



THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH
Edinburgh College of Art

UOA D32

ART AND DESIGN:
HISTORY, THEORY AND PRACTICE



RESEARCHER

Jonathan Owen

OUTPUT TITLE

Eraser Drawings

OUTPUT TYPE

Artefact: Drawings

DATE

2014 – 2019

FIG. 1
Jonathan Owen, *Eraser Drawing*
(*Audrey Hepburn*), 2016, partially
erased book page. Photo Jonathan
Owen.



01 / STATEMENT

The output consists of a group of fifteen drawings.

To make the works, Owen developed and applied a distinctive process involving the careful erasure of ink from found photographic images. Drawing usually involves making marks by adding and accumulating material (graphite, ink, etc.) on a surface. In contrast, Owen's drawings are made purely by erasure; a gradual, irreversible process of removing the ink of the printed image by hand.

This series was made using illustrated pages from books on cinema, usually large, 'coffee table' publications focusing on a particular genre, director or actor. The books were found and bought online, in bookshops and secondhand shops.

In each drawing the central figure, usually an actor or director, is erased. This disables the focal point of the photograph, bringing a new importance and directing attention to the peripheral details of the image.

Drawings from this series have been exhibited in solo exhibitions at:

- Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh Art Festival, Edinburgh, 2016.
- Kochi-Muziris Biennale, India, 2016.

And in group exhibitions at:

- Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh, 2017.
- David Totah Gallery, New York, 2018.
- Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow, 2019.

Further dissemination of the research has taken place through public lectures given by Owen at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, 2016, and GoMA, Glasgow in 2019. The Kochi-Muziris Biennale had an audience of 582,000 visitors. Twelve of the drawings were included in the monograph, *Jonathan Owen*, published by Ingleby, Edinburgh in 2016.

FIG. 2

Jonathan Owen, *Eraser Drawing (That Most Important Thing: Love)*, 2014, partially erased book page, 28 x 23cm. Photo John McKenzie/Ingleby Gallery).



153

02 / RESEARCH DIMENSIONS

This group of drawings was produced over a five-year period. Each drawing was made from a printed page which Owen had removed from a published book and altered through a manual process of erasing ink from the surface of the paper.

All the images in the series are photographs from books relating to the history of cinema – mostly movie stills or portraits of actors and directors on-set.

Some drawings are a single page, some are double page, and their dimensions range from 28 x 23cm to 31 x 48cm. They are usually exhibited framed.

Owen's process involved removing the central figure, or figures from each image, leaving behind an empty scene. No material was added to the surface of the page. The ink forming the original image of the figure was removed in such a way that it was re-shaped to form the inanimate details of the scene the figure once inhabited.

In the example on this page (FIG 2), the body of Klaus Kinski was carefully re-shaped to continue the shapes of the curtains, the window, and the street outside. His legs, feet and left hand could not be removed because they are lighter in tone than what is behind them. The incidental details left behind in each image became new focal points, acquiring new significance.

'Whereas much of art is about building up, about creating layer upon layer, about forming something out of nothing, Owen's work is about reduction. He is interested in making by removing... He gently removes parts of the original picture, which creates a new narrative within the image and leaves a ghostly trace of what was there before.'

Kelly Fliedner, *Forming in the Pupil of an Eye*, Kochi-Muziris Biennale catalogue, 2016.

The fifteen partially erased book pages drawings (FIGS 3–17) are:

Eraser Drawing (Audrey Hepburn), 2016.

Eraser Drawing (That Most Important Thing: Love), 2014.

Eraser Drawing (High Noon), 2014.

Eraser Drawing (The Man with the Golden Arm), 2015.

Eraser Drawing (Film Still), 2014.

Eraser Drawing (Suddenly, Last Summer), 2014.

Eraser Drawing (I Could Go On Singing), 2016.

Eraser Drawing (American Comedy), 2017.

Eraser Drawing (My Darling Clementine), 2017.

Eraser Drawing (The Trial), 2014.

Eraser Drawing (Artists and Models), 2017.

Eraser Drawing (Tennessee), 2018.

Eraser Drawing (Final Scene), 2019.

Eraser Drawing (The Cameraman), 2017.

Eraser Drawing (Fellini), 2018.



FIG. 3 Eraser Drawing (*Audrey Hepburn*), 2016.

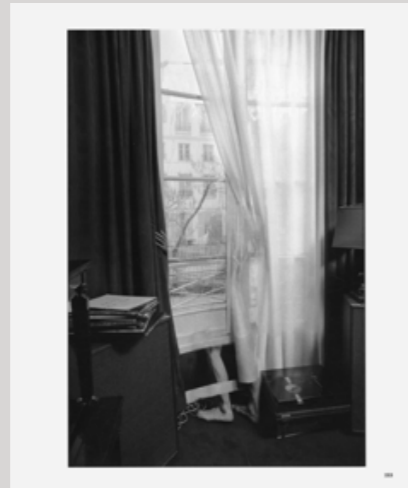


FIG. 4 Eraser Drawing (*That Most Important Thing: Love*), 2014.



