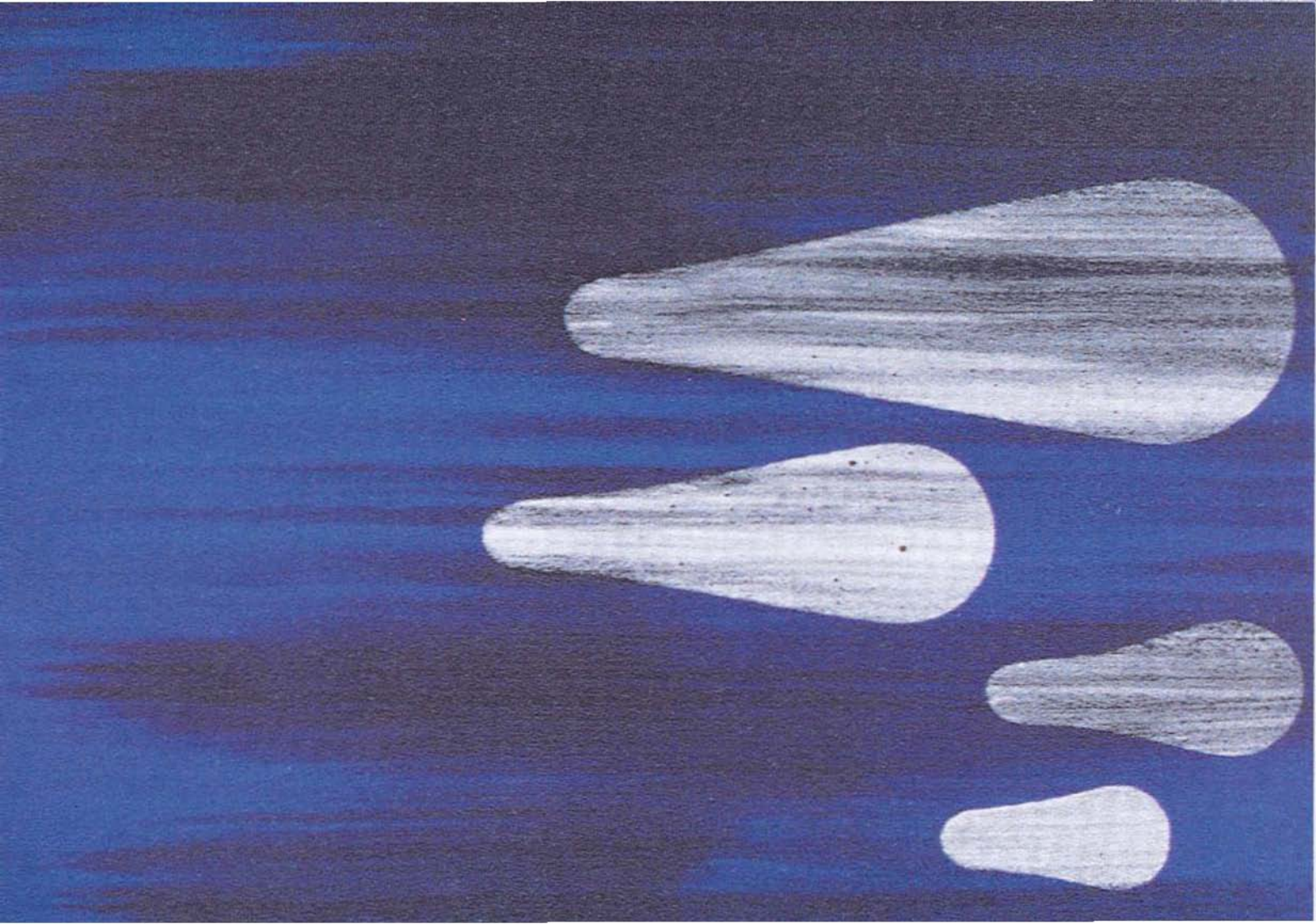


LUISE FONG

UNIVERSITY

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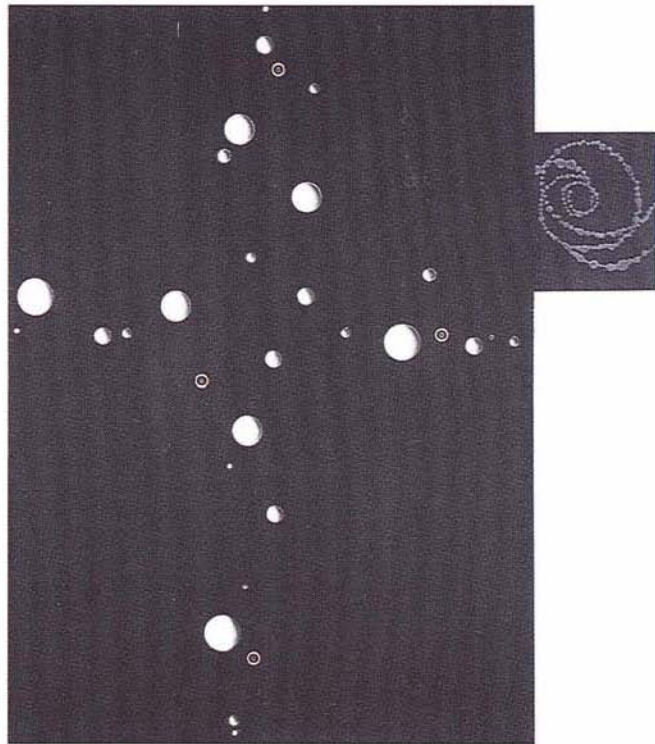
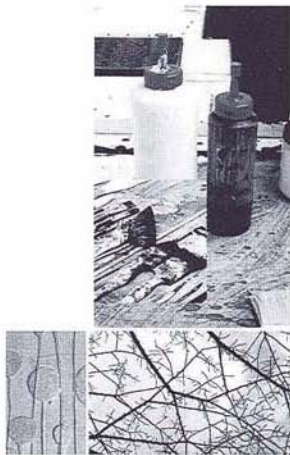
