

# Basalt

An exhibition of watercolours and prints  
by **Jill McManners**

**Introduction by Richard Cork**

Published on the occasion of the exhibition at  
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[www.jillmcmanners.com](http://www.jillmcmanners.com)



## JILL McMANNERS: A REVELATORY EXPLORATION

Richard Cork

Sometimes, an artist's oeuvre can be dominated by a long, fruitful involvement with a spectacular location. Cezanne insisted on returning, even at the very end of his life, to the dramatic presence of Mont Sainte-Victoire presiding with such monumental, unforced grandeur over the landscape near his home in Aix-en-Provence. He painted it many times, and Jill McManners has now become even more obsessive about a small, remote yet inexhaustible cluster of Hebridean islands: the Shiant Isles isolated in the Minch north of Skye. McManners and her family have a holiday home in the Sound of Harris, a short boat journey away. But she would never have undertaken the often hazardous trip to visit them without crucial inspiration provided by Adam Nicolson's *Sea Room: An Island Life*. Published in 2001, this eloquent book charts his long love affair with the Shiants. He inherited them at the age of twenty one, and declares in *Sea Room* that 'I have derived more richness from the Shiants than from anywhere else on earth...They can be as sweet as Eden and as malevolent as Hell.'

Impelled by Nicolson's prose to discover these Isles for herself, McManners set out on her formative expedition in the summer of 2003. Although she did so with considerable trepidation, realising that 'there's a big tide and it's difficult to get to', the experience proved revelatory. Crammed into 'a tiny boat' with her husband, three young sons and an academic friend, she could easily have found that their expedition became alarming. But the sea turned out to stay reassuringly calm with a low tide, and the voyagers were all heartened on the way by the excitement of seeing a

basking shark as well as a minke whale. Then, immediately she glimpsed the Shiants rising so indomitably from the water, McManners thought 'they were amazing. The very, very structured cliff-faces completely bowled me over.'

Her fascination strengthened even more when 'the boatman got us close enough to touch the cliffs.' This tactile involvement, coming so soon after the powerful visual impact of the Isles, was enormously important. McManners had, after all, spent a decade working closely with many prominent sculptors at A & A Sculpture Casting in London. Her professional engagement with sculptural priorities had been intense, and several of her own metal sculptures, like *Celestial*, *Variable*, *Occasional* and *Gale Force*, were inspired by her earlier response to other Hebridean islands. Nothing, however, could have prepared her for the momentous, life-changing impact of the Shiants. 'We actually landed and walked through the Puffin colony and round', she recalled. 'It was pretty dark, black and terrifying at the base of the cliffs, and then I saw all this life further up -- rivers of guano dropping off the steep cliffs and fascinating lichen which grows like a fleece covering everything, hairy and spiky.'

McManners took around one hundred photographs on this first astonishing visit, and yet several years passed before she felt able fully to absorb the overwhelming nature of her experience. 'I had always loved studying the origins of the world, and how our continents were punched apart four hundred million years ago. So how could I not be enthralled by these ancient rocks when I first found myself there?'

Although she explored the Shiants on the calmest of summer days, without even a hint of the belligerent storms that often assail them, McManners could see that ‘these Isles were scary. It was a really tough environment, and the thought of falling into the water at the bottom of those black cliffs is quite grim. It’s very intimidating; you realise that you’re tiny and don’t matter at all.’ In this respect, the Shiants reminded her of growing up on the edges of the Trough of Bowland in Lancashire, where her family lived by an immense sandstone quarry known as ‘the bottomless pit.’

Even so, McManners was truly astounded by the visceral extremes she encountered at the Shiants, continually deepening her awareness of the Isles on subsequent visits to this alarming yet irresistible location. ‘I’ve never felt more euphoric on a summer’s evening, but it can be the most desolate place when it is blowing a gale. The weather is always changing, and you feel like you’re on the edge of everything.’ This primal impulse, closely linked to the survival instinct, is a crucial factor in understanding McManners’ approach to her work. ‘I need that feeling of being on the edge in my art when it’s going well. The Shiants are beautiful, but not in a pretty way. They are very difficult to deal with.’

That is why several years passed before she found out how to make images of her own from the Shiants revelation. After deciding that it would be pointless ‘to compete with cliff-faces by doing sculpture’, McManners surprised herself when she concluded that watercolour was the best medium to deploy. Drawing played an important role as well,

enabling her to ‘map out’ each section in outline first. But after this preliminary process of definition, watercolour took over. And the choice of paper was crucial as well: ‘It is cotton rag -- an Italian paper, very heavy, rough, tactile and furrowed. I worked the paper like a stone, almost as if it was a sculptural relief.’

Eventually, in 2008, McManners managed to begin making the kind of images she had been searching for. The earliest ones are very abstract and structural, with lichen-like edges. *Basalt Cliff-Face No.1* (page 44) brings our eyes right up against the surface of the rock, and McManners emphasizes its strength by making the watercolour surge through the paper in the sequence of fierce, vigorous strokes. They reappear in *Basalt Cliff-Face No.2*, (page45) and yet this time we are further away from the motif and given a glimpse of the white sky above. It is rendered in the simplest possible way, by an artist who knows precisely when to stop her own mark-making and let the empty paper assert a visual identity of its own.

The following year, McManners experimented with joining two sheets of paper together and making a more composite, all-embracing image. In *Basalt-Bristled*, (page 12) the cliff-face takes on a more eruptive force, seeming almost to explode away from a dark crevice asserted on the right of the composition. As its title suggests, *Corrugated Cathedral with Buttresses* (page34/35) is a more solid, monumental vision of the rock as architecture. But it still appears to be on the move, as if determined

to cover the black recess lodged near the centre. The titles of the works become more emotive, too. In *They keep their heads above water*, (page 11) she closes on a dramatic vertical crevice and allows it to dominate the entire image. It is at once inviting and sinister, making us wonder what may lurk inside the shadows of the recess while at the same time hinting at the instability undermining even the most redoubtable expanse of cliff-face.

Taking us on a fascinating journey through the Isles, McManners seems to hold out the promise of a redemptive destination by calling one 2010 work *Stairway to Heaven* (page 28). Yet the broken rocks assembled at its base look eerily carnivorous, like the teeth of a hungry monster. As for the basalt columns rising above, they cannot be climbed by humans at all. Crumbling and manifestly unsafe, they offer no easy access to a heavenly haven -- unless, of course, it is achieved by a climber who dies fortified by a belief in the Christian after-life.

Suddenly, all our thoughts of mortality are banished when McManners suggests, in *Pink Cliffs and Peppermint Seas No.2* (page 30/31) that we make for the archway leading us through to another island beyond. It is an enticing prospect, and *Roller Coast Diptych* (page 52/53) goes further by showing no less than three apertures leading into caves. Time and again, though, her work emphasizes the ultimate impossibility of escaping from the inexorable reality of the cliffs. For aeons, they have been obstinately rearing up from the waters and weathering even the most ferocious turbulence. A work titled,

*Long Reach Cliff Face* (page 46/47) celebrates their inescapable presence all over again, and in 2011 several of the watercolours reveal that the cliffs' reflections in the still seas look almost as solid as the rocks themselves.

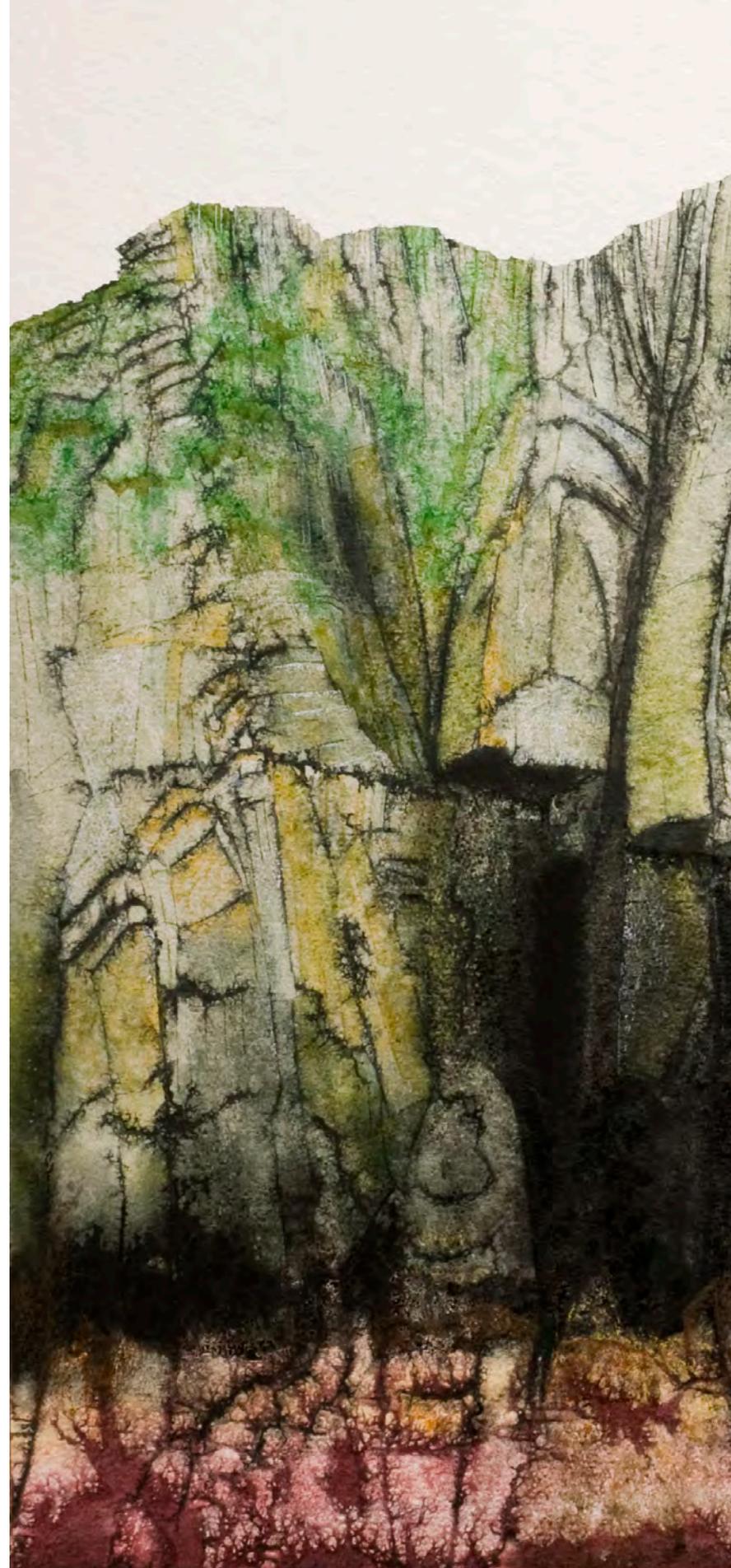
Music also plays a felicitous role in stimulating McManners' imagination. She acknowledges its inspiration in the titles of many works. *No Hell Below Us*, (page 16/17) where the cliff-face bulges out towards us as well as withdrawing into unknowable shadowy clefts, takes its name from John Lennon's song *Imagine*. So does *Above Us Only Sky*, (page 18/19) where McManners leaves a significant upper expanse of the paper completely bare. Its emptiness contrasts with the complex brushwork beneath, making us appreciate just how much discerning labour she is prepared to devote to her work. The technical accomplishment is impressive, and within an inevitably limited palette the sheer variety of colours surprises us at every turn.

