

Studio As Laboratory

The Artist & Eloise Stevens

Discuss The Experimental Work

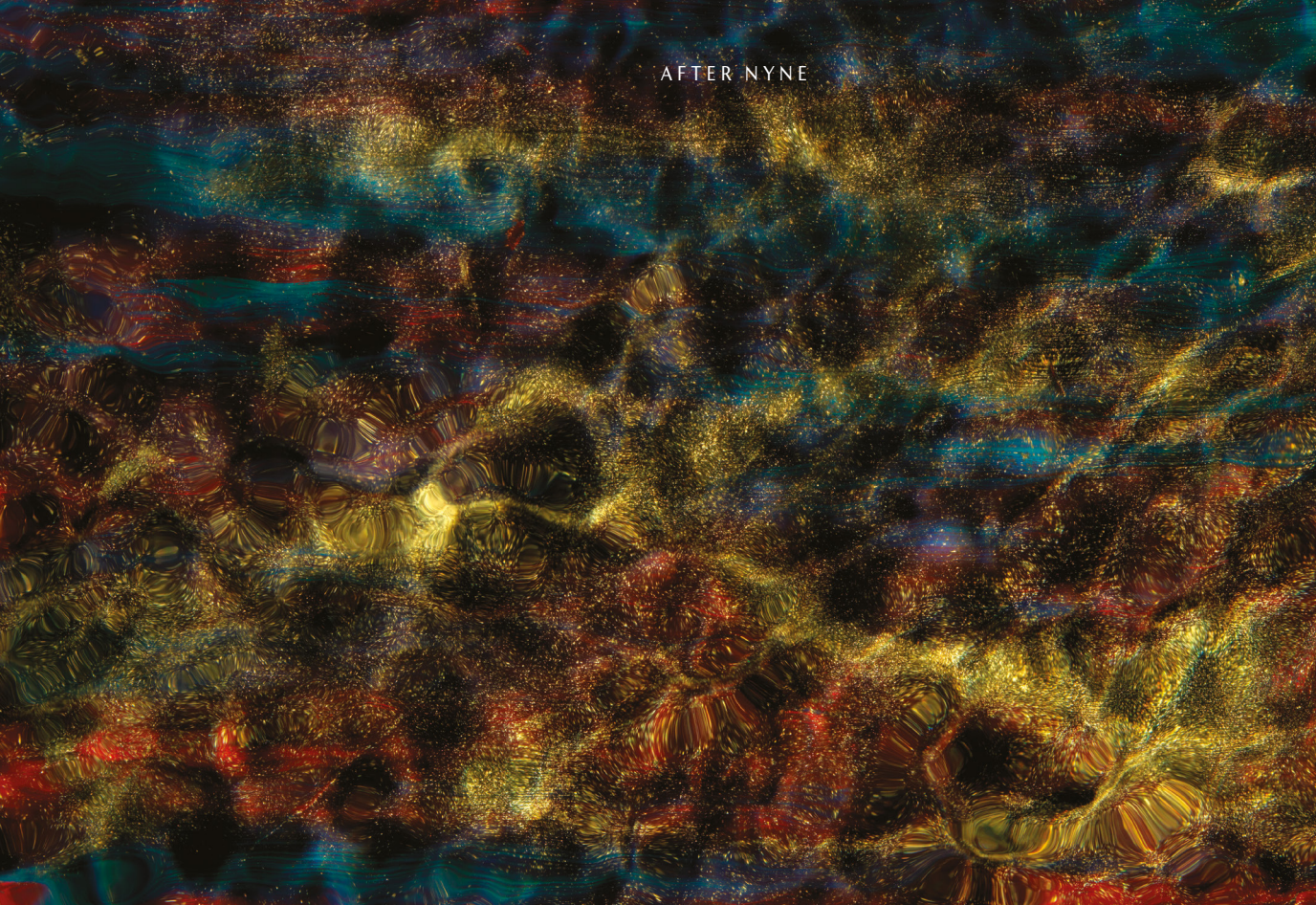
of Alexander James

WORDS · ALEXANDER JAMES & ELOISE STEVENS



— **Recently** the subject of ‘Laboratory’ was raised as a discussion piece, debating the permutations of the word and how these can be invoked both in and around the world of art. In the past I have hosted four one month artist residencies to enable an expansion of process. Each was selected individually based on a belief in the commitment and language of their particular practice. For the last project I invited eight artists to experiment and explore ideas in the studio.

