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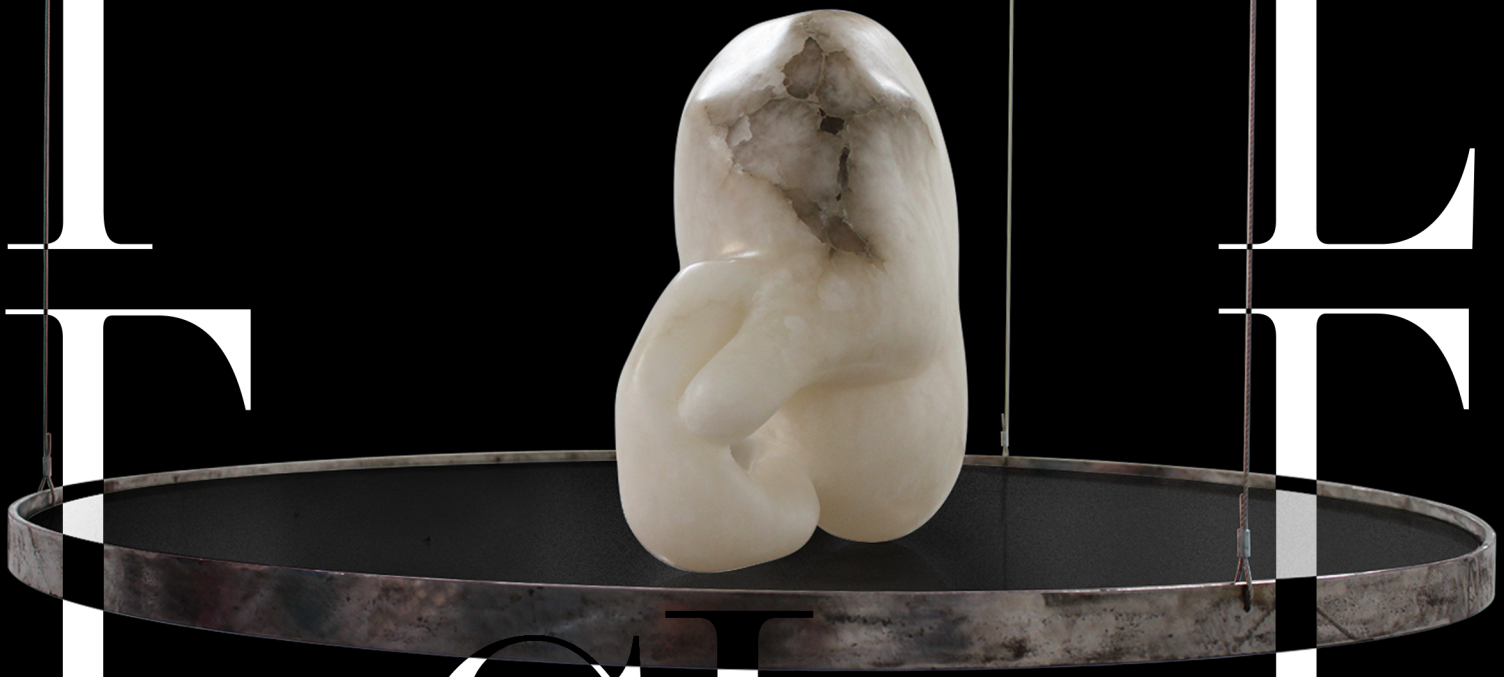


