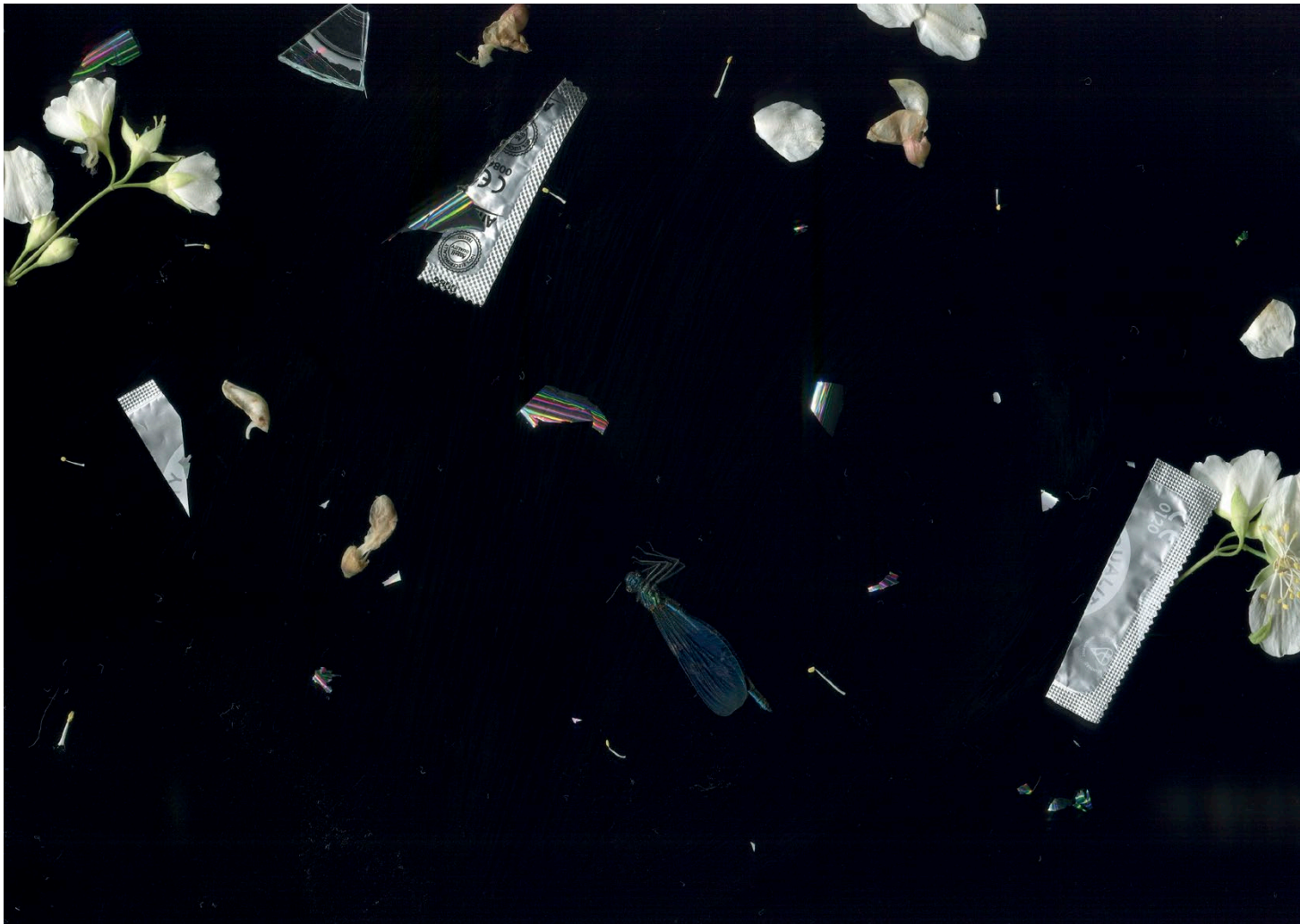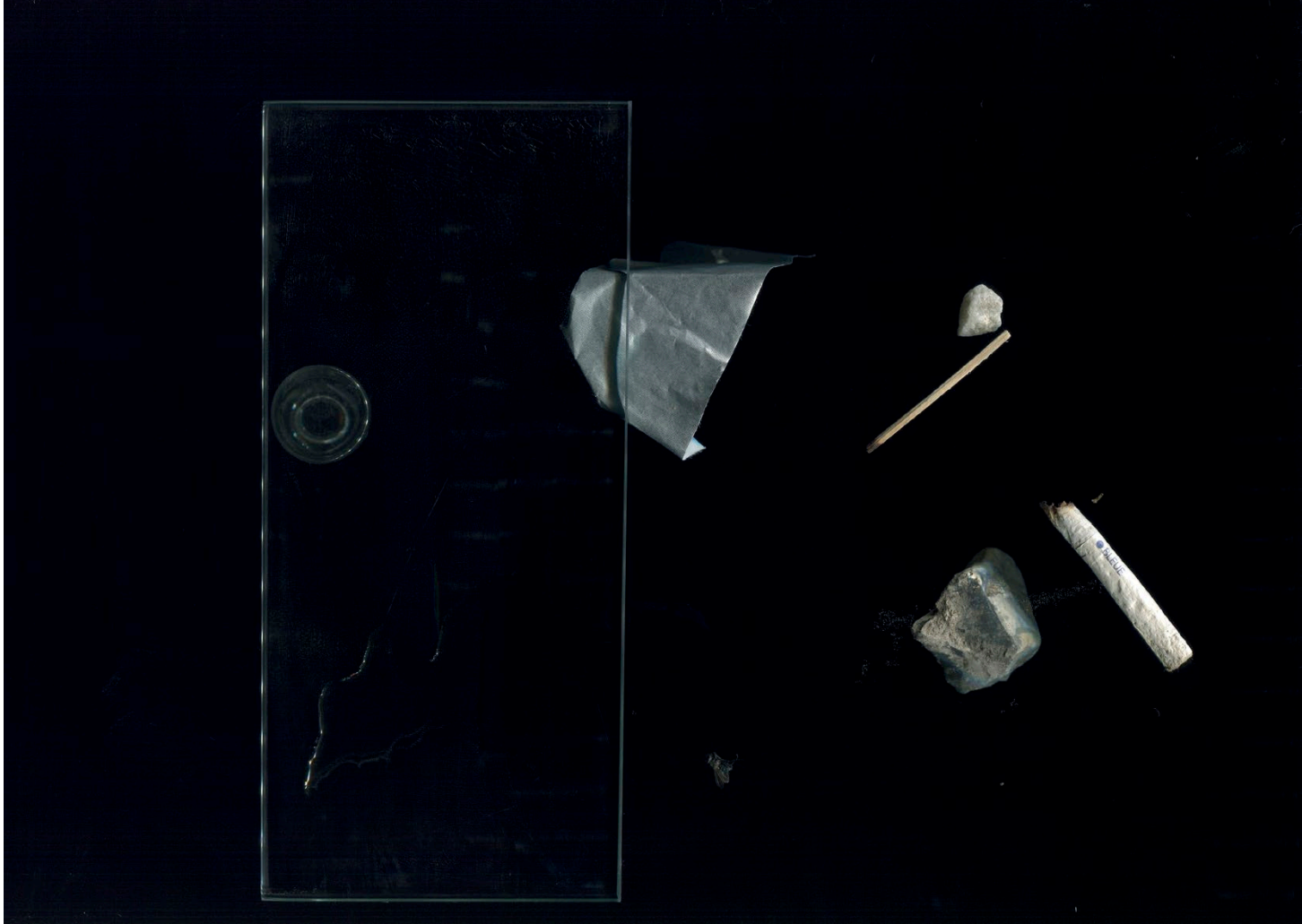# CCQ

