

BOSI
CONTEMPORARY



THE LOSS OF SO MANY

DAVID MELLEN

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David Mellen

BOSI Contemporary, New York
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INSTALLATION VIEWS













Karolina Chojnowska

THE ENDGAME

“In my case all painting... is an accident. I foresee it and yet I hardly ever carry it out as I foresee it. It transforms itself by the actual paint. I don't in fact know very often what the paint will do, and it does many things, which are very much better than I could make it do.”

-Francis Bacon

David Mellen's paintings and sculptures create a very unique dialogue between what he extracts from his predecessors and how he combines that with the notions of the modern painter. Though his paintings are largely abstract, one cannot help but find representational images. The exhibition *The Loss of So Many* features works that question the idea of dimensionality and how a canvas can become a vehicle for more than just two-dimensional representation. Combining the sculptural and the painterly in *Red Lies Body, Meter, Still Stand*, and *Into the Throats of Birds*, Mellen creates a trapeze act between the flat and the three dimensional, between the placeable and the unidentifiable. The physical malleability of the sculptural parallels the impressionable subject matter.

In *Still Stand*, there is an intricate duality between the diptych panels. On the left we see a figurative semblance to fish and on the right what appears to be drying and open eggs. One side breathes life while the other loss. The painting's sculptures found on top are also balanced by the painterly on the bottom, creating a duality between the material and the immaterial, the protruding and the embedded, the three dimensional and the two dimensional. This residual balance and duality is carried out in the compositions of all his paintings. There is a constant push and pull between the right and left side of the canvas as if they were in dialogue with one another such as in *Pursuit* and *Breath Without Breath*.



Michelangelo, *The Creation of Adam*, 1512, fresco, Sistine Chapel, Vatican

The *Offing's* composition is a reminder of Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam*. In the center you have the focal point of the unity of lines on the canvas. The heavy right merging toward the left and the left extending out to the center to meet the right. 'Offing' is a term used to describe the part of the

deep sea seen from shore or the near or foreseeable future. The viewer can make out the blues of the sea, where heaven and earth coincide, just like in the *Creation of Adam*, where man coincides with God. However the composition, colors, and depths of layered paint also create a sense of convergence from the more stable left, the present, to the more tumultuous unknown and varied future on the right.

“I would like my pictures to look as if a human being had passed between them like a snail,” Francis Bacon told David Sylvester, “leaving a trail of the human presence and memory trace of past events, as the snail leaves its slime...When I look at you across the table I don’t only see you but I see a whole emanation which has to do with personality and everything else.”¹

Each of Mellen’s paintings is an individual story. They are not a series, but more like a collection of short stories within a single book. All of them however speak to the individual and are left for our interpretation as to what the story is. Together they create a psychological penetration, and some pieces a discomfiting examination of the relationship between viewer and inner psyche. Drawing inspiration from Samuel Beckett’s quote from the *Endgame*: “There’s something dripping in my head... A heart, a heart is in my head,” Mellen’s work allows us to access our own individual personality. His paintings create complex algorithms of illusory and invisible correlations between visual interpretations and inner monologues. ‘Endgame,’ a term referencing the final stage of a chess game when there are only a few pieces left on the board, corresponds to the intellectually prevalent game between the exhibition and the audience, between painting and viewer. The paintings’ titles characterize known physical and emotional attributes that are then contested by their visual gestures.

Using strokes of paint that pass both in front of and behind each other there develops a type of shutter motion stressing the spatial ambiguity of the canvas and adding to the psychological power of the painting. As a whole, the surface of the painting seems to have been activated by the depth of

¹ Sylvester, David,
The Brutality of Fact,
Interviews with Francis
Bacon, London 1990,
p. 82.



