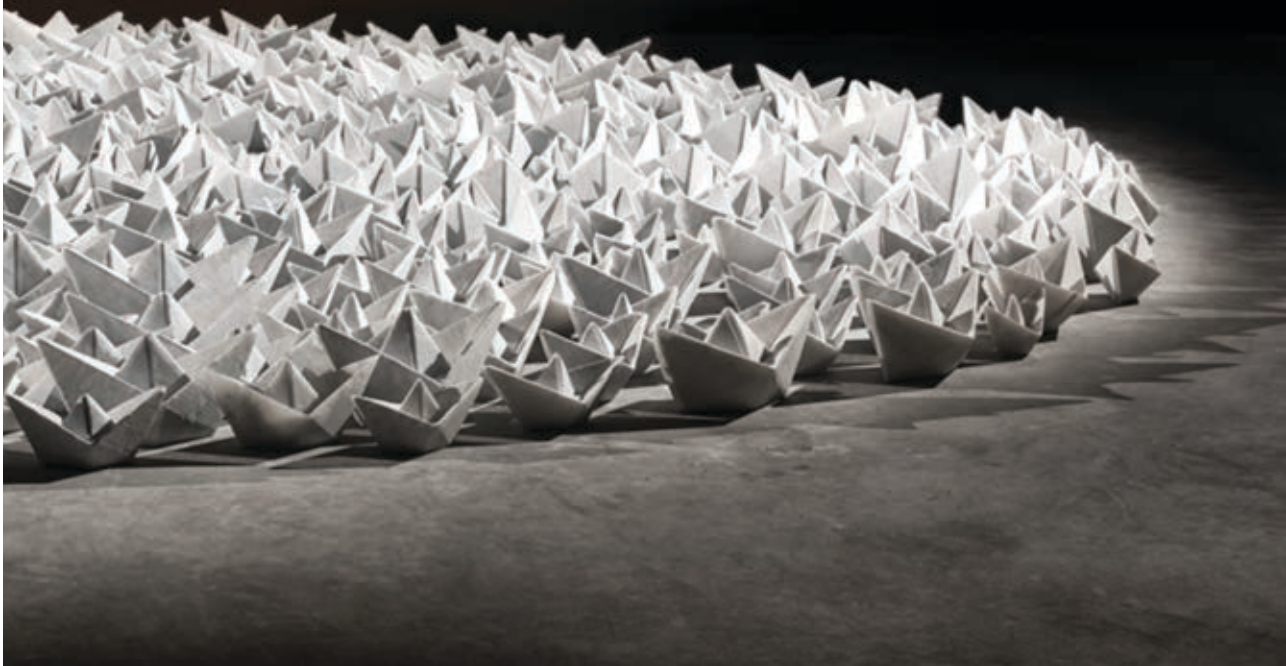


ALEX SETON
THE ISLAND



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18 FEBRUARY - 7 MAY 2017

NEWCASTLE
ART GALLERY



Cover image

Paper Armada 2015
Bianco Carrara marble
dimensions variable
Artist collection
Courtesy the artist

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FOREWORD

Newcastle Art Gallery is pleased to present *THE ISLAND*, a compelling solo exhibition in which artist and sculptor Alex Seton contemplates and questions Australia's role in the refugee and asylum seeker debate. In context with the exhibition, *THE ISLAND* can be a safe place of refuge isolated from the humanitarian challenges the world is grappling with today, or it can take on a more sinister tone as a desolate place for those survivors of perilous sea journeys seeking asylum only to be marooned, stateless, looking to the horizon for help.

In this exhibition Seton's intention is clear, his moral compass is set on revealing true stories about real people as embodied in his major work *Someone died trying to have a life like mine* 2013 generously loaned by the Art Gallery of South Australia and so eloquently described in Linda Jaivin's following essay.

Seton's mastery of traditional stone carving combined with the development of his own unique

shaping techniques are crystallised here in ancient marble. Working with stone is hard graft, an artistic journey that Seton has been on for over 20 years transforming solid stone into the fluid folds and bends of *Life vest S (Emergency)* 2014 and the inflatable palm trees of *Last resort* 2014 displayed in the exhibition. These are major technical and artistic achievements where Seton purposely edits out all bodily representation drawing our attention to the human condition, now set in stone forever. We are captured in the centre of these stories, standing on a precipice. There is a past, but also a future, the rest is up to us.

