



KAREL NEL
THE BRILLIANCE OF DARKNESS

KAREL NEL THE BRILLIANCE OF DARKNESS

ART FIRST 2008

ART FIRST CONTEMPORARY ART

www.artfirst.co.uk



KAREL NEL

THE BRILLIANCE OF DARKNESS

ART FIRST CONTEMPORARY ART

COSMOS

From its inception four years ago, Karel Nel has been an active participant in one of the most comprehensive astronomy projects ever undertaken – *the Cosmic Evolution Survey (COSMOS)* • This project was initiated with the largest allocation of time ever on the Hubble Space Telescope¹ (ten per cent of the time for two years) to obtain deep, high resolution images of galaxies and clusters of galaxies in a two degree square area of the sky • The project now involves over 100 scientists (in the US, Japan and Europe) and data from all large ground based and space telescopes •

I invited Karel to join our project at the beginning, after several insightful conversations with him • The project studies the evolution of galaxies, galaxy clusters and dark matter structures over 75 per cent of the age of the universe • With deep astronomy imaging, one is seeing galaxies at greater and greater distances and hence further back in time or cosmic epoch • Effectively we are turning back the clock to observe the universe as it was near the beginning and as it evolves, coming forward in time to the present epoch seen in the nearby universe •

Karel has attended and interacted closely with the COSMOS science team at our meetings over the last four years; at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, Kyoto University (Kyoto, Japan), the Max Planck Institute, Ringberg Castle (near Munich, Germany), and this June, at the Institute for Astrophysics in Paris • In the meetings, he is a stimulating presence, talking to the astrophysicists and attending the science talks • At four of these meetings, Karel provided hour-long lectures on his past work and his more recent art relating to our COSMOS project • His presentations were the best attended, vastly enriching our experience with deeper insights and appreciation, holding the audience in rapt attention •

Karel has a unique ability to bring out the commonality between the aspirations of both artistic and

scientific endeavors, a desire in each case for unification and distillation of diverse phenomena, together with an appreciation of beauty and elegance – physical as well as philosophical • His approach is equally insightful to the specialist and the layperson, which makes it a real pleasure to collaborate with him on this project •

Often in our profession, one becomes fixated on the details of narrow corridors, losing sight of the inter-connectedness and poetry of the whole • Karel's images distill these connections metaphorically, much like the physicist uses equations to unify phenomena in diverse environments and over vast ranges of scale • For example, it is remarkable that the same Newton's law of gravitation, describing how it is we are held to the surface of a spinning earth, also provides a prescription for the assembly of large scale cosmic structures of dark matter extending over a 100 million light years • Although artistic imagery can be much more complex and nuanced, Karel's work often provides a similar unification between such diverse phenomena, bringing together 'significant' salts and dusts to express our view and connection to the cosmos •

Over the last decade astronomers have come to realize that the overall evolution of the universe is determined by mysterious '*dark matter*' and '*dark energy*' • Our project has mapped for the first time the dark matter structures over half the age of the universe • They are detected indirectly since their gravitation distorts the space nearby, thus distorting the images of more distant background galaxies – an effect referred to as '*gravitational lensing*' • The normal matter we observe with our eyes and through powerful telescopes constitutes but a trace four percent of the mass and energy content of the universe • Karel finds deeper significance in the recognition of these unobserved constituents as symbolic of our human need to experience the darkness of night for our spiritual well-being •

In '*The Brilliance of Darkness*' Karel Nel recognizes and highlights a new insight to the cosmos above us, signaling that the darkness of space is central to both the human spirit and to our emotional health – indeed, to our very existence • All of us who are fortunate enough to view the sky from a dark place dream and wonder upon the bright stars; however, like Olbers 200 yrs ago, who recognized the deep cosmological significance of the darkness of the night sky, Karel has a novel appreciation of the mysterious binding darkness of space and its sanctity •

The salts and carboniferous dusts² he uses in his work were expelled in the distant past from the brilliant stars we see lighting up the night sky • In fact, all the heavier atoms within our bodies were synthesized from the primordial hydrogen at millions of degrees, deep in the interiors of stars – a close parallel to the volcanic materials deployed in his other bodies of work • In this sense we share with the art of Karel Nel a common origin that is at once physical and symbolic •



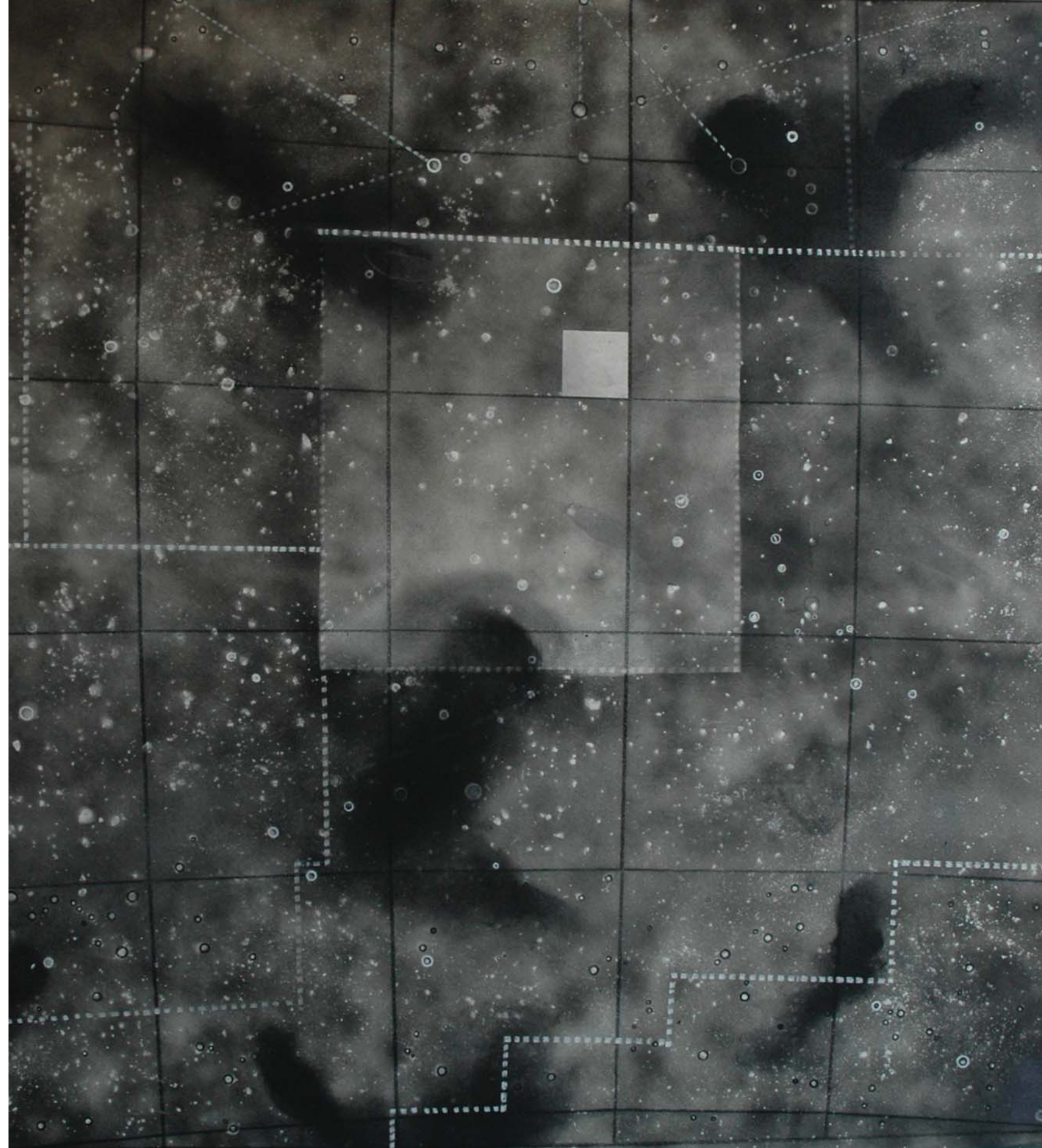
Nick Scoville, 2008
Moseley Professor of Astronomy at Caltech
and Leader of COSMOS

Sector: Two Square Degrees

2007

Charcoal, pastel, specularite and sprayed pigment
on bonded fibre fabric

193x193cm



The Brilliance of Darkness

Darkness, it would seem, is revelatory, clear, all-encompassing, and it is the nurturing matrix of manifestation itself • The series of works for this exhibition deals with the reciprocal process of looking into darkness to see scattered stellar light, and looking at this light in an attempt to understand the darkness •

Dark matter and dark energy appear, as I understand it, to form a kind of invisible scaffolding in our universe • The dark matter affects galaxy formation, leading to vast strand-like structures of clustered galaxies through deep space, yet we don't know really what dark matter is • The dark energy is causing an apparent speeding up of the universe's expansion and our understanding of it seems to be mainly by inference •

Now in its fourth year, The COSMOS Project has meticulously recorded over a million new galaxies in a seemingly small, seemingly dark, two square degree sector of the universe • These awesomely beautiful images contain galaxies as large and even larger than the one in which our own solar system exists • Over two decades, a central concern in my work has been an investigation into the interface between the seen and the unseen worlds, between knowledge and consciousness, recording and mapping, and between the disciplines of art and science •

