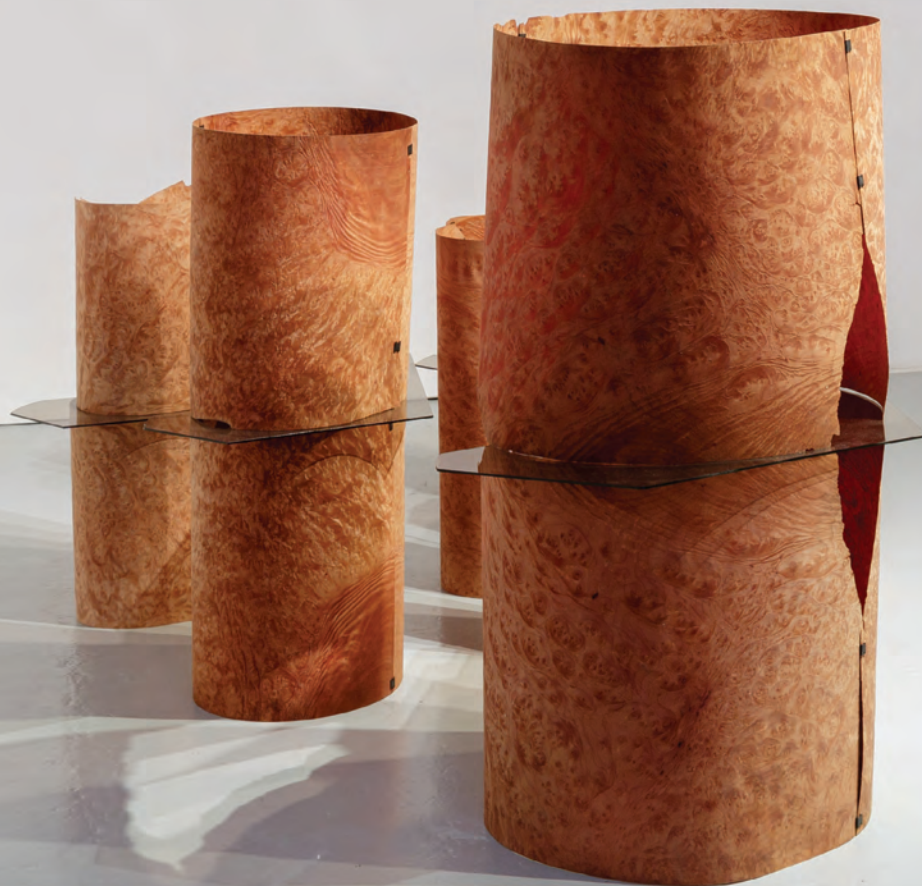


# About the Search:

A Conversation with Frances Richardson

by Elizabeth Fullerton



# q/a



***Not all temporary objects can be avoided,***  
2018.

Madrone wood veneer,  
metal clips, and Perspex,  
86 cm. high.

**British sculptor Frances Richardson**, 2017 recipient of the Mark Tanner Sculpture Award, endows utilitarian materials such as Perspex and wood veneer with unexpected lyricism and elemental force. Her Tanner Award show, “Not even nothing can be free of ghosts” (at Standpoint Gallery in London, then Cross Lane Projects in Kendal, northern England), gave full rein to her poetic sensibilities as material, form, and content engaged in a bewitching interplay of doubles and reflections between pieces and sometimes within one work. Loosely based on the theme of water as a metaphor for the state of perpetual searching, the exhibition marked a departure in approach for Richardson, breaching her self-imposed mandate to use materials with “no history” and exploring a conspicuously intimate scale in relation to her 2006–13 series of monumental MDF I-beams that forcefully dictated movement through space.

