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**Ian Mc Keever**

**Painting : Landscape : Geology**

**by**

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## **Introduction**





This thesis will explore what are considered to be the most formative factors in the development of Ian Mc Keever's distinctive style. This will include the characteristics that have produced or shaped Mc Keever and his psychology, as a landscape Artist / Painter.

Chapter one provides a brief understanding and appreciation of the artist, with a summary of his life as an artist, from the early seventies to the mid-eighties.

Chapter two gives consideration to his early works and influences in relation to Robert Smithson and Land / Earth art, which was in its hey-day from the late sixties through the seventies. This will bring to light the strong impact this association had in relation to the presence both historical and geological in his work of that period.

In Chapter three, a specific series of paintings by Mc Keever, moving from description to methods of approach and medium are examined.

The conclusion, summarises my interpretation of his relationship with the land.





## **Chapter 1**

### **Biography of Artist**



Ian Mc Kever, a self taught, predominantly landscape artist, was born on 30th Nov 1946 at the seaside resort of Withernsea, East Yorkshire.

In 1965 he moved to London where he undertook a teaching course at the Avery Hill College of Education, and it was about this time he realised his true love or vocation lay in the field of fine art. Having no formal training in the arts however, Mc Kever's early knowledge was wholly absorbed from books and magazine's, his skills were purely practical. In 1970 he took a Space Studio at St. Katherine's Dock, London, a move which marked his first real contact with professional artists.

One of the first people to be of great influence on Mc Kever was the American artist Robert Smithson, known mainly today, for his sculptural works. Articles written by Smithson which appeared in the Art Press between 1966 - 1973 and which came to Mc Kever's attention around 1970 when he first moved to London, were profoundly influential on his early thinking. Formal ideals on art practice held no real attraction or meaning for Mc Kever, his subjects had to be his own experiences. These included the physical experience of his surroundings as well as the intellectual experiences, which he was developing with time. It is necessary to understand these in order to understand his work.

Like Smithson, he harboured a passion for natural history, including a passion for the science of the earth; its composition, structure and the origin of its rocks. It





was about this time that Mc Keever's earlier works, mainly painted perspex reliefs, gave way to more fully sculptural assemblages. (fig 1. p. 35)

These Assemblages featured painted wooden panels, pieces of stone and ceramic, some of which were stacked up on the floor in piles. It was the mineral presence of the landscape which engaged Mc Keever's concern, not only the landscape that can be seen with the naked eye, but the feel of the earth's physical and chemical structure. The feedback of history revealed itself onto the present day. The land also held memories of the elemental activities of the sea and wind which were ever-present in Mc Keever's memory of childhood days.

Mc Keever's method of working with large landscape based canvases and huge boulders of stone etc, presented numerous difficulties in the context of a gallery, therefore it was then that Mc Keever made the decision of taking his installations out of doors. He continued working in this way until 1976, during which time he exhibited in galleries either the preliminary drawings, maquettes or more rarely, the photographic records of his work on site.

In 1971 Mc Keever was offered his first opportunity to exhibit in a mixed show in Berlin, and was subsequently invited to teach part time at the Slade School of fine art, which was his first association, of any kind, with a professional fine art establishment. It was in the same year he had his first one man show at the Cardiff Arts Centre.







In 1974 he moved to a studio in Martello Street, East London. In 1976, he had his first solo exhibition with a commercial gallery. This was the Galleria Del Cavellino in Venice, through which he was introduced to Nigel Greenwood and with whom he later showed his works between 1977 - 1987. His first two shows there featured, the Sand and Sea Series (1976 - 1977) and the Field Series (1977 - 1978.) These were groups of pictures which for the first time incorporated the photographic documentation of their making, within the pieces themselves.

In 1976 Mc Kever ceased making installation in the open air, instead seeking encouragement for his work in the landscape by taking walking trips to remote locations which included places such as the Shetlands and the Faroe Islands in (1979), Morocco, Algeria and the Sahara (1981) Swedish Lapland (1985 - 1989) and Tasmania in 1990, to name but a few.

In 1980 on receiving a grant from the Arts Council of Great Britain, he spent a year in Liverpool as a guest of the Walker Gallery at Bridewell Studios, at the end of which he showed his Island and Night Flak Series.

Mc Kever continued to travel and produce work throughout the eighties, one of the most noted body of work entitled Traditional Landscapes (1982 - 1984), was first shown at the Nigel Greenwood Gallery and Galleria Tanit in Munich. ( Fig. 2 p.36)





From 1985 - 1986 he produced the Lapland Group, the last body of work to date incorporating direct references to landscape and in 1986 he went on to show the Swedish Lapland and tape slide, commissioned by the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London. In 1987 he had a major exhibition at the Kunstverien Braunschweig in Germany, entitled Echo and Reflection. (Fig. 3 p. 37)

That same year, 1986, saw a period of cessation in his work, brought about by the death of his sister. Consequently, it was several months before he was to return to his London Studio. He then began work with great determination on A History of Rocks. This project which lasted almost two years, contained a series of forty works, one for each year of his life. At the same time, he continued work on a series of Dyptychs (1983-1990). (Fig 4. p. 38) These were a succession of twenty works, eleven of them incorporation earlier paintings, which had been used as a ground, for the succeeding images.

Despite appearances however, it is not particularly the landscape that is the most important element in Mc Keever's work, through his journeys. It is not the subject matter that is of sole importance (although most of his research work is based in natural surrounds) but the information and methods by which he achieves his images. He was not in search of subject, but of a method, not 'wilderness', but 'information'. It was by going to these deserted places that a clearer and more beneficial picture was set for Mc Keever to feel the presence of the history of the





land, which he interacts with his work. He allowed himself a clearer insight into the unwritten histories, the geology, and the nature of life that has been given, moulded and taken by the land. Through found objects and traces of lost races, such as the Aborigines of Tasmania, Mc Keever's method of reading the landscape is ever- present in his work. The land is ripe with information about change and about traces of activity etc, and does not naturally differentiate between the history of rocks and the history of peoples long since displaced by some more exploitative science.

In 1989 Mc Keever returned to Germany at the invitation of Kumscherprogramme des Daad in West Berlin, where he was commissioned to produce a large triptych in Zurich for the Swiss company Nevco. Following his two last exhibitions there, Notes (1989 - 1990) and Diptychs, he returned to London where he currently works and lives with his wife and two children.







## **Chapter 2**

### **Early Works and Influences**





Ian Mc Keever entered painting from a very exceptional angle during the early seventies, with his work relating to land art. This work mainly consisting of Environmental Installation was manifested roughly between 1972 - 1976. The idea with these installation was that the work would surround the viewer, thus filling the perceptual field.

His Icon Show in 1973 consisted of wrap around paintings, maquettes arranged on shelves and drawings for the landscape projects. He engaged himself with the installations sited within easy travelling distance from London, where he was studio based. They also included, White Chalk Quarry 1974, Painting for Three Young Trees 1975 - 1976, (Fig 5. p. 39) Painting Against a Tree 1975 - 1976, (Fig 6. p. 40). The last of them was, Painting for a Hole in the Ground, made on Chobham Common Surrey in 1976. (Fig 7. p. 41)

His method with the later projects, was to take his landscape paintings, ranging from small to very large in scale, into the landscape and leave them there to allow the elements or nature itself to complete them with their own mark-making process. Rain, snow, wind, movements of twigs, brambles, grass stems etc, worked on the images, by leaving traces of their natural activity. He wanted his subject, the activity of the landscape, to inscribe itself into the painting, to present itself instead of trying to represent it. By fusing the two, he was able to achieve a presence of the energy of the landscape within the work itself. His main concern







and the strength of these works, was their authenticity. His main objective was that his work would have the quality of actually having been in the landscape to record the conditions of that moment in time. "I think most of my work is concerned with time, with what happens to activities because of having time forced on them". (Mc Kever, Ian. 1980 p. 25.) With the exception of the last pieces in the series, most of the early landscape projects existed after the event only in their photographic documentation, or in a tape slide sequence. But Mc Kever wished it to be apparent that it was not the documentation, which many people mistook to be the artwork itself that was important, but the work on site, which was what the viewer should acknowledge and experience.

After these projects Mc Kever began to change his working methods. He began to incorporate photographic documentation which acted as a type of feed-back in the process of his mark making. This first becomes apparent in the Sand and Sea Series 1976 - 1977 and in the Field Series 1977 - 1978. Once again Mc Kever went back into the landscape, in the case of the Sand and Sea Series, (Fig 8. p. 42) he chose the sea-shore, and began to work on a very large but loose drawing. He worked with the paper either on the ground, against a tree or a rock etc. He then reworked his drawing in the studio to make it more legible, after which he replaced it back into the landscape. Having left it for the elements to make their traces, he photographed the new and immediate image. Finally he exhibited his photographic





documentation and the re-worked drawings either one above the other or side by side, as appropriate.

There was a great awareness of the environment among artist in the late sixties and early seventies. Artists such as Bruce Mc Clean, Roger Arkling, Hamish Tulton and Richard Long, had been successfully making unconventional art in the English Landscape. Between them they created a new approach to art in the landscape. This art manifested a respect toward the landscape as an area of activity. Mc Keever could identify with this as, not unlike him, they professed to work with the means of the land itself. The processes of nature are the active constituents of their work and the mark of the artists hand is almost seen to be secondary to the feedback of nature itself. "I don't have any metaphysical or political concern with the landscape as such, all it is to me is an area containing modes of activity that I can work with ". (Mc Keever, Ian. 1980 p. 6) Activity to McKeever being the physical and chemical energy of matter in the landscape.

