



Michelle-Marie Letelier



Behind every creative gesture there is a particular life that help to determine the form that gesture will take as well as the manner in which it is articulated. Naturally, there are those lives that are more interesting than others in the way they connect to concerns considered to be universal, which is just another of way of saying that some people's lives are more relevant to other people's lives. But what is shared is not a series of abstract qualities represented through self-indulgent introspection (a hackneyed assumption about what it means to make art) but the political dimension that is revealed through particular biographical anecdotes experienced by specific individuals.

Michelle-Marie Letelier's trajectory as a visual artist begins with the Atacama Desert, a 1000km narrow strip of land that occupies a significant portion of her native Chile. It is the driest desert in the world – an inhospitable terrain that symbolically isolates an already geographically distant country from the rest of the world while connecting it to a global economy through the exploitation of the rich mineral deposits that lie just beneath its hard, flat surface. In the 19th and early 20th century, its principle export was sodium nitrate (used in fertilizer and gunpowder) until World War I prompted Germany to invent a synthetic version of it bringing an abrupt halt to a thriving national industry and quickly transforming once prosperous mining communities into ghost towns whose deteriorating facades today intensify an already melancholic landscape.

This poetic image of the desert was a significant reference for a previous generation of Chilean artists, known as the "avanzada"¹, and more recently figures in the writings of Roberto Bolaño – although his desert is situated in Mexico, the country where he lived in exile for many years. For Letelier, the desert is the place where she spent her adolescence,



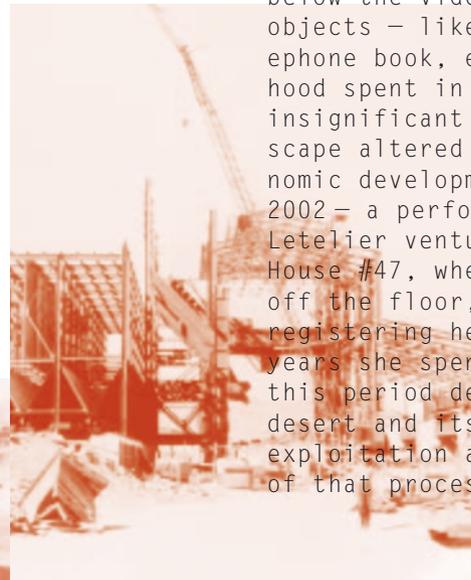
1 — A term coined by French born, Chilean critic and art historian Nelly Richard to refer to a seminal group of conceptual artists and writers active in the late 70s/early 80s including Carlos Leppe, Eugenio Dittborn, Lotty Rosenfeld, Diamela Eltit, and Raul Zurita among others.

For further reading see: Margins and Institutions: Art in Chile Since 1973, Melbourne: Art & Text, 1986.



growing up in Chuquicamata, home to the largest open-pit copper mine in the world. (With the demise of sodium nitrate, copper replaced it as the country's most lucrative natural resource; the nationalization of this industry by Salvador Allende directly precipitated the coup against him.) In previous works – photographs, videos, and installations – she began documenting the gradual erasure of the "Chuqui" mining camp, as it was fondly called, forced to close due to environmental contamination and rising fuel costs associated with the transport of waste rock to an off-site location. The decision to relocate residents to the nearby town of Calama was accompanied by a practical – if somewhat macabre – solution of disposing the waste material from the mine onto the town itself, gradually burying it under layers of rock, with the exception of the plaza, school and church, marked for historical preservation.

In "Desarme", 2004–2007 Letelier walks through and around the near-empty "John Bradford Houses" that comprise her former neighborhood. Images of discarded and abandoned objects in now uninhabited interiors are juxtaposed with fragments of texts taken from inventories, certificates, and other documents found amidst the rubble. Carefully arranged on the floor below the video projection is an assortment of objects – like a doll, a floppy disk, a telephone book, etc. – all metonyms for a childhood spent in a small place on the map made insignificant by the crushing weight of a landscape altered and deformed by history and economic development. Similarly, in 8 ("Eight"), 2002 – a performance registered on video – Letelier ventured into her former bedroom in House #47, where she used coal picked up off the floor, to make drawings on the wall registering her presence during the eight years she spent in that room. Other works from this period depict images of the surrounding desert and its austere beauty as it submits to exploitation and in turn subsumes the traces of that process.

