



DANE MITCHELL

THE IMPONDERABLES

29 NOVEMBER 2024 ~ 1 MARCH 2025

THE RENSHAWS

Dane Mitchell's exhibition *The Imponderables* explores loss, containment, and future contingent propositions via an island that is not and a place that does not.

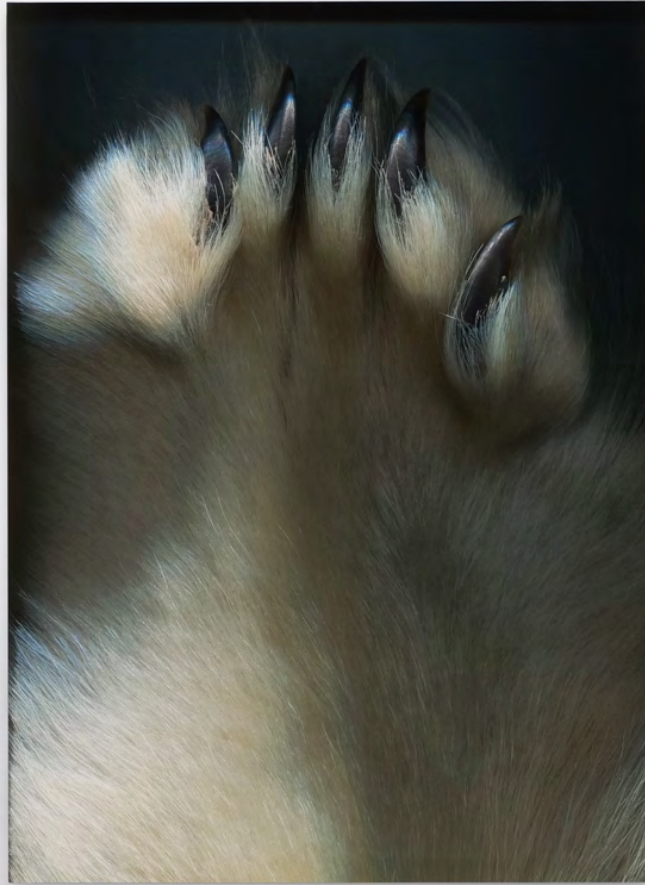
Continuing Mitchell's long-standing exploration of loss, absence, and the porous boundaries between the natural and artificial worlds, *The Imponderables* offers a perspective on our relationship with matter and the environment and estranging attempts to protect the future from our present selves.

Mitchell's exhibition orbits Svalbard, a remote, stateless Arctic archipelago: a proto-heterotopia where birth and death are prohibited, an un-country that both reflects and upends, and a disappearing natural habitat for the polar bear, held captive in the manufactured facsimile of their Arctic home in Sea World, just 80km from the gallery.

The project includes a series of letter-works — a form the artist first employed in his work in the late 1990s — alongside new sculptures and photographic work, including high-resolution detailed scans of the doors to the Global Seed Vault — a doomsday vault buried in the side of a mountain in Svalbard — using a flatbed scanner to produce images of the threshold between our incendiary present and a buried future.

Through the innovative use of technology, performative gestures, sharp reflection, and vanished and entrapped materials, Mitchell's work draws connections between the containment of nature in zoos and museums to the Global Seed Vault's paradoxical status as both a hopeful safeguard and an apocalyptic proposition.

The Imponderables contends with legacies of preserving, apprehending and comprehending the world whilst reflecting on Svalbard as a place both on a precipice and in purgatory. It invites viewers to consider the complex interplay between preservation and loss, legibility and illegibility, and our place in a rapidly evolving present and future.





Ursus Maritimus (left paw) 2024
Giclee print on aluminium
1510h x 1100w mm, edition of 3
DM005



Ursus Maritimus (right paw) 2024
Giclee print on aluminium
1510h x 1100w mm, edition of 3
DM004

Dane Mitchell
3 Harvey Street
Brunswick, VIC 3056
Australia

20 May 2023

Åsmund Asdal
Svalbard Global Seed Vault Coordinator
9170 Svalbard
Longyearbyen, Spitsbergen
Svalbard

Dear Åsmund Asdal,

I am writing to you in the hope that you might be open to discussing an undertaking: for me to perform two traceless gestures at the Global Seed Vault in Svalbard. Both gestures will be dissolving, temporal impressions as I do not wish to leave any permanent impression on a place that I don't come from, and that actually, nobody comes from.

