

Andrew Browne, *Seven Apparitions*, 2008, photopolymer photogravure, 45.5 x 36.8 cm.

L-R: *Apparition #1, Apparition #2, Apparition #3, Apparition #4, Apparition #5, Apparition #6, Apparition #7.*

# An ambiguous realm

Testing boundaries can position an artist in a place of unknowing that might lead to conceptual, technical and stylistic breakthroughs, writes Andrew Browne.

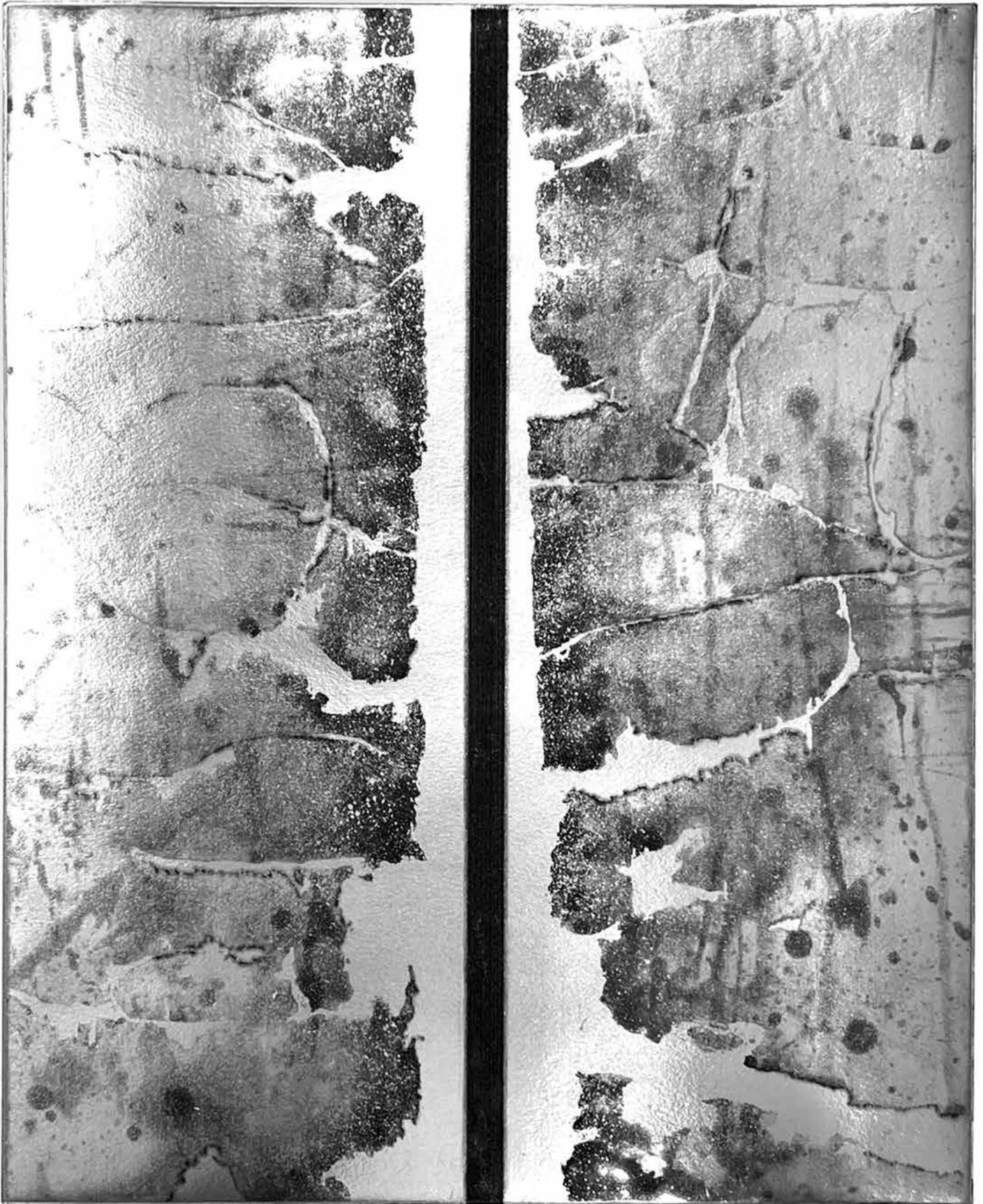
Printmaking has only ever been a small part of my productive output as an artist over the past four decades—painting and to some extent drawing are more the norm. Nevertheless, print has been a regular if intermittent constant since the late 1970s. On occasion I have been entreated to work in the medium, usually at some discomfort, as my relation to it has always involved a series of conceptual and technical leaps that requires more than a gentle push. In that sense, all my work in the print medium is experimental.