FIG. 5 Eraser Drawing (*High Noon*), 2014.



FIG. 6 Eraser Drawing (*The Man with the Golden Arm*), 2015.

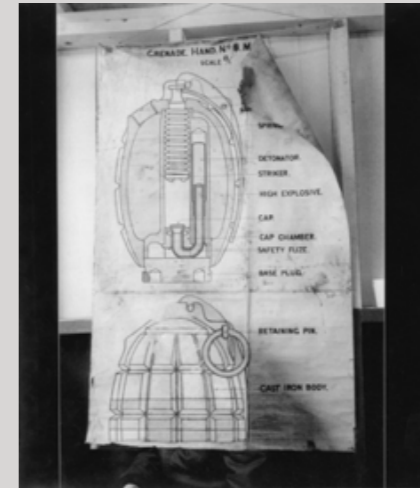


FIG. 7 Eraser Drawing (*Film Still*), 2014.

FIGS. 3–17
The group of 15 eraser drawings.
Dimensions range between 23
x 28cm to 31 x 48cm. Photos
John McKenzie/Ingleby Gallery.



FIG. 8 Eraser Drawing (*Suddenly, Last Summer*), 2014.



FIG. 9 Eraser Drawing (*I Could Go On Singing*), 2016.

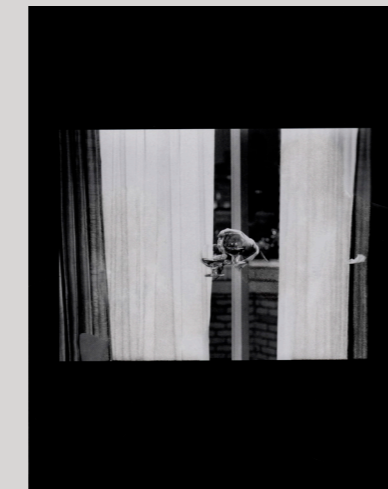


FIG. 10 Eraser Drawing (*American Comedy*), 2017.

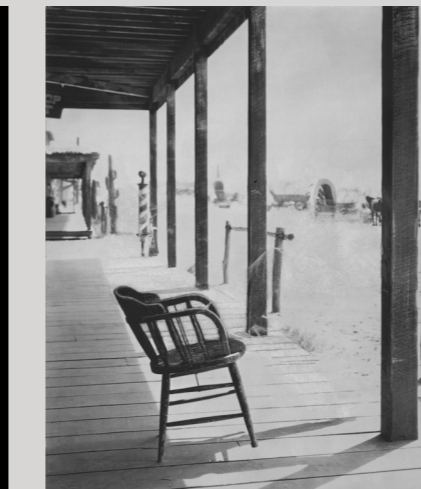


FIG. 11 Eraser Drawing (*My Darling Clementine*), 2017.



FIG. 12 Eraser Drawing (*The Trial*), 2014.



FIG. 13 Eraser Drawing (*Artists and Models*), 2017.



FIG. 14 Eraser Drawing (*Tennessee*), 2018.



FIG. 15 Eraser Drawing (*Final Scene*), 2019.

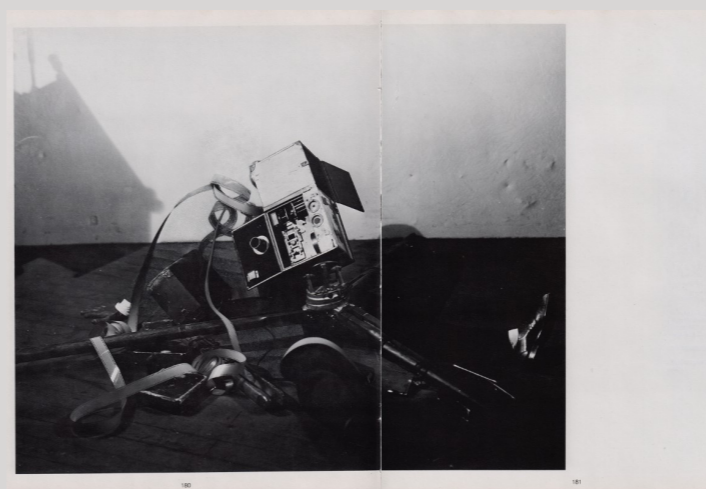


FIG. 16 Eraser Drawing (*The Cameraman*), 2017.



FIG. 17 Eraser Drawing (*Fellini*), 2018.

