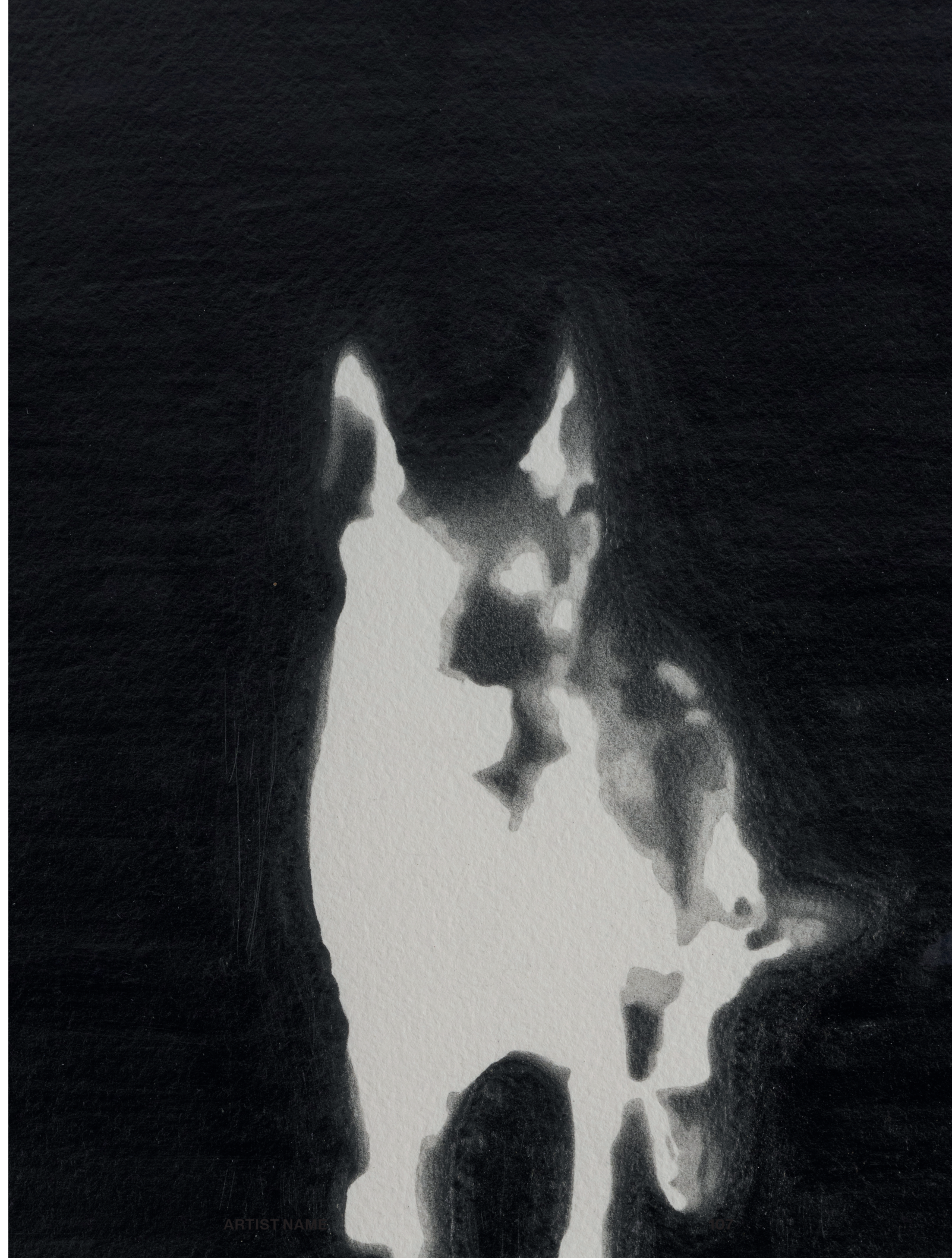
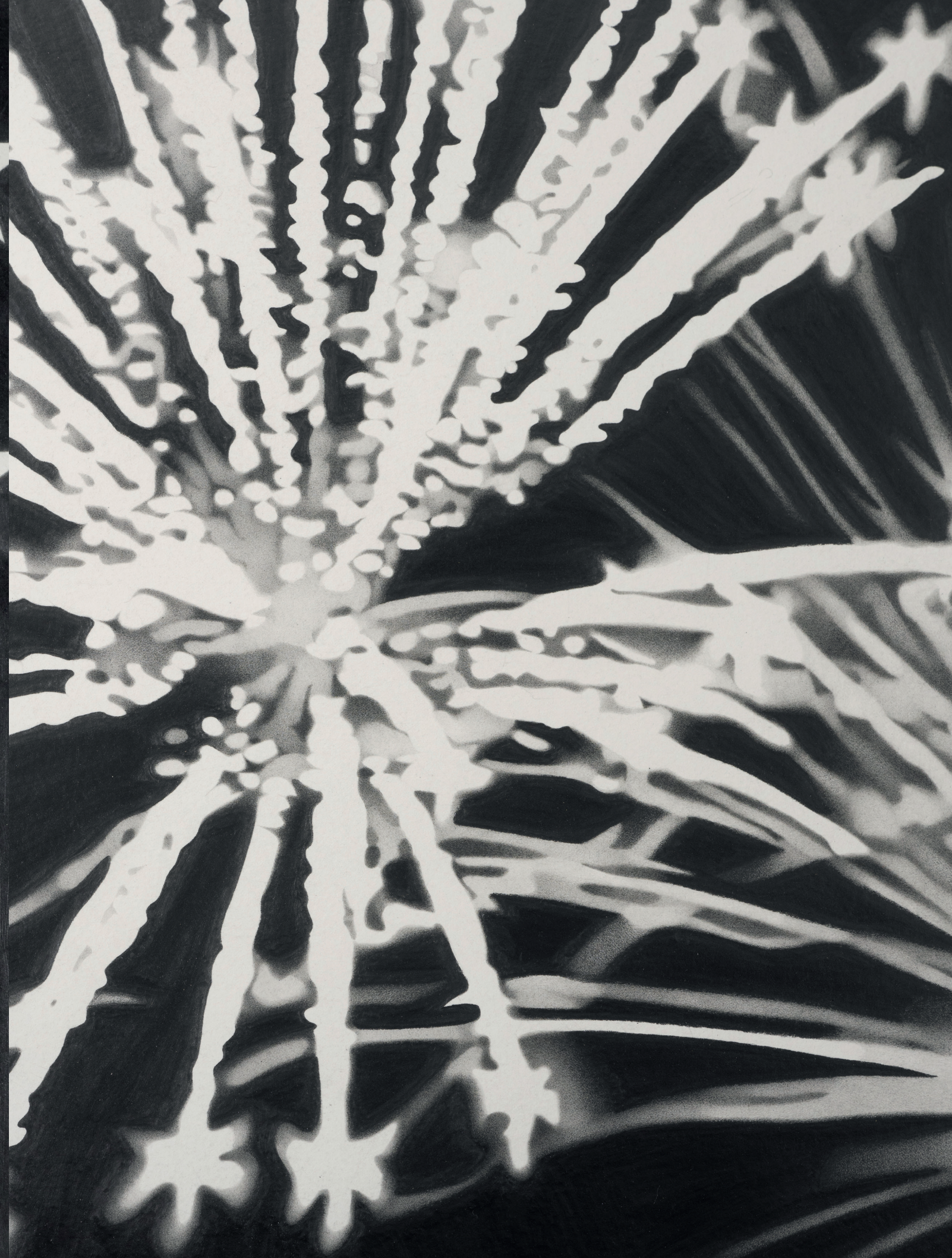
