

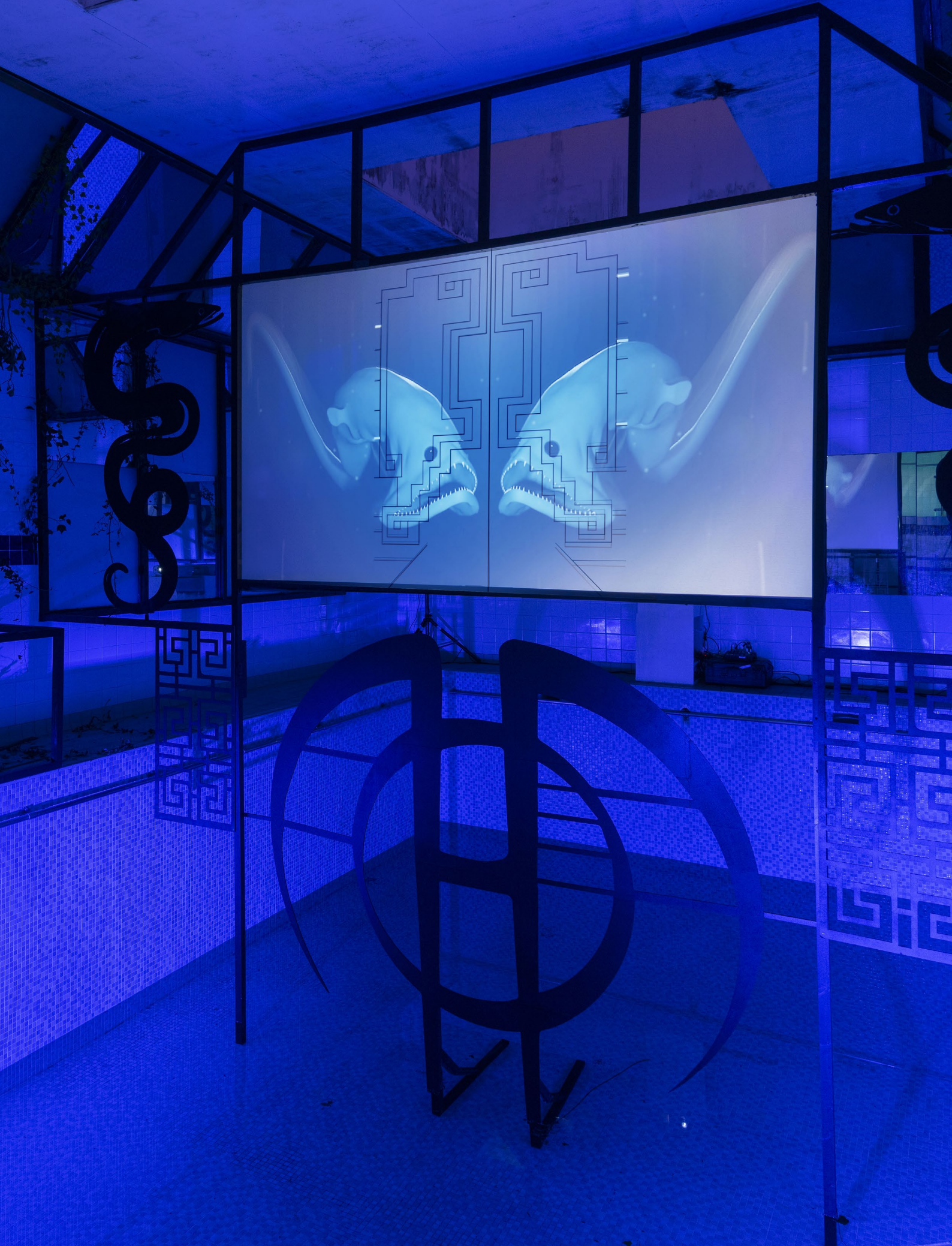
# FIGURE



*conversation with* **JOEY HOLDER**  
**JULY 2021**

**N° 45**





“Semelparous”, exhibition view, curated by Julia Greenway, Spring Health Leisure, Belsize Park, London, United Kingdom, 2020. Photographer: Damian Griffiths.



**MARCO GALVAN** *in conversation with*  
**JOEY HOLDER**

**MG**

**JH**

How did you start making art?