03 / ORIGINALITY



FIG. 18
Jonathan Owen, *Eraser Drawing*
(*High Noon*), 2014, partially erased
book page, 28 x 23cm. Photo John
McKenzie/Ingleby Gallery.

Drawings are typically made by making marks, adding material to a surface to make an image or visible indexical trace.

Owen's *Eraser Drawings* alter existing photographic images by 'drawing' into them by hand, with only a thin pencil-shaped eraser. This innovative method is a contribution to the field of drawing practice. It is a form of drawing in reverse, or 'un-drawing'. Whereas conventional drawing might involve the building up of material (e.g. graphite or ink) to produce an increasingly dark accumulation of marks, Owen's process involves the removal of ink through gradations of tone ranging from black to the white of the paper.

This method of drawing is also sculptural. Using a simple tool to re-shape existing material into a different form, it may be considered a form of two-dimensional carving.

There is a long history of art practice that transforms pre-existing photographic images through the addition of paint or ink, reconstruction and combination (photomontage), and digital manipulation. From the work of early 20th Century artists like Hannah Hoch, to contemporary artists like Martha Rosler and Lorna Simpson, photomontage is a particularly well-established technique for combining readymade photographic images.

Owen's process of erasure evolved through a period of working with photomontage, and experimentation with increasingly strict material parameters. This generated a central research question: 'How can an existing photograph be transformed into a new image without adding, combining or assembling?'

The collages of Bojan Sarcevic (1954/C, 2004) manually transform found photographs by 're-mixing' them. Sections are cut out, rotated and re-inserted. The work achieves an economy of means, using only what was already in the photograph to make a new image, without importing new elements. Owen's *Eraser Drawings* achieve such an economy in a new way, retaining the support (paper) intact, and causing minimal disruption to the continuity of the image.

Typically, when artists employ erasure or negation to transform a photographic image, the visual rupture becomes a new focal point. For example, John Stezaker's collages often replace an image's focal point with an image of a void. In contrast, Owen's *Eraser Drawings* work by disabling the focal point in a way that leaves the continuity or 'fabric' of the image as intact as possible. This method of erasure conceals or camouflages itself within the surrounding image. Some details, lighter in tone than the background scene behind them, are impossible to remove as there is no ink to erase. For instance in *Eraser Drawing (The Man with the Golden Arm)* (FIG 20), Frank Sinatra's shoulders and wrists are still discernible. These ghostly fragments remain as glitches in the image, acting as valuable points of access for the viewer to imaginatively reverse-engineer Owen's intervention.

To develop technical aspects of this process, and further explore themes of immortalisation and the power of archetypal images, Owen researched photographs from the history of European and American cinema, from the 1920s to the present day. These were selected from 'coffee table' books, usually on the theme of a director or actor's work, a certain genre, or period in cinema history.

Choosing the theme of cinema, Owen extended his research into forms of immortalisation in contemporary Western culture, and dominant archetypal narratives and characters.

In the previous series of drawings, using images of public statues, the process of erasure left behind scenes that were often unremarkable, anonymous and 'real', such as the trees and railings in a public park. Conversely, film stills are often lavish, highly staged and 'artificial'. Choosing to work with these images way to examine the notion of entropy and what Robert Smithson described as the 'illusory or temporary escape from physical dissolution' offered by cinema, whereby 'the false immortality of the film gives the viewer an illusion of control over eternity'.¹

¹Robert Smithson's 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey', *Artforum* (December, 1967).

FIG. 19

Jonathan Owen, *Eraser Drawing (Film Still)*, 2014, partially erased book page, 28 x 24cm. Photo John McKenzie/Ingleby Gallery.

