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How Art Can Alter Human Perception

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Fine Art

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Introduction

“The perception of reality is more real than reality itself”, Billionaire Boys Club (2018)

This quote captures the essence of a question that has driven both my thinking and my creative practice:

What if the way we experience the world; shaped by memory, emotion, and expectation holds more power than the world itself?

If reality is something we all share, then perception is how we individually claim it, interpret it, and at times, reshape it.

Perception is not a mirror to the world, but a filter. A filter that is constantly coloured by personal experience, culture, belief and imagination. Two people can stand before the same object or image and walk away with entirely different impressions. Art amplifies this phenomenon. It invites not only looking but re-looking. It doesn't just represent reality, it reframes, distorts, and sometimes completely reinvents it. In this sense art is not merely a reflection of perception, it is a tool that actively alters it.

Throughout history, art challenges and manipulates human perception, both through technique and concept. I am particularly interested in how subjective reality (our own internal experience of the world) can be influenced by external stimuli such as image, space, narrative and form. The question is not only what we see, but how we come to see it the way we do.

Philosophical discussions around perception, such as Descartes scepticism of the senses (Descartes, 1641, pp.11–15) or Maurice Merleau Ponty's idea of embodied seeing (Ponty, 1993)

provide a framework for understanding how unreliable our perception can be. These ideas reveal that we are never simply observing the world, we are interpreting it. In that interpretation lies the potential for transformation, distortion or revelation.

Art then becomes a powerful space in which perception is both tested and expanded. It can expose how limited or constructed our reality might be, challenging us to reconsider what we take for granted. It can provoke empathy by offering another perspective. It can destabilise what we think we know. Art reminds us that seeing is never neutral, it is shaped by our past experiences, biases and context in which we encounter the world.

The thesis of this exhibition will explore how visual art, from historical painting to contemporary installation, plays a role in shaping, questioning and altering viewers perception. Arguably the conventional dissertation is adaptable to this thesis, however I feel that the very nature of perception is an interactive and personal experience. For me the best way to explore this is through an immersive journey rather than words alone. This exhibition is designed for viewers to step away from the distractions of daily life, creating a space where they can engage directly with art in a way that is attuned to the shifting and subjective nature of perception.

Chapter One

1.1 Studio practice

Through my studio practice, I create immersive experiences that disrupt conventional ways of seeing. My work guides the viewer through a psychologically charged journey that unsettles, provokes, and challenges how the world is interrupted. My practice centres on perception as a fluid, evolving process shaped by individual experience and constant change. Research undertaken through curating this exhibition from the viewers perspective revealed how easily I become absorbed in my own creative world, encouraging a more measured approach to audience experience. I position the viewer not as a passive observer but as an active participant, inviting them to question the reliability of their own perception. Ultimately, I want viewers to leave with heightened awareness of visual processing and new insight.

1.2 Venue Choice



Figure 1a. Secret Bunker Museum, photoshopped.



Figure 1b. Secret Bunker Museum, Photoshopped.



Figure 2. Secret Bunker, Photoshopped (front view)

To effectively explore and employ perceptual deception, a highly controlled environment is essential. Factors such as lighting, sound, and spatial dynamics must be precisely manipulated.

These elements play a critical role in shaping how a viewer processes sensory information, and as a result, how they experience and interpret the work. By curating the physical and sensory conditions of the space, I can guide the audience through specific emotional and cognitive responses, creating moments of tension, disorientation, or revelation. When choosing the venue for my exhibition, I wanted a space which integrated both intimate, enclosed areas and vast, open expanses. This contrast allows for a range of perceptual experiences; from the claustrophobic to the expansive, mirroring the physiological states I aim to evoke. The shifting scale not only challenges spatial awareness but also reinforces the instability of perception itself, encouraging viewers to continuously renegotiate their understanding of the space and their place within it.

What fascinates me most is how the structures design and historical function embody themes central to my dissertation. The bunker offers complete sensory deprivation; once inside, time and space dissolve. Without natural light or external reference points, disorientation sinks in. The deceptive farmhouse above, hiding a complex underworld, mirrors how perception can be shaped and misled. A concept which is deeply rooted in the visual arts. Built in 1951 and operational until 1993, Scotland's Secret Bunker functioned as a concealed Cold War nuclear command centre hidden beneath an unassuming farmhouse, successfully evading enemy reconnaissance for over fifty years. A sloping Tunnel encased in fifteen feet of reinforced concrete leads visitors one hundred feet underground to two vast subterranean levels. Once containing RAF control rooms, a nuclear operations centre, dormitories, two cinemas, a café and a BBC broadcasting studio, allowing communication to continue during a nuclear attack. The bunkers interior was maintained at a constant temperature of eighteen degrees, ensuring the space remained habitable in extreme conditions (Scotland's Secret Bunker, 2025).

This site becomes more than a historical location; it transforms into a metaphorical and literal framework for exploring how art can alter human perception. The internal architecture includes interior windows and viewing platforms designed to allow maps and screens to be seen from every angle. These varying points of view not only align with the requirements of the artworks within, but they also reflect the nature of perception, where a constant flux of perspective leads to better understanding of what is being interpreted.



Figure 3a Secret Bunker Museum, Top of Tunnel.

Figure 3b. Secret Bunker Museum, benches outside farmhouse.

Chapter two

1.1 Paul Cezanne

Paul Cezanne, a pivotal figure in the transition from 19th to 20th century art, is often called the father of modern art (Kumekina, 2024). Although he never identified as a cubist, his radical

rethinking of space and perspective laid the groundwork for Cubism. Rejecting traditional linear perspective, Cezanne adopted a fragmented, multi-dimensional approach, inviting viewers to experience the world from multiple viewpoints and suggesting that perception is dynamic, not fixed. This break from convention made his work revolutionary, though critics of his time struggled to understand it (Malevich, 2023.)

Cezanne's approach also resonates with the philosophical shift towards mind-body dualism, championed by thinkers like Rene Descartes (Descartes, 1641). While Cezanne didn't directly engage with this philosophy, his work intuitively captured how perception involved both the mind and body. Maurice Merleau-Ponty later referenced Cezanne, emphasizing that perception is a complex interaction of sensory experience and mental interpretation. As Merleau-Ponty notes, "a figure flattened down onto a plane surface scarcely retains the forms of things; it is a deformed figure that must be deformed... in order to represent the object" (Ponty, 1993, p.8).



Figure 4a. Paul Cezanne, *Mont Saint-Victoire* (1892)



Figure 4b. Paul Cezanne, *Mont Sainte-Victoire Seen from the Bibemus Quarry* (1968)

This aligns with Cezanne's method of presenting multiple perspectives on the same object. Through his innovative use of colour, shape and texture, Cezanne moved beyond mere representation to evoke the emotional and psychological dimensions of seeing, influencing movements like Cubism and expanding the boundaries of how reality could be visually understood (Robbins and Cézanne, 2006).

Cezanne's *Mont Saint-Victoire* (1885) series exemplify a profound shift in how perception was understood in modern art, by returning to the same landscape repeatedly. Cezanne was not merely

trying to record its outward appearance; he sought to investigate how colour, form, and shifting perspectives shape the very act of seeing. Each painting becomes a distinct lens through which he encounters nature, both as it appears to him in a particular moment and as it exists independently of him (Malevich, 2023).

Instead of offering a single, definitive image of the mountain, he presents multiple, evolving interpretations. In doing so, he invites the viewer to experience the landscape as dynamic and constantly changing, mirroring the fluidity of our own perception.

This approach resonates strongly with the philosophy of Maurice Merleau Ponty, who described the “painter’s vision as an ongoing birth” (Ponty, 1993, p.6). For Cezanne, painting was not a static act of reproduction but a living process that unfolded alongside the movement of perception itself. The blocky colours, shifting planes and fragmented forms in Figure 4, do more than depict the mountain; they encompass the complexity of experiencing the world through body



Figure 5. Paul Cezanne, *The Card players* (1890-92)

and mind. By layering multiple visual impressions of the same motif, Cezanne suggests that reality is not a single, fixed truth, but a constellation of Impressions that continually shift as we engage with them. The perceptual fluidity in Cezanne’s *The Card Players* (1890-1892) series highlight his focus on ordinary life, using humble subjects to recalibrate our attention. By monumentalizing a simple scene, he encourages us to recognise subtle beauty often overlooked. His thick brushstrokes and simplified shapes shift focus from mere illustration to structure, weight and stillness. The flattened space and slight proportional distortions unsettle expectations, prompting a reassessment of visual judgment. Rather than reaffirming the familiar, Cezanne’s compositions open new

perceptual territory, making us more attuned to the quiet significance of everyday gestures and relationships. (Robbins, and Cézanne, 2006)

In his painting *The Basket of Apples* (1893), Cezanne plays with the viewer's cognitive expectation. He uses perceptual errors to make the viewer aware of how the mind organises visual stimuli. The tilted bottle, uneven table, and misaligned apples are all visual inconsistencies that Cezanne uses to train the viewer's perception, forcing them to reassess how their brain organises the world they see. Descartes describes the way paintings present objects as a "Puppet" or the "outside" (Ponty, 1993, p.8) of the object, this demonstrates how perception, informed by preconceived expectations, can obscure the reality of what is observed (Malevich, 2023).



Figure 6. Paul Cezanne, *The Basket of Apples* (1893)

Cezanne believed that beneath the complex appearances of things lie timeless archetypes, which artists must reveal (Mattei, 2023). By intentionally incorporating visual inconsistencies, Cezanne demonstrates how painting can sharpen perception itself, encouraging viewers to notice comparable irregularities in the world around them.

This relationship between body and mind is central to understanding how art can reshape perception. Philosophers like Descartes noted that "the blind see with their hands" (Ponty, 1993, p.7), highlighting that perception extends beyond the eyes. This idea resonates with Cezanne, who despite deteriorating eyesight, refused to wear glasses (Butchins, 2024). He viewed perception as

something adaptive rather than something to correct. His paintings capture this shifting world of perception, showing how the senses adjust and reorganize.