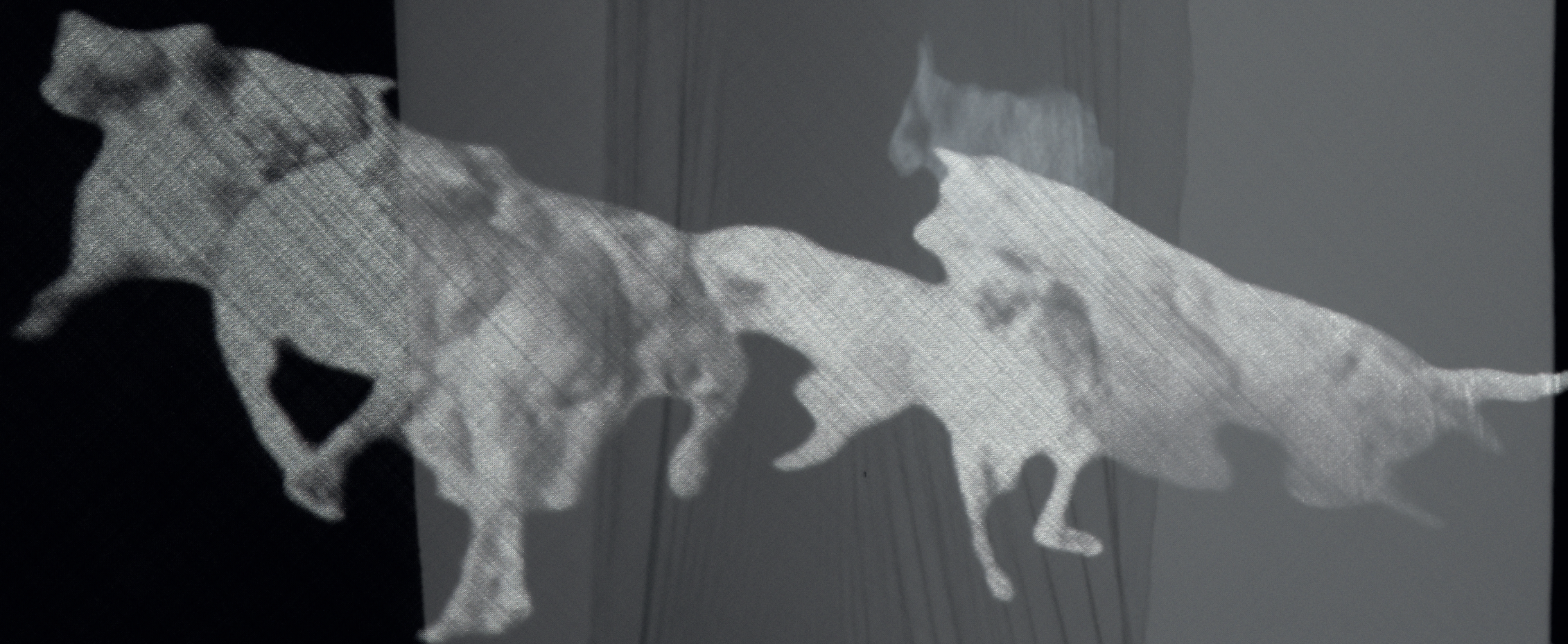