I am currently working with astrophysicists in the COSMOS team, as they create lexicons to quantify and understand galaxy evolution • These lexicons form the basis of my works, which grapple with our capacity to map and comprehend infinite vastness and our place within it • I am particularly fascinated by the fragile images of light that left their source millions of years ago • I make these momentarily tangible by using materials commensurate with their subject: 540 million year old black carboniferous dust and radiant white salt, two deeply primordial substances, one from Gondwanaland (the great land mass before splitting into today's continents) and

salt, a medium from the primal undifferentiated ocean • The shimmering refracting surfaces of the works evoke the evanescent phenomenon of photons traveling through deep space, here materialized into dense matter •

Startlingly, within this vast universal darkness, punctuated by myriads of galaxies, stars, planets and dust clouds, we have in more recent years been alerted to the notion of black holes • These have taxed our very perception of space and its contracting densities, densities so extreme they defy human comprehension • At the same time we can see the possibility that our very universe is as self-contained and closed off as these black holes • Dark matter and dark energy seem to make up 96 per cent of our universe yet we are still unable to understand what they are • Simply put, dark energy seems to be a phenomenon that pushes everything apart from everything else, while dark matter forms the attractive matrix of the visible universe •

Galaxy formations seem to spread in much the same way as filaments or capillaries, within the tissue of organic systems • In their attempts to understand large scale structures and galaxy formation, astronomers often use a kind of topological language to name, describe and locate the nodes of galaxy formation within the darkness • For example, 'the green valley' refers to the colors of galaxies undergoing the most vigorous and transformational evolution • This kind of projected metaphorical labeling indicates a human effort to understand and claim the unknown through the known • The green valley so familiar to us on earth as a signifier of fertility, fecundity, and beginnings, alludes broadly to the valley formed by the Tigris and Euphrates and its references to the complex beginnings of human (agri)culture and its concomitant evolution of consciousness; a very strange metaphor in the context of the vastness that is still so unknown to us •

Many of us live in high density areas where light pollution is a reality; our children are no longer able

to see the stars from these vast urban tracts, losing any sense of connectedness to the universe through this same starry matrix which enabled our species to locate, travel and populate remote regions of the world • At night even with lights out, most homes or apartments are light enough to see clearly, at times affecting our ability to sleep, rejuvenate and possibly in time affecting our reproductive ability as a species³ •

Astronomers around the world have to go to great lengths and travel large distances to view the firmament from isolated points on the planet that are free from light pollution • I have spent time with them at the *Subaru* telescope on Mauna Kea⁴, a 13000 ft high volcano deep within the Pacific, on *The Big Island* of Hawaii; visited the plains of St Augustine in New Mexico, the site of *The Very Large Array Telescope*, and on remote islands in Polynesia and Micronesia – to view the stars as our ancestors did •

After hot days in these distant and sometimes inhospitable places, it is a great relief as night falls and the heat is tempered and cools • As the light fades, one's eyes incrementally adjust to the powder-black darkness and the pinpoints of light emerge like a developing photograph, till the darkness is radiant with millions of visible stars • At the same time, we are bathed with emanations of infra-red and radio waves so low in energy that we humans have never evolved to receive them •

It is within these very specific conditions that we see once more, for the 'first time', the complexities of the firmament from which we extrapolate the very existence of our galaxy in relation to the countless and nameless others within the unfolding mystery that is the universe • It is only within the all-encompassing darkness that we are able to see light, acutely observe, record and attempt to comprehend the singularity of the briefest instant at the very beginning of our universe and an ever-expanding consciousness •

