



all icons are false



## ALEXANDER JAMES: USE OF WATER

by Paul Carey-Kent

If I were called in

To construct a religion

I should make use of water.

Philip Larkin<sup>1</sup>.

What sort of artist is Alexander James? It would be easy to align him with the contiguous YBA generation – James was born in 1967, Damien Hirst in 1965. Here are big, brash, self-consciously flashy images obsessed with death, exploiting the distortion of the world under water with a slickness akin to advertising – the better to modernise and expose the classic tropes of art history as being stuck in a different time and place. In fact, James is more an abrasive outsider than fashionable insider, more in the mould of van Gogh or Ensor, an artist of passionate intensity who has pursued his particular vision for thirty years irrespective of trends, and regardless of what others might think. ‘Artists must be sacrificed to their art’, he has said, ‘like bees, they must put their life into the sting they give’. James’ approach is spiritual without being religious as such – Larkin, after all, is mocking religion in suggesting that it would make sense to construct one. Indeed, James declares that those objects which are set up to inspire devotion – say gods, money, possessions, brands, celebrities – should not be treated as icons. It’s no surprise, though, to find that his practice has been compared to that of a monk.

James doesn’t see himself as a photographer, more as a sculptor whose setting is water, but who for practical reasons must record rather than retain the tableaux he constructs. By way of demonstration, a skull floats permanently in an eerily lit vitrine of water on the roof of his East London studio. What the photographs lose in immediacy of encounter, though, they gain in aesthetic modulation, and in the further category confusion of looking very like paintings. I don’t find myself wishing that the photographs were sculptures or paintings, but relishing the ways all three means feed into the images.

Spelling out his purpose early, James titled his studio, formed in 1990, ‘Distil Ennui, to extract the essence and beauty of life to appease world weariness’. He started out with the classic Vanitas – arrangements of fruit, flowers and dead animals emphasising that this world is fleeting, and so striving for the things of this world is an empty pursuit – but with the difference that his photographs are of objects submerged into black, velvet-lined tanks filled with highly purified water. James was a natural for the theme. ‘Loss is a terrible thing’, he says, ‘unless you know how to celebrate it. All negative things for me must be converted into a positive act of creation’. Since then James has completed many bodies of work, but has remained consistent in both underlying subject and tone: the metaphysics and mechanics of water inspire serious explorations of the world and its meaning.



*‘Plate 0813-022’*

*from ‘Transparency of a dream’, 2014*

James' best known works in the direct Vanitas mode may be those which, as if flying could be swimming, put butterflies under water ('Swarm', 2010-11 and 'Transparency of a Dream', 2013-14). I guess most people would try to work out how to Photoshop that unlikely scenario, but not James. He breeds butterflies in the studio, which is dotted with chrysalises, specifically the South American *Morpho* genus, which is naturally capable of entering a comatose state. He can then photograph them underwater, alive and unharmed, with no need of postproduction. The results are unsettlingly beautiful in their combination of natural and unnatural.

The watery setting, then, affects the spectacle, but how does it alter the message of the Vanitas? It might remind us that oceans cover 71% of the planet's surface, to which we tend to pay disproportionately little attention. And, of course, global warming threatens to increase the proportion of water to calamitous effect. We won't be fishes out of water, we'll be butterflies in it. That constitutes a move from micro to macro warning and, potentially, from acceptance to activism: from *Memento mori* - 'remember you will die', whatever you do, get used to it – to 'remember the whole planet will die – unless we act fast'.

James first placed people under water in images inspired by John Everett Millais' 1851-2 canvas 'Ophelia' and 'La Jeune Martyr', 1855, by Paul Delaroche. He made those in London but, never one to make things easy for himself, in 2013 he decamped with seven tons of kit to set up in a derelict building in Moscow. There he photographed Russians suspended in water for the first body of work featured here, 'Rastvoyrennaya Pechal' ('dissolved sadness'), as inspired by various nineteenth century paintings.

Putting people in water might sound macabre in this deathly context. Will they read as drowned? Surprisingly, perhaps, they don't: as James has said 'the subjects appear to be floating in a black space' and 'the collaboration within this void offers a serene and dreamlike sensation'. All have their eyes either closed or occluded, increasing their distance from us, enhancing the sense of reverie. The occasional appearance of bubbles – though Vanitas paintings use them separately to stand in for life's brevity – suggests breath recent enough not to be the subjects' last. Yet if the images prove undisturbing as images of people, they do disturb as environmental warnings. That micro to macros move occurs again, as hair and clothes act to confirm the eddying currents, and underwater shadows play a spectral role.



'Grace'  
from 'Vanitas', 2009-2013

'Rastvoyrennaya Pechal', like all James' series, was heavy on pre-planning – from sketches, to handmade props, to cutting and sewing all the garments worn, to training the models in yoga exercises. It was equally minimal in post-production: all images are exposed on 10 x 8 film plates, then either chosen or rejected prior to the framing decision – which James takes as seriously as the rest of the process. The most impressive technical feat is how clear and light the figures appear to be against blackness, generating a saintly aura. That dramatic and moral use of light is characteristic of Caravaggio, and the titles reference classical Greek mythology, adding more time periods into the mix. Moving to the present, there's also an interesting comparison possible with the leading Canadian photographer Ed Burtynsky. His 'Water' series takes an aerial view which rends the spectacular grandeur of torrents and deltas painterly, removing us from the experience of being under or even close to the water, while emphasising its scale and importance. Burtynsky's is a system builder's top-down vision in counterpoint to James' bottom up phenomenology.

Going to church  
Would entail a fording  
To dry, different clothes;

The second component of the All Icons Are False show is the 'Rosae' series (2010), in which underwater blooms are arranged to form various signs. The red rose as a 'symbol of unrelenting love', says James, 'is juxtaposed against a deep dark void'. The void stands in for the vacuity imputed to what is formed by the 20-60 roses which make up each representation. This particular way of showing the symbols makes them look like the most modern form of icon: the summary pictogram on a computer screen which links to a programme. The 'Rosae' series is suitably shallow, both in its straightforward presentation, and in the flatness which sees the flowers appear to float on the surface rather than swim in the depths. Three major religions are invoked in small format via the crucifix, the Star of David, and the Khalifar star and crescent. The one commercial symbol, 'Chanel', gets the biggest billing at 120 x 90cm. That may imply the greater emptiness of the realm, the proposition then being that religious icons are false, that brands and the celebrities who advertise them have become religious equivalents in our culture, and that they are even less worthy.

The show also includes two quite different, and spectacular, images of roses in water. In the large prints from the 'Glass' series of transparent roses (2012), James uses a process which naturally removes the pigment from the petals, leaving behind a fragile, skeletal structure which appears - as if a rose could ever be clothed – somehow naked. The capillaries are on view like flesh stripped of skin, making the flowers look very vulnerable and redoubling the air of mortality evoked. Can a rose drown, one wonders, in the very water which also sustains a cut plant's life?