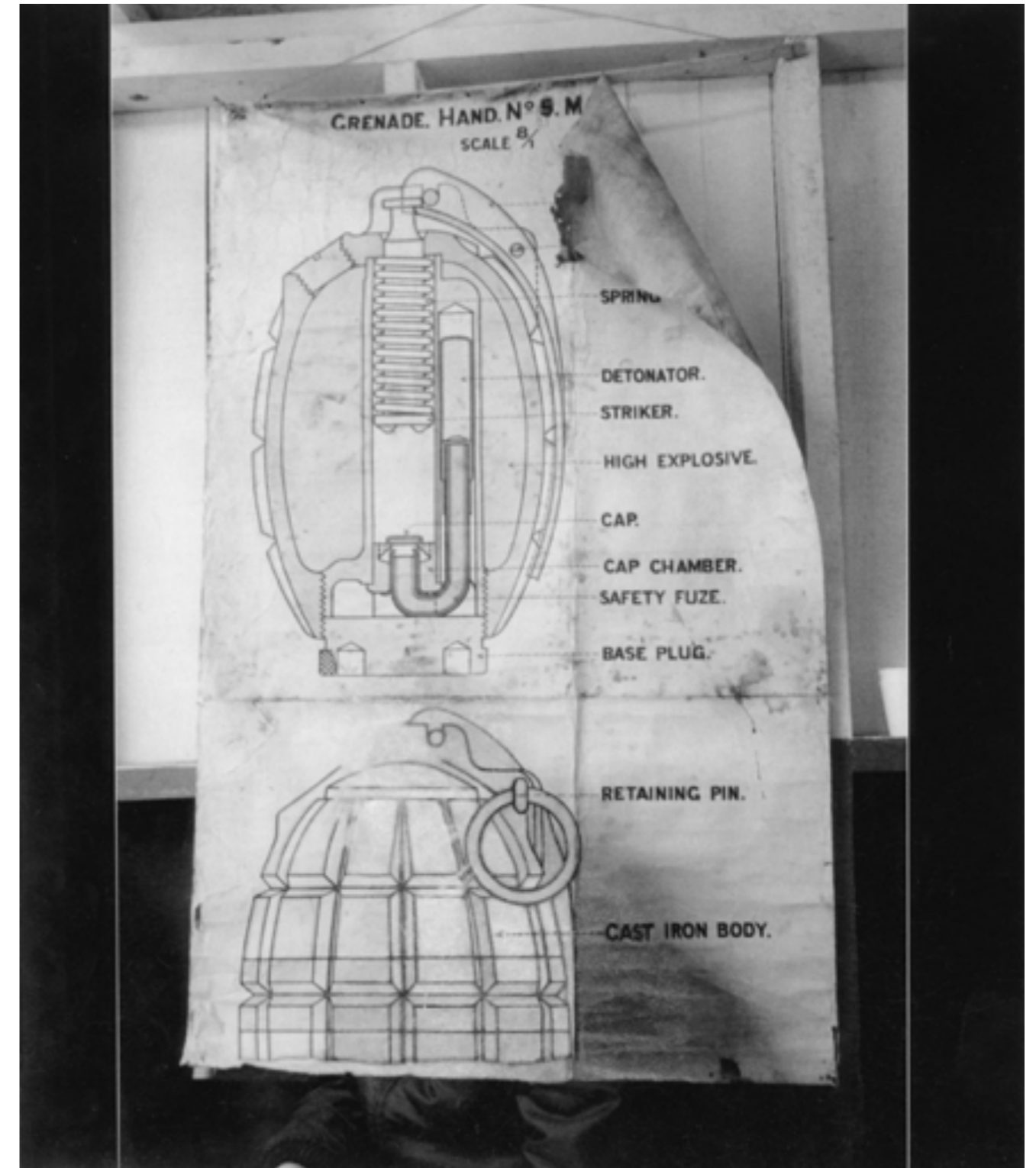




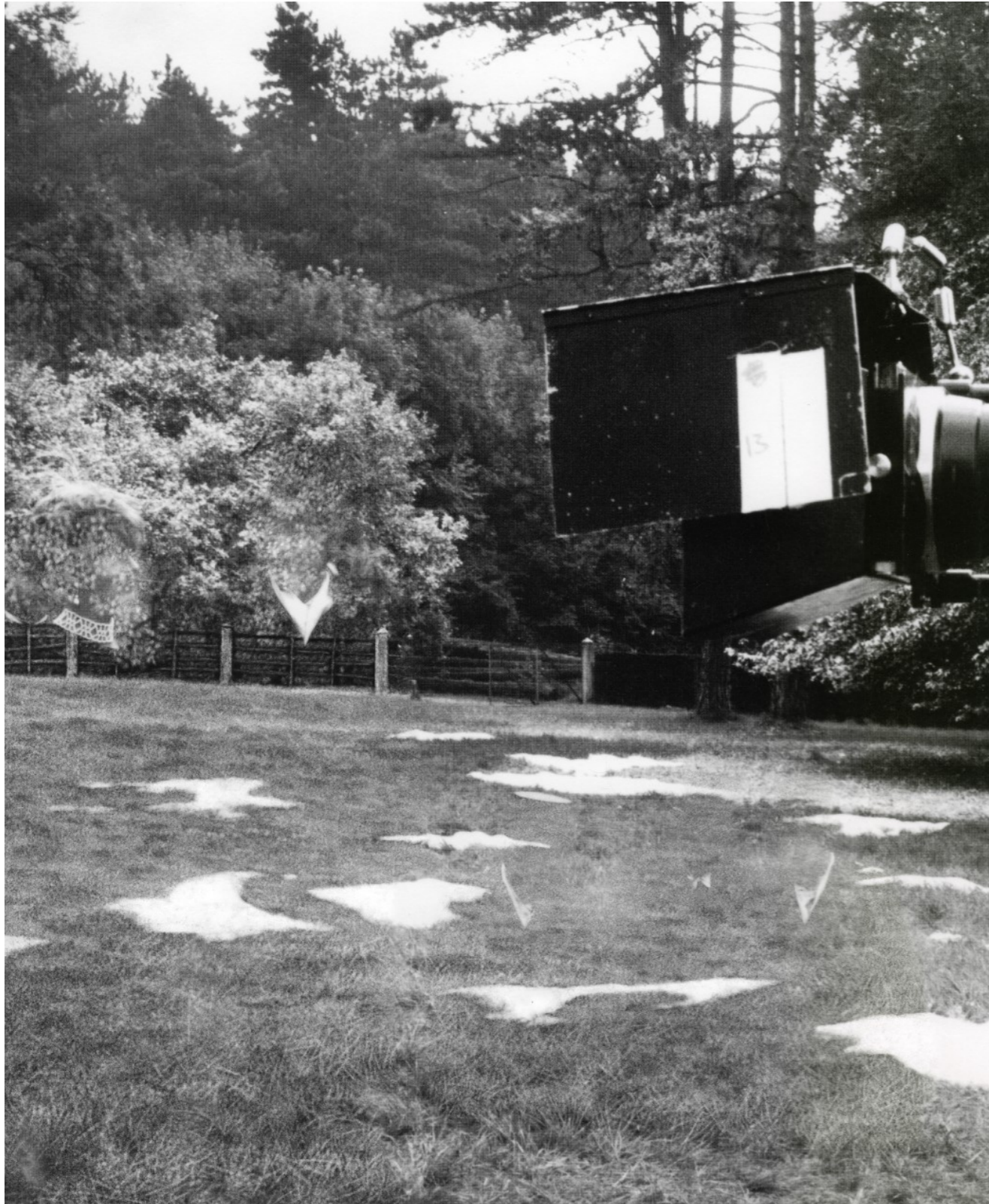
FIG. 20
Jonathan Owen, *Eraser Drawing*
(*The Man with the Golden Arm*),
2015, partially erased book page,
31 x 48cm. Photo John McKenzie/
Ingleby Gallery.



FIG. 21
Eraser Drawing in progress (2019).
The figures of Ursula Andres
and Ian Fleming in the process
of erasure from a photograph
taken on the set of the film *Dr No*,
leaving the blurred forms and
shadows of the background
and the remaining foreground
objects in sharp focus. Photo
Jonathan Owen.

FIG. 22

Jonathan Owen, *Eraser Drawing*
(*La Vie Est Un Roman*), 2015,
partially erased book page,
23 x 28cm. Photo Jonathan Owen.



04 / RIGOUR

The series of *Eraser Drawings* were developed over five years. They extended Owen's long-standing engagement with drawing and appropriated photographic imagery.

Owen developed a technique for making traced, cut-out stencils through which to erase the ink (FIG. 23). This made it possible to re-shape and erase the figure, and accurately extend background patterns and repeated forms.

Owen rejected many images in the process of production, as they presented technical challenges to the process of erasure. For example, a figure lighter in tone than its background could not be erased using this method. There must be sufficient ink to manipulate and reshape the figure being erased.

Owen also rejected images of iconic film stills (such as Norman Bates in Hitchcock's *Psycho* or stills from Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*), as these deflected interest to the identifiable referents.