This embodied experience is essential to Cezanne's work. *The large Bathers*, his most expansive painting, intertwines the human form with nature. The scene depicts nude women, possibly after



Figure 7. Paul Cezanne, *The Large Bathers* (1900)

bathing, framed within a triangular structure of trees, landscape and sky. Cezanne's composition invites multiple interpretations. As noted in *Cezanne: The Large Bathers II*, "there exists still another level, deeper than the two just mentioned, but only in the sense of more submerged, not more profound" (Giest, 1992, p.18). This suggests how Cezanne fuses figures and landscape so completely that distinctions between bodies, objects and space begin to dissolve. The central bather can be read as an extension of the bending trees and converging forms, unsettling the viewers usual categorization of body and world (Giest, 1992).

Rather than offering a stable scene, Cezanne's work challenges the viewer to make their way through shifting boundaries, reflecting perception as a bodily negotiation with space. Merleau-

Ponty's idea that perception "expresses only my incomprehensible solidarity with one of them, my body" (Ponty, 1993, p.9) resonates here. Cezanne interwoven forms prompt us to recognize that space, depth and objecthood are not fixed but shaped by our lived experience.

1.2 Calum Colvin

Calum Colvin's practice spans painting, sculpture and photography, using constructed imagery to disrupt photography's perceived objectivity. Through layered visual illusions and historical references, his work traces a lineage of deceptive imagery while simultaneously addressing contemporary concerns surrounding the contested nature of truth, in an era of rapidly advancing

technology. Colvin's approach reveals how art can shape and manipulate perception, transforming reality into fiction and highlighting the active role viewers play in constructing meaning from visual information (Normand, 2019).

In *A Portrait of Sir David Brewster* (2009), Colvin portrays the 19th century academic and optical scientist, whose work was pivotal in the early development of photography and camera technology. Brewster is best known for inventing the kaleidoscope and stereoscope, although his claims were contested by the scientific community (Normand, 2019). The tonal image of Brewster is framed by objects related to his scientific work, with grained surfaces and patterned cross-hatching that echo early photographic processes.



Figure 8a. Calum Colvin's *A Portrait of Sir David Brewster* [stereoscopic photograph left] (2008)

Figure 8b. Calum Colvin's *A Portrait of Sir David Brewster* [stereoscopic photograph right] (2008)

A mirror placed beside Brewster functions metaphorically as a lens, offering an alternative perspective on the still image and linking painting with photography. This reflects the 19th century debate about photography as both a scientific and artistic medium. The inclusion of a paintbrush and easel on the left side ties Colvin's own practice into the ongoing dialogue between painting, photography and science. Other elements such as books, research materials and a ladder symbolize the intellectual ambition that defined Brewster's contributions.

Colvin designed the image to be viewed stereoscopically, using two slightly offset angles of the same image to mimic human vision (Normand, 2019). This technique not only enhances depth but also critiques the limitations of a single lens in capturing a full visual perspective. By doing so, Colvin challenges the flatness of traditional photography and emphasises how visual perception

is constructed. The interactive stereoscopic approach encourages viewers to shift from passive observation to active participation, echoing Brewsters Victorian interest in optical science and the ways technology can expand human vision (Normand, 2019).

Colvin also draws on the historical technique of anamorphosis, developed in the 16th century to distort images so they only resolve when viewed from a specific angle (Normand, 2019). This technique plays with the instability of perception, revealing how vision can be manipulated and truth obscured.

A compelling example is the anamorphic portrait of *Mary, Queen of Scots* (1580) at the Scottish national portrait gallery (National Galleries of Scotland, 2020). Initially appearing as a traditional



Figure 9a. Reeve, A. (1580) *Anamorphosis, called Mary, Queen of Scots, 1542 – 1587* (left side)



Figure 9b. Reeve, A. (1580) *Anamorphosis, called Mary, Queen of Scots, 1542 – 1587* (right side)

portrait, the image transforms into a skull when viewed from the side, shifting the viewers interpretations from loyal icon to memento mori. This transformation fore's a perceptual and emotional shift, exemplifying how visual perspective can dramatically reshape meaning. Colvin adapts this technique called 'Channel anamorphosis' in *Lochaber No More* (2014), where the image of a young prince morphs into that of a prisoner as the viewer moves past the work. Using this technique, he manipulates spatial perception to explore themes of identity, loss, and historical revision (Normand, 2019). In doing so, Colvin demonstrates how art can disrupt fixed perspectives

and reveal hidden or conflicting narratives, ultimately altering how we perceive both image and meaning.



Brewster's investigation into his optical illusions revealed that their effectiveness relied on the manipulation of visual perception through scientific principles. In his 1832 publication *Letters on Natural Magic addressed to Sir Walter Scott*, Brewster sought to demystify these illusions, arguing that what appeared mythical or magical was, in fact, rooted in the science of vision. This early exploration of how perception can be delivered through visual stimuli laid groundwork for later developments in photography and optical art (Normand, 2019).

Figure 10. Calum Colvin, *Lochaber No More II (Anamorphosis)* (2014)

Colvin draws from this tradition in his *Portrait of Charles Edward Stuart (after Liotard)* (2015). In the *mirror anamorphosis* (2014) piece, the distorted image of the prince is stretched across a flat surface, rendering it unrecognisable until viewed through a cylindrical mirror placed at the centre. The mirror corrects the distortion, revealing the hidden portrait. Through this method, Colvin not only manipulates the viewer's perception but also references historical acts of visual concealment. After the failed Jacobite uprising in 1745, images of Charles Edward Stuart were outlawed, and loyalists resorted to secret symbols and covert imagery (Normand, 2019).

‘To accredit this myth, they went as far as to expurgate Euclid, omitting from their translations the eighth theorem, which was inconvenient’ (Ponty, 1993, p. 10)

Merlau states here that despite mathematical or visual truths perception is ultimately shaped by cultural preferences, perception is historically and ideologically constructed. Colvin uses anamorphosis to draw this parallel between optical illusion and political subversion, showing how altered perception can carry coded meaning and challenge dominant narratives.



Figure 11a. Calum Colvin, *Portrait of Charles Edward Stuart (after Liotard)*, (2015) on left

Figure 11b. Calum Colvin, *Portrait of Charles Edward Stuart (mirror anamorphosis)*, (2014) on right

1.3 Patrick Hughes

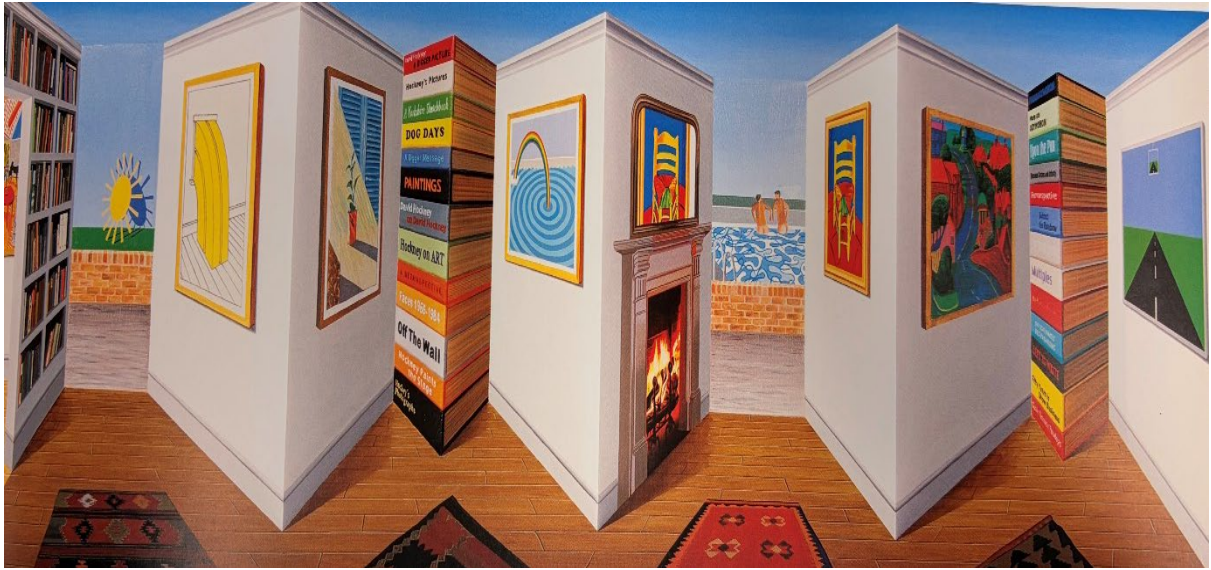


Figure 12. Patrick Hughes, *Hockney Hughes* (2013)

Patrick Hughes is a key figure in the exploration of human perception through art, particularly with his unique technique of Reverspective. This method involves creating three dimensional structures in which depth relationships are reversed, causing the depicted space to appear paradoxical and defying convention visual logic. In his works, Hughes uses skewed planes and perspective projections that manipulate how we experience space, forcing viewers to actively engage with the artwork. Hughes himself states, 'I let the viewer pull the carpet from under his own feet,' (Hughes et al., p.50, 2014) revealing his intention to destabilize the viewers perception through visual contradiction.

In *Hockney Hughes* (2013), Hughes combines his Reverspective approach with a nod to David Hockney's philosophy, who he identifies as a significant influence (Connor, 2013). Hughes paints on a 3D board, depicting a domestic space with a fireplace, patterned carpets and earlier paradoxical works (Hughes et al, p.50, 2014). Multiple stacks of books on different planes embed Hockney's name, with titles like *David Hockney on David Hockney* and *Hockney's Pictures* create a playful, deliberate clash with his beliefs. Just as Hockney sought to present a more complex view of the world, Hughes simultaneously invites and undermines the viewers perception of reality, creating a paradox where the visual world feels both real and unreal, familiar yet entirely manipulated.



