

MUSINGS



Helen Calder, *Qualia 760-620A*, 2014



Image courtesy of Clare Callaghan and Enjoy

Helen Calder, *Qualia 760-620λ*, 2014



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What Counts Meredith Crowe

Qualia 760-620λ

Helen Calder

We are obsessed with the practice of counting things, perhaps as a form of validation. How many calories have you consumed today? What are you paying per kilometre for petrol? How many days in a row have you remembered to brush your teeth? (That one is a personal favourite; I noted a friend of mine recording it on a 'Keep your New Years Resolutions' app). We want numbers, graphs, targets set and met, and we also seem to want to constantly share these on Facebook and Twitter.

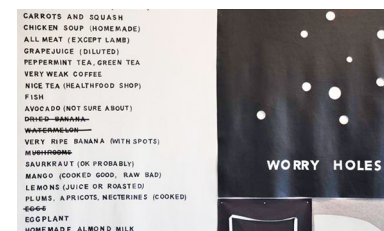
For me, this behaviour speaks of Christina Read's *Other Possibilities*, which showed at Enjoy just before my

time in March 2013, and her practice of hour-counting as a method to keep the worry just simmering, just below the surface. Read's show accumulated lists, shapes and moments: "I would change a lot about myself if I could." It is tense, like an attempt to qualify fragments, and in the same vein it nullifies them as overcompensating: "The show that you wanted to make, but in the end this one had to do".¹ I loved this show. The anxiety exhibited in *Other Possibilities* is the same anxiety; the same desire for validation that drives us to keep track of how many standard drinks we took in last week. It just doesn't add up.

Below the surface, *Other Possibilities* laughed at the data of my life and my attempt to find solace by using it to intellectualise my banal, everyday performance. Helen Calder has achieved almost the opposite; seeming to chuckle and prod at me for even seeking such a thing in the first place. *Qualia 760-620λ* uses interesting research and numbers with scientific legitimacy but without seeing the show the significance of those numbers would be zero. It is about being there; not doing the research before hand, and not tucking it away among your other experiences afterwards. Doing either, or even both, is simply not enough and it cannot equate to being



Christina Read, *Other Possibilities*, 2013.
Image courtesy of Lance Cash and Enjoy



Christina Read, *Other Possibilities*, 2013.
Image courtesy of Lance Cash and Enjoy

present with the work. In this case, research and reflection is akin to only getting the smell and aftertaste of a piece of cake without actually getting to spoon it into your mouth and roll the textures around on your tongue.

And it is not enough to physically be with it, you need to be there wholly present in your body, to absorb the colour and form through in your skin. Calder's work explores colour, particularly extending the idea of the monochrome. In *Qualia* the experience is a physical phenomenon. The wavelength range she is working in (760-620 nanometers) has been shown to raise the pulse and give the

impression that time is passing faster than it really is, providing an immediate and immersive bodily experience of the colour red. If you allow this show to fill you, there is no room for anything else; no questions, no worry, no intellectualising.

It is not that I feel like Calder's work disapproves of my state of flux, my imperfections or even my idleness, it simply laughs at me for not being bold within them. The paint skins hanging at Enjoy have many flesh-like ailments: stretch-marks, scratches, uneven texture and tone, cracks and small holes, but the way they hold their presence feels as if they have

nothing to hide and wouldn't bother to try and hide anything anyway. In the same vein, the racks that Calder has used to hang the *Qualia* skins reveal themselves. The thin supporting rods of aluminium bend towards the floor, showing us the effort involved in holding the heavy weight of the paint forms. In doing so they also expose their own lightness and flexibility.