When I was young I used to draw pictures of animals, like strange insects and fish, so the fascination for the natural world has always been there. I come from a working class family, they always supported me, but I grew up with this idea of not being able to study or do art as a profession due to it not being enough of a lucrative endeavour. I always thought that I would have done science to sustain myself better and doing art was a last minute decision. Despite making money is still not easy, I feel really grateful for being able to do follow what I wanted.

My parents didn't think that university was a good idea, as they thought the subject I wanted to study wouldn't lead me anywhere. I remember them offering to buy me a brand new car if I agreed not to go to university!



“Semelparous”, exhibition view, curated by Julia Greenway, Spring Health Leisure, Belsize Park, London, United Kingdom, 2020. Photographer: Damian Griffiths.





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**MG**

Can you talk about the relationship you developed with animals and weird creatures in particular?

**JH**

I guess it's because of my parents that I developed a particular interest in strange creatures. We always used to have strange pets like fish, frogs, crabs, lobsters, salamanders... As a kid, I remember I used to go through the tropical fish books, pick the strangest, then go to the shop to see if the fish man would be able to get me that particular specimen.

I think it's completely instilled in our biology, especially as kids, to have a wonder of nature. When I say nature, I mean it as the whole world, which we are part of. We are intrigued by the other creatures, plants that live with us in the same ecosystem. I don't really know the reason why I'm attracted by such strange creatures, I guess some people might consider certain things repulsive or ugly but for me it is just pure fascination.

I'm really interested in exploring the limits of our understanding of the natural world and how we constantly try to make sense of it all. I'm exploring the limits of the methods used to study creatures, the limit of our knowledge and what comes into play when we reach that limit. For example, through history, people have created legends and myths about some creatures because of a limited knowledge...

**MG**

Like the oafish, a very long silver/orange abyssal fish that is believed to be the one being represented in all sea monsters illustrious from the past...

**JH**

Exactly, plus they look like something that is illustrated, out of a fairy tale. I'm interested in our limited perception of these creatures, not just investigating how we perceive them through science, but the human limitations in looking and understanding them. Through my work, I often display these creatures in many different forms





“Abyssal Seeker [Demersal Zone]” (detail), exhibition view, Seventeen, London, United Kingdom, 2021. Photographer: Damian Griffiths.





“Abyssal Seeker [Demersal Zone]” (detail), exhibition view, Seventeen, London, United Kingdom, 2021. Photographer: Damian Griffiths.





“Ophiux”, exhibition view, Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridge, United Kingdom, 2016.  
Photographer: Damian Griffiths.



as videos or moving images, in the form of diagrams or symbols, and sometimes scientific drawings of those creatures.

**MG**

Science is about exploration, trying to discover things about the world and has an objective perspective on the world; art is more subjective and about interpreting the world we live in. Do you see arts and science as two sides of the same coin or do you see them as more distinct disciplines?

**JH**

I don't really believe in binaries as there are lots of different forms of knowledge production and ways of understanding the world. Both of those things can help us to interpret and understand what surrounds us. I think the problem arises when we just look at the world in a one-dimensional way, saying there is only one way you can study something. I think art also produces certain forms of knowledge and uncovers aspects of things we don't necessarily see or perceive at first. Art and science have different purposes and it's a really complex question you could talk about all day.

A lot of my work is about talking about scientific technologies and how we're now on the quest to turn everything into data, even life itself. That's a problematic one-dimensional way to look at the world: to think that everything could be turned into an algorithm and equation—I think that's extremely dangerous.

**MG**

You usually work with scientists, I'm thinking of the exhibition "Ophiux", where the whole gallery space looked like a scientific laboratory. How does this collaboration help you to develop your practice even further?

**JH**

It's important for me to have an expanded practice, where I speak and involve different researchers to tackle specialisms that forms part of my work. I'm influenced by their processes and there's a lot of scientific imagery that goes into the work that I produce.





“Ophiux”, exhibition view, Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridge, United Kingdom, 2016.  
Photographer: Damian Griffiths.



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With “Ophiux” I collaborated with two researchers, Dr Marco Galardini, a Computational Biologist at the European Bioinformatics Institute at the Wellcome Trust Genome Campus, Cambridge, who designs apps that help to simplify DNA code; I was also working with and Dr Katrin Linse, Senior Biodiversity Biologist at the British Antarctic Survey, Cambridge to study animals that live around the black smokers—underwater deep sea volcanos.