ABOVE:
DETAIL OF UNDERWATER 8 x 10" transparency film plate,
painting No. 7. linen, oil & gold dust. 2015, Alexander James



ABOVE:
RESIDENCY PAINTING, Alexander James

An artist's studio is a place of hard and often tormented work, a place that provides the necessary tools and some comfort for the long working hours endured. As time passes it will take on a very specific form guided by the process it hosts. Memory serves to recall Jackson Pollock's studio, with treacle like drip remnants layered thick on the floor to the metallic burns marks of Giacometti's walls. The studio itself becoming a measurement in time, a long exposure photograph reminiscent of an unplanned installation view capturing ghosts and remnants of every action within the space. Looking around you see how the story unfolds as dust signals that things have been that way for a time.

For the residencies however I believe it should be the place that on occasion the walls are torn bare. The idea of bringing other artists into the space when you yourself have active works in progress would for me be a mistake as it will immediately inhibit the visitors movement; a sense of respect for the work insitu stops them engaging as fully as if the space were their own. By making the walls bare and by removing all signs of works in progress you remove these restrictions.

Hosting in an equipped studio with all its tools readily to hand and bringing the artists into what would now be a studio sized blank canvas, where everyone feels the freedom invoked; including to myself is a place for true experimentation to occur.

The blank canvas was as all experiments should be, a little unusual. Some of the rarer inclusions were a five tonne installation tank of pigment black water, a 'Red October' grand piano (the only one of its kind in the west), a rooftop 45 square metre black water reflection pool installation, a fully equipped darkroom, high end analogue and digital camera rigs with a digital editing suite. Added to this mix were the two poets, one critical writer, two composers, two film makers and a costume designer. I had formulated an intervention for all the raw materials and environment, at one time.

Like acid flavoured ping pong balls bouncing and colliding around the space. ideas, objects and texts were placed under or inside one another. Overlapping, folded, reconfigured and examined the results from which were simply re-inserted into the process, one unique artefact evolving into another. Time itself folding into itself as each artworks journey was recorded and then deconstructed. Creations that would never exist without those particular circumstances coming about. I aimed to make the setting comfortable for the visiting artists but at the same time unfamiliar, everything seemed alien around them all, as it was to me having so many artists in my normally secular space.

By not having a direction, a brief, sketch or concept or even a pre-conception of which mediums

to explore made everyone feel uneasy at first. Looking back I understand my calm demeanour in what was unfolding as an expensive experiment for the studio to bear. I understood that as they collided with the space, objects, tools and freedom around them 'chaos in residence' would explain itself to them all. I asked that they all start to write and sketch absolutely everything they think of down, instilling the belief that unrecorded thoughts that are not acted upon in some way are a waste of time. What we may or may not have produced during the residency was not a primary goal.

What we did produce was a broad range of unscripted materials including three original musical compositions, three short films, sculptural pieces, motion underwater footage of butterflies in flight and a large collection of paintings and photographs. The material is being curated into my 2017 exhibition program.

The conversations were exciting, skills both

told and learnt by all were like rivers running through our minds; washing away the debris and channeling a revival in 'thought to action' without blockade.

Through this lab experience each of the artists are now exploring the world and their work with a revived and extended vocabulary; creating a chemical reaction in our minds eye, bubbling with ideas, releasing them into the world. Their very own acid flavoured ping pong ball factory, releasing these colliding ideas into the world enabling every thought as being possible. This was the aim for the laboratory I created in August 2015 and the experiment continues on still for everyone involved. There is so much material 'out there' being released under the guise of art, one has to be careful only to buy the very best in quality whatever your budget. These commercially aimed artworks lack a compulsive sincere emotion that should exist in all art.