Figure 13a. Patrick Hughes, *Picassos* (2012)

Hughes' obsession with visual contradiction is not only theoretical but also evident in the physical structure of his works. As discussed by Hughes et al. (2014), it is through this deliberate manipulation of visual cues, such as perspective depth, that the viewer is encouraged to question their own perception. The Reverspective pieces engage the eye, body and mind, creating a cognitive dissonance that pulls the viewer deeper into the work.



Figure 13b. Patrick Hughes, *Picassos* (2012) *side view*.

When standing still, the paintings within the sculpture seem to shift, and as the viewer moves, the entire room appears to change. This shifting perception challenges the viewer's visual logic, making

Another artist whose work Hughes draws on is Pablo Picasso, especially through his painted sculpture *Picassos* (2013). In this piece, Hughes references Picasso's cubism, which similarly fragments objects into multiple perspectives. Just as Cubism captures movement through differing viewpoints, Hughes creates a similar effect by layering depth planes within the image. The power of Hughes' pieces lies in its interaction with the viewer.

the painting come alive and altering their sense of space, much like Picassos work redefined how we perceive form and movement.

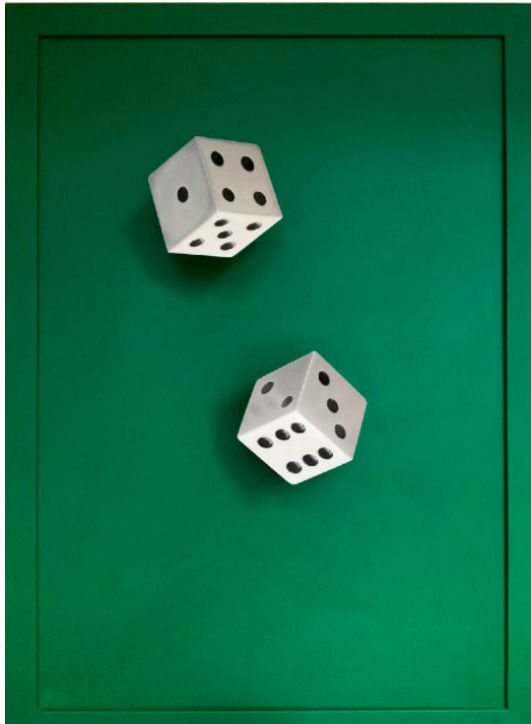


Figure 14a. Patrick Hughes, *Chances* (2022) on left.



Figure 14b. Patrick Hughes, *Chances* (2022) on right.

In his piece *chances* (2022), Hughes utilizes a minimal visual language to play with the simplicity of everyday objects. By presenting a pair of dice in an unusual, manipulated form, he distorts their spatial relationships using depth gradients. These seemingly simple forms challenge the viewers understanding of perspective, inviting them to question how depth can be altered through subtle visual cues. Hughes uses a simplified a 3 faced sculpture, where the manipulation of minimal structural elements causes the brain to misinterpret the depth. The dice appear to shift in space depending on the viewers position, drawing on the Ames room illusion, where the perceived depth of a structure is distorted based on the viewers angle (Rogers and Hughes, 2023.)

Hughes states, “I do not make the illusion; it is the seer who creates the illusion,” (Hughes et al., p.50, 2014), emphasising the active role of the viewer in constructing their own perceptual experience. Through this, Hughes also explores the concept of randomness, demonstrating how the brain can misinterpret even the simplest objects in everyday life.

Just as Hughes addresses the mundane deception of perception, he also explores imagined, dreamlike realities in sculptures like *The Oasis of Alice* (2013). This work invites the viewer into an altered world through its structure. The manipulation of the sculptures paradoxical form confused

the viewers perception, making the rules of reality irrelevant, much like the Alice in wonderland dimension. Reverspective makes the viewer feel as though they're interacting with a real-world object, but the world presented is a visual trick. This method that Hughes expertly utilises not only pushes boundaries of the canvas but also perception. Hughes demonstrates that art isn't about replicating reality but expanding our consciousness and perception of what reality could be. It also serves as an escape, much like Alice's journey into an immersive, fantastical realm.



Figure 15. Patrick Hughes, *The Oasis of Alice* (2013)

1.5 James Turrell

We eat light, drink it in through our skins. With a little more exposure to light, you feel part of things physically. I like the power of light and space physically because then you can order it materially. Seeing is a very sensuous act – there’s a sweet deliciousness to feeling yourself see something” -James Turrell (Govan et al., 2013)



Figure 16a. James Turrell, *Afrum Proto* (1966)



Figure 16b. James Turrell, *Alta Pink* (1968)

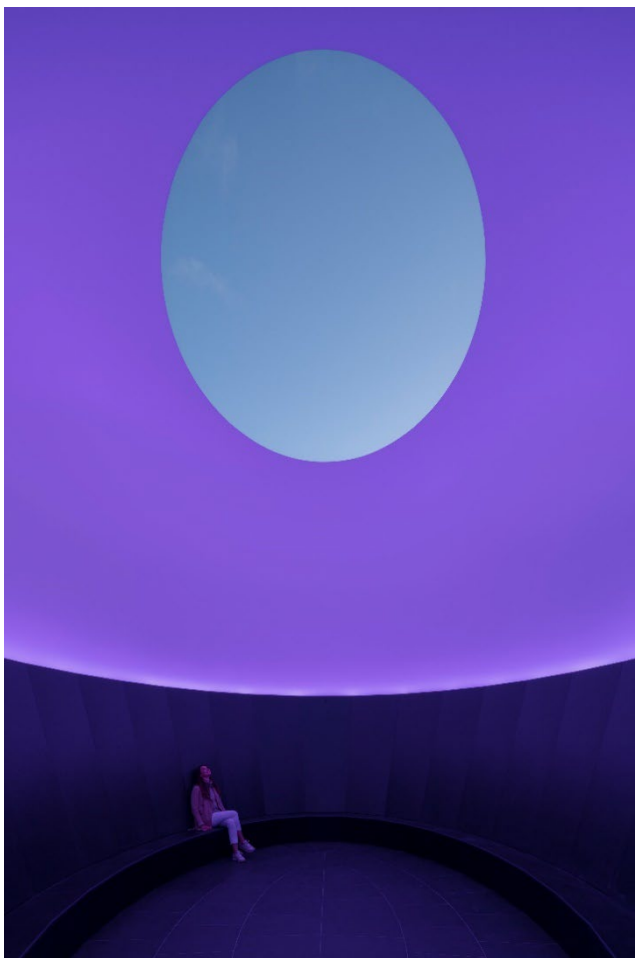


Figure 16c. James Turrell, *Squat Blue* (1968)

James Turrell, often called a “master of light” (O’Donnell, 2025), is widely regarded as a sculptor, but he asserts that perception itself is his true medium. Rather than using light simply to reveal or render phenomena, Turrell manipulates light as a physical presence that challenges how we perceive the world, urging a direct confrontation with sight itself. With a background in perceptual psychology from Pomono College (1965), (Petruzello, 2021) Turrell applied scientific insights to his art, culminating in works like *Afrum Proto* (1966), where a rectangular light projected into a corner creates the illusion of a floating cube. As the viewer moves closer, the illusion dissolves revealing the ambiguity between what is real and what is perceived.

This exploration of perceptual vagueness aligns with the idea that, “the artists aim is to communicate something well defined, even if it is the expression of vagueness” (Pirenne, p.124). For Turrell, this vagueness is an invitation to question the boundary between physical reality and perceptual illusion.

Turrell’s work challenges us to confront the space between the real and imagined, where light itself



becomes both subject and object of contemplation. As Turrell puts it, “we have long used light to reveal things, but it is in the thingness of light, that light itself becomes the revelation” (Govan et al., p.49, 2013)

In his work, light becomes more than a tool for visibility; it transforms our experience of space. Turrells *Projection piece Drawings* (1970-71) and Figure 16a, invites viewers to engage with light physically, echoing Plato’s allegory of the cave, where prisoners mistake shadows for reality. Similarly, Turrell challenges our perception, prompting us to question what is real and reconsider the truths we take for granted (Govan et al., 2013).

Figure 17. James Turrell, *Skyspaces* (2014)

James Turrell’s works explore light as both a tool and a subject of revelation, reflecting his belief in its spiritual and perceptual power. He suggests that our understanding of the world originates

from our 'inner light', a concept encompassing both physiological and metaphysical aspects of perception (Petruzzello, 2021). This is evident in Turrell's *Skyspaces* (2014) where viewers look up at a framed opening in the ceiling, experiencing the changing sky as a dynamic, ephemeral painting. This creates a transcendent experience, offering moments of contemplation and a peaceful escape from daily life.

Influenced by lucid dreaming and meditation, Turrell uses colour and light to craft immersive environments that blur the boundary between physical space and subjective experience. By inviting viewers to lie or sit and gaze upward, his work transforms perception into a spiritual, meditative experience. The constantly shifting light becomes like an infinite painting in the sky (Petruzzello, 2021).

This idea of the fluidity of perception is echoed by Josef Albers, who notes that, "No normal eye... is foolproof against colour deception" (Albers p.23, 2006) Albers emphasises that colour perception is shaped by the mind, not an objective reality. Turrell's use of contrasting colours and light in his installations shifts the viewers perception, showing how colour changes depending on context and environment. His works reinforces the idea that perception is not fixed but subjective, shaped by both external factors and psychological engagement. In this way, Turrell's art highlights the relativity of light and colour, underscoring their inherently subjective nature.

James Turrell's work is informed by his life experiences and phenomena such as the Ganzfeld effect, which he first encountered as a pilot (Govan et al., 2013). The Ganzfeld effect occurs when the brain, deprived of visual stimulation, fills in missing information, producing unusual visual patterns, sometimes hallucinations (Pietrangelo, 2020). Turrell exploits this understanding of sensory limitations to create environments that challenge the reliability of vision. He explains, "it's just like having a porch light on... you turn the porch light off and your vision will penetrate into the night" (Govan et al, P.99, 2013), emphasizing perceptions fleeting and relative nature.