UNIVERSE - LUISE FONG • Dedicated to Brian Queenin

DARK MATTER

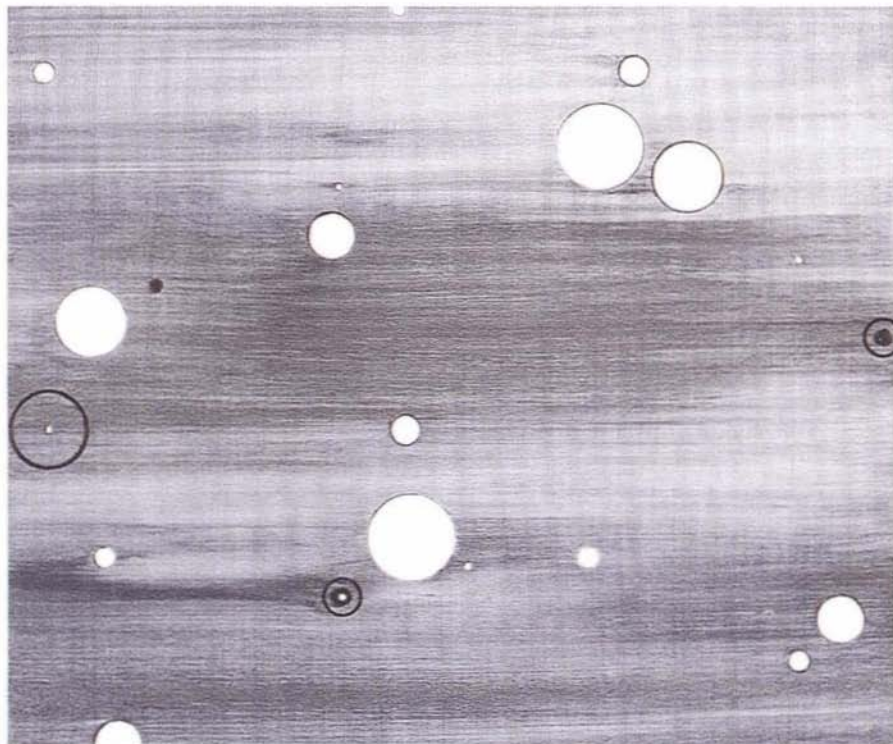
"Is this science or is this poetry? The two seem to coincide."¹