Francis Bacon, *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (Detail), 1944 © Tate © Artists Rights society (ARS)



Francis Bacon, *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, 1953 © Artists Rights Society (ARS)

paint and compositional lines into a corrugated wave that threatens to penetrate even the viewer's space. Just as Bacon admired Degas' device of 'shuttering' in which the sensation doesn't come straight out at you but rather slides slowly and gently through the gaps,² so mimics Mellen's final product in a way entirely of its own.

These paintings often contain within themselves a binary tension between the light and the dark. In *Like Butterflies* and *In Landscape*, the white and blue is penetrated and layered with colors of red and black, breaking the almost ethereal with the sinister. The depths and the brushwork are reminiscent of Francis Bacon. Especially in *Ohne*, German for 'without,' the viewer can see the fragments of teeth and mouths protruding from the recesses of the canvas. Bacon had a fascination with depicting the mouth, his most notable pieces including *The Three Studies for Figures at the Base of the Crucifixion* (1944), his series of *Heads*, and most famously his *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1953). In 1930 Georges Bataille asserted that "human life is concentrated bestially in the mouth."³ In *Ohne*, one can see gaping as well as closed mouths on the upper right, the middle left, and the lower right. Bacon drew his inspiration from Poussin's *Massacre of the Innocents* (1630-31), the gaping nanny from *The Battleship Potemkin*, the *Picture Post* images of Nazi leaders and his interest in oral diseases. As John Russell has linked, there was also the connection between Bacon and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, in particular the character of Mr. Kurtz.

In Mellen's work however, there is a twofold interest in the depiction of the mouth. At once there is a suggestion that proposes that the mouth in the lower right hand corner, is trying to draw air in rather than exhale it, while the one in the middle left is trying to expel it. The polarity between the use of black and white as the backdrop for each serves in the visual reading of the context. The mouth in the top right corner remains clenched. It is almost as if the painting is trying to breathe before our eyes, not only through the representation of the mouth but also through the fluid composition, ebbing and flowing, through layers of paint and different levels of canvas. We are left without breath, trying to inhale again.

² Sylvester, David, *Looking Back at Francis Bacon*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2000, p. 243.

³ Georges Bataille, 'La Bouche,' reproduced in *Documents*, no. 5, Paris 1930, pp. 299-300.



Willem de Kooning,
Excavation, 1950 © 2014
The Willem de Kooning
Foundation / Artists
Rights Society (ARS),
New York

Mellen draws inspiration from artists such as Willem de Kooning, especially from his 1950 *Excavation* which Mellen saw almost daily at the Art Institute of Chicago, Lucian Freud, in his intense concentration on texture, color, and impasto, and Francis Bacon, twisting reality so much that the artist arrived at something even more real. Just like in Freud's work, Mellen's subject matter deals a lot with memory and involvement. Mellen's *The Loss of So Many* however deals predominantly with the loss of memories, this exhibition becoming like a funeral for things we have lost both physically and mentally.

David Mellen considers himself an individual artist. He does everything from building the support, to stretching the linen, to putting the final coat of paint on the frame, in which case the process to a completed painting can take anywhere from a month to three months. Usually, he starts with an idea that he thinks will be interesting in capturing. He begins with a small sketch of a composition or something that he hopes will produce a good painting. Sometimes after a couple of days of work, especially when he begins to understand too well the direction it is heading, he realizes that the original idea is not good enough and he begins to push for something further. That process repeats itself every couple of days until maybe two months have passed and he finally has what he wants. In order to achieve this final product, Mellen works the canvas with paint, often removing and adding, and building up until he has achieved the desired product.

There is the mental process; the thinking and reflecting about the effects of the work. Then there is the physical process; the actual doing. He goes back and forth between both of these with the hope that each one will push the other to be a little better than it is.