McKeever however, had no direct contact with any of these artists, although living and working in the same country, and his interest in their work as a model for his own practice was limited. Rather, he followed Robert Smithson and the American land artists, in seeing a creative confusion between the role of the artist and the role of natural and non- human forces. It was in the strong analytical and conceptual influences on the art of Smithson that Mc Keever found his closest





roots, rather than the mystical spiritualising attributes that marked the work of a number of other American land artist at that time. Both Mc Keever and Smithson as individual artists sought to avoid a picturesque approach to nature as a place of romanticism, comfort or escape. As Mc Keever has said:

In terms of landscape 'romantic' is probably to do with searching for union and communion with nature, with a sense of spirituality, and a feeling that the sublime can be held and transmitted through landscape. If this is the case, then I can say that is not what the work is about, and that on the contrary I work quite consciously against such notions of mystifications. I neither look for, nor what such a relationship with the landscape. Superficial romantic references do not imply romantic intentions.

(Godfrey, Winter 1981 - 82. p. 2.)

However Mc Keever's inspirations for his Traditional Landscape paintings in the middle eighties, appear to retain romantic implications. They were derived from passages by poets such as Walt Whitman and W. B. Yeats. This would point to a certain romanticism, especially when considered along-side the great swirling, dramatic handling of his paint work. But at the same time Mc Keever kept a conscious distance from his work. This distance allowed him to scrutinise the work objectively. One of the ways he managed to lose the nostalgic, romantic qualities was through the inclusion of photography in his work. This resulted in the viewer being pulled back from the landscape and into the present. (Fig 9. p.





43) Because of the photographic under pinning, we are constantly aware of the painting being firmly placed in our time.

Shared too with Smithson is McKeever's long standing interest in the pre-history of the land, geology and the earth sciences in general. Both artists developed their interest in the land from childhood onwards and it continued to be a fascination for them throughout their work as maturing artists. As Smithson once said:

I like landscape that suggests pre-history. As an artist it is sort of interesting to take on the personal of a geological agent. Where man actually becomes part of the process rather than over-coming it.

(Smithson, Robert. p. 39)

This is a sentiment which has echoed through Mc Keever's work.

Another crucial factor is that both artists have been greatly concerned with relating exterior experiences to the work of art in the museum context, and to render the viewer conscious of the degree of abstraction that such a shift involves. Smithson explored this through his Sites/Non Sites. If earth art is about location or a Site, he concerned himself with the negation of place and arrived at the concept of non-site.

Yet if art is art it must have limits. I have developed the non-site, which in a physical way contains the disruption of site. The container is in a sense a fragment of itself, something that could be called a three dimensional map. Without appeal to "gestalts" or anti-form, it actually exists as a fragment of a greater





fragmentation. It is a three dimensional perspective that has broken away from the whole, while containing the lack of its own containment. There are no mysteries in these vestiges, no traces of an end or a beginning.

(Smithson, Robert. 1979 p. 90.)

The main focus of Smithson's art became the landscape itself, although he still relied on the Gallery and Museum. He accepted the Gallery as a necessity, but chose to allocate to it the residue of the art process which it was capable of containing.

The Sites/Non Sites juxtapositions offered a highly original way of seeing places both as art and as independent from art systems. (Fig 10. p. 44 . Fig 11 p. 45)

While he acknowledged that these earth art works were in locations that were inaccessible to most people, he emphasised the importance of knowing they were there. He looked upon these work as being collaborative art. He loved the idea of people becoming involved with his work on the land.

As with Smithson, it was the geological content, the elements of natural and historical change on the land that held Mc Keever's involvement and enchantment with the landscape. It was partially in Smithson's earth-works and in particular his understanding of artistic conceptions that Mc Keever found inspiration for his early works. Where he differed from Smithson is not in his use of abstract structure, but in his source of raw material. While Smithson chose Urban Quarries etc, McKeever sought his inspiration from rural sites. Smithson viewed most things in





a three dimensional perspective, his thoughts being purely sculptural. But Mc Keever was first and foremost a painter and managed equally to develop a highly individual strategy, within the conventional confines of oil paint. Both have managed to record the activity of natural order, disorder and change within the landscape. Both artists in their own individual way have captured the energy processes of nature in physical terms, while in biological terms their work can be read as information, as part of historical change, change which is induced by time. Both set out to challenge boundaries within the making of art. They became interested in what makes an object a work of art. As both painters and sculptors, Mc Keever and Smithson had ideas which were totally embedded in the physical sense of time, space, and matter and this is what gave them conviction within their art.

By the late seventies a change in emphasis was noticeable in Mc Keever's work. Where many of his projects up until then, were engaged directly on the land, he now began to work more in the studio. Having trekked the land in search of information, he gave himself the challenge of reproducing his experiences in-doors. The assisted mark-making effects gained from placing the work in the landscape, now gave way to his own gestural mark-making, made in response to the subject in the studio. Photography also became an essential part in the making of his images. During his walking trips and field work, he took photographs, made sketches and







notes which were taken back to the studio and worked on as a form of enquiry into the landscape and also to nourish and complete his working ideas. This approach was used in Islands 1979 - 1980 and again in three major series in the early 1980's: Traditional Landscapes 1982 - 1984, Untitled Group 1984 - 1985 and the Lapland Group 1985 - 1986. This continuous recording of information was vital to his thinking whether or not directly linked to a current painting project. The physicality of these trips were both body cleansing and also created an acute sense of consciousness for Mc Keever as a physical entity in close contact with the elements. This marriage with the elements is equalled with his experience of immersion in the act of painting in the studio.

His Waterfall Series in 1979 is a good example of his use of photography in the making of images. (Fig 12. p. 46). In January of that year he spent some time in the Isle of Skye, sketching and photographing frozen waterfalls. On returning to his studio, he processed and enlarged the 35mm photographs from his trip to a scale where the information within the image itself began to fade in the grain of paper. He then made pastel and charcoal drawings, reworked from his out-door sketches, which he then framed and presented along-side his photographs, as diptychs.

(Fig 13. p. 47) These drawings are rather sombre in colour, but are full of abstract and very active energy, which brings forth the turbulence of the land.





Within these images Mc Keever captures a random moment in time, to reveal the hectic activity of an anonymous place in all its structured beauty. Through the use of photography and drawings he also concerns himself with generating and presenting work through non painted mediums. By expressing his work in both mediums and combining them in various ways. Mc Keever also expands and explores, their potential. Photography also fulfils a variety of needs within the continuing development of his own practice and also helped him as a tool for defining his position in relation to other art practices. By incorporating photographic material in his work it also enables him to distance himself from formalist painting. Mc Keever's deep rooted concerns are firstly to do with painting, but he has always allowed himself the space to engage in other means of communication, rather than only with traditional conventions.

I think the Waterfall pieces are to a large extent about painting although they present themselves as a drawing and a photograph. They are an attempt to say something about the nature of painting as an activity, about how information on that level presents itself.

(Mc Keever, Ian, 1979 p. 25.)

Mc Keever introduces the diptych as one of the basic forms in presenting duality's within his work. It enables the viewer to enquire into particular pictorial languages, as separate identities, for both sides are treated quite differently, yet





they complement each other, thus creating a complete image. As a complete image they contain complementary but unique levels of enquiry and significance as each panel can establish and maintain a world of its own. By juxtaposing the two it also establishes a union between drawing and photography, otherwise viewed as opposite entities. Mc Keever does not try to pre-define a certain reality for us, but by presenting works in such a way he encourages the readers to question their associations. He tends to be far more literal and material, than philosophical at this stage in the associations in his work.

One is working with an activity that is full of contradictions in that like a mirror it allows alienation and intimacy to co-exist. It is sometimes necessary not to recognise the significance of what one has done: in fact the significance could be said to be held in that act of irresponsibility, in an act of transgression. Basically I approach drawing from a very materialistic standpoint, and it is on that level that I could only look as to what constitutes it as an activity. It is to the significance of the nature of the mark made, to its physicality, that I would have to look ... in terms of dealing with it as an activity.

(Godfrey, Tony. Winter 1981 - 82 p. 3.)

In reality it is the working process itself that is the creative act for Mc Keever. He brings these associations to the surface through the action of his work. It is the ambiguity within his work, that encourages the viewer to search for more.





This approach to his work continued throughout the late seventies and into the middle eighties. There was one exception in 1980 - 1981 with his Night Flak Series, made during a one year residency at the Bridewell Studio in Liverpool. These works were generated by Mc Keever's interest in Novalis, Hymns to the Night, from which they take their titles and structure. (Fig 14. p.48) With these works Mc Keever abandoned the use of photography completely, although still using the diptych as a format in the presentation of these pieces.

I worked with painting in the Night Flak pieces because I felt that painting was the most appropriate medium to work with. The works were based on the Hymns to the Night by Novalis, and were concerned with the nature of night as 'experience', not as a detached depiction. Painting allowed me to work at night in the dark for long durations in a way that, say, photography would not allowed.

(Godfrey, Tony. Winter 1981 - 82 p. 3.)

He presented one half of the diptych as a pastel drawing on paper, the other was thickly painted in oil on canvas. These painted images were based solely on the recollections of quick sketches made the previous day:

My procedure was very simple. During the day I would have someone in the studio to model for me, and I would make very quick sketches of her, or else I would go out and scribble in front of the landscape. I then went back to the studio in the evening and tried to recoup some of the information, to build into paintings.

(Collings, Matthew. May-July '84 p. 18)





These works were firstly inspired by the Novalis, and the drawing resulted as a kind of meditation on the paintings. (Fig 15. p. 49) These images were produced at night in a studio devoid of light, with the exception of reflections from street lamps. The only real difference he could see within these conditions was between light and dark. His reason for working in these conditions was as a direct response to the poems. It was the aspect of night within these odes that enveloped McKeever's thoughts.

What struck me about them was the area to do with the night that they dealt with. These poems are permeated with images of women, of landscape and of the night, and all of these things are interwoven as a blanket that shelters one from the cruel world of reality.

(Collings, Matthew. May-July '84 p. 18)

Not that McKeever was interested in avoiding reality, rather his interest, within the context of this work, lay in dealing with a whole complex of psychological and emotional aspects, that the night induces. It would not have been adequate for McKeever to depict an image of the night through a realistic painting or photograph. That would have had a detachment for him from a much deeper meaning. This approach allowed for a more intuitive involvement with the night, one based more exclusively on experience, than on investigative procedures.





