Nicolas Sassoon
2020

The Prophets (2019 – ongoing)

The making of geological strata — the very ground beneath our feet — is an essential component of our contemporary living conditions. From minerals that form microprocessors in our smartphones to machine-spun threads of sand that allow people to follow you on Instagram [1], earth formations and its histories of mineralisation and energy are connected to our everyday. Our digital culture is completely dependant on the geological earth, despite the fallacy that media is immaterial, invisible or in the cloud. Without the materials and resources gathered from geological depths, our technologies would cease to function. Yet despite this transformation of nature into culture, the lasting legacy of Silicon Valley will leave a geological afterglow of concentrated toxins in our soils and water, and e-waste and plastics that will outlive us.

Exploring this resource extraction and environmental impact required for us to use our devices to live networked lives, Sassoon's *The Prophets* asks us to think about rocks and other planetary matter as media and lively forces communicating with us across time. In his newest series of work, Sassoon recounts a partial history of our relation with matter — a speculative geology of our digital condition. Here Sassoon brings together volcanically produced pumice stones into conversation with electronic hardware and LCD screens. Seemingly frozen in time, these pumice stones are unstructured and irregular, full of lobes, cracks, crevasses and voids. Together with vestiges of our digital technology gained from rare earth metals, Sassoon has produced new assemblages that juxtapose human and geological time.

Rooted in volcanological processes, *The Prophets* speak to the possible connections between organic and inorganic materials. The minimal aesthetic elaborates an implicit understanding of sensation and perception that pertains to the connection between technology and its origins. Veering between documentation, visualization and aesthetic treatment, *The Prophets* connects us to the geological forces usually omitted from our view of technology, and invites us to re-examine our relationship to the natural world.

Text by Nora O Murchú

[1] Parikka, Jussi. Geology of Media. University of Minnesota Press, 2015

Image: The Prophets (Surya), LCD screen, Pumice, media player, screen holder, PVC, ABS, rubber, aluminum, 12.5" x 12.5" x 24", 2019
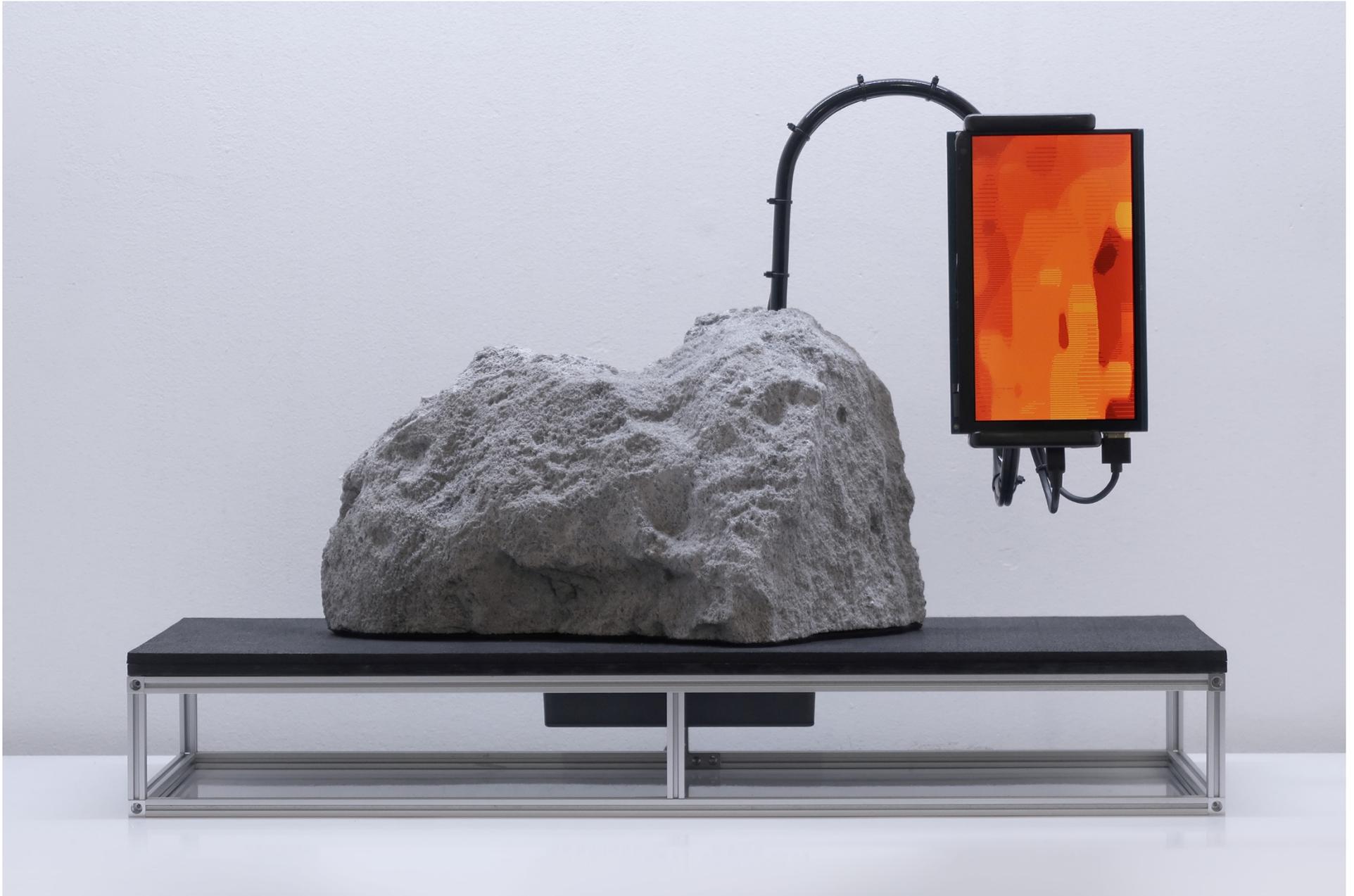
The Prophets (Surya), LCD screen, Pumice, media player, screen holder, PVC, ABS, rubber, aluminum, 12.5" x 12.5" x 24", 2019

The Prophets (Sanyga), LCD screen, pumice, media player, screen holder, PVC, ABS, rubber, aluminum, 12.5" x 12.5" x 22", 2019
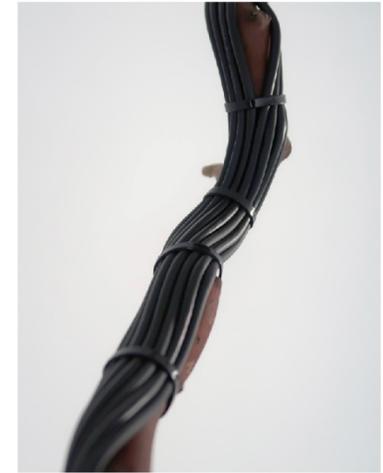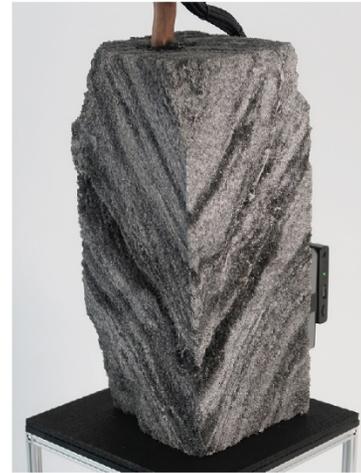
The Prophets (Lantern #1), LCD screens, pumice, media player, screen holder, PVC, ABS, splitter, USB hub, rubber, aluminum, 30'" x 40'" x 12", 2019

Index, Avenue, Skylight
Exhibition view
Wil Aballe Art Projects, Vancouver BC, Canada, 2018