The amount of time his work usually takes is dependent upon how close the original idea is to the final image that he is satisfied with. Usually once he becomes accustomed to a painting, it is not enough for him and he begins to try and push it until it is something he is not used to. It is very important for him to try to surprise himself. Bacon once said that in the case of his painting it was all an accident, that he foresaw it but hardly ever carried it

he had originally planned it and that it transformed itself by the actual paint. He often did not know what the paint would do, and in fact it did many things that turned out to be much better than he could make it do. Just like with Bacon's creative process, Mellen's painting is often an accident, but at the same time not an accident at all because every artist must select which part of the accident they wish to preserve.

The fact that Mellen is not a prolific artist makes this exhibition that much more unique. *The Loss of So Many* spans his work over the last seven years. Just like a chess game, this exhibition demonstrates the complexity and never ending way to explore different endgames within our own humanity. Like chess pieces, these paintings serve as signifiers which allow the viewer to explore what drives us, breaks us, consoles us, what it means to be human on the way to the pursuit of happiness. These images, both abstract and familiar, are devised by the artist to make us rife with connotations of the physical and immaterial space of our everyday life, and the things we lose in between.

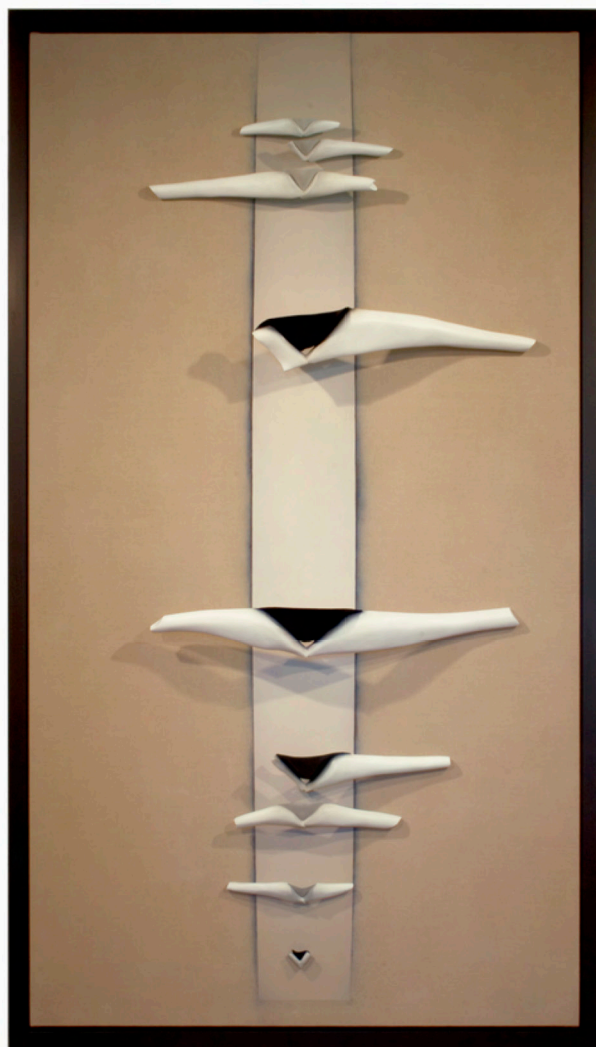
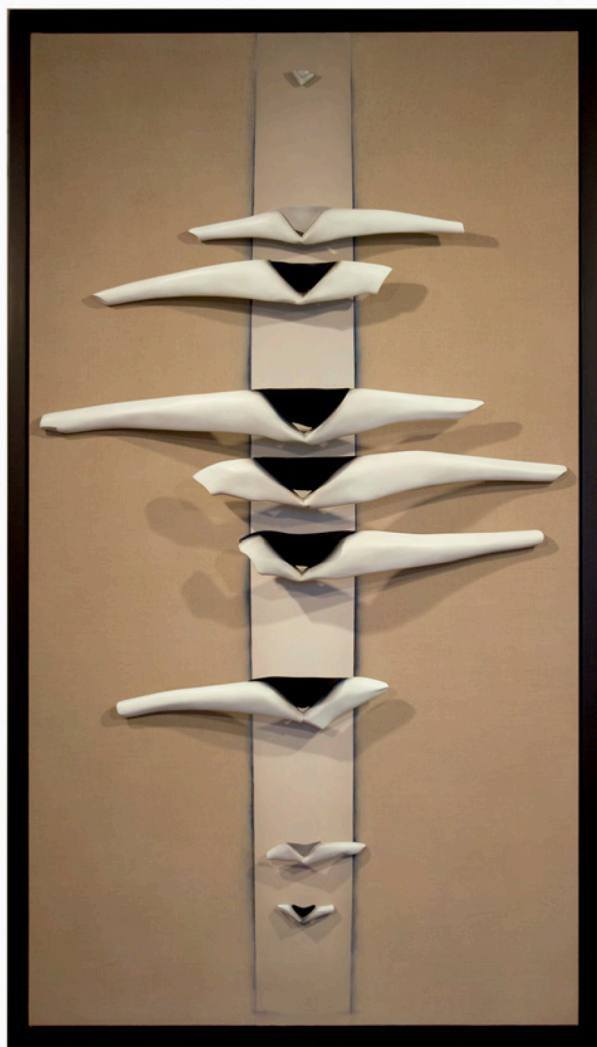
EXHIBITED WORKS