Richardson’s recent works include *Because the two parts don’t quite touch* (2019), created for “What isn’t

OPPOSITE:  
**We have never been modern: Goodhope, 2018.**

Photograph,  
 170 x 122 cm.

here can't hurt you," an elegant show with Alison Wilding at the Royal Society of Sculptors. Here, Richardson employs strips of laminated white correx, typically used to protect flooring during construction projects, to create a large-scale, broken boat form inspired by John Everett Millais's *Ophelia* (1851–52). To compound the sense of drowning, she positioned two hefty black ceramic balls adjacent to the decrepit structure. Whether involving installation, photography, video, or drawing, Richardson's works remain rooted in sculpture. Rejecting material hierarchies to achieve a deeper sensitivity, she gives equal weight to volume and space, presence and absence, history and memory.

**Elizabeth Fullerton: What was the concept behind "Not even nothing can be free of ghosts"?**

**Frances Richardson:** Rather than working with the architecture of Standpoint Gallery as a formal starting point, I spent time in the space, where I had a strange sense of water. To start with something that isn't tangible is an interesting stance, and not how I usually start, so it provided a problem to work with.

**EF: Then you discovered water running under the gallery.**

**FR:** It's the Walbrook, one of the hidden rivers of London. Actually, I could probably smell the drains, but there's a romance that leads you somewhere. Sometimes as you're wandering in the wilderness of not knowing, it's nice to get little tangible things that you can hold on to. They become narratives of the process and feed into the nature of the work—the searching and looking, the idea of divining, of looking for something and sensing it without being able to see it.

**EF: A video piece capturing the changing tide was the clearest water reference in the show, but there were hints of wateriness and fluidity throughout. Even your black and white photograph of a menhir, *We have never been modern: Goodhope*, is elusive and slippery, the stone form merging with what look like shadows or archaic echoes receding in time and space.**

**FR:** Working with the nature of materials is embedded in everything I do. I want to understand the material that I'm working with. The whole thing with making a

photograph is that it's a way of capturing light; but I'm capturing it on my digital camera, and the resolution is different than if you had a large format camera and could capture the real light. This is a re-processing of the light captured in one way and formed into a photograph. So, the blurriness, which I liken to a drawing, is a remembered light because they take the digital image and an analogue negative and then project that onto the photographic paper. It's not the real light that's captured, it's a reinvention of itself.

With something like a menhir, your memory of it is not a single image, it's something that you embody by moving around the object. The photograph shows four viewpoints—north, south, east, west—superimposed on each other. I wanted that feeling of being with the object and recalling it, rather than looking at it.

**EF: It's as sculptural as a photograph can be, isn't it?**

**FR:** I hope so.

**EF: It also seems to connect to *Eidolon* (Greek for "object") in terms of presenting hulking forms that evoke something primeval, even though one is a photo of an ancient stone monument and the other is a sculpture made from a slab of salvaged chipboard paired with laminated paper, which manages to combine a totemic quality with the grace of a butterfly wing.**