The strand of practice Calder has pursued leading up to *Qualia 760-620λ* is responsive to both site and material in a way that it seems to unapologetically illustrate what the site and material is. Her residency work at Victoria's Gertrude Contemporary

Studio 18 in mid-2013 was in a constant state of movement, or rather, decay. In her Artist Talk at Enjoy (Friday, February 22, 2014), Calder said that she had to cut the residency short and so didn't have time in Australia to complete dried forms. She talked about the skins stretching when they are first hung, and even breaking if they are hung too early or made too thin. If you look carefully you can see one of the skins at Enjoy has lost one of its ends to gravity, leaving a shorn off, non-perforated glad wrap tear instead of the tucked under, rounded finish of the others. The black and yellow skins on show at Gertrude Contemporary Studio 18 had definitely not had long enough to dry and by the

end of the exhibition many of them had ended up in a pile on the floor. Calder was perfectly at ease and even excited to let the skins show themselves in this way, for what they are - a long form of poured paint that hadn't sat long enough before they were suspended above the concrete.

Visitors to Enjoy have compared *Qualia* to many things; mostly tongues, but also lipstick and nail polish, and some talk about the show being flesh-like and bodily somehow. I think there is a certain Cuba St flair to Calder's show that fits our location perfectly. There is a suggestion of dress-ups, like the wheeled rack could be one of

those movable wardrobes that movie stars on screen have whisked past them as they choose an outfit for the evening; a sense of glamour and fantasy accompanies the boldness and shine, and the scale. This potential game of dress-ups could also play out between the two racks by wheeling the moveable one over to the wall and trying on different skin combinations for display. The wall rack teeters towards the other, almost asking for the newness and change that would come with the makeover. It is a conversation of movement very different to what played out over Calder's residency, but it is almost a more personal one. In the same way that the colour gets into

your body, the yearning for change and glamour seems to resonate under the skin.

I find great enjoyment in having a calendar that looks like a very colourful game of Tetris in which you can cheat and overlap shapes, but Calder's show just doesn't care, and won't even begin to accommodate that kind of contentment. Read's show asked me, "Is that all you are?", and I revealed my organised schedule and RunKeeper stats with a sense of smug quantified assurance. *Qualia* has come back with, "So?", and I am buggered. But I love it. Being with the work is a moment to forget my shopping list and stand

palpably in the presence of RED.

1. Megan Dunn (2013), 'Texting with Christina Read, EyeContact, <http://eyecontactsite.com/2013/04/texting-with-christina-read>

Helen Calder, *Qualia 760-620λ*, 2014



Image courtesy of Clare Callaghan and Enjoy

Helen Calder, *Qualia 760-620λ*, 2014



Image courtesy of Clare Callaghan and Enjoy

Helen Calder and Tom Mackie with Emma Ng

It hasn't been long since I last worked the floor as a gallery guide, and given Enjoy's scale I still get the chance to talk to many of our visitors. Amongst these interactions, I've encountered a lot of reluctance when it comes to relying on one's senses as a primary mode of experiencing art (rather than approaching via literary or intellectual faculties).

In many ways both *Qualia 760-620λ* and *Open Facade* address this reluctance. With their emphasis on subjective perception they offer very validating experiences. Yet they are also demanding, requiring visitors to be active viewers. Visitors need to

involve their own bodies, trust their senses and sometimes, to examine the surroundings and look outside the bounds of what would traditionally be considered 'the artwork'.

An emphasis on subjectivity can make it difficult to find the language to talk about these works, with the uncertain correlation between words and experiences suddenly becoming glaring and self-conscious. The title of Helen Calder's work, 'qualia', gets at this difficulty – deriving from the word *quale*, which describes a purely subjective experience. Tom Mackie turns to a set of binaries – 'interior/exterior', 'inhale/exhale', 'architecture/sculpture' –

looking at the way the work exists in the tension between these poles.

So when it came to discussing their work (with words!) for this publication, it seemed logical to begin by asking Helen and Tom about one of the more easily graspable overlaps between *Qualia* and *Open Facade* – colour.

Emma - There are strong conceptual overlaps between your exhibitions at Enjoy, and your shows are also very complementary on a visual level – Helen's centering on the colour red, and Tom's dominated by blue light. Although you're not using colour in a representative way, are there other

functions that you hope to invoke through your choices?