I would like to thank Joanna Strumpf from Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney for her assistance in securing loans from private lenders for this exhibition. Alex Seton features in the Newcastle Art Gallery collection as well as other national and international public and private collections and is represented by Jan Murphy Gallery, Brisbane and Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney.

JAMES COLLIS

Exhibitions Coordinator
Newcastle Art Gallery



Someone died trying to have a life like mine 2013
Wombeyan marble, nylon webbing
dimensions variable
Art Gallery of South Australia collection



Last Resort 2014
Wombeyan marble
dimensions variable
Gold Coast City Gallery collection

THE ISLAND

LINDA JAIVIN

1. MARBLE

When tectonic plates collide, they create heat and pressure. The violence of earthquakes and volcanoes shakes and shocks us. If we are close, we run. If we are far, we either look, or look away. Beneath the surface, meanwhile, the heat and pressure acts on limestone to create the metamorphic stone we call marble.

When wars break out, when dictators or mobs decide that people who are of a particular colour or tribe or sexuality or religious or political belief must be exterminated, when famine spreads or water runs out, this creates heat and pressure. The violence of it shakes and shocks us. If we are close, we run. If we are far, we either look, or look away. Beneath the surface, meanwhile, the heat and pressure acts on humanity to create the metamorphic state we call refugee.

Every ten minutes – the time you took, perhaps, over a cup of coffee this morning – somewhere on earth, two hundred and forty people flee their homes and sometimes their homelands to become one of the world's 65-odd million displaced people, asylum seekers and refugees. That is a population the size of the UK. Big numbers blur our vision. The individuals they describe become an undifferentiated mass, a block, as solid as stone – as solid as marble.

A sculptor sees the form within the marble. A humanist sees the humanity within the refugee. Alex Seton is both a sculptor and a humanist. Metamorphic states are states of becoming. They are by nature transitory. The refugee was not

always a refugee – he or she was once someone with a life and a family and a home, someone like you or me. Now, however, the refugee and the journey are one, a metamorphic state captured by Seton in metamorphic stone.

I almost wrote metaphoric stone just then – and that would be right, too. This exhibition of major works that Seton has created over the last four years in response to Australia's immigration history and policies, specifically with reference to refugees, is called *The Island*. An island stands as a metaphor for myriad and often contradictory things: holidays, shipwrecks, that which 'no man is'. Australia. *The island. Our island.*

Looking for further inspiration on the subject of islands in a book of literary quotations, I found this by Thomas Dibdin (1744-1841):

'Oh! what a snug little Island,
A right little, tight little island!'

It must be a particularly dyslexic sort of day, because when my eyes lit on this verse, I read it as 'Oh! what a *smug* little Island, A right little, tight little island' – and that wouldn't be wrong, either. Refugees? Choose to look away. *Someone else's problem*: A marble-and-wood frenzy of oars, a great churning, the discarded ones, forever offshore. Or you can choose to look: *Someone died trying to have a life like mine.*

In May 2013, the Indian Ocean delivered a strange cargo to a beach in the Cocos Islands, a remote

Australian territory southwest of Christmas Island and halfway between Sri Lanka and Australia: twenty-eight lifejackets, strewn across the sand. The only clue as to the lives they failed to save was a tiny amount of Iranian money in the pocket of one.

The image of the lifejackets haunted Alex Seton: '...there was no incident, no sinking' observed or recorded anywhere, he reflected, just 'twenty-eight souls likely lost at sea'. He has said that the shock of it provided 'a sort of aesthetic trigger'. Working in warm, 'rusty' Wombeyan marble, he re-created these twenty-eight lifejackets as 'part memorial, part personal meditation, part documentation of the state of affairs in Australia today'.¹ *Someone died trying to have a life like mine.*

However steady or unsteady our personal lives may be, we live them on solid ground in Australia. Yet we too are lost, adrift, shipwrecked by our inability or lack of will to offer help to those who so desperately need it. If things had gone another way, if the fault lines had been drawn differently, the drowned might have ended up

our workmates, our neighbours, our mechanics, our doctors, our artists, our friends. Instead, we know them by their absence, the lifejackets that slipped off their shoulders, or floated out of reach when the boat capsized. The use of Australian marble tells us that their story is part of our own. Memorialised here in marble, the life jackets remind us that these people were once alive like us.