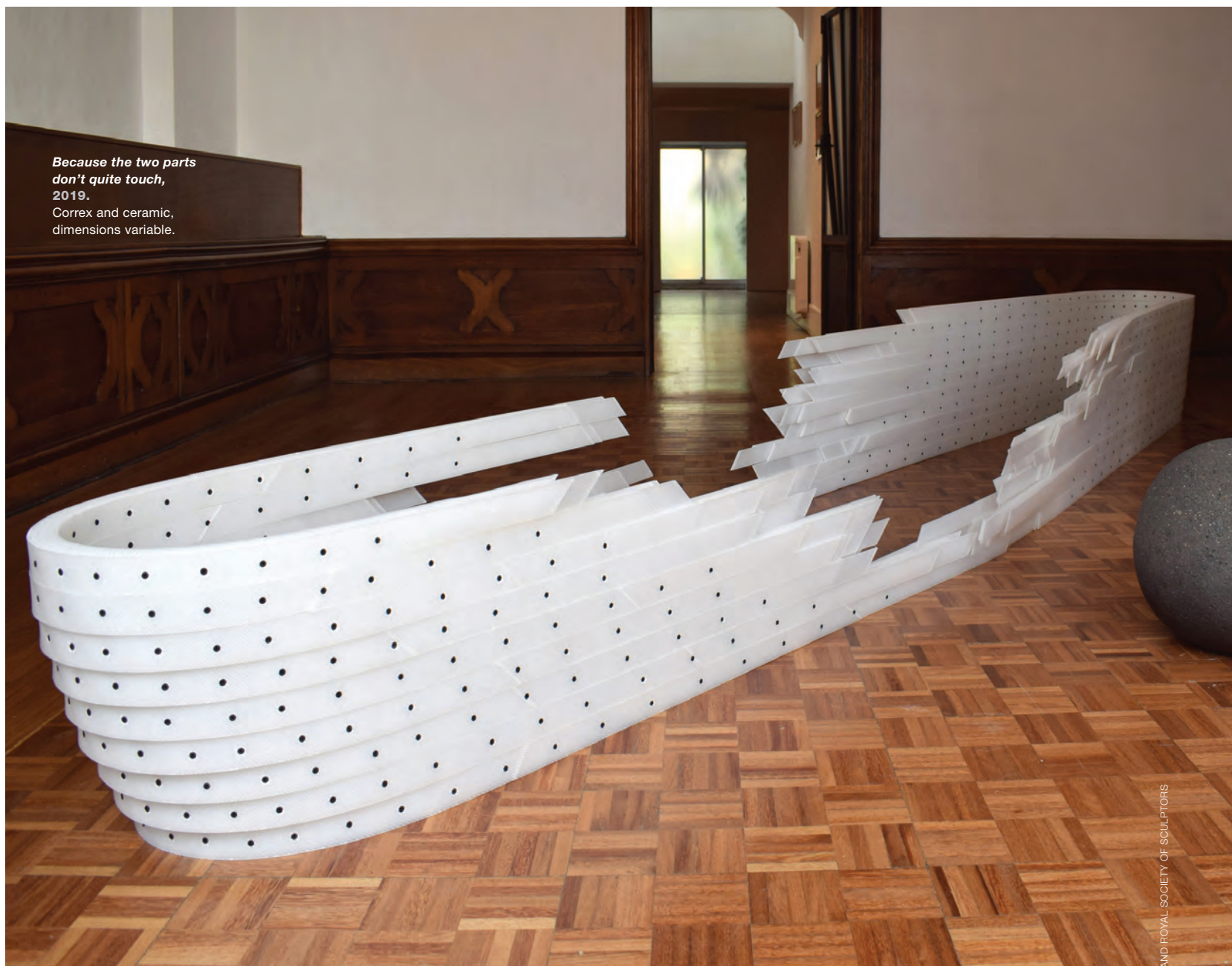
**FR:** How we engage with an object is prevalent through the whole, whether it's a material or something recognizable like a menhir. With *Eidolon*, I was attracted to this piece of stuff, and yet it wasn't anything. It was a discarded thing, which is quite unlike the menhir. But then is it nothing just because it doesn't have a reason for being or a name? It *is* something because it exists, yet how do we establish a thing's existence? Somehow by repeating or reflecting or remembering, we give something a presence. If you invest some observation, you can see a thing's history and it becomes something. It may not have a name, but it has some kind of majesty and some kind of presence. That was where I was going with *Eidolon*, and it is quite monolithic in the same way that the menhir is monolithic.

**EF: The chipboard's reflection in paper finds an echo in your abstract diptych *A thought drawn /drawing of***



*Because the two parts  
don't quite touch,  
2019.*

Correx and ceramic,  
dimensions variable.



“ I’ve always been interested in things that allow other things to happen and then get discarded afterwards. ”



**thought. The left-hand composition depicts the act of drawing, and the right depicts the thought of the drawing, which are not the same. The plus and minus signs from which this and other drawings are composed underpin your wider practice. Could you explain their significance?**

**FR:** When I began them, I was wondering what my work was all about. I started writing the date over and over again every day until it was time to go home. It sounds like a breakdown, but then I got to know On Kawara's work and the idea of time being important—of really looking into the cave and trying to get back to something elemental, the desire to grab hold of the essence of something. I'm also interested in mathematics and physics (my parents were geologists). I was thinking about the idea of who "we" are. When someone says "we," how far does it extend? Is there an unseen boundary of we-ness?