Karel Nel
2008

3



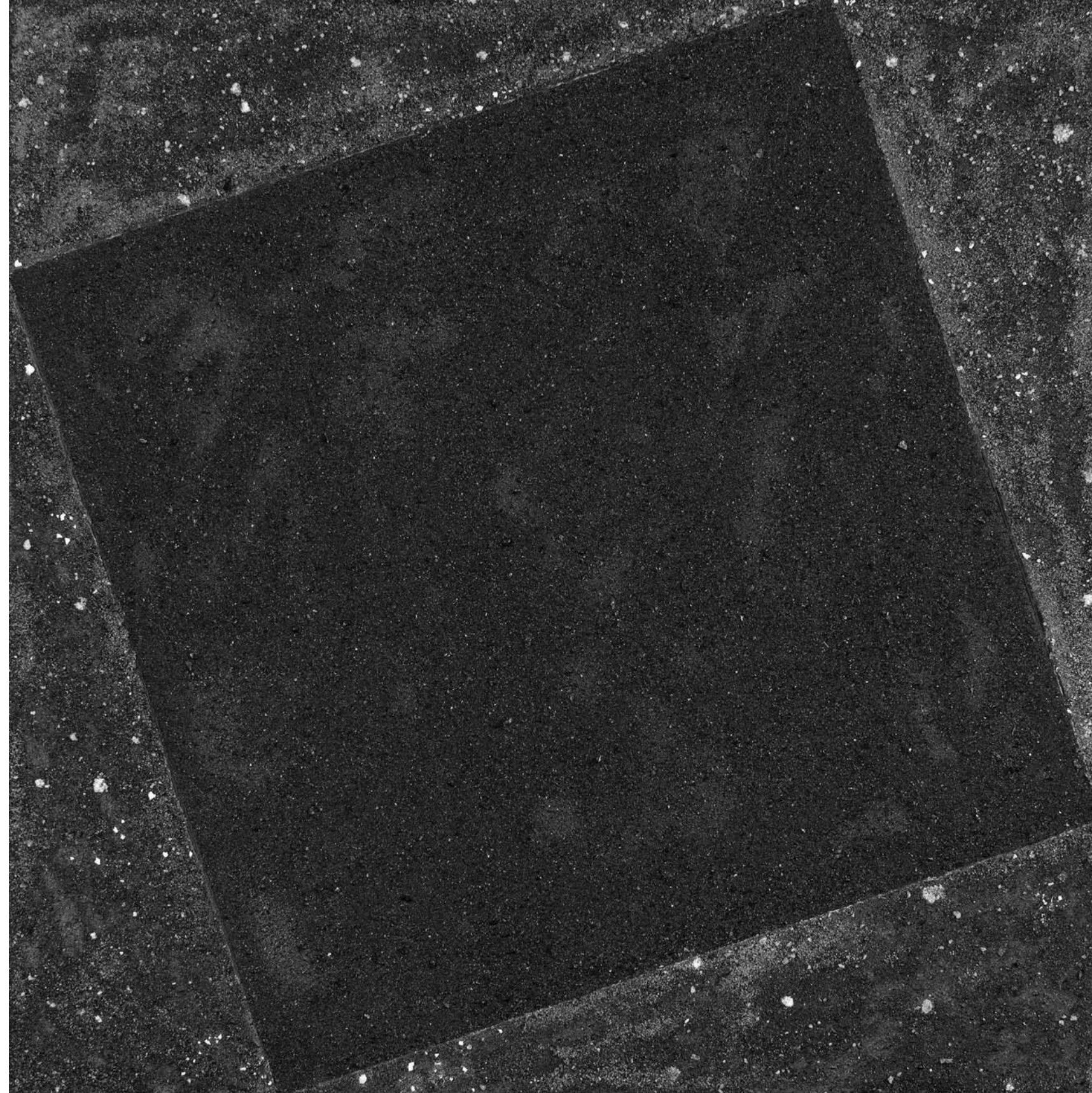
4



Composing Darkness

2008

540 million year old black carboniferous dust and salt
80x80cm

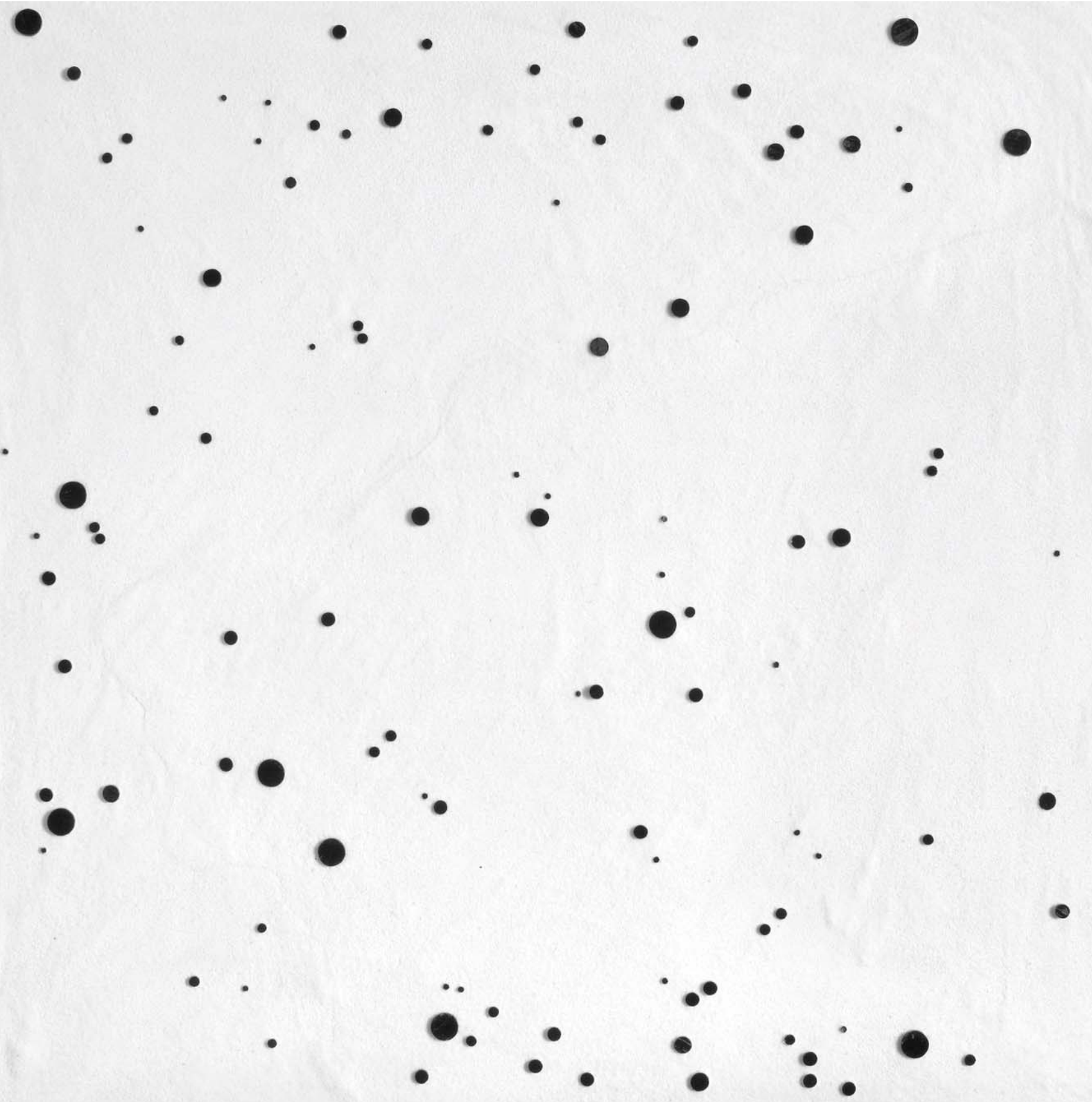
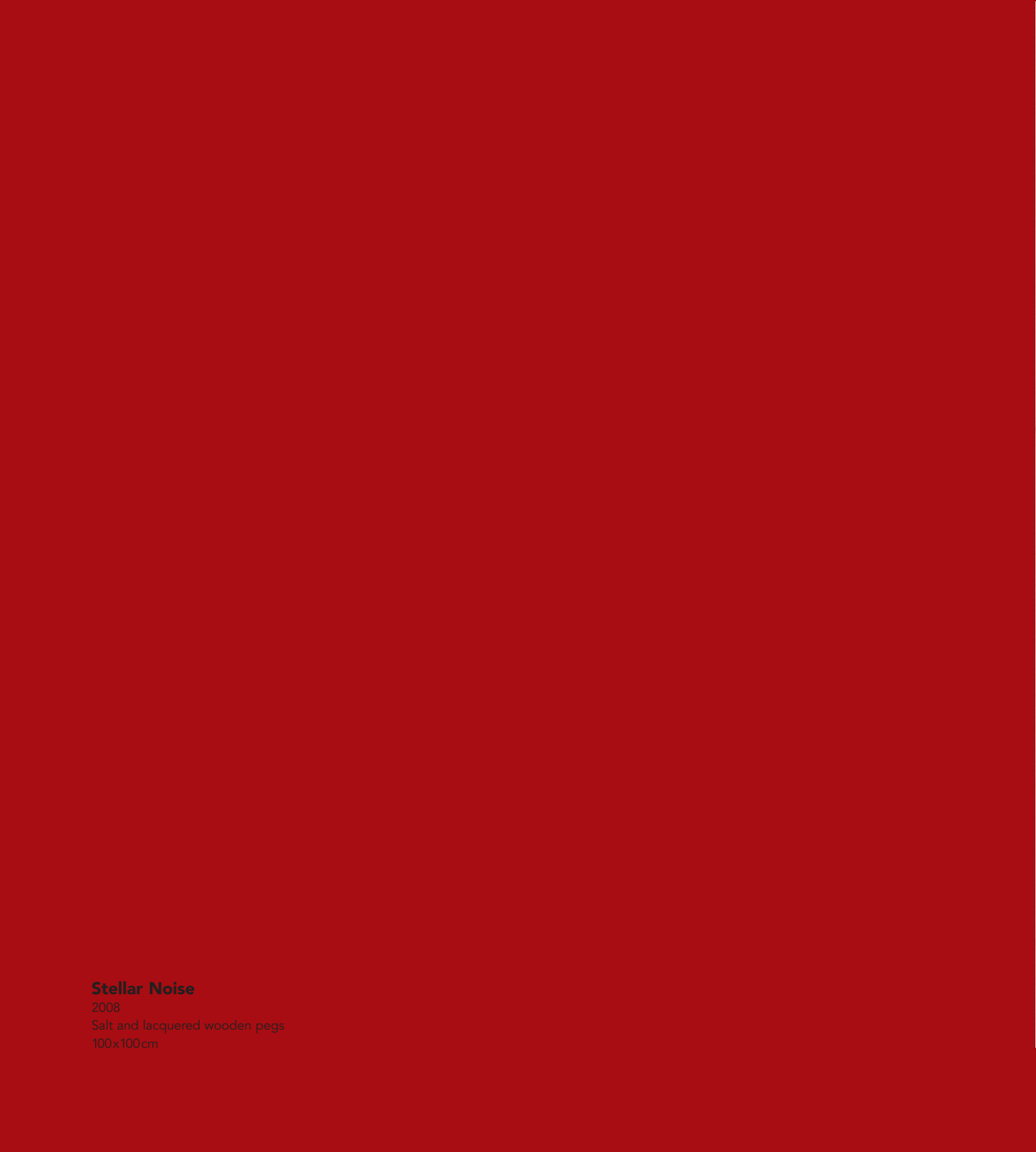




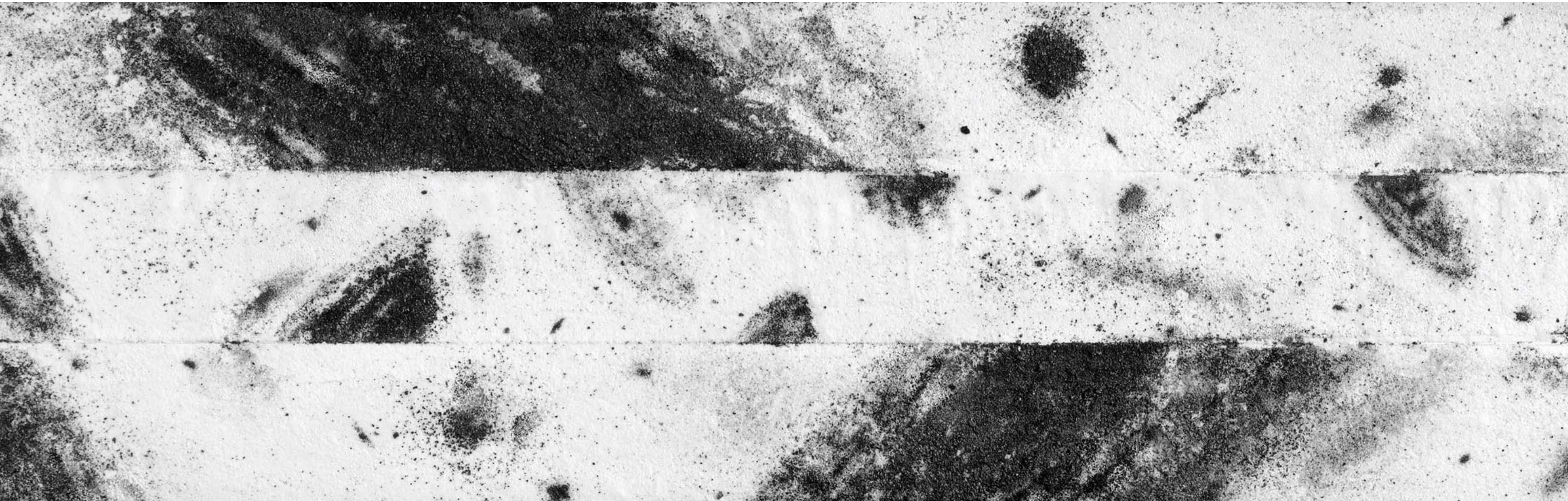
Leaping Darkness (detail)