It was as much the result of a series of coincidences rather than any clear intent that *Craquelure (silver)* (2022, aquatint, dry point, spit bite chine collé on Japanese silver paper on BK Rives)

was included in the Castlemaine Art Museum's Experimental Print Prize 2023. An invitation from the Australian Print Workshop to contribute to its 40th anniversary *APW 40x40* project led me to propose a silver paper chine collé intaglio, the metallic silver paper (sourced Japanese origami paper in this case) demanding a good amount of care and attendant precision in the tricky printing process, ably handled in this case by senior printers Martin King and Simon White during the edition process. The outcome, parallel to my contemporary painterly focus on modernity's succumbing to the ravages of both gesture and ruin, gives some sense of the abrasion and decay at the heart of the intaglio process, while also

presenting a cryptic image that contains architectural and abstract references, both commonplace and art historical. Pleased it was accepted into the context of the prize in Castlemaine, it was relatively restrained alongside many other artists' works that pushed 'experimental' in wildly diverse directions.

'Experimental' is a slippery term. Does it suggest novelty simply for the untethered sake of it, or is it a more formal strategy for enacting a series of actions that may uncover previously unknown or obscure relationships within an artwork? At its best, I would propose that embracing the experimental should position the artist in some place of unknowing, one that might potentially lead to conceptual, technical



**Andrew Browne, *Craquelure (silver)*,**  
2022 aquatint, dry point, spit bite,  
chine collé on Japanese silver paper  
on BK Rives, 42 x 32 cm.

**(opposite)**  
**Andrew Browne, *A HOLLOW*,**  
2013, aquatint, 89.5 x 119 cm.

A. Browne '22

and stylistic breakthroughs. Technically, I guess the sky's the limit, novelty or not, and recent advances in technology, including AI, are no doubt fertile areas for exploration. But perhaps the key value of the 'experimental' is its supposition that art doesn't necessarily emerge only out of sensibility, but must embrace some erasure of artistic ego—as a playing field for advancing an art's otherwise given parameters and functions.

Taking several steps back as some background to my episodic relationship to printmaking, you might imagine me, a callow student at Melbourne State College in the late 1970s, surely a time as ripe with experimental approaches as any time subsequent, I would propose. There I found myself in the hands of several experienced lecturers, among them James Taylor and Hertha Kluge-Pott, both committed practitioners of printmaking practice. I found both to be alternately bemused and sceptical of my efforts, a good combination for an aspiring artist, rather than the teacher I wasn't to become. As an art teaching course it included a solid grounding in the basics of zinc etching—copper no doubt deemed too luxurious for us fledglings, or our future high school students—which led to an inquiring interest in the formal and conceptual characteristics of image production.