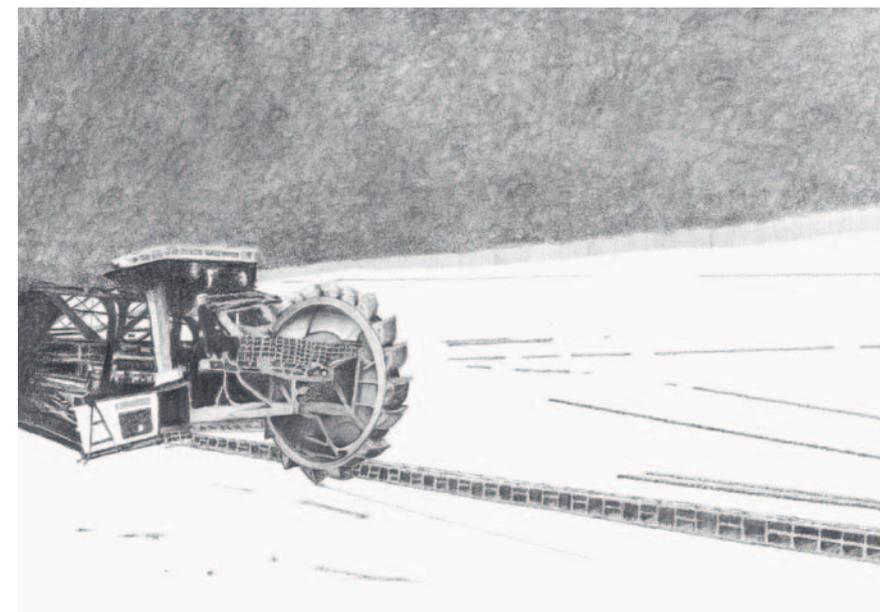
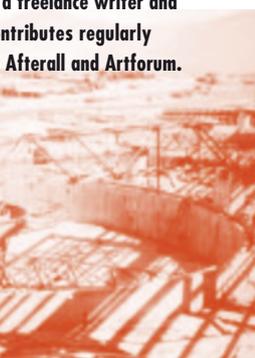


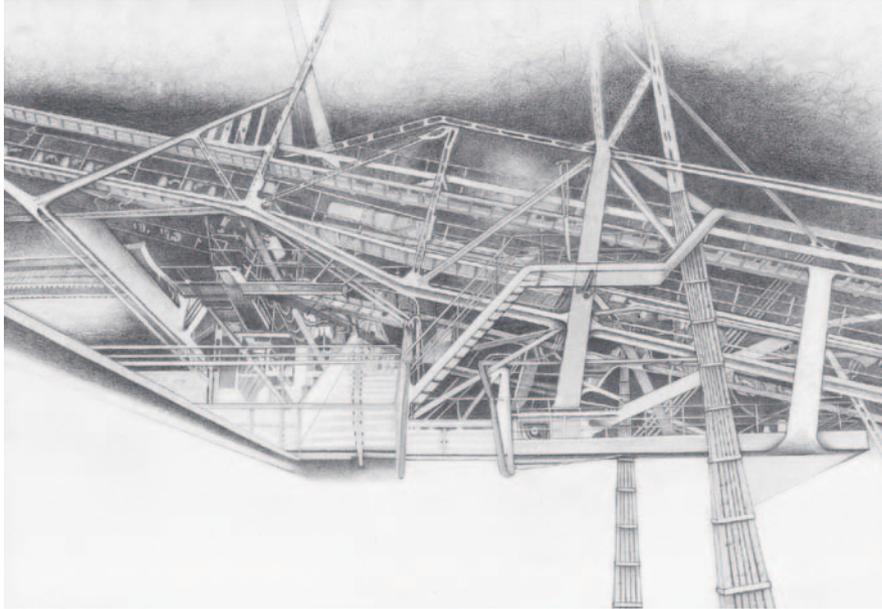
In 2007 she relocated to Germany, a country whose historical ties to Chile derive not from the flight of war criminals to the Southern Cone following World War II as is typically commented, but the active recruitment in the mid 19th century of German colonizers – desired for their presumably superior work ethic – to settle in the country’s southern provinces. Consistent with her long-term interest in “the social changes connected to the dismantling of a landscape,” her most recent work – drawings and paintings in coal and graphite – departs (in a manner less documentary than before) from an interest in the coal mining industry, whose slow decline is emblematic of an embattled and seemingly never-ending process of German reunification. In “Machine” Studies, 2009–2010 a series of massive mining machines appear against an empty landscape, like dinosaurs recalling a former era, while her painting series “Des Hecho”, 2009, utilizes aerial photography – a medium associated with military operations, surveillance, and real estate development – to represent the topography of the environmental devastation that, in a global economy, is perpetually displaced onto the periphery.

In Western Europe, Berlin is the city in which the East-West divide is still clearly visible – from its massive, bleak housing blocks situated in the eastern periphery to the thousands of visual artists, musicians, and writers who have flocked here during the last decade, seeking an affordable lifestyle and cosmopolitan anonymity increasingly scarce within Western capitals. If there’s something that can be characterized as the particular smell of this historical limbo, it’s that of the burning coal still used to heat a large number of pre-war buildings in the neighborhoods of the former East as well as the old western ghettos. Its absence inevitably signals gentrification – that curious process of destroying exactly what it is we seek, which is another form of colonization.



2 — Michèle Faguet directed non-profit project spaces in Mexico City, Bogotá, and Vancouver before moving to Berlin in 2008. Currently she is a freelance writer and contributes regularly to Afterall and Artforum.