Index, Avenue, Skylight
Left to right: MIRROR, HEATER, COUCH, MASK, laser prints on high density foam, dimensions variable
Wil Aballe Art Projects, Vancouver BC, Canada, 2018
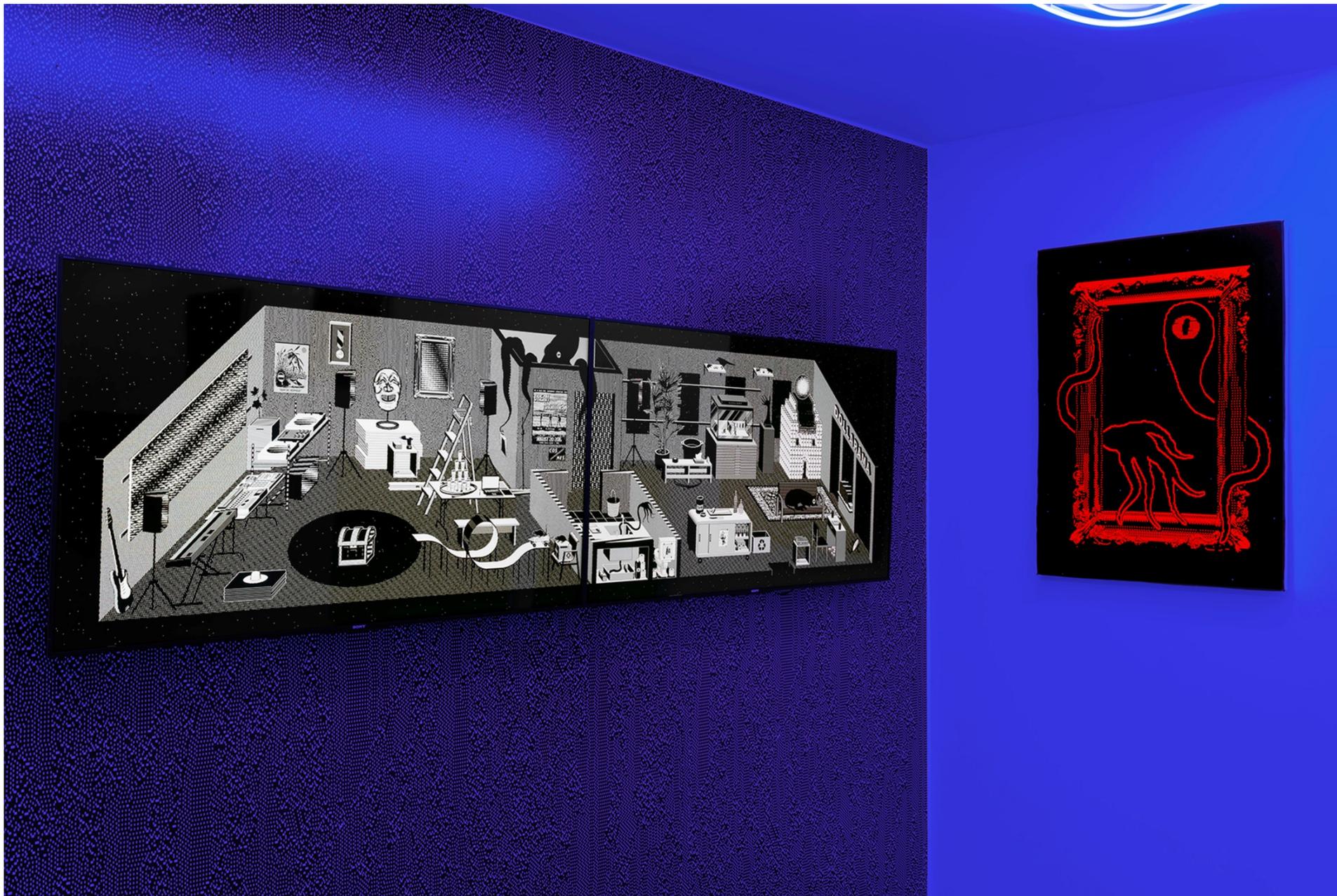
Index, Avenue, Skylight
Left to right: SKYLIGHT, digital animation, 7680x2160pixels, 2017 – MIRROR, laser print on high density foam, 28 x 38 inches, 2018
Wil Aballe Art Projects, Vancouver BC, Canada, 2018
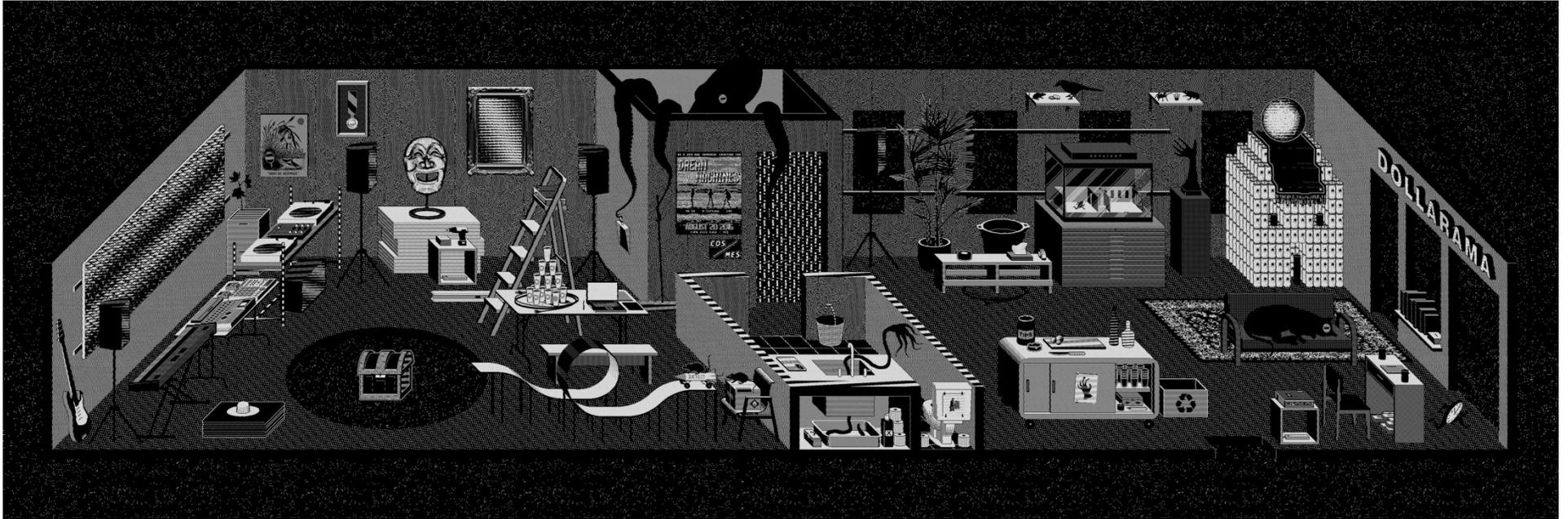
SKYLIGHT, Animated GIF, HTML page, 7680 x 3840 pixels, 2017

AVENUE, Animated GIF, HTML page, 7680 x 3840 pixels, 2017

INDEX, Animated GIF, HTML page, 7680 x 3840 pixels, 2016

Common Grounds Essay by Nora O Murchú

There is an unspoken labour that goes into the construction of underground venues. Run voluntarily and operating on a not-for profit basis, these spaces constitute more than the makeup of the objects and events held within. The labour that sustains these places is a vulnerable process requiring both the generosity and emotional commitment of those involved. The artists running these venues leave traces - reflections of the socio-political conditions the spaces operate in, and the forces that both destabilise and sustain them. These spaces are ephemeral and experimental, and build various work processes and relationships that constitute communities of artists. Index, Avenue and Skylight are three such venues that operated in Vancouver B.C. between 2014 and 2016. They made up part of the city's cultural landscape and provided space for local artists and musicians to collaborate and contribute to the city's underground scene. They were spaces of social interaction as much as they were spaces of work, offering refuge and kinship for many to interact.

These types of venues often operate in pointed contrast to commercial and institutional structures. They follow their own social and visual codes, and form their own logic based on collective experiences. They provide the space and autonomy to experiment with identities and cultural forms. They often operate at night - a time when others are sleeping - to cater for bodies to congregate around shared interests, collective consumption of common media, and desires to meet others with similar tastes to themselves. Although these activities are global phenomenon, they are at the same time firmly rooted in the local. Music and Art may be easily imported and exported, but the crowds that attend are municipal, regional and national. Taking part in these cultures builds affinities, socialises participants into a knowledge of the likes and dislikes, meanings and values that are embedded into the infrastructure and affective labour that manages the spaces.

These are otherworldly environments in which we can escape; they act as interior havens with such presence that often we forget time and place. They separate inside from outside, private from public, and allow us to abandon our daily routines of rules and codes. It's in these spaces that we can find a type of renewal or leisure that blurs the boundaries between affective and political freedoms, a cure for the alienation and dissimulation of the everyday. In this exhibition, Sassoon evokes the culture and communities surrounding these spaces using idiomatic visual elements from his practice: pixelated patterns, digital moirés and isometric perspective. Stemming from his accounts of operating within these spaces, Sassoon recalls his memories - the infrastructure, the objects, the events and the energies that unfolded over a period of time. He articulates the inner workings of these spaces, rendering them through pixels and patterns, and makes visible the unseen forces that weave in and out of these spaces. These visualizations are subjective records, halfway between recollection and imagination, simultaneously factual and fantastical. Sassoon's aesthetic exploration creates a multitude of details, textures and imaginary figures, conveying the energies and processes at work in these communities.

Sassoon's work has long been concerned with the tensions between the pixel and the screen, reflecting on their entanglement and materiality by constraining himself to experiment with pixelated patterns and figures as its sole visual language. In his approach to recall these memories he applies this visual language to materialise these spaces through large scale animations, projections and prints. There is both a familiarity and a distance to these materializations. Based an ocean apart in Ireland, these objects and spaces encourage me to remember hazy nights out and spilled drinks in similar venues. They embody seemingly immaterial interactions, processes and histories that raise questions about the means in which we are connected.
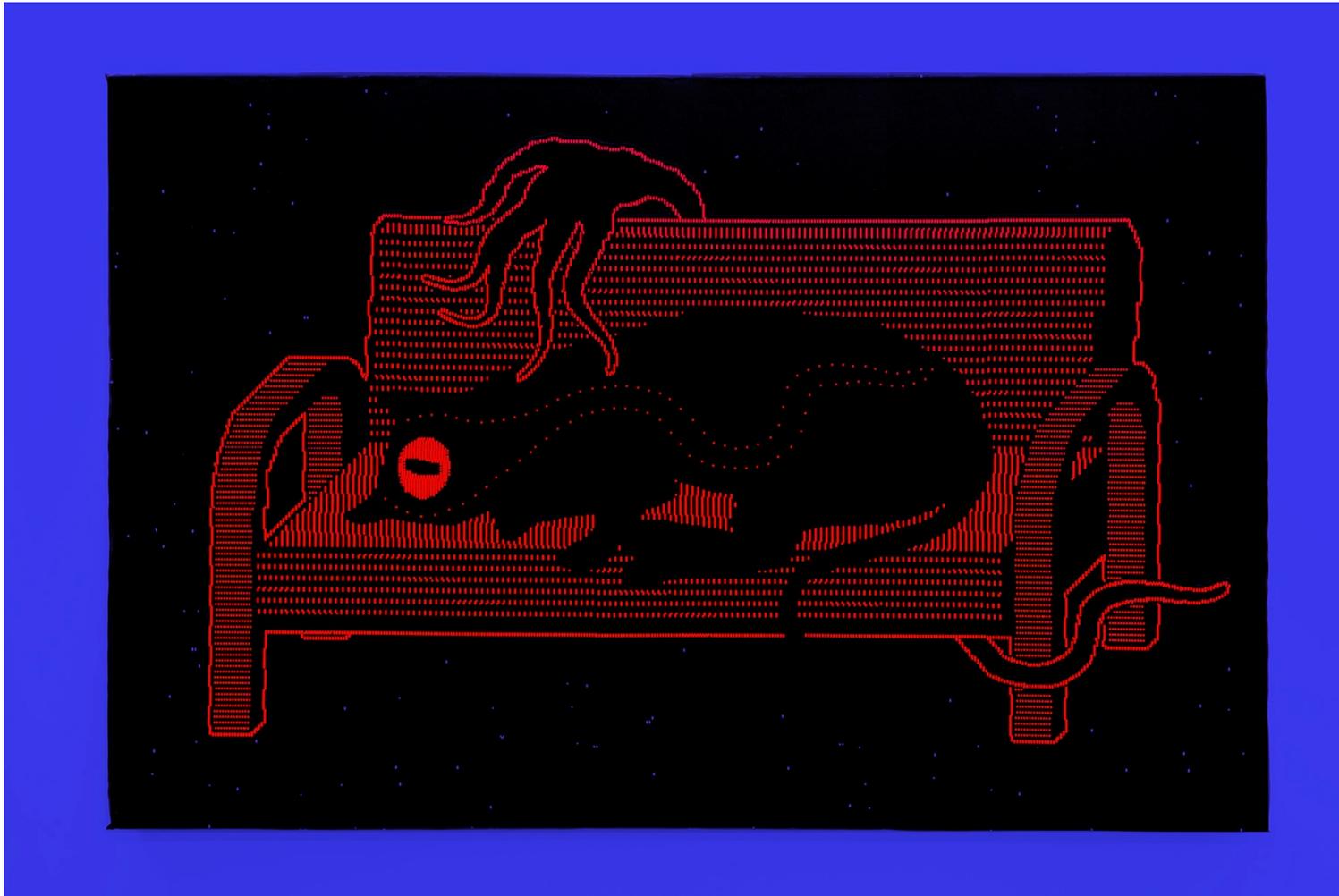
COUCH, Laser print on high density foam, 58 x 36 inches, 2018

