

Shadow : Other : myself

photographic research 2010–2017



Aldobranti

The artist had been to see an exhibition of photography entitled “Shadow Catchers”. He fell to wondering what it would take to catch a shadow; what it would mean ...

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opposite: #008.

In late 2010 I went to an exhibition at London's Victoria&Albert Museum entitled "Shadow Catchers". As a research led artist I came away with the question "how can I catch my shadow ? And, what would the image look like ?"

Science would say that my shadow obeys the physics of light and must form itself in the space framed by a light source and my periphery. Even so the title of the exhibition shows that there is room for manoeuvre here, and to the psychoanalyst Carl Jung the shadow has a part to play as an archetype of behaviour. For Jung the Shadow represents the nature of my unconscious versus any presentation I intentionally make of myself. Given therefore some level of honesty about the nature of my shadow it seems responsible to record its behavior of itself. This work, "Shadow Jumping" therefore revolves around the differences between the performative character of the self and the appearance of the shadow.

I could try catching my shadow by jumping suddenly onto it.



opposite: #021.

This photography was all made on black and white emulsion film, I work in film to match the rate of thought with action. I do not regret the absence of a viewing screen on the back of the camera; I take more responsibility for each exposure and use an editing table to plan each new step of my research.

A method establishes itself: I walk or run over a short drop pointing the camera at my shadow. Jumping off, I release the shutter. My shadow and I travel over the same patch of ground which becomes blurred. On the other hand the shadow and I remain in much the same orientation in space and the image of the shadow is more consistently recorded.

A longer exposure time serves to isolate the definition of the shadow from the movement of the performance. I settle on a timing of between one eighth of a second and a fifteenth.

I am fascinated to see the emergence of textural themes in the ground on which the shadow plays. Almost the 'Petzval' swirl of an old camera lens.

Soon it becomes clear that the more interesting shots are where my shadow is clearly separate from myself; better still when my body does not appear in frame at all.



opposite: #157.

The performance is quite energetic and I may only get one or two successful exposures in each roll of film. I started out with a long wire release but was greatly helped by the development of a micro-controller driven gas valve. This will release the shutter via a pneumatic, bulb release. Several sensors were developed to detect the moment of free-fall after I jump holding my camera. Careful examination will reveal the shadow of the trailing release hose.

I begin to connect with Eadweard Muybridge's pioneering work to find a point where all four of a horse's feet leave the ground, I am spending time finding moments where I lose contact with the ground and so relieve the Shadow of its bond to my foot.

following: #174, #175.





As the project evolves I begin to ask:

“What would a shadow do if it was free of the body?”. Sometimes it appears to me that my shadow might turn on me or make good its escape.

J.M. Barrie’s story of Peter Pan’s shadow is well known; in the 19C the story of Peter Schlemihl who unwisely sold his shadow to the devil was a best-selling book. Oscar Wilde wrote the story of the Fisherman and the Mermaid, the young man giving up his soul, identified with his shadow, for the immortality of love with a mermaid. Both stories offer a considerable animation to the shadow. With these and many other research influences I had begun to look at the cultural values of the Shadow. I find initial disinclination in audiences to engage with this project. Jung’s perspective of the Shadow is that it may represent parts of ourselves that we are least comfortable with. In psychoanalytic jargon we may ‘project’ these parts onto other people, other groups. The intellectual honesty of the first page must be extended to this Other, this *not-I*.

I began to consider ways in which I could imagine the Other, to conjure it up, perhaps through automatic drawing. Using a laser pointer, in total darkness I drew on a wall during a long exposure. In the absence of a visual memory or any tactile feedback, the images tended to be haphazard.



To move on with my study of the Shadow I must temporarily withhold the psychological, the Self and Other from the enquiry. This is not so easy: Derrida identifies dark and light as the founding metaphor of Western philosophy; and the Shadow carries the burden of each and every antipathy to an Other. For a sense of completeness, I made some self-portrait work. I found that these anti-contamination clothing suits provided a useful foil to the anonymity gained in the naked portrait. I had continuously to ensure that their role as Form remained free of any interpretation as shadows in the finished image, instead emphasising the physical Shadow cast by the illumination source. Quite satisfyingly the suits of clothing began of themselves to develop identity as ghosts of some prior narrative, perhaps as proxies for the Other.