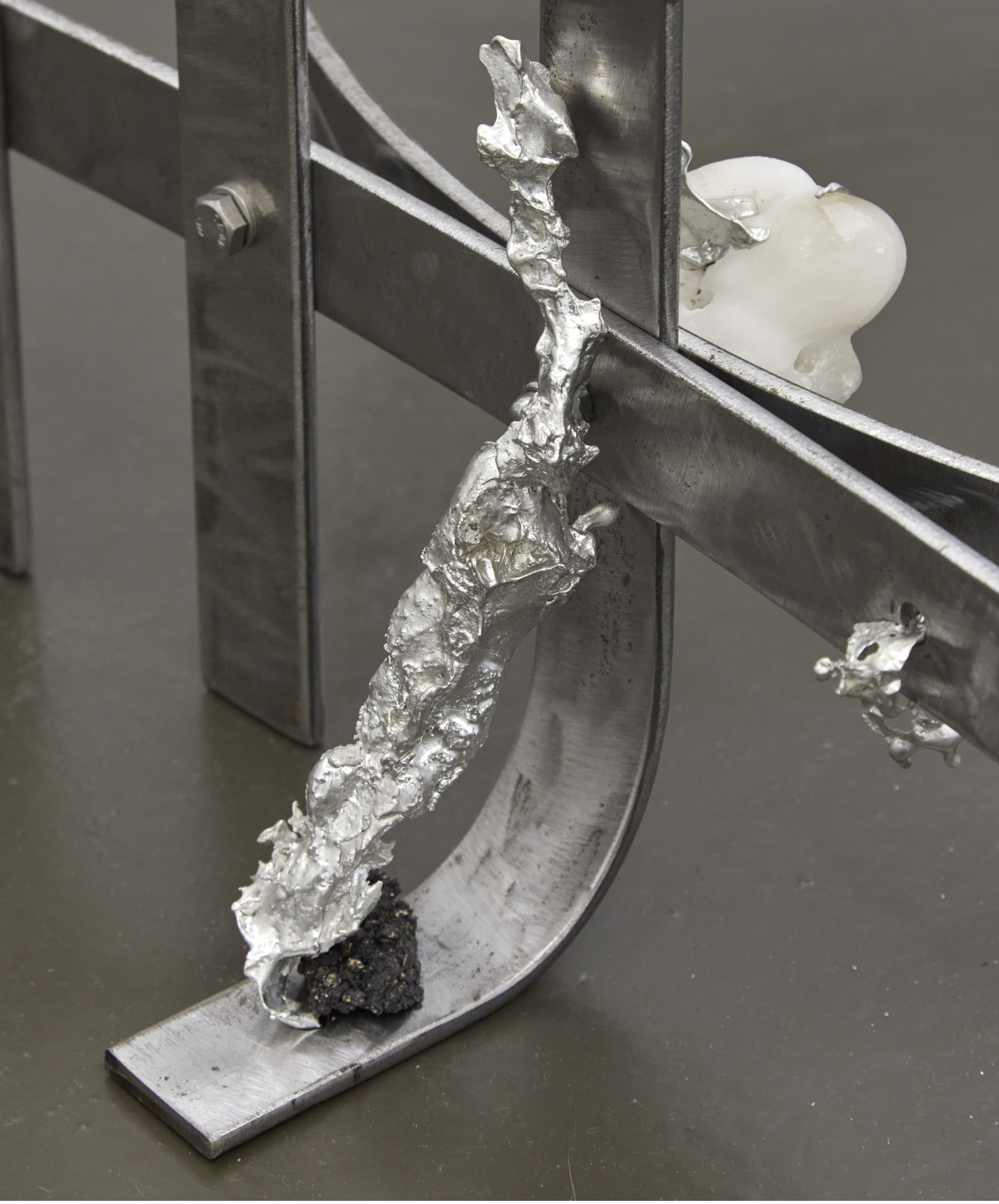
FIGURE

conversation with **HANNAH MORGAN**

JANUARY *2025*

art edition

N° *72*



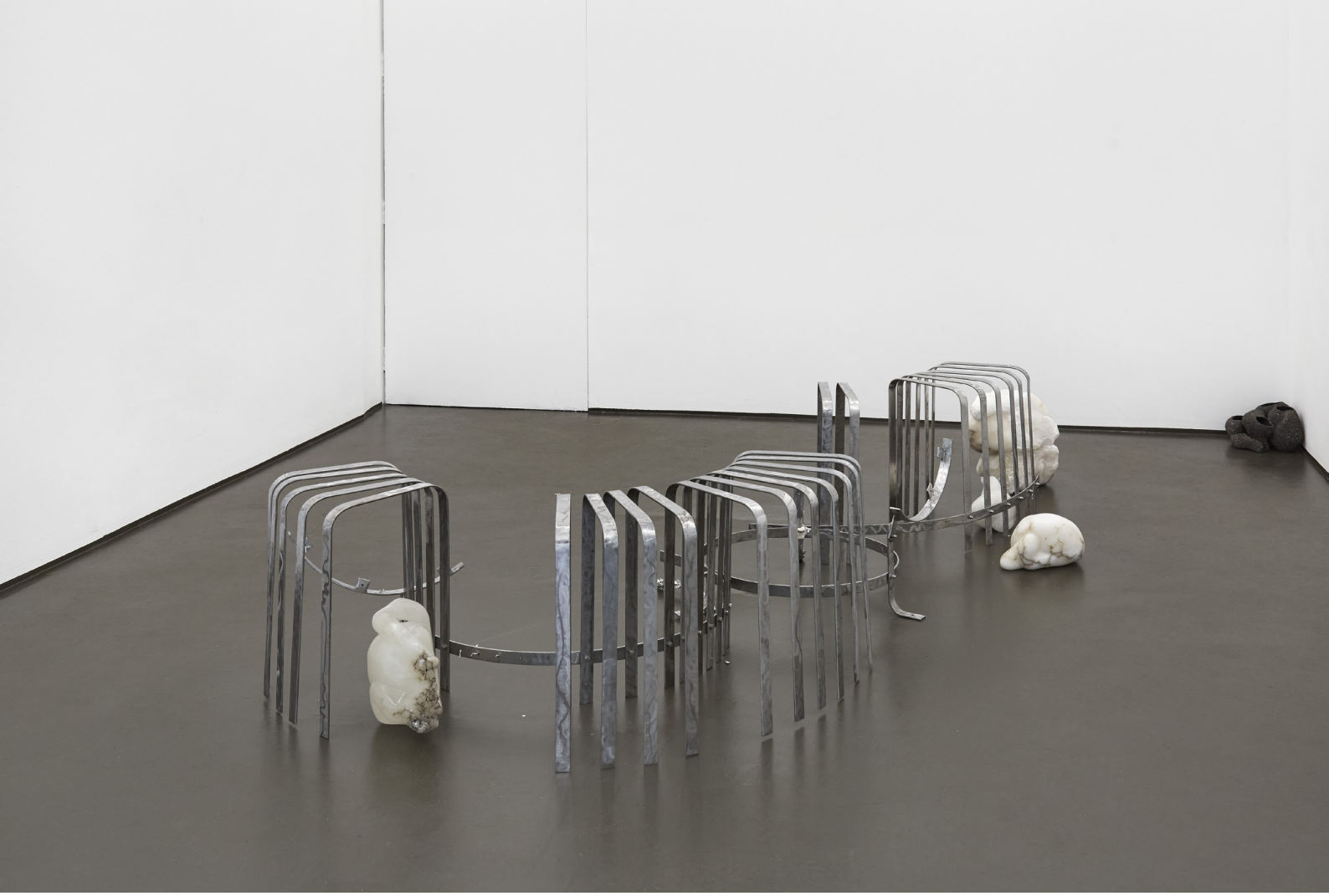
Mudtime Fissures in Tethered Descent (detail), Hand bent hand ground steel, sound, alabaster, acrylic, sgraffito drawings, acrylic oculars, pewter schemas, pewter scraps, aluminium prints and hand grogged clay, Variable dimensions, 2023.
Photographer: Corey Bartle-Sanderson.

NOAM ALON *in conversation with*
HANNAH MORGAN

NA Could you share your earliest memory of encountering art and how it influenced your journey toward becoming an artist?

HM My first significant encounter with art is rooted in a unique privilege—I was raised in a very open environment where art could encompass almost anything. The first moment that truly impacted me, however, was during my childhood, here in France. I visited the prehistoric caves in Rouffignac in Dordogne, and saw paintings and imprints on the cave walls created thousands of years ago. That experience sparked a realisation that there existed something far larger and more enduring—a profound history beyond my own microcosm.

Following that, various artists left a deep impression on me. From a fascination with



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Photographer: Corey Bartle-Sanderson.

Carolee Schneemann's visceral interrogation of the body, and Eva Hesse's labour with materials, to becoming obsessed with Carravagio's painting of feet, and encountering the film work of Eija-Liisa Ahtila as a teenager. These were some of the key formative moments that shaped my path as an artist.

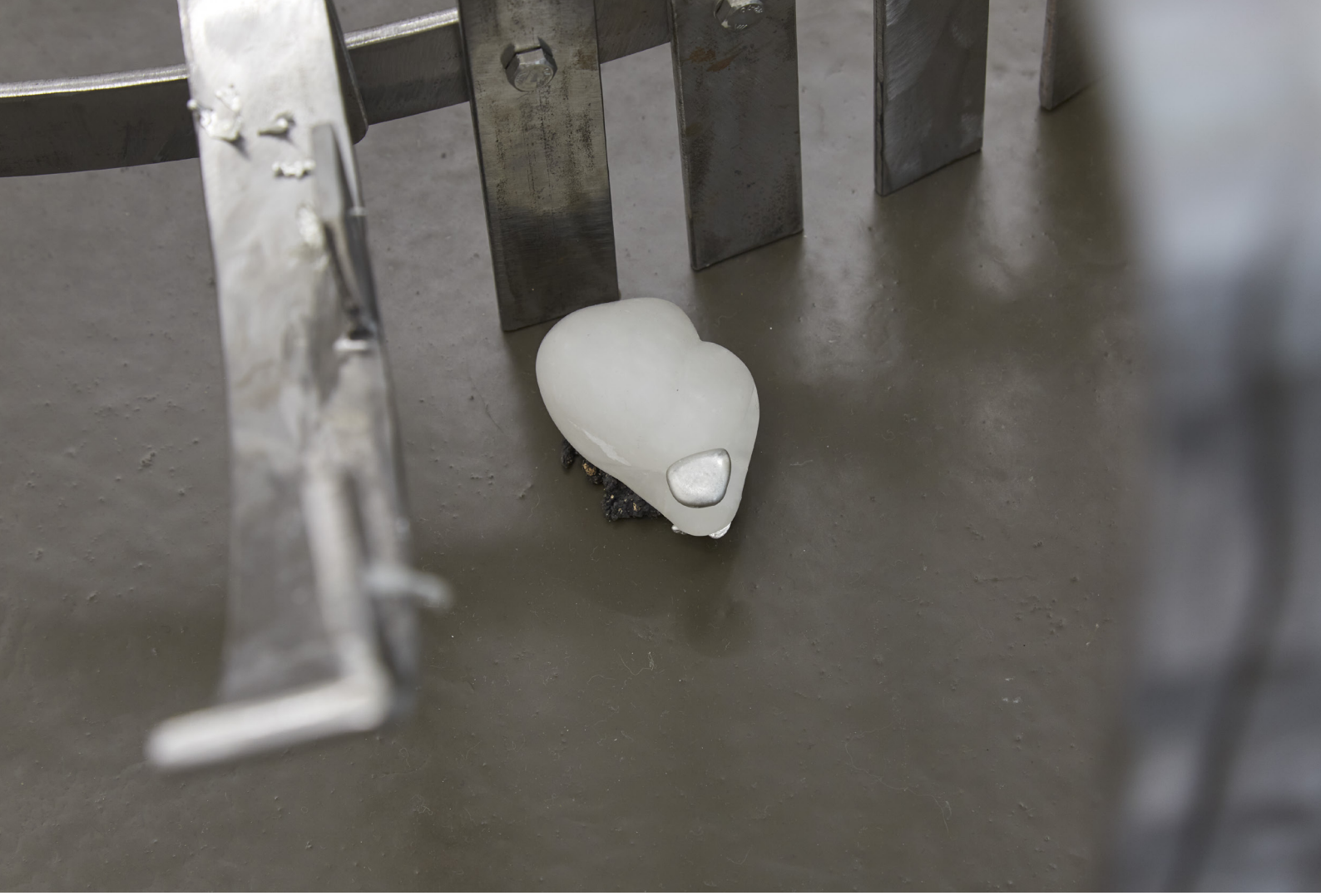
NA What ultimately led you to decide to become an active artist?

HM For a long time, I actually avoided pursuing art professionally and only graduated two years ago. Navigating what it means to be an artist is complex, and I didn't want to take that path without fully committing myself to it. Art is something intrinsic to me, and if I couldn't embrace it completely, I wasn't ready to proceed. I also have a deep love for learning, and I felt drawn to explore other disciplines as part of that journey.

My work is interdisciplinary, which aligns with my belief that art is interwoven into nearly every facet of society. I don't think art exists in isolation—it's something we encounter everywhere. Ultimately, what propelled me to make the final decision to commit to art was the passing of my father. Events like that can have a profound effect, leading you to reflect deeply on what truly matters and how you want to live your life. That experience, for me, was transformative.

NA As you mentioned, your work is interdisciplinary, often conceived as narrative installations. Could you describe how you typically begin the creative process for a new interdisciplinary project and what guides you through the initial stages?

HM That's actually a challenging question because, as I mentioned, my work and research are deeply internalised—they're constantly evolving within



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Photographer: Corey Bartle-Sanderson.