Liquid Landscapes (Serpentine)
Exhibition at the Surrey urban Screen, Surrey Art Gallery, BC Canada 2018-2019, curated by Rhys Edwards

Dreaming the Pixel Imaginary Text by Rhys Edwards

That pictures can be deceiving is a cliché today. Whereas we once perceived pictures to be an accurate record of the world, the ability to produce, manipulate, and share them across social networks is so straightforward that we know all too easily the ease with which it is possible to deceive. So, deception is impossible, since the subjectivity or outright falseness of the picture may be assumed in the first place. We have become too clever for our own good.

Our wisdom has produced a more complex relationship to pictures: though we have become skeptical of their truth, we nevertheless indulge in pictures more frequently than ever. With a kind of joy, we assiduously seek to reconstruct the world in image-form. At no point in prior history has the world ever been so saturated with images; indeed, it is more appropriate to say now that we live in an image-world of our own creation. Having untethered pictures from any indexical (i.e. directly connected) relationship to a previously distinct, autonomous reality, they now occupy a new realm for us. Regardless of any particular content, pictures have become suggestions: speculative forays into an attitude, an emotion, a politic, a taste, or activity. The art of Nicolas Sassoon traces this movement from the indexical to the speculative. Using a pixel aesthetic originating from computer art and web design of the 1990s, his images of hypothetical architecture, reconstructed studio and gallery interiors, and imaginary landscapes all allude to an imminent reality that is never realized. Conversely, his *Patterns* series of pixel animations employ the use of movements inspired by sights, materials, and natural phenomena drawn from the real world in order to generate totally abstract compositions.

Liquid Landscapes, Sassoon's site-specific project for Urban Screen, conjoins these two modes of making. The artwork consists of seven different animations, one for each night of the week. Each animation is inspired by a real-life geographic site located somewhere in the city of Surrey; locales include Boundary Bay, Crescent Beach, Fraser River, Nicomekl River, Redwood Park, Serpentine River and Serpentine Fen. The animations reference patterns of natural phenomena likely to be found at each site, such as the movement of waves upon the beach, raindrops landing on still bodies of water, the reflection of light, and the growth of plants throughout the seasons. The colour palette of each animation is derived from a single found photograph of each location. Crucially, as each animation proceeds, its composition and movement pattern changes. Consortiums of pixels that had previously read as seeds, sunrays, or shadows begin to disperse and fragment; rhythms which had matched a single tempo speed up or slow down. Almost imperceptibly, each animation deconstructs itself into its discrete elements, and we are slowly shown that what we have been looking at is not a truly figurative image, but is merely symbolic—and always has been.

It is telling that Sassoon's early digital works were intended to be models for three-dimensional sculptures that were never ultimately realized, such as his *PYRAMIDES*, *GEODES* and *HOMES* series. Each animation in *Liquid Landscapes* captures something seemingly essential about an area of Surrey, and vividly helps to bring this aspect of local geography to life. But the gradual transformation of each animation, from a documentarian record of a real place and moment to a total abstraction, alludes to the subsumption of reality within picture-making. Could Serpentine Fen, Nicomekl River, or Boundary Bay ever be "known"? We may certainly visit each location and glean something of its character, but the experiential element of nature walks is subjective, distinct to each visitor. As such, the pictures we take or make from each site become part of the composite assembly of documents (albums, portfolios, books, websites) through which we develop an understanding of place. Over time, these grand composites gain a life of their own— abstracted, universalized, and independent of origin. They become speculative models for a world which might exist, rather than the one we actually inhabit. Sassoon's use of seemingly dated image-rendering techniques also compounds the effect of distancing from the geographic source. The shimmering pixels call to mind the screensavers of a long-forgotten computer operating system, which primes us to perceive the subject as outmoded in some way— as if it is being transmitted to us from a prior era.

But pixel art also has a secondary, deeper meaning: unlike other art media, the figurative capacities of the pixel are limited only by processing power. Pixels are the palpable building blocks of computer software which, in time, may come to simulate entire realities. They hold therein the promise of unlimited possibility, of virtual utopia. Pixels connote more clearly than any other medium the modelling of reality. Thus Sassoon's use of pixels is not only visually appealing (although it is certainly that too), but a way of making explicit the underlying processes through which images transform the world in the digital era. In other words, the supposedly "kitsch" qualities of 90s web aesthetics are only the first primordial cries of the all-dominating graphics technology that powers the advertisements, sports replays, weather reports, games, and movies we consume today.

It is important to note that the distancing Sassoon introduces into his image-world, through the gradual shift into abstraction and the explicit use of pixel art, does not imply that his symbolic rendition of each site is inaccurate or misleading. Rather, it mirrors the "real-life" abstraction of Surrey. For many, Surrey itself is a speculative place. Rapidly shifting and growing, the city invites investment in its future. Further, as one of the largest metropolitan regions in Canada, the breadth of the City makes many of its parks and rivers accessible to the general populace only from a distance; citizens are more likely to identify with individual neighbourhoods than with the City as a whole. The pictures found upon Urban Screen are further iterations of the same images found upon the internet; regardless of the source, they exist at a remove. In this way, *Liquid Landscapes* captures the tensions underlying the continuum between reality, nature, place-making, and picture-making. Hypnotic and enticing, Sassoon's art does not show us the world as it actually is, but does disclose the means via which it is delivered to us.

LIQUID LANDSCAPES (left to right, top to bottom: Redwood, Crescent, Nicomekl, Boundary, Fen, Fraser)
Digital animations, 3 minutes each, seamless loops, 2018
Exhibition at the Surrey urban Screen, Surrey Art Gallery, BC Canada 2018-2019, curated by Rhys Edwards

SIGNALS (2015 – ongoing) in collaboration with Rick Silva
Exhibition SIGNALS, Wil Aballe Art Projects, Vancouver 2016, curated by Wil Aballe