'It's a forced act of empathy,' Seton told me. Elsewhere he has spoken about 'grabbing' people's attention and 'that jolt that you experience when you're looking at something that evokes emotion in you. In these moments people are open, they work to recompose their understanding of what's in front of them.'²

¹ Quoted in 'Somebody died trying to have a life like mine': A conversation on the role of art in politics with visual artist Alex Seton' by Nicholas Watts, *Future Perfect*, Issue 2, 2014, p. 47.

² Ibid.



Someone died trying to have a life like mine (detail) 2013
Wombeyan marble, nylon webbing
dimensions variable
Art Gallery of South Australia collection

2. WATER

Limestone forms in water. It is essentially the calcified accretion of the skeletal fragments and biological by-products of molluscs and corals and other marine organisms. During the metamorphic process, under heat and pressure, limestone recrystallises as marble. Locked within a block of marble, therefore, are countless, interlinked tales of the sea.

With chisel, drill, hammer and rasp, the sculptor coaxes stories from stone. A master storyteller knows that just as important as the details you present to readers or viewers is the space you provide for them to employ their own imaginations. In traditional Chinese painting, empty space is associated with breath, *qi*, cosmic power and Daoist notions of stillness; it forces the viewer to actively engage with the image. Seton is a master of narrative detail: the crinkle in the fabric of a life vest, the bendiness of an inflatable palm tree (*Last Resort*), the flexible crease of a rubber dinghy (*Folded Zodiac*), the precise dimensions of an oar (*A Paddle*). His work is figurative – we can see exactly what these forms represent. And yet, like the Chinese painter, like the Daoist, he doesn't fill in all the blanks – look closely and you can see where he leaves the marks of his tools, reminds us that the story here too is also that of process, of a journey. By denying us specific figures and faces – we never see the pale/dark/emaciated/muscular/plump arm that holds the oar – he coaxes us into picturing our own. It is, Seton told me, about involving the viewer 'bodily'.

We have met the refugee and (s)he is us.

'I want to hit the perceptual reset button,' the artist has said, 'so I can engage the critical and conceptual faculties that allow concepts to flow back and forth between the art object and its audience.'³

It is hard to imagine how foreign is the sea to someone whose only experience of it is through trauma. Once I took an Afghan refugee, newly released from onshore detention, for a walk in Rushcutters Bay. As we approached the seawall, he began to tremble; he could not bear to look upon either this protected little body of water or the sailboats that were moored there. He had made the journey here by boat and nearly died along the way. I had to hasten with him away from the water so he could rest by a tree, something sturdily rooted in the earth, and recover. On another occasion, I taught someone who had grown up in the desert not to swim, exactly, but to float – how to trust the water to hold you up. He found this miraculous.

Alex Seton performs the miraculous. He transforms heavy, dense marble into light, buoyant objects – lifejackets, lifeboats and the whimsical inflatable palm trees that take our thoughts on holiday, with their suggestion of swimming pools, pina colodas and Hawaiian shirts. At the same time, he grounds them, casting them from the water, chucking them up against the wall, displaying them high and dry on plinths or, in the case of the inflatable palms, planting them on barren islands of marble rubble that might as well be a heap of shattered dreams and broken promises. He makes what is heavy light and then heavy again.

And then, in a symmetrical inversion, he crafts a large marble anchor – a solid, hefty object that ought to moor us, prevent us from drifting, keep us stable and secure, and he hoists it into the air like a thing without gravity, and therefore in this case, maddeningly without use.

The metamorphic state of the refugee shares these gravitational paradoxes. To be a refugee is to have shed the weight, not only of possessions, but the social and cultural context of personal identity; it is a floaty, insubstantial state. Yet it is also a leaden and burdensome condition: to be a refugee is to drag around an unshakeable ballast of dread, uncertainty and fear. It is to endure a tempest that threatens to blow you off your feet even as it leaves you sodden and heavy.

Seton evokes such an atmospheric disturbance in *The Odyssey*, a sound installation that suggests a storm at sea. The title links it to the most classical of heroic journeys – to *the* classic hero's journey. He crafted it, however, from sounds recorded on the streets of Sydney's inner west, the din and babble of daily life in the city. The refugee's journey may well include the high drama of a storm at sea. But the fragile vessel in which the refugee travels is also buffeted by the quotidian challenges that blow in like gales, unfamiliar language sheeting down like rain, and the thunder of other nation's politics.