Working with scientists made me realise that there’s so much that we don’t know about the world. For example, we know less than 3% of human DNA code. “Ophiux” was very much about the datafication of life, and in the exhibition I was displaying large scale medical models of machine installations.

**MG**

“Ophiux”, which is the name for a fictional pharmaceutical company, also covers conspiracy theories within the medical world, and your work mostly revolves around an exploration of the distrust we now collectively hold toward the idea of “truth”. How do you deal with issues of authentication that these ideas call upon?

**JH**

I started using symbols and religious symbols and at first I didn’t really know why I was drawn to this or what I was doing. I started thinking about conspiracies and thinking about how the internet could fuel certain beliefs, as you can easily open a few pages, make some assumptions and you quickly have a home made conspiracy theory that you can spread online. There are thousands of companies that have been set up to influence and control your behaviour online.

**MG**

Have you watched *Can’t Get You Out of My Head* by Adam Curtis? It explores pretty well conspiracy theories related to politics and society...

**JH**

Yes, he explains very well what I’m actually failing to articulate right now (laugh). I’m really inte-





“Semelparous”, exhibition view, Galerie Lisa Kandlhofer, Vienna, Austria, 2019.





rested in the idea of how knowledge and belief are constructed and how they can become realities. I guess I first started getting interested in this when I started noticing the mechanisms behind social media, maybe around 2015, when people were starting to talk about filter bubbles and echo chambers: I could see people arguing on social media, being quite horrible and aggressive to each other, even within friend circles. These platforms can really divide people, creating the opposite environment to what they were originally conceived for. When we are divided it's easier for us to be controlled.

MG

In relation to conspiracy theories, *Selachimorpha* (2017), tackles the conspiracy theory of sharks with implants in their brain to control their movement. In that video, you are using, amongst other things, images of sharks being manipulated with implants, footage of a presumed UFO captured in the film *Jaws* directed by Steven Spielberg and a morphing Pepe the frog. What interests you in the confusion between the fictional and the real?

JH

There's a back story to that work, while I was doing some research on sharks, I found out that the US military had once implanted chips in shark's brain to see if they could control their movements and act as spies. I found scientific papers on the subject, proving that that was real. A few years later, there were some shark attacks in Egypt and some people got killed. What played out in the end was a result of somebody reading this piece of research and thinking that it must have been Israel that was sending remotely operated sharks to Egyptian waters to jeopardise the tourist industry. Of course that was not true. It's a good example of a story that mutates through the media and the internet which politically affects people and their relationships.

MG

Your work examines the nature of the belief in today's climate and particularly how belief can be “manufac-