SIGNALS is a collaborative project between artists Nicolas Sassoon (Vancouver, BC) and Rick Silva (Eugene, OR) focusing on immersive audio-visual renderings of altered seascapes. Sassoon and Silva share an on-going theme in their individual practices: the depiction of wilderness and natural forms through computer imaging. Created by merging their respective fields of visual research, *SIGNALS* features oceanic panoramas inhabited by unnatural substances and enigmatic structures. The project draws from sources such as oceanographic surveys, climate studies and science-fiction to create 3D generated video works and installations that reflect on contamination, mutation and future ecologies. *SIGNALS* has been exhibited at 150 Media Stream in Chicago, the Chronus Art Center in Shanghai, House of Electronic Art in Basel, the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, Wil Aballe Art Projects in Vancouver, Interstitial Theatre in Seattle, Villa Beatrix Enea in Anglet, France, Resonate Festival in Belgrade and GLAS Festival in Berkeley.
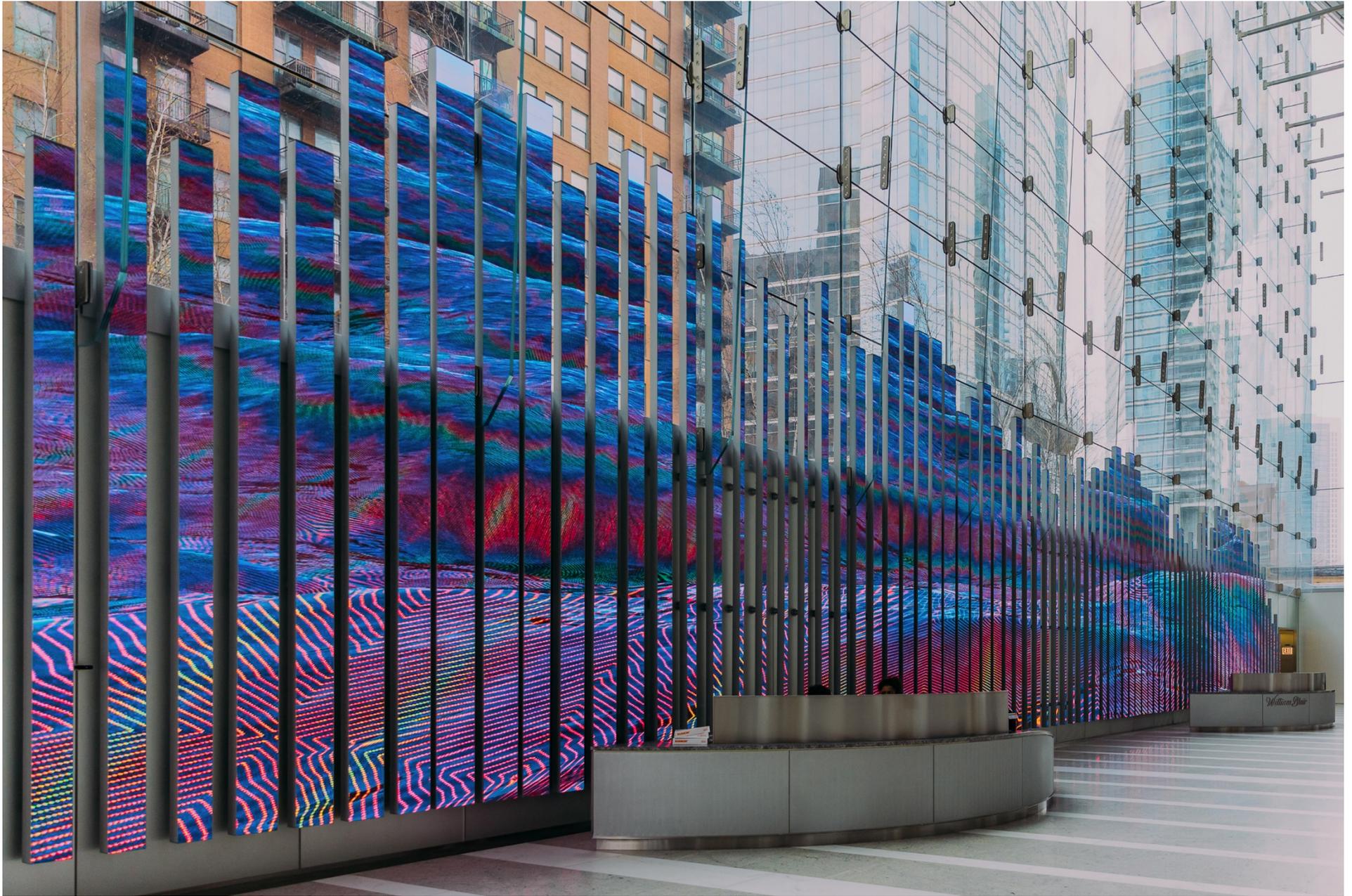
SIGNALS in collaboration with Rick Silva