After centuries of astral study and decades of cosmic exploration, astronomers at the end of the twentieth century have come to recognise that the more they discover about the world beyond the blue horizon, the less they can be sure of. Recent studies suggest that 'dark matter', the invisible reaches of the universe concealed by vast, impenetrable dust-clouds, comprises ninety percent of all matter. The acknowledgement that the traditional ways of measuring and valuing knowledge, by what we can see and understand, no longer apply articulates the painting of Luise Fong. In an echo of eastern religions, Fong's eerily constructed worlds transfer our focus from the surface we can see to the vast emptiness beyond, perforating and interrupting the visible with membranous networks and light absorbing tunnels. It is this 'space between' which comes to prominence in Fong's *Universe*, probing the mystery of the dark voids within space, consciousness and the human body.

A certain complacency resides around the corporeal. Whatever else we doubt, however the smoke and mirror world of virtual reality and simulacrum causes us to question accepted beliefs and preconceptions, when we examine the physical and tangible we can say 'this is real'. Accordingly, we use the words 'flesh and blood' to indicate that which exists without question, a physical entity not caught up in the intangible realms of the imagination. In truth, however, the stability we imbue the body with is no certainty at all -



Transit (1999)

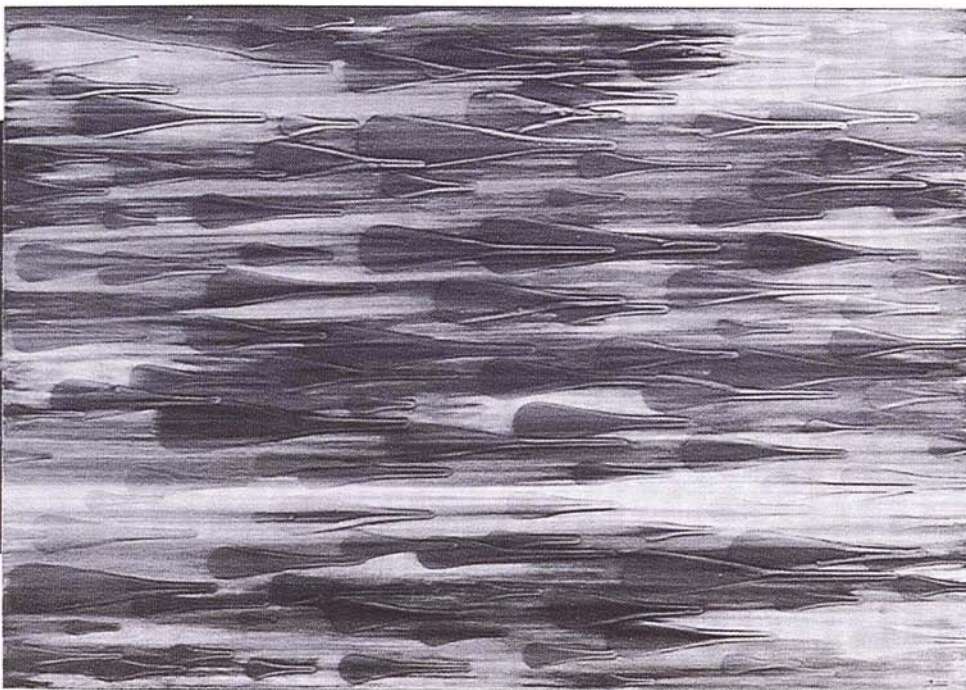
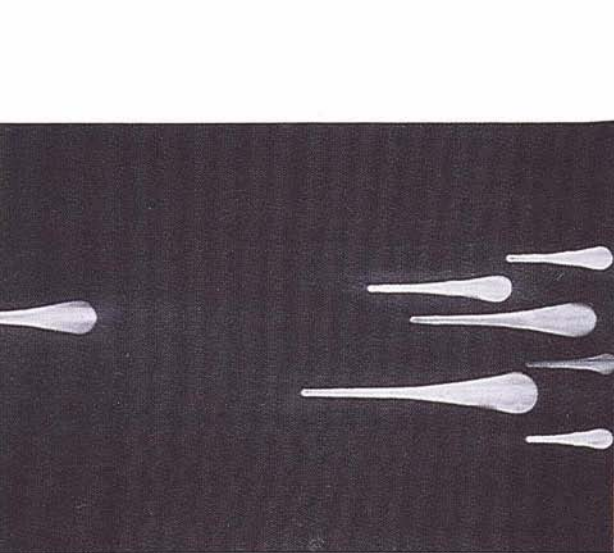