There's a universality about the word "we" that led me to the idea of infinity. It's an expansive thing, but it's also toward zero. I started writing  $1+1+1+1+1$ , and it was both positive and negative in terms of the rhythm and the marks. It was weaving, it was a magnetic surface. It's the binary code through which we send all messages now. I also saw it as a finished sculpture, a carbon mesh of attractions and repulsions. I thought it would last about a month, but it's gone on and on. That positive and negative has the element of time embedded in it, of being present in the act of drawing. There's the idea of locating past, present, and future, and you're always in all three at once.

**EF: Have duality and reflection been important ideas in your work?**

**FR:** They hadn't been evident before. I set off on an experiment to look for something, and then the show became about the search. It swallowed itself. Through that process, it became about how to recognize a quality, about how things inherently contain elements that are not immediately evident. With *Not all temporary objects are avoidable*, I came

across a page of madrone veneers, and one had a similar shape to *Eidolon*. I bought two so I would have a spare in case I messed up. When they arrived, I realized that the veneer slices are taken sequentially off the burlwood; so if you open them up, you get the repetition of the grain patterns. It was like peeling open time. It's not the rings of the tree that add year on year; you're splitting the burl, and these are the nobbles that have happened over various periods of time. You're opening it up and seeing time in a different way from the inside.

**EF: Not all temporary objects are avoidable, the title for these cylindrical forms, came from a computer manual, referring to immaterial objects. How did that chain of association come about?**

**FR:** When I was forming them into reflective stacks of hollows, there was an association with water holes—the idea that you create a well, it fills up, and you dig it again. Then there's Heraclitus's saying that you can't step into the same river twice; water is always flowing. There is an analogy with thoughts and an elusiveness that ties in with the material of the veneers. I tried to fix them into more permanent tubes, but they resisted, and I thought, "Maybe it's about temporariness." I realized that, because of the flexibility of the material, they'd be collapsible and could be packed away flat. They were temporary objects; you could carry your own water hole with you. I looked up what a temporary object was and found that in computer language it's a function that is applied to something else. Usually there's another function that erases these temporary objects so you don't clog up your data. I've always been interested in things that allow other things to happen and then get discarded afterwards. But sometimes within the coding, you can't eliminate the initial temporary object. There was this sentence, and I just loved it.

**EF: What prompted the exhibition title "Not even nothing can be free of ghosts?"**

**FR:** It's a quotation from the American feminist



theorist Karen Barad. She explains that how we measure something depends on what we measure the thing with. Because you can't measure without using a tool, that is always present in what is measured. So, with *Eidolon*, I measured the piece of chipboard with the paper. I wanted the paper not to mimic the chipboard but to use its properties in order to measure the chipboard. I think there are six sheets of paper. I could have gone up to the width of the chipboard, but I stopped when I had enough for it to stand because the chipboard stood.

**EF: What determined the shift in your choice of materials?**

**FR:** I was at a point in my practice where I wanted to experiment and break out of the things that I knew. I'd been working specifically in MDF and had done several pieces with Concrete Canvas, and I really got to know them as materials. I wanted to expand my vocabulary and left myself open to what might happen. With *Eidolon*, there was a large part of me that wanted to cast it in bronze as a contradictory thing to the actual chipboard piece; but instead of going to bronze, it went to paper because it's playing with the weight of something, making a bit of chipboard that's been out in the street for probably six months look more substantial. Looking at how its edges have broken with water, it's like investigating the nature of material and appreciating it, not making it do something it doesn't want to.

*This dry feeling will pass* includes copper, which is elemental; it's also quite common and utilitarian—we use it in pipes. I had bought the strips of walnut with something quite different in mind, but I'd backed away from using wood for quite a long time because it's very seductive. After about eight months, I noticed that the straight structure of the machined wood was being warped by the nature of the material. When you lined them up, they were folding over each other, and that started to fascinate me. It's a very subtle thing, but it animates the straight line. When they fall over each other, they don't fall dead straight, they move, and that, for me, was redolent of water bursting out of something. It comes out of what you think is a straight trajectory, but it then veers off in different directions.