Instead, Owen selected images for their technical potential for his erasure method alongside an invocation of the cinematic through the presence of objects, the quality of lighting, and sometimes the presence of film-making equipment such as cameras and microphones. See *Eraser Drawing (I could Go On Singing)* (FIG. 24).

A cinematic atmosphere also insisted within the transformed image in more subtle ways – the remaining fragments of erased figures can suggest ghostly presences and the emptied-out scenes imply lost, unreachable narratives.

For example, in *Eraser Drawing (Fellini)* (FIG. 26) the figure of Federico Fellini has been erased from the centre of the image, leaving the viewer to focus on remaining elements like the dog in the truck, the sign-posts and the smoke from a fire in the distance. With the focal point disabled, pictorial conventions no longer hold. The image has lost its original visual logic and invites new meanings or narratives.

FIG. 23
Eraser drawing in progress, with
the stencil used to erase shapes
and continued edges with
precision. Photo Jonathan Owen.





FIG. 24
Jonathan Owen, *Eraser Drawing*
(*I Could Go On Singing*), 2016,
partially erased book page,
23 x 28cm. Photo John McKenzie/
Ingleby Gallery.



FIG. 25
Jonathan Owen, *Eraser Drawing*
(*Suddenly, Last Summer*), 2014,
partially erased book page,
23 x 28cm. Photo John McKenzie/
Ingleby Gallery.