*'Jupiter'*  
from 'Rastvoyrennaya Pechal', 2014





The Vanitas still life, then, takes us back to the Dutch golden age, and the Russian figures to the Pre-Raphaelites, but with an Impressionist infection. The images of the series 'All Icons are False' itself bear some resemblance to paintings of flowers in water – most obviously Monet's waterlilies – but look more like abstract paintings: the scraped canvases of Gerhard Richter and the syncopated striations or Jean-Paul Riopelle come most readily to mind. The slight variations in focus and blurs from movement resemble by turns the effect of brushstrokes or smeared paint.

My liturgy would employ  
Images of sousing,  
A furious devout drench,

The most literal and immediate effect is of looking through a textured glass door, such as is most typically found – appropriately enough – screening the watery goings-on of a bathroom. Second, the images look rather like a view of a river from above, one which has perhaps been put through some sort of digital distortion but retained its ripples. Or maybe we're looking at a more magnified zone: could it be the detail a butterfly's wing or lizard's skin? All those impressions, though, are soon displaced by the references to stained glass, as that covers both form and content. Light streams through from beyond, and the complex overlays generate the sense of an intricate framework imposed separately from the composition, rather as the leading operates in stained glass. The flowers could be those which appear in stained glass imagery, and James has, in fact, been careful to research what those would have been. He uses old varieties, returning us to how they looked at the time when their own symbolism was most vivid. Nineteenth century church goers would automatically have associated the rose with the Virgin Mary, the white lily with purity, the tulip with grace. James also features the red *Lilium Chalcedonicum*, which he sees as a link, through its prevalence in Galilee, back to the Sermon on the Mount.



To make the new series, James has taken 850 plate film photographs of 50 petal heavy arrangements of flowers densely combined underwater, then variously layered these 'core plates' on a scanner – up to four at a time – using both positive and negative images. The rhythms which result are complicated, as not only are several plates scanned, but both the natural forms of the flowers and the wave effects of the water make their separate contributions. Various unpredictable, semi-accidental effects arise from the process: topographically complex overlapping; unexpected greyscales where colours combine; evidence of movement in the water; strips where the edges of slides don't quite align; slides not yet fully dry stick together slightly; dark zones with a dominance of negative images; the odd mote of studio dust stuck between slides; gaps between slides causing apparently differential focus. The result is an acceptance of the contingent in sequence of semi-controlled accidents, much as occurs in process based abstract painting like Richter's, and with the characteristic attraction of being able to trace or at least speculate on what events have caused the particular outcome.

These are much more intricate images than the 'Rosae'. The combination of science and nature is not reduced to ciphers as are commerce and religion. Where the roses suggest straightforward surface effects, 'All Icons Are False' enacts a complex deconstruction and rebirthing which resonates with the need James sees for 'a spiritual renaissance with nature'. And if art is the other potential area of activity which – however bad much of it may be - can be venerated when 'all icons are false', then its abstract qualities must convey that here. No wonder James has spent many hours examining the images closely to see which should be selected – those with the right balance of rhythm and irregularity; with a gothic undertone to the organic; with a complex, unanticipatable yet harmonious interaction of hues.

It's pretty clear, then, that if James were asked to construct a religion he would make use of water. There's a logic to that, for it sustains life and if water is threatened, so are we. Like Larkin, James would have little time for international commerce or the literalities of a creed, yet the aesthetic emerging from his theological approach to making art chimes very well with the poet's conclusion to 'Water', in which Larkin seems to move beyond irony to a genuine epiphany:

And I should raise in the east  
A glass of water  
Where any-angled light  
Would congregate endlessly.

1 Philip Larkin: 'Water', 1954 (all four quotes)





'Plate 0336-9'

from 'All icons are false', 2016

The only strange thing about my practice is that I only want to produce these kind of pictures, and only this way. It can be done in other ways, but it would not be the same; not at all: through darkroom or digital manipulation of some kind, but this does not appeal to me. I have no desire to manipulate anything other than these liquid mechanics; if I used these other methods, tricks would occur to me and I would be able to repeat them endlessly, to me that would be horrific and the pictures no good.

The scene is there, created underwater; now I want to see the places it will go, new and unrepeatable. It appeals to me to be able to handle the work like this; not knowing what is coming.

Alexander James.





Plate 0305-8.3  
unique chromogenic print 60 x 45 cms.  
signed & dated recto





Plate 0003-8  
unique chromogenic print 60 x 45 cms.  
signed & dated recto  
*nb.. 80x60 cms studio proof is available for viewing*