Banks Violette & Charlie Fox







i like america and america likes me, installation views Photo: Vivian Doering
Courtesy: the artist and von ammon, Washington DC (pp. 107-113, pp. 116-117)





Banks Violette: reasons to be cheerful, installation view, Gladstone Gallery, Brussels, 2024 Photo: Useful Art Services Courtesy: the artist and Gladstone Gallery

I'd rather be

killing my
family



BPS22 2024, installation view, Charleroi Photo: Leslie Artamonow
Courtesy: the artist and Gladstone Gallery

Banks Violette was the only person I wanted to talk to once the editors of CURA. told me the theme of this issue was going to be ‘Blackout’. Not just because his artistic career has been a long and sinister romance with darkness in all its forms—black metal, underground subculture, the color black—nobody has got more out of monochrome since Robert Ryman—black dogs, the ruins of burned churches—or that the story of that career is also riddled with voids where he’s left the art world entirely—but because of its unsettling strangeness and beauty which gives me a feeling of not knowing exactly what I’m seeing, KO’d. I phoned him the day after Ozzy Osbourne’s death (R.I.P.) and we mourned the Prince of Darkness in between discussing his sculpture based on the cover for New Order’s LP, *Power, Corruption and Lies* (1983), Robert Gober, and his new video works involving those ghostly black dogs and a certain famous white horse. I was at home in London, he was stood next to a gas station in Ithaca, New York.

FOX: Can we talk about dogs for a bit? Because I love that you used the dogs from that movie *Suburbia* [in your new piece]?

VIOLETTE: I’d done a video installation at a gallery called Von Ammon [in Washington D.C.] and there’s a Victorian stage illusion called Pepper’s Ghost which is a way of presenting a ghost image in a space, usually it’s used for theater.¹ There’s a scrim material that I’ve been using that allows you to create that illusion with having to rely on these multiple angles and all this stagecraft so you can, in essence, project a ghost into a space right on screen, to an extent. That’s how these things were presented. It was a series of loops taken from Penelope Spheeris’ movie *Suburbia* which is kind of about punk rock and Reagan-era Los Angeles and these white suburbs that are abandoned. Classic white flight. And all throughout the movie there’s this constant recurring motif of these abandoned domestic dogs that have been interbred with coyotes that have swept down from the hills.