As you are of course aware, the Global Seed Vault is a doomsday vault for the world's crop diversity in case of global crises to ensure that plant genetic material is preserved. Only you and several of your colleagues are permitted inside the vault. The rest of us can only imagine what it might feel and smell like to permeate the permafrost — to be inside the mountain — with the millions of stored and buried seeds. We can only do this by pressing up against the exterior surface of the doors to the vault; they are all we have access to. In this sense, the doors are crucial. The doors are, in a way, all that matter to our present selves. The doors are the impenetrable threshold to the present's idea of an imagined future. They define the separation of the world from the vault, and the separation of the present from a buried future.

The first of the traceless gestures I wish to perform is to use a document scanner to scan the doors of the Global Seed Vault. I have been using a desktop scanner for some time as an alternative to a camera as they upturn the logic of the camera. The camera takes light in: the world enters it. Distinctively, the scanner projects light outwards: it enters the world. The scanner reads the world in a left-to-right, up-down motion, turning the world into data. By its very nature it is indexical — scanning the world. At the Global Seed Vault I aim to hold the scanner hard up against the doors to read and index their surfaces.

The second gesture arises from an interest in homoeopathy. Homoeopathy is a strange and beautiful framework for (mis)understanding the material world. It is a medical-magic cross-species that is reliant on belief and some irresistible notions as to how materials and forces interact with one another, the world and the body.

One of these notions is that water can contain memory: that you can put a substance in water and through a process called succussion (simply shaking) the water molecules can contain and retain information or knowledge of the thing that was diluted in it. And dilution is an understatement. The homoeopathic framework requires dilution to such an extent that the substance is quite practically gone. This act of dilution completes a beautiful equation: dilution equals potency.

Homoeopathy believes that the less present something is, the more effective it is. It's an alluring notion — the less present something is, the more grip it might have on the world. Given Svalbard is ostensibly a liquid world covered and shaped by water and ice, what diluted memories must it hold?

The gesture I wish to perform is to bury two homoeopathic remedies next to the Global Seed Vault. Both remedies come from a poetic corner of homoeopathic medicine called *The Imponderables*: they can't be pondered; they can't be thought about: they are unthinkable.

The Imponderables I will carry with me to Svalbard are made from energy, not substance. One is named *Sol* — a substance made of trapped light emitted from the sun. The other is *Luna*, which comes from trapped sunlight reflected off the surface of the moon. I purchased these two substances from a pharmaceutical dispensary so that I might bury homoeopathic sunlight and moonlight either side of the Seed Vault's doors.

The Global Seed Vault is an imponderable place — equally a museum and a burial ground; in an imponderable location — Svalbard is a territory that by law does not permit anyone to be born or die there; addressing an imponderable future — presupposing the loss it seeks to protect against. The vault is imponderable just as the future for which it is buried is — the history of the future being a history of obsolescence after all — as surely there is simply too much future.

I hope that you might be able to support me realising these two traceless gestures. Please get in touch if you require further information.