A key example is *Aftershock* (2021), a site-specific installation at Copenhagen Contemporary. Turrell manipulates light, space and sensory experience to immerse viewers in a destabilised reality. Even when experienced collectively, each perception is unique, underscoring the subjectivity of seeing and echoing Descartes idea that the senses cannot always be trusted (Descartes, Meditation 1, 1641). Turrell's exposure to sensory deprivation as a pilot, which required perceptual recalibration, directly informs this work.

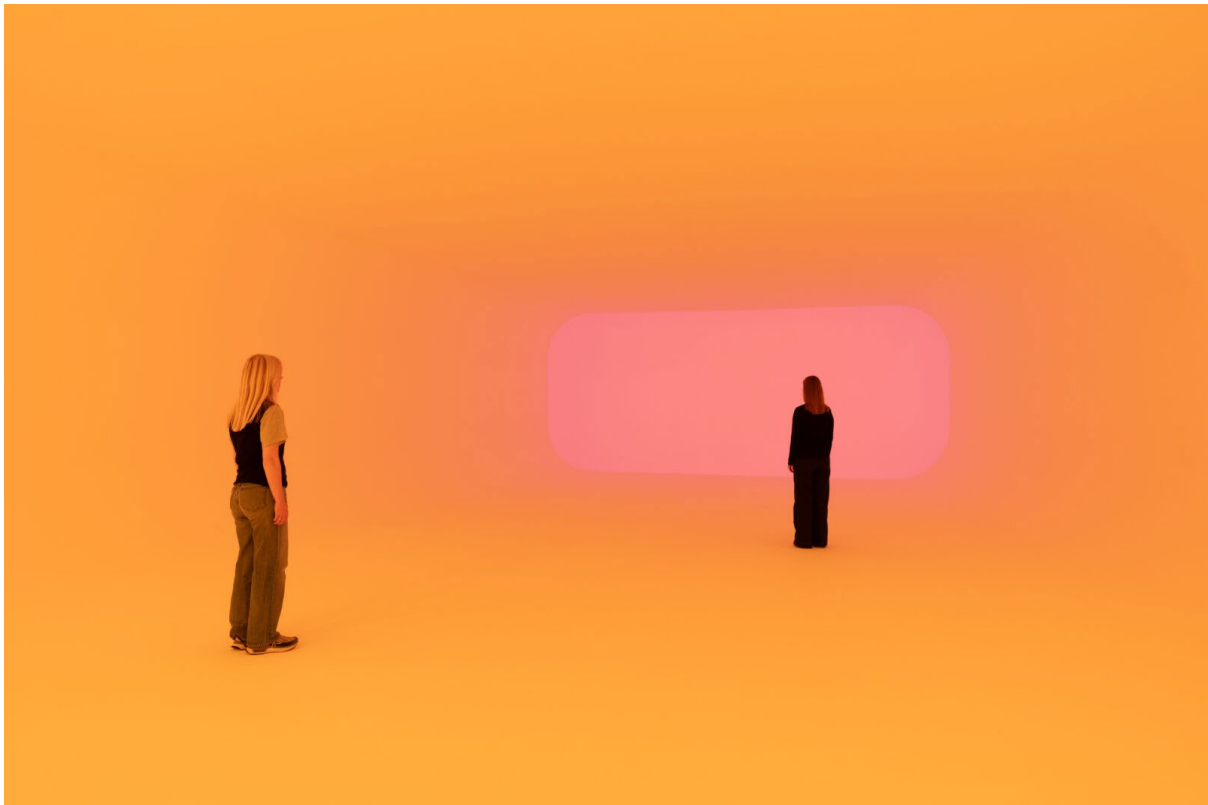


Figure 18. James Turrell, *Aftershock* (2021)

In Figure 18, viewers are invited to interact with the light, blurring the boundary between subject and object. As Turrell states, 'Your eyes do the touching' (Govan et al., p.103, 2013) reinforcing that seeing is as tactile and embodied as touch. The vastness and emptiness of the subjectless room draws attention to the colour itself, without distraction. In this wide, unbounded space, the mind becomes more susceptible to colour deception, as the absence of clear visual cues makes perception more fluid and subjective. This experience allows for moments of contemplation, connecting the viewer to something greater and offering a reminder of their place within reality. As Josef Albers notes, 'he who claims to see colour independent of their illusionary changes fools only himself, no one else,' (Albers, p.23, 2006) highlighting that perception is shaped by environment, light and space. Turrell exploits this by bending and collapsing, and reinterpreting space, compelling viewers to question not only their perception of light and colour, but the very nature of physical reality itself.

2.1 Curatorial arrangements

My aim is to walk the audience through this historical site not as a preserved bunker, but as a perceptual Time Machine. As visitors approach, they pass through vast, quiet fields, with no signs to indicate what lies below the surface. This removal of external markers heightens the mystery, preparing them for an altered reality inside. Even repeat visitors will find themselves in a transformed space, where history, environment and art converge to shift their perception.

2.1.1 Above Ground

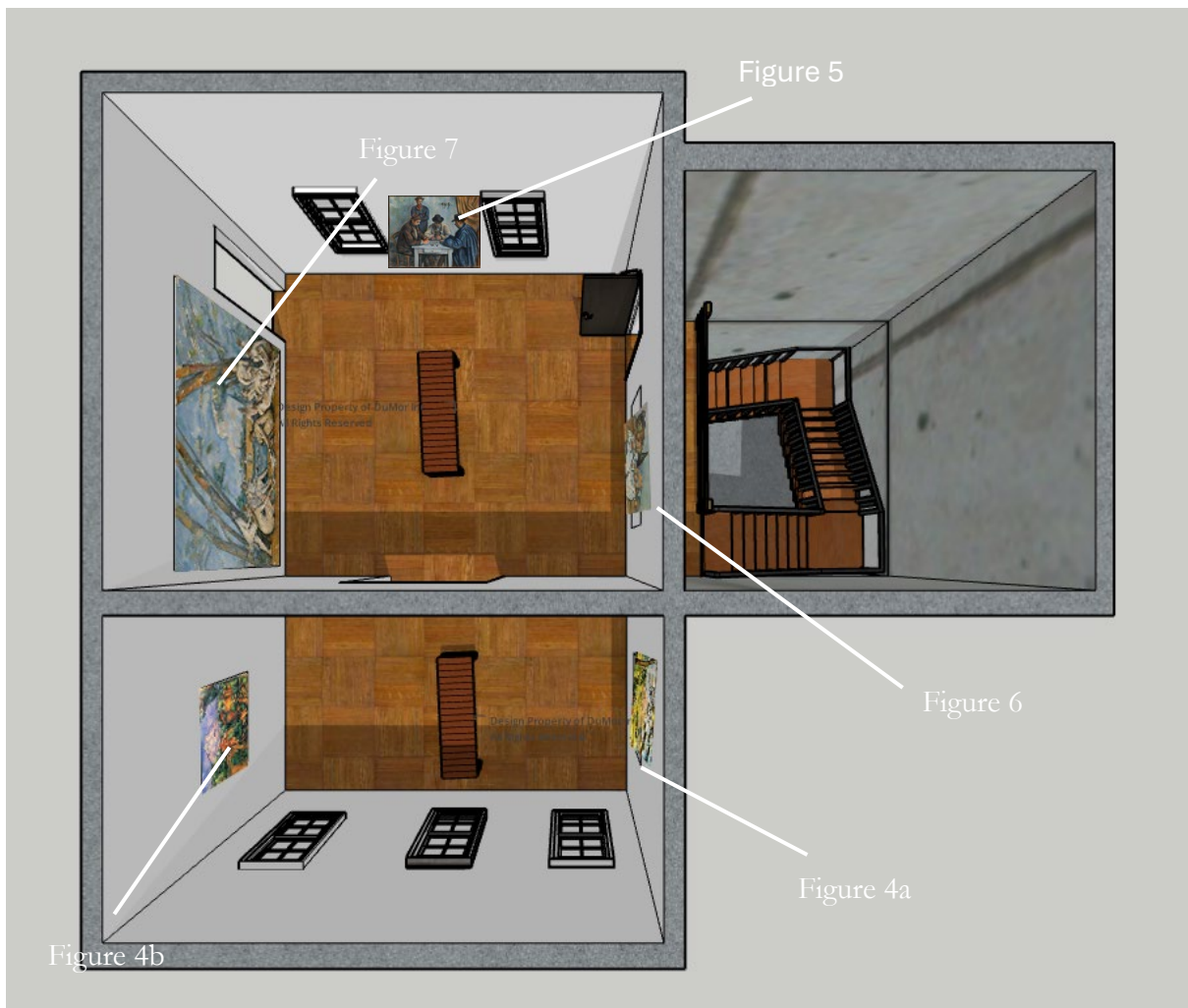


Figure 19. Top floor Gallery plan (2025)

The exhibition begins in a conventional, white-walled gallery above ground, creating a neutral foundation. Cezanne's *The Large Bathers* will dominate this room. The large scale (210cm x 200cm) and almost life-sized figures, invites viewers to rethink their perceptions of space and form. Cezanne's innovative use of brushstroke and perspective challenges the viewers understanding of depth, drawing a parallel to the visitors own shifting perception as they move through the space.