Leaping Darkness
2008
Sprayed pigment on bonded fibre fabric
250x80cm





Stellar Noise
2008
Salt and lacquered wooden pegs
100x100cm

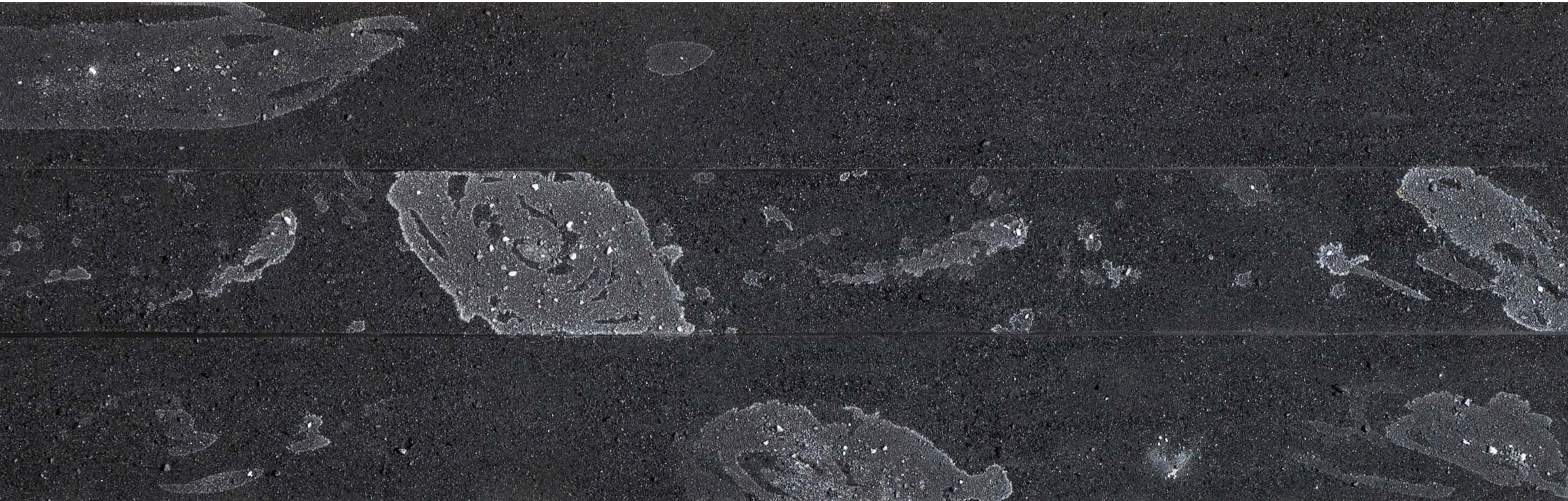


Bandwidths

2008

540 million year old black carboniferous dust and salt

50x145cm

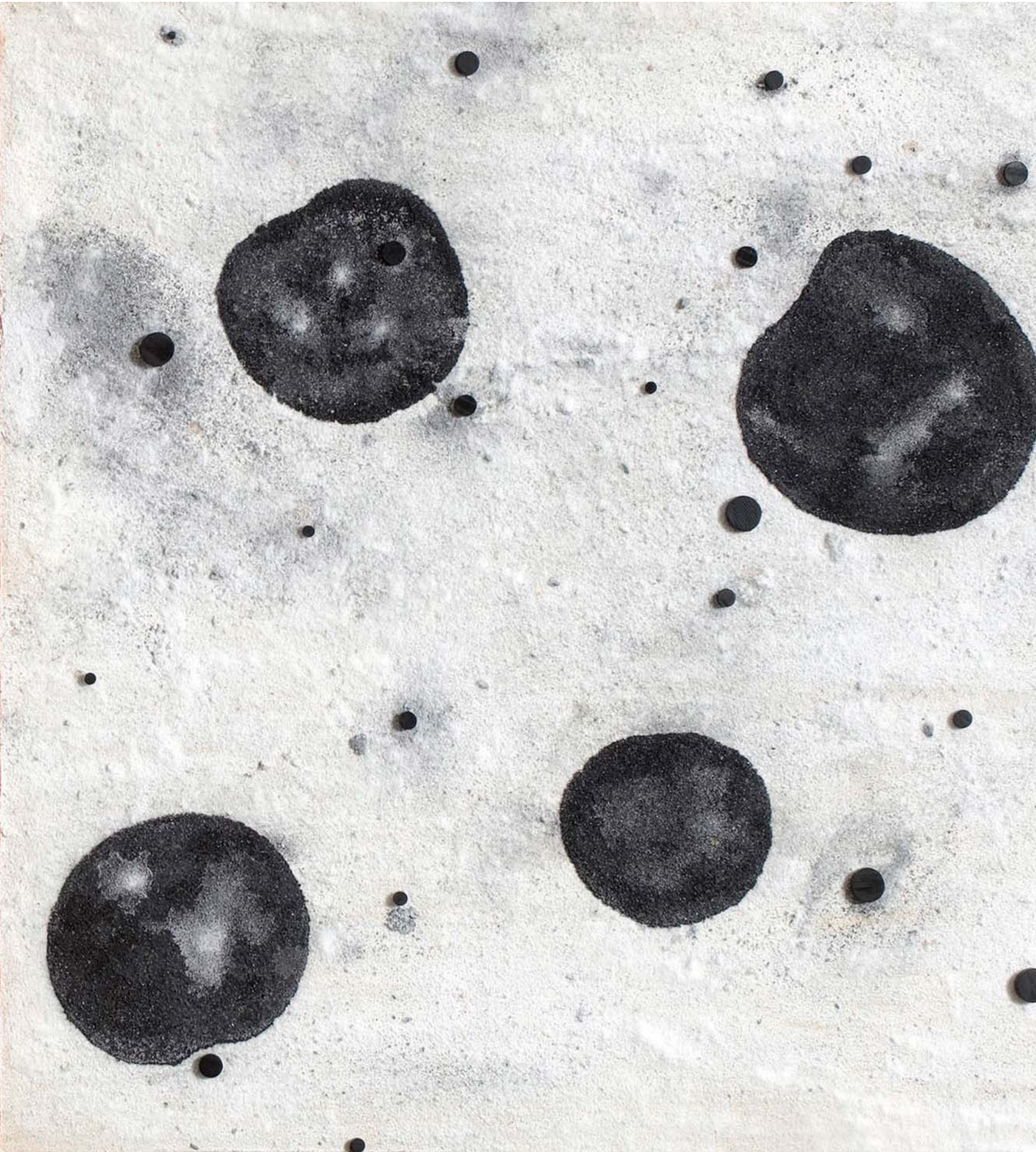
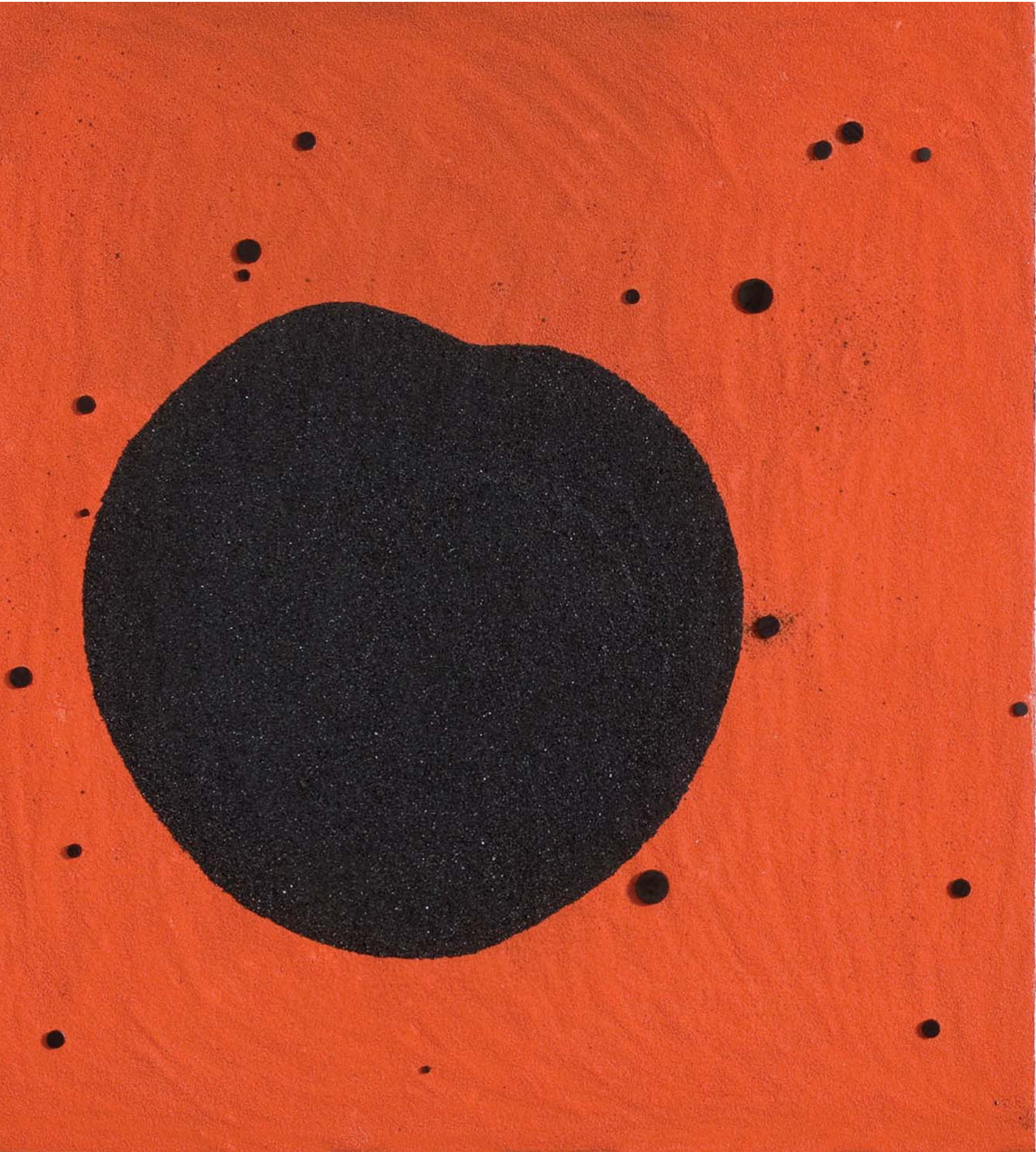