I was more interested in something on-going, that I would just get deeper and deeper into and lose myself in, as Novalis suggests one can lose oneself in the night.

(Collings, Matthew. May - July '84 p. 18)

For Mc Keever, working in the darkness distanced him from making any conventional or aesthetic judgements about his paintings. The outcome of this was that it eradicated many of the inhibitions one can encounter whilst producing a painting. The pieces Mc Keever produced within this period, were extremely intuitive as well as physical. There was also the continuous battle against his own visual preconceptions and the lack of technical clarity, from working under such conditions.

So I would just go into the studio night after night and work, and towards the end I was hallucinating and all sorts of strange things were occurring. One of the consequences of the series was that it got rid of a lot of inhibitions about just getting on and making a painting, it allowed me to make a start.

(Collings, Matthews. May-July p. 18)

This method of working installed a greater belief and faith in his own judgement and ability, in applying himself to the act of painting. It was also an invaluable exercise in his gaining confidence to work directly from the studio.





That series was quite critical for me in that I went into work in a much more raw state than I'd ever allowed myself before. The intellectual framework that previously substantiated the work took much more of a back seat - I just got on and made the pieces.

(Collings, Matthews. May-July p. 18)

McKeever further abandoned his use of photography and walking treks for his show to follow in 1982 called, Black and White or How to Paint with a Hammer.

(Fig 16. p. 50) This show was based in Matts Gallery, London, where Mc Keever painted directly onto the gallery walls. These images were drawn from the many hundreds of sketches Mc Keever had made in the past years in the forests of South Germany. Each piece was organised compositionally around a clearing of negative space and when completed acted with a very powerful positive presence. The paintings were of course destroyed at the end of the show, having served their purpose which was primarily in their performance, as a statement of intention and practice rather than an installation.

By 1985 Mc Keever began a re-evaluation of his work, knowingly or unknowingly,

he began to re-explore possibilities within his previous projects. His incessant appetite for work during this period led him to embark on a project he entitled.

The Lapland Group. (Fig 17. p. 51) This body of work completed the following year is a strong summation of his concerns of the previous six years. This was also the last group of paintings to date to use specific experiences of a particular place,





through studies and photographs, contributing to the final composition. The chief innovation in these pieces was to create an image in paint which acted in parallel with the image carried in the photograph. This had the effect of bringing both images back to the surface of the canvas, therefore giving equal significance to both mediums. (Fig 18. p. 52) On completion of the Lapland Group Mc Keever made a number of relatively small canvases, each no larger than 140 X 106 cm. Their format allowed him greater freedom in the manipulation of the canvas as a whole. Working on specially prepared canvases, using solutions, working with gravity, and added materials etc, he began to see his work and the formulation of his ideas from a new perspective. Consequently, Mc Keever's paintings became more internalised. In method they took as their inception possibilities existing within his earlier works, sometimes even re-using existing paintings. In terms of motifs even the presence of the landscape became almost secondary. Interior structures rather than the visible surface of things predominated.

I'm starting with vague ideas of qualities, properties, entities, domains, levels, etc; and the sense of an image being in their somewhere. I have to pull it out or push it back until it feels clearly articulated.

(Mc Keever, Ian. 1978 - 90 p. 45)





## **Chapter 3**

### ***A History of Rocks (1986 - 1988)***





Mc Keever decided to continue working with the same format to complete an unfinished series of forty pieces, each one representing a year of his life. This project was called a History of Rocks 1986 - 1988 and took Mc Keever almost two years to complete. (Fig 19. p. 53 ) These works tragically inspired by the death of his sister, acted as a pictorial autobiography of his life to date, and was both monumental in scale and impact. Comprising so many individual pieces, these canvases are considered by many to be a single work. Although these works are more conceptually based than the title suggests, there is an evident link between them and nature. These images are not completely new in conception, but take their origins from a compendium of experiences, some derived from a number of treks through remote and desolate arctic regions. These treks along with the reworking of previous canvases, photographic documentation etc, coupled with other personal experiences afforded Mc Keever the necessary ingredients for his work to follow. Ultimately this work seems to have provided Mc Keever with 'a crutch', a means for him to understand and come to terms with the many events that had occurred in his life both physical and psychological. The format for this project presented Mc Keever with the freedom required for medium manipulation and he took to this with great enthusiasm.

Most of the panels in this body of work contain organic forms which have evolved through a decipherable process of painting and repainting. Photography has also reappeared but with a completely different interpretation. Some of these images contain only fragments of barely legible photographs. (Fig 20. p. 54) On





occasions these have become submerged under layers of reworking and are only distinguished by their silhouettes. In other pieces, sections of photographs remain partially visible.

Direct application of negatives have also been used to some degree, where film edges and sprockets are intertwined with the image, leaving us with a sense of distance from the medium. (Fig 21. p. 55) The information these snippets used in some of the panels is residual, not complete in image but rather part of a discovered pattern, most predominantly cruciform in appearance. On other panels there are linear marks across the page, as if writing had been erased.

(Fig 22. p. 56) This use of deletion itself takes on the significance of a message. In others the enlargement of the original negative is such that the identity of the original image has virtually been destroyed, the result being a blurry greyish form verging on abstraction. Where formally photography provided one type of visual record, Mc Keever now has it operating more as a signifier of a certain notion in time. Within these works abstraction has been the driving force for his conceptually based issues, but not by any means devoid completely from nature, as nature is still a significant instigator in his work. In this case abstraction is representing nature, devoid of realism.

Where formally Mc Keever's concerns were involved with on-the-land activity, gestural mark-making and with the ways nature had been mediated by the conventions of traditional landscape painting, now he engages himself with nature





at the level of abstraction. For Mc Keever abstraction is a way of dealing with nature in a non-representational way.

Equally significant is the change in character of Mc Keever's mark-making, where the hand of the artist is far less evident than previously. Now Mc Keever incorporates to a greater degree the activities of change and gravity in the application of the different mediums; paint splatters, runs and dribbles, pools and congeals appear in the upper- most layers of the canvas. These may collect into dark pools which like erosion itself, break through and reconstruct the densely worked layers. The impression that this achieves is one of shifting surface planes, magnified so as to distort in the extreme, thus making it decidedly difficult to comprehend the true size of juxtaposed images. (Fig 23. p. 57)

A History of Rocks, has several different points of reference, the most important of these being Geography, the place of origins as inspiration for the images, and geology which gives birth to the title.

Rocks are the most ancient physical entities known at first hand to man. They belong to a period very early in the earth's history and are considered a part of our very origins. They reveal the conditions of time to man over millions of years. They also contribute to our knowledge of past lives. They act as a time clock in reality. Mc Keever's concerns are involved with the land, with time, the unfolding of its secrets, its history both past and present and his place within that.





These images are confined virtually to black and white, with the only hint of colour being green and red, placed at either end of the sequence of images. (Fig 24. p. 58)

One is not forced to read these works in any precisely structured way, there is no particular starting point or ending. Reading the work is entirely up to the viewer, to become involved in exploring the inter-connecting relationships of the images. Without approaching each picture individually, we can read them in their totality as a complete image, or almost as a contemplation on his life. It is only closer inspection that views behind the thick layers of paint and begins to trace the black and white photographic prints. Although carrying minimal information, they are not meant to be recognised as complete, but part of a discovery format, of unfolding the many layers of knowledge from his discoveries within a remote landscape.

(Fig 25 p. 59) Each layer is a suggestion of an element of a particular discovery. It is then that the evidence in the images becomes real and connects with the title, to give a further more tangible and complete meaning. In this cycle of works Mc Keever depicts a many layered history. A history of the passing away, the transience of all matter, and of the transformation of material into a new composite, in this case pictorial images.





## **Conclusion**





The earth's main natural environment has, and will always be, a continued source of inspiration for artists and poets alike.

Since man's first venture into the world of art via cave-paintings, primitive carvings etc, through the great landscape painters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, on to the abstract painters of the twentieth century, the artist's link with nature is undeniable. Few however have approached it with such individuality, veracity and insight as Ian Mc Keever. For Mc Keever, natural surroundings, primarily the vast inhospitable lands of the Northern Hemisphere, have been the source of information for his projects. The land for him is laden with data. This data or 'diary of the earth' is written in time, in movement, its information, coded and cloaked in darkness and light, which Mc Keever constantly explores through his work. Thus because of such close contact or 'hands on' experience with nature Mc Keever, through various mediums, manages to echo the activities of the land. He has an approach to painting or art as he puts it, "much more felt, than, to what is, say on the surface of my finger tips".

His aim was not to create an illusion but to reveal an aspect of reality itself. He wanted to find parallels in art for the way nature works at its deepest levels. To reveal the reality that is behind the visible surface of things. His ability to expose or obscure, enter or withdraw, when need be, must surely make him one of the most natural artists of the 20th century.

When I became involved in carefully looking at Mc Keever's work, I saw more than a man in contact with the mere organic make-up of the earth, I witnessed a marriage, a fusing of man with the elements. While the psychical aspect of his work is indisputable, I feel Mc Keever works on a deeper spiritual level. He traverses alone through cold, barren, terrain because as he puts it, "My nerve ends seem to open up, things are often physically excruciating close up against the skin, I need that proximity". (Mc Keever, Ian. 1978-1990 P.41)

This reference to his nerve ends "opening up" and his "needing that proximity" shows him to be working closer with nature than even, he might realise. When alone for any length of time, one not only observes and questions one's





surroundings, but also oneself. Mc Keever maintains that he is a purely material artist working solely on matter, without any metaphysical or spiritual connection. While this statement may be true, I would like to have questioned him about this. When one merges with such a force as nature there is always the spectacle of life and death close at hand. Surely these factors played a part in Mc Keever's thoughts about his own role within the cycle of life and death, a role he so actively enquire into in his later paintings in particular, A History of Rocks and the subsequent Diptychs (1988-1990). I feel it is the spiritual side of people, that keeps them actively seeking, queering, probing life's unanswered questions. This philosophy I think is existent within Mc Keever's work, but is something that has as yet, not been realised, or maybe he does not wish to reveal it. Although Mc Keever denies his spiritual link with nature, you only have to look at his work to realise that, this is a man who portrays and reveals that very link whether consciously or not. Maybe with time there may also be conscious changes in his thinking as inevitable and as powerful as those of nature on the landscape, which he displays through his work so magnificently.