Figure 20a. Top Floor gallery



Figure 20b. Top Floor gallery

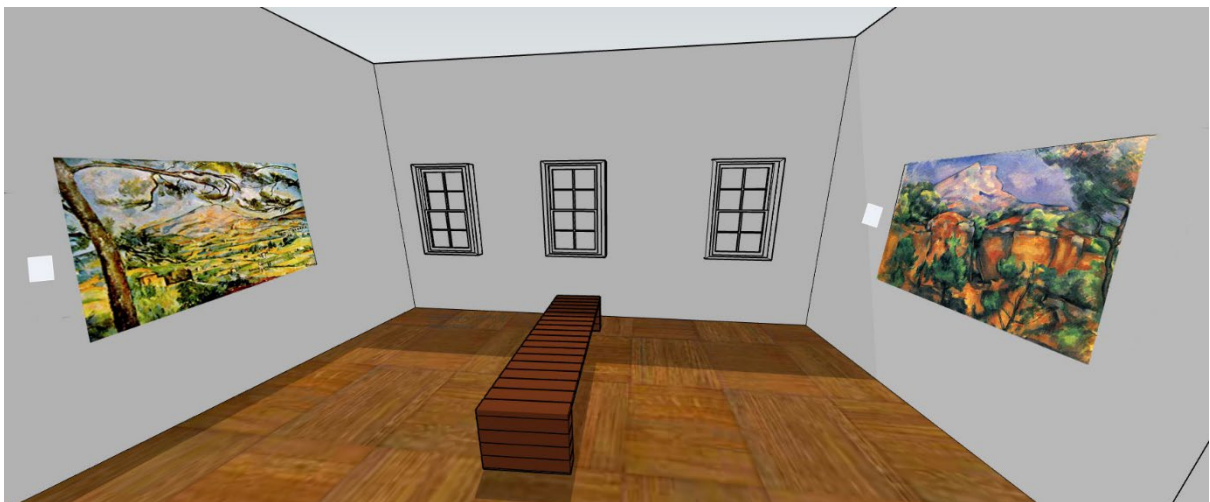


Figure 20c. Top Floor Gallery

Other works, like *The basket of Apples* and *Mont Saint-Victoire* further disrupt conventional views of reality. This room filmed with the fragmented forms and tilted surfaces of *The Card Players* create a sense of instability. Figure 20c has multiples from a series, demonstrating how a single subject can transform based on perspective. Each Piece will have a label indicating its title and medium, maintaining a familiar format of a traditional gallery. Benches will allow viewers to sit and engage with Cezanne's work, while being able to compare two *Mont Sainte-Victoire* paintings, offering different perspectives of the same object. This contrast enhances the disorientating nature of what the visitor is about to experience. Just as visitors view of the bunker shifts as they traverse underground, so to does Cezanne's paintings demonstrate how perception is shaped by perspective and context. *The Card Players* emphasising the power of interpretation with its still figures, absorbed in their card game. This suggesting a deeper narrative beyond the visible, mirroring the bunkers isolated atmosphere. What is hidden beneath the surface becomes as important as what is seen.

2.1.2 Tunnel Journey



Figure 21. Start of Tunnel Gallery featuring figure 8.

The Journey to the bunker is a sensory experience designed to shift the visitor's perception from the familiar to the hidden. As they descend the staircase into the tunnel, the temperature drops, creating a physical sensation of transition. The concrete walls, repetitive and narrowing, evoke feelings of vertigo, drawing the visitor deeper into the space. This descent, both physical and psychological, mirrors the shift from the known to the unknown, enhancing the tension and anticipation of what lies ahead.

Along the tunnel, Calum Colvin's work will be strategically placed, acting as a timeline that links art, history and secrecy. His works, positioned along the path, encouraging the visitor to reflect on the secretive nature of the space they are entering; once hidden from the public, much like the figures in Colvin's work who used art to communicate covertly. These works will also be accompanied by a label with title and medium, so that the viewer still draws the connection to the familiar gallery space above. By placing these works on the way to the bunker, the visitor is prompted to consider how art has historically been a vehicle for secrecy and hidden truths.

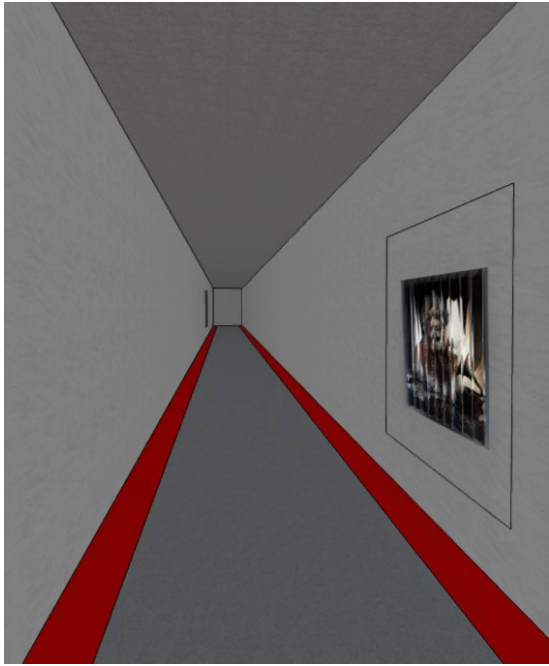


Figure 22b. End of Tunnel, featuring figure 10.

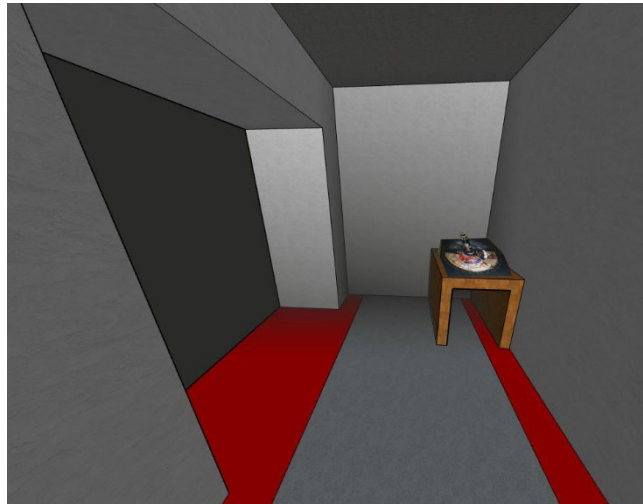


Figure 22a. Middle of Tunnel, featuring figure 11.

This curatorial choice strengthens the connection between Colvin's work and the bunkers history. This allows visitors to recall the secretive nature of the Cold War era while moving toward a space that, for decades, was concealed from view. The physical journey through the tunnel, combined with the artworks that evoke hidden narratives, prepares the visitor to engage with the bunker in a new light.

By combining sensory experience, historical context and art, the exhibitions shifts perception at every step and reinforces the central theme of how art can alter our understanding of history and reality.

2.1.3 First steps

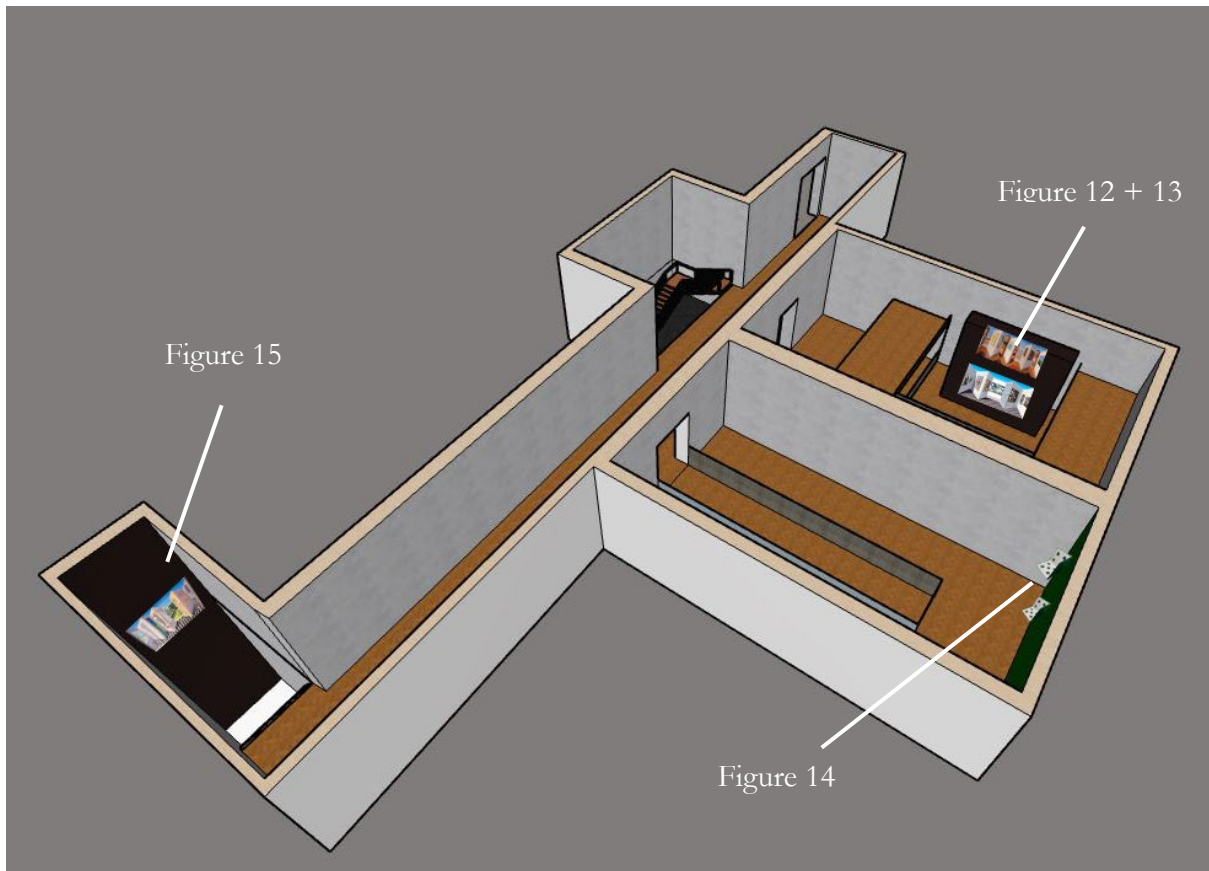


Figure 23. Bunker Lower Floor Plan

The tunnel curves left to reveal a large red steel door, propped open as the entrance to the main bunker. Original signage is retained, allowing visitors to connect with the site's history with its new inhabitants. As the temperature regulates, a sense of separation from the outside world is established. A blocked staircase directs visitors along a predetermined route, ending through a dimly lit corridor whose soft lighting creates a contemplative atmosphere and amplifies the perception of space.