Dark Transmissions

2008

540 million year old black carboniferous dust and salt

50x145cm



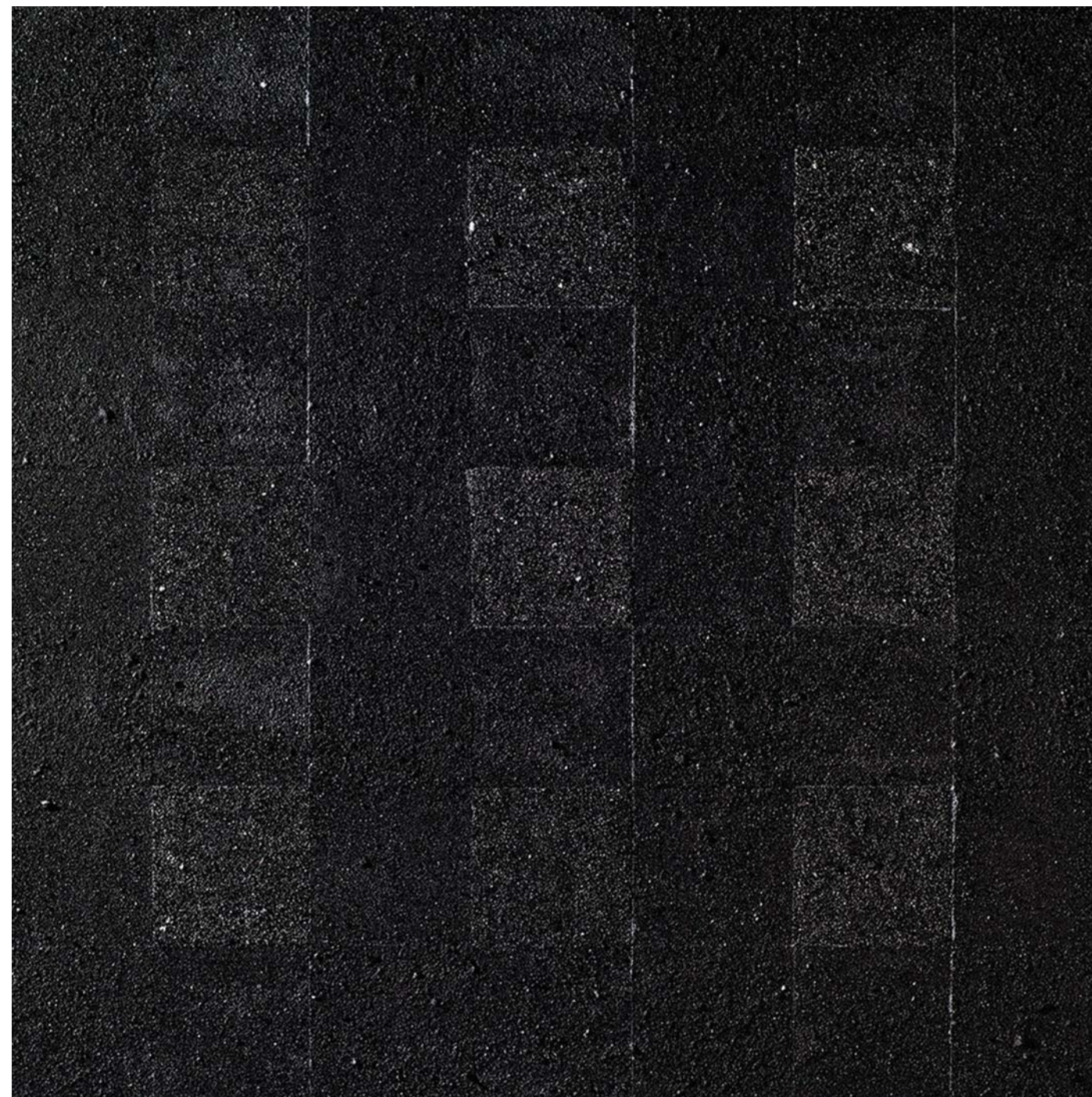


Sound Syntax (previous page) (detail above)

2008
540 million year old black carboniferous dust and salt
and vermillion pigment
100x200cm

Hidden Beauty

2008
540 million year old black carboniferous dust
100x100cm





New Light (detail)

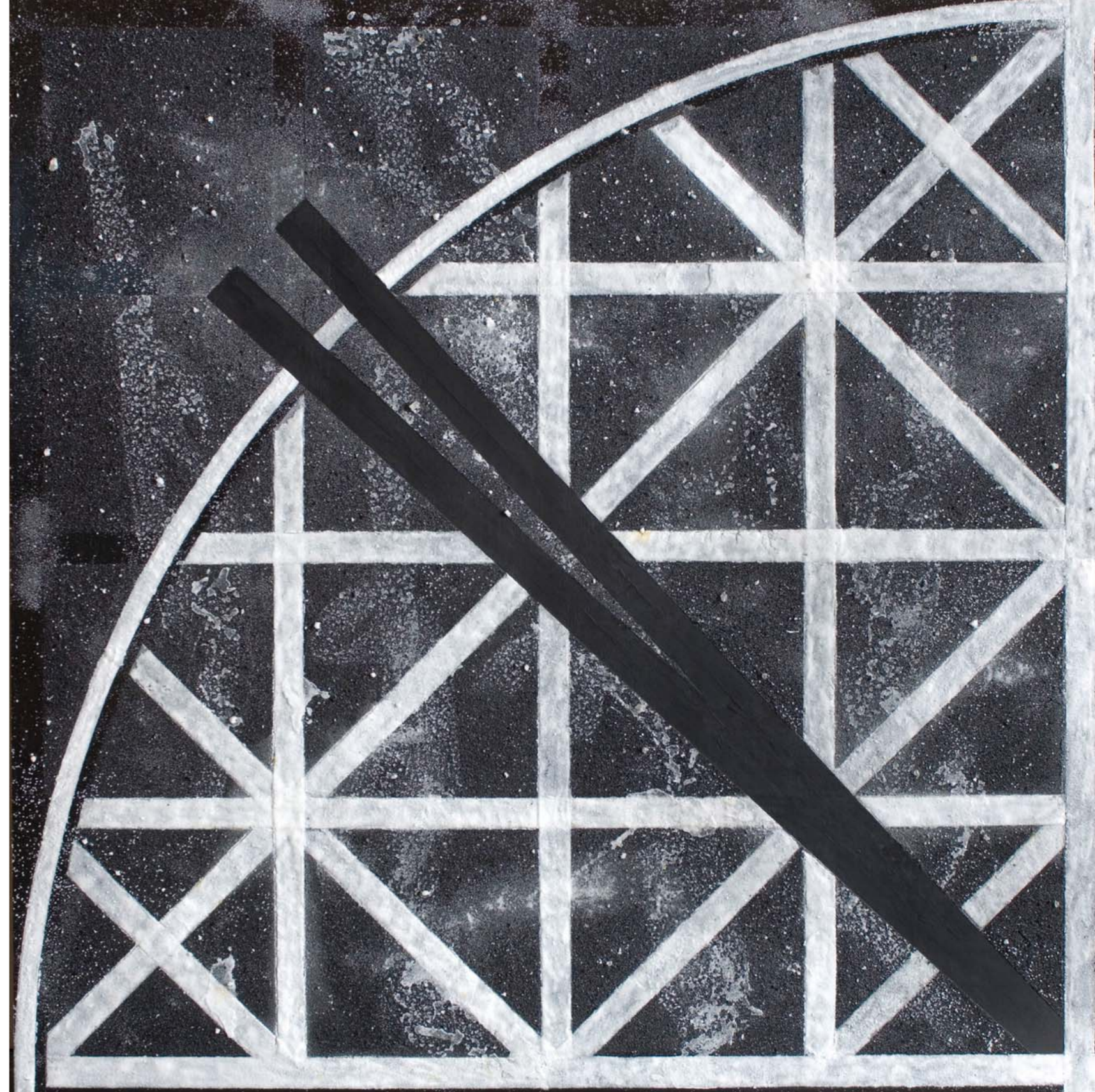
New Light
2008
Salt and violet pigment
70x70cm



Stellar Calculus

2008

540 million year old black carboniferous dust and prehistoric salt from the atomic testing site, White Sands, New Mexico
170x170cm