Those politics can be expressed – as they often are in Australia – in highly corrosive rhetoric. And here is another interesting thing about marble. Because of its origins in limestone, marble is composed largely of calcium carbonate. Calcium carbonate neutralises acid – in soil, in industry, in water, even in our stomachs (some antacids are essentially powdered marble).

On their own, the marble sculptures of *The Island* cannot neutralise all the acid, the caustic, wounding language of our so-called leaders and their hatemongering cheerleaders in the media, much less the harsh and venomous policies they promote. But perhaps these and the other artworks in the exhibition can help create a more alkaline reality, one in which the people, not just their lifejackets, may come ashore, where the 'last resort' is a new haven, and where the anchor can finally drop.

³ Quoted in Gina Fairley, 'Subverted Reality', *Alex Seton: Roughing Out*, (catalogue), Hazelhurst Regional Gallery & Arts Centre, 2013, p. 15.



A Paddle... 2014
Bianco Carrara marble, timber
100.0 x 38.0 x 4.0cm
Private collection

3. ART

Marble is a heavy stone to which we traditionally ascribe moral weight. It is the literal stuff of memorials, of statues and sculptures dedicated to the virtuous, the beautiful, the good, the accomplished, the heroic, and the brave.

In his art, Alex Seton has often subverted the usual associations of marble. In previous exhibitions and bodies of work, he has used his mastery of the art of marble sculpture to celebrate such notions as resistance to surveillance and control, to dignify the homeless, to humorously memorialise objects of daily life (a hoodie, garbage bags, a jug of milk) and even poke fun at the assumed solemnity of marble itself.

But if Alex Seton is witty, that doesn't mean he is not sincere. The art of carving, slow and careful, is by nature a sincere art. What's more, he is absolutely wedded to using his art to express moral concerns. To be an artist concerned with morality, with notions of right and wrong, is not an easy thing in an age that values irony and considers all values relative. Irony is cool. Sincerity is embarrassing. Irony lets you off the hook – sincerity does the opposite.

It is clear that to Alex Seton, the tragedy and challenge of our times is not just the great humanitarian crisis of asylum seekers and refugees, but also the intentional cruelty and hypocrisy of our responses to it. One of his most powerful and visually arresting works on the theme of refugees is from a series called *Oilstone*. It is an outboard motor sculpted from white Bianco Carrara marble lying in a pool of motor oil. The longer the motor lies in the oil, the more it will absorb, the more it will be stained. How many of these heroes' journeys began with the stain of oil – wars of greed that we have helped to prosecute and that have torn apart

whole regions of the world? How many of us understand the stain of our own complicity?

At the thematic centre of this exhibition is *Paper Armada*, a fleet of four hundred marble representations of origami paper boats in a swirling, circular formation. When he began work on *Paper Armada*, this represented the approximate number of the asylum seekers whose boats had been forcibly turned back by the enforcers of Operation Sovereign Borders. Four hundred people who might have ended up our workmates, our neighbours, our mechanics, our doctors, our artists, our friends.