FOX: I remember!
VIOLETTE: And they’re feral and they’re running wild in these abandoned housing developments. And at a certain point these rednecks, these self-appointed vigilantes are driving through [them] and shooting the dogs. There’s two sequences in this gallery in D.C. One is this pack of dogs that are just sweeping right to left and then another one—it’s really disturbing when you watch the movie—is just this German Shepherd that is running side-on and then suddenly it looks like it’s been shot. It’s difficult to imagine how this effect was pulled off. It’s white anxiety and whiteness in America and a lot of stuff that is about America right at this fucking moment.

FOX: What do you think the dogs might be meaning there?
VIOLETTE: The constant perceived threat to the idea of whiteness. The domestic dogs are stand-in for white suburbia, a stable home life, and then they’re abandoned and—here’s the drum roll part—they intermarry with these feral wild coyotes that sweep down from the hills. It’s about miscegenation, *The Birth of a Nation* [1915], threats to white womanhood, all these classic fucking tropes that exist to buttress racism, not just in America but generally but it’s typical of America. And then to have the instrument of authority be vigilantes, a mob of white guys who’ve appointed themselves the role of the sheriff. Classic western, they’re gonna go and clean up the neighborhood by shaking out the race traitors. It’s about all those things. And then the title of the show is taken from Joseph Beuys. [*Like America and America Likes Me.*]

FOX: Coyotes again.
VIOLETTE: This is a reframing of that idea. Less in a shamanistic and more in a ‘we’re terrible, terrible human beings’ kind of way.

FOX: *Suburbia*’s part of a whole genre of post-punk Reagan-era movies that knew where society was going, the debris, the dislocation. *Streetwise* [1984], *Red Dawn* [1984], *Out of the Blue* [1980] with Linda Manz.

VIOLETTE: Not a punk rock movie but [on the same wave-

length] Robert Altman’s *Nashville* [1975]—
FOX: Oh, of course, yeah!

VIOLETTE: You’re watching it and you’re like here’s this political assassination that takes place in front of this reconstruction of the Parthenon and the Parthenon was built as part of this World’s Fair kind of thing so it’s [just] a prop in a spectacle. The community liked it so much that they rebuilt it as a real thing but then it’s just being used as a prop in this movie. Like, oh, shit, it’s so specific to the sickness that runs throughout a kind of American-ness, of entertainment, religion, spectacle, the performance of patriotism and all these ugly fucking things.

FOX: Yeah, Altman really understood that spectacle and politics were gonna converge. It was already happening then, the reverb is vast. Have you seen that Jack Goldstein [video], *Shane*?²

VIOLETTE: That’s another thing I was referencing. Jack Goldstein’s a personal hero. His whole existence and biography is the sharpest example you could use of like, “Hey, art world, you’re a terrible fucking place!” I’d done a piece a number of years ago at Maureen Paley, projected in water vapor with the Tri-Star horse animation. That was a deliberate quotation of Goldstein’s MGM lion [piece] [*Metro-Goldwyn Mayer*, 1975]. Then the dogs running were supposed to evoke *Shane* so I’m super super happy that you got that.

FOX: It’s one of my favorite artworks of all time. It’s perfect. It’s so elegant. I feel the same way about that work as I feel about the [Seattle post-punk] band Flipper.

VIOLETTE: Yeah!
FOX: It’s so confrontational but it’s so strange, so moody and weird and it has a drug aspect. You can stay with that for a long time.

VIOLETTE: It does such a perfect job of dislocating something that should be super comfortable.

FOX: Yes, that’s it.
VIOLETTE: It pushes it off axis just enough that it’s not weird and it’s not off-putting but it is! It’s perfect.

FOX: I mean, horror aesthetics we can talk about... But I don’t feel it’s necessarily spookiness with the dogs [in your work], they’re like totems or something...³

VIOLETTE: Personally, I differentiate horror and terror. A lot of the times when people are talking about horror they’re actually talking about terror. Terror is the imminent threat. It’s the knife coming at you. Yeah, that’s fucking scary but you know what it is. The shadow in your closet? That’s horror. Talking about *Shane*, that is slightly deranged or dislocated from what’s comfortable or what’s legible by one degree and that puts in the realm of the potentiality to be horror. It’s something that escapes and elides language. Not to be nerdy and Lacanian. There’s an instance of the Real. How do you frame that? How do you strategically frame that event? It’s not just to scare somebody, it’s to motivate them in a different direction but the fuel for the event is horror.