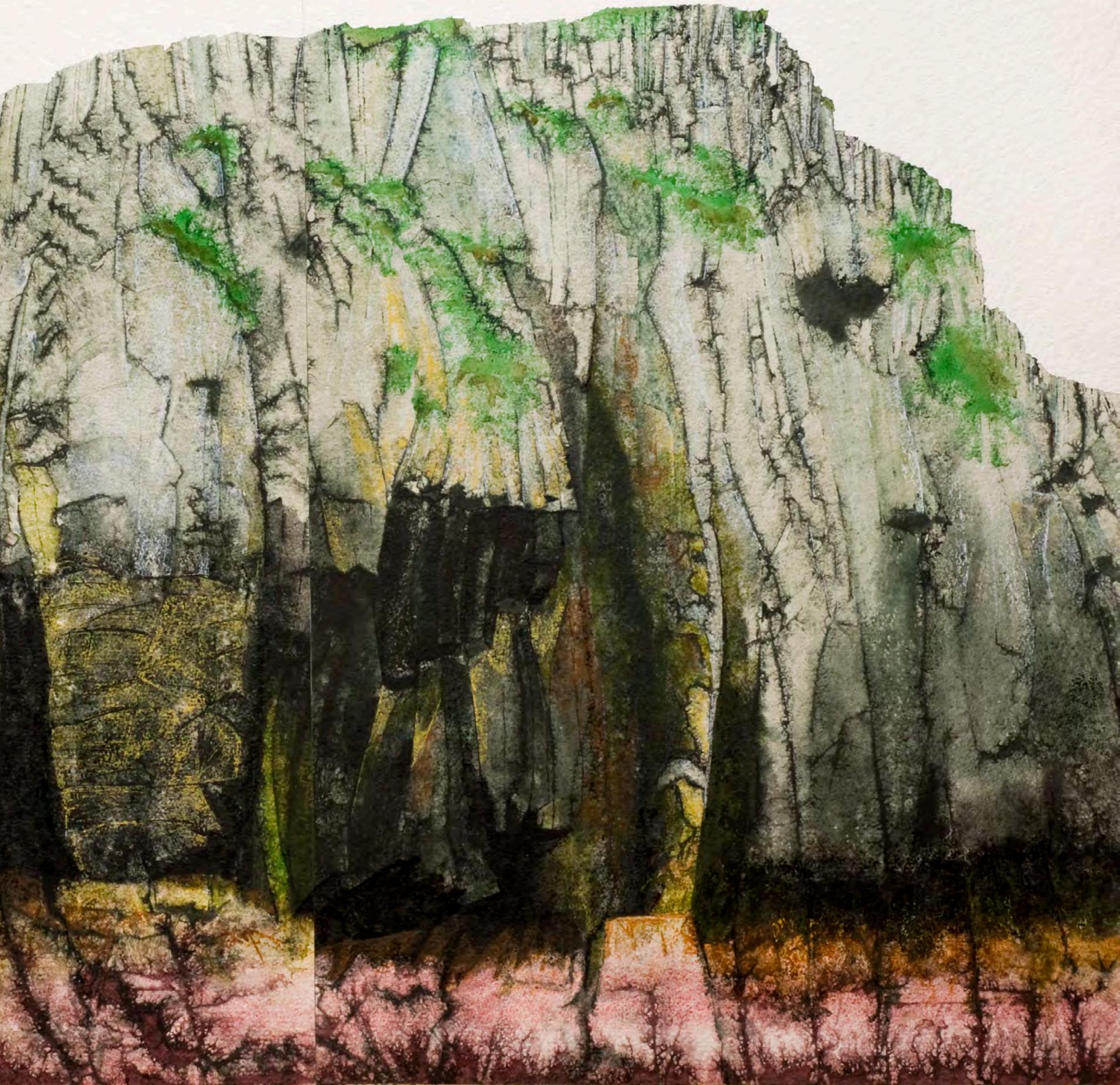
As the views from her studio windows in rural Berkshire attest, McManners has devoted a substantial amount of her time to gardening. The Shiant watercolours are alive with her rapt understanding of the green and yellow growth which can be found on the Isles. *Stay and Make My Heart Fly* (page 23) is the subtitle of a vertical work called *Proclaimed*, where the rocks leading up from the sea glow with verdancy.

Her handling of watercolour, both meticulous and free, gives the sombre cliffs an equally remarkable vivacity. Nowhere more than in the major *Wilderness Triptych*, (page 42/43) commenced in 2011 and completed

the following year. Here, in the tall central section which she executed first, the shimmering green leads up to a very dark, tempting yet ominous cavity near the apex. McManners calls this image *Coming out of my Cage*, (page 38) so the words carry a promise of liberation. But the cavity is, in reality, a dead end, and the right section of the triptych confronts us with the uncompromising vision of *Wilderness Locked in a Cage* (page 40/41). On the left side of this multi-layered triptych, however, a more optimistic note is sounded. We are led from the cavity towards the summit of the cliff-face, where an inviting strip of colour becomes visible for the first time between rock and sky. *Learning to Walk Again* (page 36/37) is the title of this section, the last one in the triptych to be completed. It invites us to participate in the artist's journey, and discover for ourselves the fundamental sense of wonder to be found throughout this epic, infinitely mysterious region.