Exhibition at 150 Media Stream, Chicago 2020, curated by Yuge Zhou
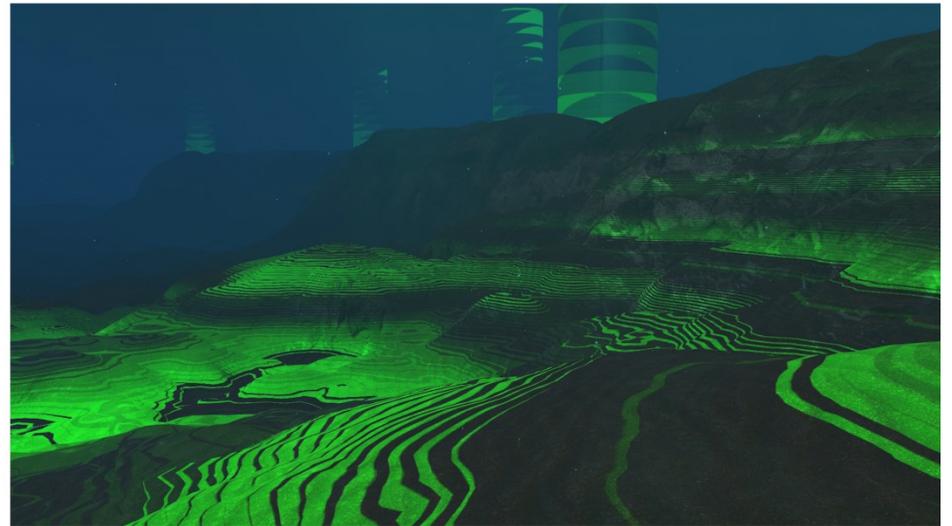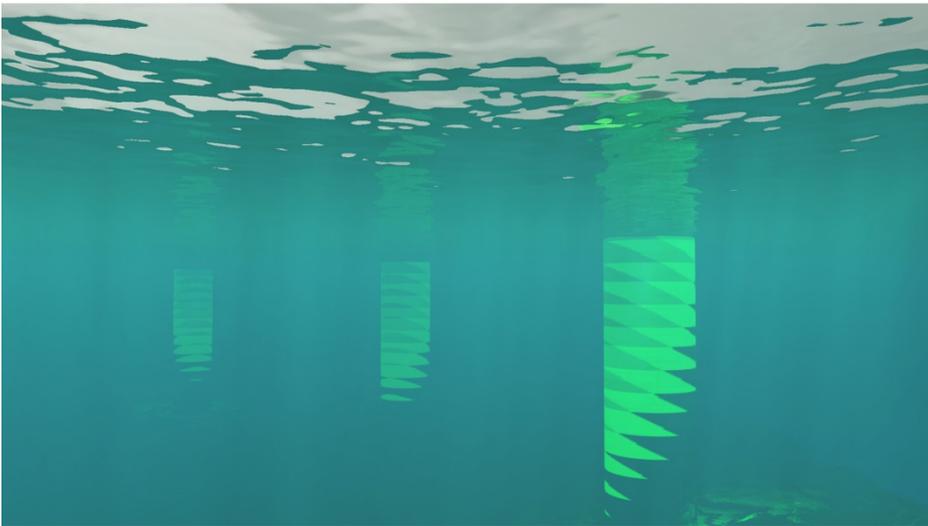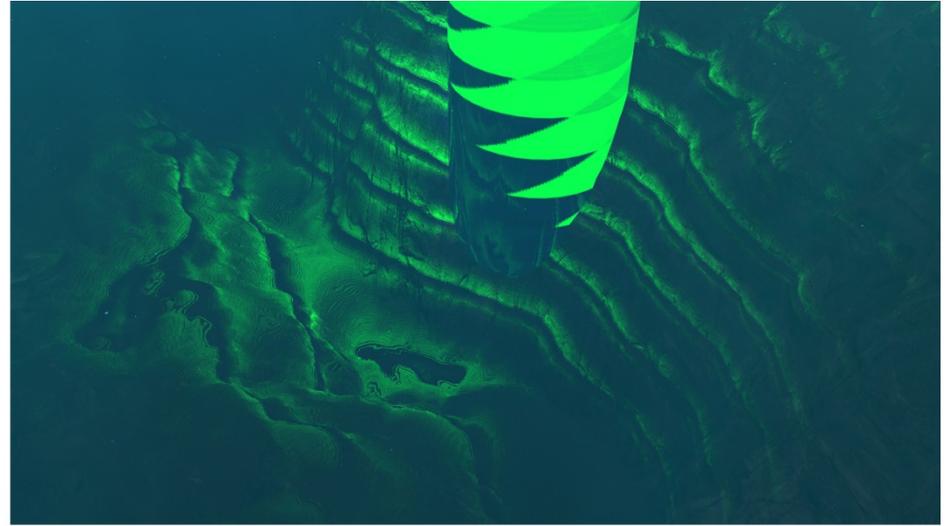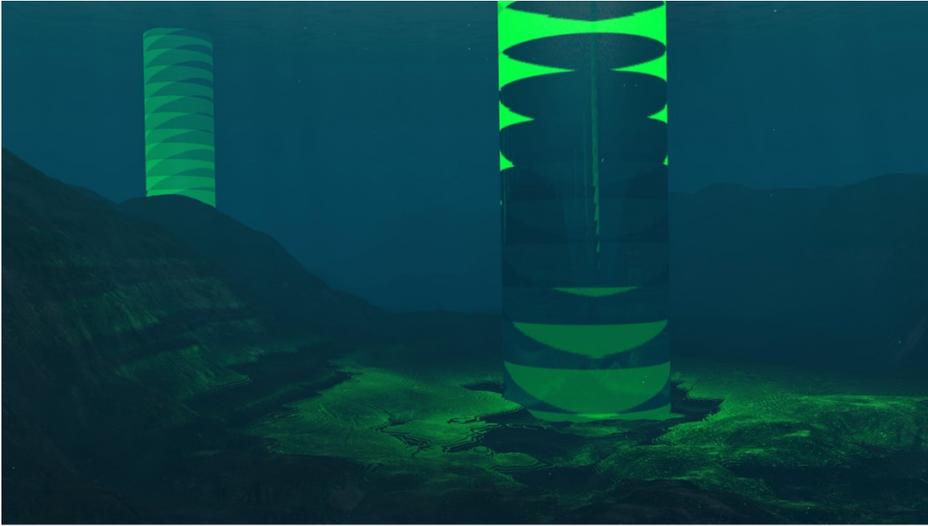
SIGNALS 5 (video stills)
Computer generated animation, 5 minutes, seamless loop, 2017
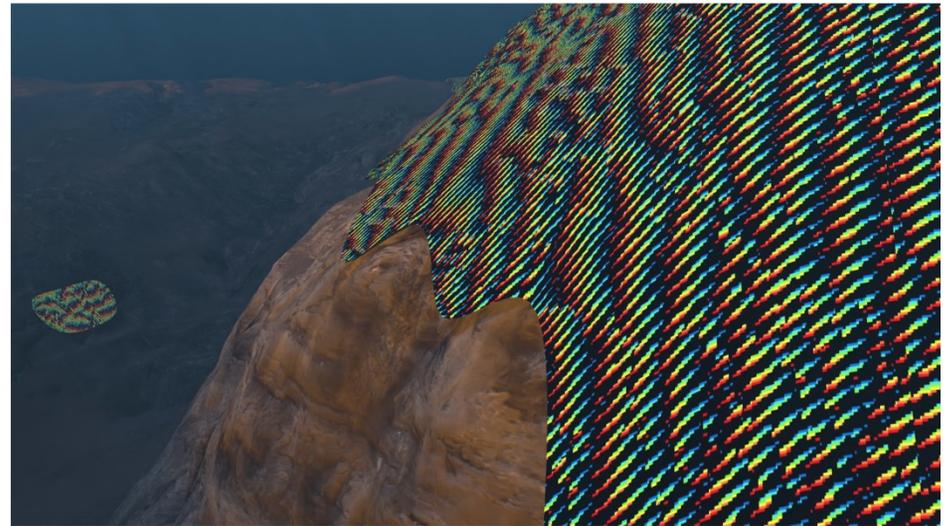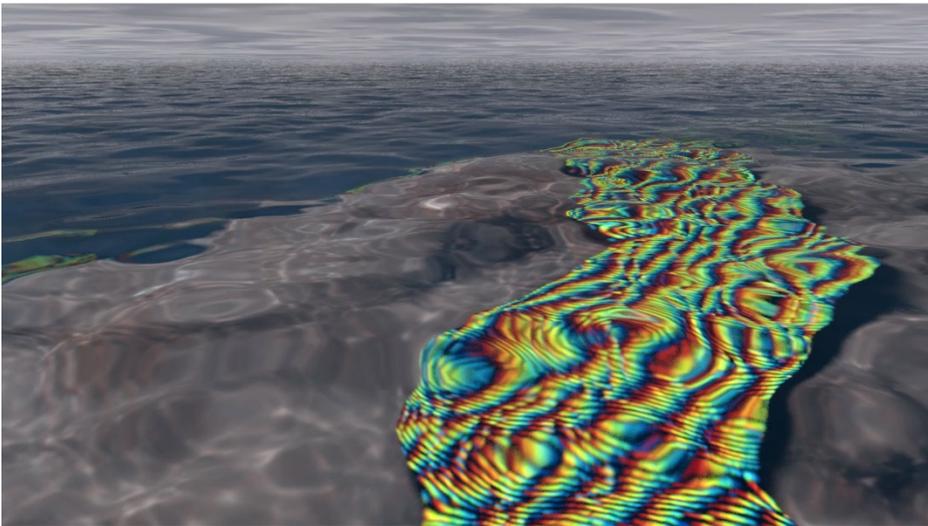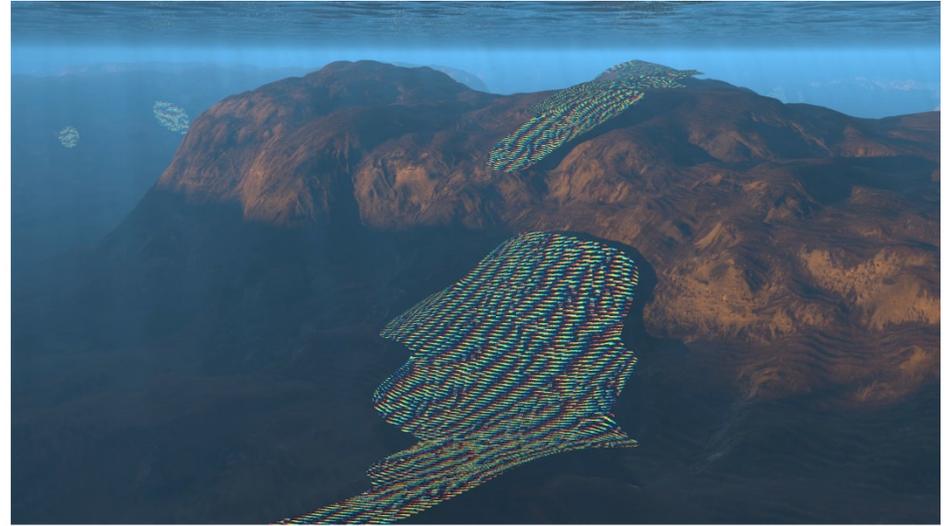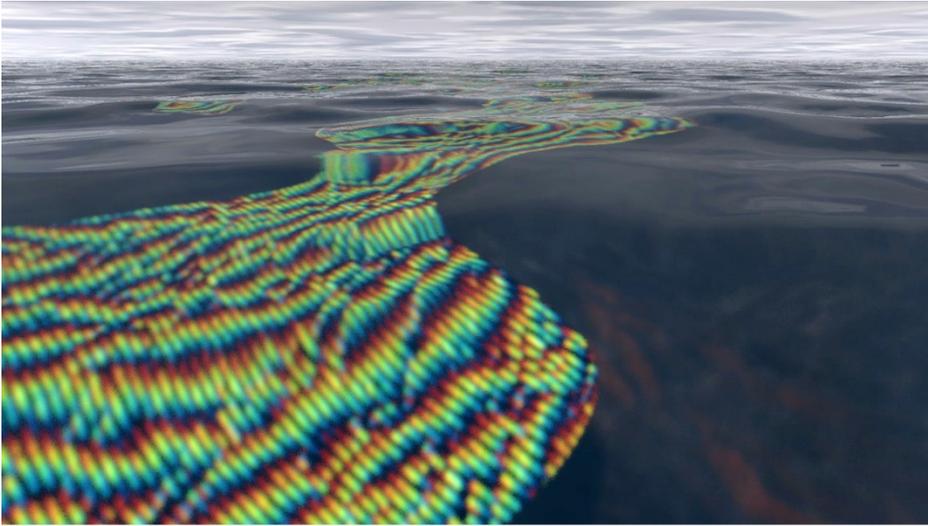
SIGNALS 4 (video stills) in collaboration with Rick Silva
Computer generated animation, 6 minutes, loop, 2017
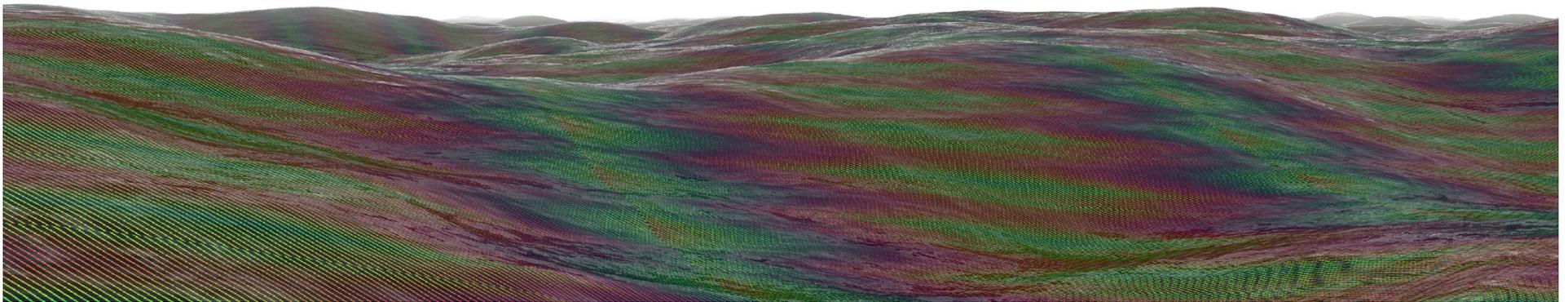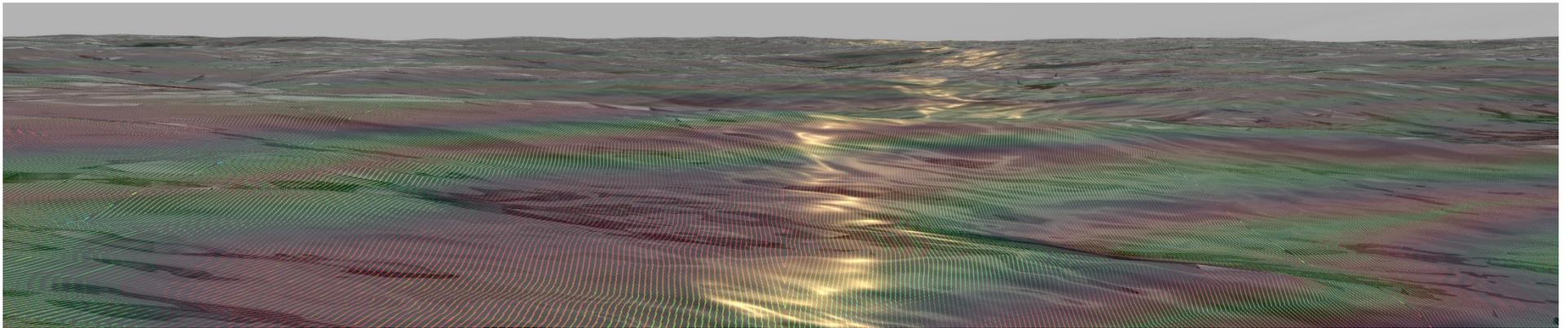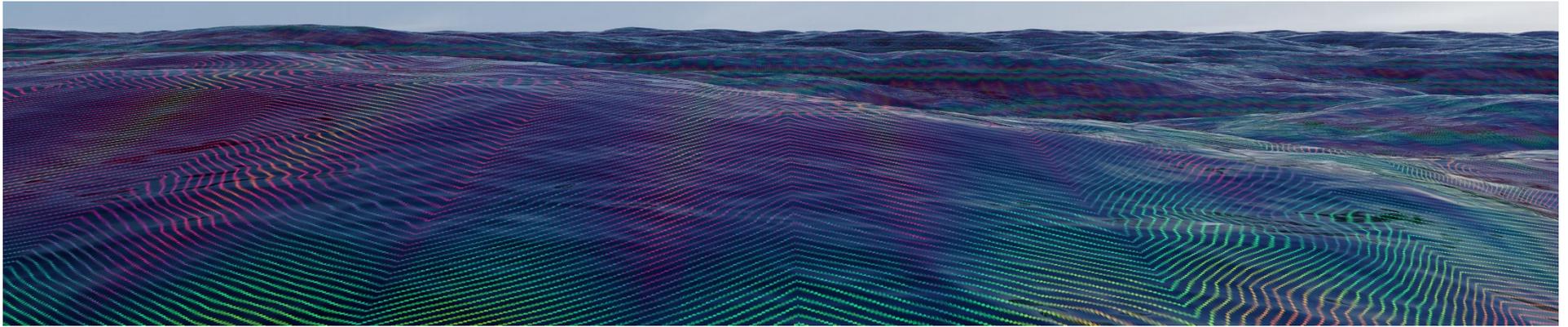
SIGNALS 1, SIGNALS 2, SIGNALS 3 (top to bottom)
Digital animations, signal or multi-channel, 2 minutes each, seamless loops, 2015 - 2020
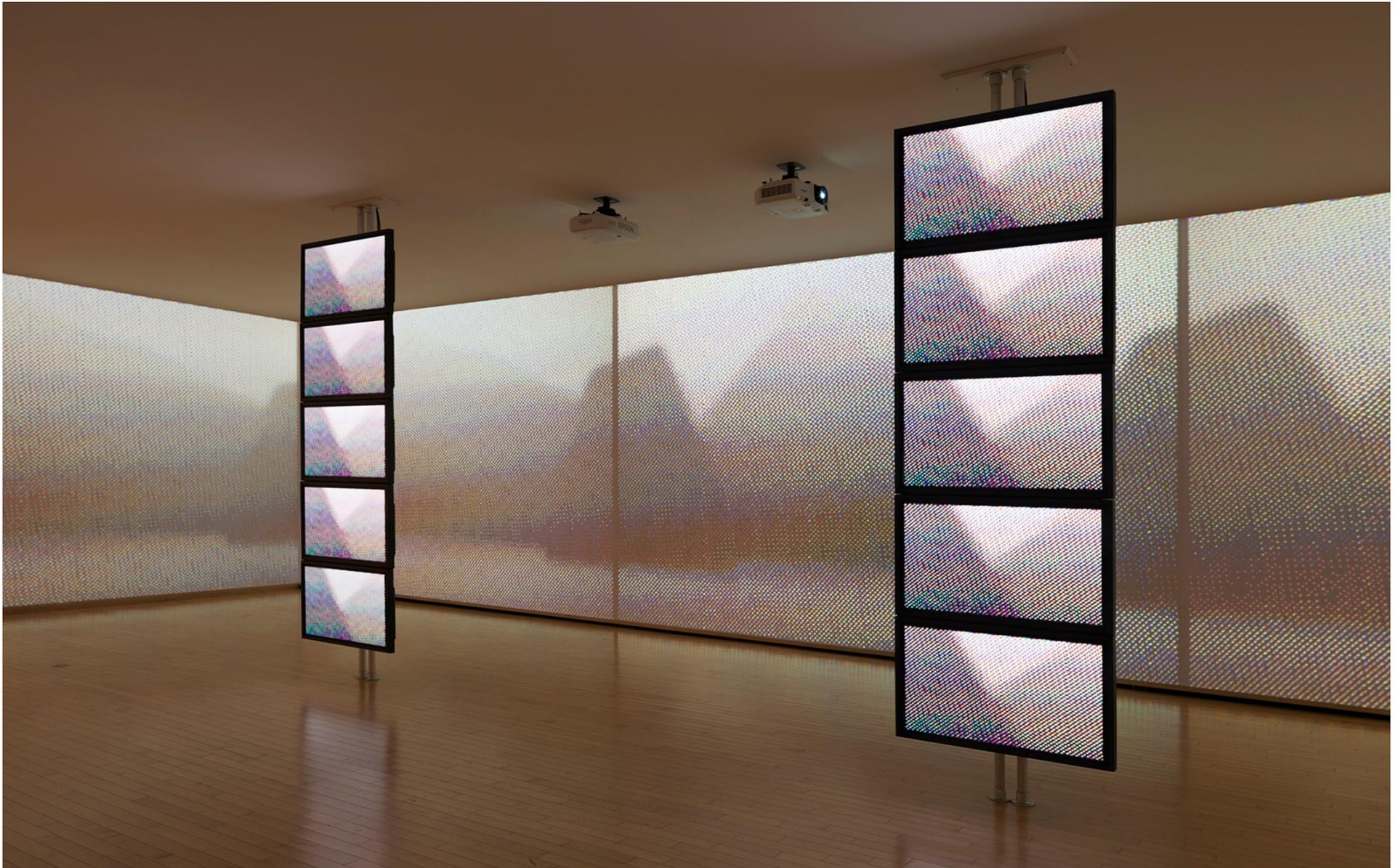
ISLANDS
Digital animation, 2 minutes, 2015
Collaboration with WALLPAPERS (Sara Ludy, Sylvain Sailly)
Exhibition Beyond the Trees: WALLPAPERS in Conversation with Emily Carr, Vancouver Art Gallery, curated by Diana Freundl & Caitlin Jones, Vancouver 2015