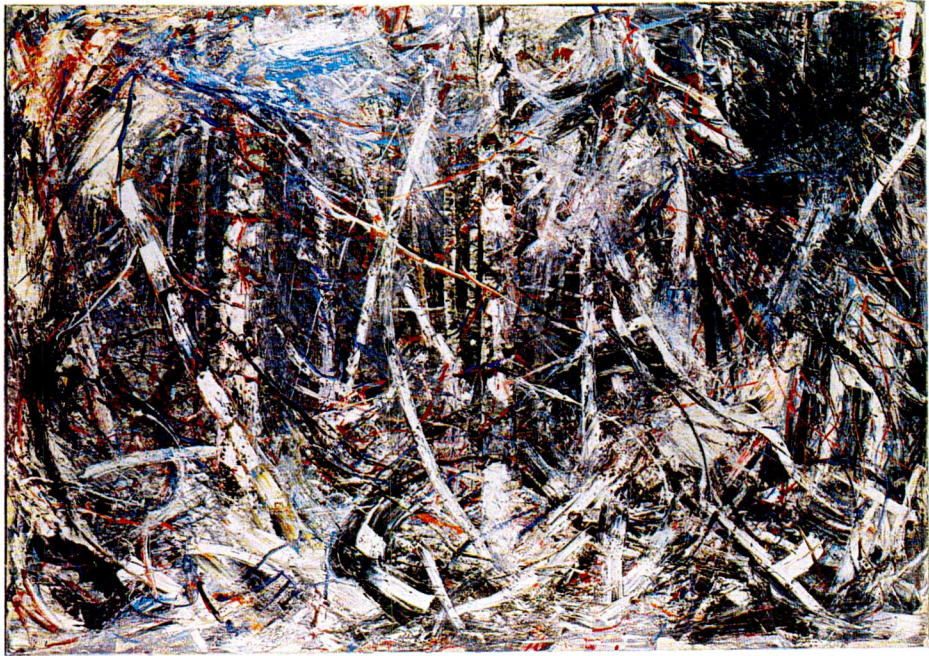
**Land and Sky Lanes (1973).**

**Installed at The Institute of Contemporary Arts, London.**









**Earth of the Slumbering and Liquid Trees (1983)**

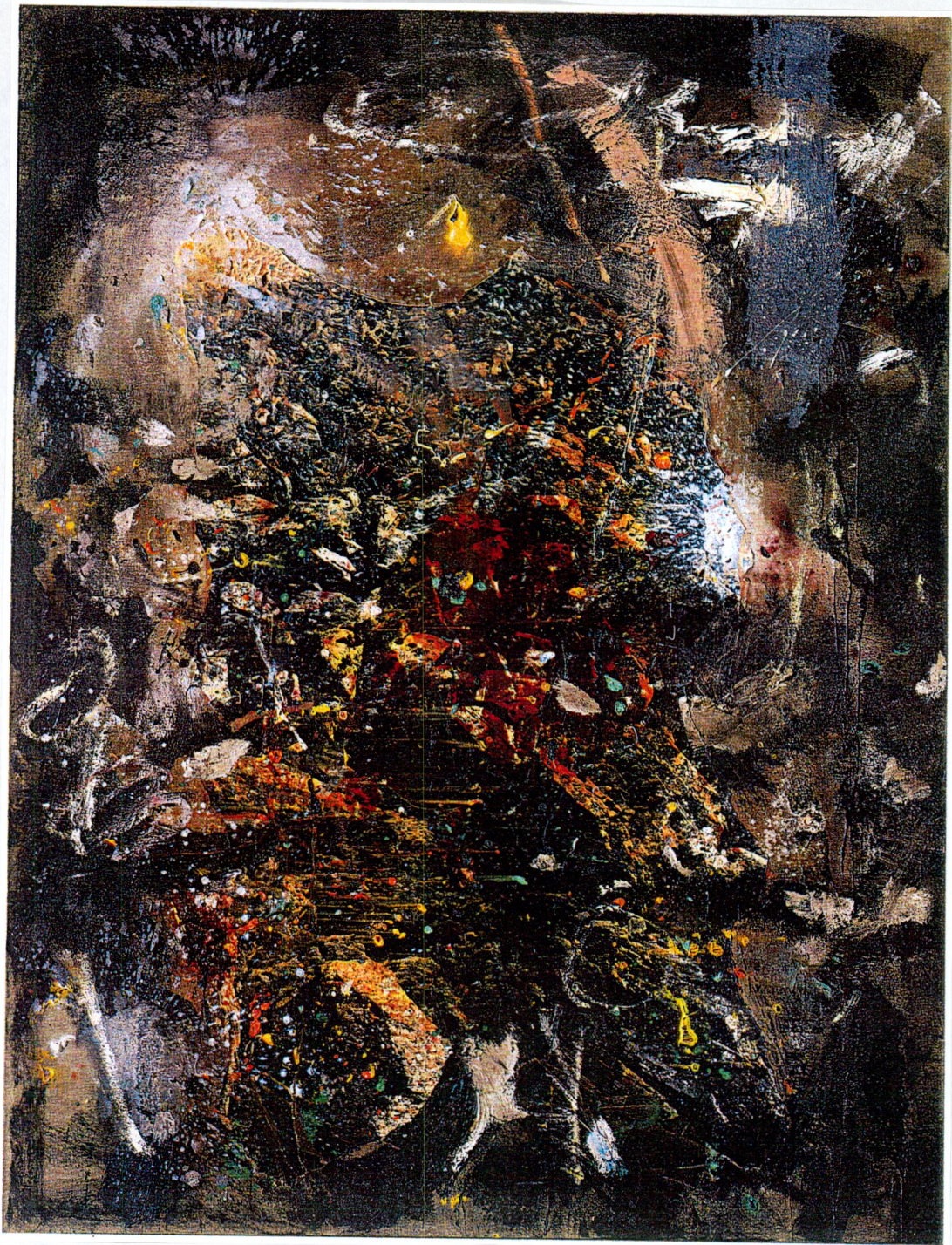
**Oil and photograph on canvas,**

**213 x 310**







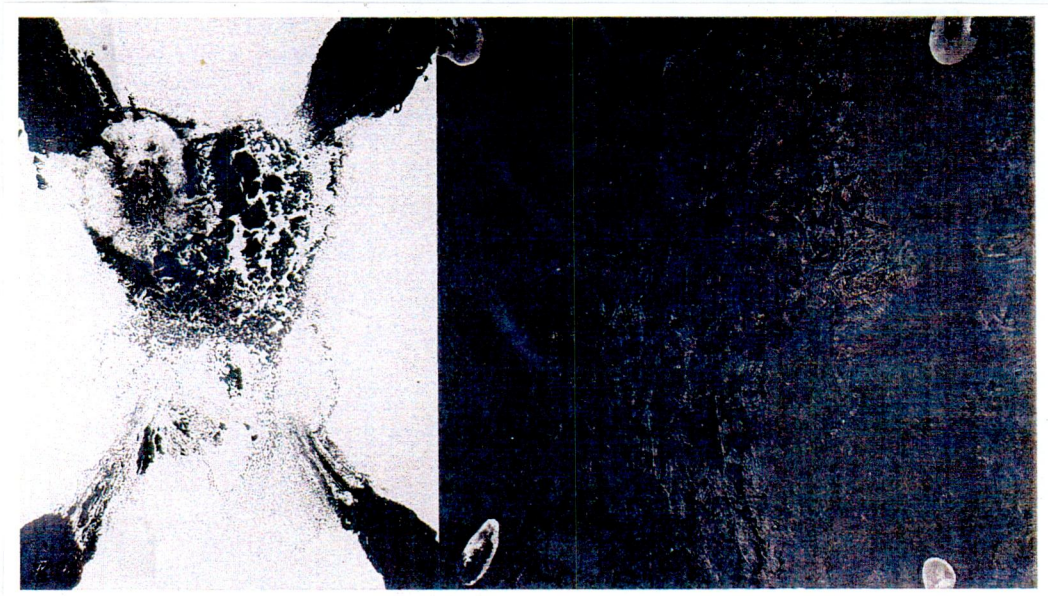


**Echo and Reflection 1 (1986)**

**Oil and photograph on canvas,**

**220 x 170**





### **Diptychs**

**Oil and Acrylic on canvas**









**Painting for Three Young Trees (1975 -1976)**

**Installed at**

**South Hill Park Arts Centre.**









**Painting Against a Tree (1975 -76)**

**Installed at**

**South Hill Park Art Centre.**









**Painting for a Hole in the Ground (1976)**

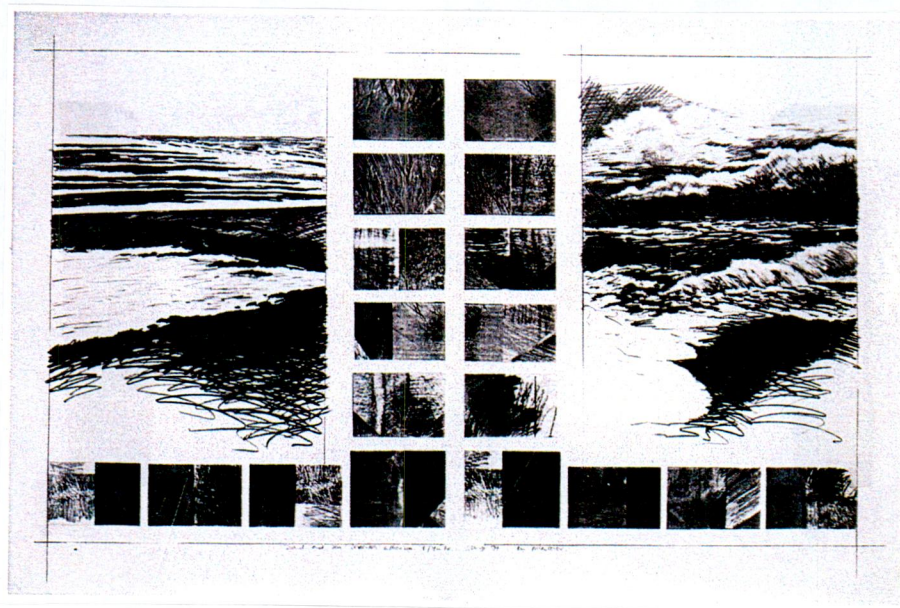
**Installed at**

**Chobham Common .**









**Sand and Sea Series no. 6**

**Graphite and photograph on paper,**

**99 x 152 cms.**









**Early Morning /The Needles (1983).**

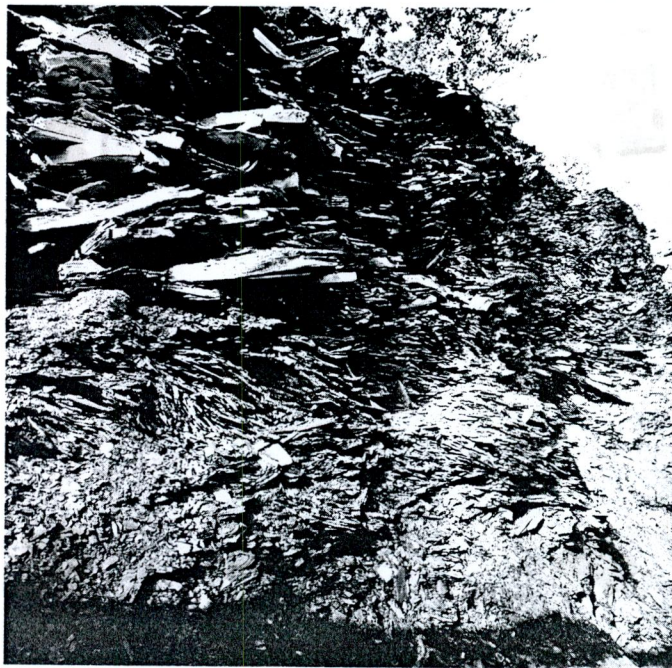
**Oil and photograph on canvas,**

**250 x 164**









**Site: The Bangor Quarry.**

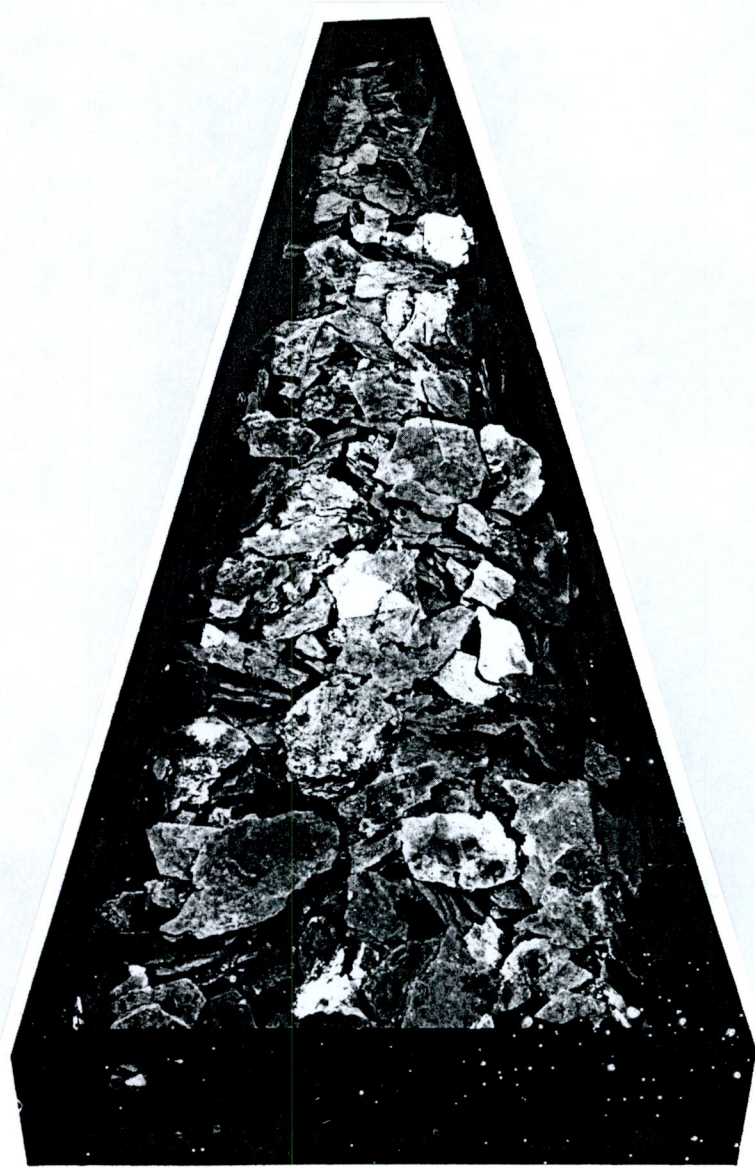
**Slate Site in an uncontained condition**