To the left, a former Royal Observer Corps operations room (Figures 24) with upper and lower viewing galleries presents works by Patrick Hughes on a large black partition. The multi level structure enables the illusion to be experienced from multiple horizontal and vertical perspectives.

Further along in Figures 24, visitors enter a former dormitory where a cordoned central path ends to Hughes's *Chances*, mounted on a dark green wall and spotlighted to cast a single shadow behind the dice. From a distance the form appears convex, but this perception shifts as viewers approach, revealing the instability of perspective. At the corridors end, a staircase descends to a lower level where *The Oasis of Alice*, is displayed on a white wall. As visitors move downward, the work continuously transforms, signalling an encounter with realities that defy expectation and priming

viewers for Turrell installation, where assumptions about illusion and deception are ultimately unsettled.

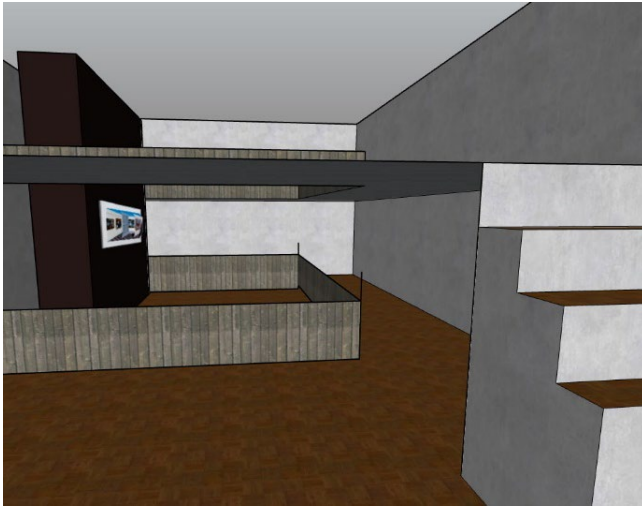


Figure 24a. Patrick Hughes Gallery



Figure 24b. Patrick Hughes Gallery

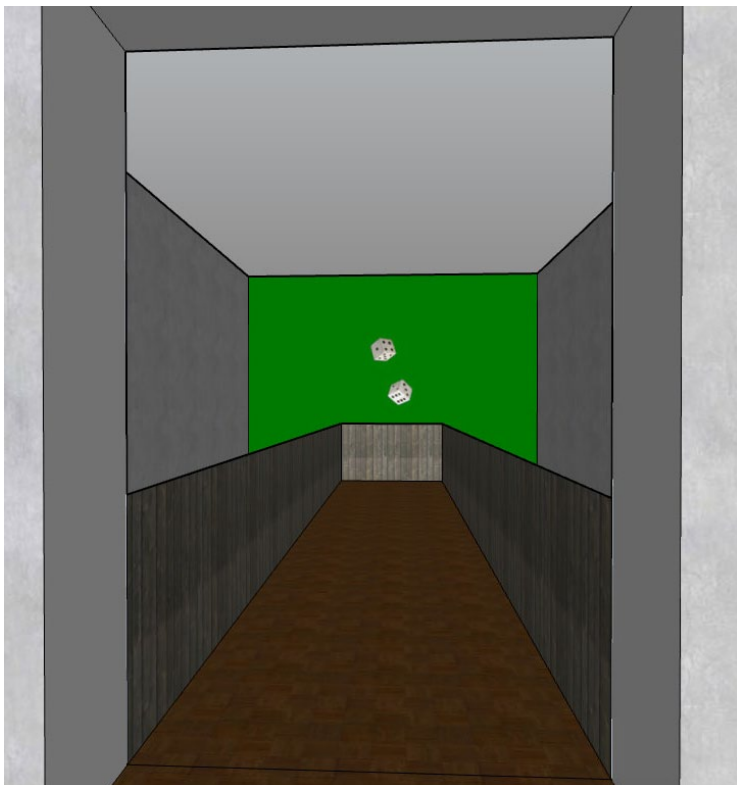


Figure 24d. Dice Room from end of path

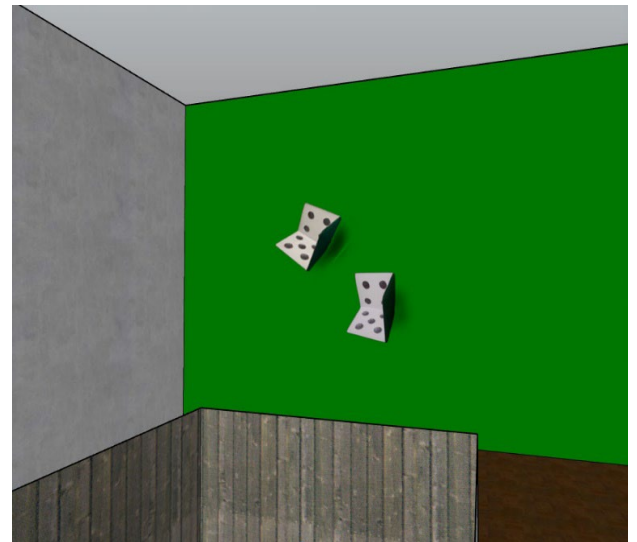


Figure 24c. Dice Room



Figure 25. Stairs down to Bottom Floor, featuring figure

2.1.4 Full Immersion

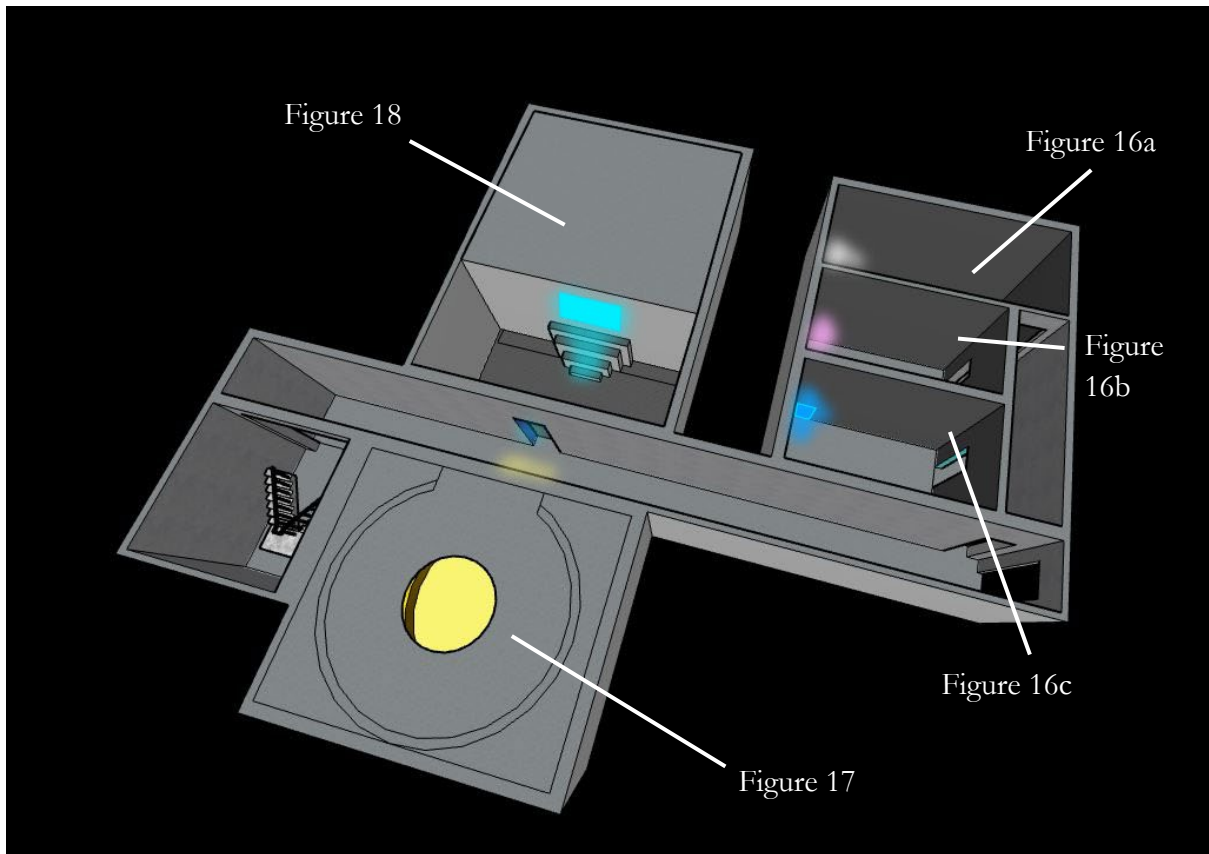


Figure 26a. Bottom Floor Plan

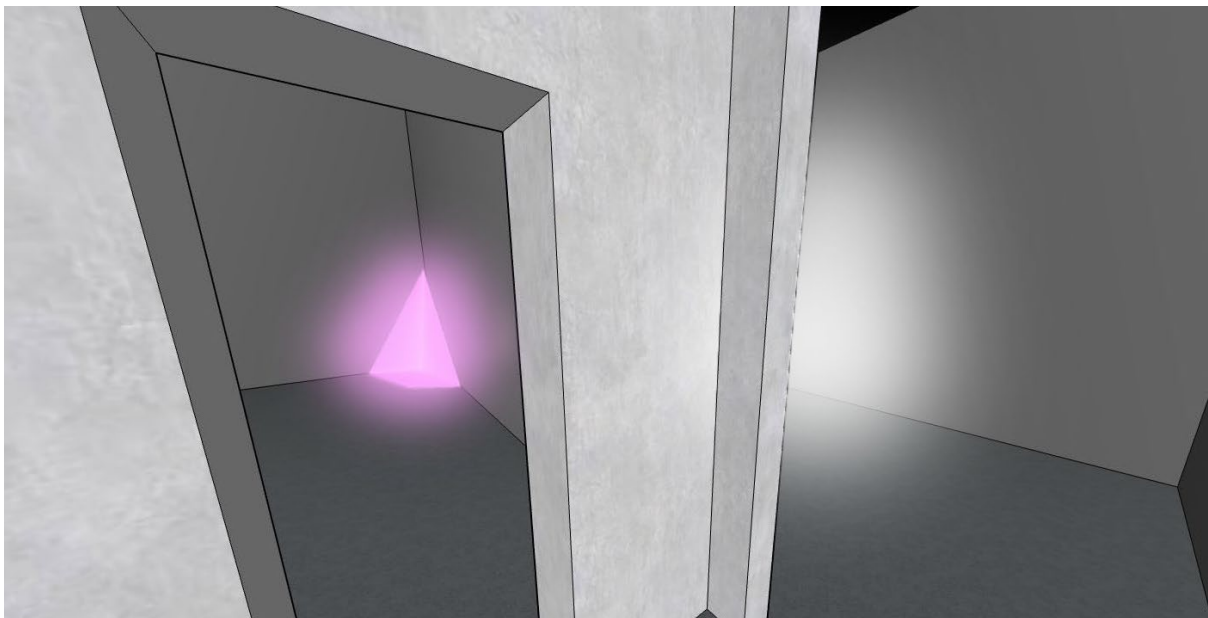


Figure 26b. (Alta, Pink) and Afrum Proto from corridor

As viewers descend the stairs, they hear faint music and colourful lit doorways in distant rooms. To the right, several of Turrell's *Projections Drawing pieces* are displayed in darkened rooms, where