MOUNTAINS
Digital animation, 2 minutes, 2015
Collaboration with WALLPAPERS (Sara Ludy, Sylvain Sailly)
Exhibition Beyond the Trees: WALLPAPERS in Conversation with Emily Carr, Vancouver Art Gallery, curated by Diana Freundl & Caitlin Jones, Vancouver 2015

ISLANDS & ARCHES
Digital animation, 2 minutes, 2015
Collaboration with WALLPAPERS (Sara Ludy, Sylvain Sailly)
Exhibition Beyond the Trees: WALLPAPERS in Conversation with Emily Carr, Vancouver Art Gallery, curated by Diana Freundl & Caitlin Jones, Vancouver 2015
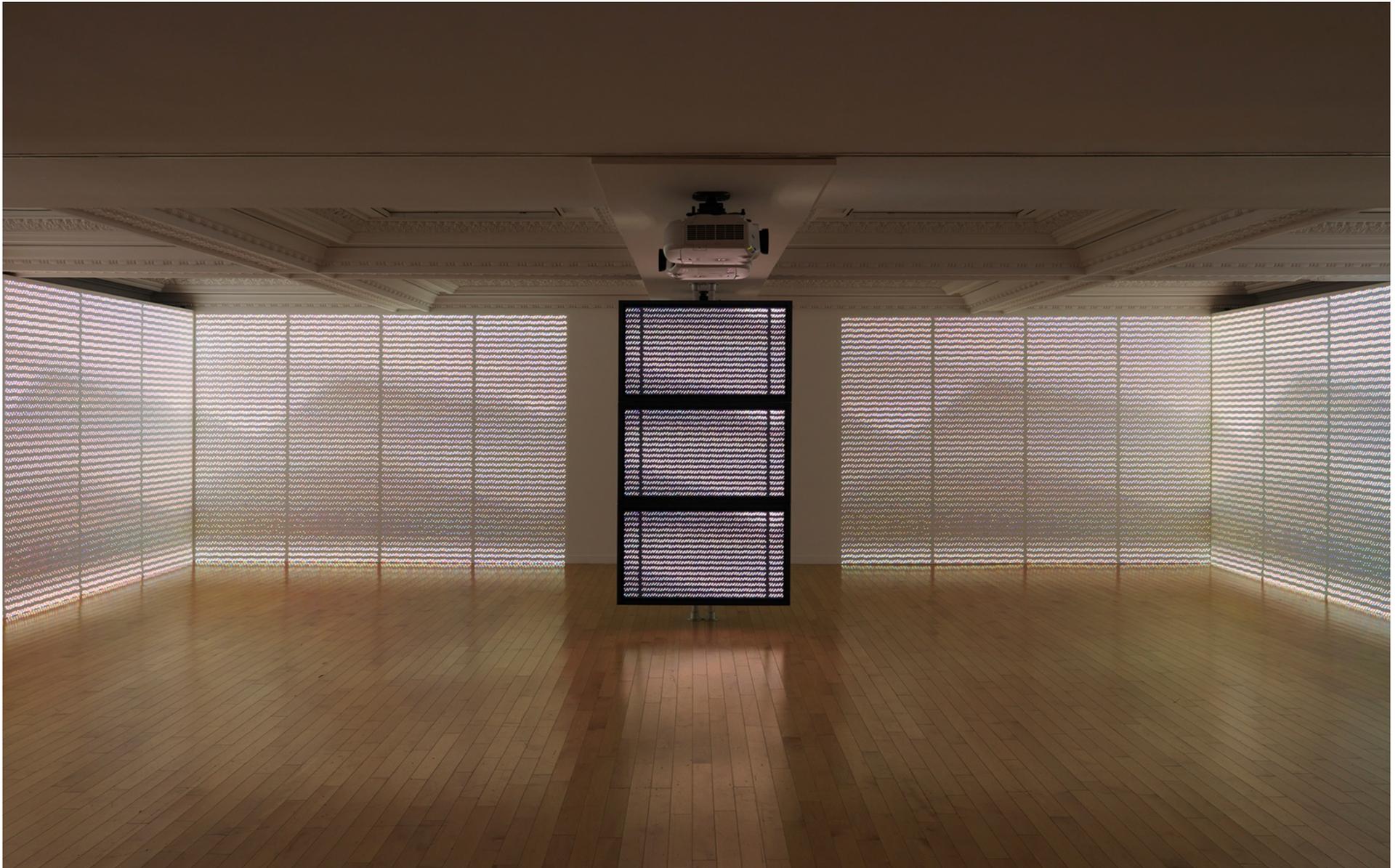
SOUND & BLINDS
Digital animation, 2 minutes, 2015
Collaboration with WALLPAPERS (Sara Ludy, Sylvain Sailly)
Exhibition Beyond the Trees: WALLPAPERS in Conversation with Emily Carr, Vancouver Art Gallery, curated by Diana Freundl & Caitlin Jones, Vancouver 2015