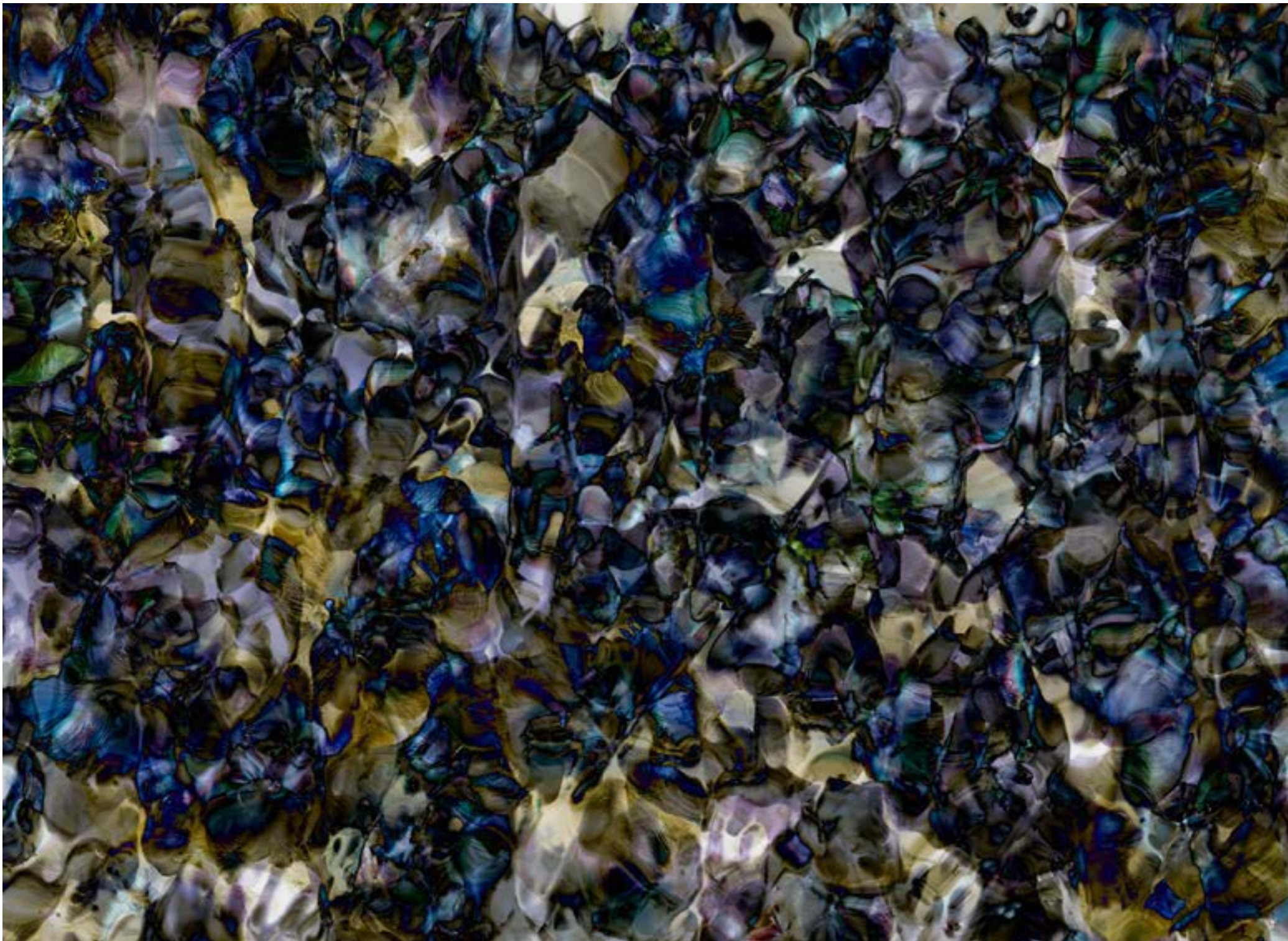


Plate 0469-1.2  
unique chromogenic print 60 x 45 cms.  
signed & dated recto



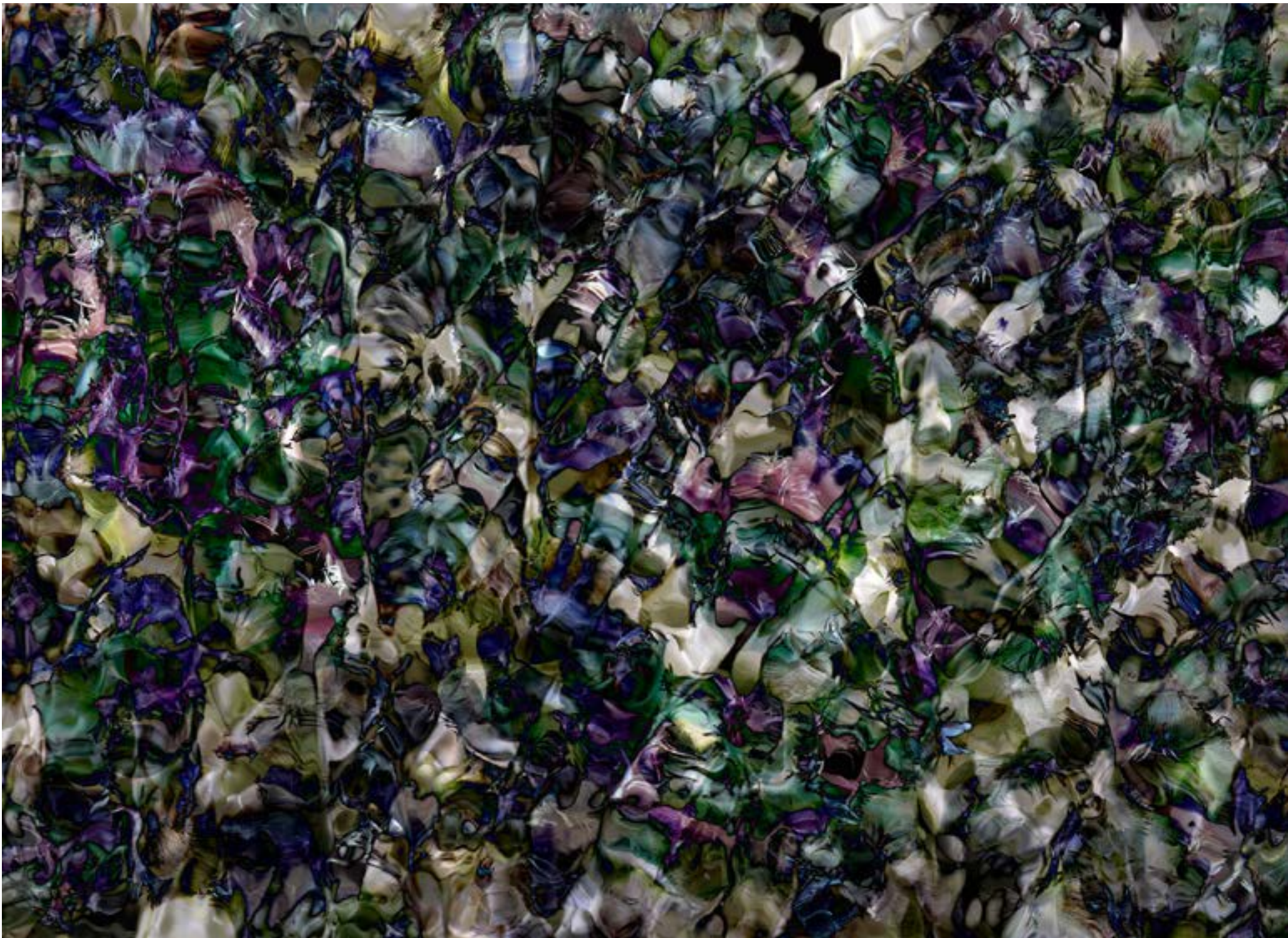


Plate 0469-1.1  
unique chromogenic print 60 x 45 cms.  
signed & dated recto





Plate 0001-I  
unique chromogenic print 60 x 45 cms.  
signed & dated recto





Plate 0003-8.2  
unique chromogenic print 60 x 45 cms.  
signed & dated recto  
*nb.. 80x60 cms studio proof is available for viewing*





Plate 0004-8  
unique chromogenic print 60 x 45 cms.  
signed & dated recto





Plate 0008-1  
unique chromogenic print 60 x 45 cms.  
signed & dated recto  
*nb.. 80x60 cms studio proof is available for viewing*