FOX: You start thinking [with *Shane*], where am I? Where does the screen begin and end? What is the frame?

VIOLETTE: Yeah, because it’s using the vocabulary, the grammar that we’re all familiar with and all these kind of things, it’s deferring the satisfaction in such a strategic way where you’re like, “Oh, *fuck*. I can talk about it for as long as you want because it’s fucking amazing.”

FOX: It’s beautiful. I remember seeing it as a teenager online.

VIOLETTE: And that was the way his brain worked. He thought about the loop, this sample that you’re able to return to, all these things that now you can loop anything, but at that point it was analogue, it was vinyl, you had to loop film. It was a laborious process. He was able to anticipate these things that are now second nature.

FOX: That we’d end up living inside a loop.
VIOLETTE: That it would become so familiar. That we’d live in a landscape dominated by fucking TikTok. If you watch any one of those things again and again and again it becomes terrifying. And I just think, before the tools existed that allowed you to do that fluidly and easily, he anticipated how fucking weird it was if you took a slice of the day-to-day,

isolated it, shifted it one degree and made you stare at it.
FOX: And then the Tri-Star horse. I mean, a white horse has a lot of American resonances as well.

VIOLETTE: Yeah. There’s this American romantic muscular myth about, Out in the West. It’s so saccharine as a stand-in for a set of ideas. It’s this white horse that runs from right to left against a black background that spreads its wings out towards the viewer but in each instance I’ve done it, it gets to the point where it’s about to spread its wings and then there’s a rough edit and it starts again so it never achieves flight.

FOX [laughs]
VIOLETTE: It’s a permanently stalled action. And you talk about a pale horse rather than a white horse, we’re talking about death.

FOX: Exactly.
VIOLETTE: It’s such a blunt way of saying, “Yeah, man, I’m making a work about death.”

FOX: Yeah. Because there’s *Behold A Pale Horse* which is one of those American symbolist paintings...

VIOLETTE: Yeah, [Albert] Pinkham Ryder.⁴
FOX: Yeah!

VIOLETTE: It’s a really fucking weird painting.
FOX: Yeah, it looks like black metal artwork, like a Burzum album [cover].

VIOLETTE: Yeah, if Burzum had a sense of humor.
FOX: Yeah, that was one of his flaws. He has a few but he’s never found anything funny. The *Power, Corruption and Lies* sculpture that debuted during the first era of Trump—

VIOLETTE: Yes.
FOX: And here we are now. When did you start getting interested in the idea of that piece, when did that occur to you?

VIOLETTE: That entire generation of designers like Peter Saville and Barney Bubbles, those people, with their hands, defined how a decade looked and how a worldview looked. Obviously, Saville designed the *Power, Corruption and Lies* album cover—that piece ended up being renamed *Age of Consent* [after the first track on the album] which I think makes more sense for it but the genesis of that title was that Gerhard Richter spray-painted [*Power, Corruption and Lies*] on the side of museum. This is perfect post-war sincerity, I’m gonna Baader-Meinhof this at the museum with spray-paint. And then there was this group exhibition (I think it took place in Scotland?), it was called *Power, Corruption and Lies*, after this Gerhard Richter graffiti and Peter Saville (or somebody from New Order) saw that, loved the title and then Peter Saville was in the National Gallery in Scotland. And saw the Fantin-Latour and was just, “Oh, I’m just gonna use it.” They’re all these happenstance things that kind of accumulate and build. The same way, talking about *Shane*... dislocating something by one degree from its original context but then I’m also interested in its effect in a real-world way. Like, Judas Priest is gonna cause you to commit suicide.

FOX: Yeah!
VIOLETTE: Making that particular sculpture, I contracted with a basket weaver who looked at the Fantin-Latour and tried to reconstruct it, a real basket that existed I’m assuming some time in the 1890s, and remade the entire thing. We invested that with plaster at a foundry in upstate New York, and it was stuck in a kiln and burned... this is where it all gets kind of elaborate. There was a reconstruction of a basket. It gets burned down, it gets turned to ash, and then into that void, metal gets poured, so in order to make the recreation you have to destroy the recreation, if that makes sense. And then I worked with a florist to identify period-specific flowers, recreate that flower arrangement and get it as close as possible to what Fantin-Latour would have had in the 1890s, and then that just withers and dies over the course of the exhibition.