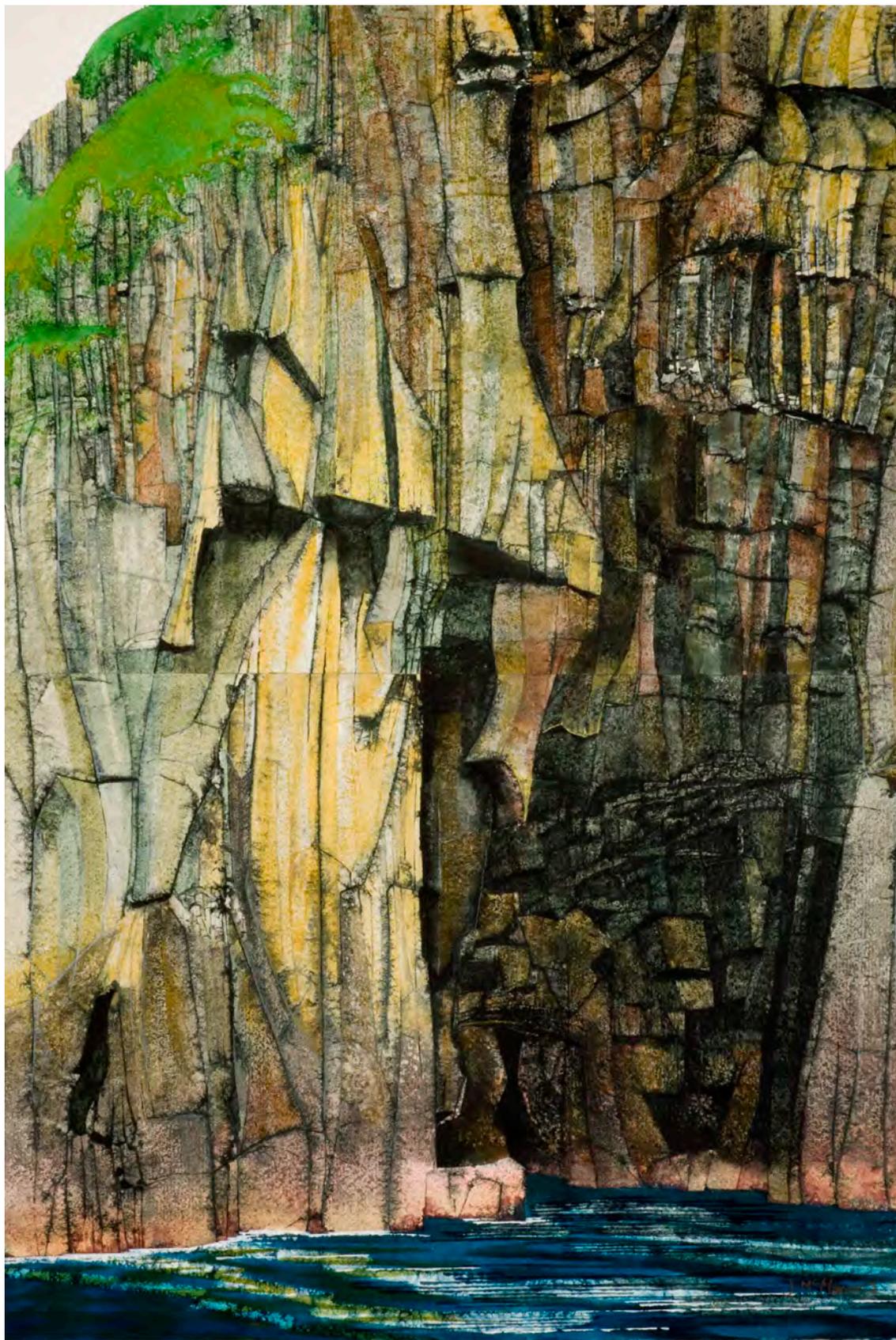
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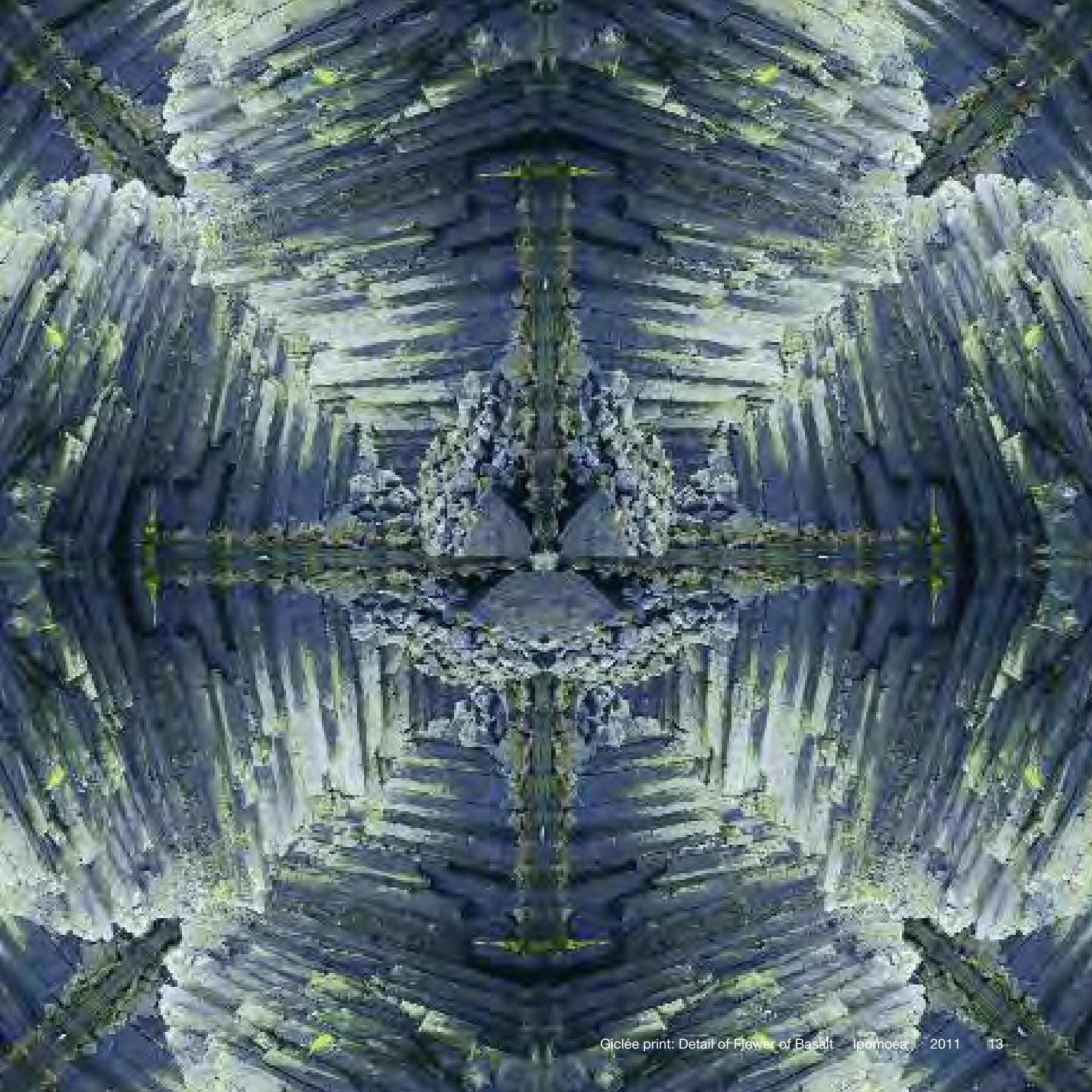


