I made a series of work “Knowing the Other” and tried to draw an imagined Other into the scene with a laser pointer as a brightly lit adjunct to the Figure and illuminate the unknown of the Other. I work holding the laser pointer in hand and watching the trace of the spot in a mirror. The mirror then means that the trace on the wall beside them is “handed” correctly though the subject’s hand is continually in motion and will be blurred.

These studies tended to be in quite low lighting to balance exposure times with the time required to complete a trace. Naturally the Shadow takes a back seat in the project development. Further, the seasons play their part: the high elevation of the summer sun means a shorter shadow to be caught in frame; the early dark of the winter months make blackout of studio space easier to achieve. The sub-projects overlap.

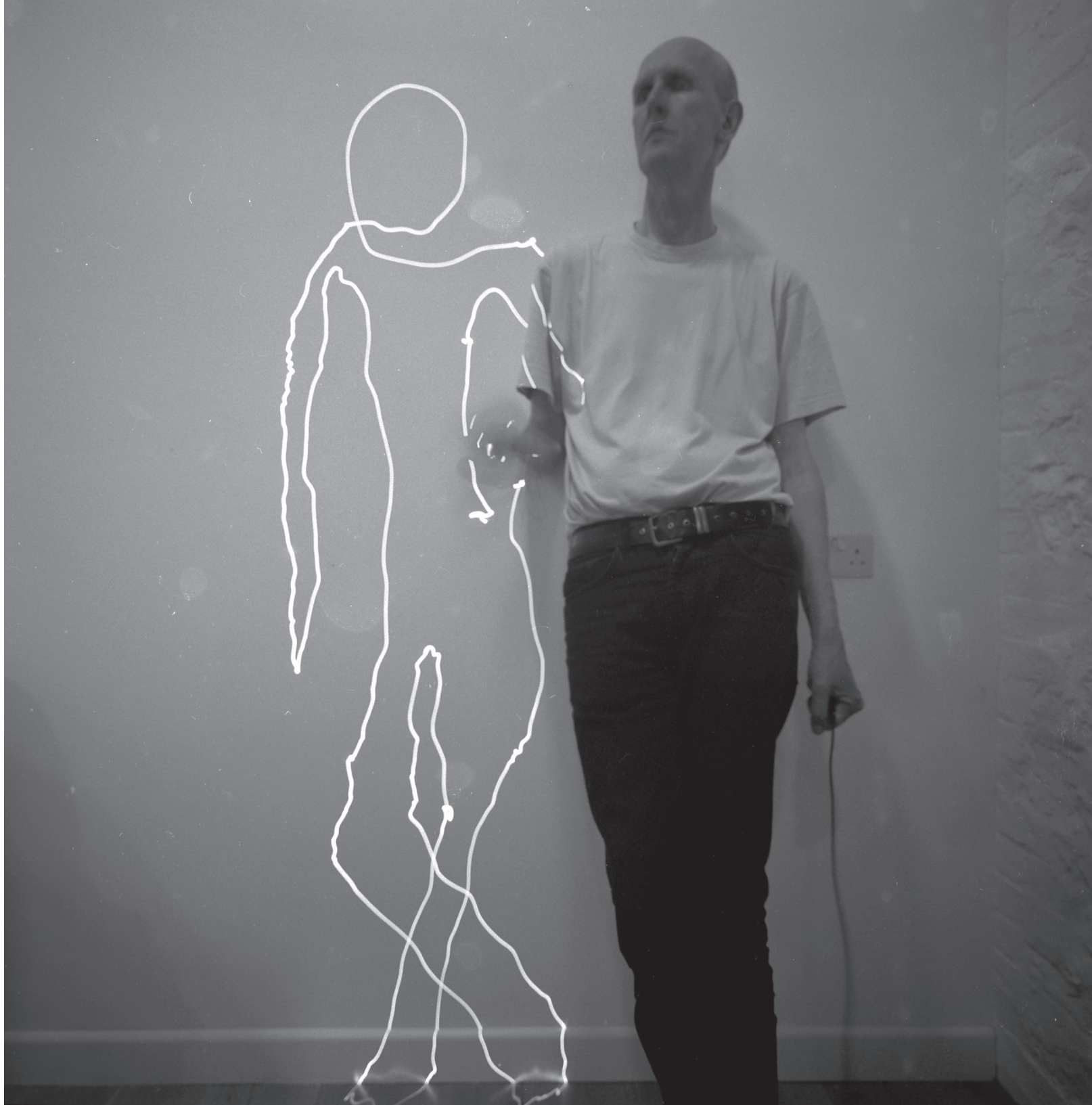


More questions continued to emerge, driving this work:

“Why doesn’t the shadow figure in Asian art?”. Space does not allow of further discussion beyond an approximate thought that classical Chinese painting is concerned with the depiction of qì (气) and a person’s shadow has no qì.

In western 2D art we use shading to delimit the boundaries of form. Leonardo da Vinci wrote:

“The beginnings and ends of shadow lie between the light and darkness and may be infinitely diminished and infinitely increased. Shadow is the means by which bodies display their form. The forms of bodies could not be understood in detail but for shadow.”.



I could therefore argue that any painterly discussion of Figure and Ground must give greater precedence to the Shadow. My series, "Where Shadows Play" is my enquiry into the relationship between the 2-D Shadow and the 2-D Ground in this domain, the shadow becomes the first citizen of the ground; any 3-D Figure is demoted to an irrelevancy but the Shadow is given appearance by the ground. The tilt-shift facility of a field camera enables a highly detailed view of the fine structure of the ground, to understand the domain that the shadow inhabits.



Following on from the quotation from Leonardo, I own up to a great admiration for the work of Giorgio Morandi. It seems to me that Morandi understood the space between objects in some equivalence, duality to the objects themselves which are anonymous, often covered in white paint.

In the metaphysical direction that this project has taken I follow up his views on the abstract unreality of the visual world, and add questions: “What is the materiality of shadow?” or

“Might Shadow be the ‘dark matter’ of composition?”.



Playing with this language of dark matter and high energy particle physics, I built a device which probed the space between objects in a still-life with a travelling laser spot. I hang the elements of the scene with fishing line in a Calder mobile. Some of the exposures work best as images in negative print, others I have tried colouring red to reference the original laser beam. It seemed more interesting to me to allow resonances in the system to add 'waggle' to the path of the laser beam, deflector mirrors carried by motors responsible for horizontal and vertical motion are supported by light springs.





opposite: #1064.

