Carte Blanche, Volume 2: Painting*, and *The Donovan Collection* catalogue. Collins is an Assistant Professor in the Drawing & Painting program at the Ontario College of Art & Design University (OCADU) and she lives in Toronto with her husband artist Michael Davidson and their daughter. Collins' work is represented by General Hardware Contemporary in Toronto.

David Dorenbaum is a psychoanalyst in private practice in Toronto, an assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Toronto, a member of the International Psychoanalytic Association and of the Lacan Clinical Forum in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. His interest in the relationship between psychoanalysis and art has led him to collaborate with various artists. His most recent essays have appeared in *Incarnations*, with Janieta Eyre, Coach House Press (2017), and *Synchrony and Diachrony*, with Robert Polidori, Steidl and the J.P. Getty Museum (2018).

The artist would like to extend warmest gratitude to: Daniel Collins, Ronald Collins, Bartley Collins and Fernande Collins for leading the way; the Koffler Centre of the Arts; Curator Mona Filip for great vision and empathy and for opening this contemplative space; David Dorenbaum for insightful conversation and titles assistance; Corrine Carlson and Jamie Crane for transforming the gallery; Kerri Reid and Tyler Brett of the Sointula Art Shed Residency where I first dove into the nets; Paul Moleiro for sensitive video editing; Frances Miller for expert recording, singing, editing and "the cosmic drone"; Frank Griggs our fearless pitcher; singers Pleasance Crawford, Charles Crawford, Naomi Duguid, Stella Green-Sanderson, Max Kelly, Gabriel Levine, Andrew Louis, Jan May, Tim McCready and the community of Shape Note Singers worldwide; Chris Westcott, stone whisperer; studio mates Stella Cade, Azadeh Elmizadeh, Trudy Perks and Margaux Smith, for making our work space a haven of creative actions; OCADU for requiring and supporting my art practice, especially the students, who keep me on my toes and endlessly amaze and inspire me; Kim Chiotti, my sounding board and great collector; Niki Dracos, General Hardware Contemporary, for keeping it real; Matilda Davidson whose creative path is just beginning; and always, Michael Davidson, for 36 years of persistent inspiration, encouragement, critique, support and love.

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All works: Nicole Collins. | Cover: *Apeiron*, 2018 (installation detail), microcrystalline wax, charcoal, burlap, jute, coir, stone, dimensions variable. | Inside cover: *Being knowing willing*, 2016, microcrystalline wax, black walnut on canvas on panel, 36" x 48". | Pages 3-4: *Furthest Boundless*, 2018 (installation detail). | Page 5 (top): *Aphelion*, 2018, video (installation detail), 9:46 min. | Page 5 (bottom): *Calcine (Malcolm Island Net)*, 2015, microcrystalline wax, charcoal, on panel, 24" x 24". | All photos: Toni Hafkenscheid.

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