controlled darkness enhances the light projections. Each room features a unique shape, introducing light as the central subject on this level, even in the depths underground where natural light can't reach.

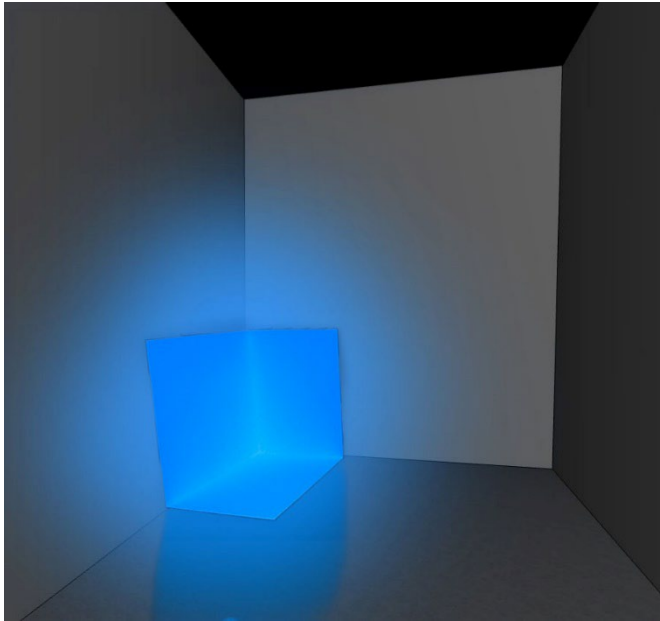


Figure 27b. Afrum Proto from door

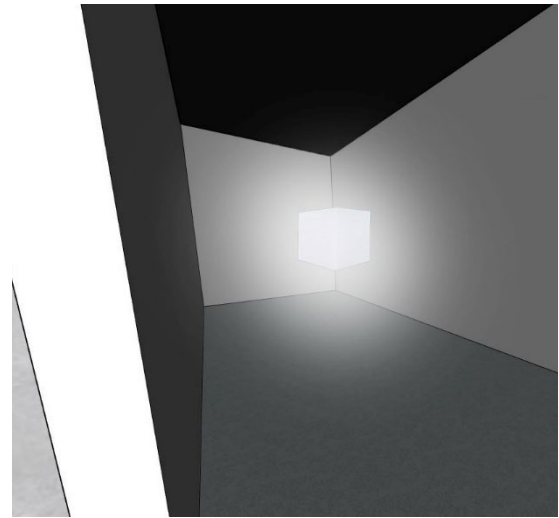


Figure 27a. Blue Squat Room

As the corridor darkens a guide awaits at the end, ushering visitors into the former plant room, now housing an adapted *Skyspace*. Instead of a hole in the ceiling framing the sky, hidden lights slowly shift hues to mimic the changing daylight. Visitors are encouraged to sit or lay down and meditate, staring at a space where light is imagined above, enhancing a sense of disorientation; much like the RAF pilots who were once communicated to from this depth during the cold war.

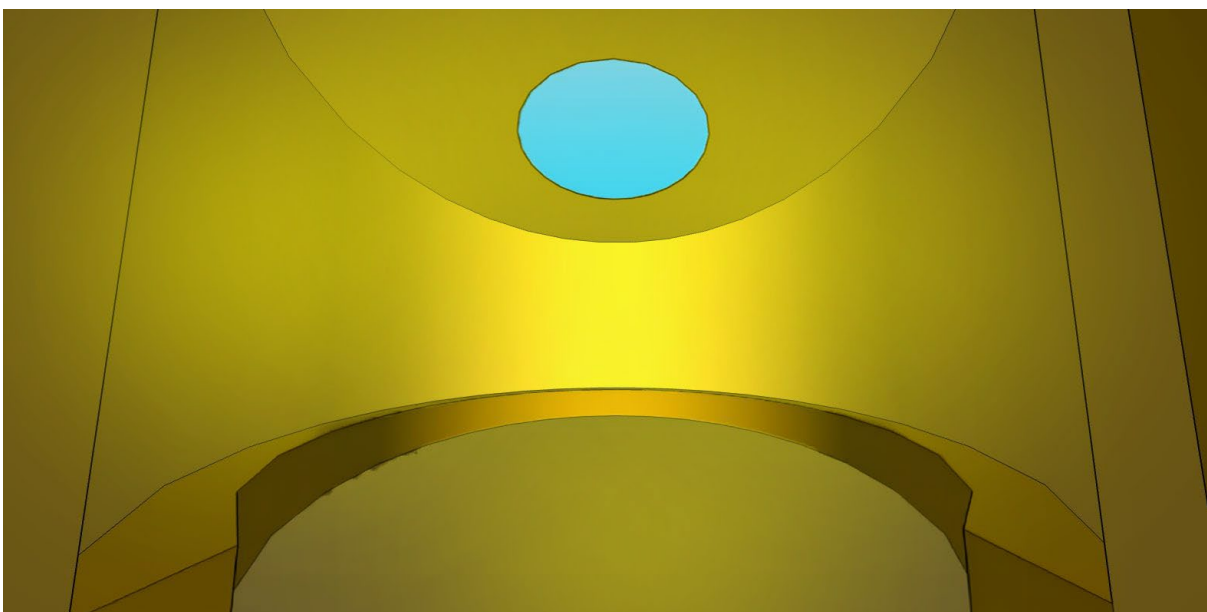


Figure 27c. Skyspace Room

Next, Visitors are instructed to enter the former Government Command Centre in small groups. This large space contains a carpeted waiting area, where a square of light appears above a converging stairway. A guide is present to manage the experience, ensuring safety as the Ganzfeld effect in Turrell's *Aftershock* can induce dizziness or nausea. The artworks physical boundaries are difficult to perceive, so improper movement could lead to injury. Visitors remove their shoes and ascend the stairs into the light, becoming immersed in *Aftershock*, where colour challenges their perception of reality and creates the illusion of endlessness. A soft, white-noise sound amplifies this disorientation. Visitors then exit through a corridor back into daylight, returning to a grounded sense of space and perception.

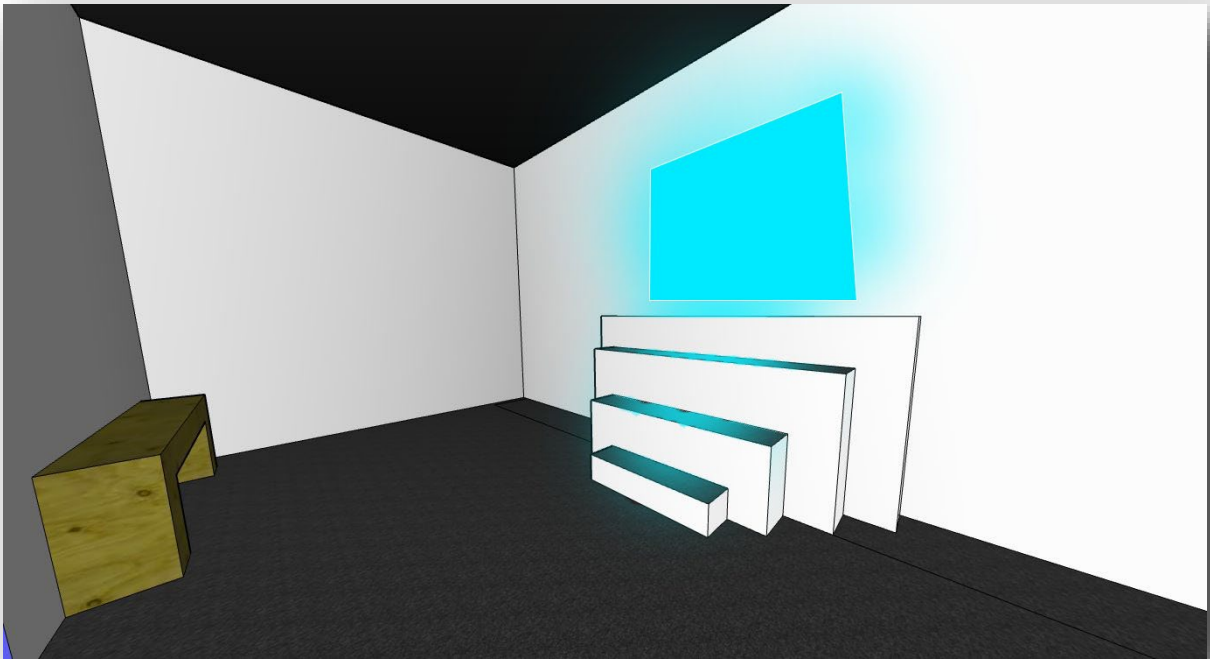


Figure 28. Aftershock Room

Chapter 3: Curatorial Influences



Figure 29. Rachel Macleans of Upside down mimi, Photographed by Hatherley, E.