Helen - Colour is part of a set of experiences that include other visual (and other sensory) stimuli. They form a package that conveys information. For this work I wanted to deliver an experience with a colour at the centre. The choice to use red was deliberate. I was interested in the known physiological responses to red – its therapeutic and stimulating effects and the other responses that are not measurable or definable, such as the way certain colour makes us feel. And at the same time I was interested in the way colour changes in different light

conditions, becoming more intense or less as the amount of natural daylight increases or decreases.

Tom - As the colour of the sky and water, blue is often used to attribute peace and serenity as it creates chemicals in the body which soothe and slow down the human metabolism. By flooding the gallery space with blue light I aim to create a peaceful environment, slowing down the process of looking and inviting contemplation. Another reason I used the blue film was that it bears a close translucency to water; it has an in between quality of reflection and transparency. It is able to show its own face as well as what it encounters.

You both seem to be interested in science (wavelength, perception, sensory experience) but your work also resists scientific explanation, gravitating toward phenomena that are easily experienced but not easily explained.

Colour is something that can be scientifically explained in terms of light and its reception, but colour is also an experience that cannot be explained. Yes, qualia are at the heart of the mind-body problem.

You are almost coming at similar ideas from opposite ends. Helen, you put paint forms into the space, to play up the way that light makes colour and

form visible. Tom, you are making light visible using colour, to highlight the space.

Speaking of the way they relate to the space – arts such as painting have often been tied to the conditions of their display, and the idea that they are always framed by architecture, or viewed within architecture. Are these ideas that you wanted to address in your work?

Helen, I'm thinking of how these ideas might have developed from some of your earlier works from the mid 2000s in Christchurch and Dunedin, where you were directly appropriating

architectural details and dripping paint onto wall panels...

Yes my work has developed because of interest in this relationship between architecture and painting - the historical relationship between the two as well as the physical one. Earlier works included 'kitset' 2.4m high timber framed walls with rectangular plasterboard panels secured where paintings might have hung. These were reconfigured for different spaces- some leaning against walls and others assembled to mimic existing architecture in a space.

I refer to these works because they relate in many ways to the work now,

both in the aspect of the 'readymade' and the spatial relationship of the work to the site. The current works are framed by the architectural space. The Enjoy work takes this a step further by using the frame of the window to include the space outside.

Tom, your work brings to mind the Light & Space movement in the US (1970's). As Robert Irwin said of his work, 'I slowly dismantled the act of painting to consider the possibility that nothing ever really transcends its immediate environment'.

I am interested in ways of mobilising space, acknowledging and working

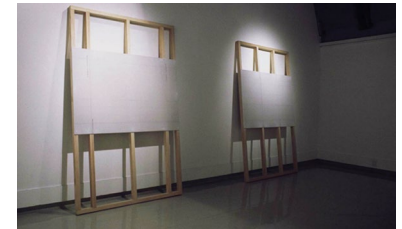
alongside architecture to inscribe the work into the context of its display. I like the idea of subtly manipulating gallery space so that the viewer becomes more aware of their environment.

I have been interested in the works of Spencer Finch and his modern take on air, light and multiple points of view. A lot of his work is influenced by the study of Monet; he attempts to mimic the master's refraction of light into colour, to capture how our personal experience with nature is constantly changing. Monet coined the expression 'painting air' in an interview he had in 1895, "I want to paint the air... and that is nothing short of impossible".

Both *Qualia* and *Open Facade* are not only sensitive to the space itself, but also treat it as a contributing agent or character within the work.

Tom, early in the project you also talked about Billy Apple's 1979 interventions in Peter McLeavey gallery. In *Open Facade* every part of the work seems to occupy this in between category – not quite sculpture, not quite architecture – or maybe, both?

Like many artists of the Light & Space movement I am interested in heightening and altering the viewers' awareness of space using unobtrusive material and structural components.