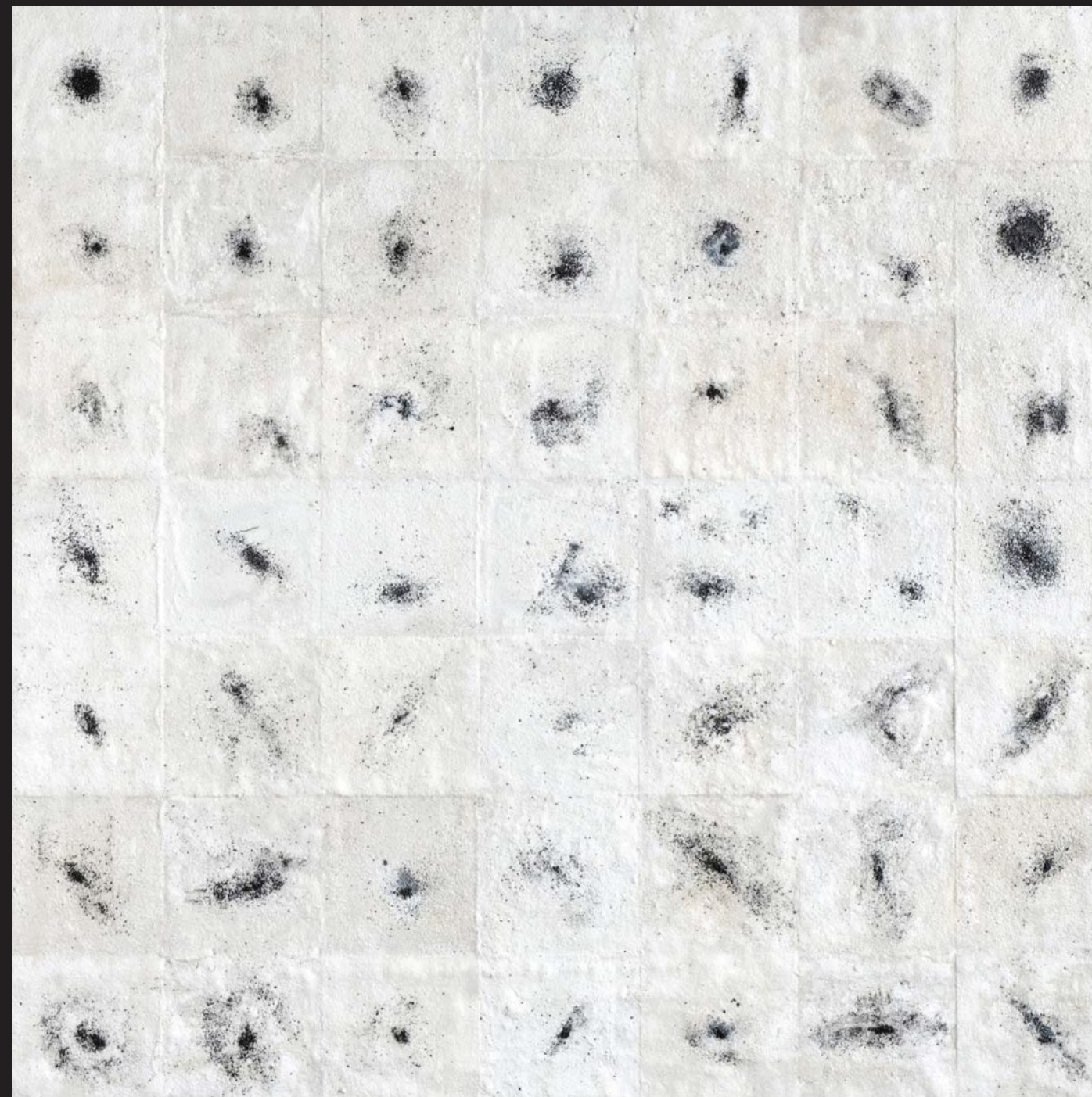


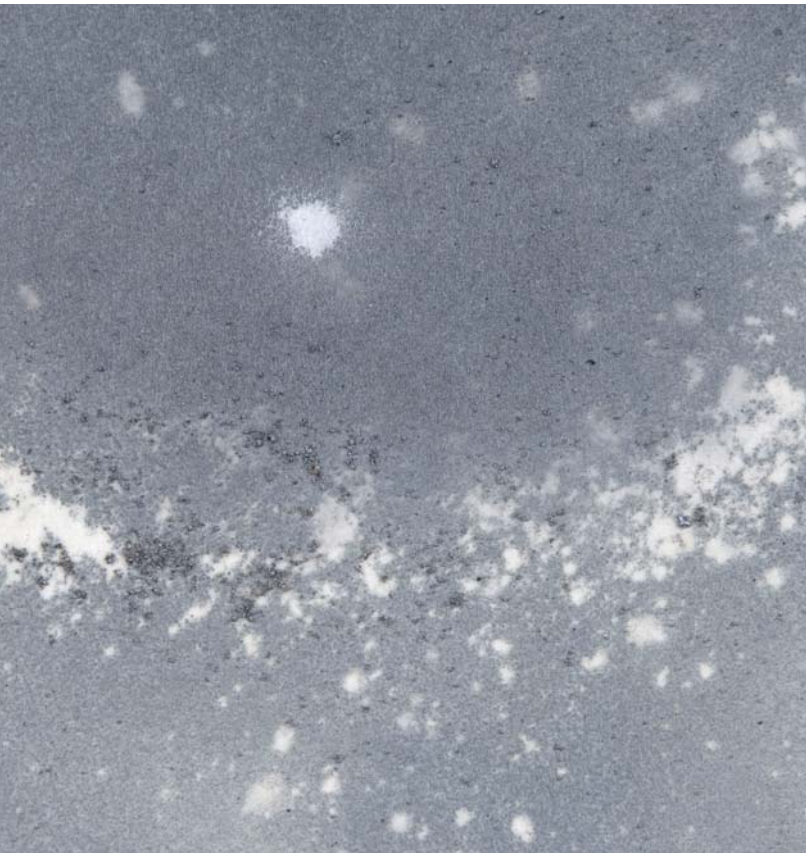
Representational Problem

2008

540 million year old black carboniferous dust and salt

100x100cm



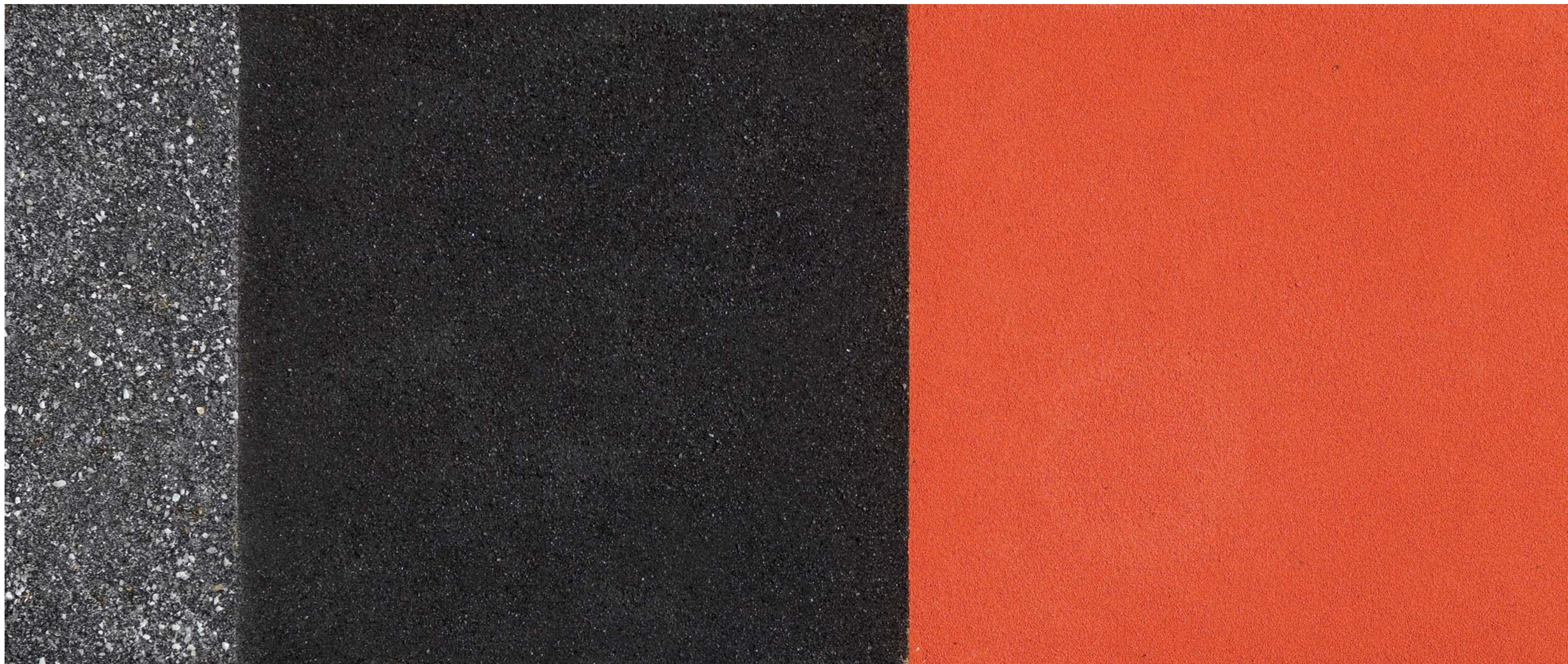


Stacked Coda (detail)