FROM OPPOSITE:

***This dry feeling  
will pass,***  
2018.

Walnut wood and copper,  
250 x 60 x 140 cm.

Installation view of  
"Not even nothing can  
be free of ghosts"  
at Cross Lane Projects,  
Kendal, U.K., 2018.



“ Sometimes as you’re wandering in the wilderness of not knowing, it’s nice to get little tangible things that you can hold on to. ”



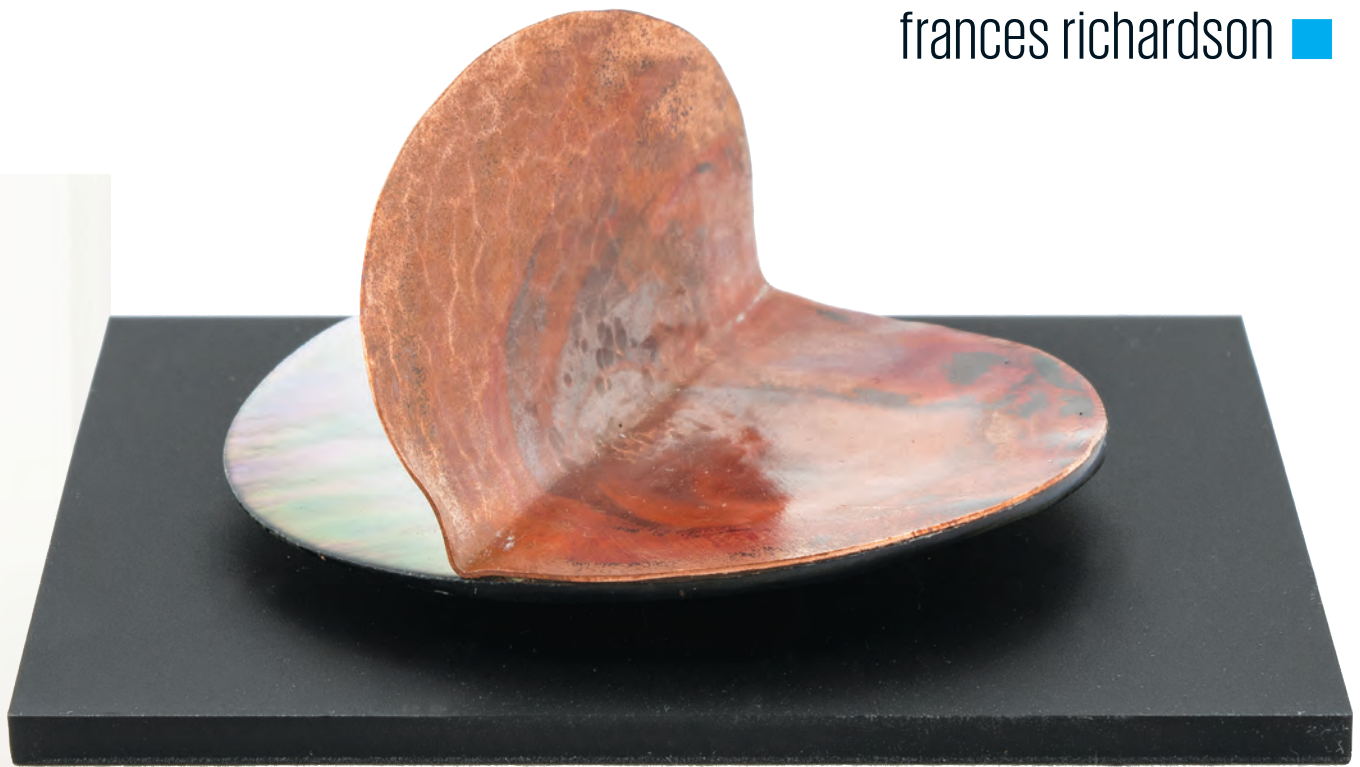
LEFT TO RIGHT:  
**Performed Object:**  
*fig. 090118,*  
**2018.**

Concrete Canvas, MDF,  
carpet, and wheels,  
114 cm. high.