FOX: Wow.
VIOLETTE: So, there’s this whole kind of life cycle to these references. It’s not just a quotation but the thing that I’m quoting is already a quotation of a quotation so how do you literalize that kind of process? There’s a feedback loop.

BANKS VIOLETTE & CHARLIE FOX

FOX: OK, first of all, I’m really pleased you’ve mentioned Barney Bubbles because he doesn’t get enough airtime.⁵

VIOLETTE: My understanding is a lot of his artwork he refused to sign and he refused to take authorship for, all the Stiff Records stuff. All that stuff he designed but nobody had any attribution for it so all these other designers were like, “Oh, I did it!” There are these anecdotal stories of him having absolutely no money and going to agencies and them being like, “We just hired the guy who did this.”

FOX: Fuck! I always think about his album cover he did for The Damned—

VIOLETTE: Yeah...
FOX: It’s like a Kandinsky... I’d never seen Kandinsky So, when I think about Kandinsky, the first thing I think about is that album cover. He was such a great mutant, he was almost too good a mimic and changeling. Like the Ian Dury record that looks like wallpaper. [*Do It Yourself.*] He was doing kind of everything. It makes you think of like espionage or something.

VIOLETTE: He was doing it at a point where like, who the fuck was looking at like, early twentieth-century avant-gardists? He’s responsible for so much of how the world looks. The paternity case for Barney Bubbles is pretty strong.

FOX: And Judas Priest... Have you seen *Dream Deceivers* [1992]? It’s about the boys who killed themselves [after obsessively listening to Judas Priest’s records.] It’s about the boy who survived and he’s had this facial reconstruction surgery but he looks like—

VIOLETTE: He looks like *Mask*.⁶
FOX: And he goes back to the playground [where they shot themselves] and he’s sitting there talking about how they would listen to the records and get high. They were getting high anyway but they would get high on the records. But it’s that desire to find meaning inside things, it’s reverbed out to now.

VIOLETTE: Yeah.
FOX: That Southern scriptural thing: the meaning is in *there*, it’s just a question of how deep you look.

VIOLETTE: And that suspicion of culture. When I was growing up, those events were kind of taking place in the background. There were Senate commissions about, “Oh my God, this record is gonna turn my kids to drugs or suicide” so you were inevitably to look at your record collection if you were involved in something marginal as something that had the potential to blow up your life. I played in bands, I had friends who played in bands, I did album covers for friends’ albums so if you were potentially involved in creating a dangerous culture... You can trace it further back. People did the same thing with fucking Goethe and *The Sorrows of Young Werther*.

FOX: Exactly.
VIOLETTE: There were mass suicide events tied to that novel because people were so subsumed within the fiction that they couldn’t tell fact from fiction and chose to commit suicide so there were countries that had bans in place against *The Sorrows of Young Werther* [1774]. So, who would have put that genealogy together? Judas Priest to *The Sorrows of Young Werther*.

FOX: That whole era of Tipper Gore, the PMRC thing, how that was taken as this dystopian [event]...⁷ it’s turned to be such a symptom of where things were going.

VIOLETTE: There was something about [the idea that] the culture you were absorbing could corrupt you. And if you’re somebody who deeply cares about the culture you consume, much less produces it, that’s a heady thought. ‘I didn’t just make this thing because it’s beautiful but I could potentially destroy society!’

FOX: That’s the dream! That was the lure of art and making things.

VIOLETTE: 100 percent.
FOX: You could go off into this darkness and it’s also a thing of wanting to be corrupted. ‘Corruption’ maybe is a difficult thing to say now but wanting something to transform you.

VIOLETTE: There’s an album by Celtic Frost called *Mor-*

bid Tales [1984] which has this song called ‘Danse Macabre’ which is this soundscape kind of thing. There was this rumor that if you listened to it at a certain time at a certain volume, the Gates of Hell would open. The very fucking first thing I did when I got the album was listen to it at that time, hoping that the Gates of Hell would open.

FOX: Of course!
VIOLETTE: There’s no inducement like, “Oh, this might be bad!”
FOX: When you’re that age, the work really *is* opening up a gate but inside your head.

VIOLETTE: Yeah. Maybe not in the metaphysical sense but in a structural sense, especially something like punk rock where the idea of, like, “I’m a passive recipient of culture” instead of “I’m a direct and active character,” a much, much different way of relating things [than], like, “I sit here and I’m an audience. I am directly responsible for what I consume and how I engage with it and how I make things.” The idea of these things potentially being gateways: fuck yes, they were! Thank God they were...