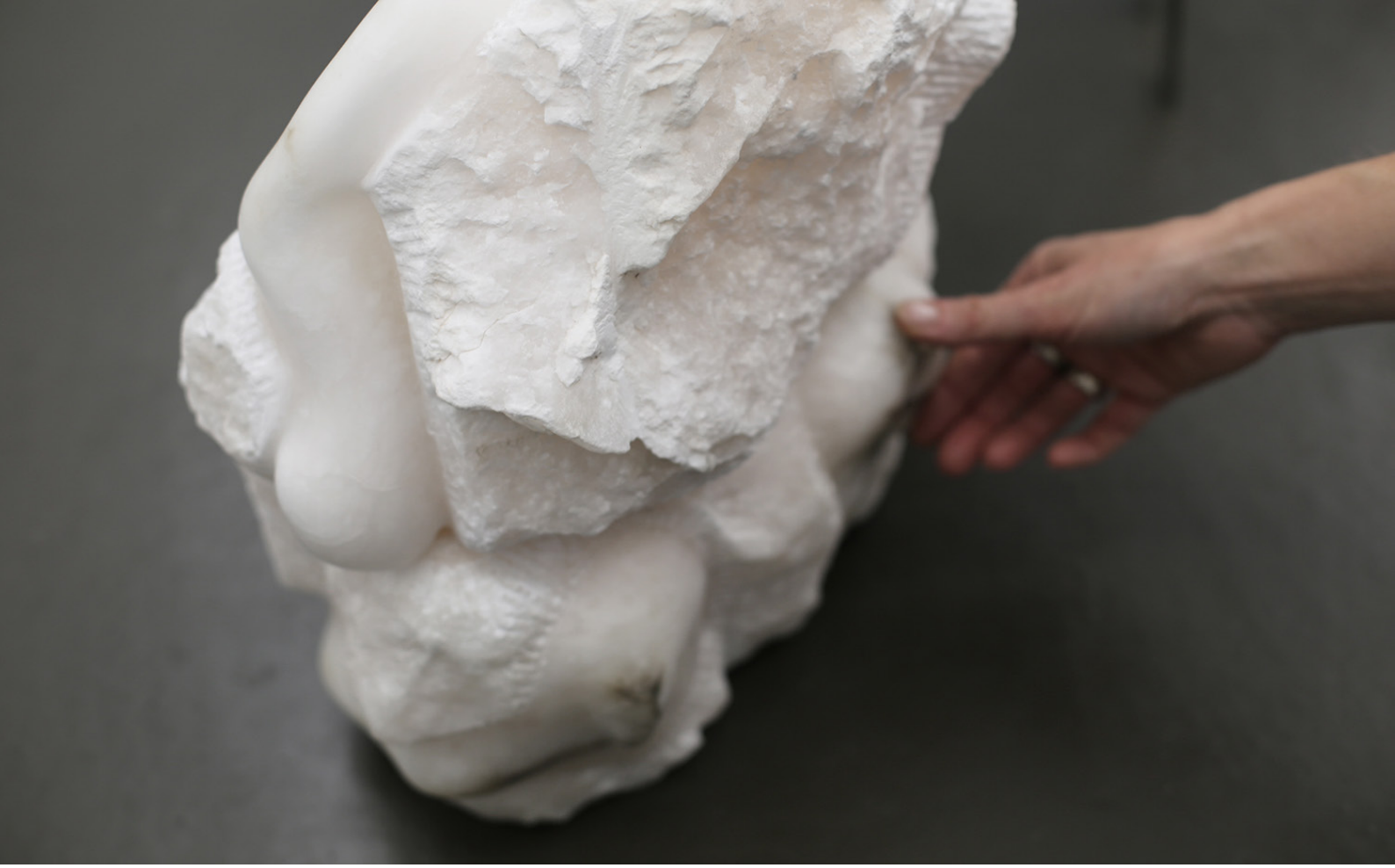
me. I don't approach my projects as separate entities; instead, they flow into each other organically, drawing on memories and reflections from both childhood and recent experiences, as well as future ideas. Rather than a specific starting point, it's a process of collecting and layering—almost like a palimpsest, where previous marks are overwritten but still visible, or like composting, where elements transform and combine.

In practical terms, I write frequently, take videos on my phone, and make voice notes—some of which are completely unintelligible! However, within these notes, there are often threads that can later connect to other areas. My thought process is structured somewhat like a web, where everything is interconnected. There's a book that profoundly resonated with me during my time at the Slade, *A Thousand Plateaus* by Deleuze and Guattari. Its format allowed me to explore connections and contradictions in my own thinking, pushing me to question and refine my ideas.

Ultimately, a project truly begins when these connections start "bubbling" to the surface, coming together in a way that feels significant. That's when I translate these webbed conceptual layers into material form.

NA *Framework for Descent* (2023), presented here at *ART-O-RAMA*, delves into the intricate underland entanglements and is grounded in your research on Scotland's caves and early mine cartography. Could you share the specifics of this research and how it informed the conceptual framework of the piece?

HM Yes, this piece is a part of a project that has been in development for about three years. The work emerged through a series of experiences I had while travelling around Scotland for research. I was involved in different roles, from photographing an amazing queer Scottish painters' work, who



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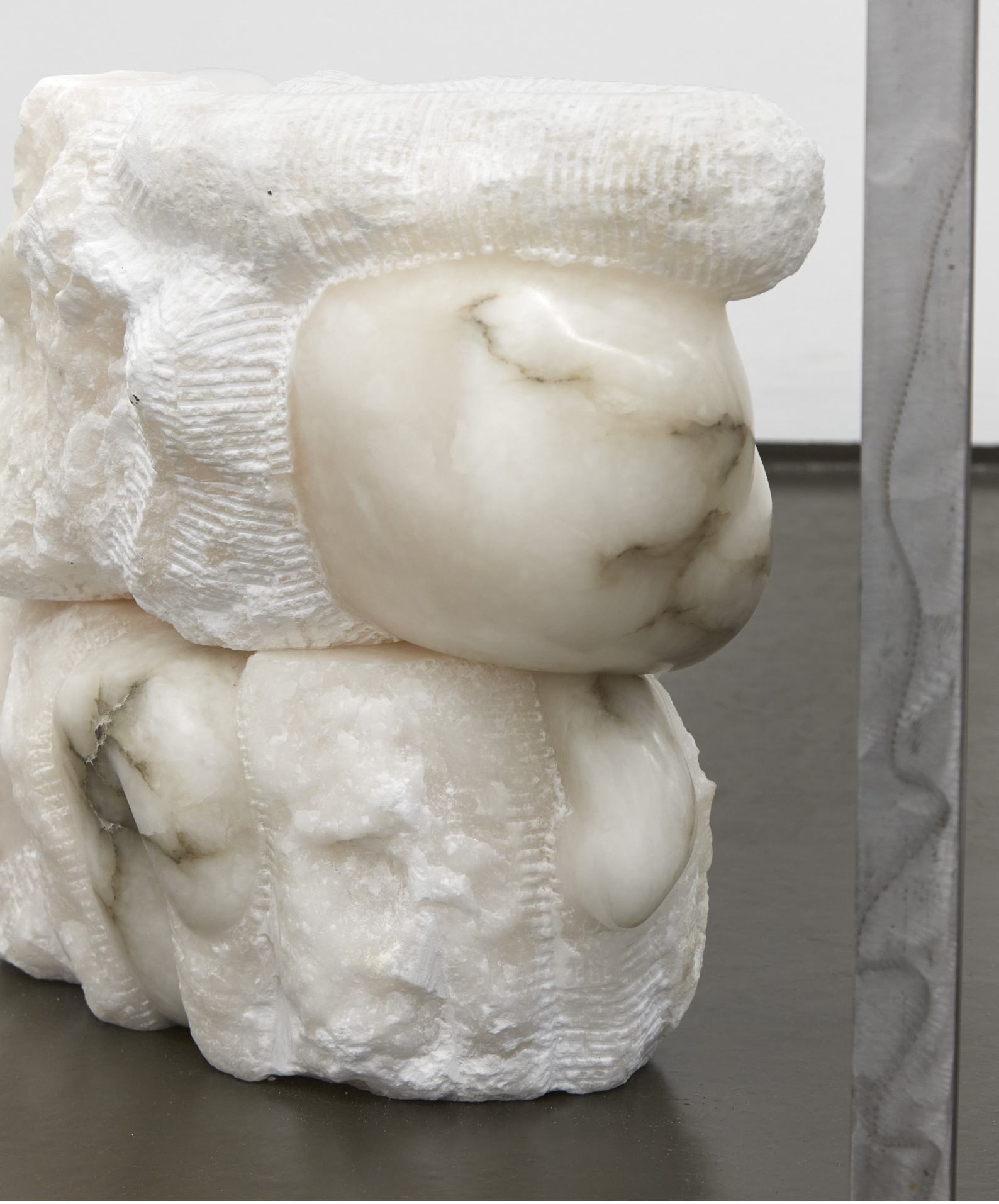
Photographer: Rosemary Hudson.

looks at Deleuzian theory, to participating in a residency in Orkney. During that time, I connected with various people, including specialists in archaeology, which sparked new ideas and insights.

While staying in Inverness, I had an unexpected encounter with the "Flat Earth Society", whose members fundamentally believe the Earth is flat, not round, and that our perception of the physical world is entirely constructed. The very existence of this belief intrigued me, leading me to consider how personal perspectives shape reality. Inspired, I began writing about these ideas and my research around archaeological sites, stone formations, and even natural elements like mushrooms and lichens.

One particular site that profoundly influenced me was the Sculptor's Cave, an archaeological site in Scotland accessible only by walking along coastal sea caves. This "pilgrimage" down to the cave made me reflect on the often-overlooked connections between us and what lies beneath our feet. As I walked along the seashore, observing multiple sea caves and the natural erosion of our coastal landscapes, I realised how easily we ignore what we don't immediately see. This cave, historically significant as both a burial site and a migratory point, transformed my understanding of how people once traversed between Denmark and Scotland.

I was pregnant at the time, carrying a new life, which added a layer of personal meaning to the experience. As I stood by the seashore, surrounded by the erosion and lichen that seemed to merge with the rock, I became acutely aware of the cycle of life, death, and regeneration present in nature. Lichen was forming new soil and sustaining new life—a dynamic ecosystem within



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Photographer: Corey Bartle-Sanderson.