3.1 Jupiter Artland

A major influence in my curation came from my time volunteering at Jupiter Artland, particularly engaging with Rachel MacLean's exhibition *Upside Down Mimi* (2021). This experience was crucial in shaping my interest in how art can alter perception, especially in the way it manipulates space and narrative. Maclean's work juxtaposed the innocent façade of an abandoned doll shop with its dark, disturbing interior, compelling viewers to confront unsettling imagery. Hidden within a secluded forest, the bright, orderly structure stood in stark contrast to its wild surroundings, suggesting that what appears safe and familiar can conceal something threatening. Curatorially, the work required careful control of access, balancing surprise and immersion while ensuring a guided and responsible viewing experience.

What intrigued me most was how the dolls shop concealed location shaped viewers perception. The environment guided visitors through a carefully structured journey, with the dollhouse functioning as both an invitation and trap. This spatial design manipulated expectations,

highlighting how art can alter human perception. Maclean's heart shaped stepping stones further reinforced this, leading viewers along an apparently simple path that unfolded into a complex and challenging experience, revealing that the journey itself is as significant as the destination.

Experiencing Maclean's work at Jupiter Artland, set within a former post-industrial landscape known as the "Texas of the north" (Jupiter Artland, 2024) shaped my understanding of the relationship between art and environment. Encountering artworks embedded within the untamed grounds created a continual sense of discovery, where each finding felt revelatory. This importance of exhibition that engage with their surroundings and use unexpected spaces to transform how visitors perceive both art and place.

Another key influence was Andy Goldsworthy's works at Jupiter Artland, particularly his *Coppice Room* (2012), which immerses visitors in nature and reveals hidden bedrock beneath the surface. His art encouraged viewers to confront what is often hidden or overlooked, inviting them to see the familiar in a new light (Jupiter Artland, 2024). This approach to revealing layers of history, nature and perception would later influence my own curatorial philosophy. I am seeking to create experiences that challenge the viewers' understanding of space, context and meaning.

My experience at Jupiter Artland taught me how deeply the physical space and visitors' movement through can influence their perception. This understanding has been instrumental in shaping my curatorial philosophy, where I focus on crafting environments that don't just present art, but invite viewers to interact with it, prompting them to engage more critically with both the artwork and the space itself.

3.2 Exhibition Experience

A significant curatorial influence came from experiencing Turrell's *Aftershock* at Copenhagen Contemporary. The installation left a lasting impact due to its ambiguity and sense of mystery. Entering as guided groups, we removed our shoes to engage directly with the work. The space featured white walls and a staircase leading to a glowing square of light. As I approached, my brain perceived a wall where none existed, hesitating before stepping into the light.

Inside, the absence of visual cues created a foggy, disorientation sensation. Though my eyes adjusted, the room of pure light and colour felt boundless. Walking around and touching the walls could not anchor my perception, and I eventually left, unsettled by the lack of visual reference points aside from the other visitors.

What struck me most was the shared, yet individually different experience of those around me. Some had prior knowledge of the visual illusion, while others were unfamiliar with it. This experience felt like a journey, where the coloured light acted almost as a performance i was physically part of. The guidance through the installation added another layer, transforming the space into an interactive experience that blurred the lines between artists, viewer and artwork. It made me reflect on how art, light and body intersect in creating a performative, sensory experience that could only be fully understood through participation.

3.3 Interview

I had the opportunity to talk with artist-curator Gair Dunlap, who is currently planning an exhibition in a different Scottish Secret Bunker. Dunlap has been given rare access to the entire site, and he shared a video illustrating his initial curatorial ideas. One sequence showed him walking down a long tunnel lit only by red emergency lights. This immediately prompted me to consider how I might use light to shape the psychological journey of my own viewers' experience.

Dunlap explained that the red lighting was originally intended to prevent the inhabitant's eyes from being overwhelmed when exiting the bunker. This functional use of light, one that deliberately manipulates sensory adaptation, revealed how the environment already participates in acts of perceptual control. His footage of opening and closing the heavy steel door further reinforced this point. The slow crank of the mechanism and the final enclosing lock emphasised how physical architecture can produce a heightened, almost ritualistic atmosphere. Visitors resultantly primed to feel as though they are entering an underworld.

Our discussion also highlighted the importance of researching the site's history and considering accessibility needs when working with extreme or restrictive spaces. These insights helped me understand how curatorial decisions, from lighting to spatial navigation, can intentionally transform how an audience interprets and receives an environment.

Chapter 4: Other Sources

My first encounter with philosophy was in high school when I came across Descartes famous quote, “I think therefore I am.”, (Meditation 1) His book, ‘Meditations on first philosophy’ (1641), introduced me to the idea that our senses deceive us; giving examples such as seeing things that aren’t there or mishearing sounds. This concept of sensory deception has stuck with me, especially when people rely on their senses as an unquestioned source of truth. I began to view the world through this lens, literally and metaphorically. Descartes claim in meditation 1 that “the senses are a deceptive and treacherous source of knowledge” (Descartes, 1641) resonated with me, as I often rely too much on my senses. Just as Descartes urges doubt, art also challenges our senses, offering new perspective and disrupting our assumptions of reality.

In my higher education I have been able to immerse myself in the art world, meeting many like-minded people who deepened my thoughts on perception. One conversation with Allan Grieg, the technician at the Art Practice Workshop, particularly stood out. He shared his perspective, saying, “back when cavemen were seeing things for the first time, no one was there to explain that the tree close to them wasn’t the same size as the one in the distance” (Grieg, 2025). This made me reflect on how perception is a fundamental human experience, shaping how we understand the world from the beginning of our existence. These discussions also shaping my curatorial approach, guiding viewers through how art has embodied perception across time. Merleau Ponty explains:

“This two-dimensional being, which makes me see a third, is a being that is pierced [troué]—as the men of the Renaissance said, a window.” (Ponty, 1961, p9)

This connection between window and perception has endured through centuries of art, presenting the canvas not just as a surface but as a threshold into another dimension or reality.

Maurice Merleau Ponty’s an *Eye and Mind* (1993) was introduced to me by Sandra Plummer after I shared my interest in Cezanne’s way of capturing a perceived moment. Ponty uses Cezanne to explain how perception is not just a passive act but an embodied, dynamic experience. He shows how art disrupts our sense of space and time, pulling viewers into a more immersive understanding of reality (Ponty, 1993). Pontys work deepened my understanding of how art and philosophy both engage with and transform our sensory experience. This perspective influenced my curation, guiding me to create an exhibition that challenges the viewers perception and explores the boundaries between reality and illusion, much as Cezanne’s paintings do.

Ponty’s idea that, “lighting, shadows, reflections, colour, all these objects of his quest are not altogether real objects; like ghosts, they have only visual existence” (Ponty, p.5, 1993) guided me

to think about light and shadows in the exhibition and how they can create a sense of shifting perception.

Similarly, Josef Albers concept that “colour is the most relative medium in art” (Albers, p.8, 2006). Became a core idea in my curation. His teachings on colour, particularly how it deceives the eye, had a significant impact on how I approached the exhibition. Albers explains that colour itself has no inherent depth, yet our brains read depth into it based on its context and contrast with other colours (Albers, 2006). This insight made me more mindful of how the placement of each work in the exhibition can alter the way it is perceived. I carefully consider the surrounding context, knowing that small changes in lighting or contrast could drastically affect how each piece would be experienced.

Albers also discusses how warm and cool colours can create the sensation of advancing and receding within a composition, affecting how a viewer perceives spatial relationships (Albers, 2006). Whilst having a profound influence on my curatorial decisions surrounding colour, it has also informed my own studio practice, encouraging me to explore how colour can generate illusions of depth and spatial tension not solely on the physical surface of a piece, but within the viewers mind. By considering the process of seeing, it shows how colour and compositional choices can subtly alter understanding and interpretation.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the quote that opened my thesis, “the perception of reality is more real than reality itself,” (Billionaire Boys Club, 2018) underscores how our understanding of reality is often shaped by illusion. This idea parallels the power of art to challenge and transform perception, revealing the malleability of what we consider True or real. Writing this dissertation has not only shaped my practice but also fundamentally changed the way I experience and engage with art, encouraging me to actively consider how my own perceptions are formed and influenced.

Perceptions inherently fluid and constantly shifting nature highlights the importance of remaining open to new ways of thinking. Too often, people become closed to alternative perspective, limiting their understanding, creativity and potential for personal growth. Through curating this exhibition, I have explored how spatial design, colour, light and sensory manipulation can guide viewers to question their assumptions and confront the ways in which perception shapes interpretation.

I hope the exhibition encourages audiences to engage critically with what they see, consider multiple perspectives and reflect on the influence of prior experiences and cognitive biases on their understanding. By encouraging viewers to reconsider reality and how they perceive the world through art, I hope to inspire a more mindful approach to life and creativity. I aim to foster curiosity, prompt reflection on assumptions and help individuals embrace the complexity of human perception.

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