

GREGORY CONNIFF: WATERMARKS

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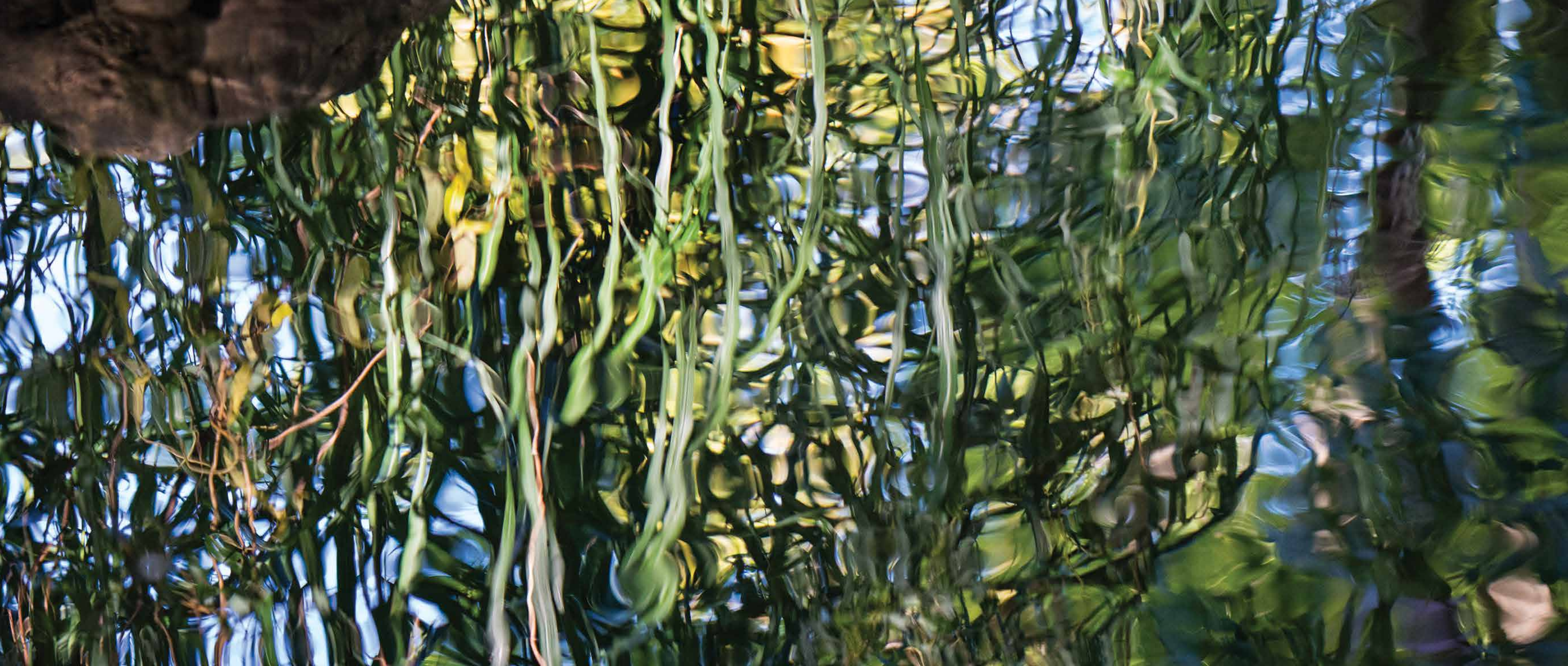
GREGORY CONNIFF