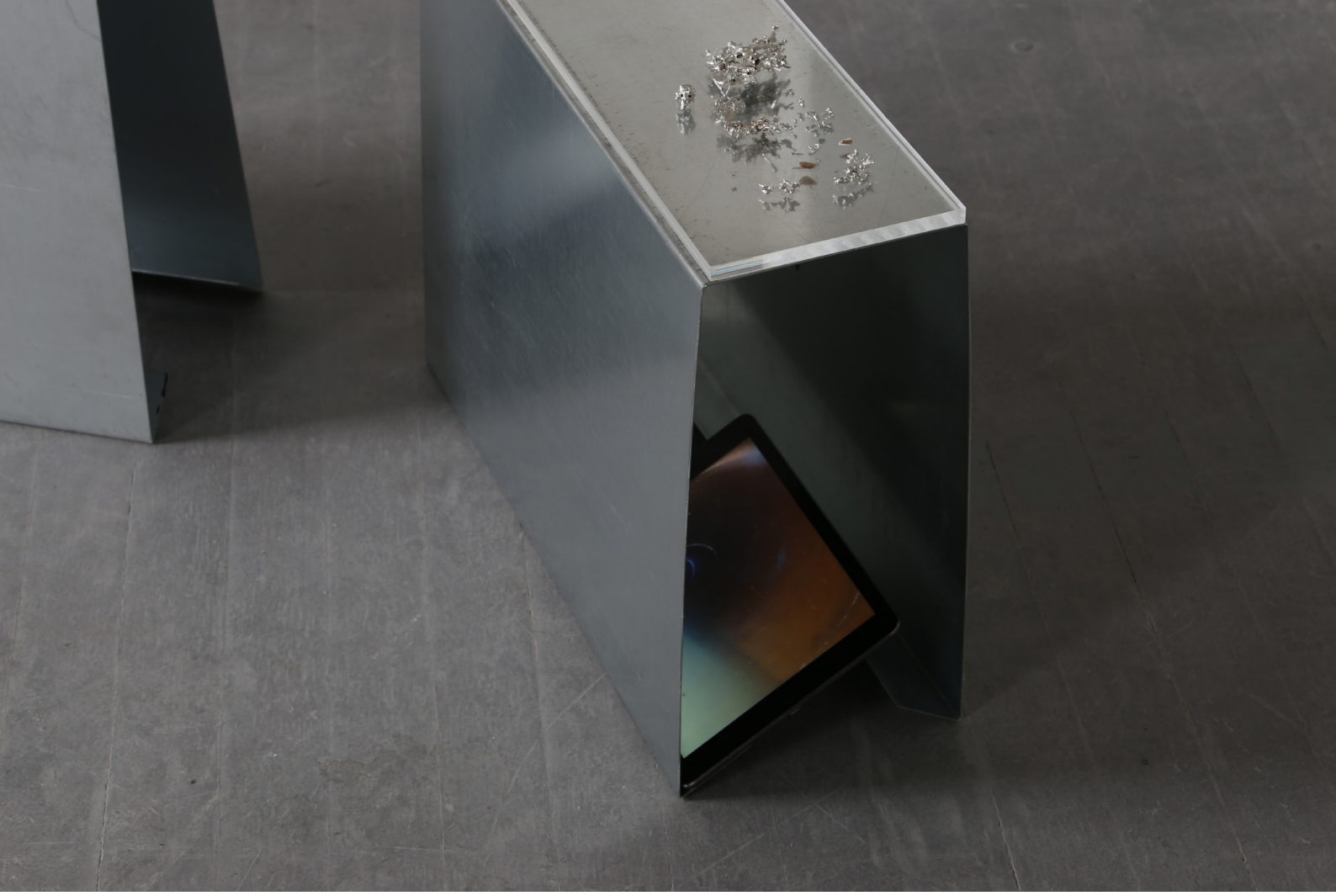
this ancient, quiet space. There was a profound vitality here, not just in the external landscape but also in the life growing within me.

This experience laid the foundation for *Framework for Descent*, which explores themes of navigation, liminality, and portals between life and death. The work examines the concept of decay as something generative, where grief and loss can push us toward new stages of understanding. This led me to think about structures—how to create forms that could simultaneously suggest industrial strength and bodily vulnerability. Everything in this piece is handmade, meticulously worked in the studio. I stripped layers from metal, revealing shapes and inscribing textures reminiscent of ancient cave carvings, and began incorporating hand carved stone pieces as well.

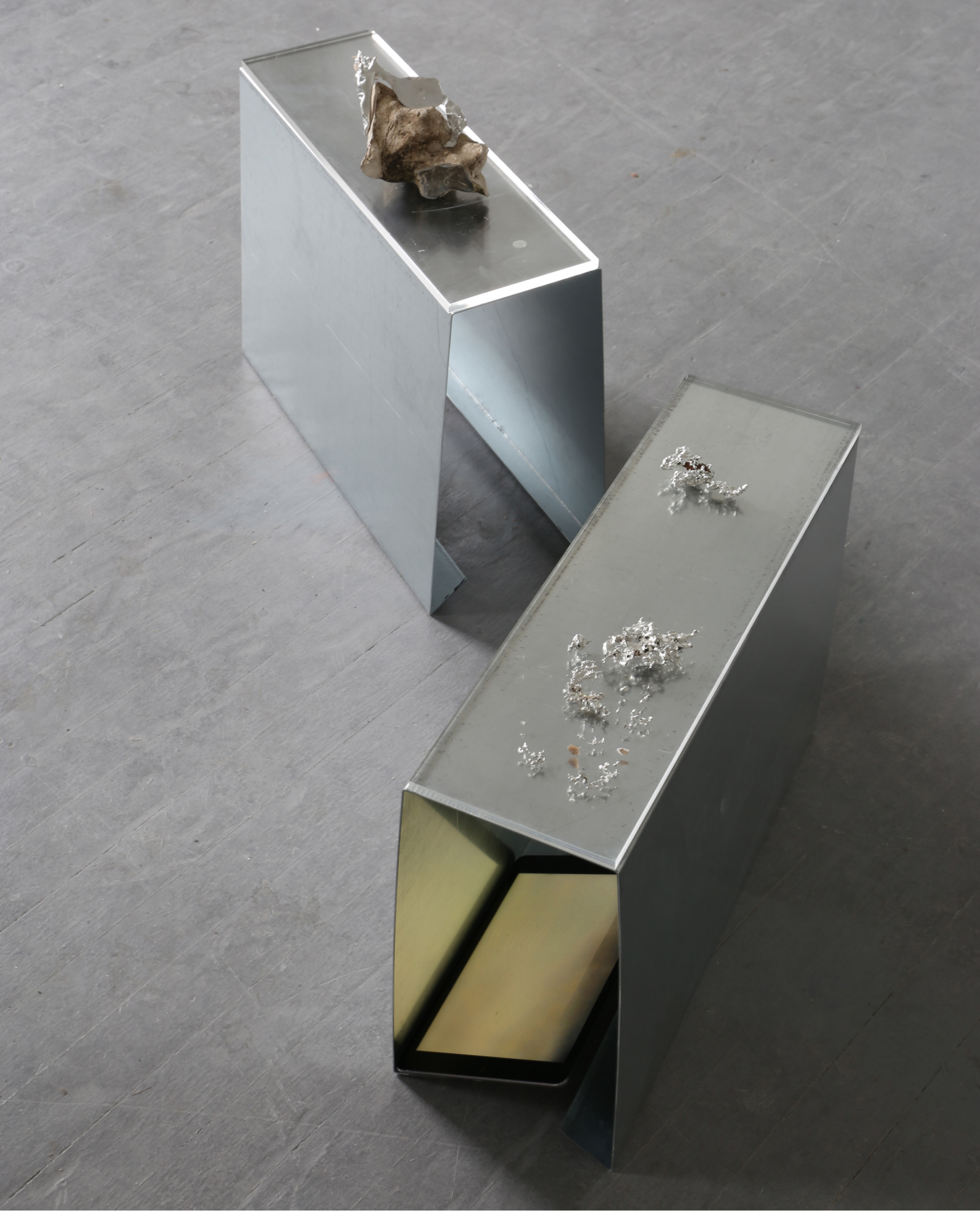
This layering and blending of elements—from industrial to organic, historical to personal—became the starting point for this piece.

NA Your exploration of the "underland" evokes a parallel with Victor Hugo's depiction of the Parisian sewers in *Les Misérables*. He describes the underground not as a metaphor for the subconscious, but as the city's core, where "everything converges and confronts everything else. In that livid spot, there are shades, but no longer any secrets. Each thing bears its true form, or at least, its definitive form." How do you perceive these speculative, unseen spaces beneath our feet? Do they resonate with your own interpretations of hidden or forgotten landscapes?

HM The underland is, in essence, a space of subversion and transformation. Going underground has always fascinated me. As a child, I spent a lot of time exploring caves, and as a teenager, I navigated the London underground scene in a different sense, often joining marches, going to



Descent (detail), three bent galvanised steel with acrylic top featuring sgraffitio ‘shadows’ of objects on top, cast grass in pewter with video (*Under*, 4 min 20 s, internal rodding of London sewers removing fat burgs), knapped hag Sussex flint stone with pewter casting the negative hole; ground ‘core’ cast in pewter, Variable dimensions, 2019.