BELOW:
THE PAINTINGS, Alexander James



Chaos In Residence

— A girl with wistful green eyes is sitting beside a blackened pool. The night is dark for London, as if the ebony water has seeped from its tarpaulin and flooded the infected sky. Her maroon dress parachutes out over the surface. In the rhythm of Alexander's waving hand, it ripples softly as a jellyfish. Beyond the fabric, a skull rises from the black, its enamel surface flickering with the ripple's reflections. A crucifix is positioned in another corner, embedded on maroon velvet, Jesus' feet entwined with dried ivy and flaking flowers. Her words skim the surface towards him, "but to be an angel is false love, there is no maker left to meet..."

The diverse outpourings of the artists on the residency seem to be drawing to a point. Only a week ago, we were in "acid-flavoured ping pong balls bouncing off the wall" stage, as Alexander exclaimed on the first day. None of the eight artists selected for the residency knew where the final piece was headed, nor do they know how it will continue to unfold. Alexander clearly relishes this approach, and even more so in the discomfort it brings people accustomed to having a brief, a call sheet, a final image of how things will be. Control, in short.

Many of the artists can't quite believe their good fortune. Alexander James, Saatchi & Saatchi and the University of the Arts London selected two camera operators, three writers, two composers and one studio assistant from approximately 270 applicants. "Raw talent" was the only criteria, although a number are already fairly established in their careers. No matter what stage they are at professionally, for many, this is the only occasion in which they have been given total creative freedom.

Sophie Robins, a writer and performance poet, is clearly revelling in the experience. "I'm coming to the studio for ideas, and then going home to shape them into poems. And I'm being paid for this! I feel like Wordsworth!" she laughs. "This is something I haven't been able to do since uni, just sitting there playing with the camera, the light, having hours to spend getting the right look" adds Katie, a camera operator.

Others take a little longer to cast off their professional shackles. James Butler, also a camera operator, arrived back in the UK from a shoot in Japan, a week into the project. He was immediately given the task of filming the models' recitations over the dark water. "I'm a bit of a tech freak so I would have liked more days to prep and to test, trying different lights out, using a few different camera systems to see what we can get the best from" he admits.

Alexander clearly delights in plunging people into the wilderness, forcing them to be resourceful with their creativity, drawing from the most unlikely of sources. It seems the quickest way to learn, the way Alexander has grown all his life, like a deer calf born into a stampede. "I am gloriously unsullied by academism" he states. All aspects of his craft he has taught himself, from the breeding of Butterflies to the crafting of a 24 carat gold halo. Part of the reason for the residency's creation is to pass that knowledge on, and the attitude that embodies this approach. There's a kind of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory appeal to the experience; everyone will come away having learnt something.

Although Alexander has been doing this for his entire career, this is only his second formal artist residency, a place where the "acid-flavoured ping-pong balls" could collide. "I just wanted to prove to myself that there should be more artists practicing different art forms with each other in the studio. Currently there's no overlap with traditional art mediums. I don't want to force them into a flavour but to see what happens in the clinical environment of an underwater studio that has been pre-prepared for them. And if there are harmonics working this way, why aren't other artists doing it? There are enough questions here for me to want to explore it further."

Money, and often the increasingly murky territory of copyright, is the short answer to the question. Alexander is struggling to secure the sufficient funds to finance the project, but in the face of such infectious convictions and passion, such matters appear trivial. All the artists wanted to be involved.

The residency is a romantic idea, a historical one too, and perhaps most crucially, intricately weft with the threads of nostalgia. Just as Alexander speaks often of the intense dedication of the Flemish painters, his eyes often glaze over in reference to the Dadaists, the Surrealists, the Cubists. Guillaume Apollinaire appears to be his lynchpin, the keystone. As an art critic, he chronicled the work of some of the most salient artists of the 20th century during their early days, Picasso's Cubist phase, Marcel Duchamp's Dada works, André Breton's Surrealist paintings. He wrote poems of great visual effect, coiling his words into striking and moving images.