Plate 0009-8.2  
unique chromogenic print 60 x 45 cms.  
signed & dated recto





Plate 0336-9  
unique chromogenic print 60 x 45 cms.  
signed & dated recto





Plate 0002-I  
unique chromogenic print 60 x 45 cms.  
signed & dated recto





Plate 0336-8  
unique chromogenic print 60 x 45 cms.  
signed & dated recto



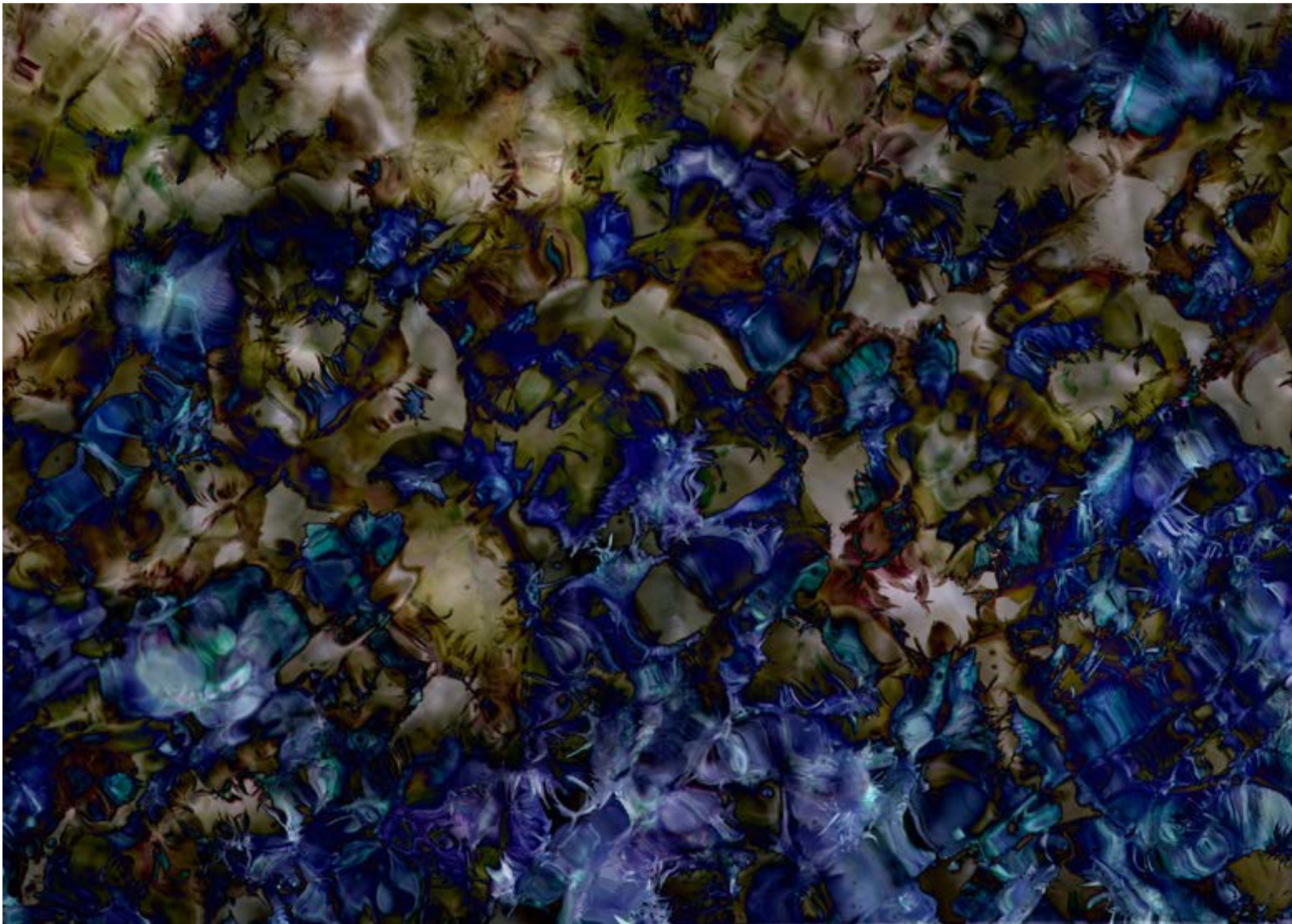


Plate 0296-8  
unique chromogenic print 60 x 45 cms.  
signed & dated recto





Plate 0009-8  
unique chromogenic print 60 x 45 cms.  
signed & dated recto



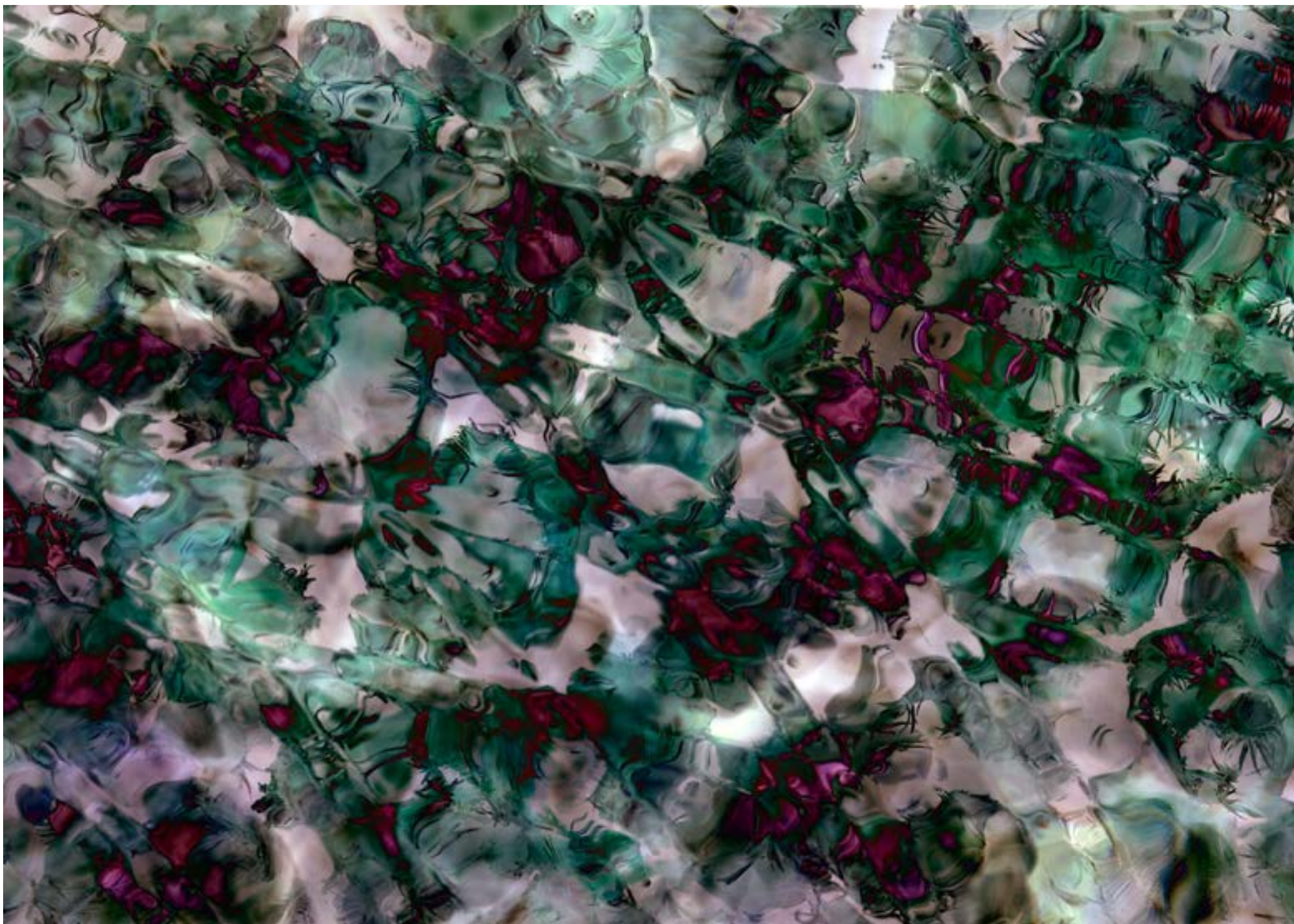


Plate 0026-9  
unique chromogenic print 60 x 45 cms.  
signed & dated recto  
*nb.. 80x60 cms studio proof is available for viewing*



