



— Process

Richard Blackwell

FOR RICHARD BLACKWELL, FINDING WAYS OF LINKING A REMOTE AUDIENCE TO HIS OBJECTS THROUGH THE VIRTUAL SPACE HAS BEEN A PROCESS OF ADAPTATION – AND INNOVATION.

I observe my paintings developing like a conversation, whereby each mark influences the next. Emergent forms oscillate in dialogue with one another, and motifs are repeated across planes. My work adopts the potentialities of paint to create visual dialogues where action, experience, perception and memory are interwoven and folded back into one another.

I recall exactly when I realised my exhibition 'Labyrinth' would be different from those I have had in the past. It was March this year, and I had just received a link in a group messenger thread titled: 'Golden Plains Music Festival Attendee Diagnosed with Coronavirus'. I called Claire, Director of Flinders Lane Gallery, to talk about my upcoming show and the possibility that the COVID-19 pandemic would reach Melbourne before its opening. Neither of us knew what to do.

My original intention for 'Labyrinth' was to return to my 'Black Lams' (Black

Laminated panels), a body of work that has been ongoing, in some form, since just after I finished art school. These works, illusionistic linear engravings on black laminate panels, have remained a central part of my practice for the past decade, largely because I can create them remotely. As life has taken me around the globe, they have continued to evolve in the digital space, periodically taking physical form through collaborations with commercial fabricators overseas. Though my instinctual fascination with this body of work has never faltered, I recently found myself becoming frustrated with its progression, which felt stagnant and often left me staring at the computer for hours with little progress.