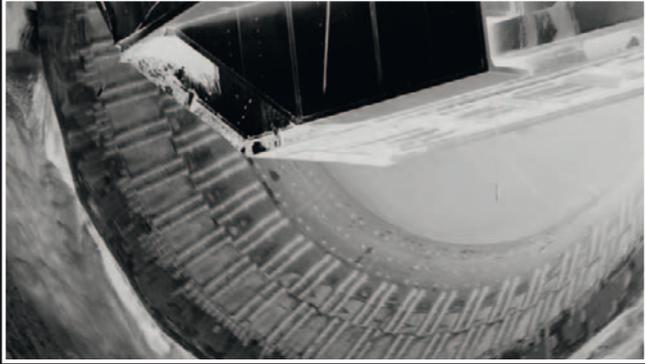




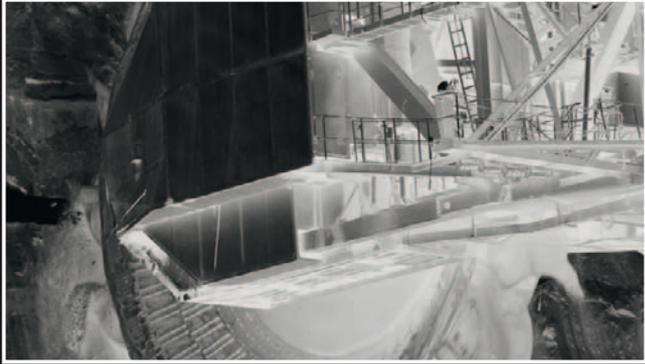
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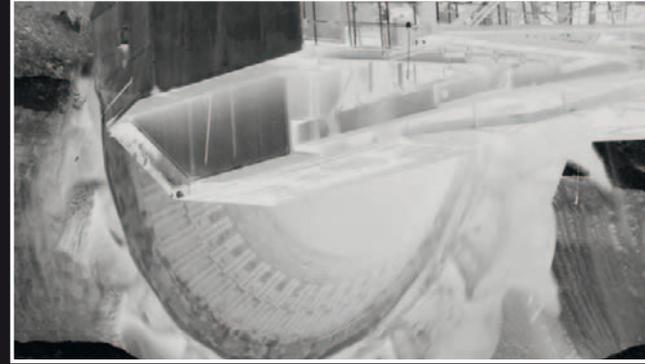
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The title of this work is taken from a verse of Goethe's Faust, one of the most significant figures of scientific irresponsibility and indifference to life, by tragic means, in German literature. This video work is a personal attempt to re-interpret some passages of this play, through the constant grasping of a coal-mining machine. A soft-voiced, off-screen narrator whispers these passages, while the constant movement of the machine seems to return the earth back to its source, as the video plays backwards.