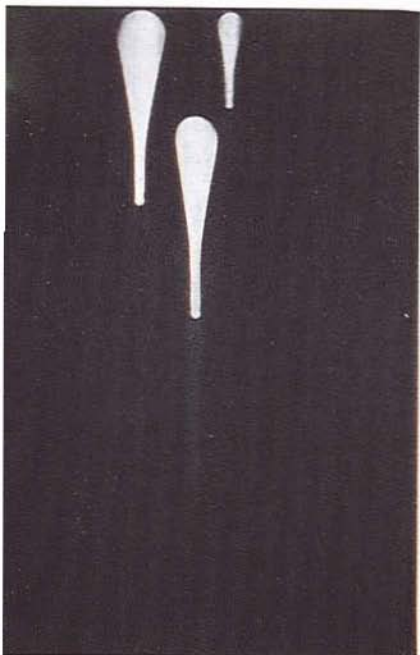
Element I [detail] (1999)

it too is a site of constant change, mystery and renewal. Composed of over 75 trillion cells, the human body continually renews itself, with 3 billion cells dying and being replaced every sixty seconds. In addition, the atoms which form us and all existing masses are in a state of constant fluctuation: "*The solidity of matter is mere illusion. It is neither solid nor motionless, and it is mainly empty space.*"² We are, therefore, not quite as irreducible as we would like to imagine. Defining the real as something we can touch, or experience, transforms the physical senses into arbiters of actuality, living 'bodies of evidence'. Negotiating a path between reality and illusion, Fong's paintings explore this paradox. Undeniable structural entities, they physically occupy the gallery space but, on closer inspection, reveal piercings, scars and dark openings; chinks in the armour of our nonchalant faith. The works in *Universe* explore dimensionality in many ways, spiritual and metaphysical, simulacrum and surface.

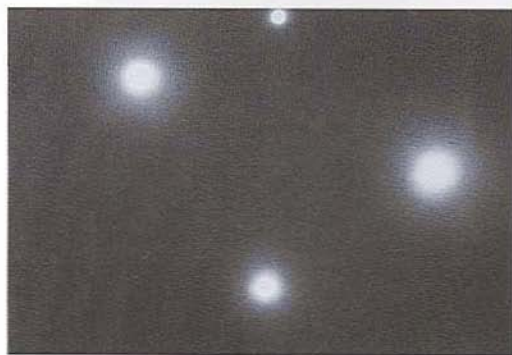
Such a premeditated and calculated interrogation of the painted plane also hints at surgical intervention - an exploratory biopsy undertaken to discover the nature of the surface and what lies beyond. Nebulous stains and cell-like grids recall the ghostly traces and patterns of forensic pathology, in which microscopic samples of blood, tissue and other body matter are studied in an attempt to define the cause of death. Glittering compositions coated with shimmering carborundum dust echo the spectre of luminol-coated fingerprints rendered suddenly visible in a darkened crime scene. The gothic morbidity expressed by these marks contrasts hauntingly with the undeniable beauty of the surface. The gauzy skins of Fong's paintings are as elusive of meaning as the body itself, and their vitreous and incandescent layers as readily evoke an intricate concentration of molecules as they do the distant patterns of a galactic explosion.