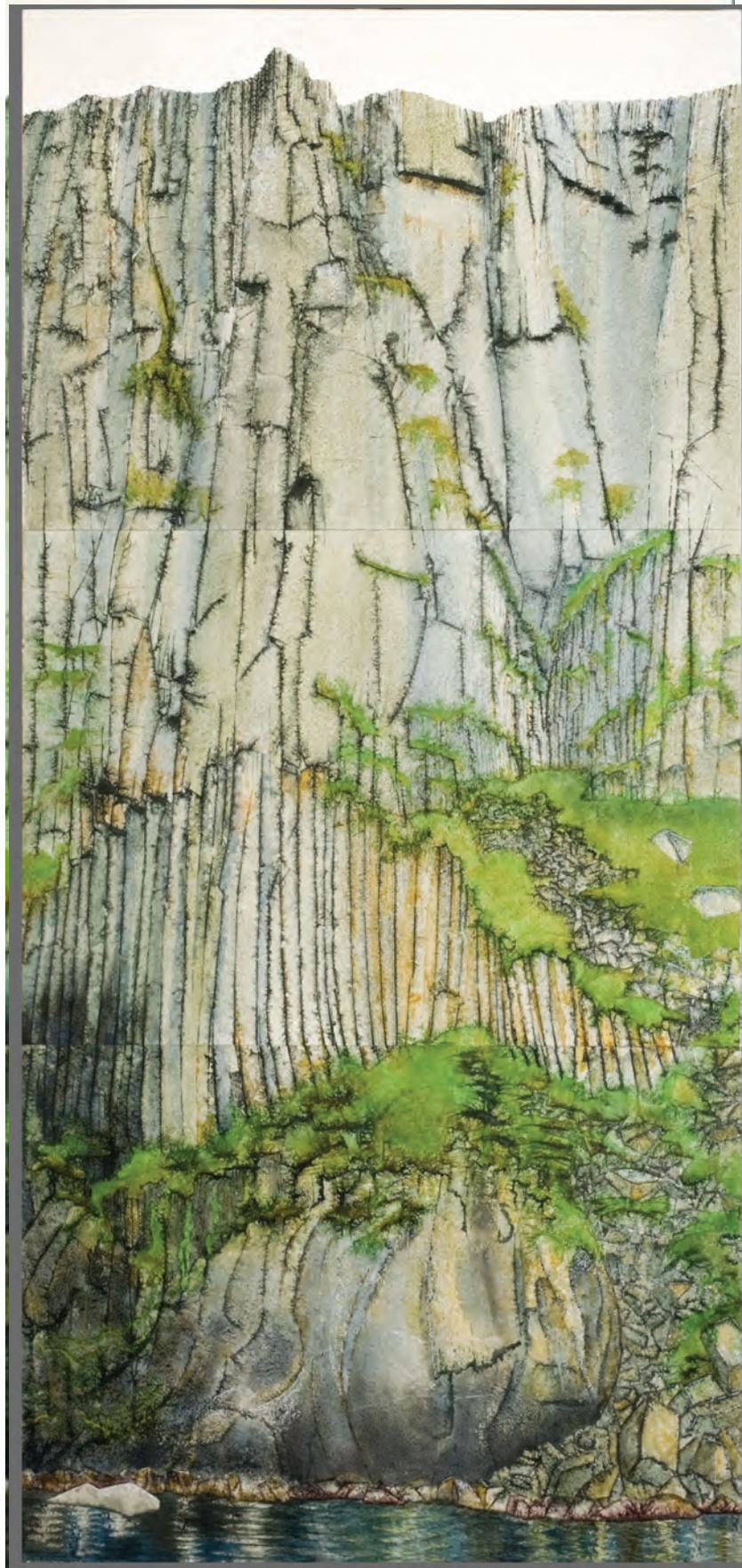


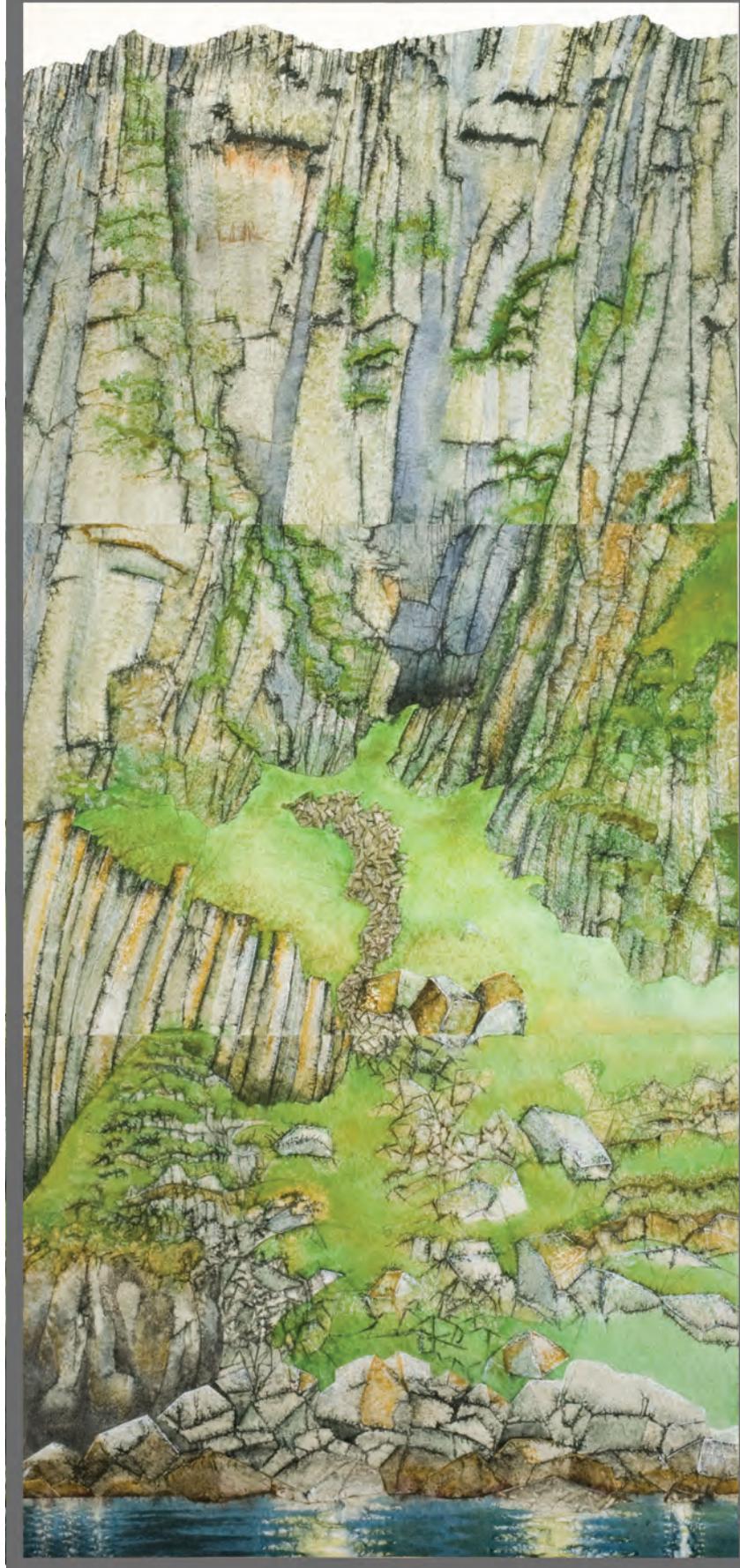














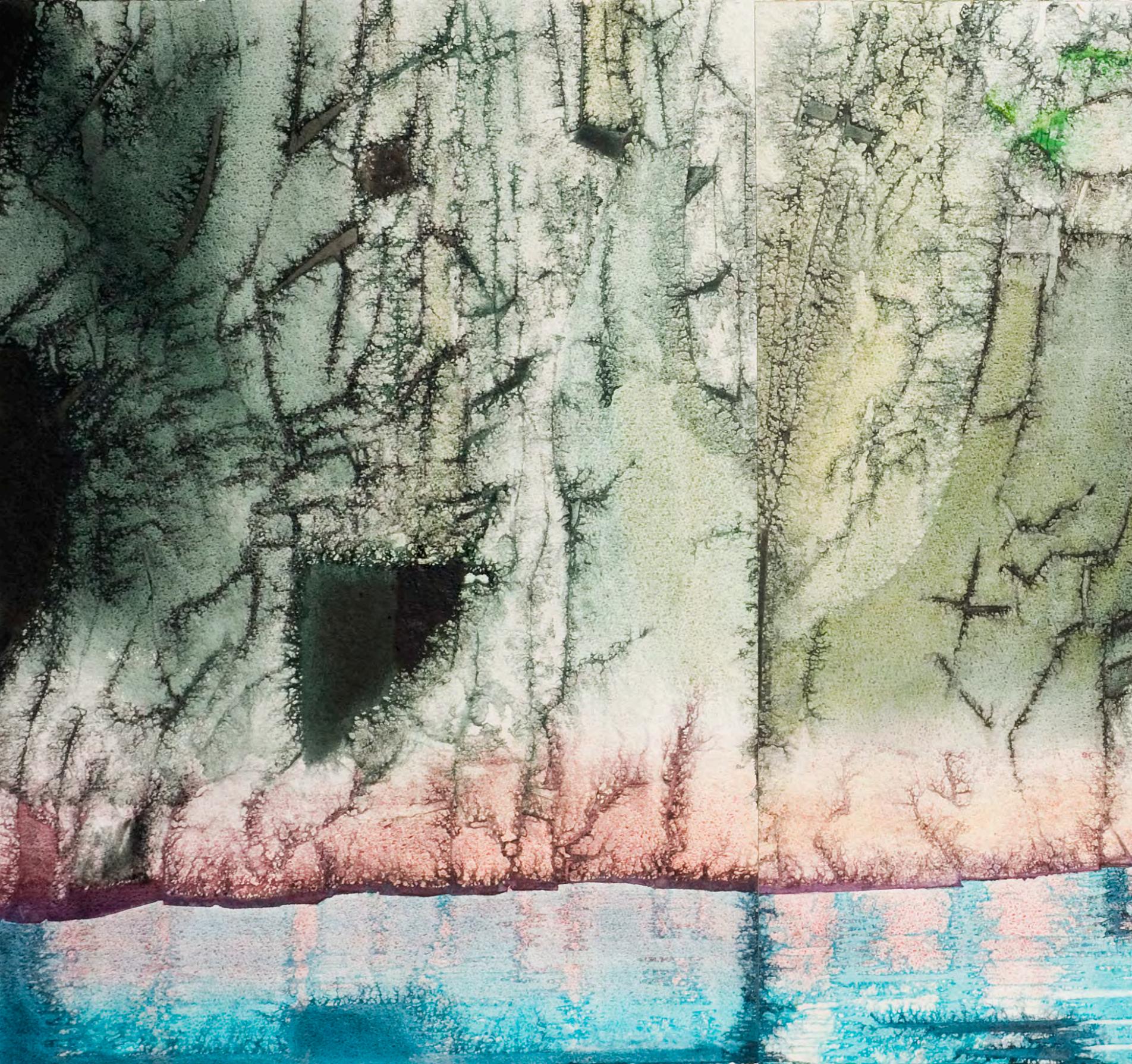


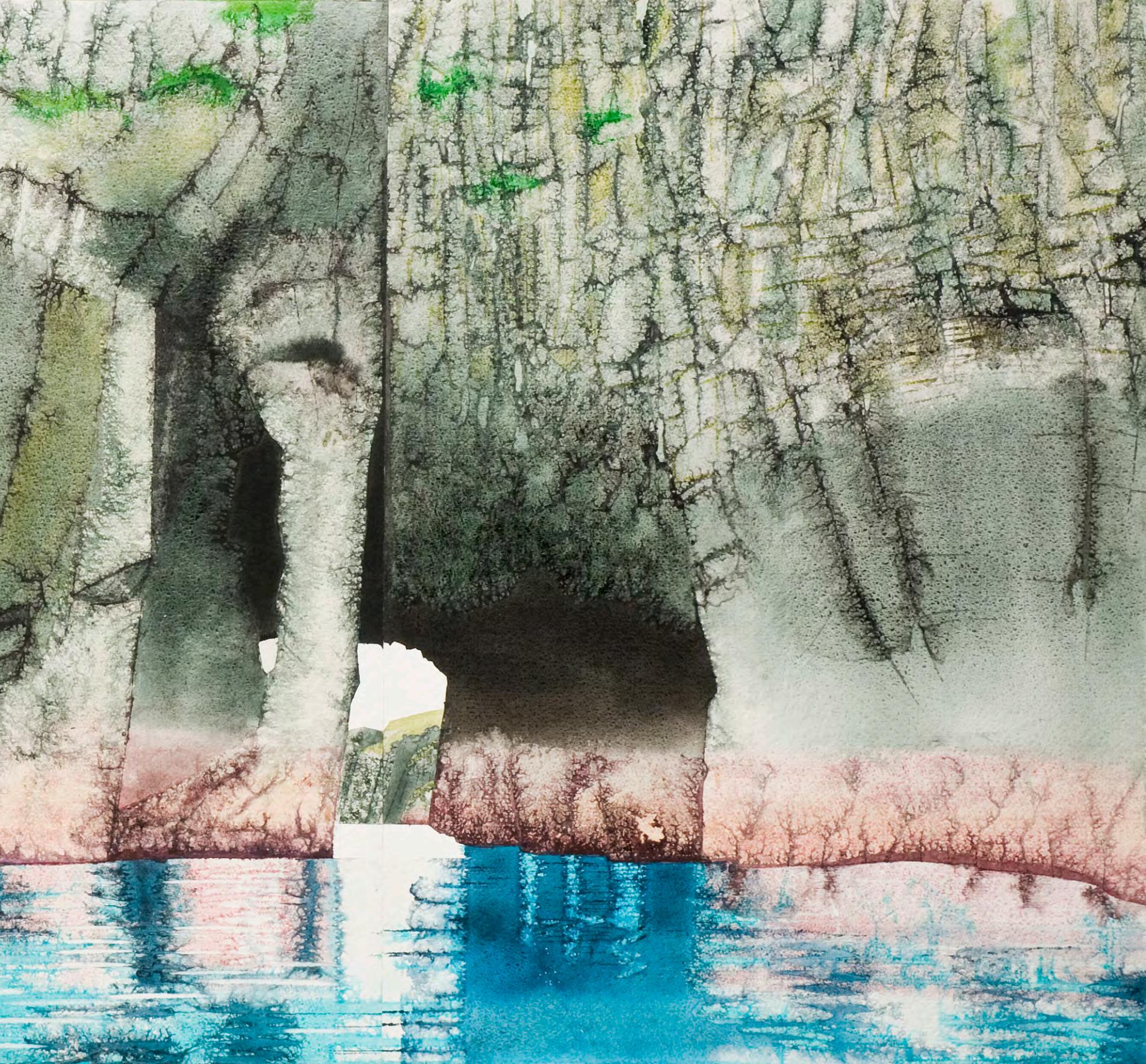




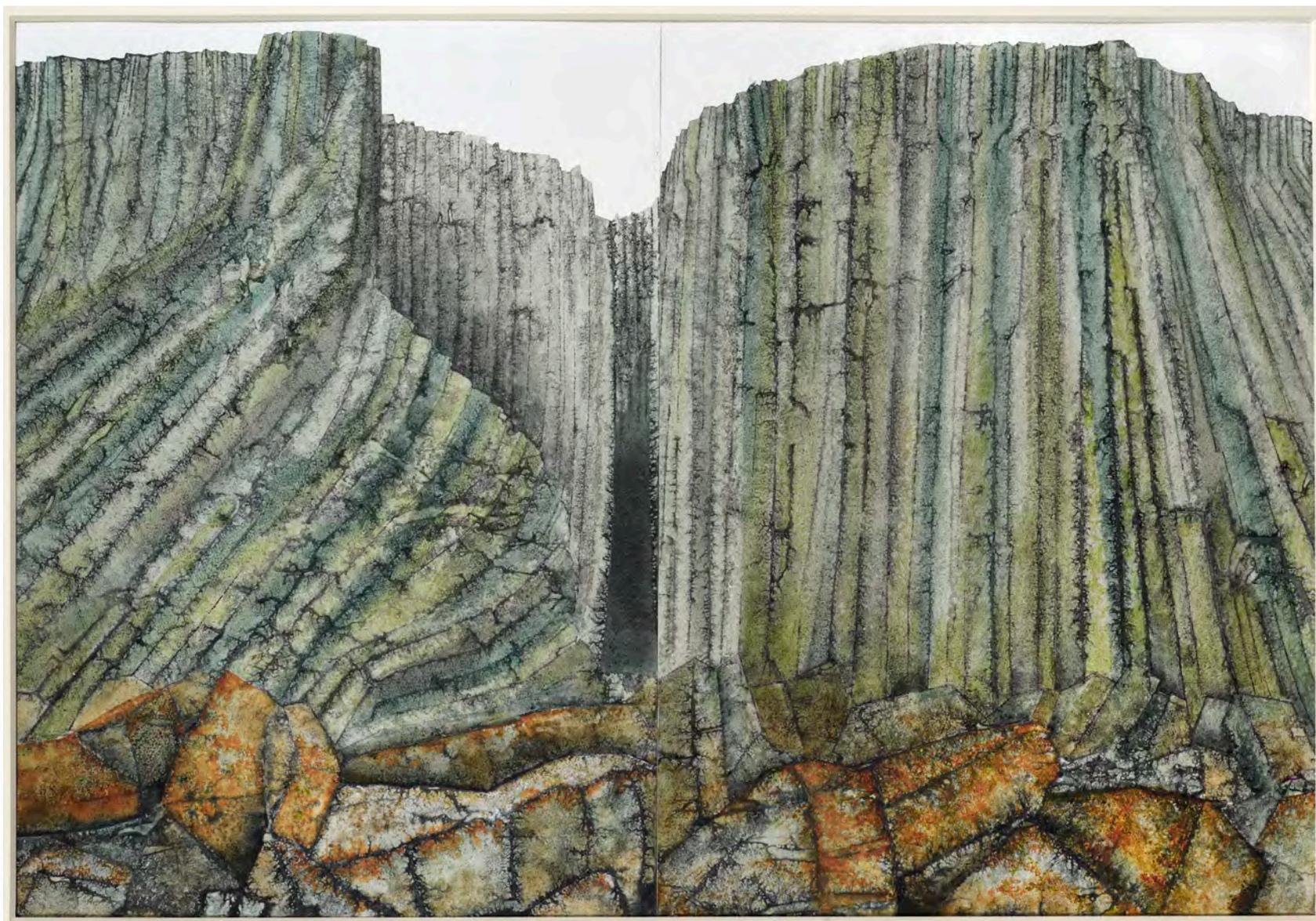


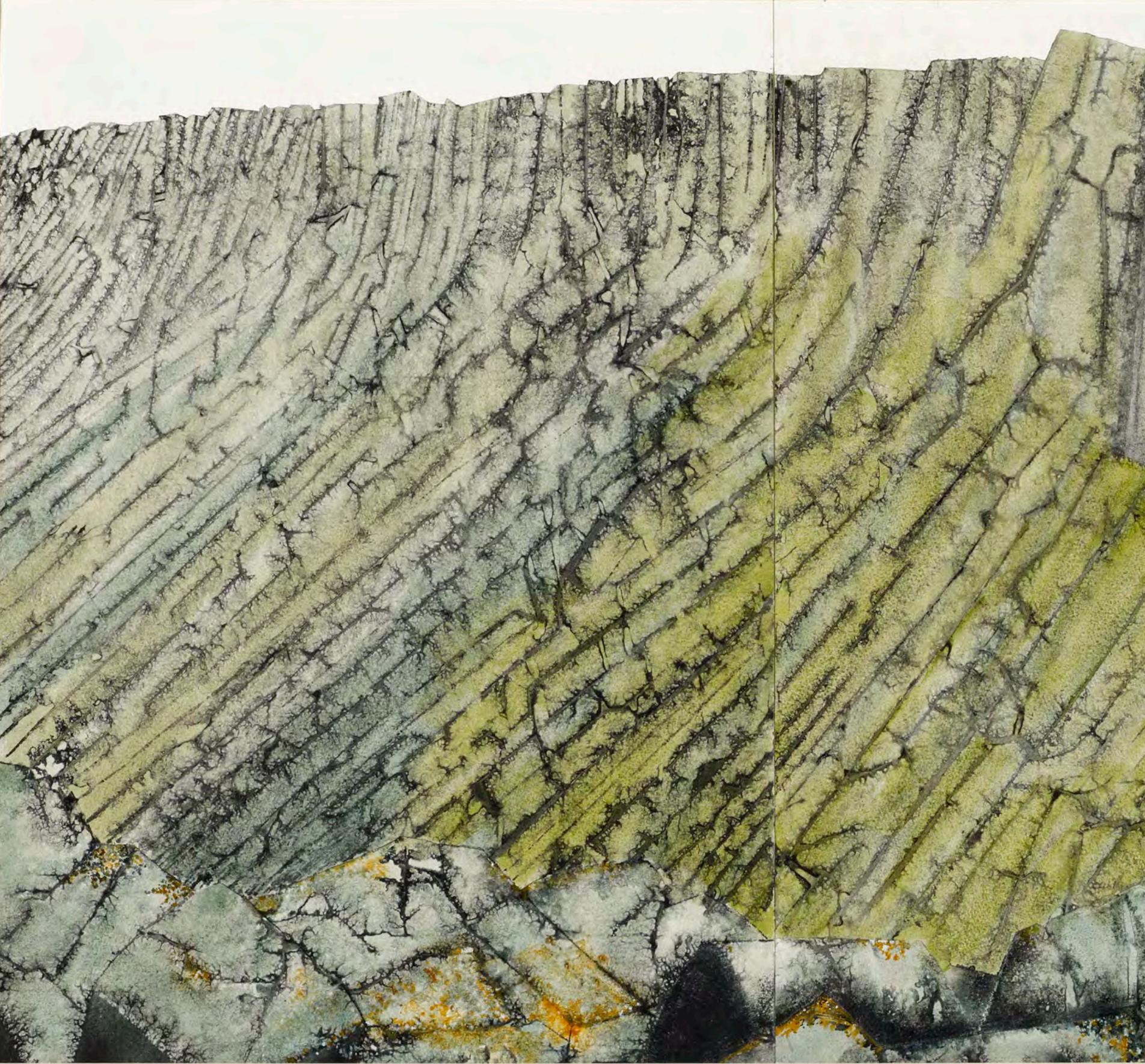








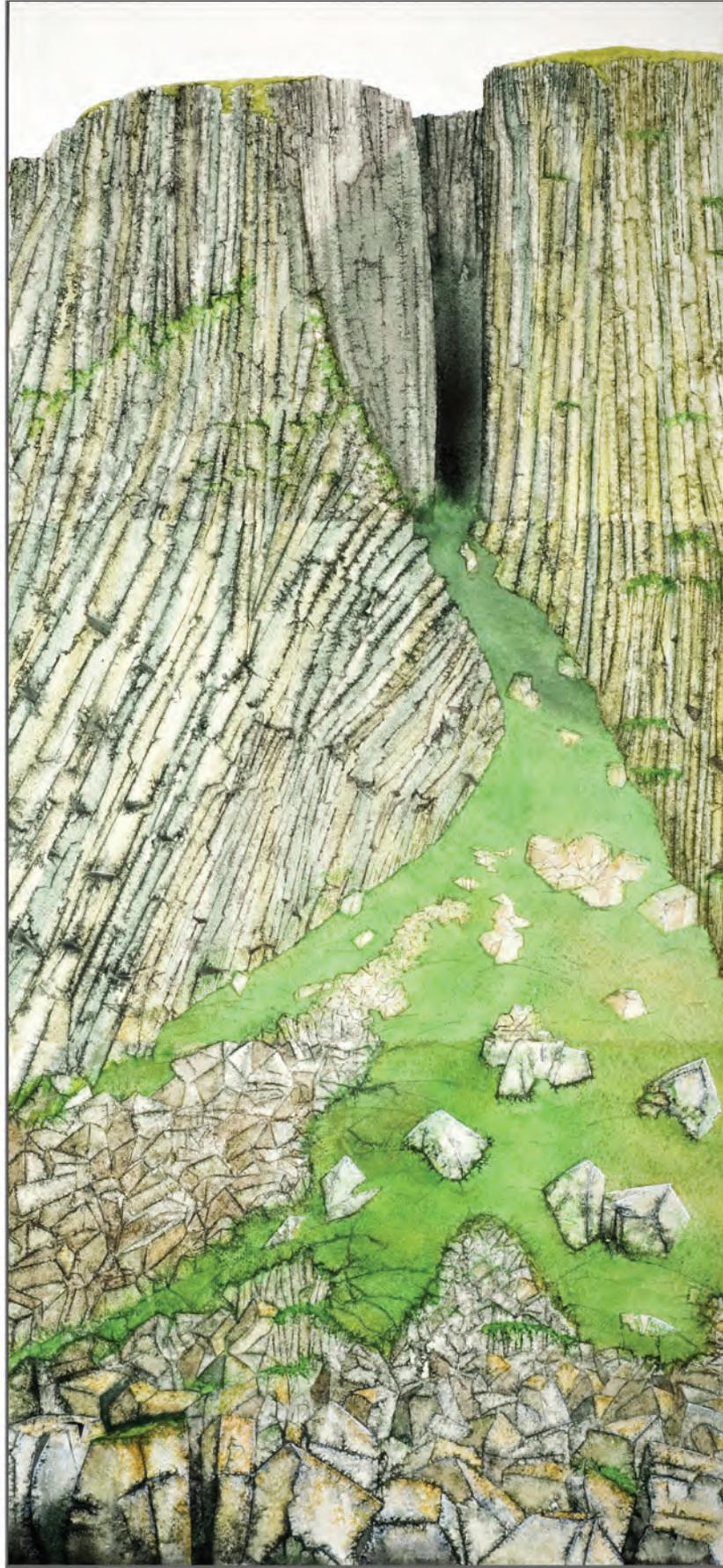










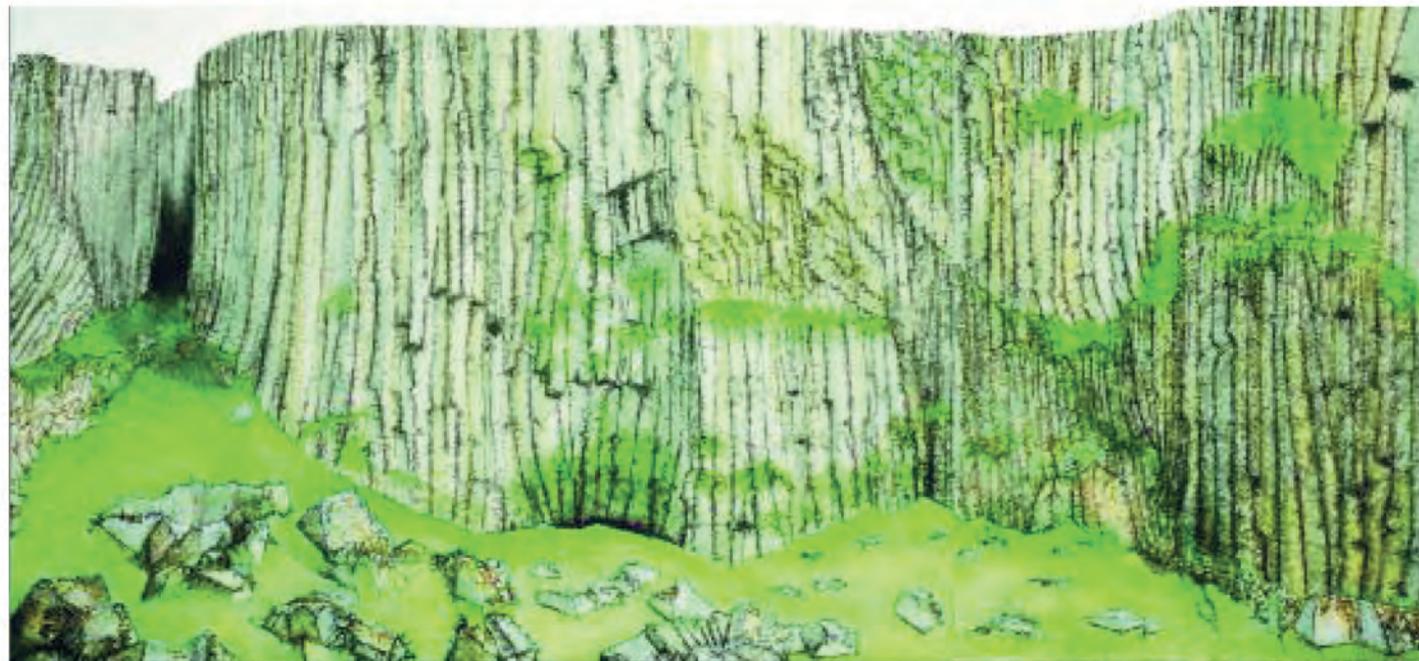




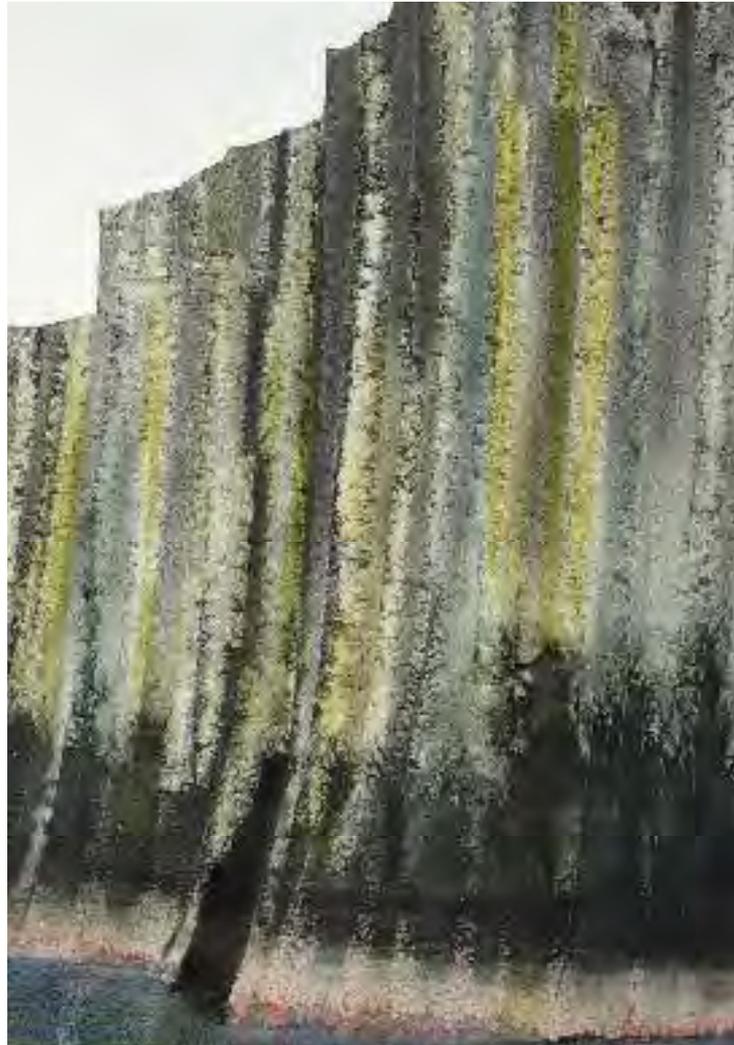




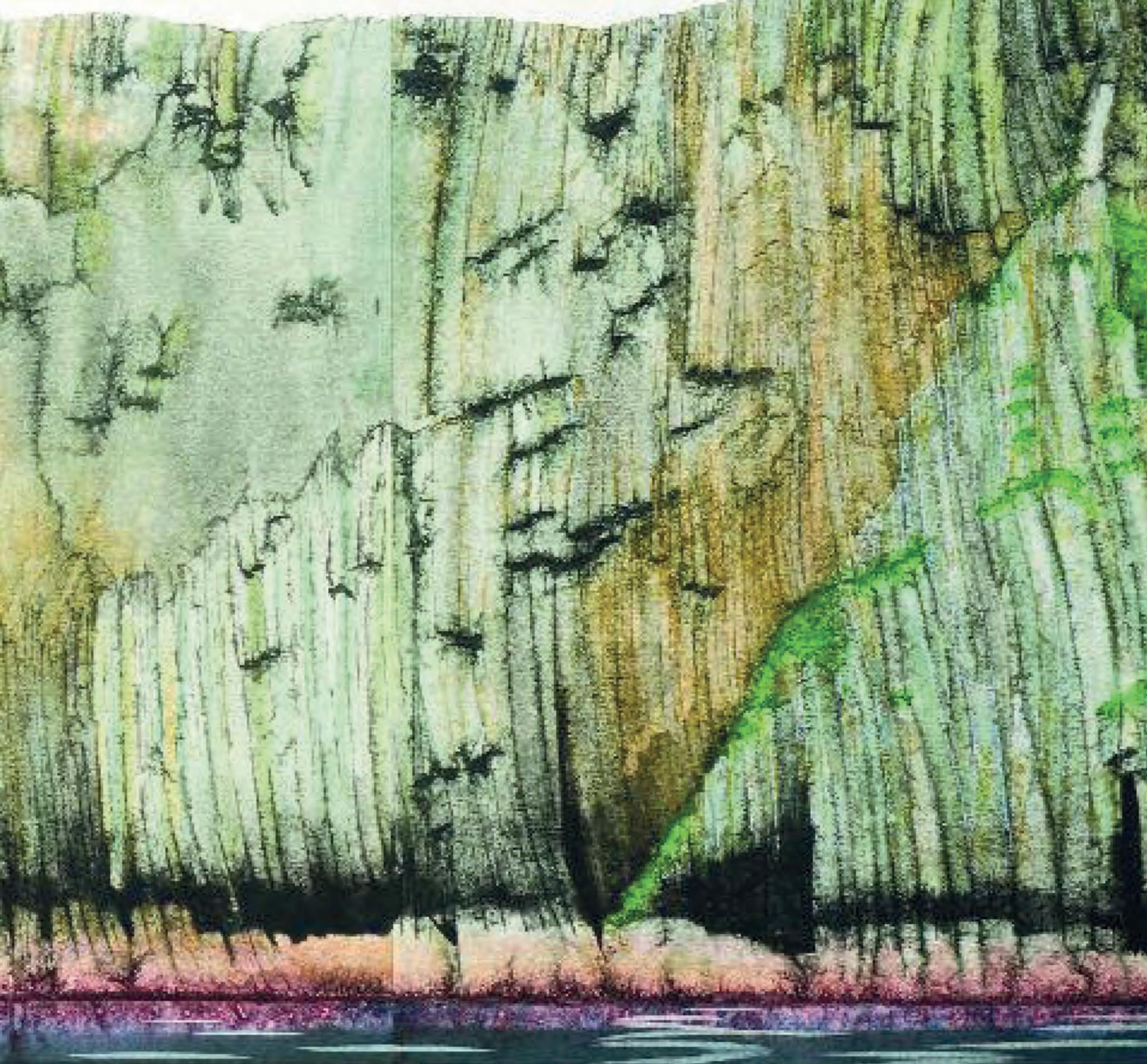


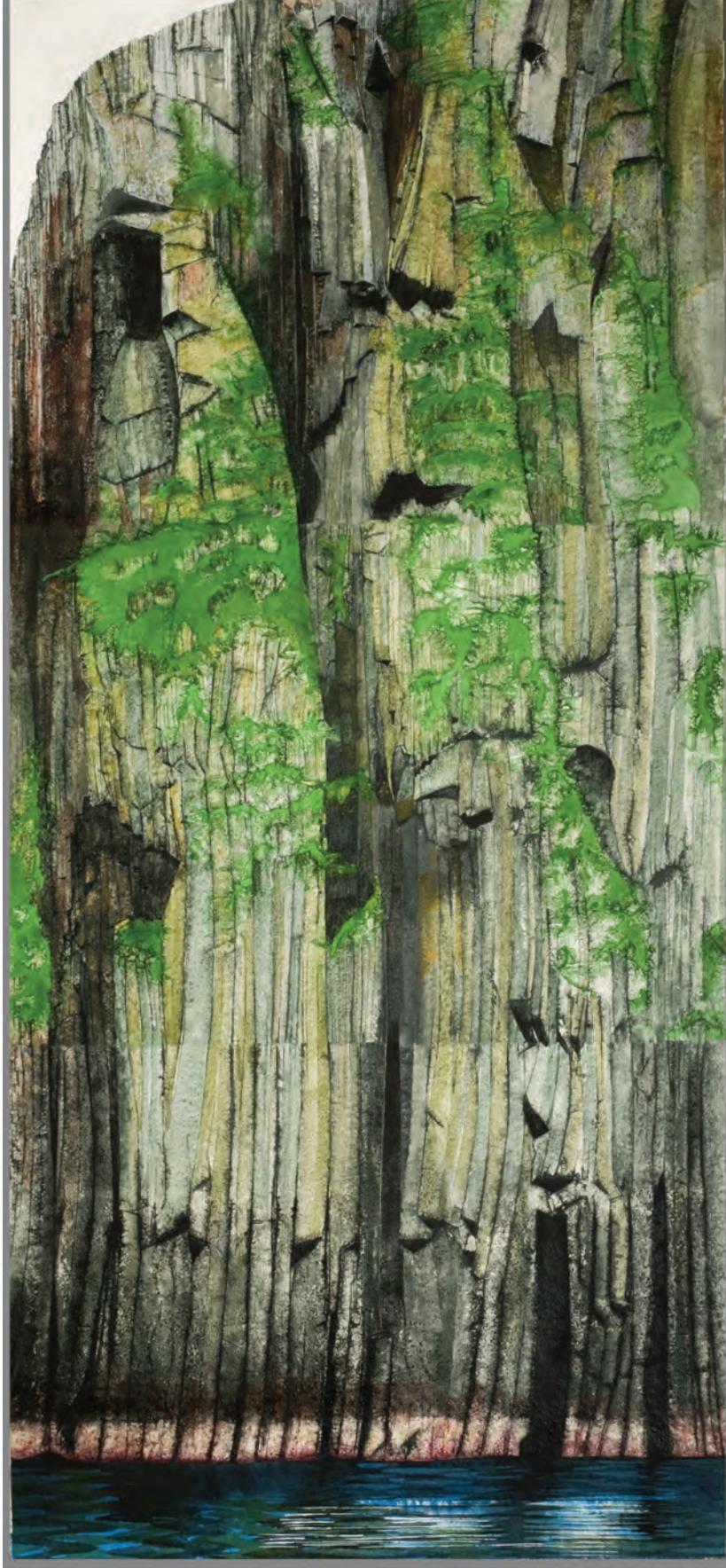




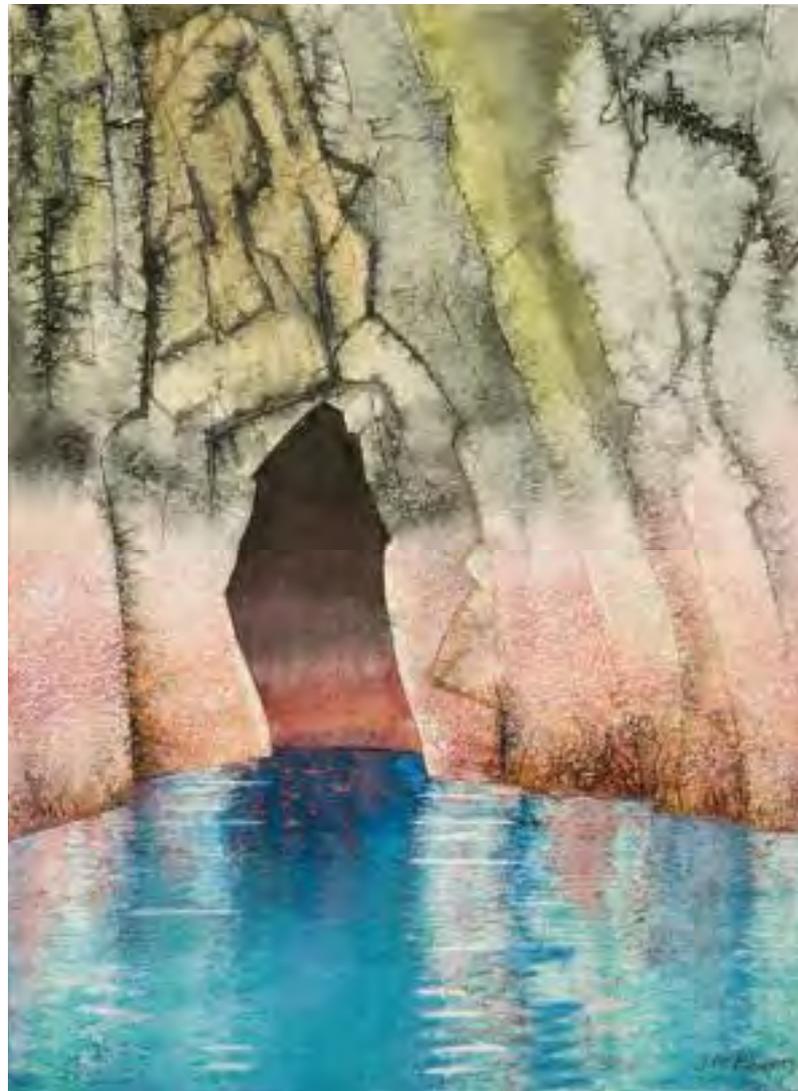






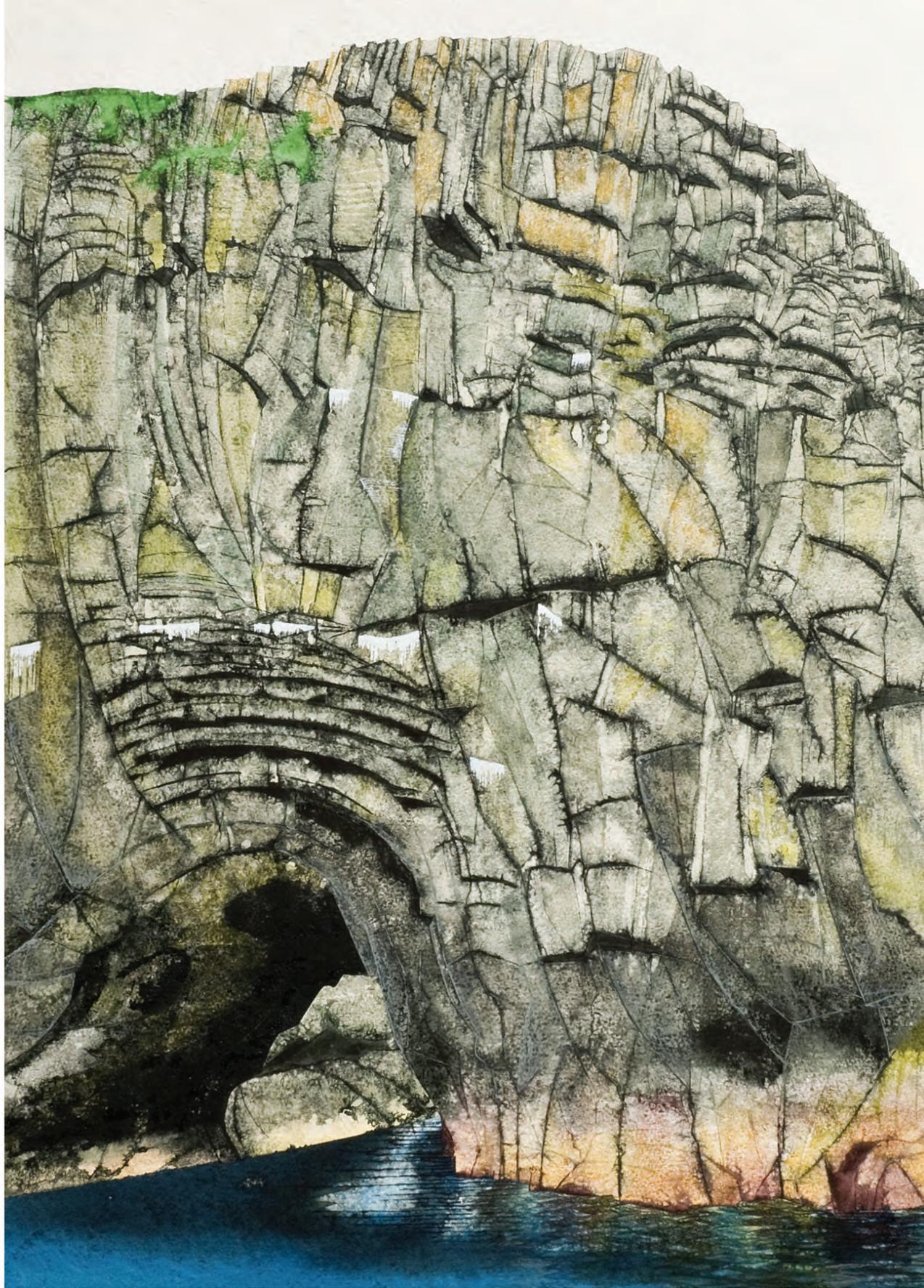














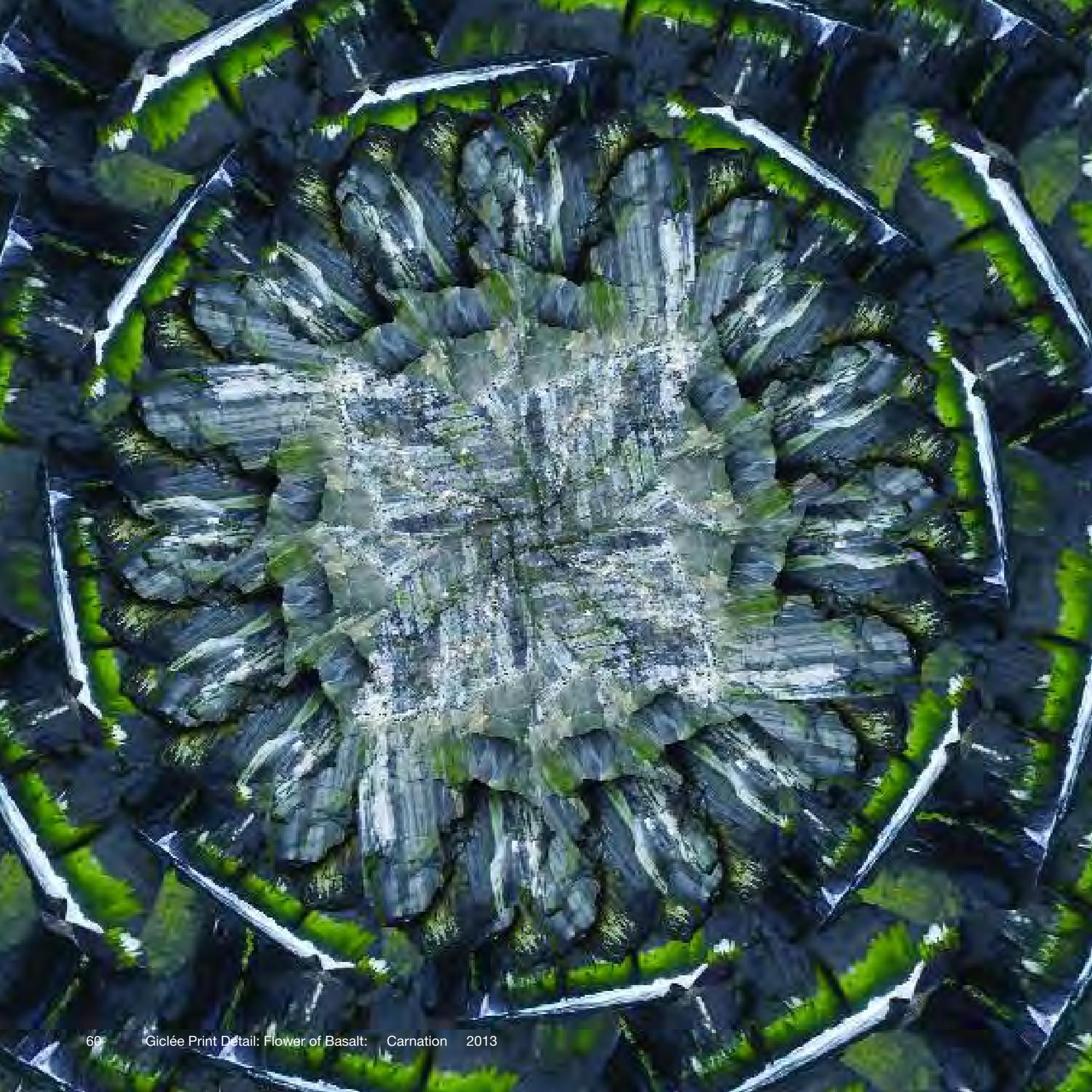












On the Shiants the landscape is all about the Rock. The weather was important to me only in that it had to be calm to get as close to the rock as possible, not an easy thing on these cliffhigh shores.

In 2003 our sons were thirteen, twelve and seven and it was some years before I could begin to seriously work out how I was going to work with this unforgettable landscape. I had to find the right paper, palette, a way to paint the rock, the atmosphere of the cliffs, the sea and the tide mainly from the viewpoint of being on the sea rather than the land. The paintings take a few months to do. There is nothing sketch like or immediate about them as you might associate with a watercolour. They are constructed using in many cases three sheets of paper that then have to work together. I make drawings, tracings and then templates before starting to paint. I have