At that time the pre-eminent Victorian artists Fred Williams and George Baldessin, both deeply embedded in the print medium, were very present examples. Williams was even then a legendary figure, known for his paintings that were re-writing the history of the Australian landscape but perhaps less so for what I personally consider his most singular achievement: his prodigious print output that explored his paintings' subjects but with a graphic acuity and economy that even today sets them apart from his illustrious peers. Baldessin, who tragically died the year I commenced my study, was similarly setting a high standard for technical and conceptual innovation, while exploring an idiosyncratic language, in part informed by his European heritage, that would outlast successive fashionable movements and be as gripping today as it was then. Both Williams and Baldessin embraced the fertile zone between abstraction and figuration, and between the carefully planned mark and the visual shock of gesture and accident. In that sense, their work was based on a long lineage of experimental breakthroughs.

It was Bea Maddock's example that was particularly formative. Her use of



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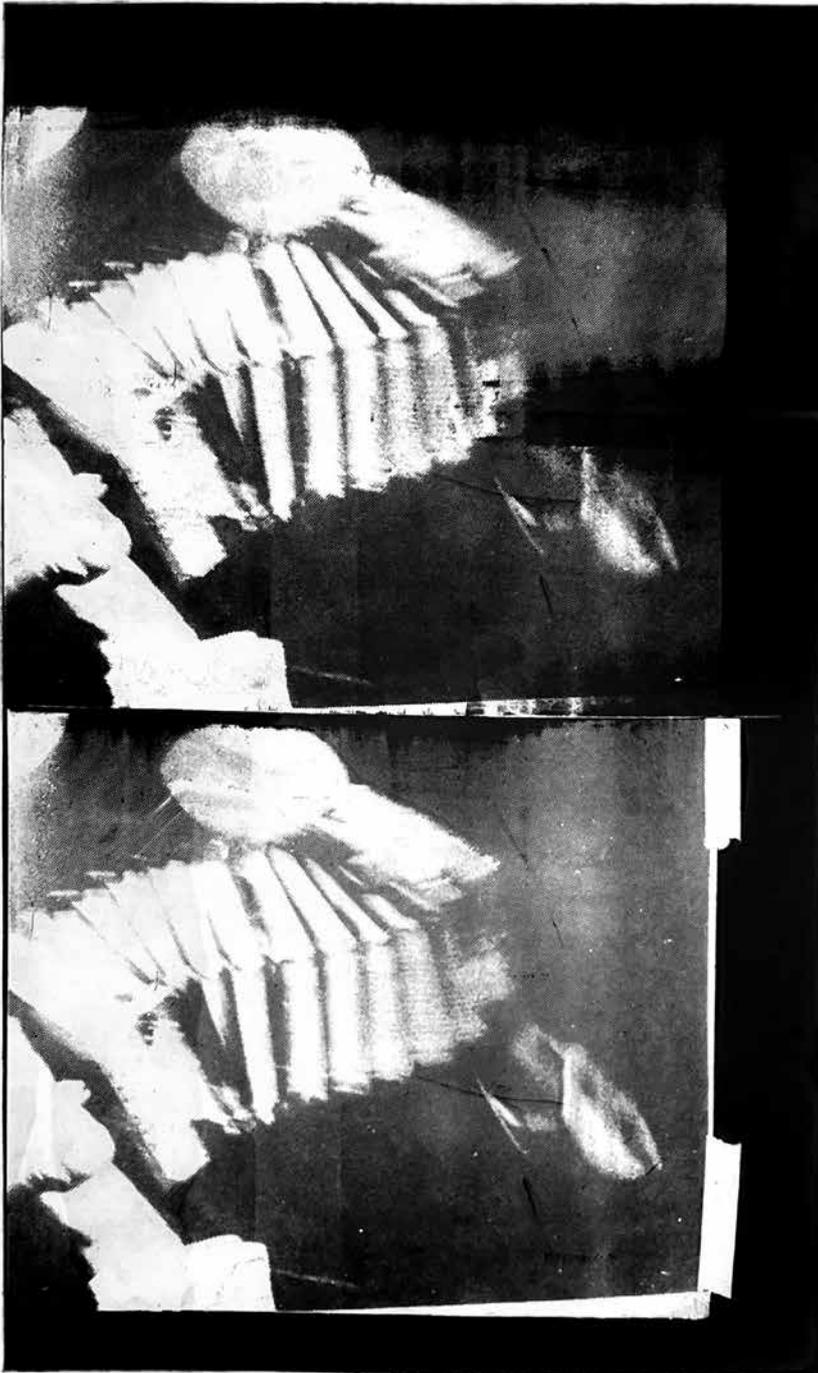
photo-derived imagery, tonal delicacy and a certain inscrutability of particular resonance. Unhappy with my early attempts at hand-worked imagery, a problem I also had with the mandatory life drawing, I gravitated toward photo-derived technology, taking as a cue Maddock's own formal path from earlier expressionist figuration to photography, text and grid. And no doubt Andy Warhol's example similarly provided some sort of conceptual and technical model. During excessive amounts of time spent rifling through *ARTnews* and *Artforum* magazines I recall being particularly drawn to Warhol's deadpan, dead-eye use of news photography and Polaroid snaps via screenprinting as a kind of distancing strategy, a way of keeping the 'artist's hand' at some remove from the subject.