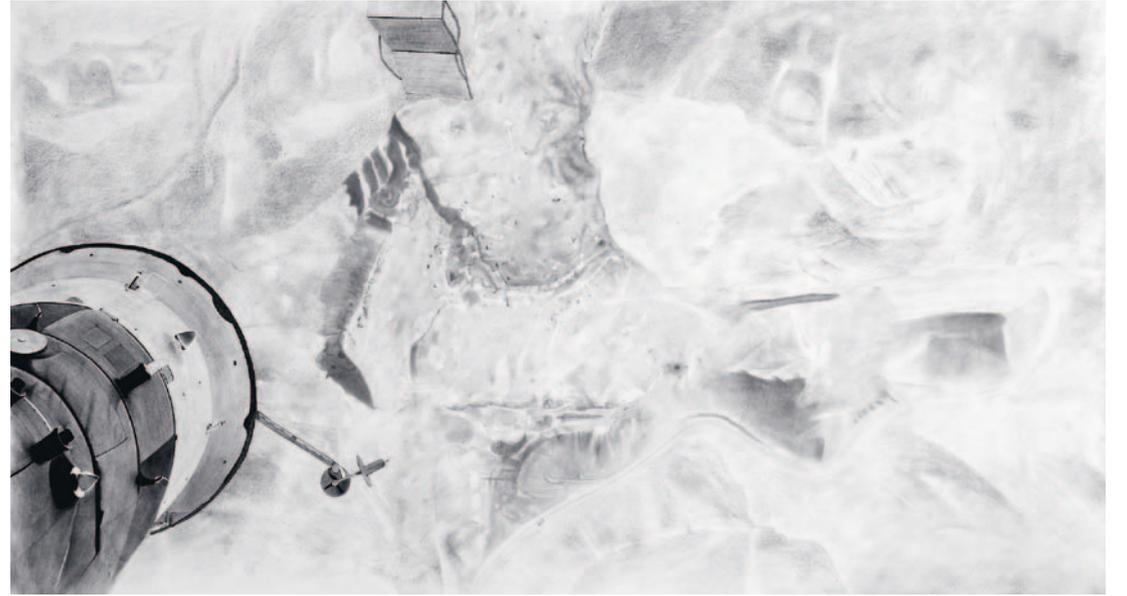
Des-hecho

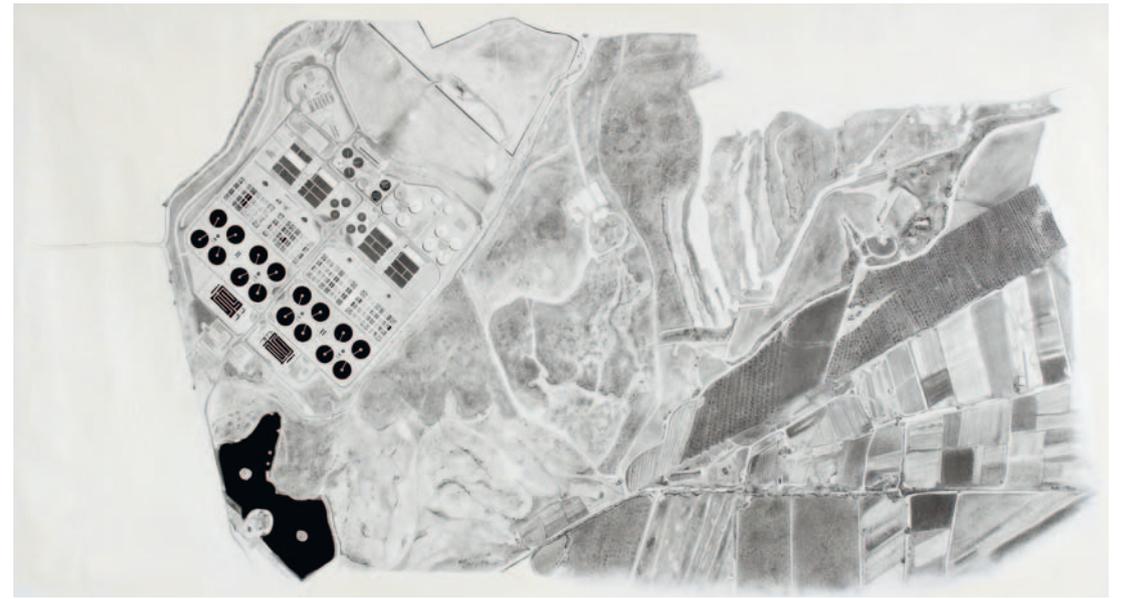
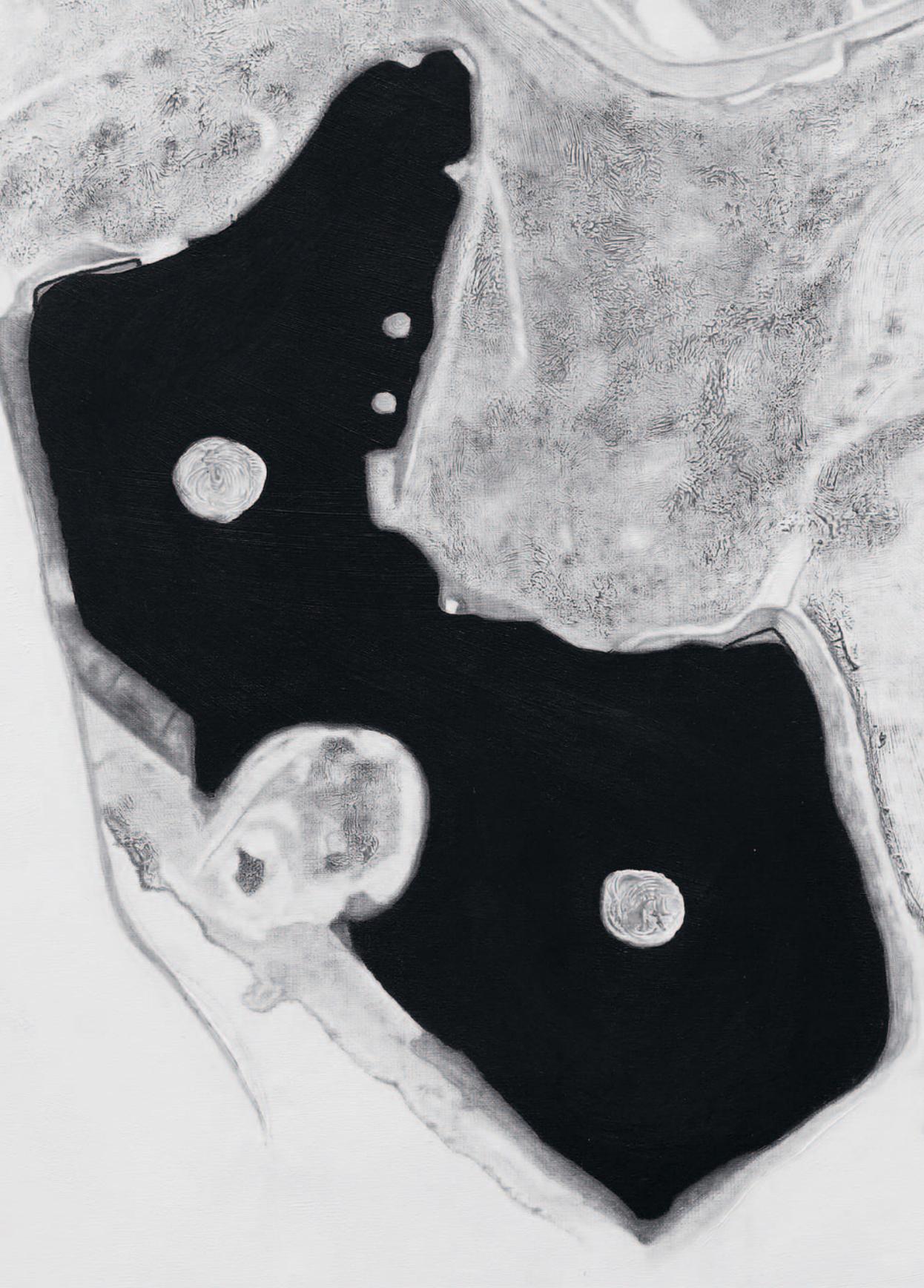
This is a 4-piece series of paintings on canvas.