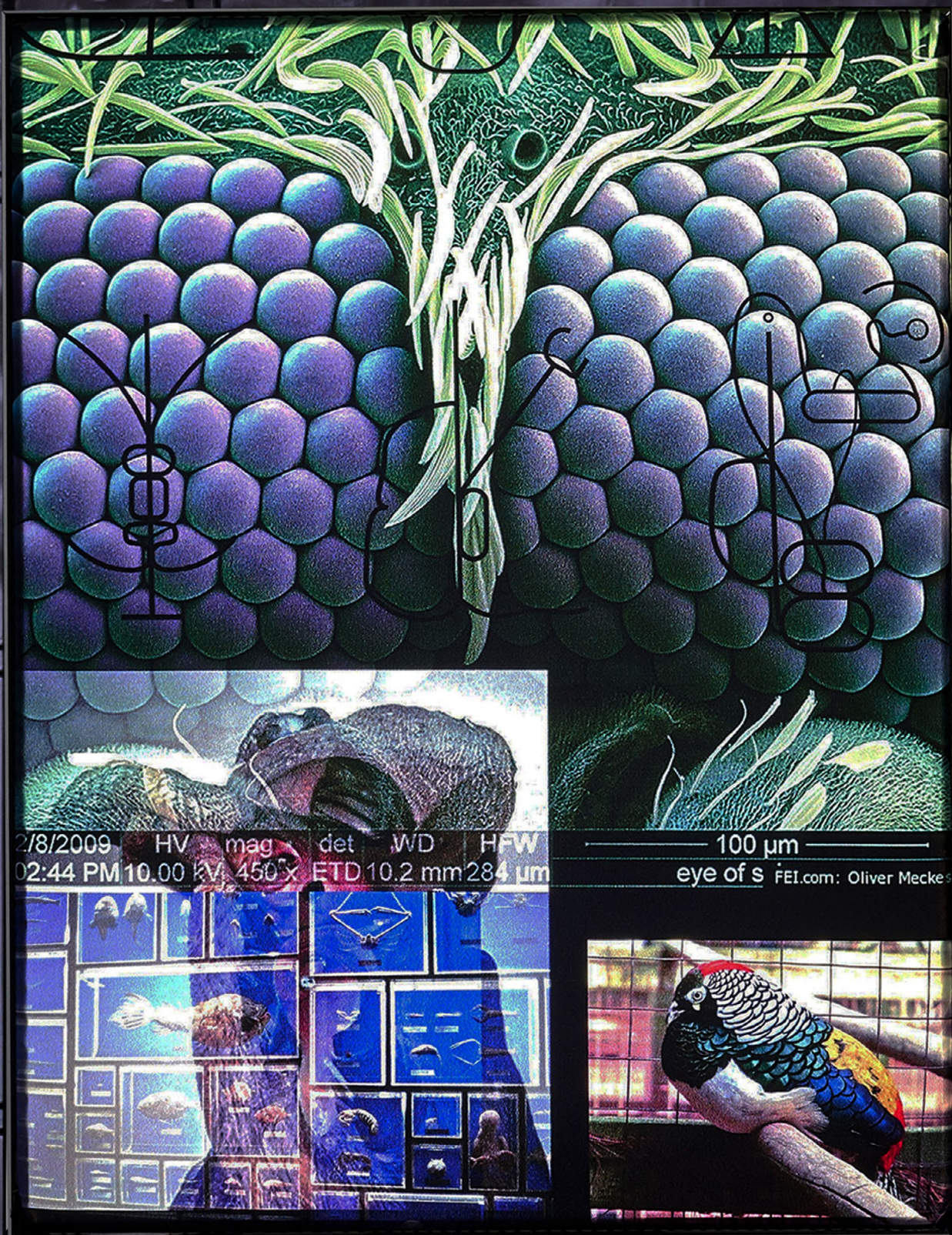
“Khthon”, exhibition view, Liste Art Fair, Basel, Switzerland, 2020.  
Courtesy of Seventeen.





“Khthon”, exhibition view, Liste Art Fair, Basel, Switzerland, 2020.  
Courtesy of Seventeen.





“Khthon” (détail), exhibition view, Liste Art Fair, Basel, Switzerland, 2020.  
Courtesy of Seventeen.



tured” online. I’m thinking of *Adcredo* (2018), presented in the form of a multi-screen installation, with twenty-two videos playing in random sequence. Was this somewhat all-encompassing structure meant to mimic the way in which information is absorbed nowadays?

**JH**

I had this idea that I was trying to make sense of what was going on, watching political YouTube videos, reading about alien conspiracy theories, and researching companies like Cambridge Analytica. So I decided to present all of the works at once on different screens, so you had different CGI heads talking about different topics, there was a Donald Trump, Kanye West, Putin, various aliens, beetles and all of these fragments were layered on top of each other. I was trying to create this sort of hellscape hosting all the monsters we’ve created in society.

**MG**

You talk about hell scape and it makes me think of how your installations usually seem to compensate the space you exhibit in. I’m thinking for example of “Semelparous”, your solo show from 2019 in a disused swimming pool and leisure centre left to ruin in North London. In that show you were responding to the eels population crisis, spawning migration, and structural characteristics of the pool. Sculptural elements were extended from the existing architecture as plants and organic materials spilled out from the skylights overhead to the depths of the pool. Can you talk about the relationship between the work and the space in which it is shown? Do you have a specific process when you begin working on a project or piece?

**JH**

Not really, I tend to work from scratch each time because I want to respond to the space I’m working in. I don’t really make things in the studio anymore so I make the work fit into the space, architecturally and conceptually. The process starts with researching and what sparks that research is an issue that I feel like I have to





“Adcredo — The Deep Belief Network”, exhibition view, QUAD, Derby, United Kingdom, 2018. Photographer: Damian Griffiths.