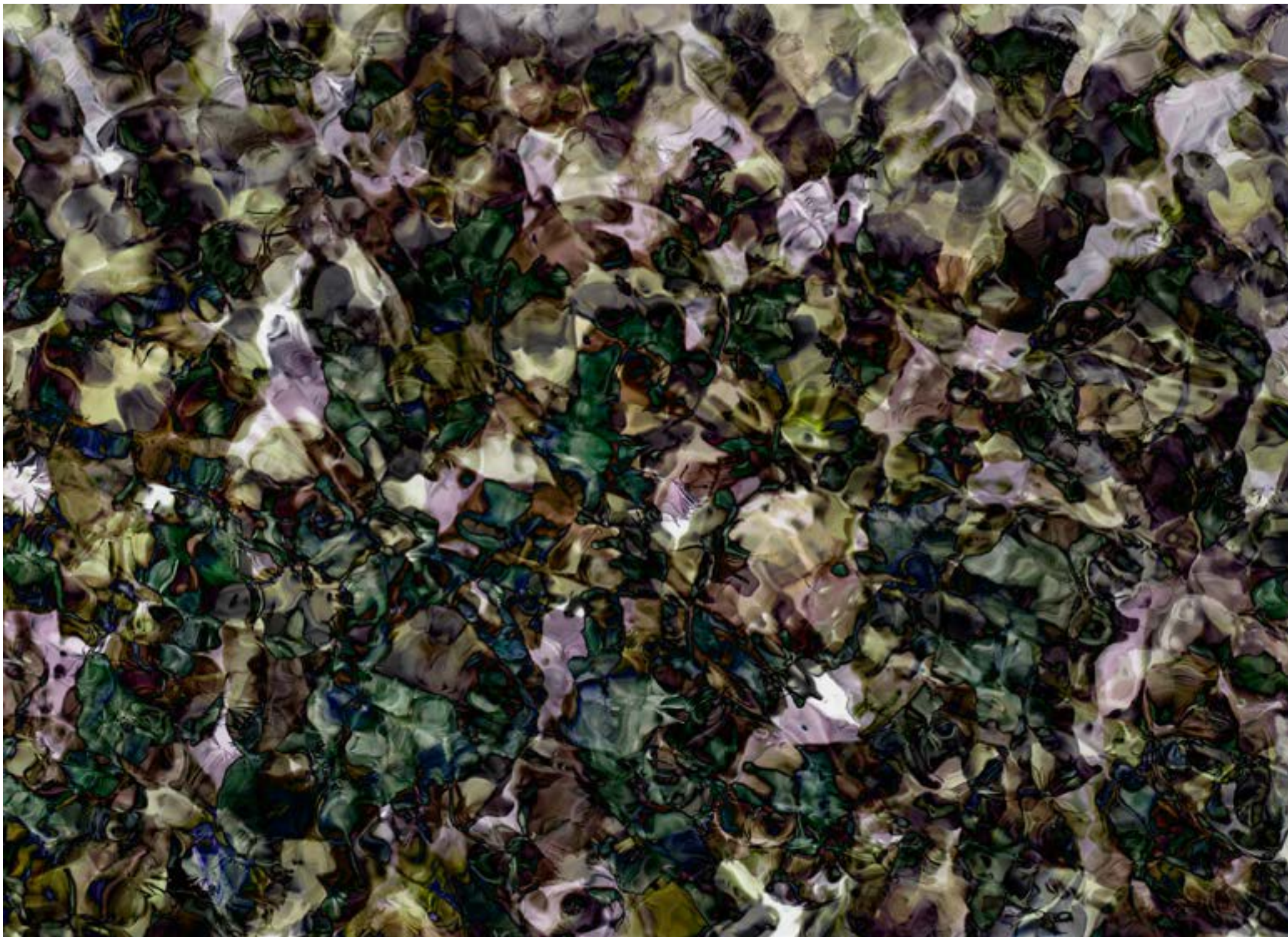


Plate 0261-2  
unique chromogenic print 60 x 45 cms.  
signed & dated recto



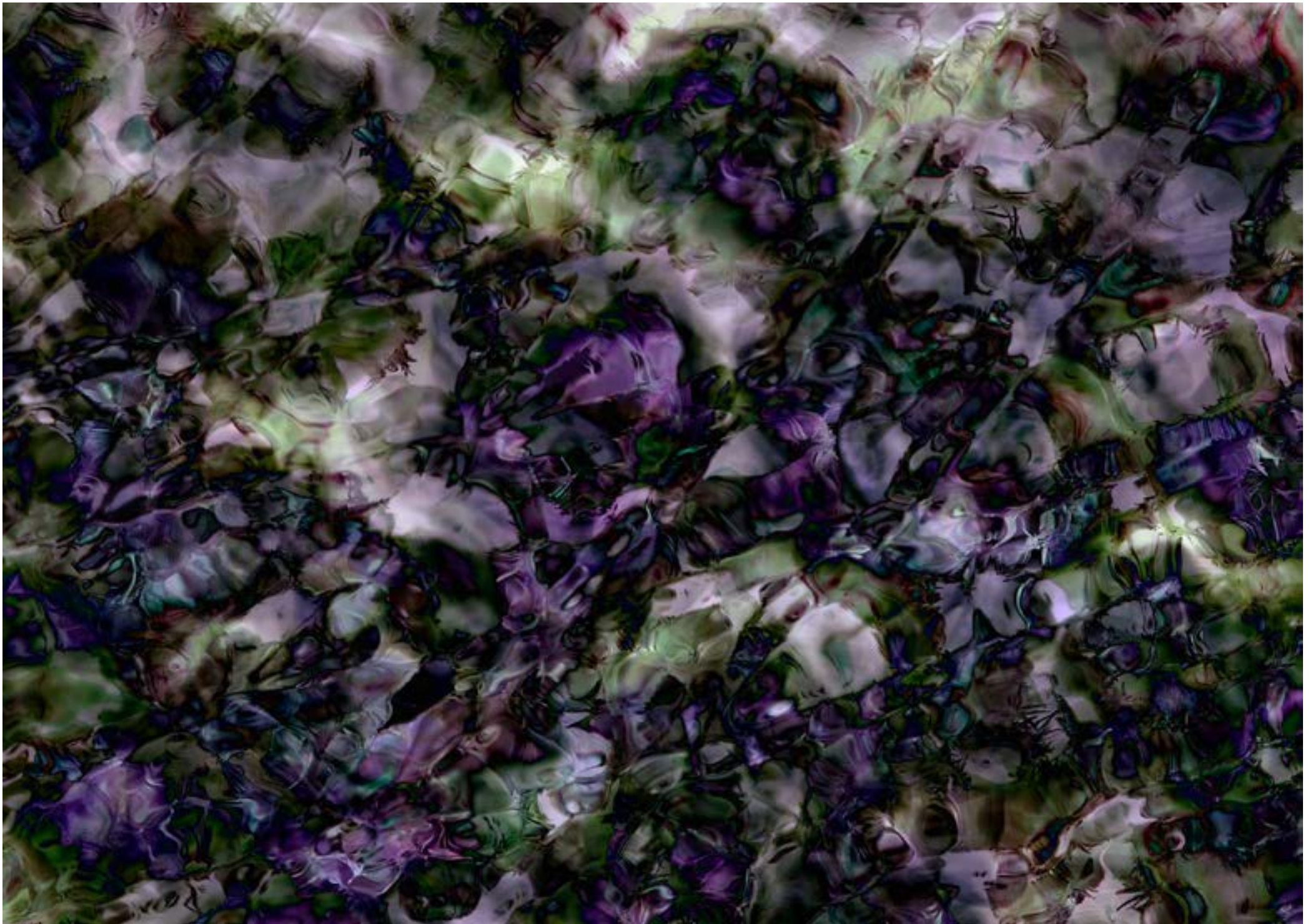


Plate 0261-8  
unique chromogenic print 60 x 45 cms.  
signed & dated recto





Plate 0296-9  
unique chromogenic print 60 x 45 cms.  
signed & dated recto  
*nb.. 80x60 cms studio proof is available for viewing*