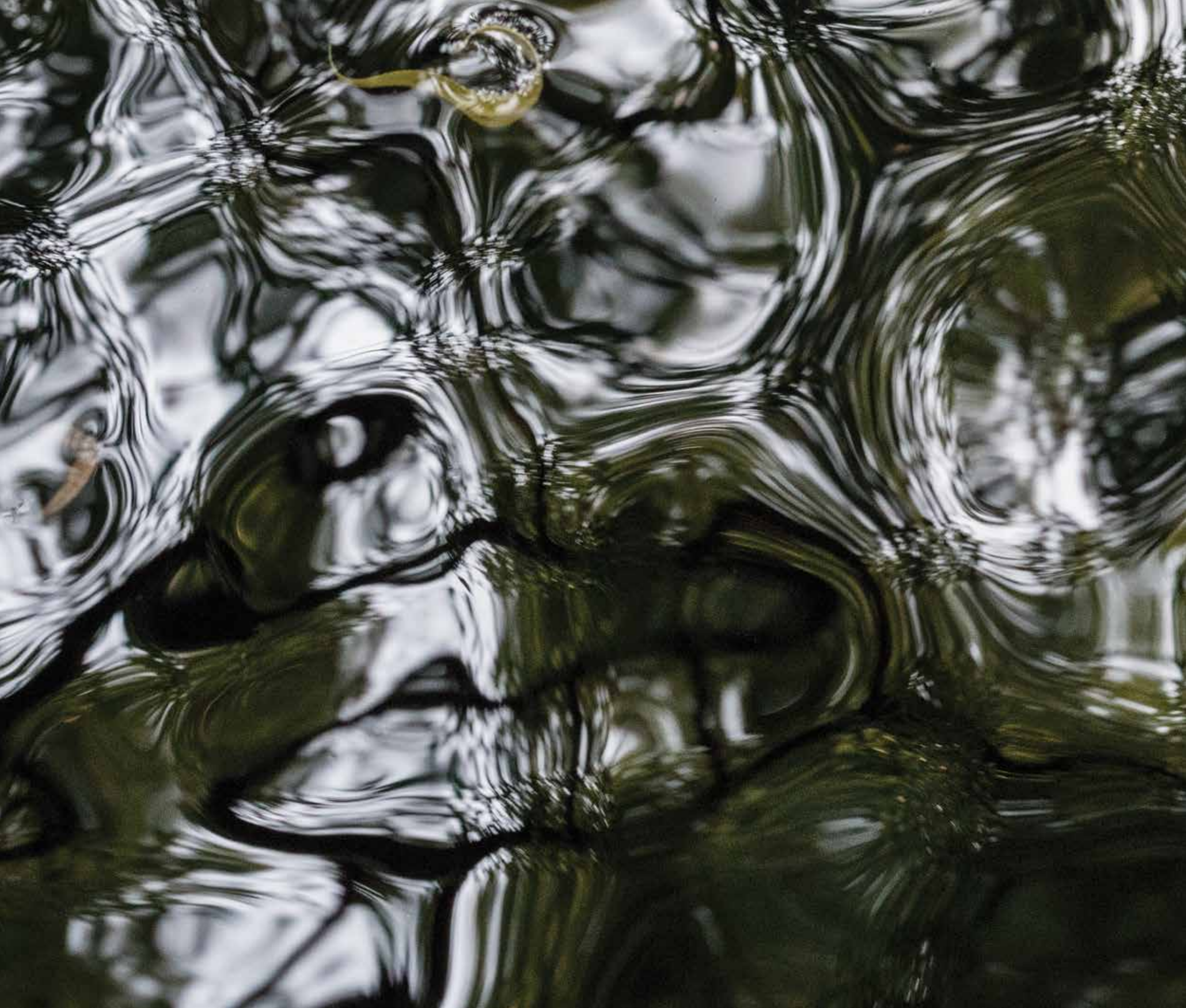
WATERMARKS

Curated by Graeme Reid

Essays by David Travis and Gregory Conniff

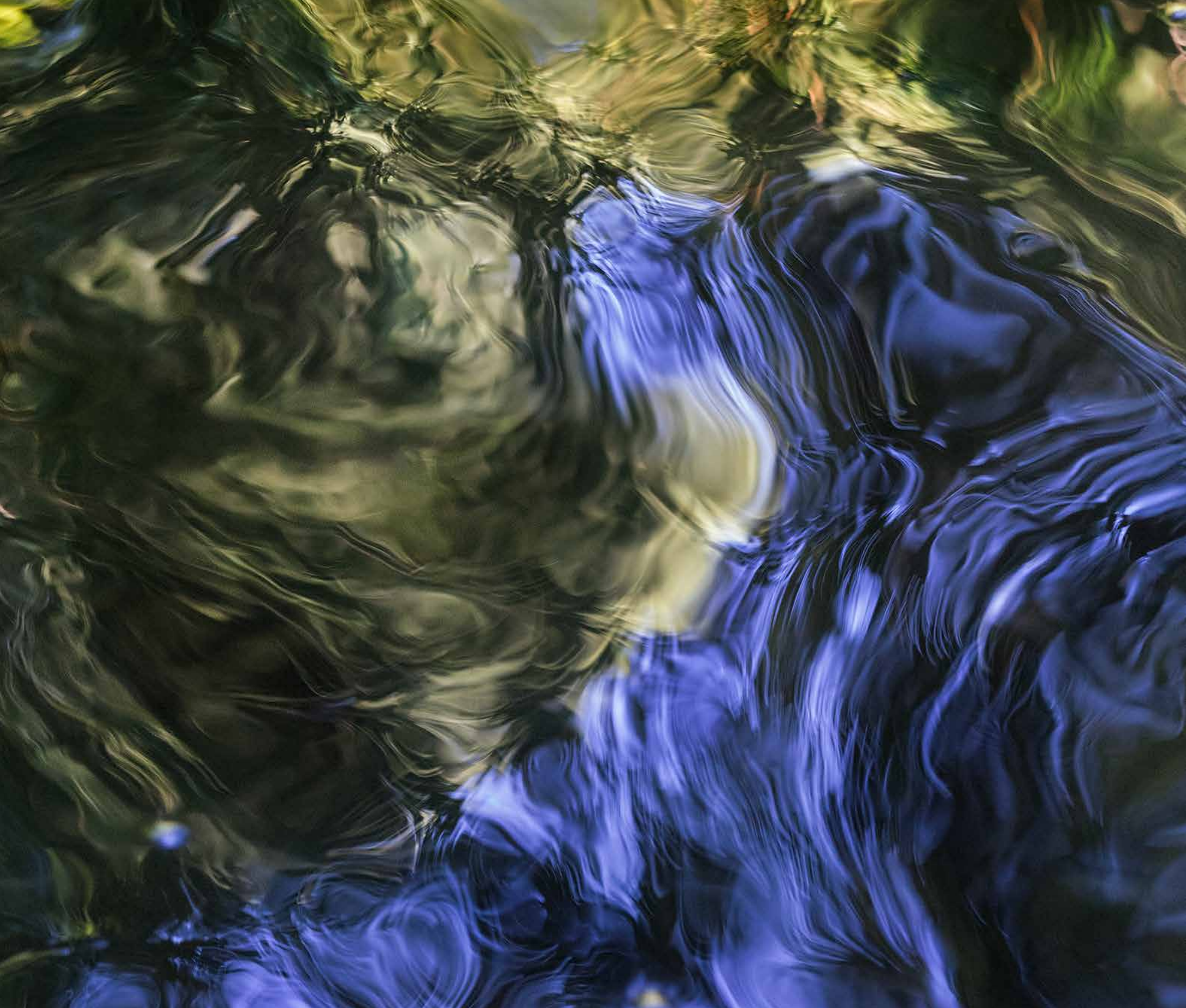
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FOREWORD

Laurie Winters, MOWA Executive Director | CEO

Gregory Conniff: Watermarks is the fifth exhibition in an ongoing series at the Museum of Wisconsin Art that features exceptional artists at the midpoint of their careers. Gregory Conniff was an obvious choice. His work is original and deceptively simple. Over the last thirty years, his national reputation has grown steadily with museum exhibitions at The Art Institute of Chicago; High Museum of Art in Atlanta; Milwaukee Art Museum; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, DC, and thanks to several prestigious national fellowships including a Guggenheim. *Watermarks* is the largest exhibition of Conniff's work to date and the first major museum exhibition of his work since 2006. It is also remarkable for the fact that it presents not a retrospective of the pristine, black-and-white images Conniff has been known for, but a startlingly new and inventive body of dazzling work in color.