In hindsight, it was fortuitous that the workshop at college, well-equipped following the tertiary funding increases of the Whitlam years, included access to screenprinting options allowing the transference of photographic imagery to

the screen, via light-sensitive emulsions, incidentally anticipating much later developments in polymer gravure.

From Maddock's and Warhol's technical examples I embraced screenprinting in service of etching, applying resist via the mesh and dot matrix of the screen to zinc plates, then aquatinting or otherwise open-biting in etchings of imagery derived from nocturnal adventures and abstracted photography. Overlaid, a variety of mark-making, including overdrawing via angle-grinder (the sculpture department making its way into the print room, I guess) and free-form gesture, aped Robert Rauschenberg's poker-faced satire of abstract expressionism's subjective tropes in collision with mass-media imagery and Frank Stella's then-contemporary embrace of decorative 'fill'. All this was aimed at conjuring some of the generative, if haphazard, qualities of the accident, rather than that of traditional composition.

More broadly, my early interest in American late Modernism and leading practitioners Stella, Johns and Rauschenberg led to an appreciation of each artist's extensive graphic output, and of the innovative possibilities, intimidating though they appeared, that were available in the print medium. Much of this innovation was no doubt enhanced by the rise of highly professionalised print workshops such as Universal Limited Art Editions (ULAE) and Gemini G.E.L. where Kenneth E. Tyler was leading rapid



(above)  
**Andrew Browne, *Untitled*,**  
 1980 Aquatint, photo-etching,  
 84 x 50 cm.

(left)  
**Andrew Browne, *Shoegazer*,**  
 2021, photopolymer photogravure,  
 chine collé on vintage Japanese  
 silver foil mounted on Fabriano,  
 24 x 17.5 cm.

(opposite)  
**Andrew Browne, *Untitled*,**  
 1980, aquatint, photo-etching,  
 54 x 70.2 cm