“Adcredo — The Deep Belief Network”, exhibition view, QUAD, Derby, United Kingdom, 2018. Photographer: Damian Griffiths.



address. Quite often I'm making work that is responding to what is happening in the world around me, like a particular thing that is happening within the science community or similar. As in the *Adcredo* project that we were discussing above, I was following lots of different trails, characters and voices within the work, which resulted in this multitude of screens depicting a cacophony of different voices reflecting the contemporary state of things.

MG

How about the music, how important is the soundtrack in your videos? What's the process of creation of the music that accompanies your pieces?

JH

I used to make my own tracks and take sampled sounds that I remixed, creating this collage of sounds; then sometimes I work with sound artists or musicians. If I really like a particular track I contact the people that made it and see if they're OK for me to use it on my work, which is what happened in the last piece I've done, "Abyssal Seeker". When I was working on *Semelparous*, I contacted a label and asked for permission to use a track that I really liked. They agreed and then they came up to me saying they had this other artists that really wanted to work with me, which is how the collaboration for "Abyssal Seeker" soundtrack came to be.

It might happen the other way round as well, starting with the track which helps me to know when to edit the video, giving me some sorts of instructions or guidelines to work with.

MG

I'm really impressed by the titles of your works and shows, as you often use taxonomic vocabularies, specialist terms, coming from Latin most of the time, opening up to possibilities to speculative thought. How does language impact your work and come to function in your pieces?