Collaboration with WALLPAPERS (Sara Ludy, Sylvain Sailly)
Exhibition Beyond the Trees : WALLPAPERS in Conversation with Emily Carr, Vancouver Art Gallery, curated by Diana Freundl & Caitlin Jones, Vancouver 2015

WALLPAPERS is a collaborative project founded in 2011 by Nicolas Sassoon, Sara Ludy and Sylvain Sailly. WALLPAPERS exists under two specific contexts; exhibited online at w-a-l-l-p-a-p-e-r-s.net and manifesting in space through exhibitions and events. WALLPAPERS online exists as a catalogue of digital patterns created by each artist. Each digital pattern from the catalogue is displayed full-screen on its own URL. WALLPAPERS offline takes form as site-specific installations comprised primarily of large-scale video-projections. The site-specific installations employ digital patterns and project them in space at a larger scale, producing environments adjusted to the architecture in context. WALLPAPERS refers to traditional wallpapers applied to walls as well as digital wallpapers applied to computer desktop backgrounds. By extension, the project also refers to pattern-making for the creation of traditional and digital wallpapers. At large, WALLPAPERS refers to a wide range of imageries and formats, equally drawn from the history of computer graphics as from the artist's on-going inquiries. WALLPAPERS as a collaborative project embodies a multiplicity of approaches by displaying an array of artistic inquiries on the wallpaper format in the digital age. The artworks exhibited through WALLPAPERS hold ties to traditional methods of pattern-making while also being art forms adjusted to a modern context of art production and dissemination.

WALLPAPERS was founded by artists sharing similar relationships with digital technology: individuals deeply involved with computer imaging tools and culture while developing research focused on the production of motion-based, screen-based and projection-based artworks. WALLPAPERS relates to the viewership; more specifically the viewer's experience of digital content through technological and mediated means, through time, through digital and physical spaces. Through its online publication of patterns, WALLPAPERS makes use of the home computers as displays for digital artworks and as context for aesthetic experiences. Through its exhibition of digital patterns within physical spaces, WALLPAPERS makes use of projections and screens as key elements in the formulation of site-specific installation. During the creation of each digital pattern, principles relating to decorative arts, graphic design, industrial design and fashion design are taken into account. During the creation of each installation, principles relating to interior design, trade show design and architectural planning are taken into account. The digital patterns exhibited through WALLPAPERS intend to address fields of Applied Arts while offering a distinctive experience in terms of content and environment. This aspect is emphasized through installation by projecting digital patterns to the scale of architecture. The artworks and installations produced by WALLPAPERS reflect on the notion of digital content becoming an essential part of today's constructed environments.
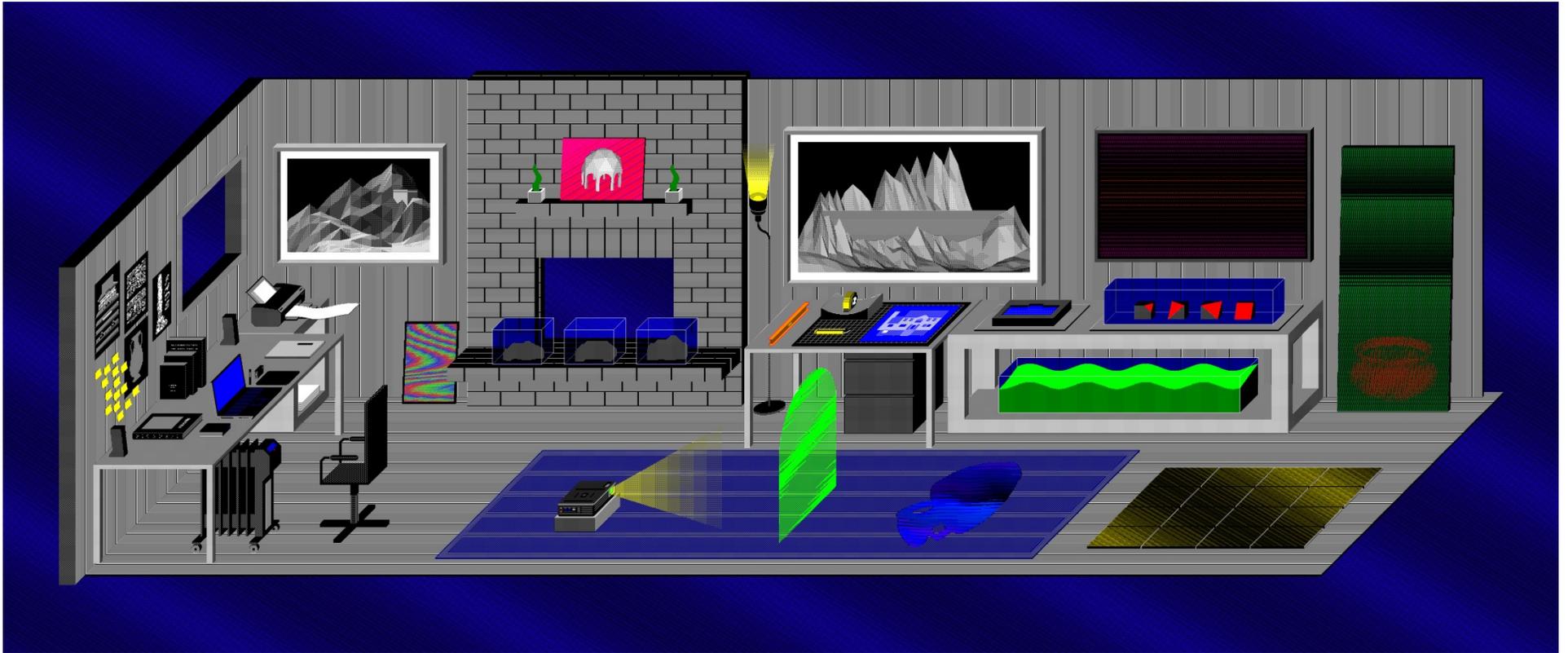
STUDIO VISIT #1
Animated GIF, HTML page, 3840 x 2160 pixels, 2014
Pandora, online residency hosted by Opening Times, London 2014, curated by Seventeen Gallery
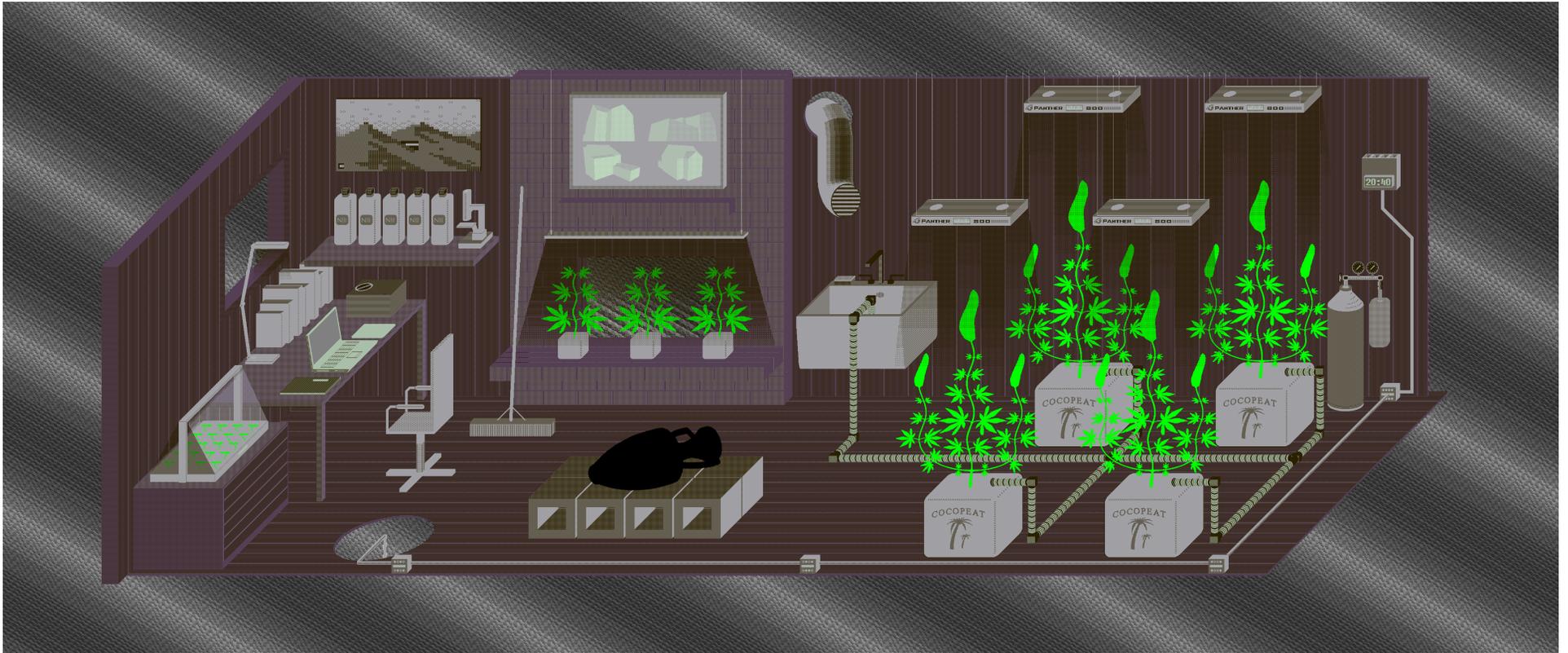
STUDIO VISIT #2
Animated GIF, HTML page, 3840 x 2160 pixels, 2014
Pandora, online residency hosted by Opening Times, London 2014, curated by Seventeen Gallery
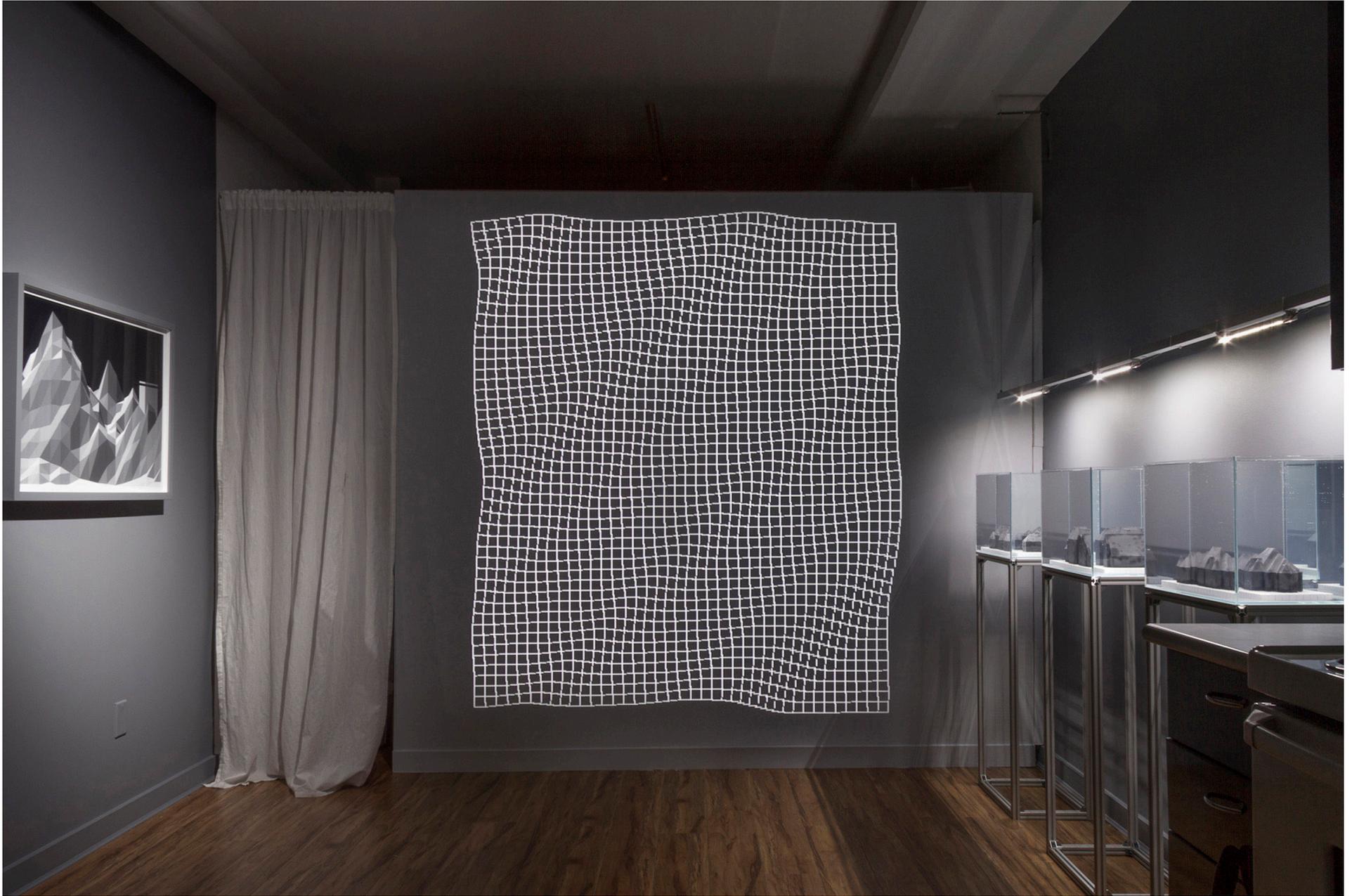
GRID #1
Digital animation, 1 minute, 2014
DREAM HOMES, Wil Aballe Art Projects, curated by Wil Aballe, Vancouver 2014