**before being contained in a Non/Site.**







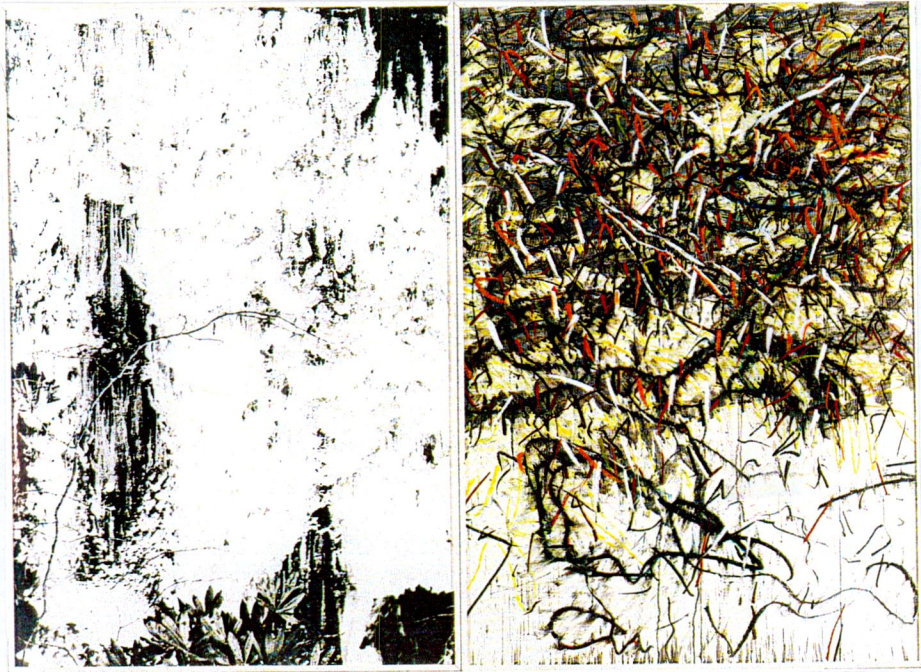


**Non/Site: Micia from Portland (1968).**









**Waterfall no. 9 (1979).**

**Charcoal, pastel, graphite and acrylic**

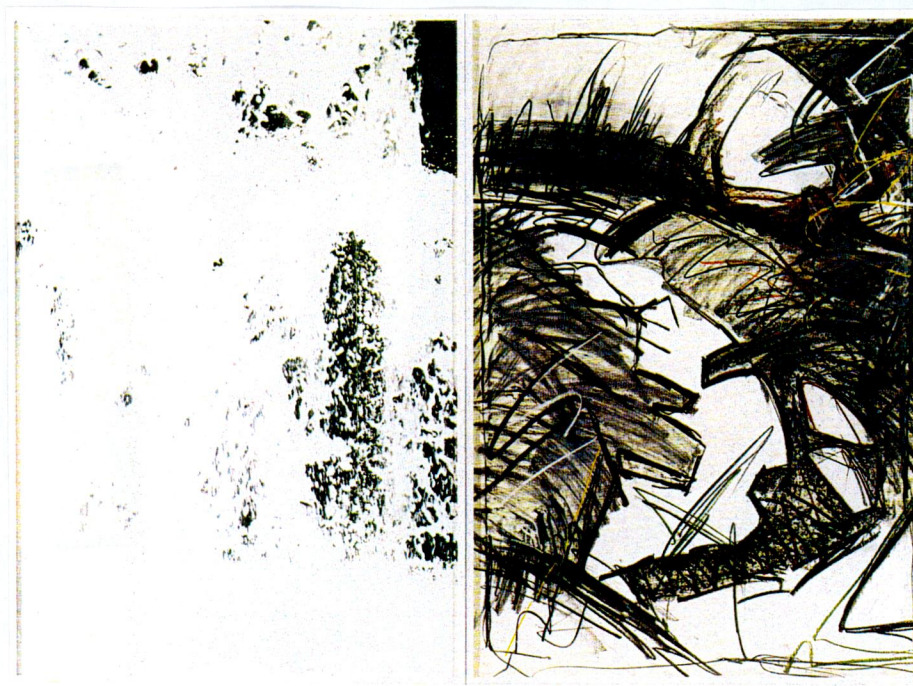
**on paper and photograph .**

**152 x 216**









**Waterfall no. 1 (1979).**

**Charcoal, pastel, graphite and acrylic**

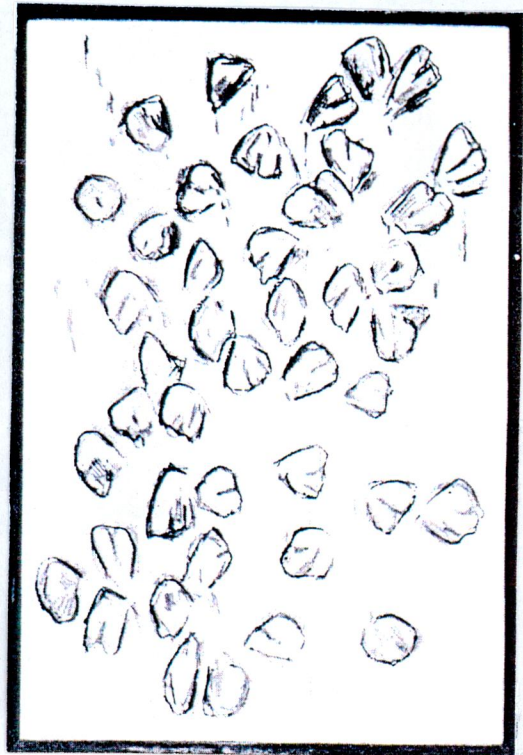
**on paper and photograph.**

**152 x 216**









**The Evening Dawn Shows Grey (1981).**

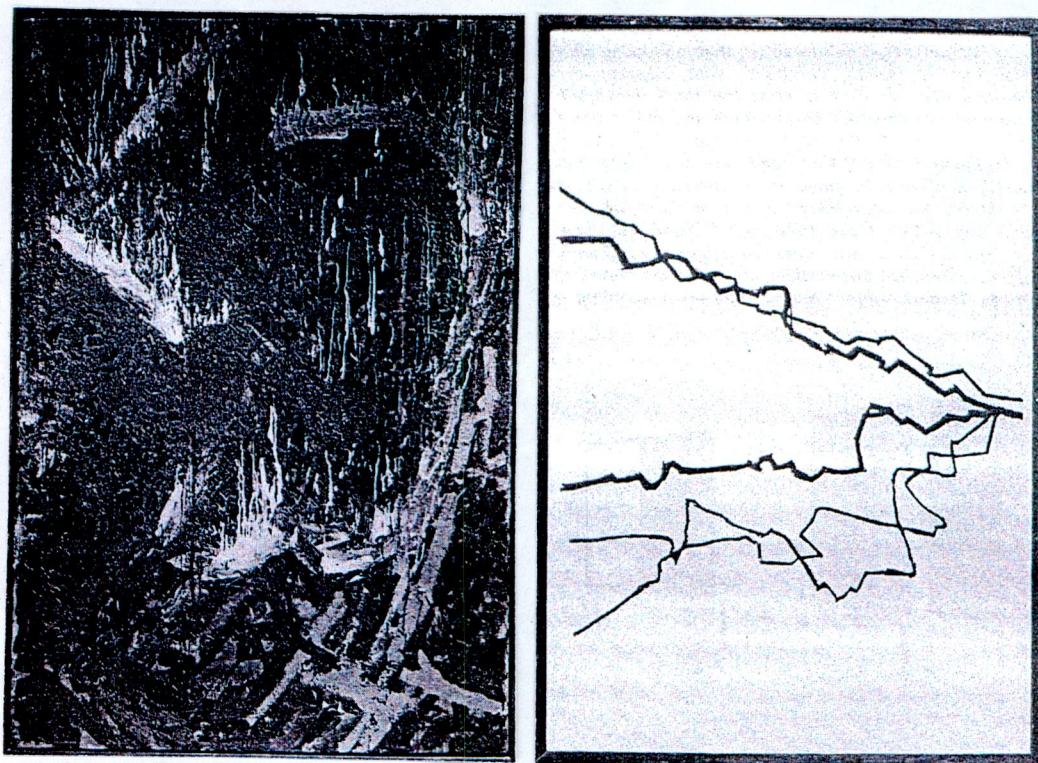
**Oil on canvas and pastel and wash on paper.**

**86" x 128"**









**A Sigh of Solice in the Dark of Fears (1981).**

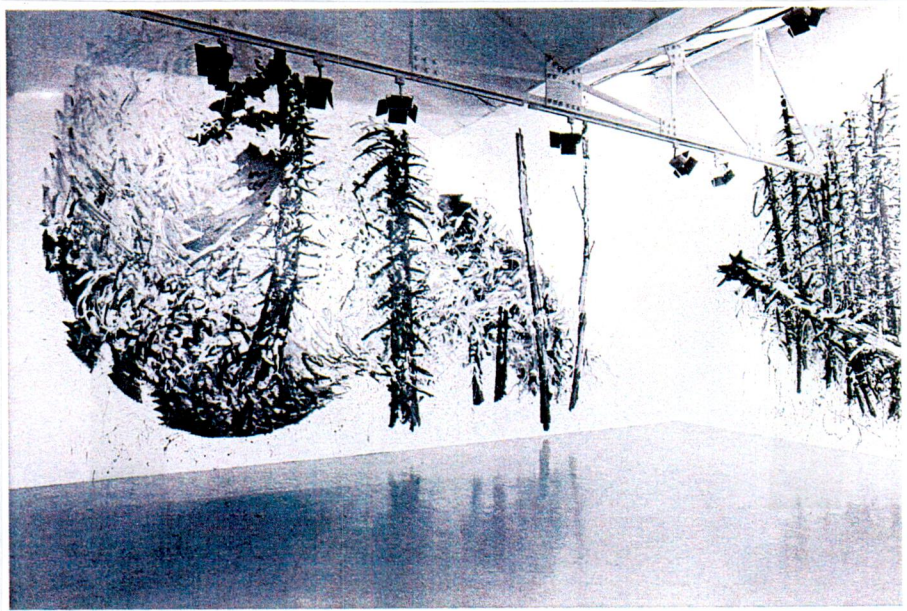
**Oil on canvas and pastel on paper.**

**86" x 129"**









**Black and White**

**or**

**How to paint with a Hammer.**

**Matts Gallery, London.**

**1982**









**The Moth Tree (1986).**

**Oil and photograph on canvas.**

**220 x 170**









**Glacier 111 - Lapland (1986).**

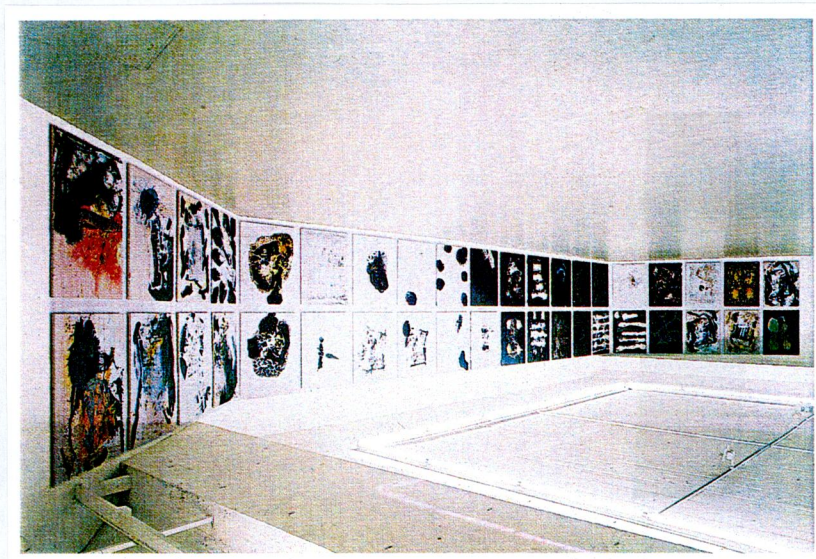
**Oil and photograph on canvas**

**220 x 170cms**









**A History of Rocks (1986 - 88).**

**1 work in forty parts**

**Oil, acrylic and photograph on canvas**

**Each work 140 x 106cms**









**A History of Rocks no. 1**

**Oil, acrylic and photograph on canvas**

**140 x 106cms**









**A History of Rocks no. 3 (1986 - 88).**

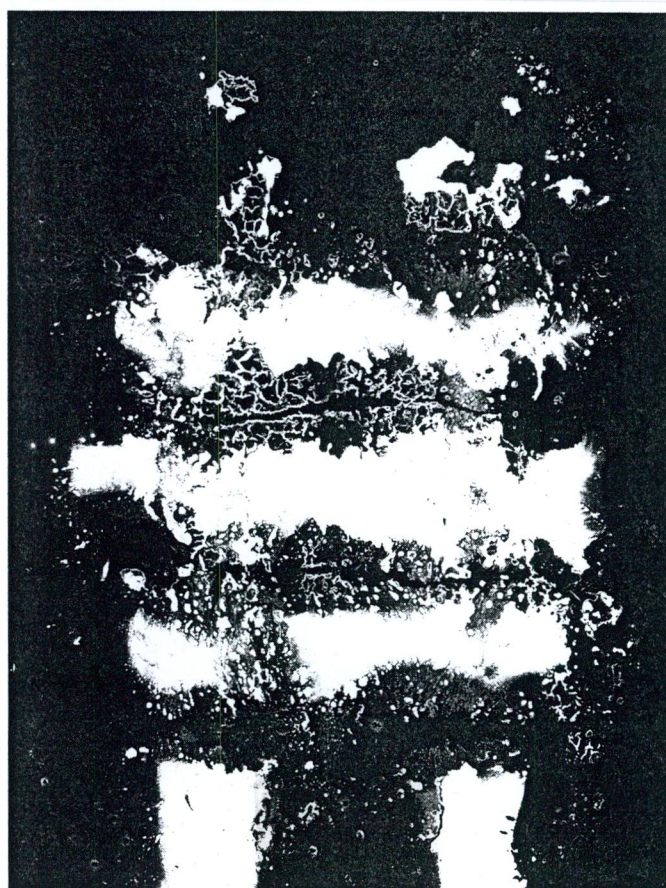
**Oil, acrylic and photograph on canvas**