THE LOSS OF SO MANY

2014

pigment and varnish on linen

80 x 46 x 9 in



STILL STAND

2014

varnish and pigment on linen

79 1/2 x 70 1/4 x 8 in



OHNE

2014

varnish and pigment on linen

73 1/4 x 51 1/2 in



THE OFFING

2013

varnish and pigment on linen

44 1/4 x 83 1/4 in



LIKE BUTTERFLIES

2013

varnish and pigment on linen

58 x 37 1/4 in

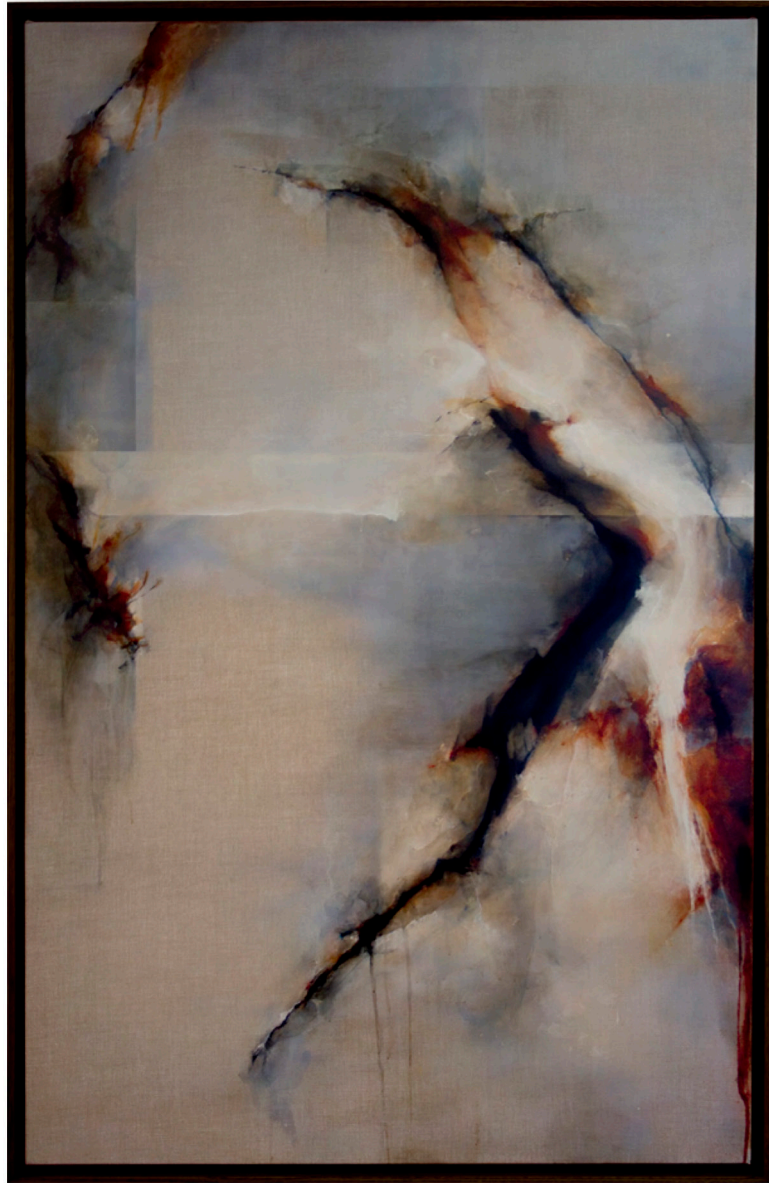


IN LANDSCAPE

2012

varnish and pigment on linen

64 x 41 1/2 in

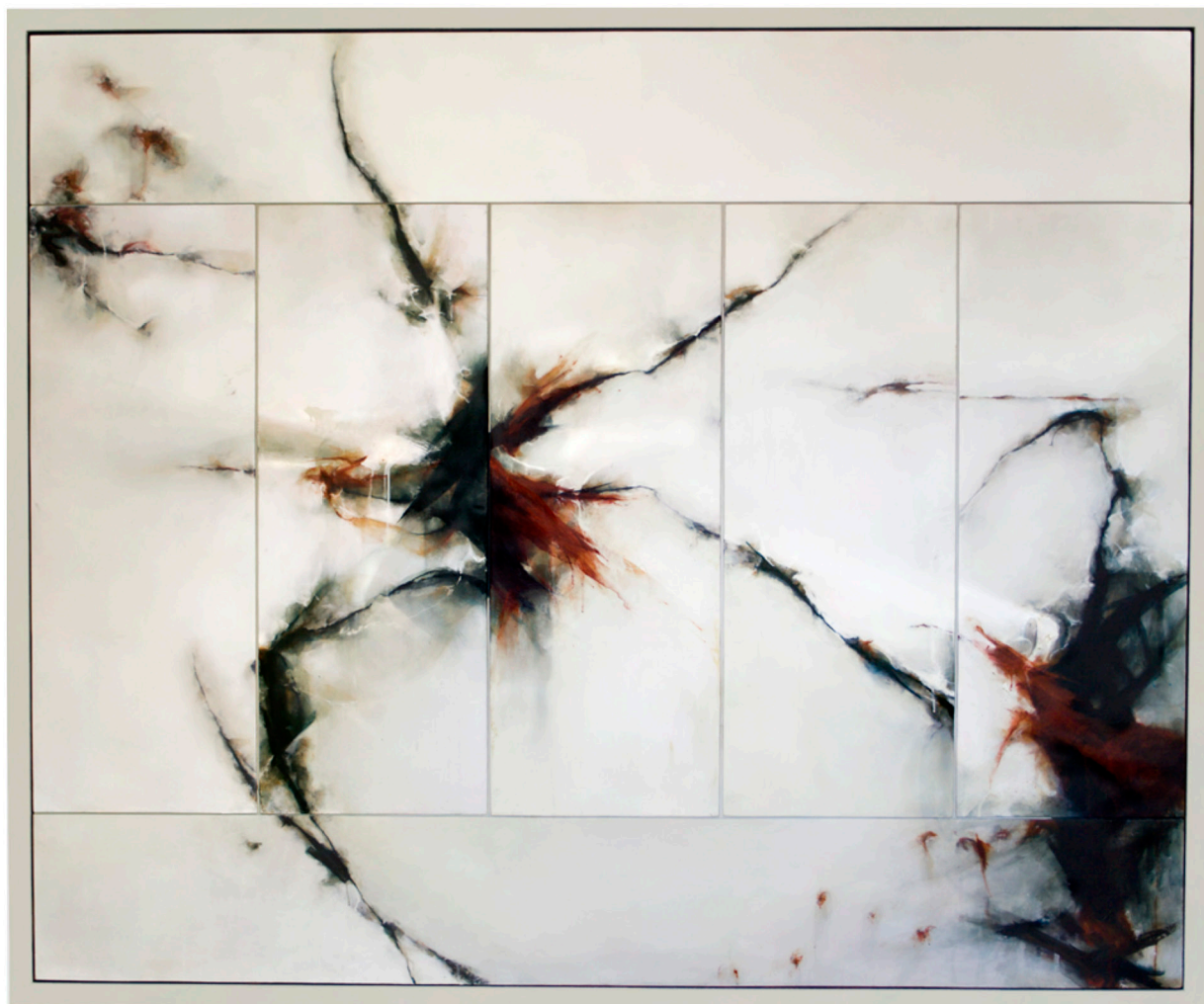


PURSUIT

2011

varnish and pigment on wood

69 x 83 in



INTO THE THROATS OF BIRDS

2011

wood, metal, varnish and pigment

80 x 38 x 7 in



BREATH WITHOUT BREATH

2010

varnish and pigment on wood

82 1/2 x 48 1/2 in



METER

2008

wood, metal, varnish and pigment

79 x 42 x 18 in



NEGATION

2008

varnish and pigment on wood

74 x 115 in



RED LIES BODY

2007

wood, metal, varnish and pigment

27 x 72 x 11 1/2 in



ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