a creative conversation

Nástio Mosquito | David Salle | Koo Jeong A | S Mark Gubb

Joël Andrianomearisoa | Futurefarmers | Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva

Fragments

Singaporean artist WeiXin Chong makes physical and digital works in response to the detritus she collects. She spoke to **Ric Bower** during her solo presentation at Start Art Fair 2016 about cross-disciplinary processes and the digital realm.

WeiXin Chong: I made the *Toute La Nuit* series of scanned images while on a residency in Paris. I was there as part of The Urban Explorations Project [a project by the Media Lab at Lasalle College of the Arts, Singapore] with a group of other creatives, including a photographer, a bio-enthusiast and media artists. It was a strangely isolated and focused work environment... the idea was to collect data in urban spaces. I began the project conscious that I was doing something quite different from science; I was trying to create 'aesthetic data'. I collected, organised and labelled detritus from various locations in Paris, then picked out fragments at night to look at them separately, before choosing and composing them for the scanner.

Ric Bower: How did you choose what to place on the scanner from the detritus you collected?

WXC: I'm very aware that I am in a strange position of power over these assorted fragments. When I look at them, they take on personalities... out of a large pool of various detritus, I start to see the relationships and connections between the individual objects.

RB: What influences the selection process: is it an externally imposed narrative or is it intuition?

WXC: It's entirely intuition. Especially for this series, as none of the detritus belonged to me – they all had their own history. I tried to see what feeling I could absorb from each object.