**still thinking,**  
**2020.**

Copper and abalone,  
5 cm. diameter.

© FRANCES RICHARDSON, 2020



**EF:** The warm red of the copper made me think of sparks of fire. I loved the fact that the piece changes from different perspectives.

**FR:** Yes, you're rewarded for walking around. When the copper strips face each other, you get the reflection of light between them and it heats up. The light seems to glow.

**EF:** Why were you so resistant to wood?

**FR:** I had carved from when I was doing my BA. Some people have a natural facility in a process, and mine was carving. When I started doing the 1+1 drawings, I got rid of all the carvings. That was when I realized that drawing numbers and making the “tuktuktuk-tuktuk” was going to be my mark—that was my rhythm. My interest in wood wasn't that I could make a figure or a face, but that it holds a record of time. That's why I was carving it. I left it alone and turned to drawing because I thought Giuseppe Penone had done everything that could be done with wood.

I worked in MDF for a long time because it has no grain, it has no history, it has no time embedded in it. It's perfectly neutral, like a drawing. Now, I'm seeing perhaps another side to using wood. I'm not

sure what's going to happen, but maybe things have opened up a bit.

**EF:** Your juxtapositions with wood draw me in more than beautiful carving. The exquisite tension of the fine ash branch apparently holding up hefty folds of bulky Concrete Canvas in *Divider* offers a compelling visual puzzle.

**FR:** Having made it almost a rule that I was going to work with materials that had no romance, no memory, no history—like MDF or Concrete Canvas or plywood—there was an integrity in the material from one surface to the other. And there's such a complexity of associations. Those ash saplings were next to each other and are exactly the same age, like twins, so they had very mirrored beginnings and shapes. Ash has a symbolic history within European folklore; it is associated with water and is used for bows and spears.

You can get quite entwined with all that, but the most important aspect is the tension of the thing being held up by or holding up—you don't know which—the piece of stuff. The rod has got ends, which look charred, pointing in both directions, seeming to be one thing but it's two. Maybe it's a drawing tool, and maybe it's measuring something. There's the idea of an arc or a gesture.

**EF:** Although there is no figuration in your works, a human presence is implied in their scale.

**FR:** There's an awareness of something that's at knee height, something at eye height, something at shoulder height, something that you look into, something that you have to walk around. The work relates to your presence quite directly, either your sight or your height or your desire to touch or to stop it from falling or your desire to kick it. It makes you aware of your body.

**EF:** The title of your video *What beauty is I know* not comes from Albrecht Dürer. In your exhibition statement, you also draw a connection between Dürer's 1514 engraving *Melencolia I* and this body of work. What is his significance?

**FR:** I've had a print of *Melencolia I* in my studio for years. It's a speculative image; there is no solution. It's almost wrong to look for an answer—to feel the weight of the unknown is maybe what he was getting at. As humans, we're always looking for new horizons, which can be a lonely and disappointing position. You're always faced with the possibility that there isn't anything over that hill, or that you can't even find the place to start looking.

In a way, it's been a mascot in the studio, prompting me to just start. I realized that not knowing was actually the subject of the work. I was making my own speculative conundrum of works that linked to each other, but not quite. Certain threads seemed to relate, like the ash to water, but how far you'll get led down the wrong road I'm not sure. The rods, *If I measure it must exist*, are maybe the tools to start with. I realize that I'm in the same melancholic place as Dürer, where nothing quite fits together but there seems to be the potential for something to happen. It's all about a problem and leaving it open, like the suggestion of fire with the copper. Yes, there's some heat in there, and the elements were definitely on my mind. ■■■

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*Richardson's ink drawings of ordinary objects, executed during lockdown, will be on view both online and at Karsten Schubert London, November 2–20, 2020. "skip," an exhibition of Richardson's sculptures, will open at Karsten Schubert in spring 2021.*

**A thought drawn / drawing of thought, 2018.**

Pencil on paper,  
110 x 77 cm. each.