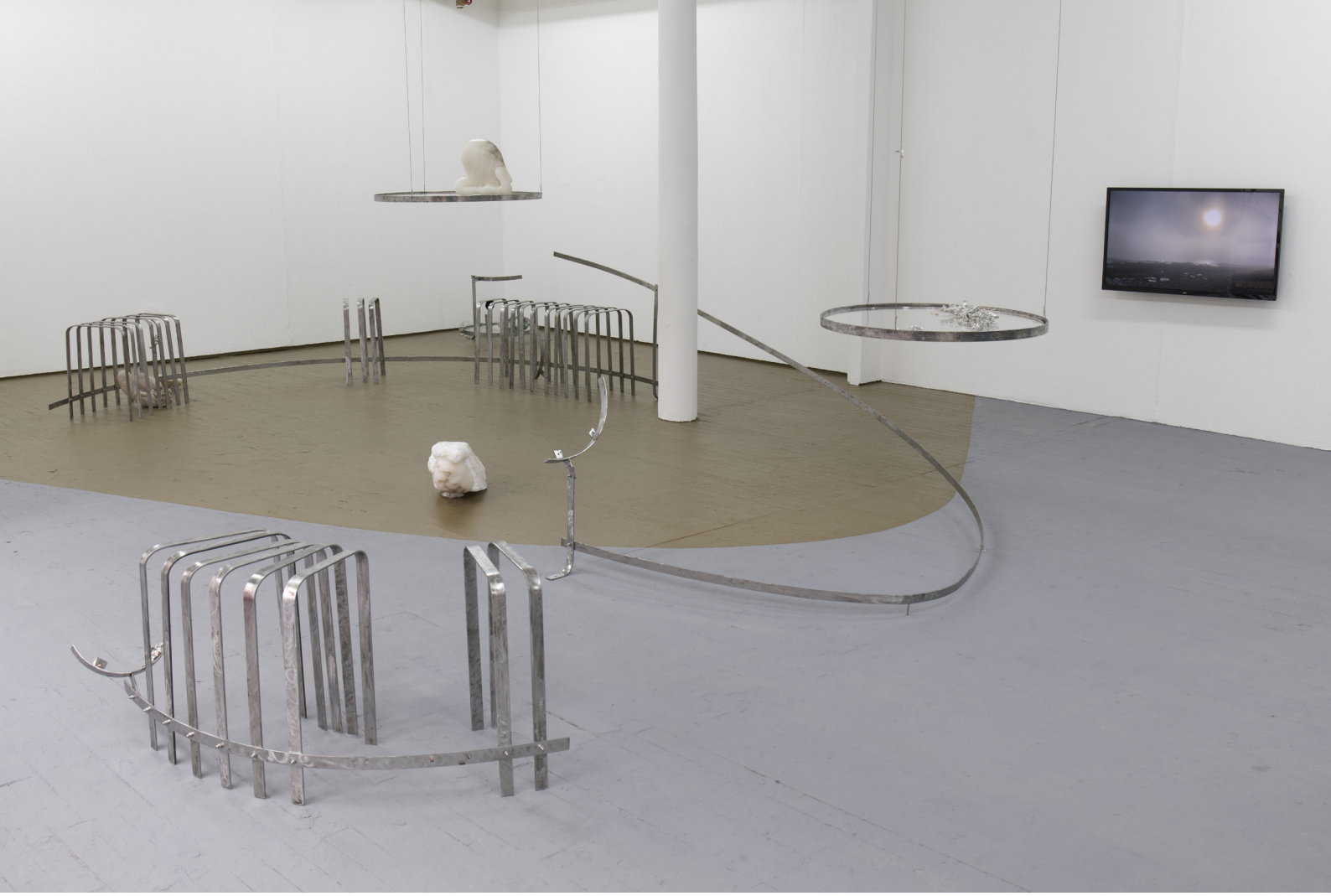
Descent (detail), three bent galvanised steel with acrylic top featuring sgraffitio ‘shadows’ of objects on top, cast grass in pewter with video; knapped hag Sussex flint stone with pewter casting the negative hole; ground ‘core’ cast in pewter, Variable dimensions, 2019.

raves, or simply inhabiting spaces typically off-limits. These experiences offered a profound sense of freedom—a place where the body could move outside societal constraints.

Subterranean spaces are unique because they offer freedom from the social norms and hegemonic structures that shape our experiences above ground. They allow for a kind of self-expression that may not align with what society deems acceptable. These underground realms are vital not only as spaces of personal freedom but also in a broader social and political context. Our understanding of these spaces is evolving, especially as we consider their ecological and social significance. Questions about our food sources, waste management, and the movement of chemicals in groundwater all highlight how critical the underland is to our lives. So, the underland is both an existential freedom and a point of convergence for many essential, often unseen, systems.

NA Alabaster frequently features in your work, and you have referred to your alabaster sculptures as creatures, or even as feral beings—wild, especially after escaping captivity or domestication. Could you elaborate on this characterization and what draws you to this material?

HM Certainly. I think it's best to start with alabaster itself. I first worked with stone during my degree, without formal training, but I quickly felt an innate understanding of it. There are materials you encounter as an artist that, from the beginning, resonate deeply. Stone, and particularly alabaster, was one of those for me; even though it's challenging to work with, I connected with it physically and intuitively. Working with stone involves a certain surrender—there are elements you can't control, and at some point, the stone itself guides the process.

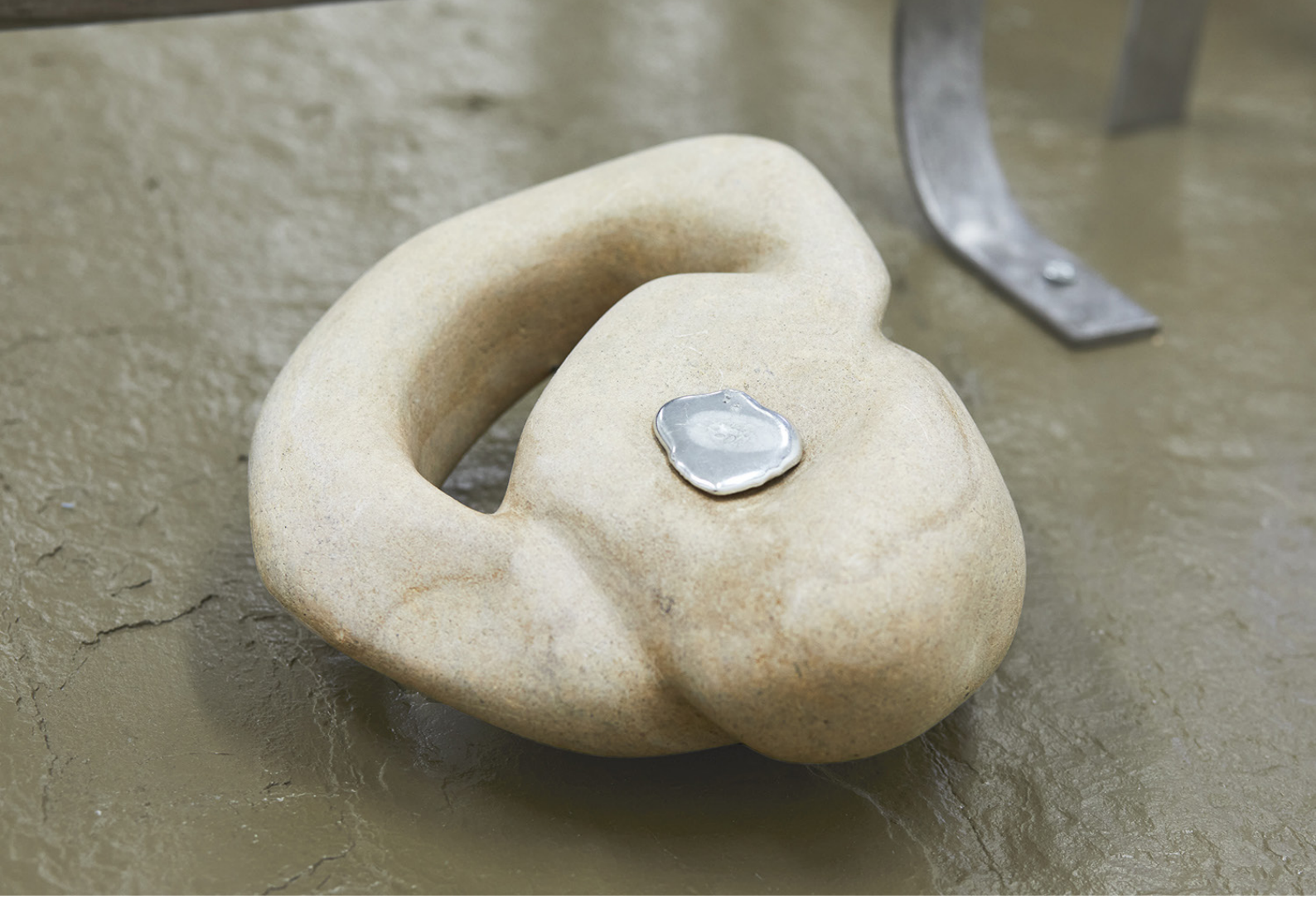


Animula, Interconnected metal bench installation with sound and video work, featuring five carvings, two suspended oculars, one floor ocular and armature with ceramic offerings, two ceramic ears entangled with cast pewter and seaweed, cast pewter vortex, cast lichen in pewter, pewter 'scraps', 6 × 5 m, 2022. Photographer: Louise Oats.

Alabaster has a fascinating history that I delved into further as I started working with it. In the Middle Ages, it was a revered material, especially in the UK and Europe, used primarily for memorial sculptures in churches. After the Reformation, though, many of these monuments were dismantled, leaving only fragments. Alabaster is unique—it's a softer stone, sensitive to its surroundings much like skin, which can bruise or be altered by the environment. This vulnerability means you must work with it carefully, allowing the stone's natural changes to inform the final piece. Its softness and responsiveness create a relationship of care between the artist and the stone.