RB: Insects seem to hold a particular significance...

WXC: Insects were part of my daily life during the residency. Growing up, I loved insects; I kept them and observed them throughout my childhood. Later, by learning about their scientific names, I became aware of the history behind the observation, recording and classification of specimens in colonised regions. To me, it's an extremely

valuable history, yet also riddled with a dark complexity. This duality underlies the organic elements which reference natural history within my work.

RB: The inclusion of insects in your work seems to allude to ephemerality in the same way that depictions of insects were *memento mori* in the work of 17th century still life painters, like Georg Flegel. But how are the effects of time integral to the development of the work itself, though?

WXC: There is a lot of waiting during the process: waiting for night, waiting for the dark, waiting for people not to disturb me! Before I could see the images and respond to them, I had to wait for each high resolution scan to complete – it was a strange and suspended state.

RB: During the residency you worked alongside creatives with a science-driven focus. How does data collected by scientists relate to your collection and use of 'aesthetic data'?

WXC: There are some parallels and also some counterpoints. Despite looking for our own samples, we would complete some field research as a team which influenced our conversations, of course. However, the priorities we had would be quite different when we were at the same location. The scientist was trying to interpret the city through the collection of snails to create concrete data sets. The project aimed to bring together a group of different makers with different creative perspectives. I'm still in contact with some of the other participants... it was, and is, great to have that 'cross-view conversation'.

RB: Have you had other 'cross-view conversations' that have influenced your work?

WXC: Yes, I had a residency in Carrara with

a group of creatives and had the privilege of being at Laboratori Artistici Nicoli, an historic marble workshop (working with Gabrielle Dini, on a project called *Excavata*) where I made an archive of discarded marble chips. I had great conversations with people I met in Carrara, discussing attitudes to their own work with marble and marble workers, and views on the history of quarrying... how there is a macho, monumental relationship with the marble object: sculpted, the bigger the better, compared to a traditional Chinese or Japanese philosophy, geared towards finding landscapes within the patterns in stone. Meanwhile, I had been creating scans from the marble fragments and making these into large-scale silk pieces. In a cheeky way, this subverts the monumentality of the material and plays with the different cultural perspectives towards it.

RB: By reconstituting the marble texture with the small fragments, you were undermining both cultural discourses surrounding the material, I guess?

WXC: Yes and, significantly, my marble works are also made from detritus.

RB: You also collect digital debris, I gather...

WXC: The digital realm is an exciting alternative reality to me. Our experience of it begins with activities within our own familiar reality, but it then extrapolates those activities out and beyond what we are humanly capable of or familiar with. The idea of a digital file being both simultaneously concrete and also completely abstract is fascinating to me. It might be the case that it is completely impossible to erase a digital file from existence... This strange kind of existence the digital realm operates in alludes to ideas of reincarnation and mortality.
I'm interested in how the digital, while becoming integrated in our senses, is a ghostly extension of something beyond our

own physicality. I am also jarringly aware that when I'm looking at the icons on a computer screen desktop I'm reading in code rather than just using my natural visual sensibilities. The icons contain so much visual information, but I've learnt to process them instantly; my brain is learning to parallel the computer's processes by overriding my own physical senses.

**RB:** Are you personally optimistic about the digital realm?

WXC: I'm conflicted about it, because with every utopia there inevitably comes a dystopia. What interests me in particular is the constant flipping between those two perspectives. I see how the digital strategies might offer a possible redemption for our lost connection with materiality. Conversely I can also see how much it replaces and displaces a lot of other things like our general awareness, our memory capacity and our language.

RB: It seems to me your engagement with the digital is quite subtle, because it's addressing our mental adaptations to the digital realm rather than the perhaps more obvious physical changes in our behaviour. How do you set out to explore these subtleties as a practitioner?

WXC: Since I began the series of *Dictation* performances – where collaborators are invited to transcribe as I am reading from a selection of fixed texts – alongside my visual and material work, I have connected with my audience differently. I'm wary of the speed that we become accustomed to looking at things. Through the dictation experience, I can enter a slightly different space where the focus is purely on communication and language. This is so important to me, as the digital space is a reflection of psychological space; equally unknown and vast. As a result, I approach my work not primarily as digital, but as an extension of interior space—**CCQ**