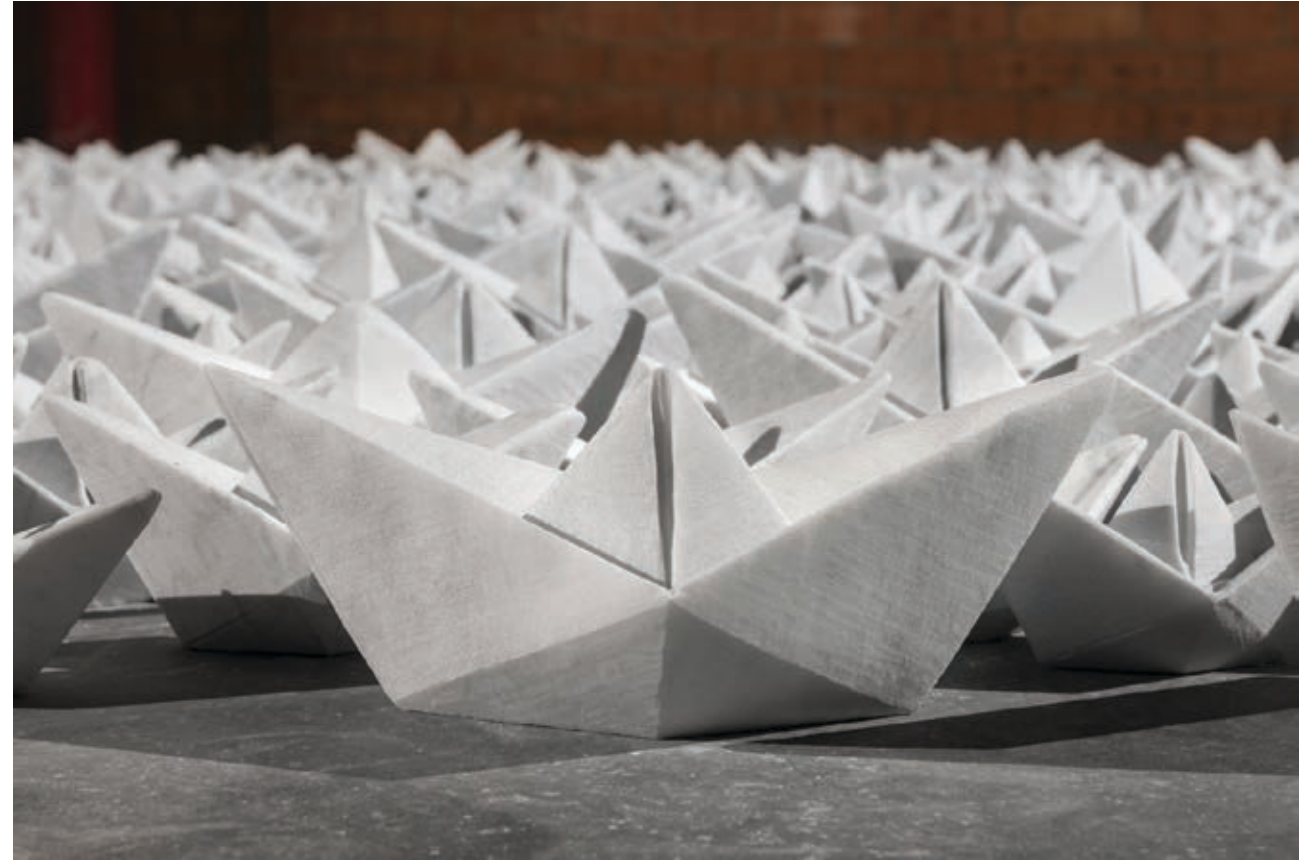
Australian government policy on what it calls 'unauthorised maritime arrivals' but what, for the sake of argument – and we must argue this – we will just call people, has been punitive and arbitrary. Bureaucratically imposed cut-off dates have cut off wives from husbands, fathers from sons. We could tear up that rulebook, and turn its pages into boats – boats of welcome, a protective fleet. Is *Paper Armada* the image of tragedy or of possibility? Is it something as light and buoyant as welcome and community or as heavy as rejection and exclusion? What exactly do we see here?

Alex Seton has said of marble that 'as a medium, it has a long history in recording the times and challenges of the day'. He acknowledges the 'complicated ethics' of making art on the subject of an ongoing tragedy, but believes that the purpose this art serves, of memorialising us as we are now, for better or for worse, is necessary.