As a title, *Universe* relates not only to Fong's many visual allusions to the cosmological - doubly ringed circles that resemble the light echo from a distant, exploding supernova, the mercurial flare of comet trails - but also an orbit of a more personal nature. She sees



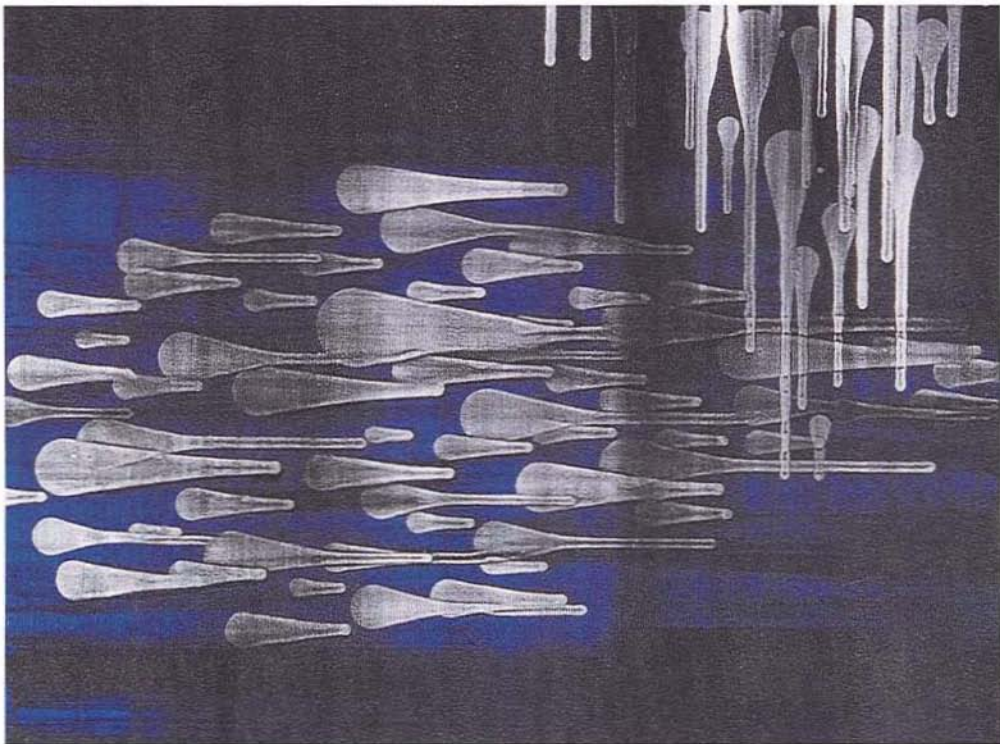


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Element II (1999)

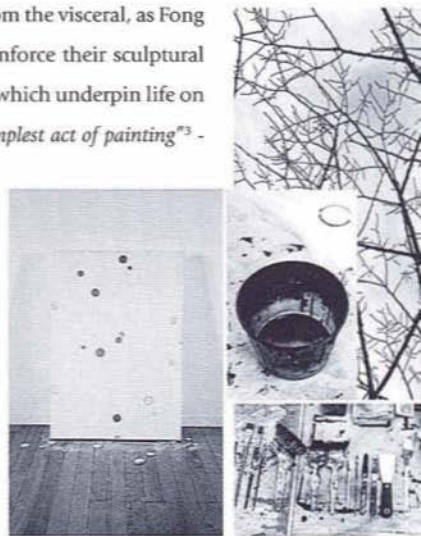




Aerial [detail] (1999)

each work, or painted cluster, as an individual body of energy, around which the viewer navigates like a satellite. This private trajectory echoes the connections and associations we piece together to assemble our own reality. In the chaotic expanses of Fong's invented galaxies the darkness is more revealing than the light, reflecting the Buddhist view of the world in which 'the void' is another name for the universal.