The idea of these sculptures as creatures emerged from this process. Alabaster allows light to pass through in certain areas, adding a sense of depth and life. Each piece contains remnants of ancient seabeds, holding layers of sediment within its structure. It's a stone that inherently holds a history of transformation, containing within it the remnants of past ecosystems. There's nothing pure about it—it's layered, collected, and shaped by natural forces over time, which I find endlessly compelling. This quality, along with its susceptibility to change, aligns with themes of impermanence and the interconnectedness of deep time, life and memory that I explore in my work.

NA Some of your alabaster sculptures bear the title *Animula*, which means "little soul," echoing Seamus Heaney's poem *Electric Light*. You're also a writer, as evidenced by the poem that accompanied your 2023 show at *Xxijrahii*, where lines like "your lung pushes / salty air between the gaps / Rocks pierce the horizon knowing their place / Water wraps and warps your solid frame" suggest a Heaney-esque inspiration. Can you discuss the



Animula (detail), Hand carved soap stone with direct cast pewter insert, part of wider sculptural installation with video and sound work, 6 × 5 m, 2022. Photographer: Louise Oats.

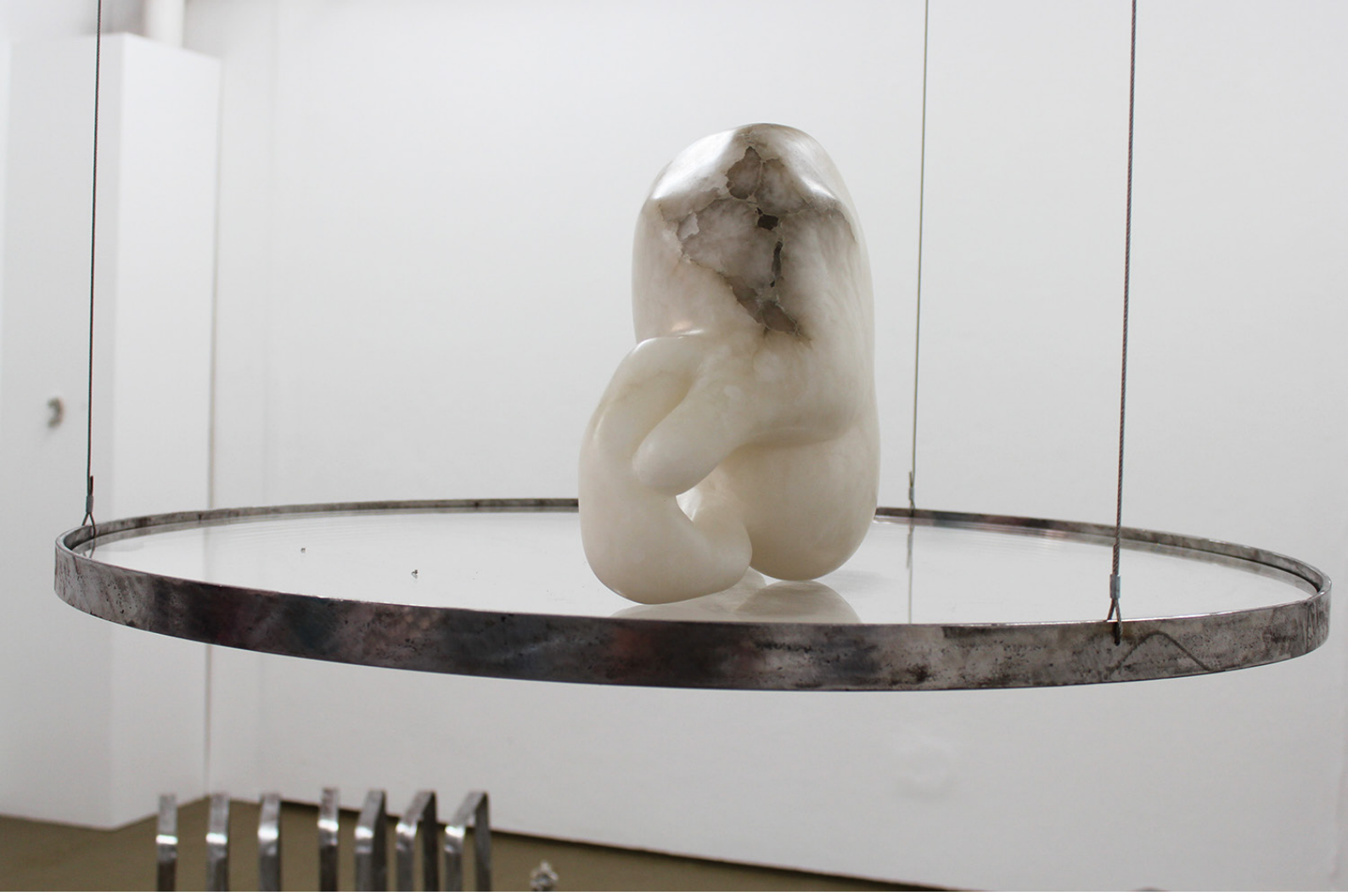
role of writing in your creative practice and how it intersects with your visual work?

HM Yes, writing is essential to my practice. Like many in the art world, I'm neurodivergent, and writing wasn't always easy for me to share, but it's evolved into a vital outlet. My first degree was in film theory and English literature, which I pursued partly as a challenge to myself to explore language more deeply. Over time, writing became a space of joy and experimentation, moving beyond academic work to encompass prose and poetry as ways of processing and understanding. Writing offers a way to grasp a landscape, emotion, or memory quickly and translate it into a form that supports my visual practice.

The piece you quoted was inspired by my father, specifically reflecting on moments when he experienced Alzheimer's. I remember our conversations, with his memories fading and my own difficulties spelling or finding the right words. He became deeply focused on metal objects for a time, and I began exploring that fixation through writing, thinking about how our brains engage with the material world even as memory and language shift. In my poetry, I also incorporate mythology, personal and collective memories, and landscapes—all without needing to frame them academically.

In many ways, writing allows me to process and create through an interdisciplinary lens, blending various sources and influences. This intertextual approach helps me capture the layers in my experiences and reflections. So yes, writing and visual art are deeply interwoven in my practice, each enhancing the other in a sort of dialogue.

NA In several of your works, themes of decay and loss are intricately linked to concepts of growth and renewal.



Animula (detail), Suspended hand bent steal ocular, hand carved alabaster on scraffito panel with pewter ‘scraps’, part of wider sculptural installation with video and sound work, 6 × 5 m, 2022.

Could you elaborate on this philosophy and how it manifests in your artistic practice?

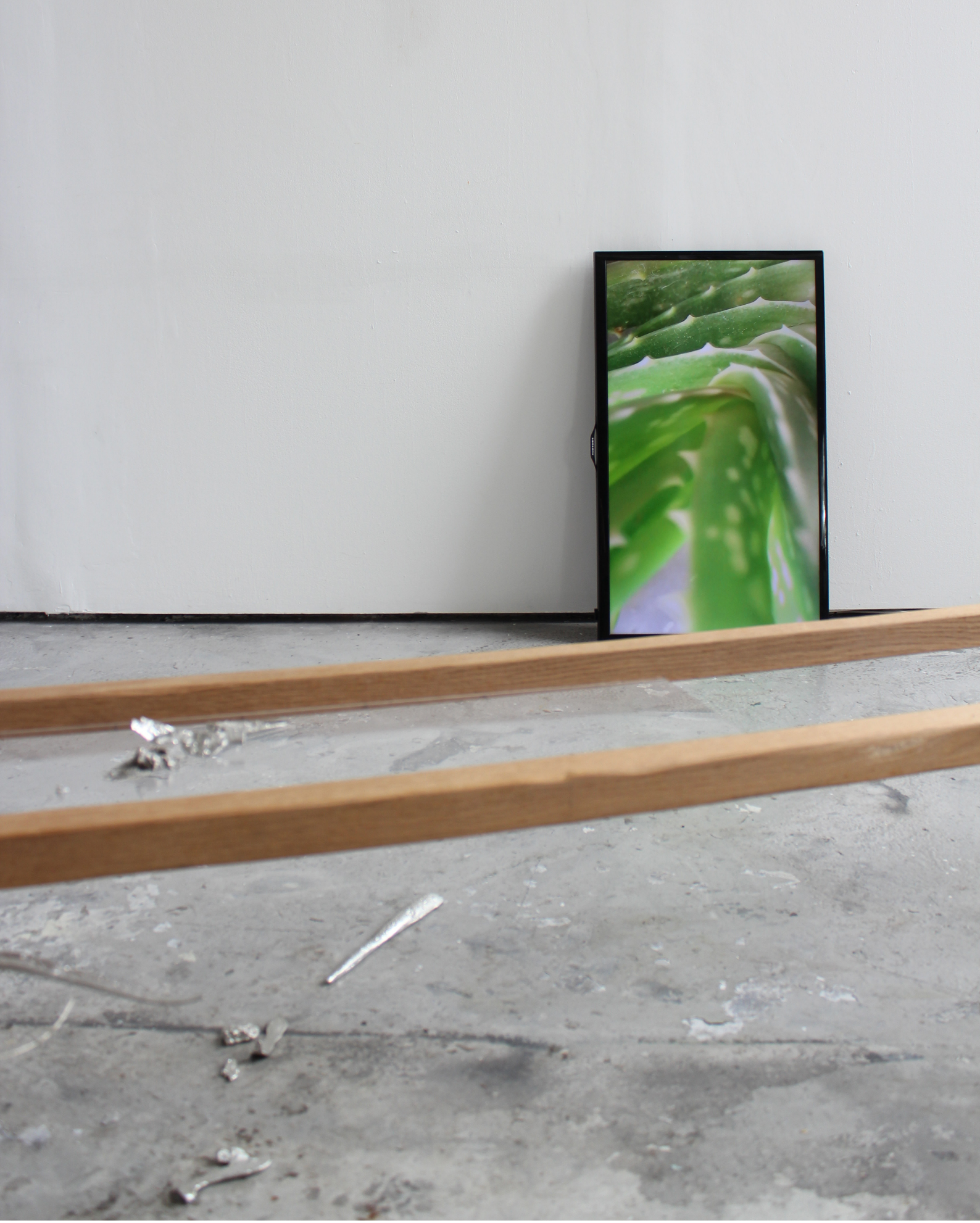
HM Absolutely. I see it as a fundamentally political stance. In our culture, there's a discomfort with decay and death, as if things breaking down is solely negative. But I think it's critical to confront these aspects. We live in a world that's incredibly unstable, and this instability actually drives growth—it forces us to find new ways to live more sustainably, to be ecologically conscious, and to recognize our own interconnectedness. We aren't isolated beings; within each of us are billions of microbes, forming an ecosystem that's linked to countless other creatures and systems around us.