Apollinaire also proudly claims to be the first model for a portrait by the Cubist painter Jean Metzinger, which was later displayed at the first Cubist exhibition in 1911. It was a time when the arts intersected more fluidly and thrived on this blurring of

BELOW:
RESIDENCY PAINTING, Alexander James







boundaries. A notable example is the automatic writing and painting of the Surrealist period, exemplified by writer and painter Breton, and the most famous Surrealist of all, Dali. The technique aimed to bypass conscious thought; literature would elude rules of syntax and grammar, while painting would dodge any visions grounded in reality, and take on a dreamlike quality. There is certainly a profound sense of this bohemia infused into the studio space Alexander has created in which all ideas are welcome, all vital to the larger picture of creation. The presence and variety of these ideas, of course, is crucial to his own artistic path. "When developing the idea of the residency, I thought, if I was going to learn from a group of people, what type of people do I think they should be? What would they bring to my work?"

Furthermore, what would they later bring to their own bodies of work? As a bastion of analogue technique and hard graft amidst modern artists' celluloid towers of Facebook and Instagram, Alexander clearly wants to spread the value of these methods, not just in the present, but into the future as well. "Perhaps my own mortality is on the agenda... What happens if I go and I don't pass anything on?" The residency has the potential to extend his artistic heritage and philosophy onto others practitioners; a just and none.

For the length of the residency, each artist is enhancing and elaborating their own and Alexander's work. If his stills are space, then, it seems, the films, music, and literature created around them provide time. They are linear art forms that allow for story and emotion to unfold in a more objective way. Alexander's photographs spark the imagination, allowing the viewer to follow their own story, the other art forms have joined and build on the capacity to guide this process more closely over a certain period of time.

The introduction of film is an obvious enhancement of Alexander's aesthetic. Whereas the photographs capture a singular moment, for the first time Katie and James' films captured those instances under guidance from Alexander. He knew what could be found with a fast frame rate. It was mesmerising, showing off the way the black water ripples like silk, dancing light off the velvety texture of the crucifix one moment, gleaming rays off its brass cross the next. With multiple cameras, they have been able to experiment with illusion. In one of the final pieces, a young girl in a flowing white dress of silk strokes the water, but instead of her fingertip disappearing, it comes out of the surface, completely disorientating the viewer. James has been fascinated by this aspect of Alexander's work long before he met him. "The fact that he was shooting the reflection of the object, not the object itself and using the light refracting was fascinating; it's definitely something I want to experiment more with." James stated.

Charli Parker, the studio assistant, has been pivotal in creating this aesthetic of illusion and dream. Though most of the time she has been helping Alexander directly, she has also been experimenting with compositions of some of her own sculptures floating in the black installation out on the roof of the building. "All the objects are on the table [in the studio], and everything starts talking to each other. It's a conversation and then objects find affinities. Charli did it yesterday with the Russian money and the ram's head. You find things that seem to have a resonance." Alexander explains. Her version of events is a little more chaotic. "He threw it on me – create two pieces from the props table and start to position them in the water and then go find three models in 24 hours that can act and learn a poem in an hour and can be here at 5pm tomorrow. Then let's run up and down the motorway and pull down branches and trees and bring them onto the set. It was totally mental, controlled but out of control; looked fucking amazing" she grins.

As Alexander's assistant "I feel like I've had a year's worth of a photography degree in three days. I'd done a bit of digital photography but I've never seen a huge bellows camera in action. And then there's processing the 8x10 plates... Already I feel like I'm his second brain a little bit." Charli tells me, giggling. "He's incredibly trusting, he asked my honest opinion about a piece we were working on; and I gave it to him and he immediately reacted and threw it out and started again. He really does listen to people he's just met which is interesting. He's incredibly impulsive."

This is most certainly a short but not insignificant example of the kind of exchange Alexander was hoping to cultivate in the studio. "Everyone is re-inventing their craft and this for me is what makes this residency" explains Sophie Jane, writer and poet. And this seems to be only the beginning of a number of insightful conversations and symbiotic relationships. For example, Alexander could have very well chosen one of the many experienced photographers who applied to be his assistant, yet he chose Charli, an accomplished seamstress. "We both have very different skills so we're coming at it from different angles. I think we are going to learn a lot from each other."