learnt to use this to my advantage, allowing some of the washes to dry really well and become more fixed to the paper so that I can lay another colour over the top at a later date. I use only watercolour with some added layer of gum which helps give a slimy sheen to some of the rocks.

The paintings have architectural titles, or are quotes from books and poems and some are lines from rock songs. The Islands are on the edge of the British Isles, they are defined by the life that exists on these edges, the weather and sea that erodes them, the taught skyline viewed from below and the edges of your emotions that are assaulted by being there.

With my interest in flowers I created the Flower of Basalt Prints and got the cliffs to bloom in another way, using my source material of photographs that I had studied so intensely. It also meant that I could work in the winter months when it gets dark early and I run out of daylight to be able to paint.

I have structured the catalogue as a journey around the islands rather than in chronological order, as I decided to hang the exhibition in the same way. This means that some of the cliffs that I painted earlier I have painted again at a later date and they can be seen together in a group.

Ten years on I feel there will always be a Basalt painting waiting to be done. Every time I go back I get new ideas and inspiration.

**Jill McManners**

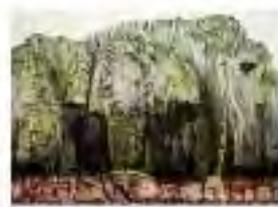
## **The Peace of Wild Things** **By Wendell Berry**

When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