Helen Calder, *Four Walls*, 2003, School of Fine Art Gallery, University of Canterbury. Image courtesy of the artist



Helen Calder, *Extension for Mr and Mrs Pinks' Fabulous Collection*, 2004, The Blue Oyster Gallery, Dunedin. Image courtesy of the artist

By doing this I am incorporating architectural and sculptural explorations into my practice. I view my work as occupying the centre island of a roundabout.

Helen, your works are always conceived with site in mind. There's the sense that because dematerialised elements are such a big part of both *Qualia* and *Open Facade*, the material components (paint skins, metal racks, coloured film, screens) could be packed up and shown elsewhere – becoming an entirely different work, iterated & transformed by each new site. In this way, all sites are potential 'readymades' (as you have both

described them), but are there particular properties in Enjoy's gallery space that you wanted to draw out?

For me the Enjoy space and light with its south facing window was the basis for developing *Qualia*. The window does several things for me. It provides even natural light in much the same way that traditional artists studios were set up (an interesting symbolic aside) and it creates a frame and connection to the location of Cuba St and its activity. The leaning steel frame echoes the frame of the window and the wheeled rack with its transported skins has affinities to the commercial activities in the space beyond the window.

The south facing window of Enjoy is by far the most dominant architectural feature of the space, the basis of my project was developed around this. It provides a platform for both gallery viewer & pedestrians below, acting as a communication medium.

Tom, the shrink-wrapped panels in your work were made to the proportions of the walls, and in the space they do look like walls that have begun to change and warp. They almost make the space seem as if it has been loosened and shaken, so that the architectural features are just ajar, or just visible...

I guess I work to and with the restrictions of the space, being observant of history and physical elements that I am making adjustments to. The form and size of the screens accentuates the fact that the architectural features of the space are slightly lopsided and ajar.

By placing the screens on the gallery floor it draws more attention to context, forcing the viewer to move around the objects as they take on light and reflection of their surroundings.

The physicality of the works and the physical presence of the viewer in the space is important, particularly in your

work Helen, where the work has an effect on the body. This immersion of the physical body in the work, or the possibility of the body moving through it is, I suppose, the result of expanding the bounds of the work so that the scale is very large.

Is greater and greater scale something you find yourselves gravitating towards? Helen, you mentioned are working on making longer skins, and Tom, using light allows to the scale of a work to become large quite quickly...

The skins and rack sizes for *Qualia* are at a bodily scale. This sets up the potential for a more immediate

response to the physical nature of the skins and colour. The scale of the skins and the supporting structures is relative to each project but generally the larger scale is more immersive and more effectively uses the architecture as a frame.

Creating larger work without losing intimacy interests me. I don't want to dominate but to operate as the work deflecting attention away from itself, deferring to its surroundings and viewers.

The other agent/character in these exhibitions is time. For both of your shows we have had the gallery's lights

off, so the works are lit solely by the changing natural light over the course of the day.

Any sense of movement or change does come from these environmental factors, external to the work.

I wondered if using sort of readymade materials (Helen, commercial Resene paint pigments; Tom, coloured film and shrink wrap) shifts the focus from the manipulation of materials to these environmental contingencies. The works are almost performative – in that the environment performs them for the viewer.

Process acts as a way of reshaping the traditional art space, when the walls are bare viewers tend to search for some visual stimuli. I want the viewer to make note of the small elements/details whether they be seen as 'sore' points or areas of celebration. I am trying to encourage contemplation beyond a visceral experience, prompting the viewer toward a renewed awareness of visual space.