If the camera operators and studio assistant can be said to be enhancing Alexander's work, then it is the composers and the writers who are really given licence to soar in any direction of their choosing. On the application Alexander had suggested the glitchy, classical duo Ryuchi Sakamoto and Alva Noto's album *Insen for inspiration*, but in such an endless space, semblance seems almost impossible.

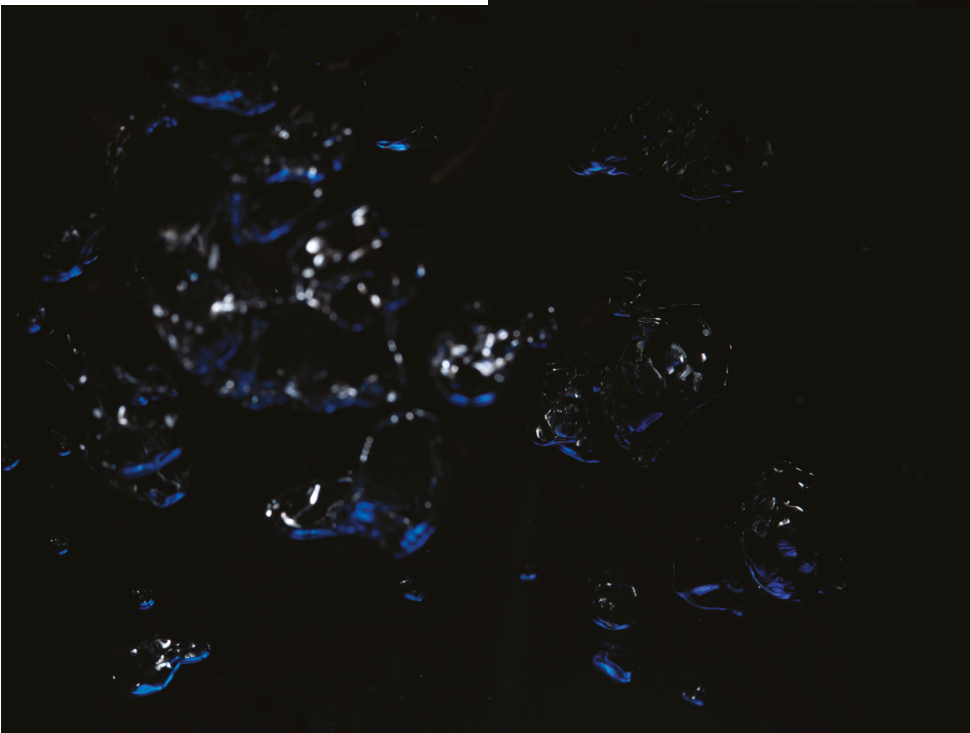
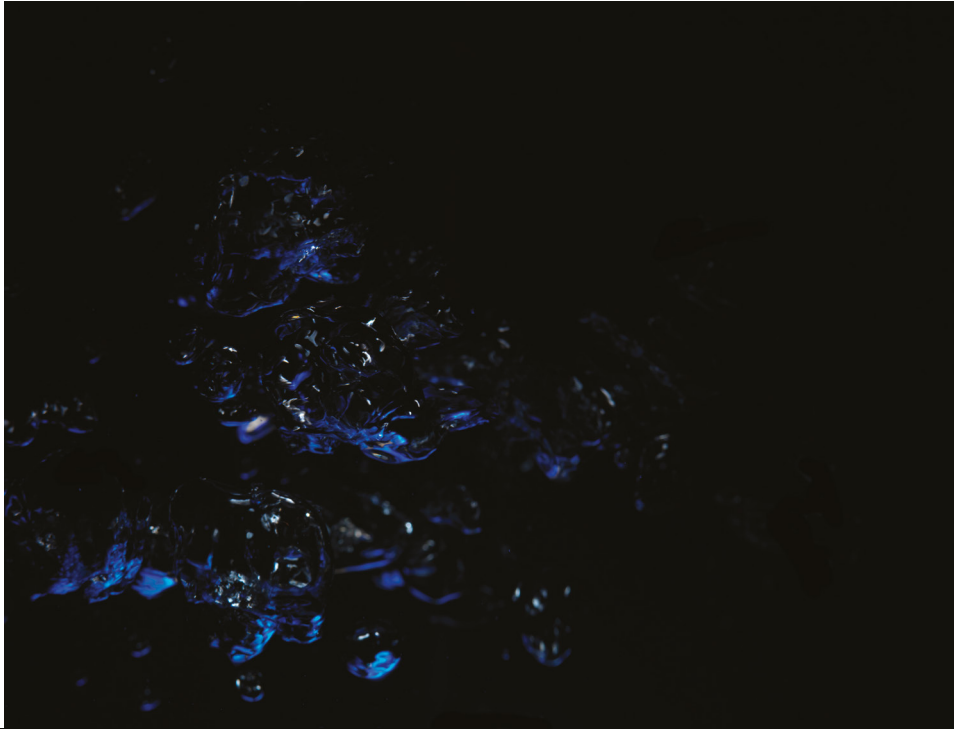
On the first day, Rae Howell and Dan McBride are scouring the room like children, seeking the potential of sound in every edge, every curve.