FOX: Things that just crash-landed in your life. Records were a form of knowledge. I’m not saying it’s good or bad but the nature of influence has changed. There was this secret world of touchstones and things that were passed around...

VIOLETTE: I miss that. The teenage samizdat, adolescent Freemasonry where you were a thirty-third-and-a-third degree nerd because you had access to some zine that had a bunch of processed Church of Final Judgment things in it.⁸ Crazy shit. I’m the only one who has access to this crazy shit. Like with the art world: “Oh, I’ve found this person that somebody *isn’t* talking about.”

FOX: And the basket, obviously, makes me think about Robert Gober.

VIOLETTE: Yes, who I worked with for a long time.
FOX: Did you? That’s amazing. What was that like?
VIOLETTE: It was a great experience. I like him and I love his practice. When I got out of grad school and I needed to be employed. It was great because it gave me an opportunity to see what the—not just what a working artist’s life looked like day to day but also it gave me insight into what it looked like for somebody to walk away from it and do things on their own terms. Which I’ve tried with limited success. [Laughter]

VIOLETTE: It’s still, like, Thank God, now there’s an example I can point to of like, “Now there’s a way to make that happen.”

FOX: I curated a show years ago and we had his candle in there [Candle, 1991], the candle covered in hair.

VIOLETTE: Yes.
FOX: There’s a lot of his work that I love but the candle and the ice skates [Ice Skates, 1997]...

VIOLETTE: The pair of buttons [Extra Buttons, 1994]. Little spare buttons and that deep matte shadow box frame. My heart breaks when I look at them.

FOX: That’s it. There’s such a pathos and a sorrow to those objects. Aside from what they’re doing which is... they’re not what you think they are. My first thing was like, “Oh, it’s found [objects], he’s on like some Haim Steinbach thing.”

VIOLETTE: Yeah.
FOX: No, no, no, he’s not doing that, he’s weaving, he’s making a dress, he’s painting a newspaper.

VIOLETTE: It’s the scale he works at. That intensity. That micro scale. I’ve never been able to make something at that size where I’m like, “Oh, that works. That baffles the hell out of me.” But that bag of donuts...

FOX: Oh, that’s right. So many of them. The cat litter piece [Cat Litter, 1989]. I could spend a week with that and I would never get near the bottom of it but, of course, you don’t want to, it’s not the point.

VIOLETTE: His things, when they really do work, it’s like going back to *Shane*, it’s this thing perfectly calibrated, slightly out of alignment... The buttons, the skates: there’s the instinct to look at that as a readymade and then the frame is shifted, the frame is slightly off, which causes you to re-examine those things. That’s wild.

FOX: It’s kind of what art is in a way. That experience of, like, “Hang on, where are we, really? It’s of the world but it isn’t.”

VIOLETTE: And so much of it is about shifting that art viewer. Not as a burden but as an act of generosity like, “I have faith and trust in you in your ability to interpret what I’m presenting, to use this lens that I’m stitching together to interpret other things.” That is an endlessly lovely thing when it’s done well. And when someone is didactic or rigid in their presentation and it becomes like advertising, I hate it. It’s such a hostile feeling.

FOX: All flowers become flowers of mourning. They perform that as they die. I thought we could end on a note of mourning by talking about Black Sabbath for a little bit, by talking about Ozzy.

VIOLETTE: Which is just heartbreaking.
FOX: It is. It’s beautiful he did that show and then three weeks later, he’s gone. It’s heartbreaking but it’s wonderful. Do you remember the first time you heard Black Sabbath?

VIOLETTE: I have an older brother who unfortunately started playing jazz. I can’t explain it.

FOX [laughs]
VIOLETTE: But he was into punk and heavy metal and stuff and I was probably like ten or eleven and it would’ve been early Sabbath. Nothing fucking sounded like that. That sludgy fucking sound. The quality of the recording. The tone of the guitar, that warm tube amp amplification, the whining quality of his vocals. There was something incredibly evocative about that. Even if you did not like that music and it did not affect your life, I’ll put a hand on The Bible and be like, “Yeah, but I bet it fucked you up.”

FOX: It seems like one of those things that’s existed forever. Everybody who hears it for the first time is like, “Well, this must have existed for hundreds of years.” Even though you know like that can’t possibly be true, it feels like that.