FIG. 26
Jonathan Owen, *Eraser Drawing*
(*Fellini*), partially erased book
pages, 2018, 31 x 48cm. Photo
John McKenzie/Ingleby Gallery.





FIG. 27
Jonathan Owen, *Eraser Drawing (My Darling Clementine)*, 2017, partially erased book page, 24 x 29cm. Photo John McKenzie / Ingleby Gallery.

This work was exhibited in the exhibition *Polarities* at David Totah Gallery, New York, September – October 2018.



FIG. 28
Jonathan Owen, *Eraser Drawing (Artists and Models)*, 2017, partially erased book page, 25 x 30cm. Photo John McKenzie / Ingleby Gallery.

FIG. 29
Jonathan Owen, *Eraser Drawing*
(*Suddenly, Last Summer*), 2014,
partially erased book page,
23 x 28cm. Photo John McKenzie/
Ingleby Gallery.



FIG. 30
Jonathan Owen, *Eraser Drawing*
(*The Cameraman*), 2017, partially
erased book pages, 30 x 48cm.
Photo John McKenzie/Ingleby
Gallery.

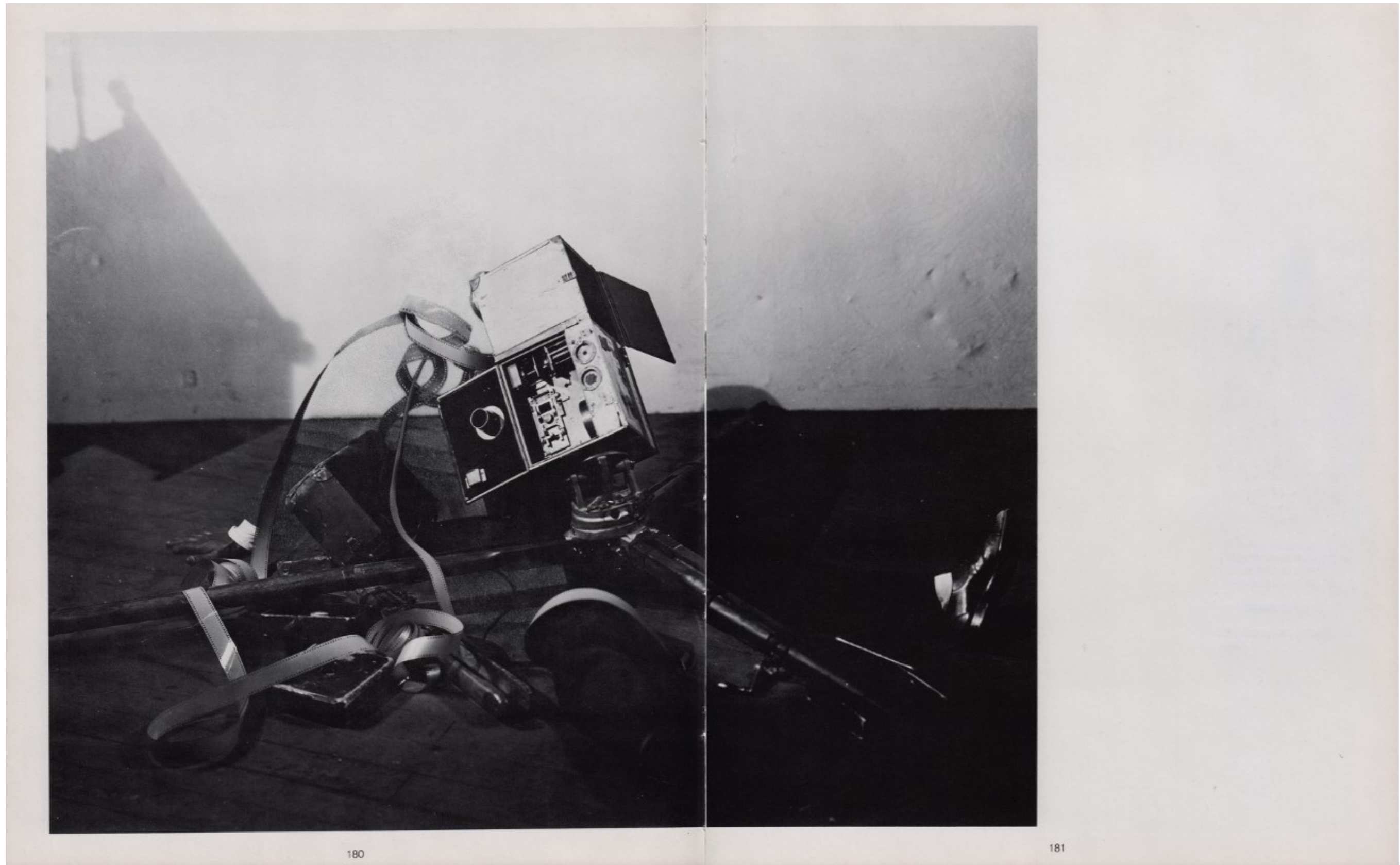




FIG. 31
Jonathan Owen, *Eraser Drawing*
(*American Comedy*), 2017, partially
erased book page, 24 x 30cm.
Photo John McKenzie/Ingleby
Gallery.