PREVIOUS SPREAD:

NEW TANK BUTTERFLIES, Alexander James

BELOW (2 IMAGES):

SWARM, Alexander James



Metal, plastic, cloth, stone. Dan is radiant as he thrusts his pinkie into a thimble, the bubbled surface already bouncing over the piano strings in his mind. He is most excited by the Russian grand piano, Red October, eagerly awaiting the musicians in the corner of the studio. "At my college it's a sin to touch the inside of the piano!" That's the Royal College of Music no less, whose courses are not renowned for ever deviating too far from the norm.

Dan had collaborated with other artists before, but never with another composer, and this pairing of "a feisty breed", in Dan's words, had perhaps the greatest potential to explode. Luckily, he and Rae were very complementary. By his own confession, Dan chases tangent after tangent, ending up in a completely different place to where he began. A man after Alexander's own heart, you might say. Rae, meanwhile, with over a decade more experience behind her, is more structured in her approach.

The pieces, however, play out under the steady hand of control; each sound and sensation is brought in with utter precision and sensitivity. Final 1 opens with the distant sound of tape singing on strings, infusing a sense of awe as you strain to urge the sounds ever closer. A high drone creates the mystery of underwater, the flurry of piano notes like drops skating the surface. A high piano melody dovetails a dolphin's pleas. It is painful at times, visceral in its discord, and, with your mind attuned, vividly conjures up the deep ocean's great expanse.

Final 2 is a more sinister creation, the high drip of water infusing a deep sense of leaden anticipation. Notes are bowed in like a steam train, creating a vision of dense, impenetrable fog. Industry, ill at ease, gives way to phrases of classical beauty, emerald forest, something more fertile, more welcoming, but still unsure. These rare instances are sliced by a resonant drone sliding into the distance; only the dripping remains.

All unusual sounds come from long experimentation with every surface and combination of textures of the piano. Musician John Cage made a name for himself working in a similar vein, but some of these sounds, according to Dan, have become familiar, and he wants to really push the boundaries of this world. "I like the VHS tape on the strings best. The grease from your fingers causes friction, which causes a squeak, which is fed into the string that makes it sound like it is being bowed. I really like that."

Some of the sounds directly reference Alexander's principal theme: water. And this is where Dan and Rae appear to meet at their zeniths. "I love water, being underwater, swimming in water. I grew up on the sea. Water always played a big part of my life. There are so many inspirations you can take from water, the fluidity, sounds underwater, whales underwater and

so on. It's like a whole new world of sounds," says Dan. "Water, the ethereal nature of his work, is floating and beautifully undulating" adds Rae. "My music is quite flowing naturally, like being in a dreamlike state. I can sit and improvise for hours on the one theme and I get taken away. I think floating in water itself has that dreamlike state."