Two concepts of subversion of the landscape were used: coal extraction and waste insertion, in Germany and Chile respectively. Both concepts have in common the use of energy, economic investment and environmental questioning, but through opposite geological procedures.

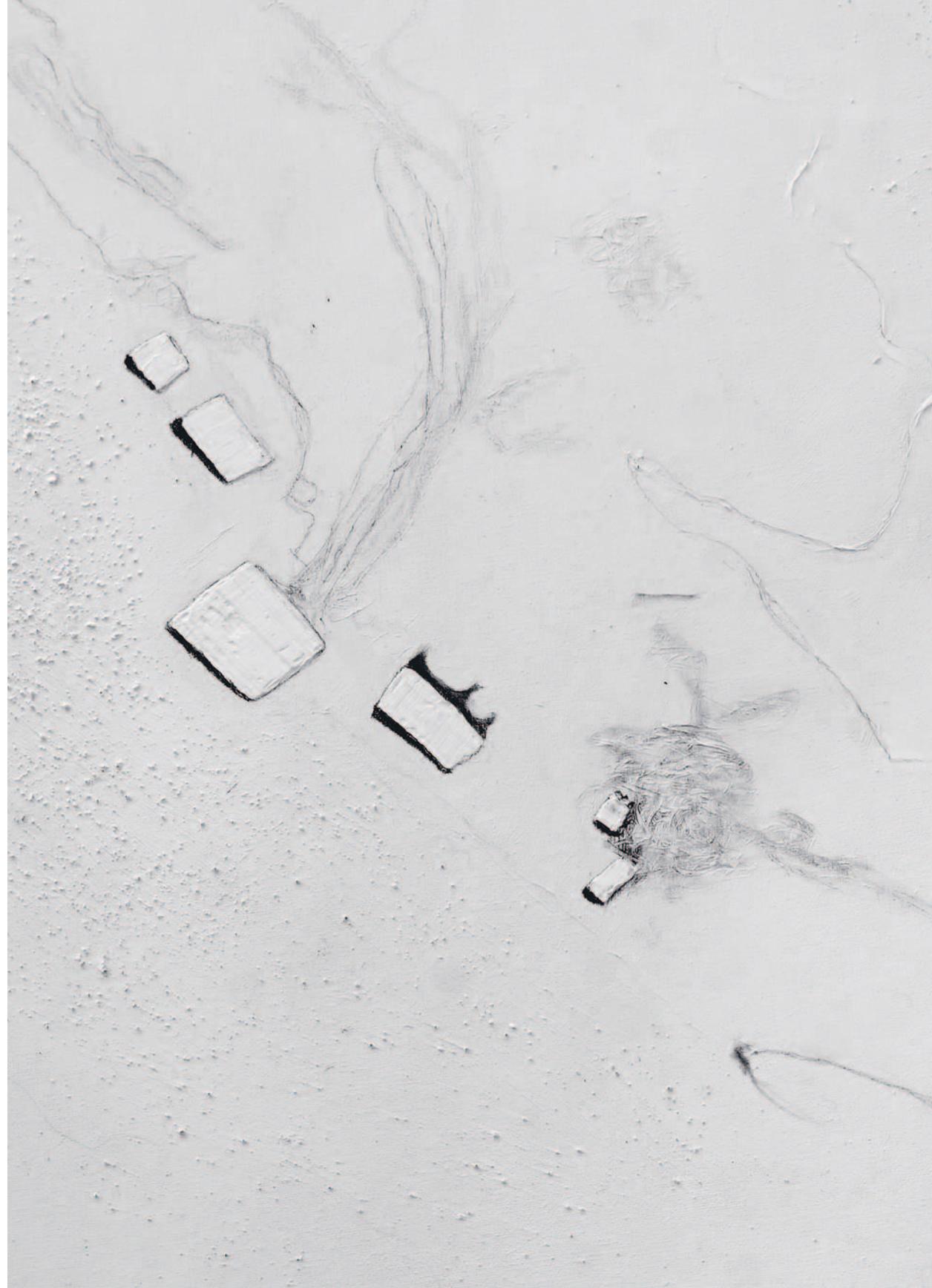
Based on satellite images as scientific instruments used for the study of both concepts, I made an interpretation of the aerial landscapes of garbage dumps, using coal and graphite on large-scale treated canvas. The selected garbage dumps have become elements of controversy in their own way, for environmental and political reasons. Coal and graphite are embodied here, not only for the direct application of the coal material in the artistic context, but also as reference to the historical meaning that this mineral has in Europe. At the same time, the solid waste that fills and pollutes Chilean landscapes is the subject of artistic interpretation through the gesture.







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F60 — A machine too big to operate

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“F60” is a conveyor bridge which is 502 metres long, 202 metres wide, 80 metres high and 11,000 ton in weight. Located in the Elbe-Elster county south of Lichterfeld, Germany, this conveyor was commissioned in March 1991 after three years of construction work. Up to 1000 people took part in the erection of the bridge. After only 13 months, the F60 bridge was taken out of operation in 1992, due to new energy policies.