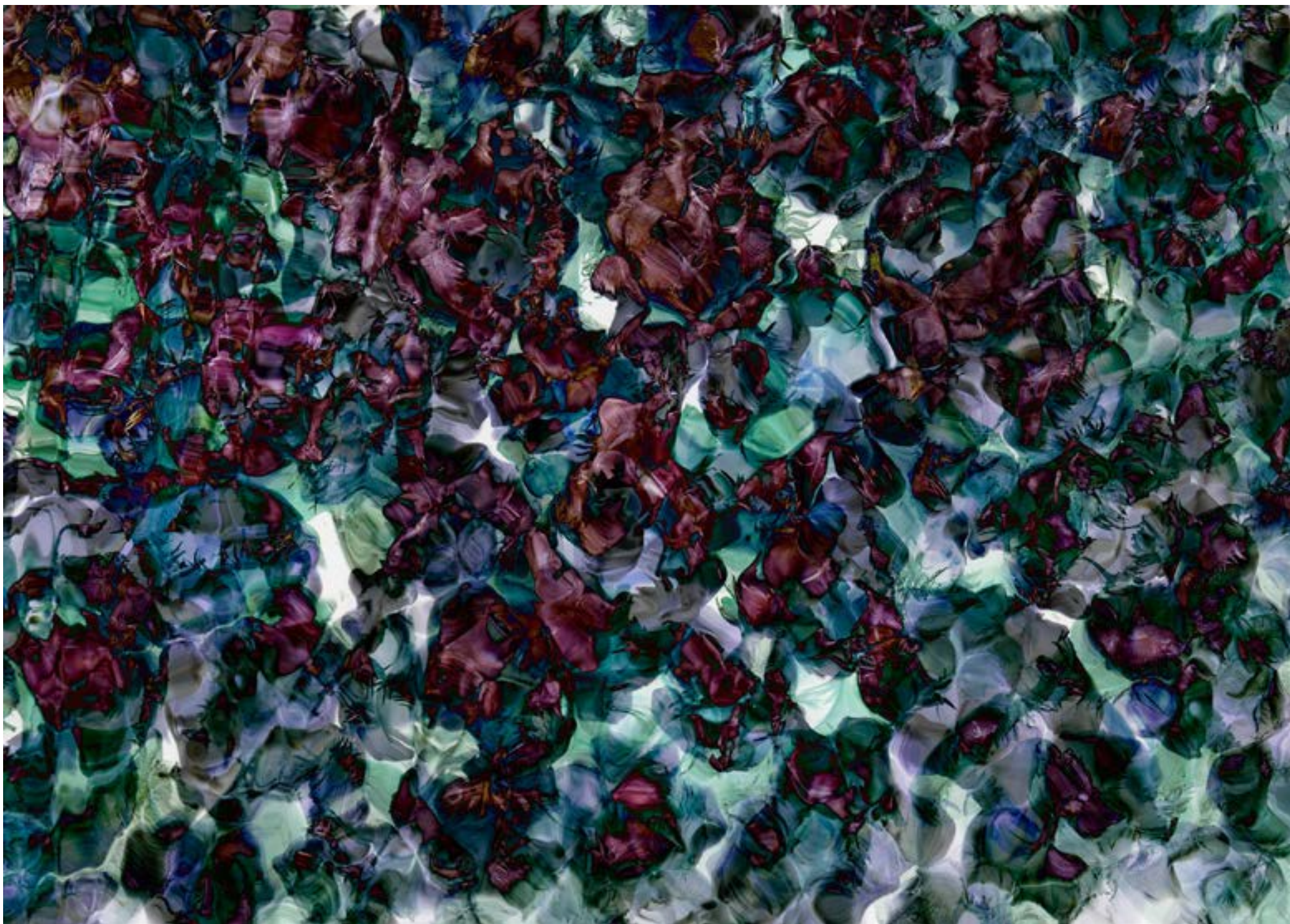


Plate 0334-I  
unique chromogenic print 60 x 45 cms.  
signed & dated recto



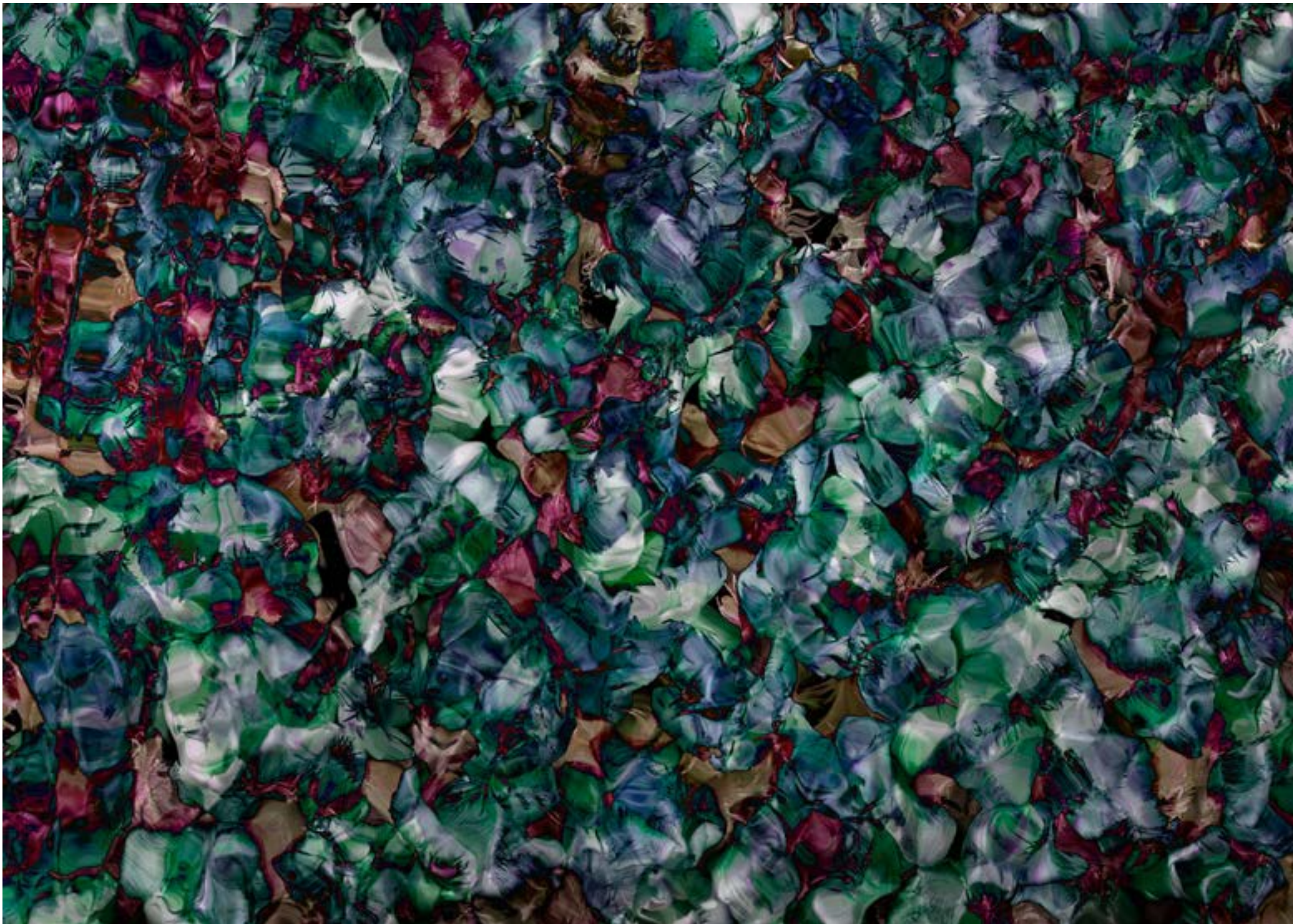


Plate 0334-2  
unique chromogenic print 60 x 45 cms.  
signed & dated recto



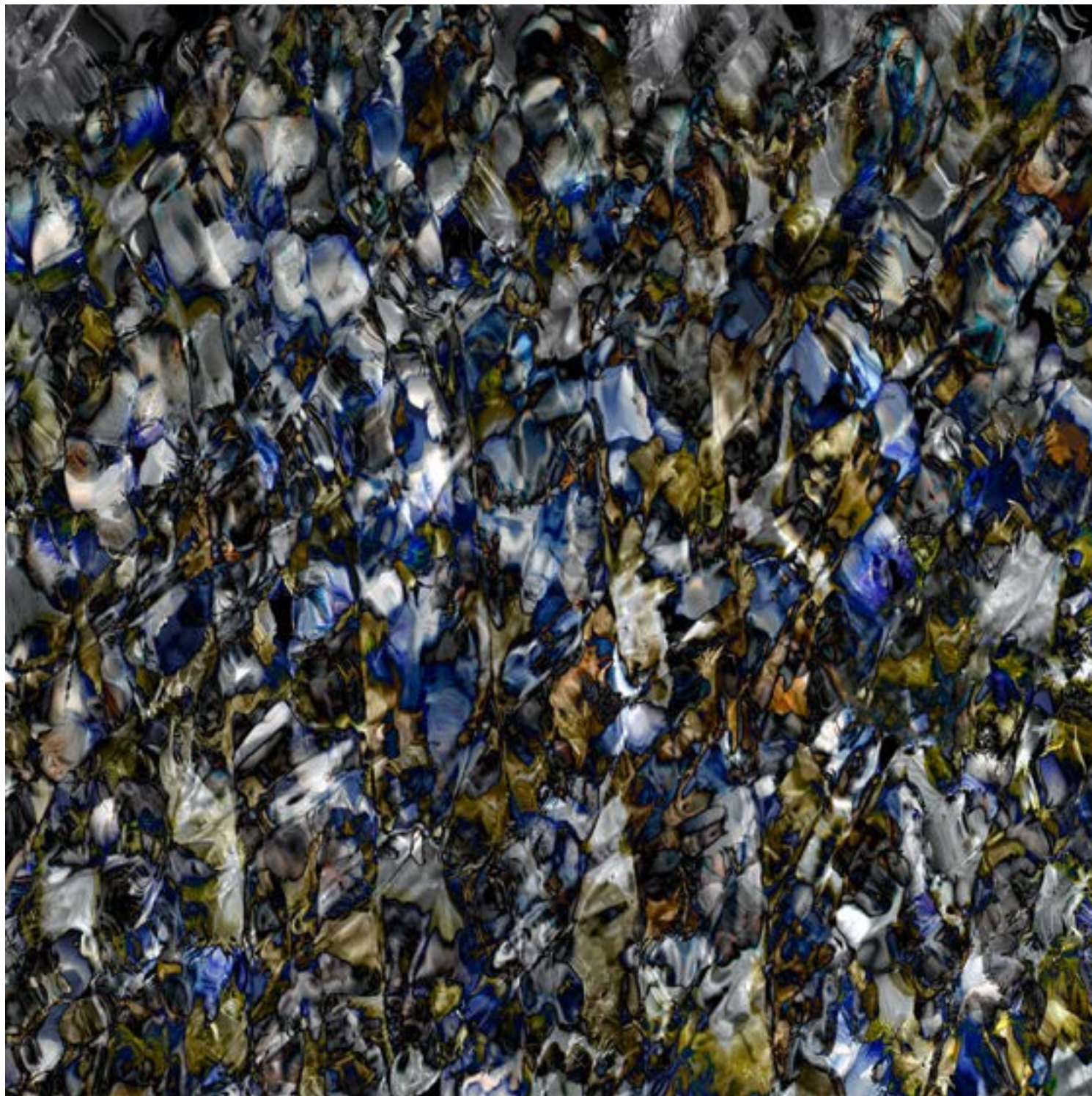


Plate 0353-I  