**140 x 106cms**









**A History of Rocks no. 31 (1986 - 88).**

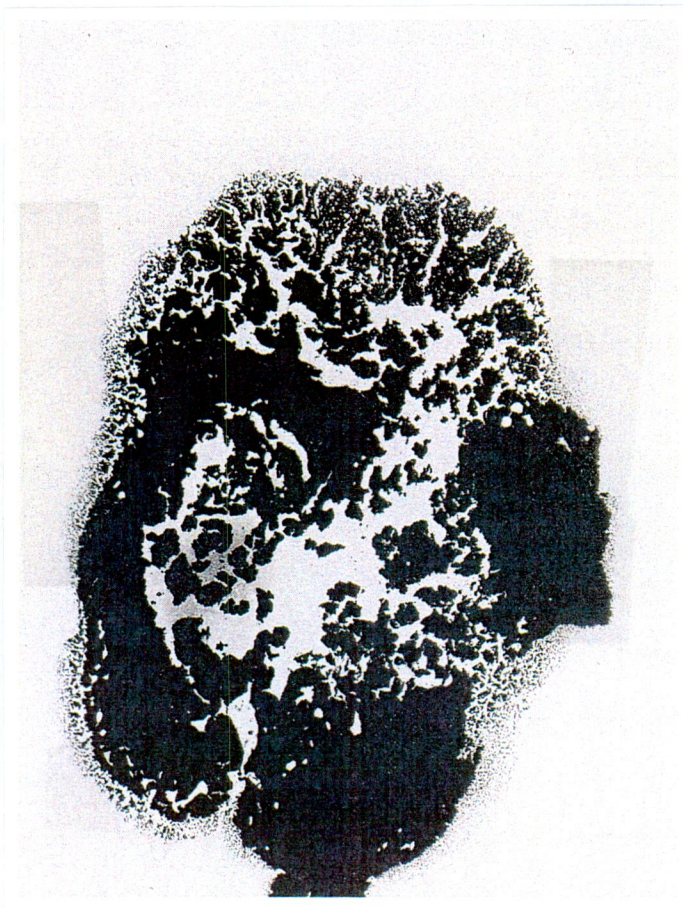
**Oil, acrylic and photograph on canvas**

**140 x 106cms**









**A History of Rocks no 5. (1986 - 88).**

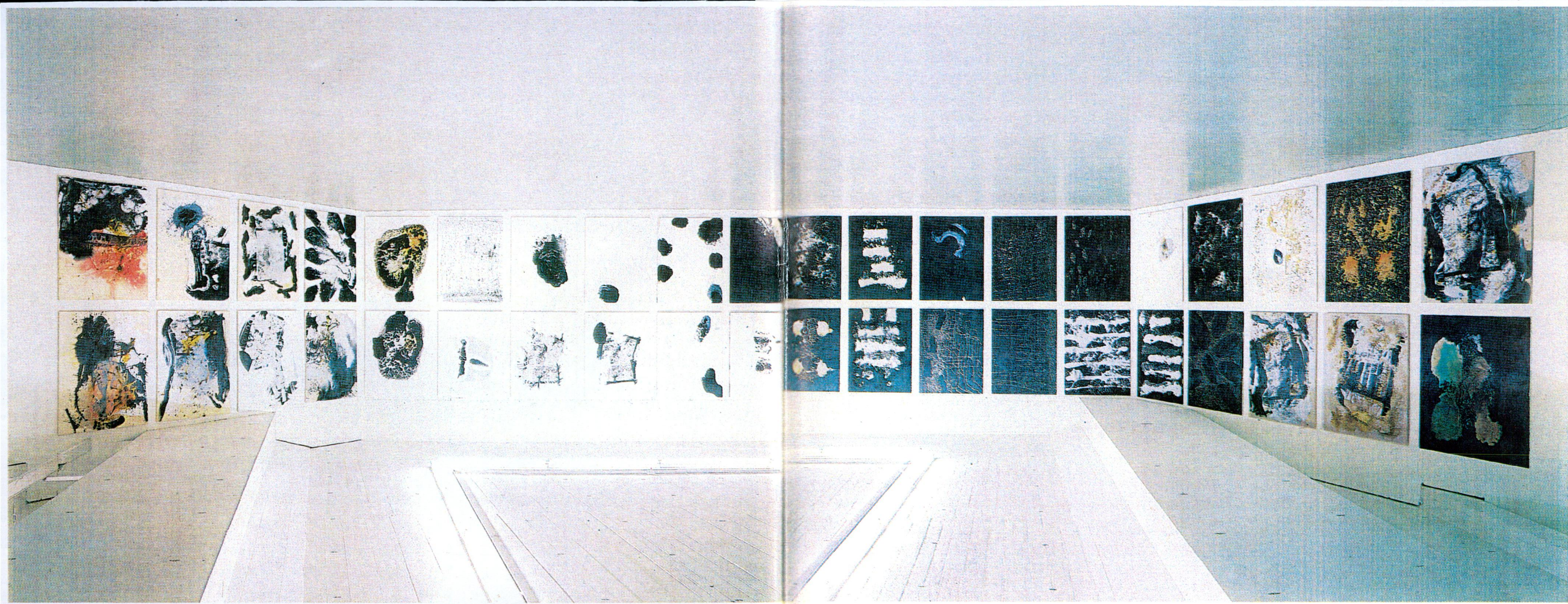
**Oil, acrylic and photograph on canvas.**