VIOLETTE: It feels like a square. It feels like a geometric principle. Yeah, there’s gravity, there’s the decay rate of radioactive isotopes and then there’s fucking Sabbath.

FOX: Sabbath was the first gig my dad ever saw. He saw them in maybe 1971—

VIOLETTE: Whoa...
FOX: *Paranoid* or *Master of Reality* era...

VIOLETTE: Oh my God.
FOX: My dad’s like 67 now. And he said to me, “Oh, I haven’t heard the first track on *Black Sabbath* for a really long time” so I played it for him on my phone. It was amazing, man. It was spooky, it was like he was time-travelling in the room.

VIOLETTE: That’s fucking cool.
FOX: He was like, “I’m back in my bedroom where I heard this for the first time.” The memory had been dormant for a long time and then it was reactivated.

VIOLETTE: If you’re someone who was touched by that man, then for that to be how he left this world... the images of him sitting on this [throne], not in a creepy, culty way, but like, here’s this person who’s like an avatar for an idea of something. Whatever you think about metal, stretch it far enough back and there’s Ozzy sitting at the exact fucking center of it. It’s weird, it’s like having the sun blank out at the center of the solar system.

- “By angling panes of glass under and above the stage, a spectre can be beamed to hover in the air as large as life.” *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media into the Twenty-first Century* (2006) by Marina Warner.
- Shane* (1975) is a two and a half minute video which consists entirely of a German Shepherd dog (‘Shane’) against a black background barking at his audience. The experience of being with *Shane* while the video loops and the ferocious bark booms at you is as disconcerting (in several ways) as being with *Clown Torture* (1987) by Bruce Nauman. It might be even be more intense because its contents are not as aggressively perverse as watching a bunch of clowns go insane in confined spaces—it’s a barking dog—and yet it feels increasingly violent and sinister and makes you ever more vulnerable. Goldstein made several works which are encoded in the very bone marrow of video art, including *Shane*, and yet his own career (for multiple reasons) was vexed by trouble and he remains oddly little-known for someone of such significance.
- Weirdly we did not discuss the spectral dog in Tarkovsky’s brain-melting epic *Stalker* (1979) or Samuel Fuller’s classic exploitation movie *White Dog* (1982) about a dog trained to attack Black people, a schlock premise which Fuller uses to examine whether racism is innate or can be taught in Pavlovian fashion. Meanwhile, executives referred to the movie as ‘*Jaws* with paws.’
- The Race Track (Death on a Pale Horse)* (1897).
- Barney Bubbles (1942-1983) was a wildly influential British artist, painter and designer responsible for the eye-popping and fantastical covers to records such as *Damned Damned Damned* by The Damned (the trippy Kan-BANKS VIOLETTE & CHARLIE FOX

- dinsky pastiche), *Armed Forces* by Elvis Costello, and *Space Ritual* by Hawkwind. He also directed the eerie (and wildly influential) video for ‘Ghost Town’ by the Specials.
- Mask* (1985) is a schmaltzy disabled-people’s-pain-can-be-uplifting-for-regular-folk movie starring Eric Stoltz, Laura Dern and Cher inspired by the real-life case of Rocky Dennis, a Californian boy who was born with craniodiaphyseal dysplasia, an extremely rare genetic disorder also known as lionitis due to the resemblance between the disfiguring effects on the skeleton the condition causes and the facial structure of a lion.
 - The Parents Music Resource Center was founded in 1985 by Tipper Gore (wife of future VP, Al) after she was disconcerted by hearing her nine year-old daughter singing along to ‘Darling Nikki’ by Prince with its lyrical icebreaker: ‘I met her in a hotel lobby/Masturbating with a magazine.’ Gore was shocked to discover that pop music was now dense with filth, sexual perversion and baroque lewdness which needed to be policed in order to protect innocent children who might be in earshot. Hysterical senate hearings were held in August 1985 during which musicians Frank Zappa, John Denver and Dee Snider were called to testify in defense of what was dubbed at the time ‘porn rock.’ The PMRC’s efforts led, among other things, to the tagging of CDs with PARENTAL ADVISORY stickers.
 - British religious cult concocted from a mixture of Satanic, Gnostic and Scientology teachings founded in the 1960s and widely alleged to have been influential on the Manson Family slayings and various other ritual murders. The Church itself always denied any affiliation with Manson.