Notwithstanding their undisguised allusions to the body, the works in *Universe* exhibit a new detachment from the visceral, as Fong explores a physicality of a different kind. Not only does the increasing solidity of her painted boxes reinforce their sculptural occupation of space, but the simple images she has used within them allude to the elemental natural forces which underpin life on earth. Clusters of tear-shaped marks pour across the surface as evidence of what Fong describes as "*the simplest act of painting*"³ - allowing the paint to be pulled downwards by the constant yet invisible draw of gravity. The process may be simple, but it is also subverted; by creating compositions in which drips run determinedly in opposite directions, Fong further undermines our faith in perception. Just as cubic painting supports represent structure, dimension and volume, the subtle perforations and cavernous sections of soft black flocking contradict the sanctity of the surface, keeping the eye moving and searching. Within this tangle of dimensions and directions, an unexpected stillness prevails. It is as if the painted fragments are frozen in time, forming overlapping and intersecting veils which guide us towards what lies beyond. Strangely, the intricate beauty of the surface is itself an encouragement to pass through to a place where the eye and mind can be still.



The vermilion red Fong employed in previous paintings to suggest the visceral, internal realm of the body feminine has been replaced with a cool, cerulean blue, evoking the cerebral and spiritual rather than the emotional and anatomical. Fong describes this colour as being one of mental and spiritual clarity which indicates "the shift from the physical into a more conceptual mind-space."⁴ In this context, Fong's subtle corruption of the surface avoids the allusions to anger, mutilation and violence made in earlier works and instead becomes a process of exploration, a 'breaking through' to a higher level of consciousness and understanding. Restricting herself to a simple, almost monochromatic palette and an essentialist repertoire of imagery, Fong constantly pushes the boundaries of the surface. The intention of this rigorous and extended investigation is not to uncover answers or deliver solutions, but rather to explore and draw attention to the many ways of looking. Simple in statement yet profound in implication, Fong's paintings exist in a world where understanding, like the known universe, is constantly expanding with possibilities.

Felicity Milburn

¹ *Shadows in the Cave : Mapping the Unconscious Universe*, Graham Dunstan Martin, Penguin, 1990

² Ibid

³ Luise Fong, August 1999

⁴ Luise Fong, August, 1999

The works in *Universe* were made while Luise Fong was the Visiting Artist at the University of Canterbury, a programme supported by Creative New Zealand (Arts Council of New Zealand *Toi Aotearoa*). All works are mixed media on board.

BIOGRAPHY

Luise Fong was born in Sandakan, Malaysia in 1964 and moved to New Zealand as a child. She graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the University of Auckland in 1989. Fong was joint winner of the Visa Art Award in 1994, and participated in residencies at the Victoria College of the Arts, Melbourne and the Govett Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth in 1994 and 1995 respectively. She has held part-time teaching positions at both the University of Auckland's Elam School of Fine Arts and the Painting Department of the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. Fong has been based in Melbourne since 1995.

Selected exhibitions

Surface Tension: Ten Artists in the 90s, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1992; *Pathology*, Brooker Gallery, Wellington, 1993; *More Human*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, 1995; *Cultural Safety: Contemporary Art from New Zealand*, Frankfurter Kunstverein, Germany and City Gallery, Wellington, 1995; *Nostalgia*, Basement Gallery, Melbourne, 1996; *Trans/fusion: Hong Kong Auckland artists' exchange* (1996), Hong Kong Arts Centre and Auckland Art Gallery; *Fathom*, Anna Bibby Gallery, Auckland, 1997; *Sonar*, John Batten Gallery, Hong Kong, 1998 and *Nova*, Robert Lindsay Gallery, Melbourne, 1998.

Selected bibliography

- Kent, Rachel *An Ambiguous Abstraction: Recent Paintings by Luise Fong*, Art New Zealand #86, Autumn, 1998.
Smith, Allan *Toxic and Tenebrous: Urban Beauty in the Art of Luise Fong*, Midwest 6, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 1994.
Vaigro, Wendy *Cosmographies: A Pathologist's Diary*, Art & Asia Pacific, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1995.