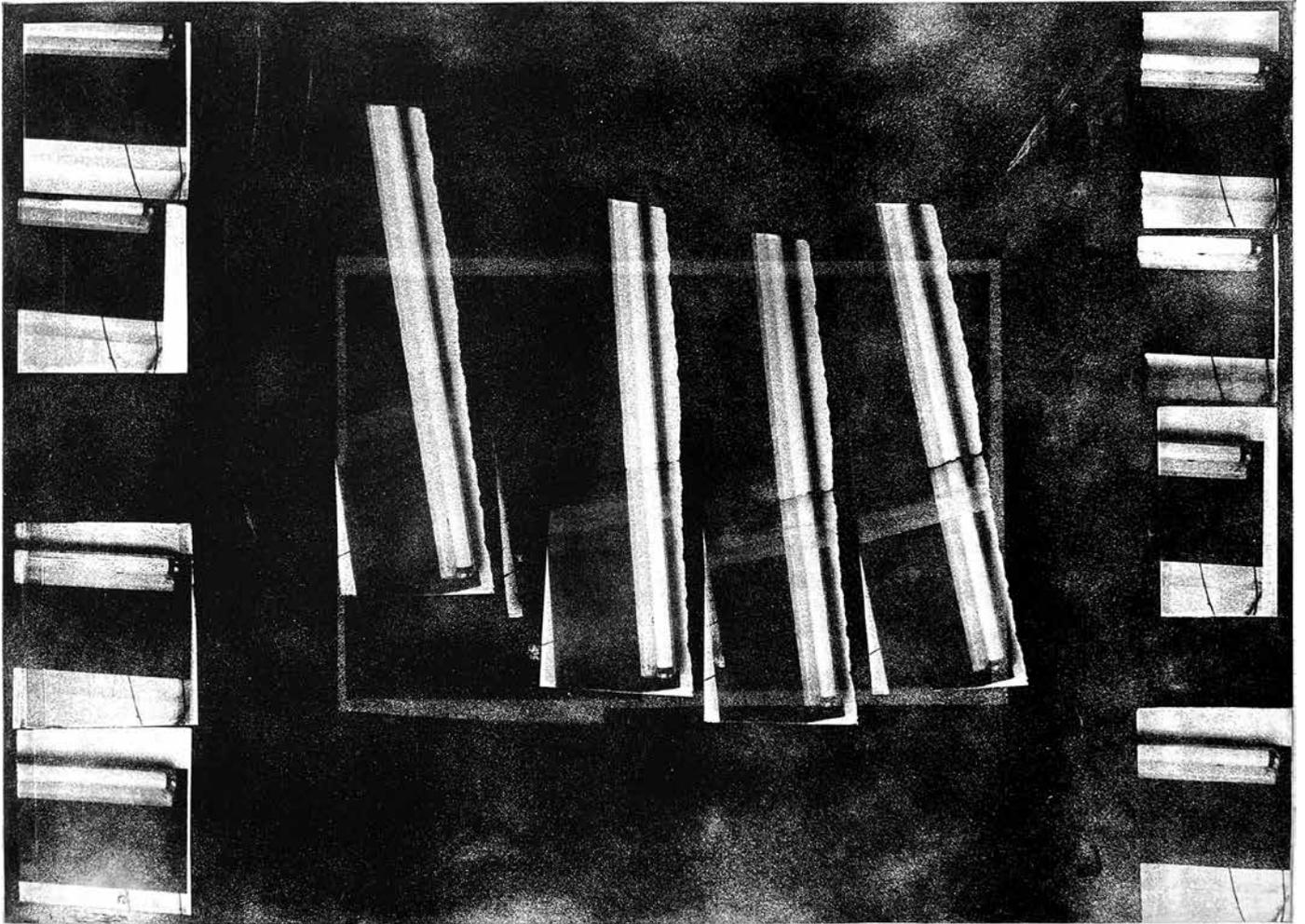
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 of the artist.

developments in print technologies, leaving an indelible stamp on international print practice and some sort of stamp on me.

The dazzling technical accomplishments of Jasper Johns from the early 1960s—spurred by his famous operating principle ‘It’s simple, you just take something and do something to it, then do something else to it...’ and in the wildly experimental work of Robert Rauschenberg—exemplified most particularly in his *Automobile Tire Print* (1953) produced in collaboration with John Cage and his Ford automobile, the driver and vehicle essentially becoming both the printer and the press—but also in his series *Thirty-Four Illustrations for Dante’s Inferno* 1958-60 (via impure print-derived techniques) were examples that spoke most directly to me. Here were two consummate artists, working across painting, sculpture, drawing, stage design and performance, who saw printmaking as intrinsically interwoven into their wider practice, rather than as separated into some kind of ghetto.