Decay, in my view, is necessary for emergence. It's about making space for new forms of life and ideas. You can see this in natural processes everywhere—like the way lichen decomposes rock to create soil, which then supports life. Or even how, within art and societies, established ideas and structures must break down to allow new growth. The concept of decay is vital in my work as it speaks to transformation and collective renewal.

In my pieces, I often use materials that change or degrade over time. For me, this decay isn't about loss; it's about transition, a slower time frame that adds richness and depth. It's a cycle that's constantly producing new opportunities for life and creativity.

NA You mentioned earlier your work with mining communities and referenced an ecological perspective that seemed interwoven with that experience. I read that you approach these materials as byproducts or "leftovers." Could you elaborate on this approach?

HM My interest in mining goes back to my father, who worked in a coal mine and was from a south Welsh coal mining family, and while I haven't



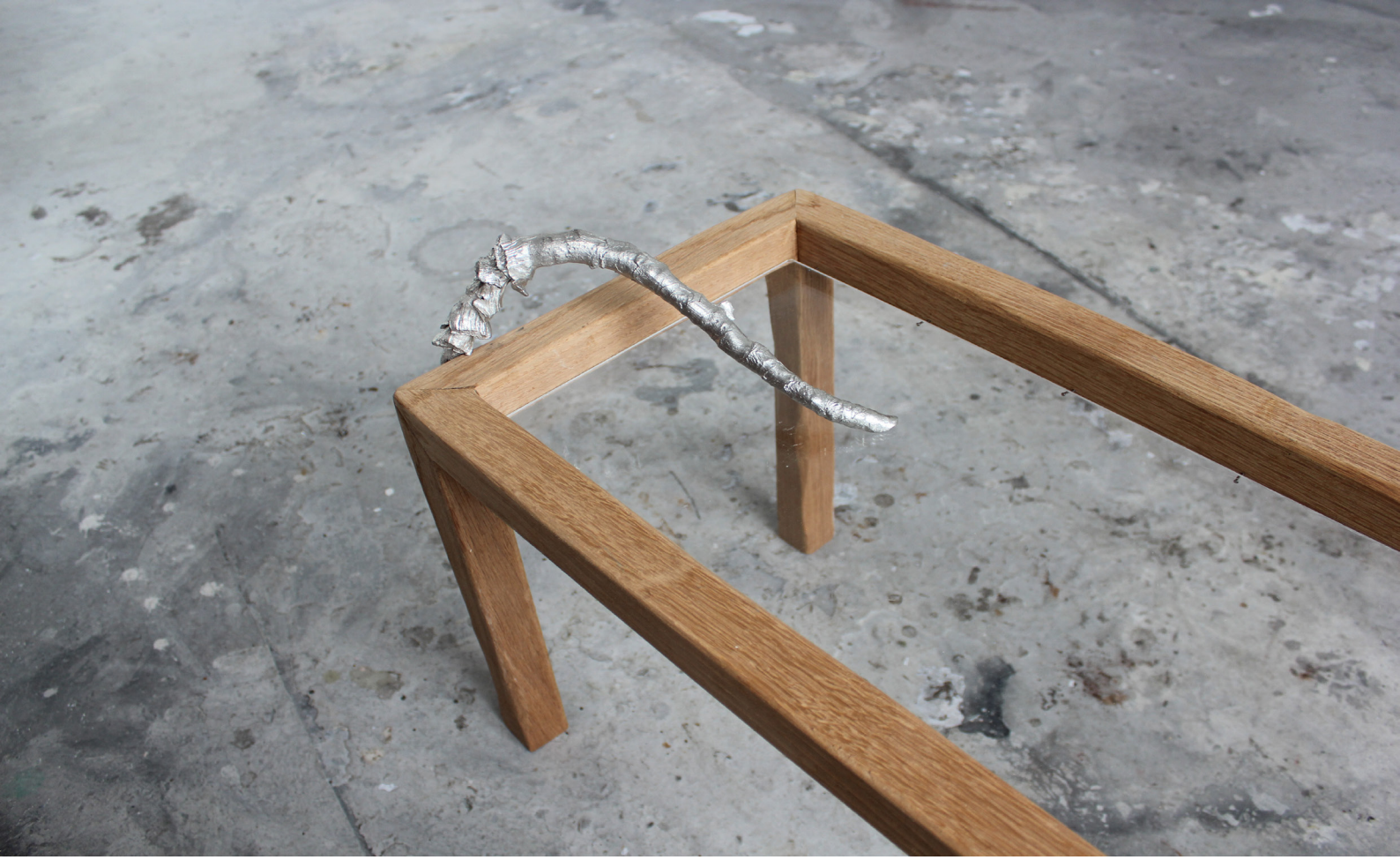
AV3G (detail), American oak, aloe vera stems and leaf cast in pewter, Sgraffito acrylic, moulded plastic silver wire, video AV3G Aloe Vera 3 Generations, Variable dimensions, 2019-2021.

personally descended into the depths of those worlds, I'm constantly drawn to them. Right now, I'm working with alabaster, which is essentially a part of other mining activity—it's not the primary focus of the mines to unearth whole slabs of alabaster, in that sense it is almost overlooked. I've had a few, rare opportunities to work with it directly from the mines and engage with the people who mine it. It's a very closed, close-knit community, and gaining access and trust has taken years, which is humbling.

Engaging with this world makes me confront the complexities of industry. There's a delicate balance: these mines are both ecologically impactful and economically essential for the communities they sustain. I'm trying to be mindful in how I approach and reflect on this duality, acknowledging that it's people's livelihoods while also considering the environmental imprint. It's a difficult space to navigate without seeming like an outsider imposing judgments. Working with leftover materials from the processing feels both practical and symbolic—honouring what's often discarded and finding beauty in what's considered waste.

The people in these communities carry incredible knowledge and insights, even beyond mining—chemists, environmental monitors, historians. They've shown me nuances that reveal how deeply interconnected these industries are with the land and with each other. So my work here is still very much in its infancy, a slow journey of understanding industry, labour, ecological impact, and community interconnectedness.

NA Your video from the project *AV.3G* featuring plants and animals captures intricate moments of never-ending transformation. Can you discuss your intentions behind it? How do you see them contributing to your broader



AV3G (detail), American oak, aloe vera stems and leaf cast in pewter, Sgraffito acrylic, moulded plastic silver wire, video AV3G Aloe Vera 3 Generations, Variable dimensions, 2019-2021.