Tom Mackie, *Open Facade*, 2014

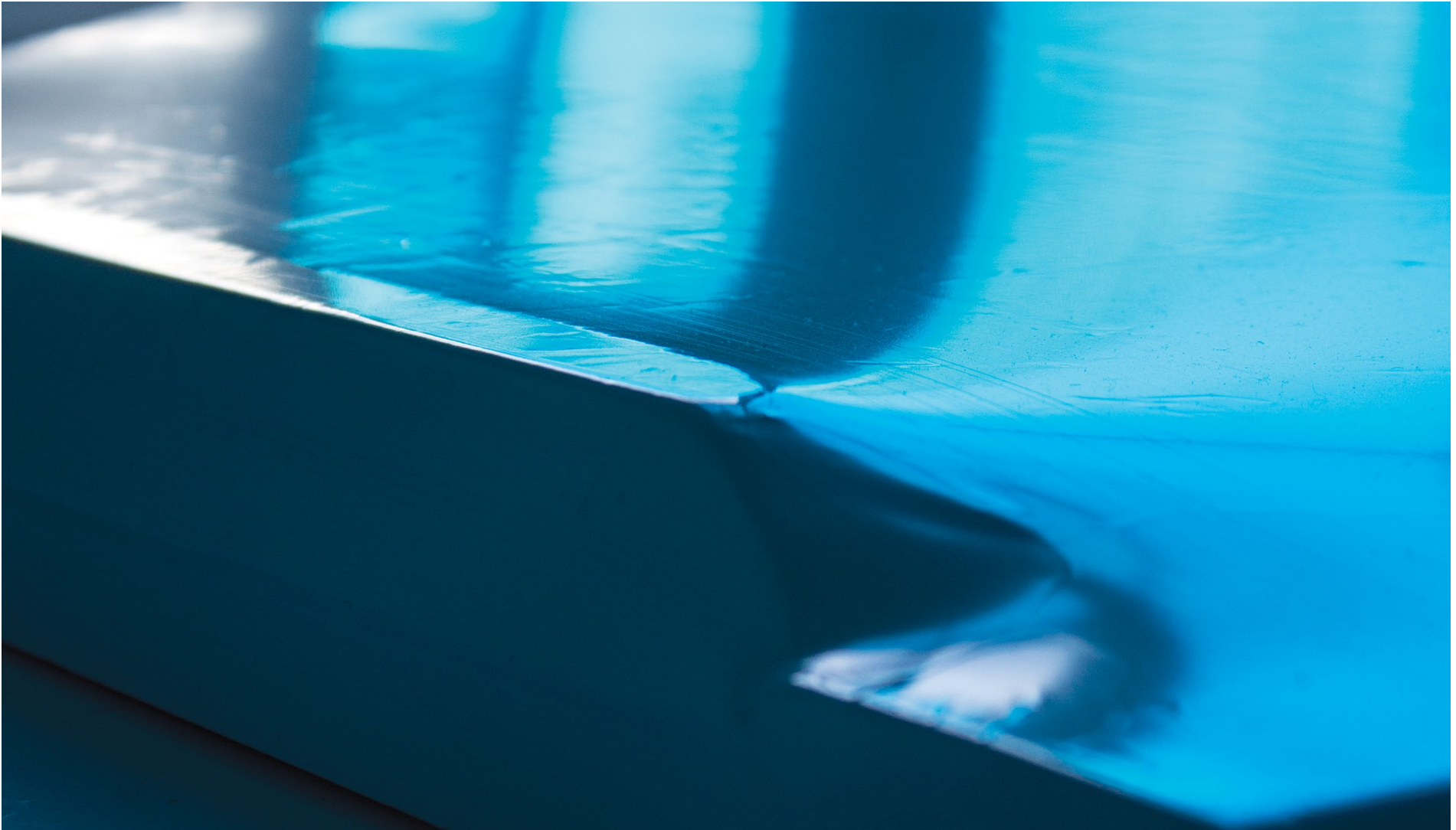


Image courtesy of Mark Wilson and Enjoy

Tom Mackie, *Open Facade*, 2014



Image courtesy of Mark Wilson and Enjoy

Searching the Immaterial

Hannah Goldblatt

Open Facade Tom Mackie

Entering Enjoy Gallery on Cuba Street to see *Open Facade* by Tom Mackie was a quietly confronting experience. I was unprepared to engage with the architecture of the building more than any objects I expected to find within. It was the influence of a monochromatic, theatrical blue light that affected me¹: my mood shifted and my mind slowed. In searching for what felt different about the Enjoy space I noticed a small crack in the large window.