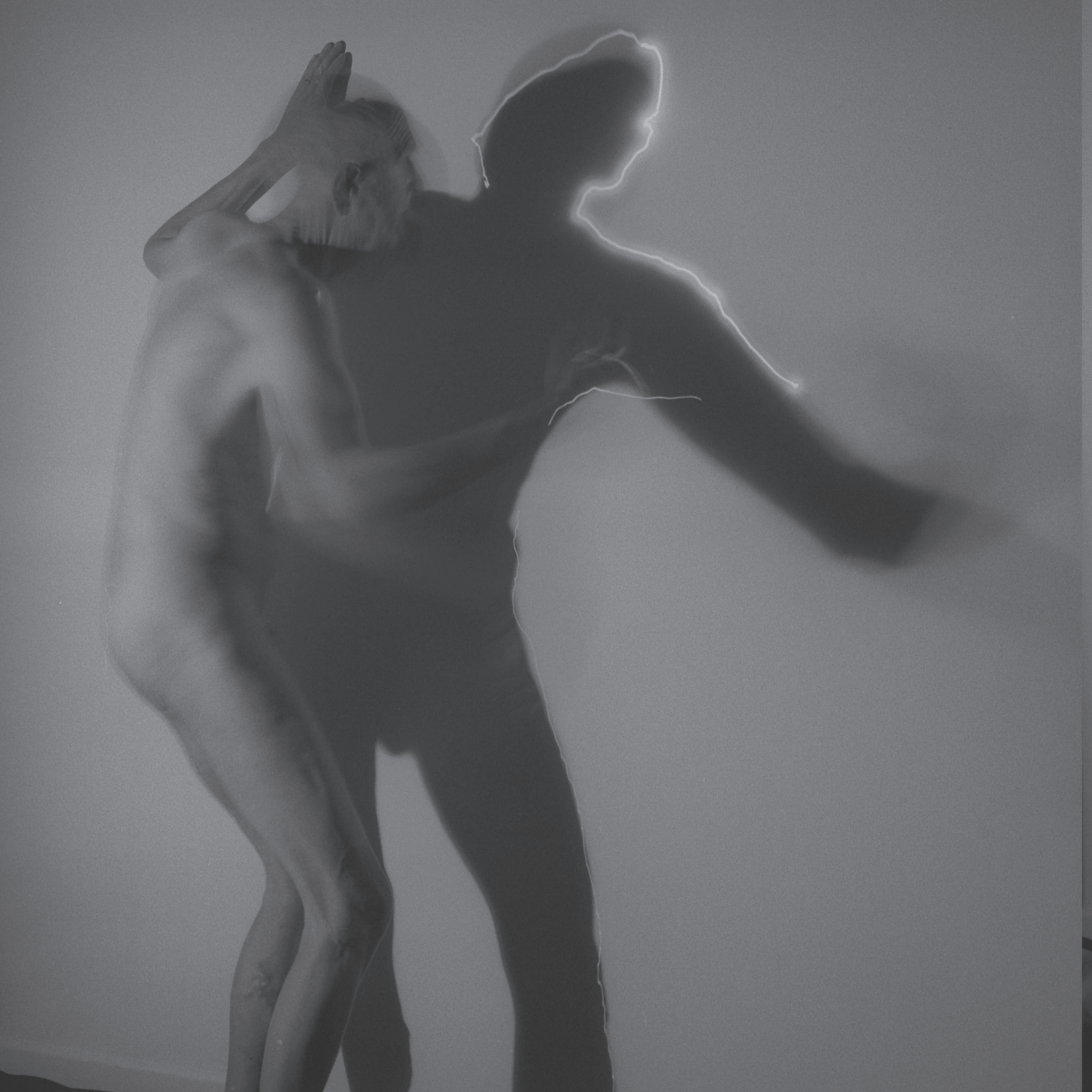
The project further evolves from these classical theories of depiction and I re-enacted the myth of the Origin of Painting as a performance art work. According to the Roman historian Pliny, Butades of Sicyon noted that his daughter traced the shadow outline of her lover's face as he slept. The daughter's name was Callirhoe or Kora but seems to have been relegated to the status of a lightly clad Muse.

In a very low key scene I needed to use filters to distinguish flesh from shadow. Once again I was using the extreme brightness of a laser pointer to catch features of the scene in a long duration exposure and revealed a titanic struggle between the artist and the shadow.

following: #1051, #1047.









previous: #1048, #1050.

And for the future I wish to draw together other strands of research on time and narrative with this enquiry into Shadow. Referring back to #157 above, I become aware of the apparent timelessness of the image, perhaps an absence of motion. There is a range of time-perception, our experience of time in photographs, from Cartier Bresson's man clearing a puddle where we may visualise a continued narrative of a pulled down waistcoat and smoothed jacket, or of Lartigue's sister Bichonnade who might yet simply flap her arms and soar into a clear sky. I think I might make progress by exploring an insight from Paul Ricoeur, likening the instant, as a boundary between past and future to the outline of shadow between light and dark.

*“welcome the other with kindness. the reward will be the whole beauty of the unknown” -
Ana Baumgart, 2017*

Images

#008, #021 #157, #174, #175 #250 #257, #271 #291 #389 #712, #783 #1047, #1048, #1050, #1051, #1064	from the series <i>Shadow Jumping</i> from the series <i>Jumping Shadow</i> from the series <i>Making Marks</i> from the series <i>Two is Company</i> from the series <i>Naked Portrait</i> from the series <i>Where Shadows Play</i> from the series <i>Shadow Space</i> from the series <i>I, Butades</i>	2011 2012–2013 2013–2014 2013–2016 2014 2014 2016 2017
Endpiece		
#819	from the series <i>Hampshire Gothic</i>	2015–2016



Aldobranti graduated MA Fine Art from Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton, gaining a Distinction and a commitment to a research backed artistic practice. As an artist his only modes of expression are Performance, the photography of the Performance and the whole palaver, general carry-on and Performance, messing about with chemicals &c that is Photography.

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