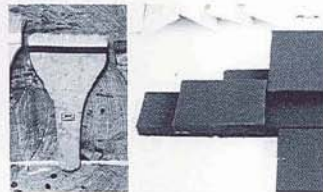


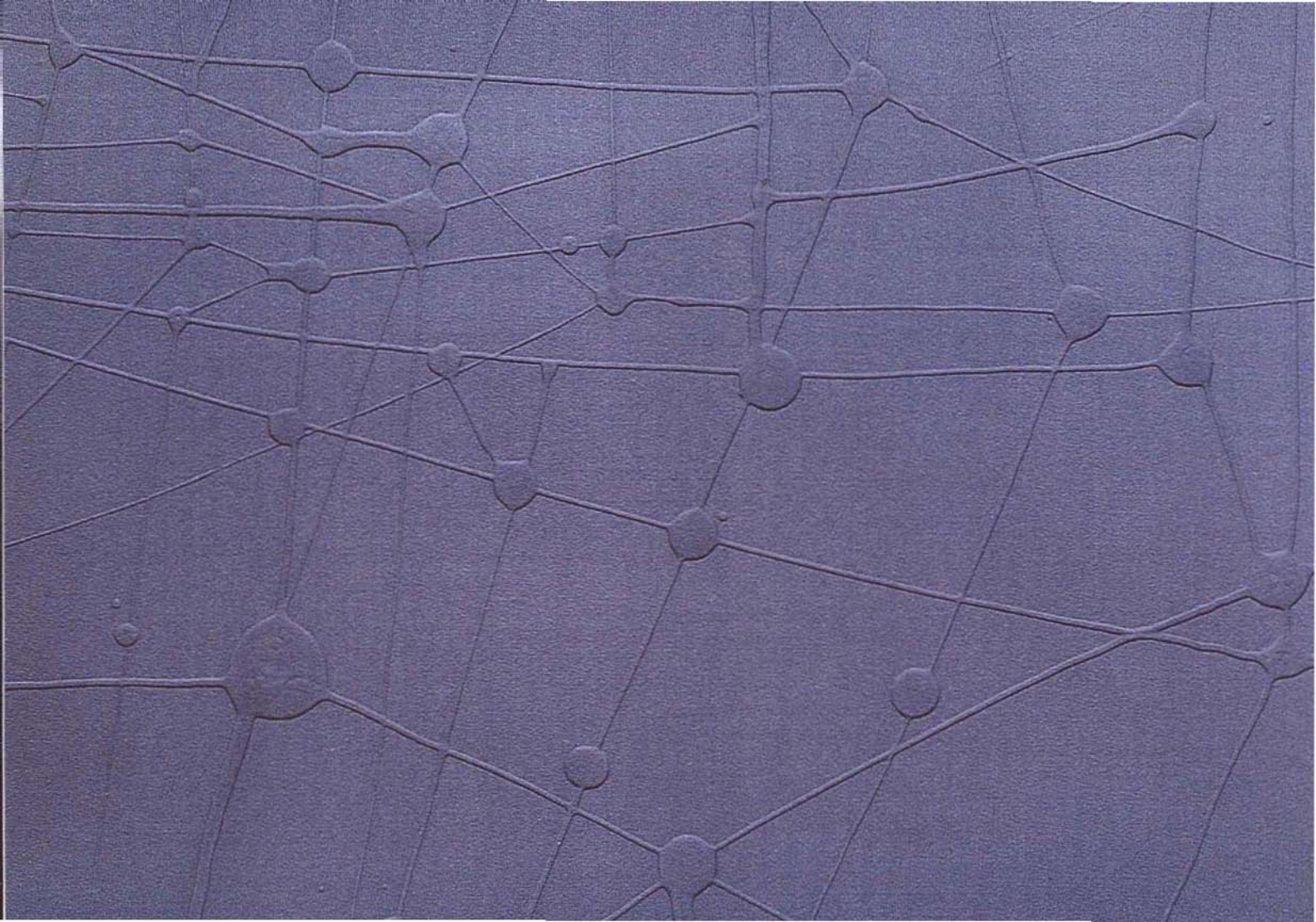
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