Had the break in the glass always been there? I had not seen it before, and soon I observed that the windowpane had been covered with a blue transparent layer. Turning back to the

gallery space I searched for *something*, but my gaze only rested on the walls. The pile of white, uneven screen-like objects in a pile on the floor seemed to not want acknowledgment. Instead I found myself looking for where they should be placed or hung. I noticed a power socket near the floor for the first time, was that new? Perhaps the blue wavelengths were simply casting a different quality of light on the walls, creating more of a shadow in that corner.

To be sure, there was a certain *something*-ness to the minutiae of *Open Facade* that seemed to add to my enjoyment of the room. Where

there might have been a focal object in the space or on the wall there was nothing, but what remained was not simply a void. Paradoxically, the lack of things fills space; the absence of stimuli brings my attention to the qualities of the building itself. The natural light afforded to us by the Victorian window architecture, filtered through blue transparency gives substance to the intangible and leads the “viewer to find the space.”

Open Facade brings into question the tension created in the dichotomy of interior/exterior; frame/object; architecture/sculpture. Light is the medium that fuses the void, object and

colour that we perceive. Hélio Oiticica (1937-1980) describes the intermediary nature present in *Open Facade*:

Structure and colour are inseparable here, as are time and space, and the fusion of these four elements, which I consider dimensions of a single phenomenon.²

Mackie mediates these relationships, using coloured light as a palpable entity for us to consider. Crucial to *Open Facade* is what Yves Klein (1928-1962) described as “a blue in itself, disengaged from all functional justification”.³

Many artists have used monochrome abstraction since the 1940s to challenge the boundaries of representation and meaning in painting. As Klein described: "it is through color that I have little by little become acquainted with the Immaterial."⁴ *Open Facade* uses the mechanism of monochrome abstraction in the way Oiticica and Klein intended: beyond our search for the object, we experience the space itself. Klein wrote:

I precisely and categorically refuse to create on one surface even the interplay of two colors...two colors juxtaposed on one canvas prevent [the observer] from entering into

the sensitivity, the dominance, the purpose of the picture...one can no longer plunge into the sensibility of pure color, relieved from all outside contamination.⁵

Removing the spectacle of object or "polychromatic decoration" is not simply a reduction but a controlled reframing of importance, and this is precisely what Mackie achieves in *Open Facade*.

⁶ To echo Klein's words, Mackie "empty[s] the receptacle...mak[ing a] limitless sense of total space, of a pure and absolute light".⁷ Klein likened monochrome painting to an "open window to freedom" and I see a link to this in *Open Facade*.⁸ As Klein uses

pure colour to break out of the confines of the canvas, Mackie uses it to shift spatial boundaries. *Open Facade* maintains a dialogue between interior and exterior by challenging our notion of the traditional exhibition space: the gallery becomes the object rather than a container for art.

This is a "Duchampian gesture" and Mackie is treating the gallery as ready-made.⁹ In the spirit of Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), *Open Facade* eschews the object in favour of the event, using light to mediate this interior/exterior dialogue. The viewer standing in *Enjoy* is receptive to the changing light as the day progresses. There is fluidity

within the interior space that comes from mixing incandescent light (light produced by heating materials: the sun, fire, tungsten light bulbs) and luminescent light (emission of electrons dropping back into an unexcited state: fluorescent light, fireflies, televisions). Throughout the day the changing wavelength creates varying nuances as colour is processed by the brain.¹⁰