David Mellen (b. 1970, Chicago, IL, USA) attended the American Academy of Art and exhibited his work in his hometown of Chicago until 1994, when he moved to Europe. Over the next five years, he showed work in Paris, Brussels and London. He returned to the States and developed a relationship with the Frey Norris Gallery in San Francisco, where he participated in numerous group shows and one solo exhibition. He currently lives in Connecticut with his family and exhibits in New York.

EDUCATION

1988- 1990 American Academy of Art, Chicago, IL.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2005 Five Sculptures, Frey Norris Gallery, San Francisco, CA

GROUP EXHIBITIONS AND ART FAIRS

2014	The Loss of So Many, BOSI Contemporary, New York, NY
2013	Abstracted Space, Haworth Showroom, New York, NY
2010	American Fashion: Designers at the Aldyn, The Aldyn, New York, NY
	Urban Utopia, Kipton Art Access, New York
2009	Objective Affection, BOFFO, Brooklyn, New York
2008	Summer Group Exhibition, Frey Norris Gallery, San Francisco, CA
2007	Summer Group Exhibition, Frey Norris Gallery, San Francisco, CA
2006	Two Paintings with Sculpture, Frey Norris Gallery, San Francisco, CA

2005	Affordable Art Fair, New York, NY
2000	Terre a Terre, APT Gallery, London, England, exchange exhibition sponsored by the British Council and Ministere de la Communauté française.
1999	Easter in Oostende- Salon Actuele Kunst, Kursaal Exhibition Center, Oostende, Belgium
1997	Breath I Dry Up, Abel Joseph Gallery, Brussels, Belgium
1996	Displaying Slight Impurities, Abel Joseph Gallery, Brussels, Belgium
1995	Cinq Artistes, Centre de Cheques Postaux XV, Paris, France
1992	The Chicago Diversity Show, Ludwig Drum Factory, Around the Coyote, Chicago, Illinois
	Fresh Show, Abel Joseph Gallery, Chicago, Illinois

CONTRIBUTORS

KAROLINA CHOJNOWSKA

Karolina Chojnowska is an independent curator, writer, art critic, and founder of the blog Aesthetic Fraktur. Originally from Poland, she attended Fordham University, where she earned two Bachelors of the Arts degrees, one in Art History and the other in Journalism. In 2012 she received her Masters in Modern and Contemporary Art, Connoisseurship, and the History of the Art Market from Christie's Education in New York. She currently lives in NYC.