By Wendell Berry, "The Peace of Wild Things"  
from *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*.  
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Basalt Isles H35xW141 page 2



The Absolute Rock H70xW100 page 7



The Dark Side of the Galtas No.1  
H70xW150 page 8/9



The Dark Side of the Galtas no.2  
H100xW70 page 10



They keep their heads  
above water  
H140xW50 page 11



Basalt-Bristled  
H70xW100 page 12



Giclée Print: Flower of  
Basalt: Ipomoea page 13



Amphitheatre 1  
H70xW100 page 14



Amphitheatre 2  
H70xW100 page 15



No Hell Below Us H70xW150  
page 16/17



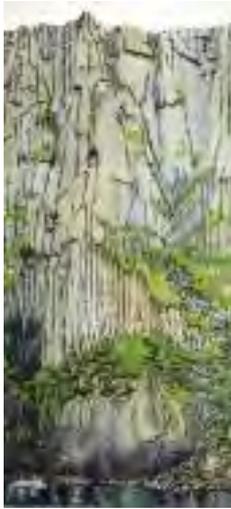
Above Us Only Sky H70xW150  
page 18/19



Giclée Print: Flower of Basalt:  
Siamese Sunflower H59 x W109  
page 20



Basalt: Bent H50xW140  
page 21



Proclaimed Diptych:  
Don't Go Rushing By  
H150xW70 page 22



Proclaimed Diptych:  
Stay and Make My Heart Fly  
H150xW70 page 23



Basalt: Curtain Wall no1  
H50xW139 page 24



Basalt: Curtain Wall no2  
H50xW139 page 25



Curtain Wall with Screens H70xW155 page 26/27



Stairway to Heaven H70xW100 page 28



Basalt: Arch H50xW70 page 29



Pink Cliffs and Peppermint Seas no1 H50xW139 page 29



Pink Cliffs and Peppermint Seas No.2  
H70xW150 page 30/31



Corrugated Cathedral  
H70xW100 page 32



Fortress Cathedral H70xW100 page 33



Corrugated Cathedral with Buttresses  
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Learning to Walk Again H70xW150 page 36/37



Coming out of my Cage  