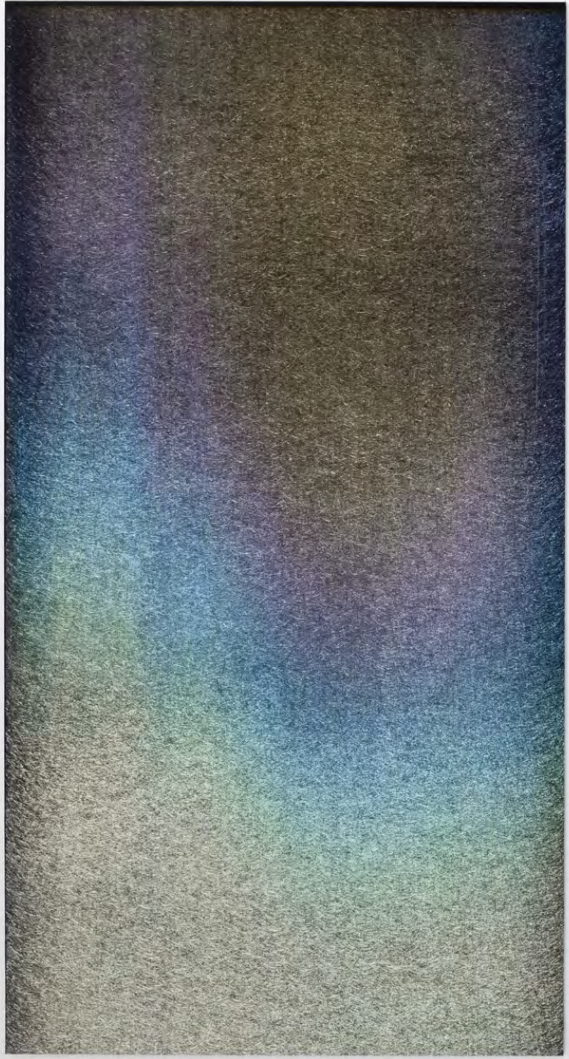
Sincerely,



Dane Mitchell



Buried Future, Letter to Global Seed Vault 2023
Giclee print on aluminium
1100h x 850w mm, edition of 3
DM007





Imponderable Future, Global Seed Vault Door (left) 2024
Giclee print on aluminium
2010h x 1120w mm, edition of 3
DM009



Imponderable Future, Global Seed Vault Door (right) 2024
Giclee print on aluminium
2010h x 1120w mm, edition of 3
DM010







The Imponderables 2024

Lab stirrers, electrical cables, bottles, homeopathic remedies

120h x 900w x 360d mm, 2 parts

DM001



Sun Hole 2024
Giclee print on aluminium, two parts
100h x 350w mm, edition of 3
DM008

Dane Mitchell
3 Harvey Street
Brunswick, VIC 3056
Australia

5 August, 2024

Tacha Mulligan
Polar Bear Supervisor, Sea World
Sea World Drive
Main Beach, QLD 4217
Australia

Dear Tacha Mulligan,

I am writing to you in the hope that you might be open to discussing an undertaking. I wish to ensnare the aromascape of the polar bear enclosure at Sea World. My desire is to capture the fragrance of the polar bear enclosure at Sea World via a non-invasive technique used in the perfume industry called Headspace Technology, which entraps volatile aroma molecules rising off and emanating from things in the world.

I have vivid childhood memories of the Auckland Zoo polar bear enclosure from the 1980s. The enclosure remained unchanged from the 1930s until it was closed in 1995 following the deaths of the last two polar bears, Joachim and Ingrid, who died within a month of each other. Now filled and repurposed, the enclosure was dressed to replicate the Svalbard landscape from which the bears came. This concrete scenography completed the decontextualisation of the largest carnivorous animal on the planet in the suburban landscape.

It is possible that this early memory has a connection to my interest in thinking about the correlation between the development of the museum out of the *mouseion*, the zoo out of the menagerie and the correlation between these two forms of containment: these techniques of enclosure and presentation. The recorded history of the keeping of polar bears dates to 285 BC when Pharaoh Ptolemy II Philadelphus kept polar bears in Egypt. Ptolemy II Philadelphus holds an important place in the history of museums too, having overseen the completion of the Mouseion of Alexandria, which contained the Library of Alexandria. And, just as Henry III kept polar bears in the Tower of London in his menagerie in the 13th century, three polar bears are kept on the Gold Coast, Queensland at Sea World. Notably, twenty-one-year-old twin brothers Nelson and Hudson, and seven-year-old Mishka are the only captive polar bears in Australia.