Start Art Fair 2016 was at the Saatchi Gallery, London, 15 – 18 September

startartfair.com
tropicalghosts.net
a-i-gallery.com
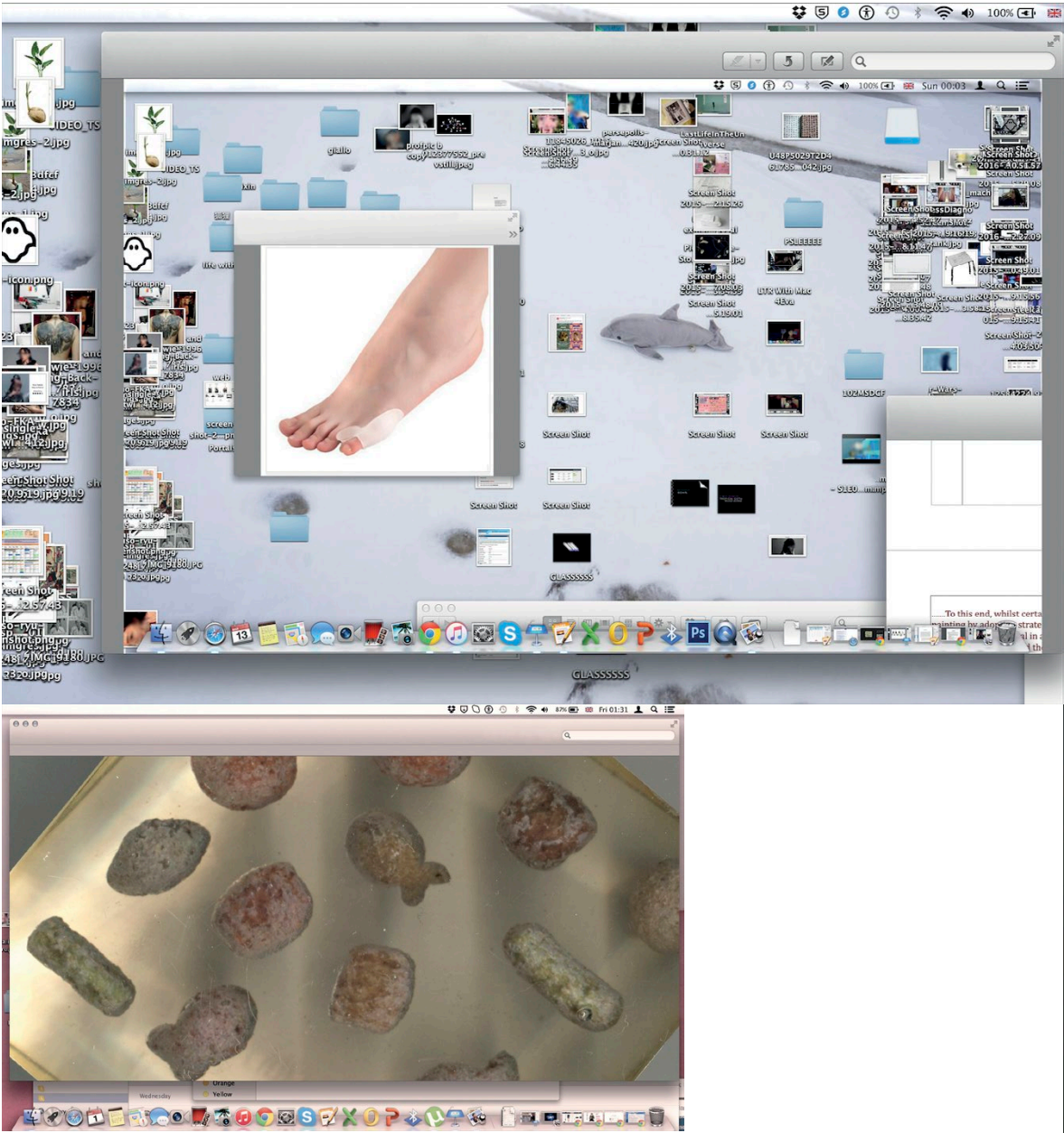
previous spread, top:
Bois de Boulogne (Toute La Nuit series), **WeiXin Chong,** 2015, Dye-sublimation on aluminium, 43.6 x 60cm. Courtesy of the artist and A.I. Gallery

bottom:
Ionesco (Toute La Nuit series), **WeiXin Chong,** 2015, Dye-sublimation on aluminium, 43.6 x 60cm. Courtesy of the artist and A.I. Gallery

this page, top:
Percentage/Proportions, **WeiXin Chong,** 2016, Giclee on high-definition paper, 20 x 29cm. Courtesy of the artist and A.I. Gallery

this page, above:
Smoothness of the succulent, **WeiXin Chong,** 2016, Giclee on high-definition paper, 20 x 29cm. Courtesy of the artist and A.I. Gallery

opposite page:
Under Dress (6), **WeiXin Chong,** 2016, Graphite on Tissue paper, 31.5 x 44cm. Courtesy of the artist and A.I. Gallery