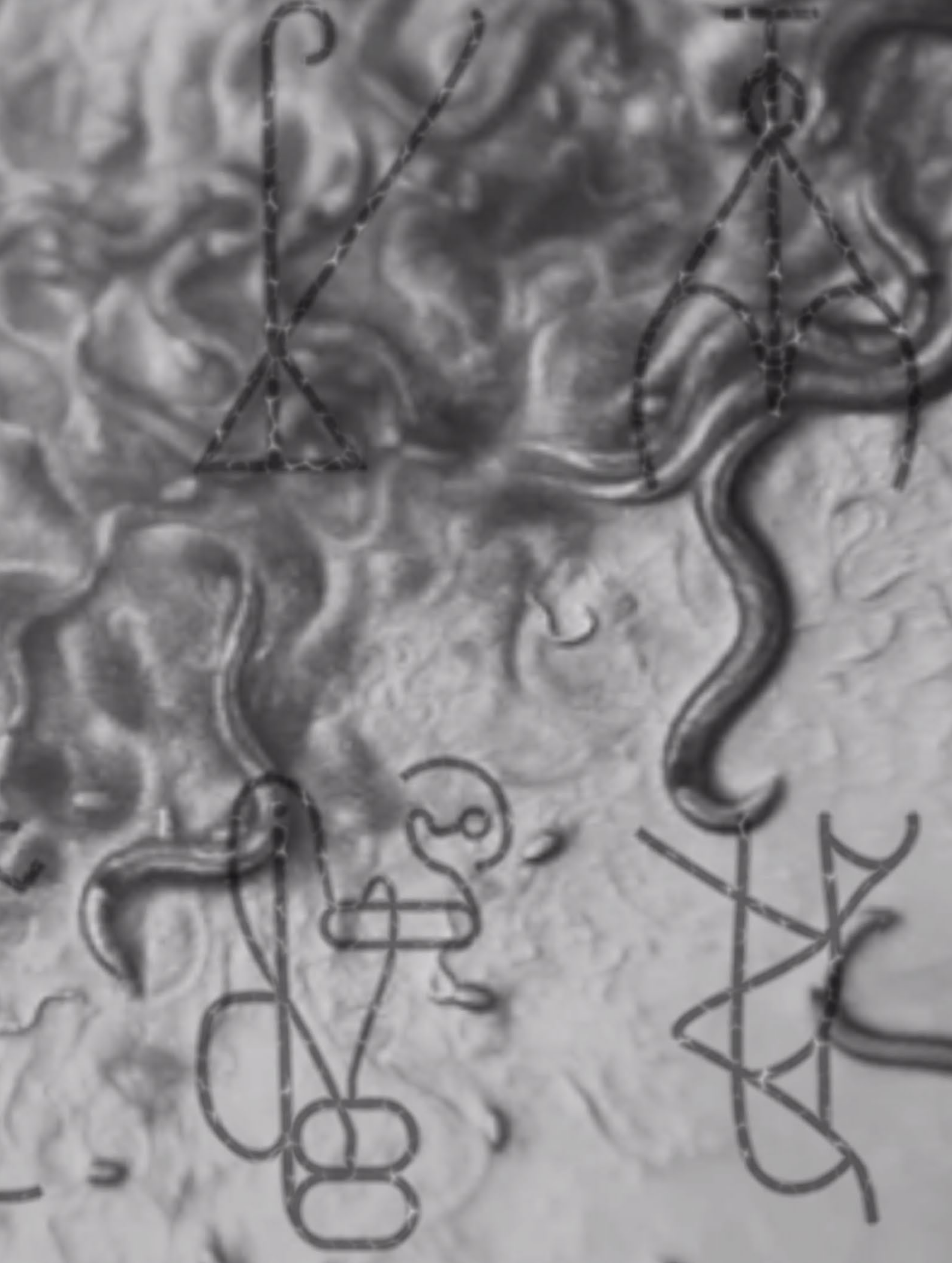
JH

Yes, I quite often use scientific names for the titles of works. "*Semelparous*" is classifying



“Adcredo — The Deep Belief Network”, exhibition view, QUAD, Derby, United Kingdom, 2018. Photographer: Damian Griffiths.







certain species that die just after they mate; Selachimorpha is the Latin name for sharks... I'm really interested in using language that becomes alluding and can open up to different interpretation possibilities. I also see it as a double edge aspect: those terms are a very ordered way of systematising animals, breaking them down into different taxonomies, which is only one way of looking at how animals can be related to each other. Going back to what I was saying at the beginning, there are instead a lot of other ways that you could think about and understand this, indigenous people in Australia wouldn't group together animals in that way, for example. So again, these titles operate in two ways, in one sense they are very scientific and ordered and in the other sense I guess for most people these titles are just quite abstract and just weird-sounding words!

**MG**

It sparkles some curiosity of understanding what the word means and how it relates to the show in some ways...

**JH**

Which is actually what I want, opening up to different realms of exploration.

**MG**

You maintain a number of different Tumblrs accounts, gathering together strange creatures, looking like aliens to us, kinda uncovering the unknown against scientific understanding. How do they fit in your practice? Do they form part of your research project or they constitute an independent area of your work?

**JH**

I don't really like to classify stuff as being work or not work, or between research and the finished product, I think it's all part of the practice. I have about fifty different Tumblrs from over the years, where I generally collect strange images and group them together. I see them like sketch books or mood boards, for example when I start working on a project I would start a Tumblrs and start collecting, trying to create an aesthetic or feeling





“Mana”, exhibition view, Frieze, London, United Kingdom, 2020.  
Courtesy of Seventeen.





“Mana”, exhibition view, Frieze, London, United Kingdom, 2020.  
Courtesy of Seventeen.



of the thing that I want to produce. I believe that with the internet and the saturation of images that we see on a day to day basis, everything seems to have already been made so it's almost like all of that already-made stuff becomes the raw material once again and gets transferred back to the art world. I think of myself as someone that is creating another kind of constellation, not the producer of anything new.

**MG**

Your latest solo show at Seventeen Gallery, showcases a new multimedia immersive installation *The Abyssal Seeker* (2021). This work will map out ways in which we can become “less human” to confound datafication—the transformation of social action into online quantified data. Are you depicting the deep sea as the unknown, place beyond knowledge, drawing a metaphor of the world attempt to evade identification, classification and subsequent commodification?