Stacked Coda

2008
Sprayed pigment on bonded fibre fabric
250x80cm





Icon

2008

540 million year old black carboniferous dust and salt
and vermilion pigment

30x65cm



Nel working on The Collapse Of Time

2008

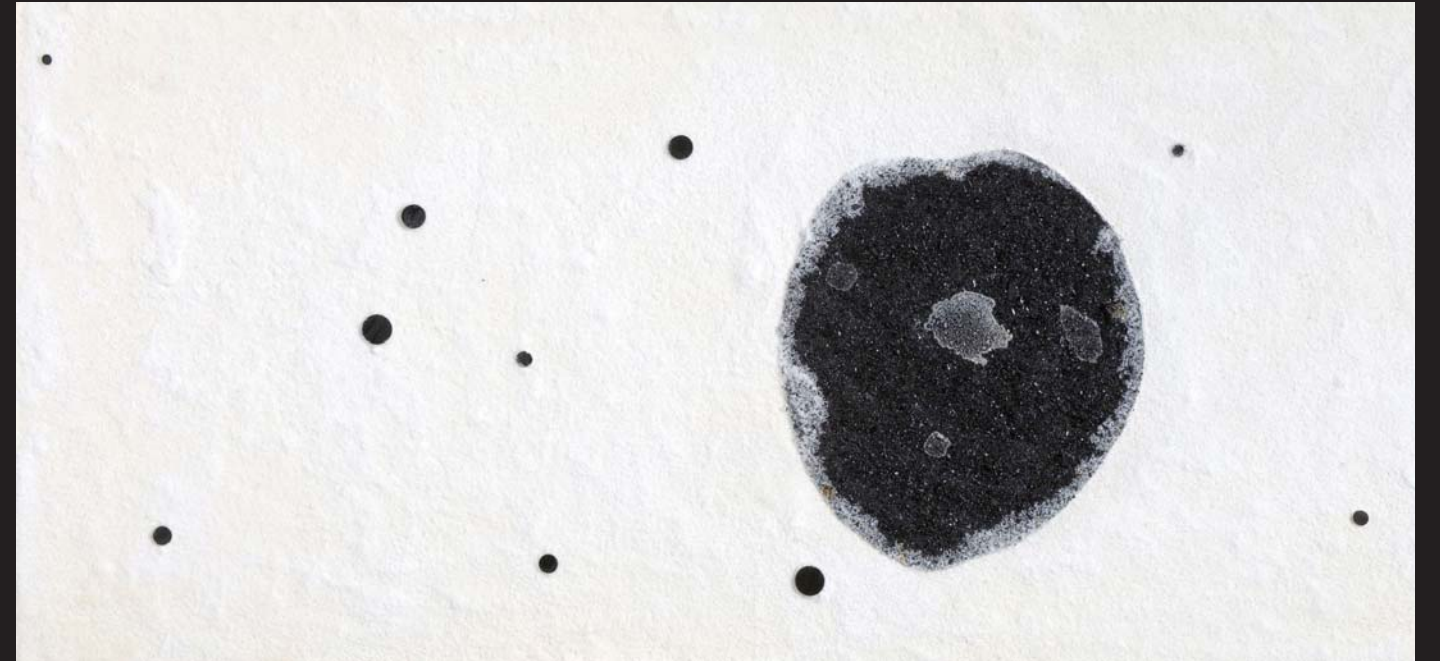
Sprayed pigment on bonded fibre fabric

240x360cm (3 part screen)



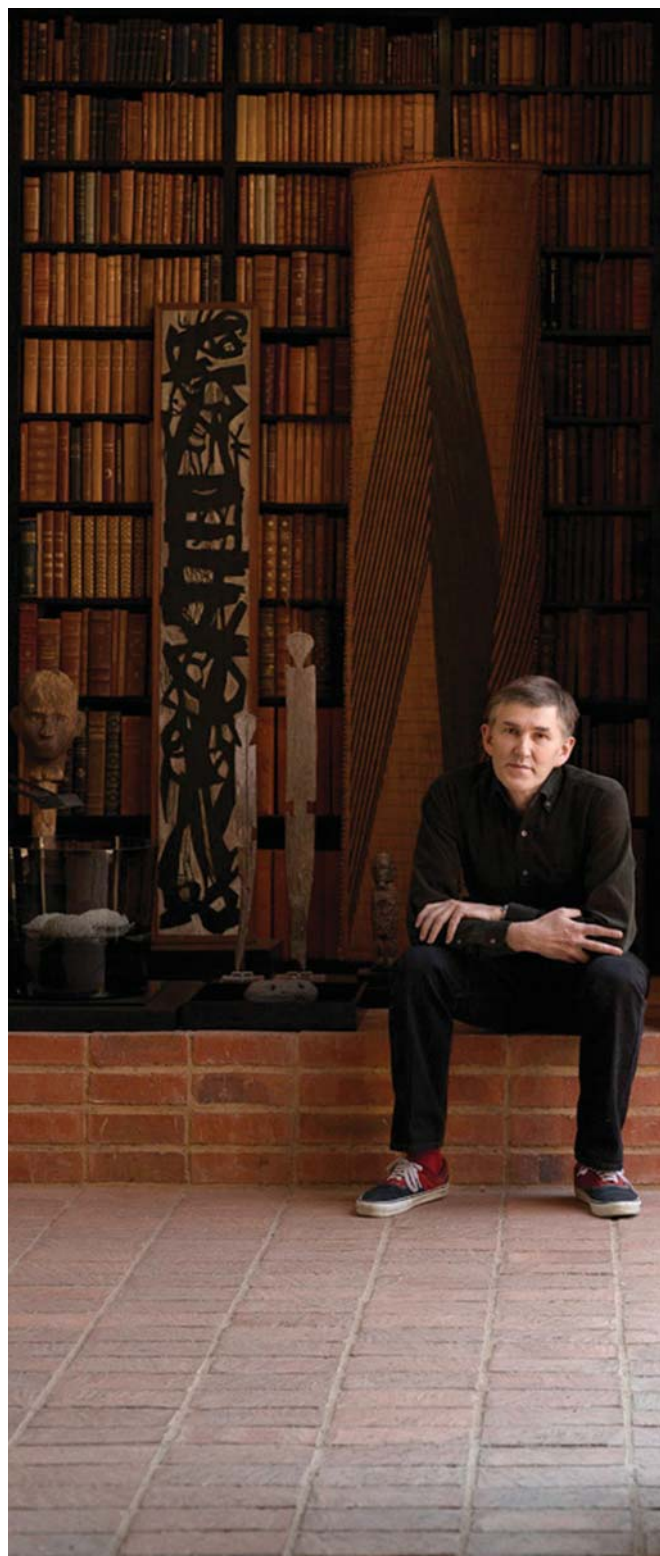
Silent Sector

2008
Salt and lacquered wooden pegs
37x75cm



Signal/Noise

2008
540 million year old black carboniferous dust and salt
37x75cm



Biography

Karel Nel was born in 1955, in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa • He studied Fine Art at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, St Martin's School of Art, London and the University of California, Berkeley (Fulbright Placement 1988-89) • He now lives and works in Johannesburg and is Associate Professor at the School of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand • Nel is a respected collector of African, Asian and Oceanic art with a particular interest in currencies • He has expertise in southern African art and advises and consults with museums in South Africa, New York, London and Paris • He has also been part of curatorial teams for major international exhibitions on early Zulu, Tsonga and Shangaan art, and has contributed to numerous publications on this material •

Over many years Karel Nel has been interested in the interface between art and science and this ongoing investigation has led to his inclusion in the COSMOS project as artist-in-residence •

Solo exhibitions

- 2008 The Brilliance of Darkness, Art First, London
- 2007 Lost light: fugitive images from deep space, Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg
- 2005 In the Presence of Leaves, Art First, London
- 2004 Leslie Sacks Fine Art, Los Angeles
- 2003 Status of Dust, Art First, London
- 2002 Status of Dust, Art First, New York
- 2000 Volcanic Texts, Art First, London
- 1999 Solo Journeys, Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg
- 1998 Images of Paradise and Death, Leslie Sacks Fine Art, Los Angeles
- 1996 View on the Inner House, Art First, London
- 1995 Isles and the Inner House, Leslie Sacks Fine Art, Los Angeles
- 1994 Inner Province, Art First, London
- 1990 Recent Work, Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg
- 1986 Quiet Lives, Gertrude Posel Gallery, University of Witwatersrand
- 1983 Recent Drawings and Guest Artist, Johannesburg Art Gallery
- 1980 Drawings, Olivetti Gallery, Johannesburg