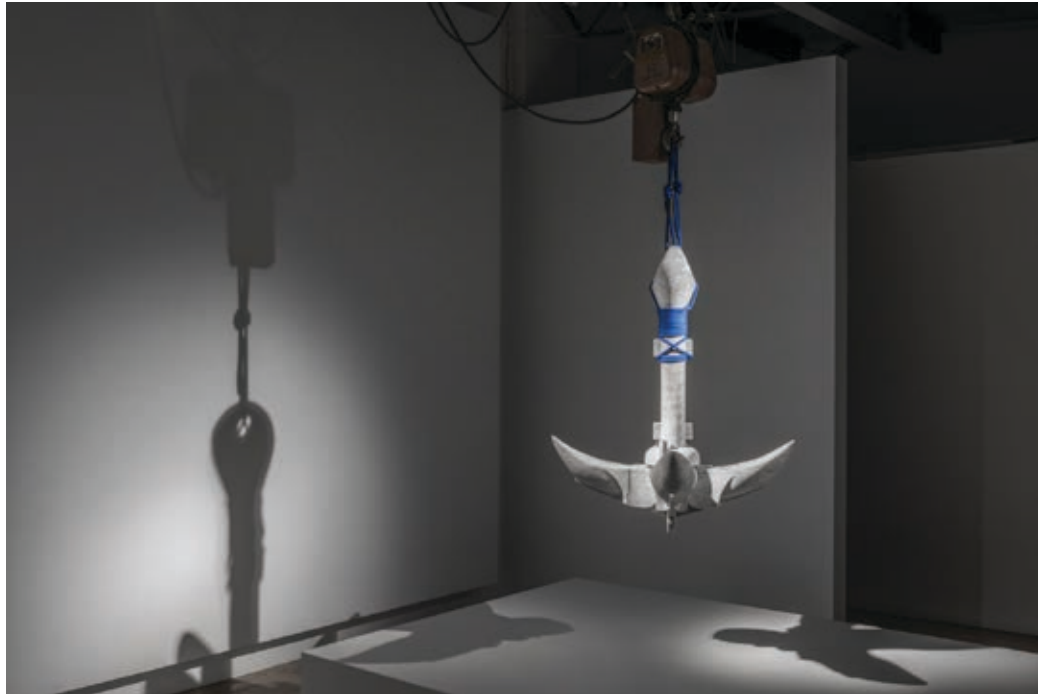
Marble is the literal stuff of memorials, of statues and sculptures dedicated to the virtuous, the beautiful, the good, the accomplished, the heroic, and the brave. Not all refugees are all of the above. Not all of us are. But we can, as Alex Seton suggests, be, and do, better.



Oilstone 04_Saturated 2016 (detail)
Bianco Carrara marble, engine oil, glass tank
dimensions variable
Artist collection



Paper Armada 2015
Bianco Carrara marble
dimensions variable
Artist collection



Seeking Safe Harbour 2015
Bianco Carrara marble, rope
101.0 x 101.0 x 65.0cm
Private collection



Life vest S (Emergency) 2014
Bianco Carrara marble
58.0 x 45.0 x 35.0cm
Private collection

LIST OF WORKS

Someone died trying to have a life like mine 2013
Wombeyan marble, nylon webbing
dimensions variable

Gift of John and Jane Ayers, Candy Bennett, Jim and Helen Carreker, Chris and Elma Christopher, Cherise Conrick, Colin and Robyn Cowan, James Darling AM and Lesley Forwood, Scott and Zoë Elvish, Rick and Jan Frolich, Peter and Kathryn Fuller, Andrew and Hiroko Gwinnett, Dr Michael Hayes and Janet Hayes, Klein Family Foundation, Ian Little and Jane Yuile, Dr Peter McEvoy, David and Pam McKee, Hugo and Brooke Mitchell, Jane Mitchell, Peter and Jane Newland, John Phillips, Dr Dick Quan, Paul and Thelma Taliangis, Sue Tweddell, Tracey and Michael Whiting, GP Securities, UBS and anonymous donors through the Art Gallery of South Australia Contemporary Collector's Director's Project 2014, Collection Art Gallery of South Australia

A Paddle... 2014
Bianco Carrara marble, timber
100.0 x 38.0 x 4.0cm
Private collection

Last Resort 2014
Wombeyan marble
dimensions variable
Gold Coast City Gallery collection

Life vest S (Emergency) 2014
Bianco Carrara marble
58.0 x 45.0 x 35.0cm
Private collection

Odyssey 2014
soundscape
dimensions variable
Artist collection

Paper Armada 2015
Bianco Carrara marble
dimensions variable
Artist collection

Seeking Safe Harbour 2015
Bianco Carrara marble, rope
101.0 x 101.0 x 65.0cm
Private collection

Someone Else's Problem 2015
Bianco Carrara marble, timber
dimensions variable (maquette)
Artist collection

The Best of All Possible Worlds 2015
Bianco Carrara marble, tarp, tin, bucket, sand,
electric fan
dimensions variable
Artist collection

Folded Zodiac 03 2016
Bianco Carrara marble, rubber spigot, nylon rope
100.0 x 47.0 x 38.0cm
Harriett and Richard England collection

Oilstone 04_Saturated 2016
Bianco Carrara marble, engine oil, glass tank
dimensions variable
Artist collection



Above image

Folded Zodiac 03 2016
Bianco Carrara marble, rubber spigot, nylon rope
54.0 x 47.0 x 38.0cm
Harriett and Richard England collection
Courtesy the artist



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