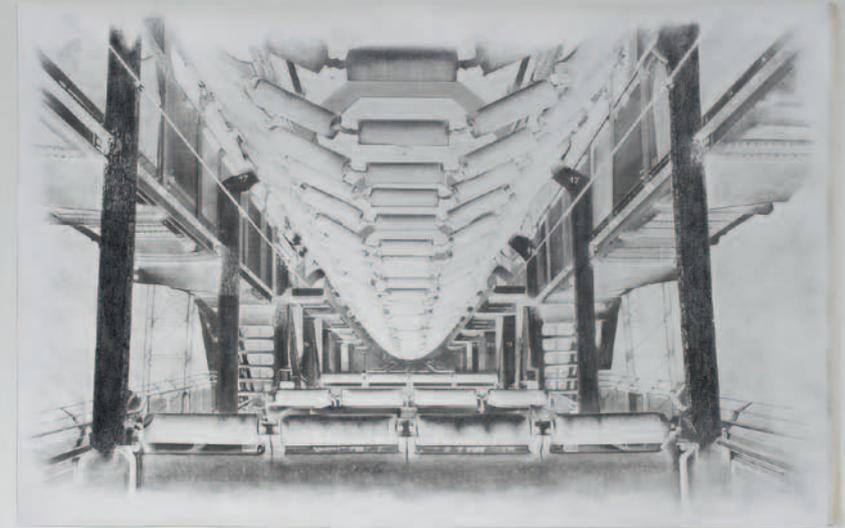
This bridge is not only a symbol for the industrial history of the region but also a sign of a structural change. Is one of the world’s largest movable machines, but due to its operation costs it is now a stationary machine converted into a visitors attraction.

This series of F60 caption studies were transferred into negative images using graphite and coal on canvas.