The studio's visual stimuli was also very important to them, Dan and Rae are both highly influenced by visuals in their composition, and the vivid environment of the studio has been a fundamental inspiration. "My music is always exploring more performance art and the visual side of it. It's not just presenting an end piece of music, but involving the audience in the performance. I also have synaesthesia, so that brings another visual element." The potential to build on Dan's syndrome seem endless, and no doubt Alexander will help this flourish.

Sophie Robins, a performance poet, has reacted in a similar way to the ever-changing palette of images in the studio. *In You* cannot imagine the complexities of liquid mechanics, she conjures up a drowning woman reminiscent of Millais' Ophelia. But the image is soon internalised and reproduced as hers and Alexander's own.

**Dear Mirror, I ask you only this,
do not let me fade in black light,
hold me up, to remember,
and remember the complexities of water
cannot bring me back to life.**

This, to me, is now the woman speaking from the depths of Alexander's *Witness*, and the effect is a tragic reminder of the power of water as the giver of life and, in many circumstances, its utter futility.

Sophie Jane, meanwhile, also a writer, has more of a philosophical mind rather than a visual one, and the mystery of underwater has proved itself a powerful launchpad for reflections on lucid dreaming and perception.

**Rationality,
Disintegrates,
Proportion, time, senses, melt
In metamorphosis**

“It’s been very inspiring working with Alexander, not just for his heart but for his philosophy as an artist. The way he thinks about life and art and enjoying yourself. I don’t get to have these kind of conversations with people.”

— DAN MCBRIDE

She writes in *Shifting Parameters Of Reflection* // Her writings are still observations of all that is unfolding before her, but her realm is in the mind, not the eyes. “My pieces deal with how exercising control over and recording these fascinatingly fleeting uncontrollable two worlds, ultimately leads to a state of insight and reflection” she says. They are a glimpse perhaps into the state of mind of an artist in the midst of creation, whether painter, sculptor, or musician.

Alexander is in deep awe of the power of words, but is also fearful of their strength, their ability to rip open fresh wounds. He asked me to write two pieces, one on his practice and the other on the residency, but confessed that he is wary. “Of me?” I asked, incredulously. He nodded. He looks at my pen and sees sword, hovering above his solar plexus. Yet he earnestly assists my own subjective truth.

Alexander’s fear is understandable. He has thrown wide the doors to his home and studio, spoiled our senses with full roasts, anecdotes, support and ideas. “Communal eating is an important part of the creative process,” he explained on the first day, as he pulled two meaty chickens out of the oven. His pleasure was tangible as we all ate together. Hunger slaked, meals and late evenings soon gave way to profound and intellectual discussion on art, movements, the subconscious. “It’s been very inspiring working with Alexander, not just for his heart but for his philosophy as an artist. The way he thinks about life and art

and enjoying yourself. I don’t get to have these kind of conversations with people” says Dan. Alexander greatly enjoys these discussions, the deserved reward of opening himself to the most intimate place of his life: his being, his studio, his heart.

That is also where an artist is at his or her most vulnerable. But if fear of my pieces is Alexander’s gut reaction, he knows he needs to rid himself of it. For isn’t the giving of oneself the creation of art? The necessary act of exposing yourself to achieve your best work? Alexander is the embodiment of the idea that art is the uncontrollable compulsion to create, the feckless path of personal emotion and experience that stampedes its beasts through mind and hand. And who am I to judge these beasts?

We will all have taken away something different from the residency; tangible skills, knowledge and ideas. “Surely the whole idea of the residency is that you leave this experience on fire, with a 12 gauge canon up your arse because you are so exited about how you’ve reinvigorated your perception of what you’re doing and how you should do it.” Alexander says. Just being given the time and space to create has reinvigorated many of the artist’s perceptions in countless ways. But for me, the most valuable lesson has been the crystallisation of this notion: To really be strong enough to feel and know your emotions and, in exorcising them, to produce art that has the power to give, and keep giving.