unique chromogenic print 60 x 60 cms.  
signed & dated recto





Plate 0488-I  
unique chromogenic print 60 x 45 cms.  
signed & dated recto



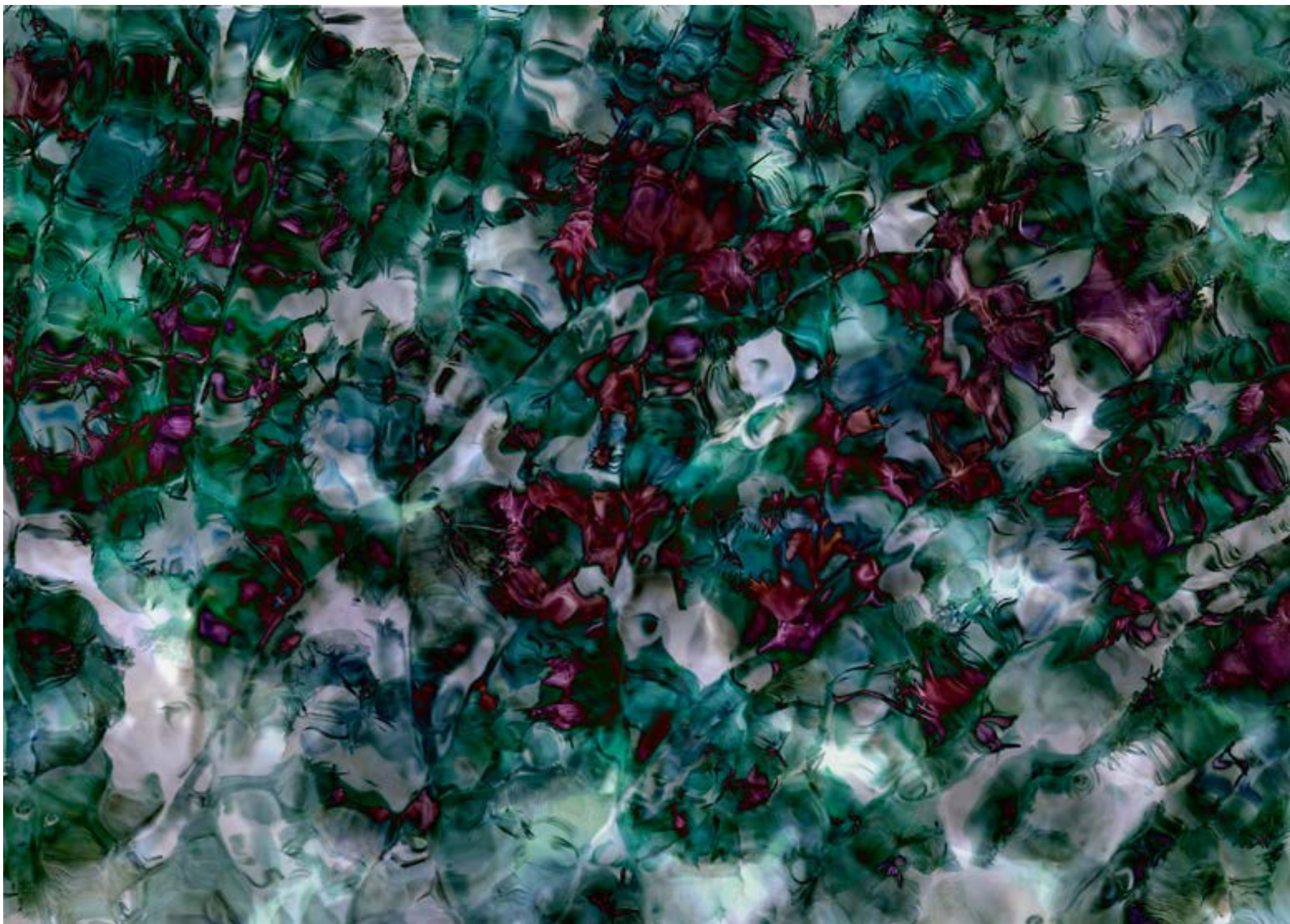


Plate 0324-5  
unique chromogenic print 60 x 45 cms.  
signed & dated recto



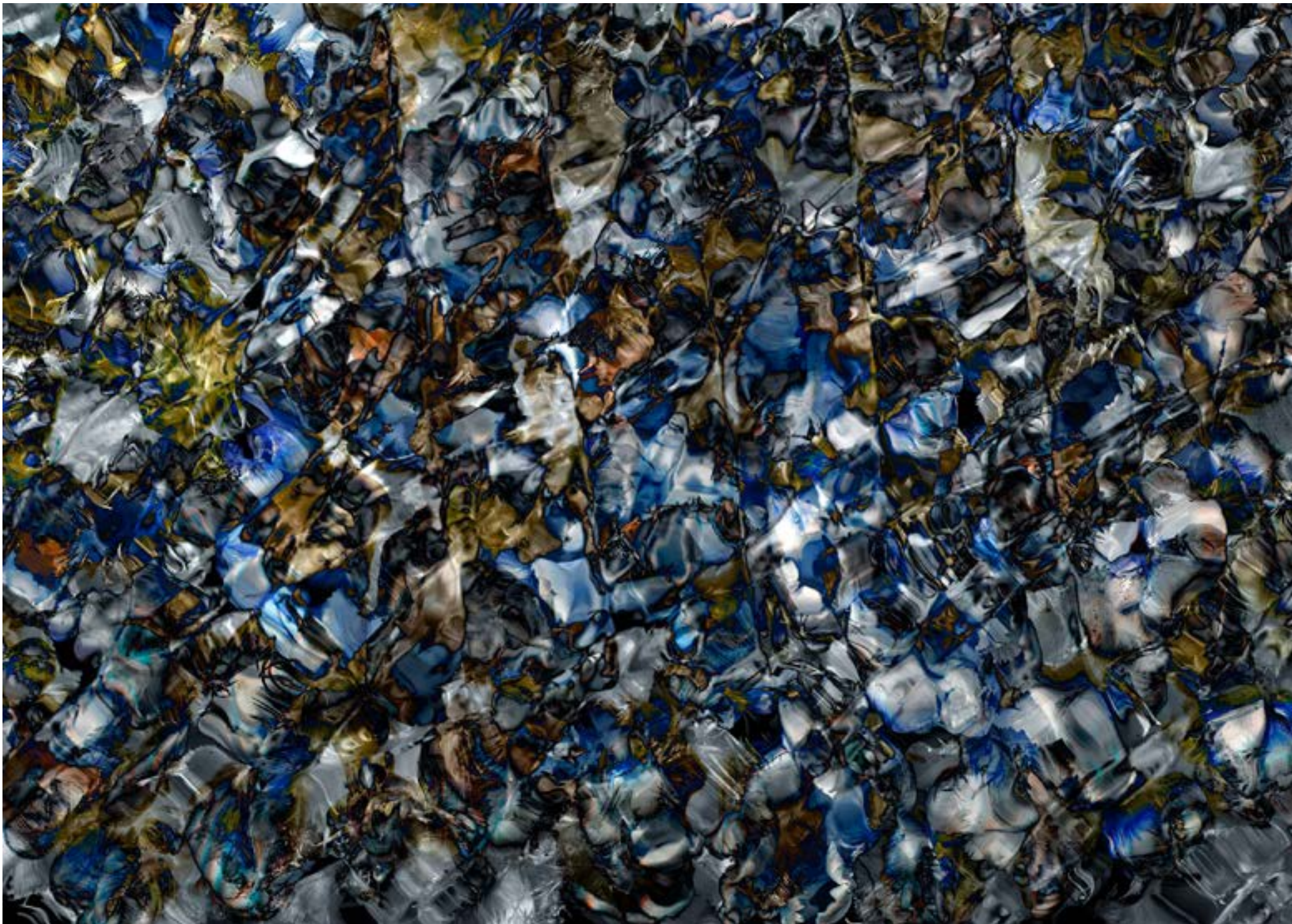


Plate 0353-2  
unique chromogenic print 60 x 45 cms.  
signed & dated recto





Plate 0353-3  
unique chromogenic print 60 x 45 cms.  
signed & dated recto





Plate 0362-I  
unique chromogenic print 60 x 45 cms.  
signed & dated recto





Plate 0441-I  
unique chromogenic print 60 x 45 cms.  
signed & dated recto