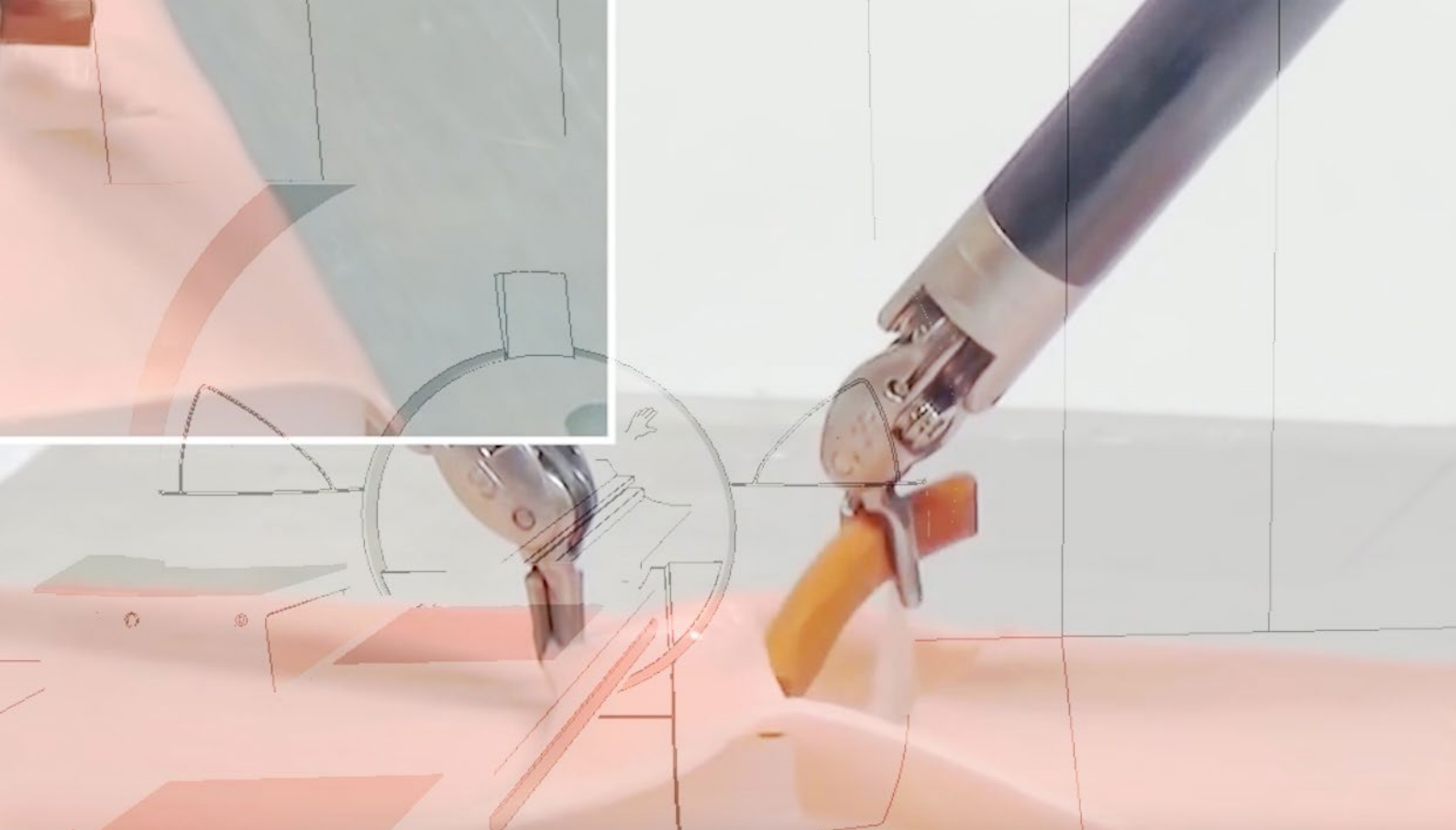
**JH**

The deep sea is an area that I always seem to come back to. It's this hopeful place where so much hasn't been explored, hence it encloses so much that we don't know—it's a sort of alien environment to us, where we wouldn't be able to survive, at the moment at least. For the exhibition at Seventeen Gallery in London, I created two rooms: the first one is supposed to be on land, a rocky landscape where creatures are almost trapped within the rock face. Within that shows scientific diagrams with taxonomical lists of different creatures. It's a room where I wanted to give the feeling like it's being surveilled that all these creatures have been mapped and modelled. The other room is an abyssal CGI landscape, and although it might give a dark and scary impression, I wanted it to be perceived as a hopeful place where we could, even metaphorically, escape to. We're not just data and information and that's the “perfect” “untouched”











environment. For me, it is quite a change from other work that I have done in the past, where I tended to accelerate narratives toward a dark future where these technologies are played out and we exist in a futuristic hellscape. In this work there is a hope of escape.





“The Evolution of the Spermalege”, exhibition view, Seventeen, London, United Kingdom, 2019. Photographer: Damian Griffiths.







Joey Holder, Figure Figure 2021  
Courtesy of the artist

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