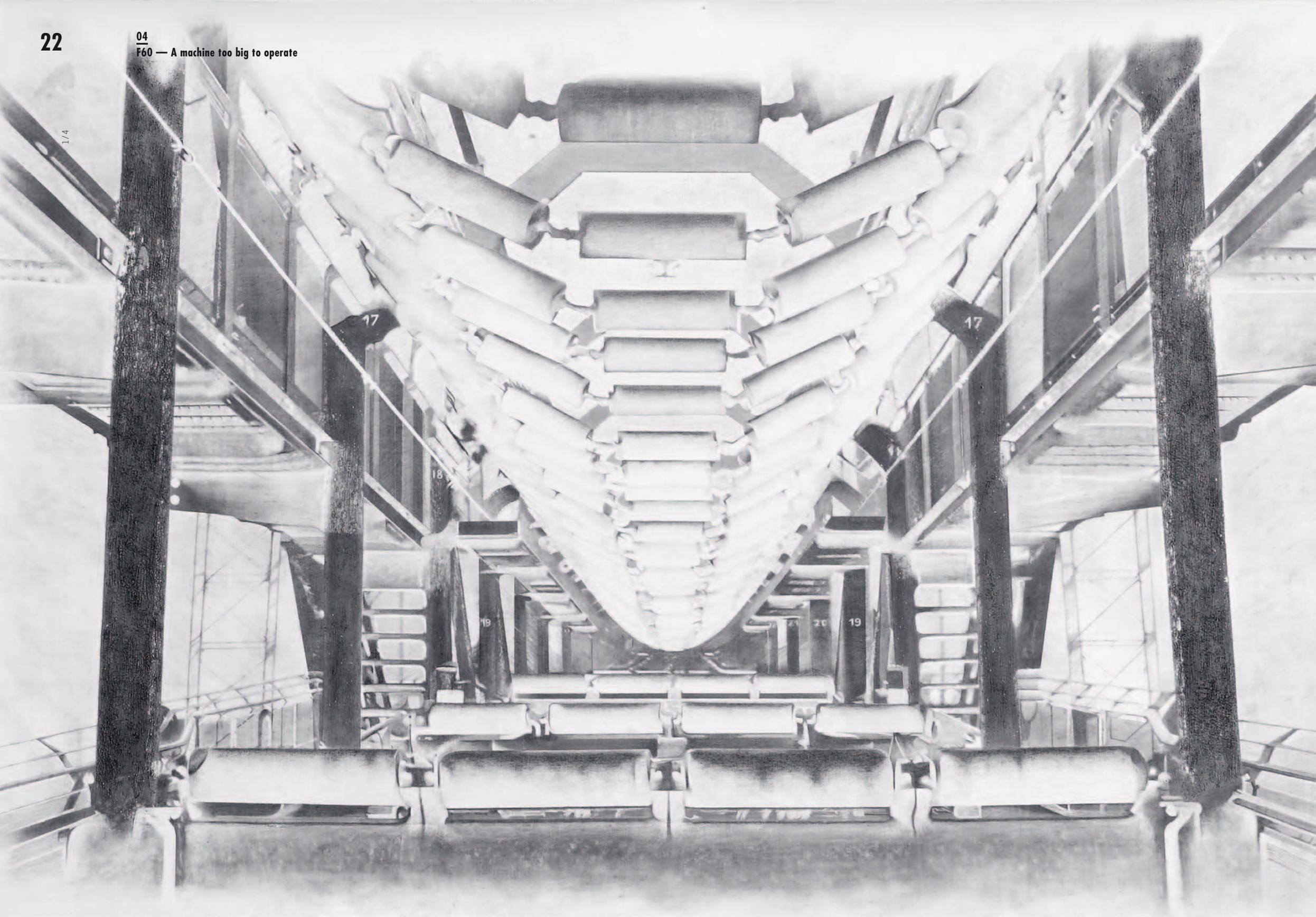
Elephants

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This video shows the routine journey of trucks in Chuquicamata, constantly emptying their loads and thereby producing a waste dump – or what is called locally as a “cake” of sterile material from the mining process. These “cakes” topographically replace the houses of the old Chuquicamata mining camp. The scale and the repetitive action involved in this process leads the viewer to see the trucks as beings on a journey, as if they were elephants in a caravan.



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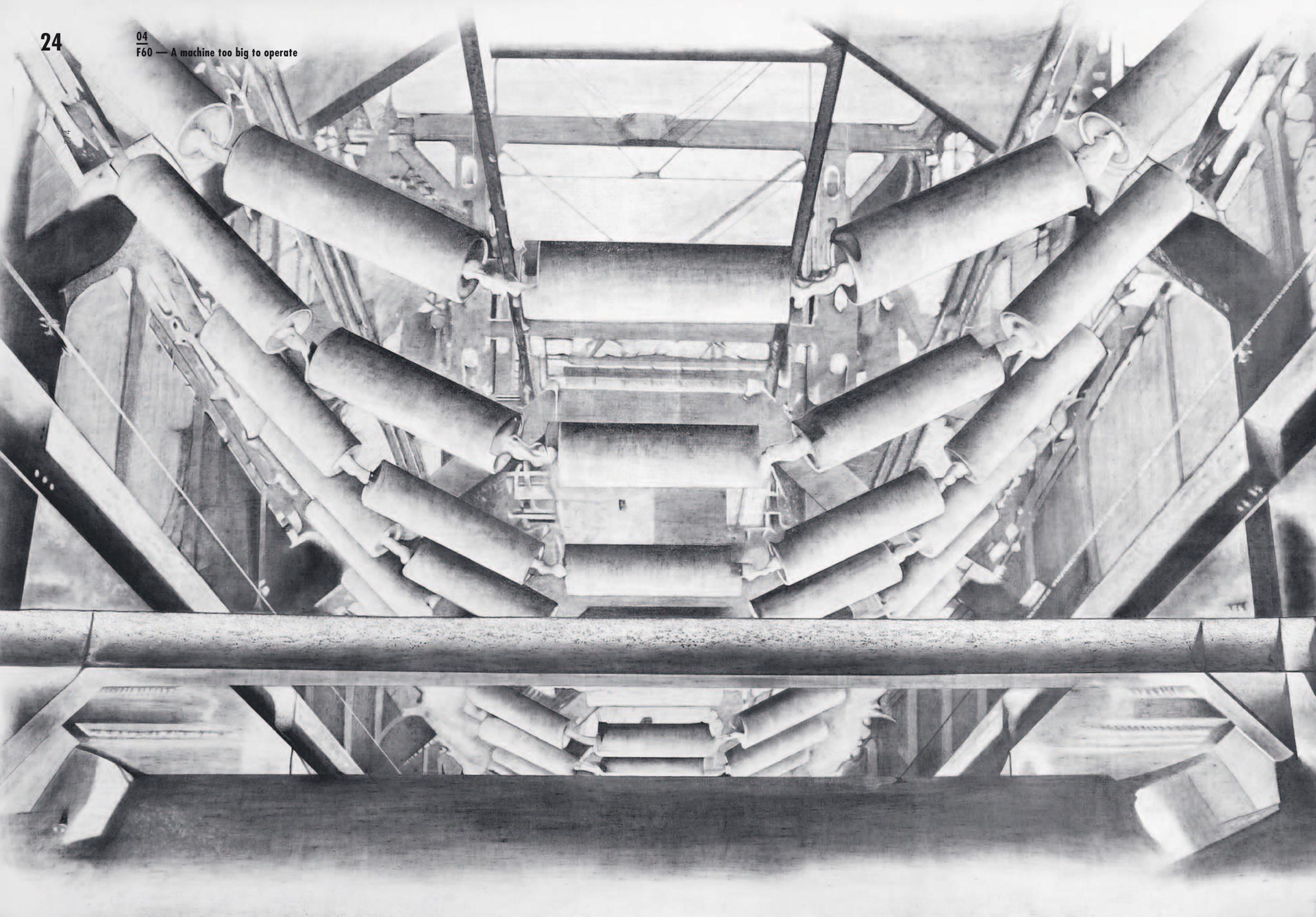
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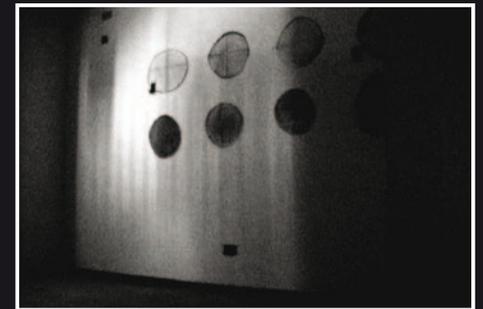
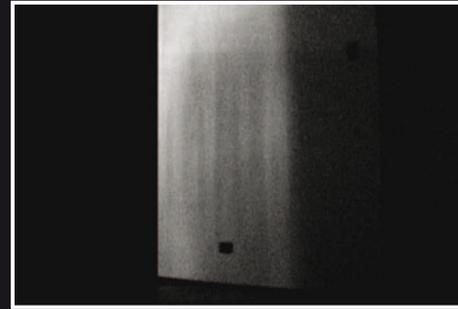
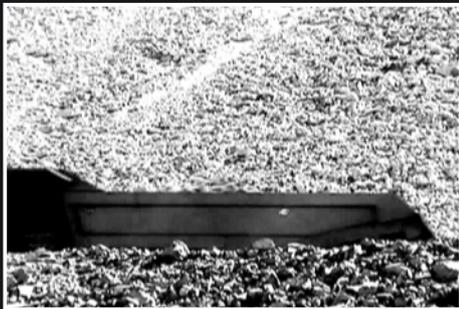
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B&W photographs taken in John Bradford village, Chuquicamata, Chile.