The practicalities of the Headspace capture involve placing the end of a 3mm diameter tube through a vent; under a door; over a wall; through a grate; or any other practical method to place one end of the tube in the den of the polar bears. At a distance, the tube would be attached to a small inflatable plastic bag called a Tedlar Gas Sampling Bag along with a small vacuum pump. This non-invasive apparatus will allow for a reliable sample of polar bear enclosure air to be trapped and stored.

A further wish of mine is to take the Headspace capture of the polar bear enclosure at Sea World and analyse it via gas chromatography-mass spectrometry. This procedure allows for the reproduction of the polar bear den aromascape through synthesis. The possibilities of aroma and its molecules to summon up experiences and reveal worlds might allow for the conjuring up of the polar bear enclosure quite literally in the body of the viewer: for the enclosure to take shape in the brain as the aroma molecules hit the olfactory sensory neurons.

As an aside, I recently visited Svalbard in the Arctic Circle and rather beautifully, I was unexpectedly struck by the reality of always thinking about polar bears. That is not an exaggeration. At all moments, you must have the polar bear in mind — by law you are not permitted to leave the two streets of the town Longyearbyen without a gun in case cornered by one — and the effect of this is that the polar bear lives in the enclosure of your mind the entire time you are in Svalbard. The polar bear always remains present in the interior of the mind and the exterior landscape simultaneously; even in their absence from view they den-in.

Thank you so much for your time in considering my proposal.