I have long held that some of the best printmakers were and continue to be artists highly adept in other mediums, who bring some of the manner and innovation from painting, sculpture and drawing, even performance, into their graphic work. Mike Parr might be an example: his prints, made in close collaboration with master printer John Loane, evidencing much of the immediacy and vigour of the performative act, mirroring the use of endurance and intensity of his durational pieces. Rembrandt’s deep embrace of the print medium, through his humanist subject matter and determined, even obsessive re-working of plates over many states, remains at least as complex and resonant as his painting practice. And Julie Mehretu’s recent layered and chaotic dives into expressive gesture and anecdotal notation, using combinations of photogravure, spit and open bite, aquatint and sugar-lift point to an artist taking innovations from her painting practice and adapting them in to a unique print language.

In 2008 a happenstance introduction to photopolymer photogravure—an emergent non-toxic alternative to traditional photogravure—via an introductory workshop at the Baldessin Press run by the estimable Silvi Glattauer, led to a deep immersion into this seductive technique, perfectly suited to the noirish character I was attempting in my wider painting practice. While this technique lends itself particularly well to an evocation of the gently hazy visual poetics of ‘pictorialist’ photography, I instead, via Photoshop, married it to mutated details from the Australian bush, conjuring in some measure a cast of unnerving spectres in the series *Seven Apparitions* (2008). Pushing



the velvety blacks and ambiguous tonal shifts achievable through this updated gravure process aided the work's psychologically shadowy intent.

In 2013 I was awarded the Australian Print Workshop Collie Print Trust Printmaking Fellowship, with the resulting residency at APW involving a deep dive into intaglio techniques I hadn't touched in decades—an invigorating if high-pressure period. In part energised by the beginnings of a large series of expansive drawings commenced around the same time (later exhibited as the exhibition *It's all around you* at Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne, 2014) the whole raft of intaglio techniques was grasped for the resultant *Fictions* series, alongside the crucial and, for me, truly experimental use of airbrush in application of a bitumen and wax resist to copper plate in the single largest print of my career. *A Hollow* (2013, aquatint 89.5 x 119 cm) was composed free-hand over a couple of days of intense airbrush spraying before the application of rosin and a deep etch in acid to achieve the

rich black void at its compositional and conceptual centre. Considering this rather 'seat of the pants' manipulation of the airbrush—a technology and technique new to me at the time, and one not forgiving of any slips or mishaps—the resultant print, summarily proofed in a 'heart in the mouth' moment for myself and no doubt printer Martin King too, emerged practically seamless in its allusions to both reality and an almost uncanny photographic-like texture, despite it being entirely 'hand-made'.

More recently, a passing query from Silvi Glattauer and enthusiastic follow-up offer from Tess Edwards at Baldessin Press led to the generous donation of some of the remnant degraded silver foil from George Baldessin's estate, the original metallic material used in so many of his iconic prints from the 1970s. Knowing that the metallic surface was capable of holding a printed image, the resultant petite print *Shoegazer* (2021, photopolymer photogravure chine collé on vintage Japanese silver foil mounted

on Fabriano) doubled down on the evident deterioration of the silver surface, incorporating an image of a weathered and repaired urban footpath, abstracted by its shoe-gazing angle. Once again, a suite of drawings, in this case executed during the first waves of COVID, prompted this image. Yet, here, the metallic surface takes an otherwise commonplace subject into more ambiguous realms, evoking its own scored intaglio plate, suggesting ripe scope for further experimental investigation of surface vs. image.



**Andrew Browne** is a Melbourne-based artist. His prints are held in Australian collections including the National Gallery of Australia, the National Gallery of Victoria, the Art Gallery of Western Australia, regional galleries, and in London in the collection of the British Museum. He was the winner of the Adelaide Perry Prize for Drawing in 2016, and the Geelong Contemporary Art Prize in 2018. He is represented by Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne.