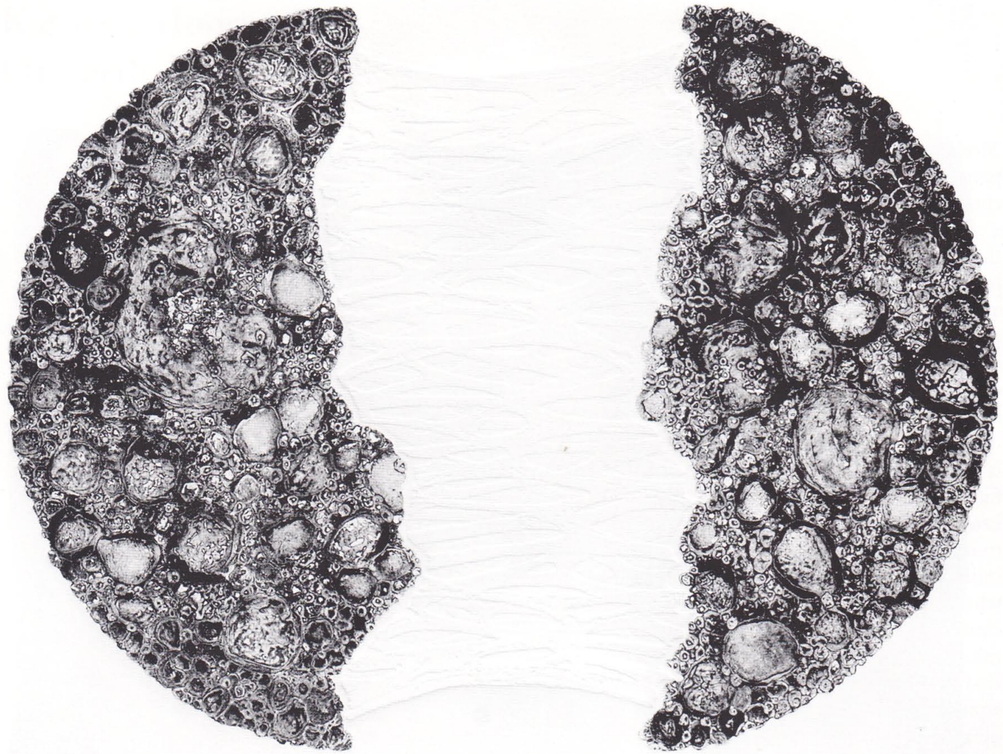

Dan Pyne.
The Art of Material Consumption.

The anthropologist Professor Augustine Fuentes recently stated that 'Human creativity is our ability to move back and forth between the realms of "what is" and " what could be"'. It is the space between the material and the imagination. For artists this space is where we exist. It is where we think, play, learn and ultimately make. The relationship with our chosen materials is a key factor in what we make. The dialogue between the ideas we engage with, the visual stimulus of giving that idea form, and the haptic stimulus of how the material feels and behaves is a balance between uncertainty, meditative action and joy. Within my own practice the nature of materials and the processes I subject them to is key. In order to say something about the world I explore, experiment and then combine those discoveries with the themes I am interested in.

Of late however there has been another conversation between the materials and myself. It is also one that I am not alone in having. Amongst so many of my peers the talk has been about the impact of our choice of materials on the planet. Which has less environmental impact: oil or acrylic paints? What are the replacements for heavy metal pigment colours actually made from? What about the bleaching of paper and canvas fibres or the glues in supposedly sustainable supports? That's just the painters, it's even worse if you're a sculptor dealing with plaster, resins, silicon, fillers and glass fibre.

In this respect the open call from the IMP@CT project seemed timely. My proposal for Of Earth, For Earth was, I thought, a simple one. Create a new work that visually represents my response to humanity's consumption of the Earth's resources. Record every physical material I used in its creation and then cost, research and write something about how each material is sourced and its value. However the studio diary I kept and the subsequent research were a Pandora's box that when opened asked serious questions about what, how and even why I make art.

Are we, despite our emotional investment in the cause of the global climate crisis, as guilty of the disconnect between the means of production and our choice of materials as those who do not realise the true cost of a pork chop or a smart phone? Is it really justifiable to make work with an ecological message if you don't actually ameliorate the footprint of that work? Is an artwork even a valid use of resources at all? A good friend recently stated that 'the decision about which works not to make are often more important than the ones you do'. So does any opinion of mine, any heartfelt reaction to the world I live in really mitigate the material consumption used to speak about it?

The problem feels cyclical. We need to keep making work now that responds to the world as we see it. If public pressure on government and industry from those of us who feel these issues most keenly grows, change will come. This should lead to new environmentally safer materials for artists to appropriate. But the material choices we make in our studios have an impact today, and tomorrow and for decades after. How should we respond in our own practice now? It takes an artist long enough to find their own voice, so changing direction is no simple matter. Can I still have a strong individual voice if many of the materials I have had at my disposal are now morally unjustifiable?

We cannot avoid being consumers of resources. Nor can we refrain from being producers of waste. However, we can seriously manage the manner in which we conduct these material interactions. Not making art is for me not an option. The form it takes will undoubtedly have to change but for me art is not disposable, creativity is a core tenet of what makes us human. Along with everyone else we must scrutinize the environmental impact of our material consumption.

In her opening to this book Dr Kate Moore asked how our dialogues would shape our material future? 'This is not about the dissemination of information. This is a narrative of individuals.' I would suggest that it is so much more than that. For those who move between the realms of 'what is' and 'what could be' it is a collective narrative and creativity our universal voice. For those who speak so much more eloquently through visual language than on any podium this is how we start that dialogue.

To expand upon Ai Weiwei's famous saying perhaps 'Every thing is art' and 'Everything is politics' but Earth is everything.

Opposite: 'Working the Earth' 490mmm x 600mm, Collagraph with blind embossing, using hand mined Bideford Black pigment on Somerset Velvet paper, 2020 Dan Pyne.

Overleaf: 'Costing the Earth' 1.2m x 1.54m mixed media on panel, 2020 Dan Pyne.