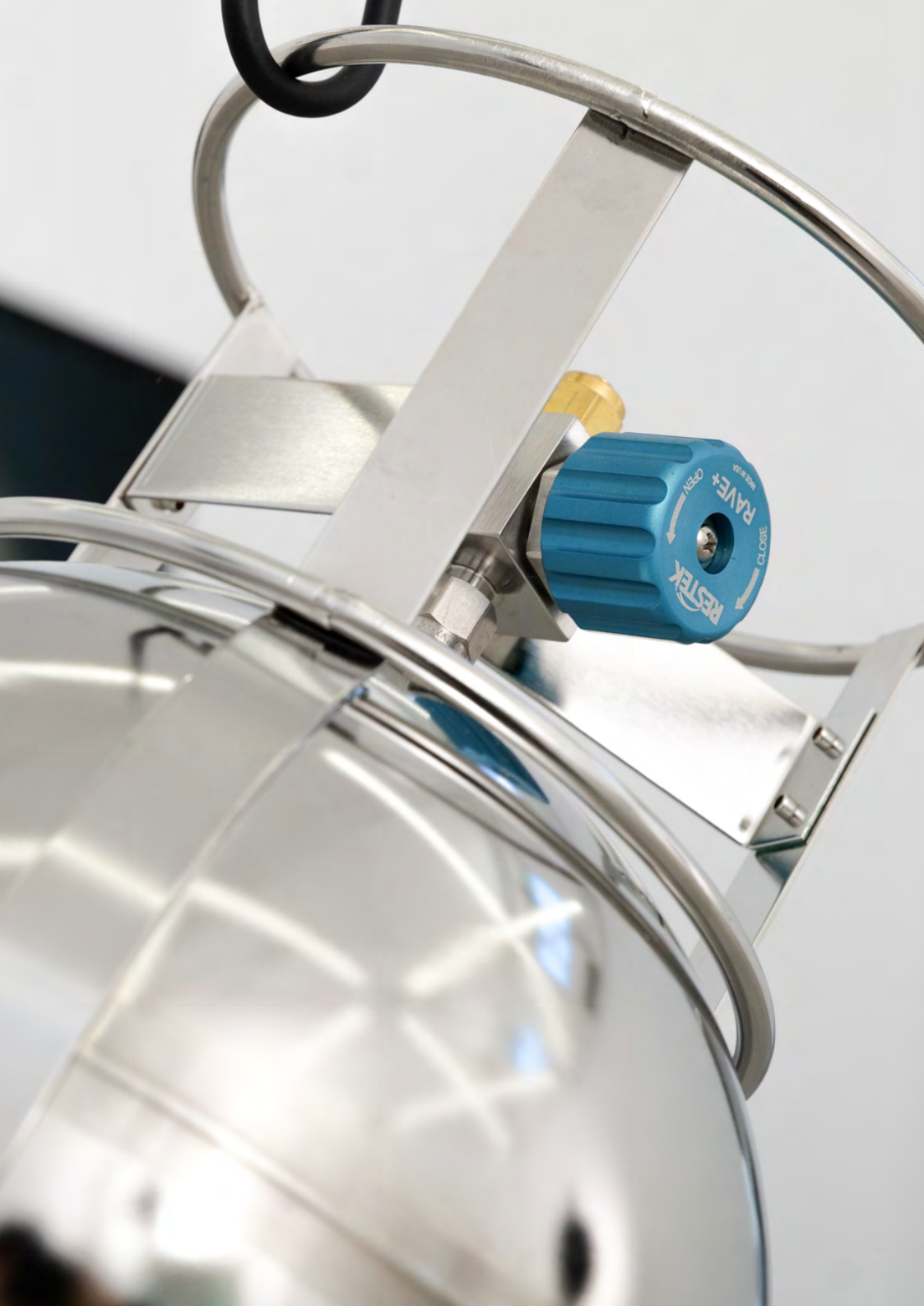
Sincerely,



Dane Mitchell



Zoo Enclosure Capture, Letter to SeaWorld 2024
Giclee print on aluminium
1100h x 1800w mm, edition of 3
DM003





Polar Bear Zoo Enclosure Air Sample 2024
Stainless steel, air
340h x 230w x 230d mm
DM006