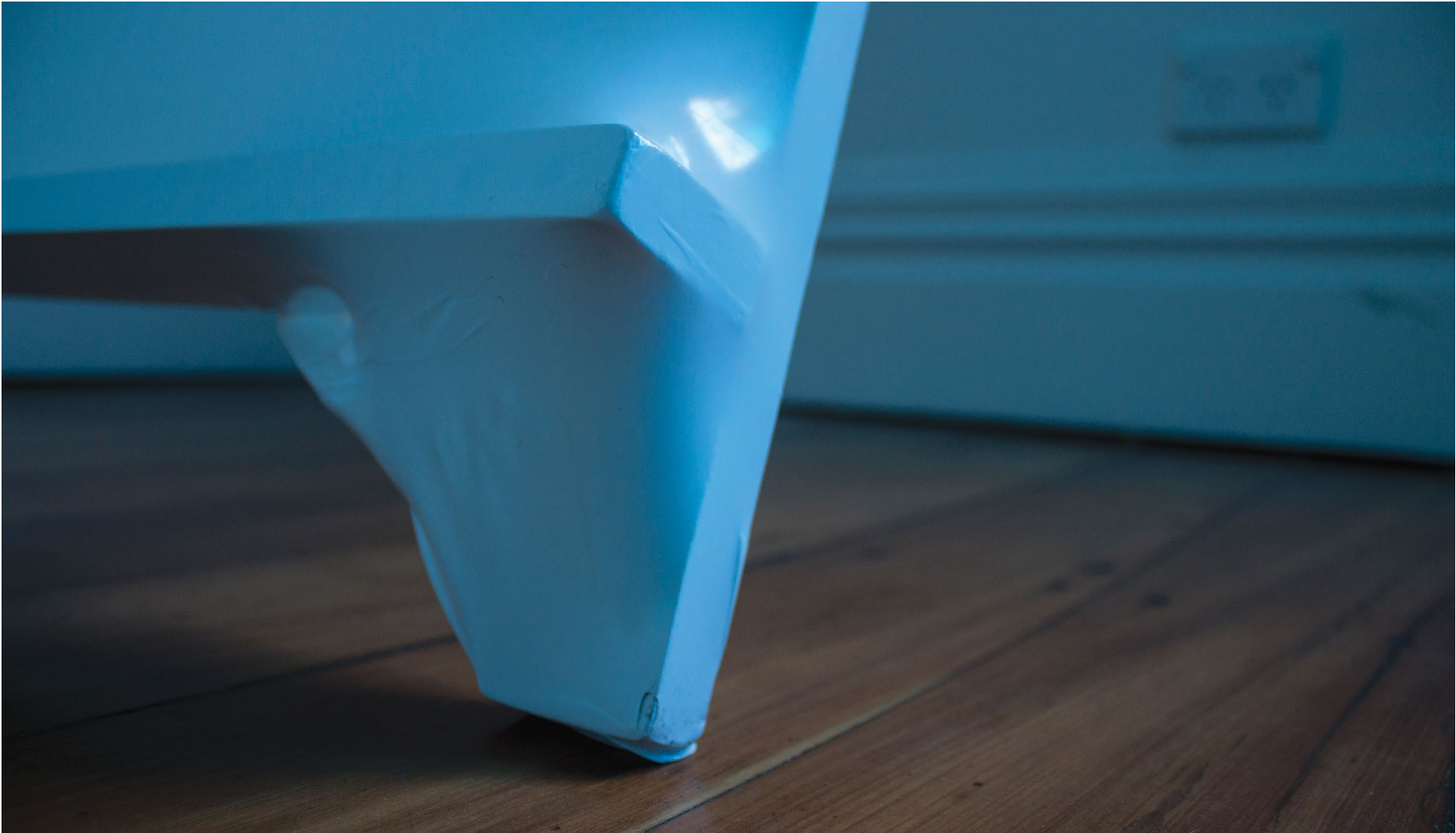
The opposite of overloading the senses, Mackie reduces stimuli, allowing experiential factors to take over. If colour is perceived physiologically and psychologically, Mackie has found an ethereal balance between substance and suggestion.

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3. Stich, Sidra. Yves Klein. (1995) Hatje Cantz Publishers, page 81
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Tom Mackie, *Open Facade*, 2014



Image courtesy of Mark Wilson and Enjoy



Tom Mackie, *Open Facade*, 2014



Image courtesy of Mark Wilson and Enjoy

Sensum

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