BOSI Contemporary specializes in Contemporary and Post-War art as well as primary and secondary market work. It focuses on creating a space that will nurture a creative discourse between different facets of art and contemporary culture. International in scope, the gallery exhibits and communicates the work of both emerging and established artists, selected for their unique aesthetic language and fascinating vision. Our objective is to present an ambitious annual program that comprises at least six exhibitions, accompanied by publications and catalogues, an annual museum-quality exhibition devoted to a historic or established artist, as well as partnerships which reinforce the influence of art on contemporary culture. Our central concern is to showcase, through our roster of artists as well as exhibitions, how international artists relate to one another at the root of their discipline through visual narratives amid various mediums and techniques.

The gallery's approximate 2,000 sq. ft. location at 48 Orchard Street (between Grand and Hester) in the heart of Lower East Side allows the gallery to be a dynamic space for artists as well as a venue for contemporary culture within our community.

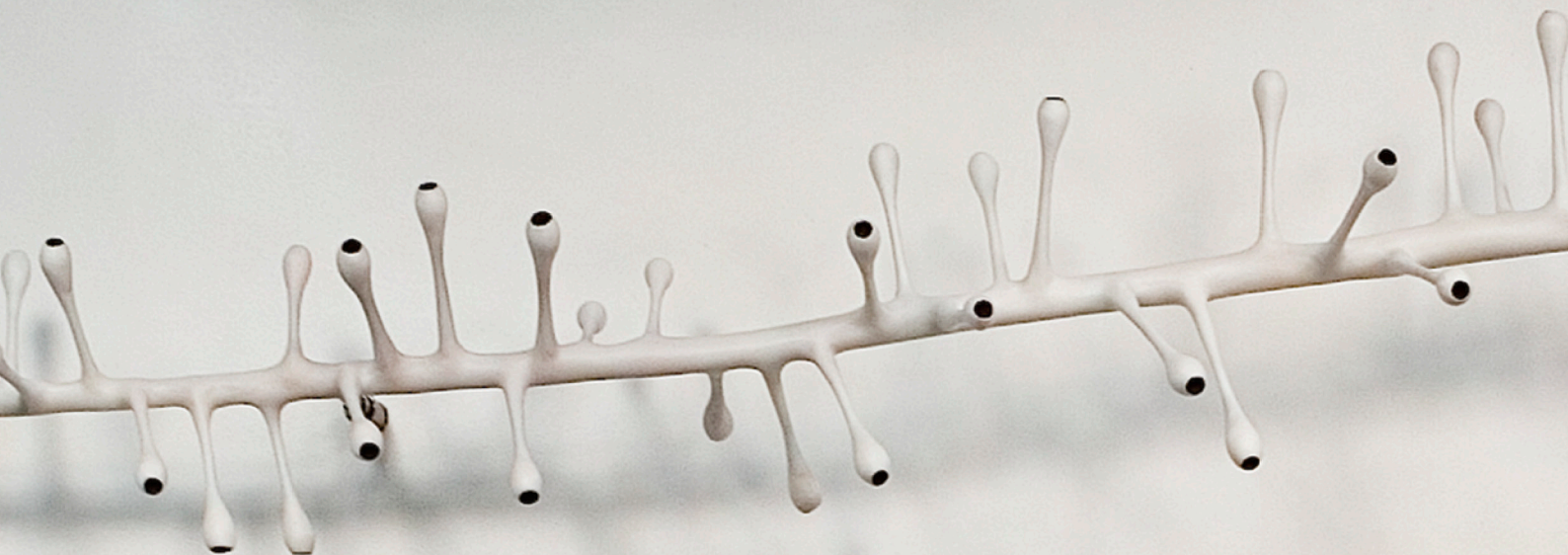
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