MANSIONS
Concrete casts, aquariums, LEDs, styrene, aluminum, water, dimensions variable, 2014
DREAM HOMES, Wil Aballe Art Projects, curated by Wil Aballe, Vancouver 2014
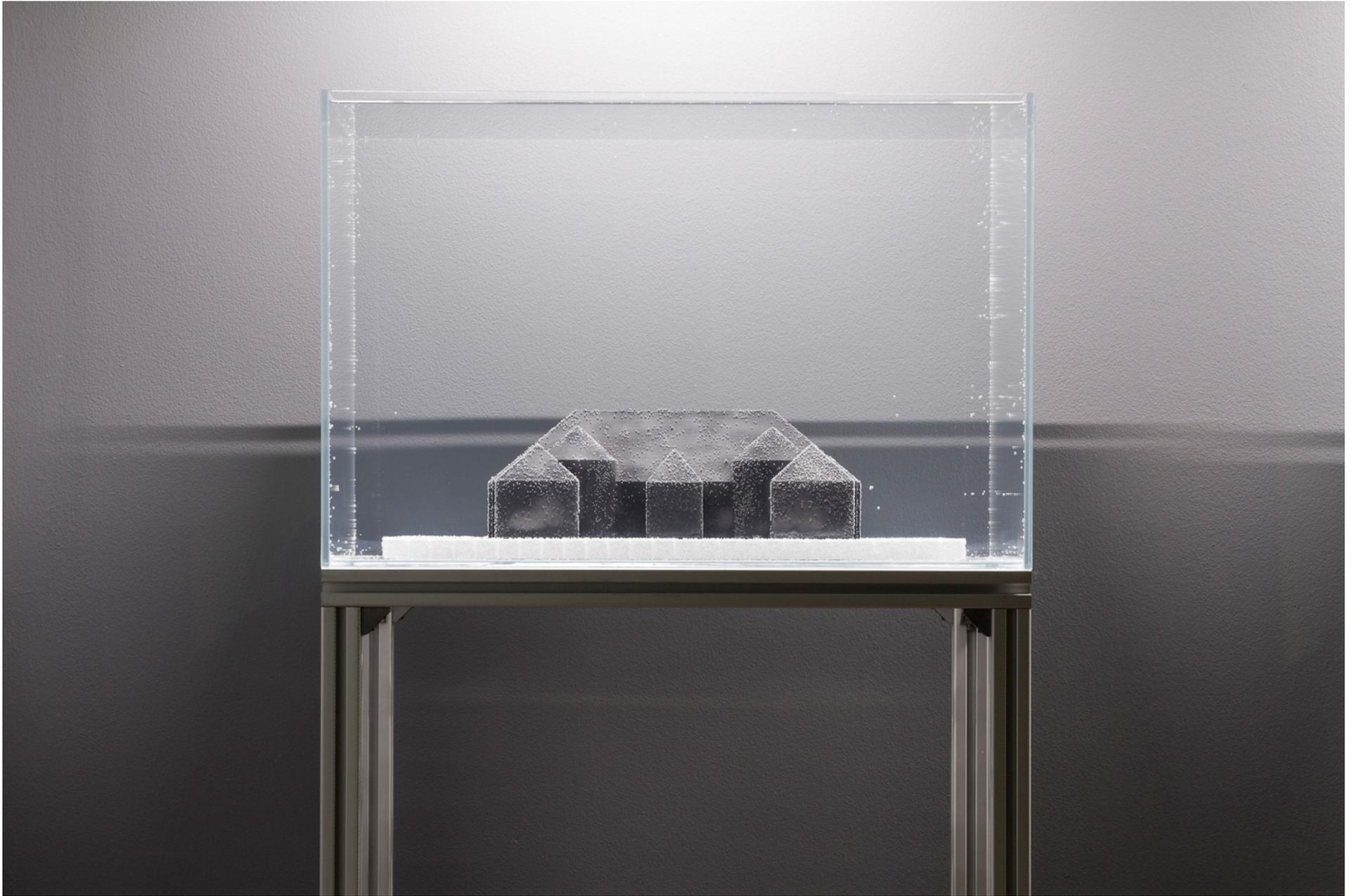
MANSION #2
Concrete cast, aquarium, LEDs, styrene, aluminum, water, dimensions variable, 2014
DREAM HOMES, Wil Aballe Art Projects, curated by Wil Aballe, Vancouver 2014

HOMELANDS
Inkjet prints on paper, 35" wide by 23" tall each
DREAM HOMES, Wil Aballe Art Projects, curated by Wil Aballe, Vancouver 2014

HOMELAND #2
Inkjet print on paper, 35" wide by 23" tall
DREAM HOMES, Wil Aballe Art Projects, curated by Wil Aballe, Vancouver 2014