Selected group exhibitions

- 2008 Angaza Afrika. African Art Now, October Gallery, London
 - Dialogue, Art First, London
- 2004 Ten Years of Democracy, South African National Gallery, Cape Town
- 2003 Place, Galerie Asbaek, Copenhagen and /04 Kastrupgardsamlingen, Kastrup, Denmark, Touring to Pretoria Art Museum and Oliewenhuis Art Museum, Bloemfontein, South Africa
- 2001 Art First at 10, Art First, London
- 2000 The Schachat Art Collection, SASOL Art Museum, Stellenbosch, South Africa

- 1999 Claiming Art/Reclaiming Space: Post Apartheid Art from South Africa, Smithsonian, Washington DC
 - Emergence, Standard Bank National Festival of the Arts, Grahamstown and touring exhibition
- 1998 Divided City Installation, In Nearer than Bronze Exhibition, Sandton Civic Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa
- 1996 Three Years On, Art First, London
 - Insights, Wright Gallery, New York
 - Vita Art Today, Johannesburg Art Gallery
- 1995 Temenos Installation, Johannesburg Art Gallery for the Johannesburg Biennale
 - Common and Uncommon Ground, South African Art to Atlanta, City Gallery East, Atlanta, Georgia, USA
- 1994 Artists Under the Southern Cross, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam
 - Giholte-Baard-Breda Fonden, Copenhagen, with Doris Bloom and Marlene Dumas
- 1993 Resident Artist, Standard Bank National Festival of the Arts, Grahamstown
 - Affinities, Contemporary South African Art, Venice Biennale (and Rome)
- 1992 Institute of Contemporary Art, Johannesburg
 - Art Meets Science, Grahamstown Festival of the Arts
- 1991 University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley
 - Three South African Artists: A Contemplative View, Midlands Contemporary Art, Birmingham
- 1988 Cape Town Triennial
 - Fort Worth Ryder Gallery, University of California (prizewinner)
- 1987 Vita Art Now, Johannesburg Art Gallery
 - National Drawing Competition Exhibition, Standard Bank National Festival of the Arts, Grahamstown
 - Valparaiso Biennale, Chile
 - Tapestries, Linda Goodman Gallery, and tour to South Africa National Gallery

- 1986 The Volkskas Atelier Award (and 1987, 1988)
 1986 Selections From a Century, Johannesburg Art Gallery
 1985 Tributaries A View of Contemporary South African Art, BMW Exhibition, touring Germany and Europe
 – Cape Town Triennial
 – Paperworks Group Show (prizewinner)
 1983 Tatham Gallery, Pietermaritzburg Association of Arts, Natal
 1982 Cape Town Triennial (gold medallist)
 1980 Durban Arts '80
 – Young Artists, Olivetti Gallery
 – Sculpture '80, University of Pretoria
 1977 University of Witwatersrand

Commissions

- 2004 Oval Carpet, South Africa House, London
 2002 Field of Value, Nedbank headquarters, Sandton
 1999 ABSA, Johannesburg, Place of Nurture (Entrance Mural)
 1997 B/M/D Headquarters, Cape Town, Signs of Fire (drawings)
 1996 The Way of Stone, Reunion, Indian Ocean
 1995 Four Core Tapestries for the Mining Group Gencor, Johannesburg
 1992 Grahamstown Festival of the Arts: Three Lithographs
 1988 Anglo Vaal: Panel
 – African Oxygen: Tapestry for new hospital complex
 1986 Johannesburg Art Gallery: Intact – graphic
 1984 Anglo American: Trance Atlantic – drawing
 – Sandt Du Plessis Theatre, Bloemfontein: Inner Dance – drawing

Awards and residencies

- 2003 Gammeldok Copenhagen artists residency /04
 1991 The Old Mutual Vita Award (overall winner)
 – The Simpson Fellowship, University of California, Berkeley
 1989 Art Gallery Founders Prize of the University of California, Berkley
 1987 Fulbright Placement (University of California, Berkley)
 – University Council Fellowship (University of the Witwatersrand)
 1982 Olivetti Travel Grant
 1981 Almaks Prize
 1979 Montagu White Travel Grant
 1978 Montagu White Bursary
 – Afrox Prize (open category)
 1977 Afrox Metal Art Sculpture Annual Competition (student award)

Collections

- Anglo American Corporation, Johannesburg
 Barloworld Corporate Collection, Johannesburg
 BHP Billiton Art Collection, Johannesburg
 Bloemfontein University
 Durban Art Gallery
 General Electric Company, USA
 Johannesburg Art Gallery
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
 MTN Collection, Johannesburg
 National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC
 Pretoria Museum
 Rembrandt Foundation, Stellenbosch
 Sanlam, Cape Town
 South African Broadcasting Corporation, Johannesburg
 South African National Gallery, Cape Town
 Standard Bank Collection, Johannesburg
 Tatham Art Gallery, Pietermaritzburg
 Trust Bank, Johannesburg
 University of South Africa, Pretoria
 William Humphreys Art Gallery, Kimberley
 Witwatersrand University, Johannesburg

Writings by Karel Nel

(2007) 'Shangaan: in search of a genealogy' in *Dungamanzi: stirring waters – Tsonga and Shangaan art from Southern Africa*, WUP and JAG: Johannesburg pp. 148-167

(2007) 'Vittorino Meneghelli: bold collector of the unexpected', in **Meneghelli (V.) et. al.** LA MIA VITA, LA MIA COLLEZIONE/MY LIFE, MY COLLECTION, memorie e pezzi selezionati dalla collezione di Vittorio Meneghelli/ memoir and selected pieces from the collection of Vittorio Meneghelli, Johannesburg. pp. 268-275

with Von Maltitz, A. 'Edoardo Villa: a life considered' in Nel, Burroughs, Von Maltitz (eds) (2005) *Villa at 90*, Jonathan Ball with Shelf: Johannesburg, pp. 25-120

'Edoardo Villa: creating an African Presence' in Nel, Burroughs, Von Maltitz (eds) (2005) *Villa at 90*, Jonathan Ball with Shelf: Johannesburg pp. 121-148

with Sack, M. 'Villa, Johannesburg and the modernist context' in Nel, Burroughs, Von Maltitz Editions, (2002)

'Southern Artifacts in the Horstmann Collection,' in *The Power of Form*. Milan: Skira, 2002, pp. 212-243

'Towards a Southern African Aesthetic,' in *Ubuntu* catalogue. Paris: Musee de l'Homme and Museum of African and Oceanic Art, 2002

'Headrests and Hair Ornaments: Signifying More Than Status,' in *Hair in African Art and Culture*, edited by Roy Sieber and Frank Herreman. New York: Museum for African Art, 2000, pp. 151-159

with Nessa Liebhammer. 'Swazi Umntfwana' and 'The Puzzle of the Pendant Figures' in *Evocations of the Child: Fertility Figures of the Southern African Region*, edited by Elizabeth Dell. Cape Town: Human and Rousseau/Johannesburg Art Gallery, 1998, pp. 161-171

Catalogue entries for southern African tobacco pipes and snuff containers in *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, edited by Tom Phillips. Munich: Prestel, 1995, pp. 211-215

Selected bibliography

Nel, K. (et al) (2007) *Lost light: fugitive images from deep space*, Standard Bank Gallery: Johannesburg (exhibition catalogue)

Wullschlager, J. 'Karel Nel at Art First,' FT Magazine, London 3 September 2005

McKenzie, J. (2004) 'The Status of Dust' in *studio international visual arts*, Design and Architecture Yearbook special issue, Vol. 203 no. 1026, The Studio Trust: New York

Bunn, David. 'Breath Alphabet: Karel Nel and the History of Division,' in Status of Dust. Art First, New York 2002

Dubow, Jessica. 'Status of Dust: A Profane Spirituality, A Radical Materiality,' in *Status of Dust*. Art First, New York 2002

Cooper Stracey, Clare, and Karel Nel. *Volcanic Texts*. Art First, London 2000

Martin, Marilyn. *View of the Inner House*. Art First, London 1996

Doepel, Rory. *Karel Nel: Transforming Symbols*. Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand, 1993

I would like to thank Nick Scoville for including me in The COSMOS Project and for his text, John Hodgkiss and Graham Borchers for photographing the work, Peter Mitchell and Dave Corney for their meticulous framing and construction work, Eugene Botha of Art Logistics for carefully crating and moving my artworks, Joni Brenner and Scott Hazelhurst for support on so many levels, and Clare Cooper, Benjamin Rhodes and Matt Incedon for their perseverance and wonderful long-standing support.

Of course, I thank my family and friends across the world who have nurtured me and inspired my work and travels. Gerrit Olivier, the head of the Wits School of Arts has been an unstinting support.

Published in connection with the exhibition:

Karel Nel
The Brilliance of Darkness

9 September to 9 October 2008

Published by Art First, London:
Clare Cooper
Benjamin Rhodes
Matt Incedon

© Copyright Art First 2008

Essay copyright:
Karel Nel
Nick Scoville

Design:
Crescent Lodge

Photography:
John Hodgkiss/Todd White/Graham Borchers

Print:
Healeys Printers

ISBN 1-901993-64-7

ART FIRST CONTEMPORARY ART

First Floor Gallery
9 Cork Street
London W1S 3LL

T +44 (0)20 7734 0386
E info@artfirst.co.uk

www.artfirst.co.uk