01 Machine Studies

**Graphite on paper/21 x 29,7 cm each
2009 — 2010**

02 Wo fass ich dich, unendliche Natur?

**Video HD/duration variable
2010**

03 Des-hecho

**Graphite and Coal on canvas/1 m x 2 m each
2009**

04 F60: A Machine Too Big To Operate

**Graphite on canvas/1 m x 70 cm each
2010**

05 Elephants

**Video Digital8/02 min 25 sec
2004**

06 8 (Eight)

**Video Digital8/02 min
2002**

07 ERASE

**Analog Photography/Lambda Print/
Variable Dimensions
2002**



**Michelle-Marie
Letelier**

1977

Born in Rancagua, Chile
Lives and Works in Berlin, Germany

Education

2003

Video Tutorial Program, Universidad
de Artes, Ciencias y Comunicación
(UNIACC), Santiago, Chile
1996 — 2000

B.F.A, Catholic University, Santiago,
Chile

Awards/grants

2010

Goldrausch Künstlerinnenprojekt Art IT,
Berlin, Germany

1999

First Award in Plástica UC Contest,
Catholic University, Santiago, Chile

Selected Exhibitions

2010

GOLDRAUSCH KÜNSTLERINNEN-
PROJEKT 2010, September Gallery
and Barbara Thumm Projektraum,
Berlin, Germany

2009

DIE FEINFÜHLIGEZONE, Die Ecke Gallery,
Santiago, Chile

2008

IN/OUT CHINA, East Asia Contemporary
Art Space, Shanghai, China

2007

HANDLE WITH CARE, Museum of
Contemporary Art, Santiago, Chile
PEEPSHOW, Gallery 54, Göteborg,
Sweden

AIRVIDEO 3: ALTERNATIVE POSSIBLE
WORLD, AirSpace Gallery,
Stoke-on-Trent, UK

DAS SANTIAGO MANIFEST, Cultural
Center Matucana 100, Santiago, Chile
2006

SUSPENCIÓN VOLUNTARIA DE LA

LÓGICA, VELAN, Center of Contemporary
Art, Turin, Italy

RESISTANCE, FALL AND MADNESS, ACC
Gallery, Weimar, Germany

2005

SELECCIÓN NATURAL, Museum of
Contemporary Art and the Fine Arts
Subway Station, Santiago, Chile;
later exhibition in Kurt-im-Hirsch
Gallery, Berlin

TOMA DE TERRENO II, by Galería Metro-
politana. Ojo del Desierto Art Center
and community television broadcast
channel 3, Calama, Chile

MERCOSUR BIENNIAL, P. Alegre, Brazil
2004

ERASE, BECH Gallery, Santiago,
Chile; CODELCO Borough Building,
Calama, Chile

Selected screenings

2008

WORLD ONE MINUTE, Citypulse
Collection, Chile; Cultural program
of the Olympics, Today Art Museum,
Beijing, China

2007

POLITICAL LANDSCAPE: NEW CHILEAN
VIDEO ART, by Paz Guevara; Kunsthalle
Lichtenberg, Berlin, Germany

2006

FIRST INTERNATIONAL VIDEO & FILM
SEASON ALBIAC, Nature Park of
Olmeria, Valencia, Spain

2005

OTRA PICHANGA: ANOTHER CHILEAN
EXPERIMENT, Monkey Town Gallery,
New York, USA
NEXT FESTIVAL: SECOND VILNIUS
INDEPENDENT FILM & VIDEO FESTIVAL,
Vilnius, Lithuania

Collections

2006

CITYPULSE COLLECTION, Santiago, Chile
OJO POR OJO Videoart Collection,
Santiago, Chile

PUBLICATIONS

2009

JOUNGER THAN JESUS – ARTISTS
DIRECTORY. Selected directory of
500 international artists, published by
New Museum, New York, USA;
New Museum & Phaidon Press,
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