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Giclée Print: Flower of Basalt:  
Papaver Pyritic page 39



Wilderness Locked in a Cage H70xW150 page 40/41



Basalt: Wilderness Triptych H 150 x W 370 page 42/43



Basalt Cliff-Face No.1  
H70xW50 page 44



Basalt Cliff-Face No.2  
H70xW50 page 45



Long Reach Cliff Face  
H70xW150 page 46/47



High Reach Cliff Face  
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Giclée Print: Flowers  
of Basalt: Ragged  
Romneya page 49



Basalt: Cave No.1  
H50xW70 page 50



Basalt: Cave No.2  
H70xW50 page 50



Giclée Print: Flowers of Basalt:  
Nicotiana Troglodytic page 51



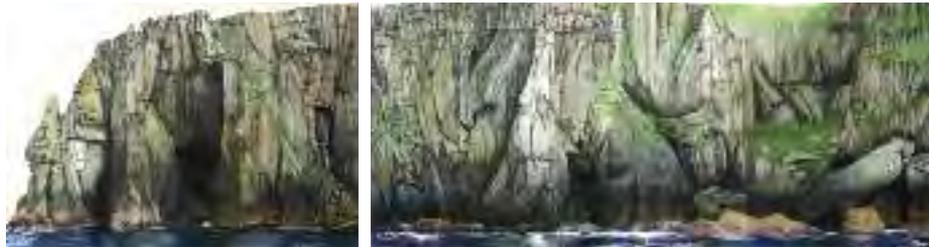
Roller Coast Diptych H70xW155 page 52/53



Lava Landscape no1 H50xW139 page 54



Lava Landscape no2  
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Love of the Loveless Diptych H70xW255 page 56/57



Gold on the Ceiling H70xW150 page 58/59



Giclée Print: Flowers of Basalt:  
Carnation page 60

## Biography

|               |  |
|---------------|--|
| Date of Birth | 2/6/1955 Lancashire  |
| 2014          | Merville Galleries at The Mall Galleries                   |
| 2014          | Merville Galleries London Art Fair                         |
| 2013          | Merville Galleries Royal College of Art British Art Fair   |
| 2013          | Merville Galleries London Art Fair                         |
| 2012          | Threadneedle Prize Exhibition Mall Galleries               |
| 2010          | Royal Watercolour Society Open Exhibition Bankside Gallery |
| 2010          | Sunday Times Watercolour Competition Mall Galleries        |
| 2007 – 2009   | Critique by Adam Nicolson and Basalt Rock Watercolours     |
| 2000 – 2006   | Three Gates and 90ft of Railings                           |
| 1989 – 2006   | Raising 3 Boys   |
| 1988          | Agnews Bronzes and Watercolours. Westward Ho               |
| 1986          | Agnews Watercolours Show                                   |
| 1985          | The Phoenix Gallery Lavenham, Suffolk                      |
| 1979          | The start of 30 yrs trips to the Hebrides                  |
| 1977 – 1987   | A&A Sculpture Casting                                      |
| 1974 – 1977   | Central School of Art and Design London                    |
| 1973 – 1974   | Southport College of Art Foundation                        |

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## In association with

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*They keep their heads above water* is from a poem by Anna Adams, *Island Chapters*, published by Littlewood Arc 1991

An aerial photograph of a wetland landscape. The terrain is a mosaic of different vegetation types, including dense green areas, lighter green grasslands, and brownish-grey patches. A network of narrow, winding water channels or ditches is visible, some of which are highlighted with thin yellow lines. The overall scene depicts a complex, natural environment.

**Special thanks to DPW, Margaret Alleston and North Atlantic Tom**