**140 x 106 cms.**









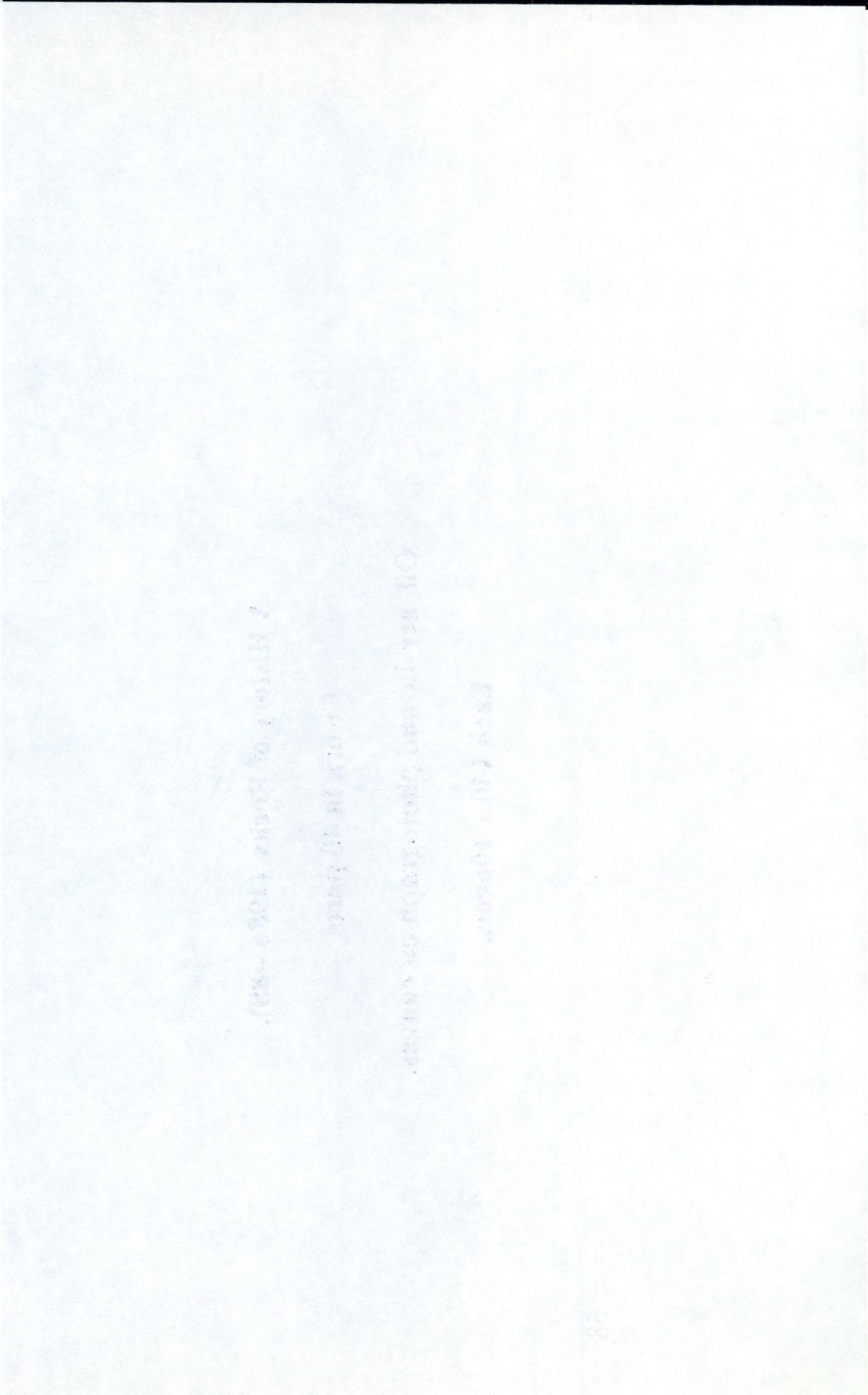
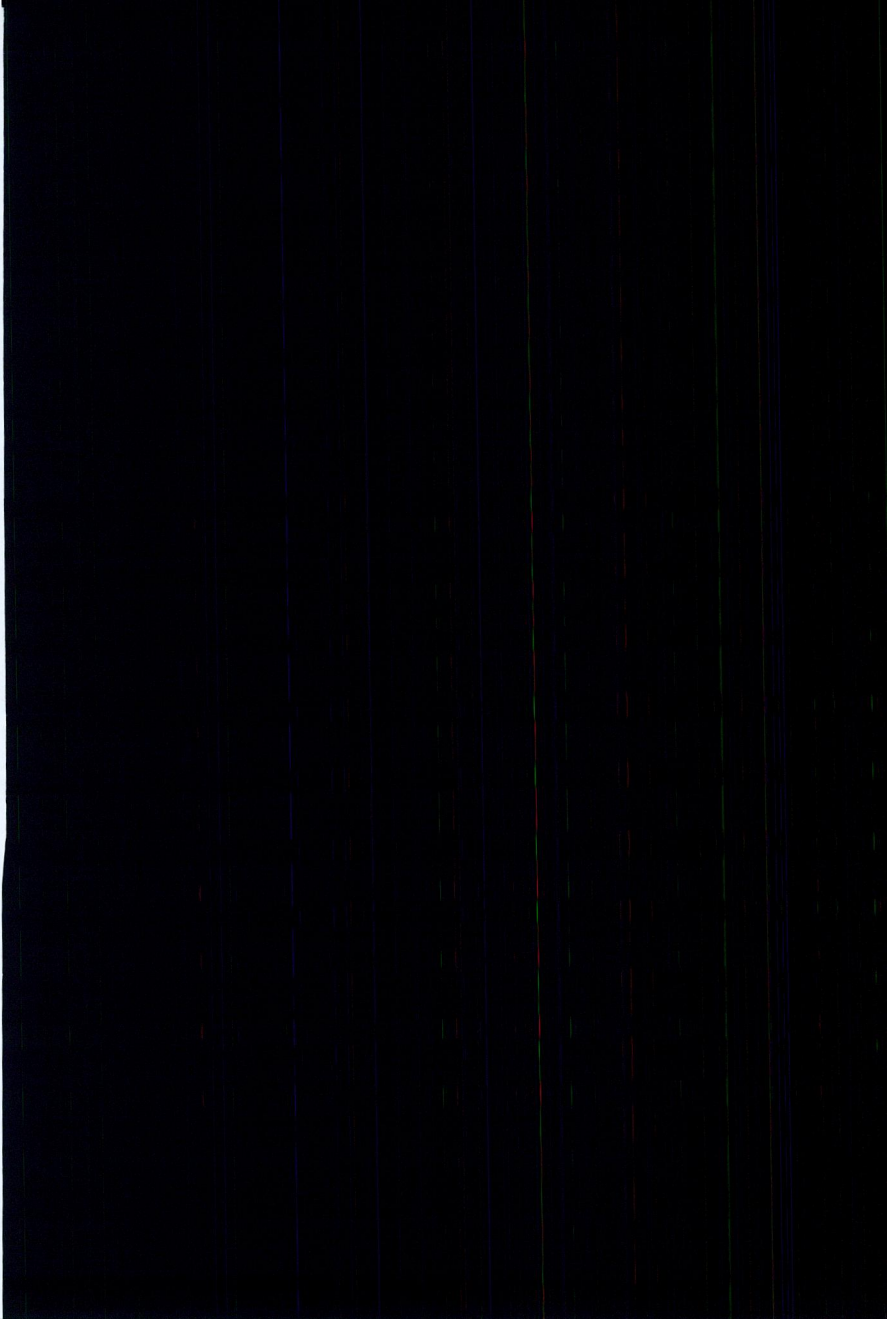
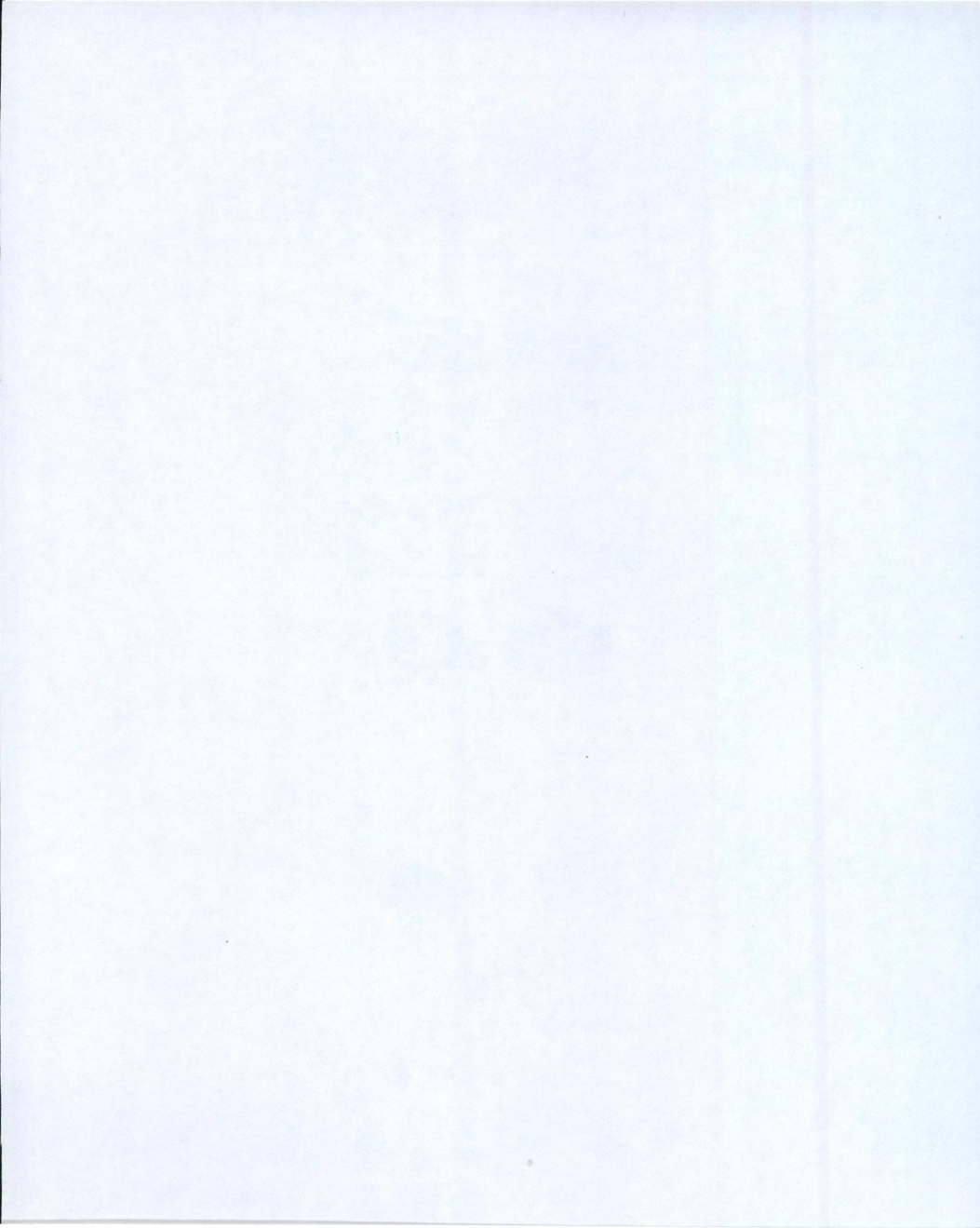
**A History of Rocks (1986 - 88).**

**1 work in 40 parts**

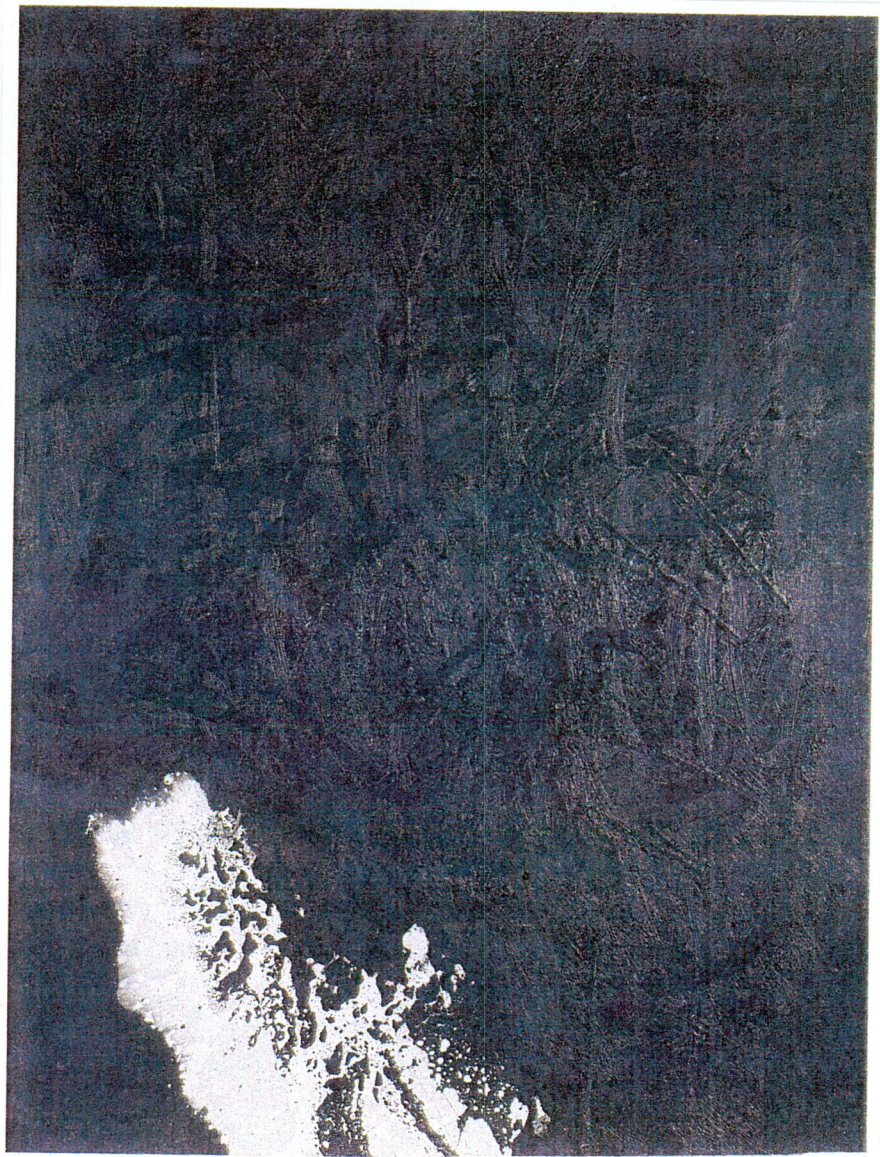
**Oil, acrylic and photograph on canvas.**

**Each 140 x 106cms.**









**A History of Rocks No 30**







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Whitechapel Art Gallery

Exhibition

Flash Art

Volume No 156

January / February 1991

Page 136 - 137





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