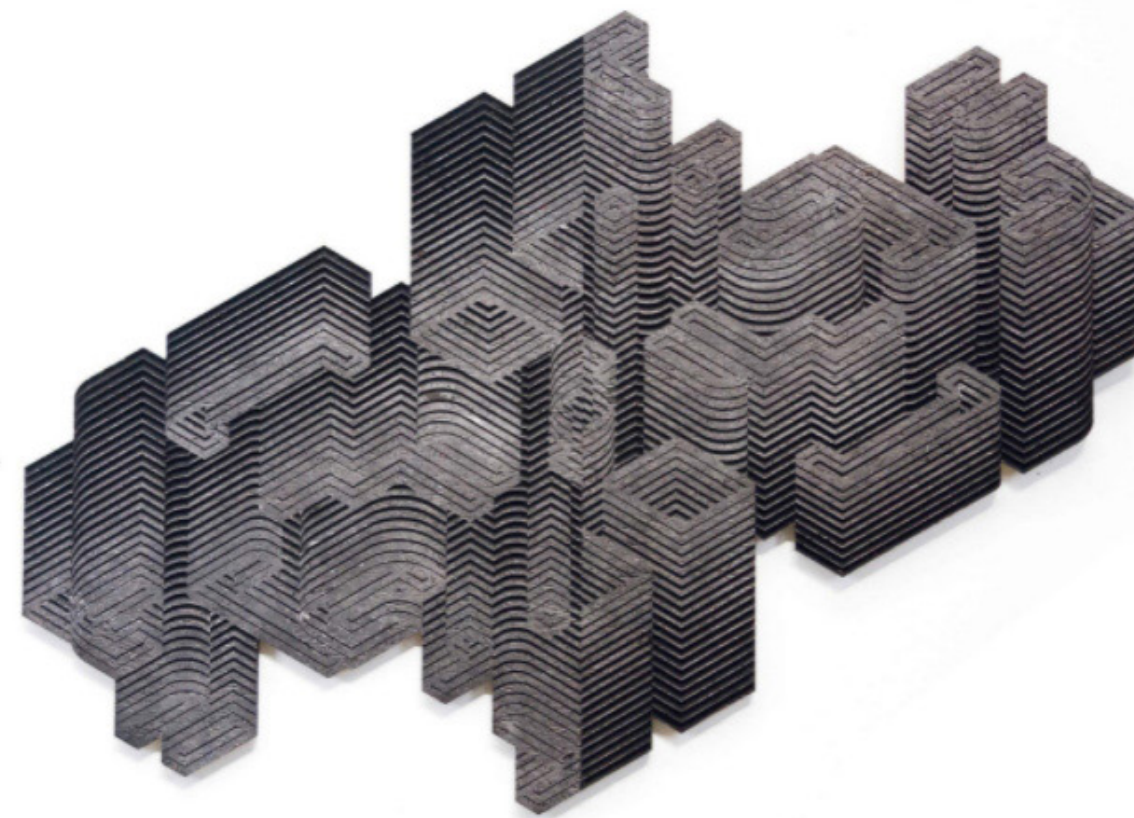
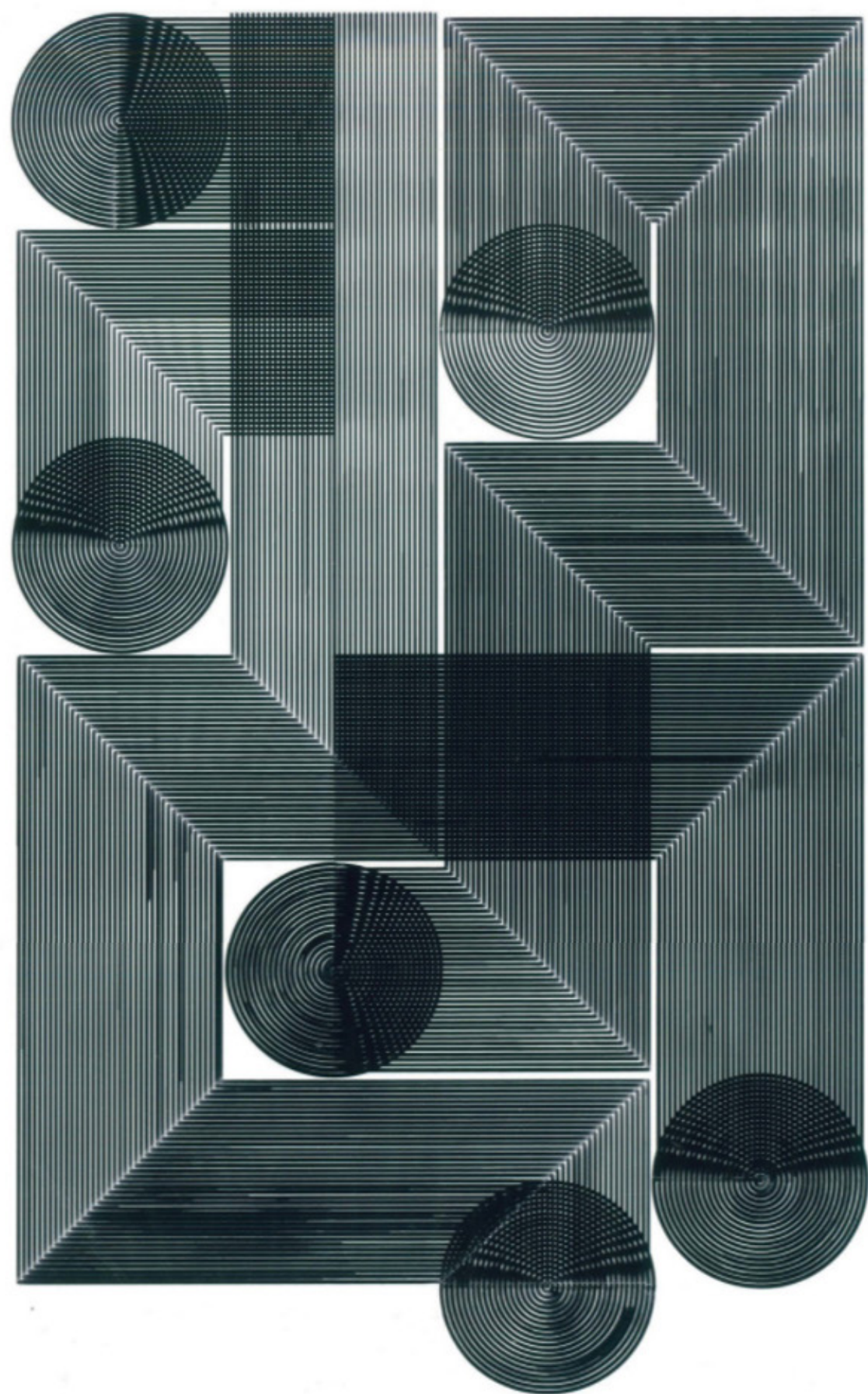
A turning point for this work came while traveling from Rome to Turin in 2016 to lead a field studies trip for a group of graduate students (from the VCU in Qatar). Confined to a train for most of the day, I experimented with a new piece of code that would allow me to rapidly simulate