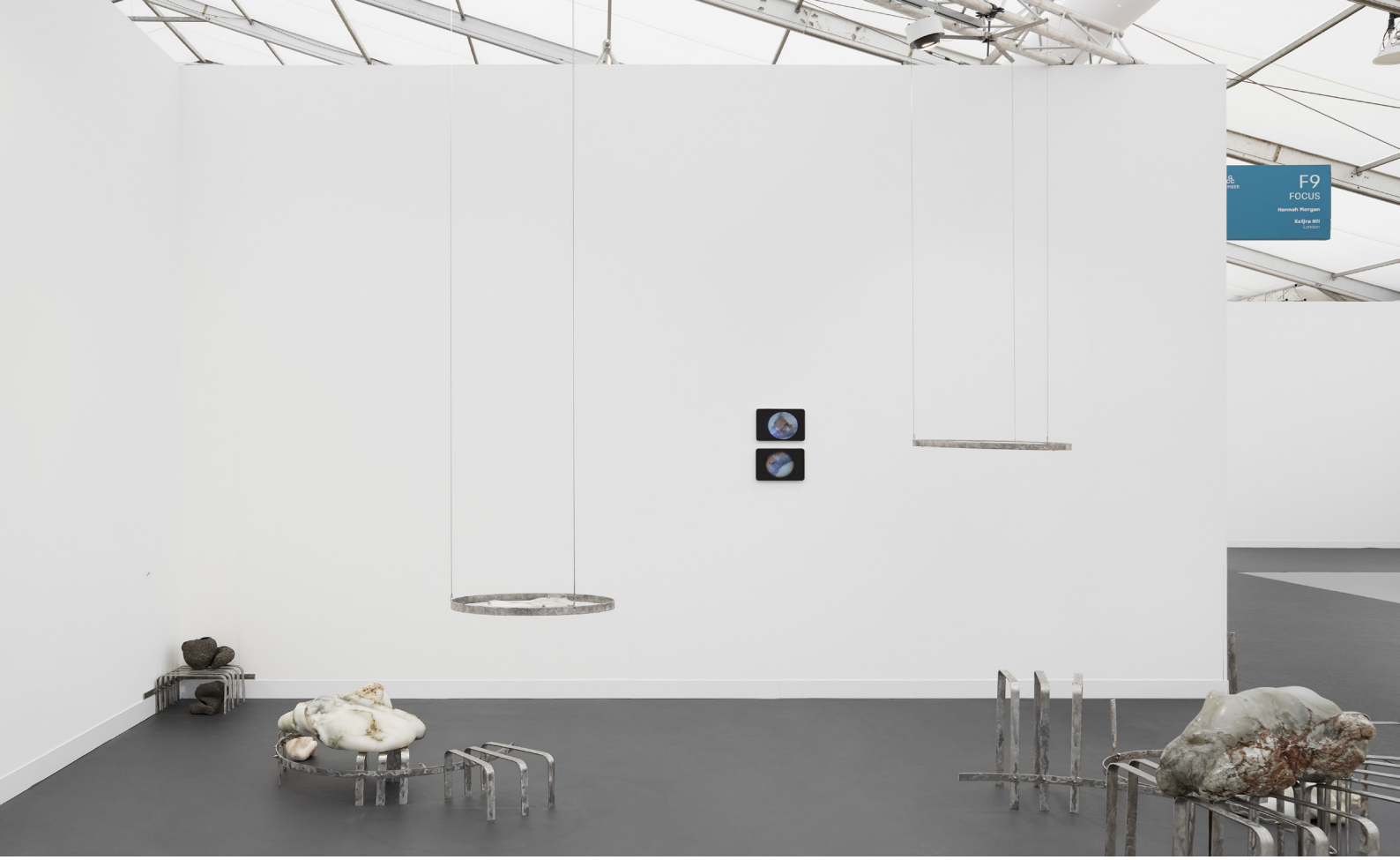
artistic narrative?

HM That film and text is very important to me and was the seed for an approach to the work in *animula*—both from a material perspective of working with vulnerable material, to weaving text around mourning, personal experience and historical, universal moments. I used my fathers Aloe Vera plant as the subject of the film, filming its 'limbs' very close up, intrusive of its body almost. Tracing its physicality there is a narrative voice over that 'remembers' its life and its position in a home, a home which was no longer occupied by people. I looked at a multitude of agency within its environment—from it beginnings as a cutting from my grandmothers house in america to my fathers time in his house, then to it being unintentionally bashed with a vacuum cleaner in my home and itself becoming a house for spiders and other creatures in its soil. It ultimately was a reflection on reciprocal care, how continuing care after someone dies is full of overlapping rituals, and the symbolism of the plants own transience in a multiplicity of being.

NA How do collaborations with other artists or communities impact your creative process, and can you share any recent or upcoming projects that reflect this collaborative spirit?

HM Working with other people is vital, whether they are artists or people within the proximity of my research and making. As I have said before we are made up of multitudes, to ignore that in art attempts to negate the world we inhabit! Most important to me is trust in those spaces; from my friends in a shared studio, makers who I can ask advice from in workshops, to meeting people in group shows and sharing literature.

This side of the New Year I have the pleasure of working on two group collaborative



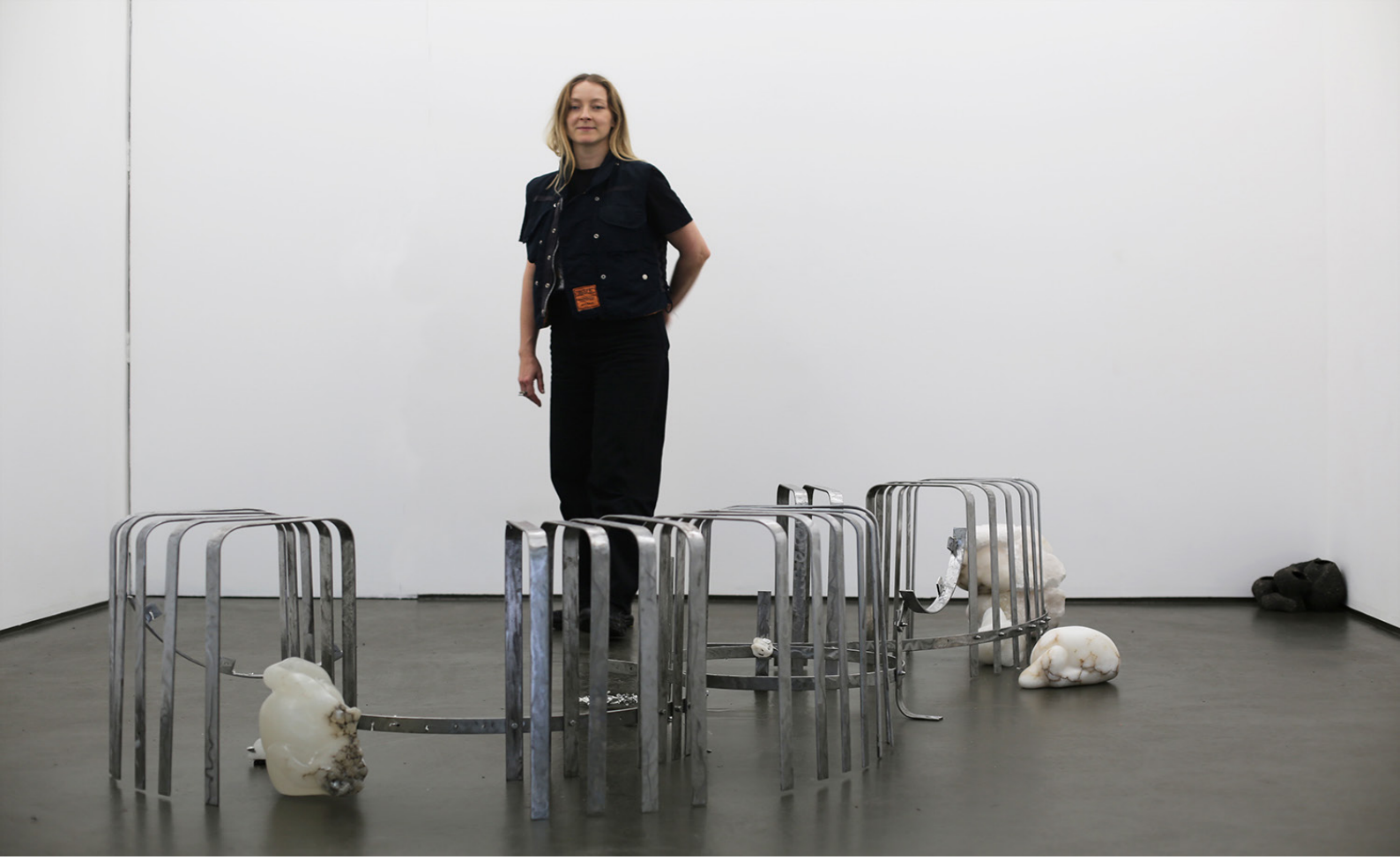
“Animula”, Exhibition view, Xxijra Hii, Frieze London, United-Kingdom, October 9–13, 2024. Photographer : Corey Bartle-Sanderson.

shows, one here in London with “Surface Matters”, and one in Riga with a curator and artist (Nastia Svarevska and Sabine Šné). The latter have drawn together video works for the project, looking at the reciprocal relationships between body, land and the living world. That has expanded my literature and an understanding of Baltic artists perspectives. Being born a European I suppose I still subscribe to an idealist aspect of it—common ground. I will also be in Italy next year for a show and working on a few other projects that are getting my neurons firing!

NA As you look ahead to your upcoming projects, are there any particular themes or concepts you feel particularly drawn to explore? How do you envision these new works expanding on your previous research and artistic explorations?

HM Where do I start! I'm in a land of thresholds still: Between mythology and visual speculation of other worlds and bodies in mediaeval manuscripts, to ideas around the word ‘feral’ within a post humanist context. Materially I'm working on more sound pieces, and I have an unhealthy obsession with windows and window grates at the moment… My research and work is part of an ever expanding “world”—that could include chance meetings on research trips or the library, but is ultimately driven by a need to understand something intrinsically. However the more I uncover about the underland from material/psychological/universal perspectives the more I realise I don't know. Which is part of the appeal and longevity of the work. I think new threads will naturally appear alongside working on existing threads that are in their infancy—being open to it all will guide the work.

Books I'm currently currently reading or



“Animula, Mud Time Fissures and Tethered Descent”, Exhibition view, Xxijra Hii,
London, United-Kingdom, 2023.
Photographer : Rosemary Hudson.

Hannah Morgan, Figure Figure 2025
Courtesy of the artist

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