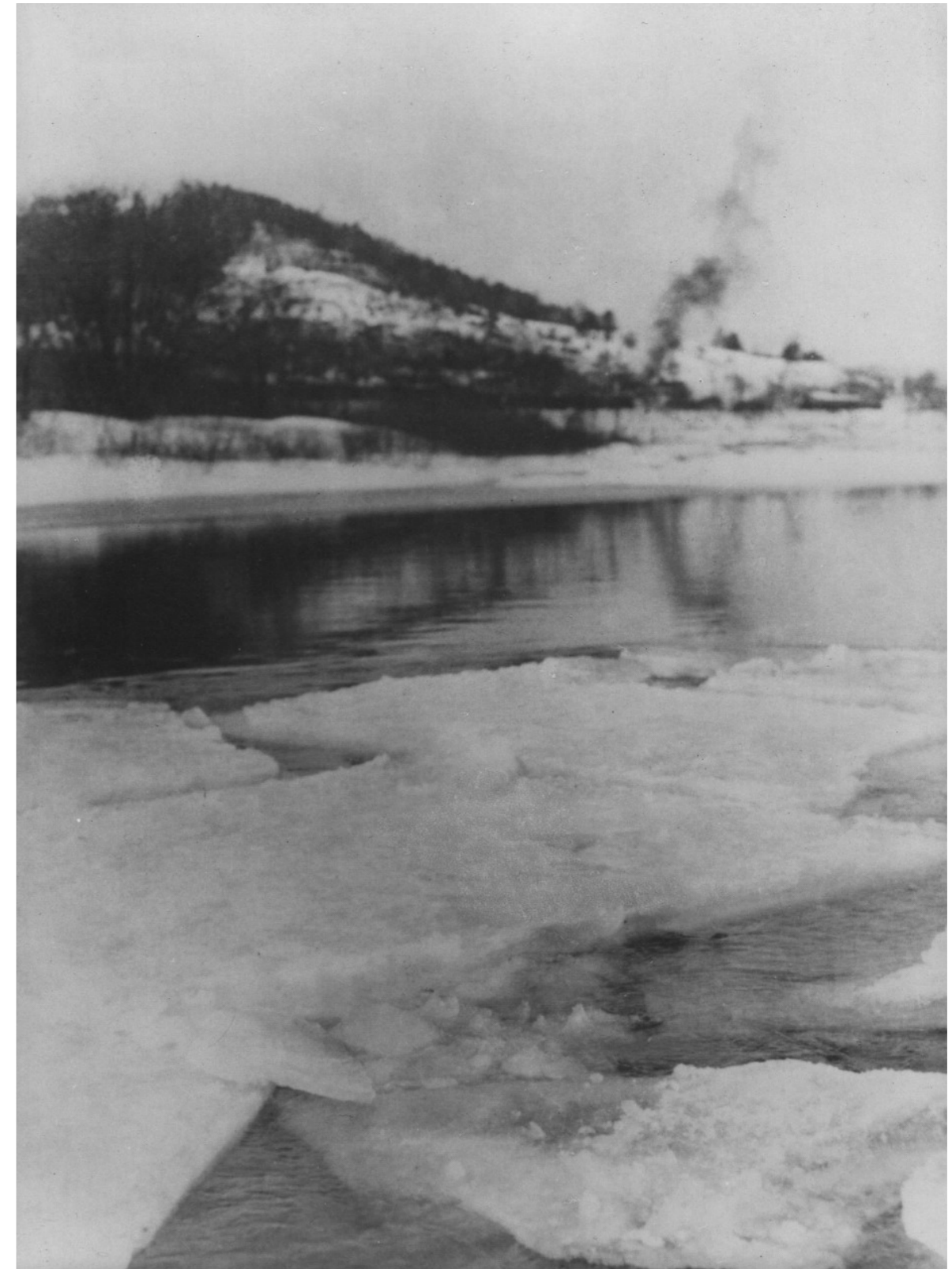


FIG. 32
Jonathan Owen, *Eraser Drawing*
(*Final Scene*), partially erased book
page, 2019, 24 x 30cm. Photo John
McKenzie/Ingleby Gallery.