POTENTISED SUBSTANCE

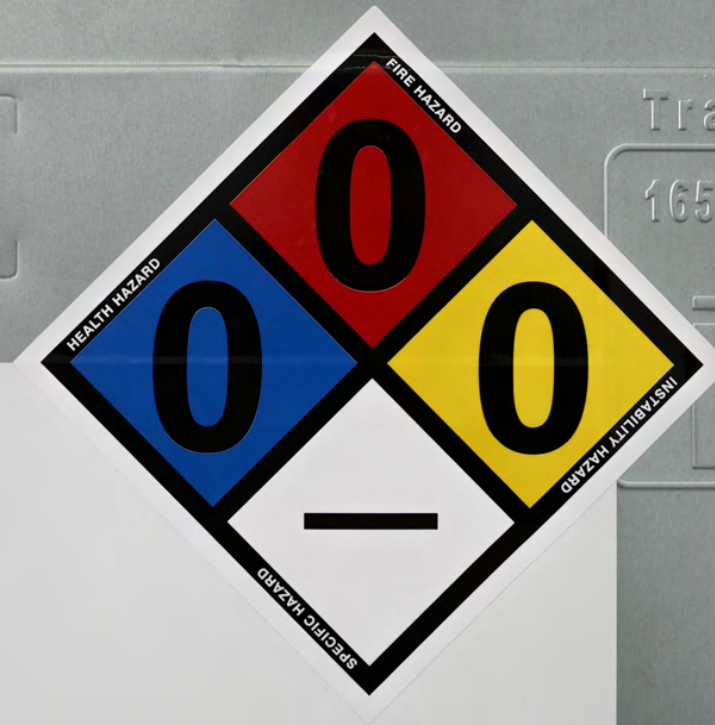
Ursus Maritimus

CARNIVORA	URSIDAE

For Loneliness & Introspection

Original Homeopathic Dilution /1M

1000L



Transport

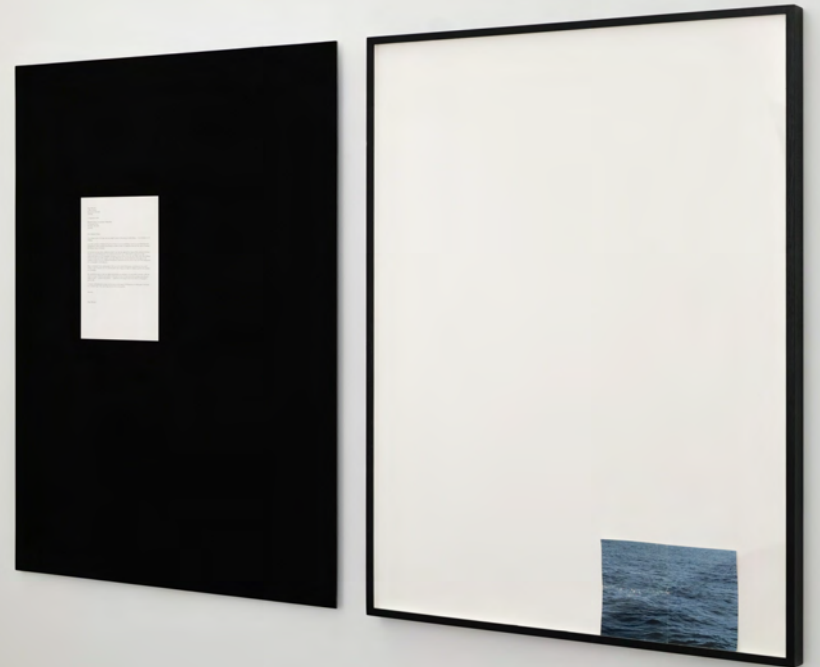
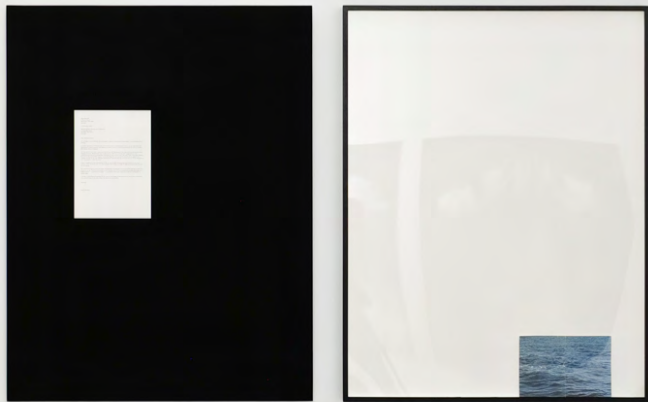
1650 kg max



SCHÜTZ
ECOBULK / RECOBULK



Ursus Maritimus (for Loneliness and Introspection) 2024
Intermediate bulk container, homeopathic remedy
1170h x 1000w x 1200d mm
DM001



Dane Mitchell
3 Harvey Street
Brunswick, VIC 3056
Australia

11 September 2024

Judith Tyner
Professor Emerita of Geography
California State University, Long Beach
1250 Bellflower Blvd.
Long Beach, CA 90840
United States

Dear Judith Tyner,

I'm writing to you in the hope that you might be open to discussing an undertaking — to an intimate act of holding.

I recently travelled to Svalbard in the Arctic Ocean to not see something. I went to see an island that isn't. Perlamutrovy, which translates from Russian to *mother of pearl*, is a phantom island off the coast of Graham Bell Island, close to Svalbard.

As I am sure you are aware, a phantom island is one that has appeared on maps and has subsequently been found to not exist. Perlamutrovy was un-discovered in 2017 up to which point it appeared on maps — named and charted on all cartographic documents of the territory since the early 1900s. Still today, flicking between terrain and satellite imagery on Google Maps the now unnamed phantom island appears and vanishes in front of our eyes. Whether Perlamutrovy sunk back into the ocean or rose out of the imagination of a cartographer is still unknown.

On my travels I took a photograph of the sea out of which Perlamutrovy was believed to rise, and I enclose a copy of this for you. It is with this photo that I hope you might be willing to perform the intimate act of holding.

My unsolicited request is that you might fold this photo up and place it in your pocket and take it with you wherever you go. Tucked in your pocket it will map the traces of your movements, perhaps operating as a hidden terrain — a pearl in your pocket — a phantom on the map, in the ocean and the cartographer's pocket alike.

I enclose a self-addressed envelope for the return of the image of Perlamutrovy, at which point I will send you a framed edition.

Sincerely,



Dane Mitchell



Mother of Pearl 2024
Giclee print on aluminium, giclee print on paper, framed
1100h x 1800w mm, unique
DM002

For further information please contact

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THE RENSHAWS

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