countless variations of these works without taking the time to manually draw them. This code fundamentally changed the way I conceived, composed, and controlled the digital files that become the 'Black Lam' works. It condensed all of my understanding of the compositional and graphic considerations into an elegant block of code, akin to the instructions for a Sol LeWitt wall drawing. This gave me the ability to plan out as many panels as I could imagine. I now needed a reason to make them.

A second major change in these works resulted from my recent move back to Australia. My new proximity to the site of the exhibition meant that I could produce these works myself without the help of a sign writer or commercial fabricator. Rather than sending off a single finished file for

01 Richard Blackwell with Graphite, 2020, OSB, etching ink, acrylic seal, 118 x 160 cm

02 Labyrinth Offset Surface for Artist Profile, 2020, marker felt on Yupo paper, 23 x 27.5 cm



production, I could now make countless tests and explore materiality in more detail. I could be inefficient and idiosyncratic. I could try new materials and approaches.

One studio experiment led me to try making works from Oriented Strand Board (OSB). I found that, with some finesse, the textured surface of this material can be inked like an etching plate. Ink can be forced into the rough recesses of the wood chips and then buffed off of the higher points which have been coated in sealant. *City* (2020) was created by engraving lines into one of these inked panels, revealing the original porosity of the composite wood and allowing for matte black strokes to interrupt the speckled, almost metallic surface. I found that the OSB has an interesting dialogue with machinery. The unpredictable density of the material leaves chips and other artifacts on the surface, disrupting the pristine line of the robotic cutter – a glimpse of the reciprocity between the digital and the physical.

Through this more experimental approach, I began to value the process of wrestling

physical works out of the digital world. In *LOSAP* (2020), a unique series of robotic drawings, I allow the precision and repeatability of computer aided manufacturing to expose the idiosyncratic. As a robotic arm creates the drawing, countless unpredictable factors affect the result. There are tiny imperfections in paper, changes in the humidity in the room, dust and particles falling through the air. I noticed how the flexible pen nib bends as it makes a turn on the paper and how the texture of the paper draws ink from its capillaries at varying rates.

When I came up with the name 'Labyrinth', I emailed Claire right away. When a name arrives to me, it is usually right when I understand what I'm really doing. I looked at my work and saw its darker side. The noise and distortion I was introducing through materiality was creating uncertainty, and by mirroring the shapes in the composition I was transforming the architectural spaces. The laneways were confronting, alternate realities. Rather than finding myself walking through, I became lost inside the space of the work.

An exhibition is ultimately a lot more than art-filled walls. Whilst creating an online 3D viewer of the space and content for social media goes a long way towards communicating and promoting a show online, we are now being asked how all of it – the discourse, the interpersonal exchange, the presence and physical experience of an exhibition – can be pumped into that virtual space. 'Labyrinth Remote Viewer' acts as a portal into the space, allowing remote viewers a view into the show in a synchronous way. Conversely it acts as a recorder of the physical space, documenting conversations and interactions between those in the space to be compiled into an asynchronous digital experience of the exhibition. You are invited to follow the link below to experience the show in this permanent digital form. ■

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04 *City*, 2020 OSB, etching ink & acrylic seal, 120 x 170 x 4 cm
Courtesy the artist and Flinders Lane Gallery, Melbourne