FIG. 33
Installation view of Jonathan Owen,
Ingleby Gallery, for Edinburgh
Art Festival, 2016. Photo John
McKenzie/Ingleby Gallery.

05 / SIGNIFICANCE

The Eraser Drawings – either as the complete series, or as a selection – were presented as solo exhibitions at:

- Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh (for Edinburgh Art Festival 2016) 28 July – 24 September. Established in 1998, Ingleby is one of the leading and most prestigious galleries of contemporary art in Edinburgh. The exhibition was accompanied by a fully-illustrated monograph, with texts by Sorcha Carey and Maria Fusco (FIG 38). Works exhibited:
Eraser Drawing (I Could Go On Singing), 2016.
Eraser Drawing (The Man With the Golden Arm), 2015.
Eraser Drawing (La Vie Est Un Roman), 2015.
Eraser Drawing (Film Still), 2014.
Eraser Drawing (The Trial), 2014.
Eraser Drawing (High Noon), 2014.
Eraser Drawing (Audrey Hepburn), 2016.
Eraser Drawing (Film Still), 2015.
Eraser Drawing (The Black Tulip), 2016.

Also exhibited was *Untitled*, 19th Century marble bust with further carving, 2016 (FIGS. 34–35).

- Kochi-Muziris Biennale, Kochi, India, 12 December 2016 – 29 March 2016, curated by artist Sudarshan Shetty. This international event attracts a large international public audience with approximately 582,000 visitors. Works exhibited:
Eraser Drawing (The Man with the Golden Arm), 2015.
Eraser Drawing (Film Still), 2015.
Eraser Drawing (Film Still), 2014.

The drawings were also invited for inclusion in group exhibitions at:

- *Between Poles and Tides*, Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh, 11 February – 6 May 2017. With work by other artists including Katie Patterson, Luc Tuymans, Daisy Lafarge and Ian Hamilton Finlay. Three of the works, *Eraser Drawing (Audrey Hepburn)*, *Eraser Drawing (Suddenly Last Summer)*, and *Eraser Drawing (I Could Go On Singing)* were acquired for the University of Edinburgh Art Collection.
- *Polarities*, David Totah Gallery, New York, USA, curated by David Totah, 6 September – 4 October 2018. *Eraser Drawing (My Darling Clementine)*, 2017, was exhibited with works by 48 artists including Cindy Sherman, Andy Warhol, Vija Clemins, Pablo Picasso, Sherrie Levine, Mel Bochner, R.B. Kitaj, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Paula Rego, Gordon Matta-Clark, Robert Ryman and Ad Reinhardt.
- *Mark-making: Perspectives on Drawing*, Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow, 19 April – 20 October 2019, curated by Martin Craig. With other artists including France-Lise McGurn, Erica Eyres, and Gregor Wright.

Owen gave a public lecture on his research at Cabral Yard Lecture Theatre, Kochi, as part of the Kochi Muziris Biennale public lecture programme, on 16 December 2016.



FIGS. 34–35
Installation view of *Jonathan Owen*,
Ingleby Gallery, for Edinburgh
Art Festival, 2016. Photo John
McKenzie/Ingleby Gallery.



FIG. 36
Installation view of Jonathan
Owen's solo exhibition at
Pepper House, Kochi, for the
Kochi-Muziris Biennale, 2016.
Photo Jonathan Owen.



FIG. 37
Installation view of the exhibition,
Polarities, at David Totah Gallery,
New York, September–October,
2018. Photo courtesy of TOTAH.

06 / APPENDIX

Publications

Catalogue

Forming in the Pupil of an Eye, Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2016, Kochi-Muziris Biennale.
ISBN: 9788126474516.

Book

Jonathan Owen, hardcover book, 88 pages.
ISBN: 9780993155147.

Published by Ingleby in August 2016 to coincide with Jonathan Owen's presentation for the Edinburgh Art Festival, this thoroughly illustrated book features texts by Maria Fusco and Sorcha Carey.



FIG. 38
Book *Jonathan Owen*, from the solo
Ingleby Gallery / Edinburgh Art
Festival Exhibition, 2016.



FIGS. 39-40
Catalogue *Forming in the Pupil
of an Eye*, from the Kochi-Muziris
Biennale 2016.





THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH
Edinburgh College of Art

ISBN: 978-1-83645-031-3
DOI: 10.2218/ED.9781836450313

All text in this portfolio is under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) licence. This means you are free to share and adapt this content provided you give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made.

All images in this portfolio are All Rights Reserved. This means the authors retain copyright over original work and it is not permitted to copy or redistribute these images.

May 2020

The University of Edinburgh
is a charitable body, registered
in Scotland, with registration
number SC005336.

www.eca.ed.ac.uk