A project of this magnitude would not have been possible without the collaboration of a number of individuals who generously contributed their time and talent. Our greatest debt of gratitude is to the artist, who not only took on the challenge of a major exhibition, but boldly proposed these radically new photographs that would take his career and MOWA's exhibition in dramatically new directions. The project was suddenly no longer about past achievements, but about

self-reinvention. Graeme Reid, MOWA's director of exhibitions and collections, deserves special mention as the curator of the exhibition. A deep debt of gratitude is also owed to David Travis, former curator of photography at The Art Institute of Chicago, whose catalogue essay not only articulates the life and vision of the artist, but flows effortlessly and personally as a result of their decades-long friendship. Thanks also go to our talented book designer Amy Hafemann and to our savvy book editor Terry Ann R. Neff, and to the many MOWA staff members whose hard work helped bring this project to fruition.

This catalogue is the fifth in an ongoing series of museum publications that are offered as free downloads on the museum's website (wisconsinart.org), a reflection of the institution's commitment to making Wisconsin art accessible around the world. Printed hardcover editions are available for purchase from Blurb.com.

For their generous support, we sincerely thank exhibition sponsors James and Karen Hyde, Bruce Rosen and Diane Seder, Pick Heaters Inc., Horicon Bank, and the Greater Milwaukee Foundation. These sponsors have helped us to share the extraordinary vision of Gregory Conniff. MOWA is proud to present this unprecedented exhibition. We hope it gives you new insights and great pleasure.



Even before we know what
we're looking at, the visual
world has caught us up.



The surface of water
is a layer of light.



A wave entangled with
its reverberation is a fact
challenging itself.



Our minds teem with unmoored
images seeking anchor in memory.

WATERMARKS

David Travis

Gregory Conniff is obsessive and enduring. He is curious and adventurous. He is also learned. Having gone to law school to discipline his mind and to increase his professional flexibility, Conniff took heart in the idea that the fields of law and photography shared something essential. “Both...have at their center an understanding that the ‘truth’ of any fact or situation lies amid a potentially infinite number of points of view, all of which exist simultaneously and independently of one another” (*Common Ground*, p. 6). The two professions require different intelligences; one makes its findings verbally by argument and the other optically by perception. Conniff has mastered both.

What is characteristic of Conniff as a photographer, starting with obsession, can also be said of him as a gardener. The backyard of his home in Madison, Wisconsin, is the nexus of a trail of plants and arbors that pass lot lines into six adjoining yards. More privately, his gardener’s sensibility and the idea that one can live within a picture extend into his house and the garage turned cedar-lined-hangout. Both places are unified by a sensibility that resists simplicity. In season, there are abundant flowers indoors from the farmers market, but in a permanent state of flux are hundreds of objects gathered over decades—from a pond yacht to curious plastic creatures inhabiting the bathroom, crawling over sink and windowsill. Then there are the large framed black-and-white prints of his magnificent landscapes (see Fig. 1). Standing close in front of them, one can examine the myriad details of a particular order he has located in his home states of New Jersey and Wisconsin, absorb the aura of the kudzu-draped grandeur of the Mississippi hill country, or sense the delicacy of still lifes taken of the garden outside. Photographs from his exhibitions along with pictures by a few favorite painters crowd the walls and a staircase where they are encountered incidentally rather than presented through formal sightlines. It is like many artists’ studios: a welter of random relationships and prearranged visual conversations.

When one has visited Gregory and Dorothy Conniff often enough, the garden and house reveal a design that is partly an echo of his photographs from the late 1970s and 1980s. That was when Conniff first achieved notice on a national stage. In that period, he learned something that changed him permanently. Through regular visits to the artists Jack Beal and Sondra Freckelton, and especially to her garden, he saw and embraced what they meant by making art out of life and life out of art. That oriented his approach to landscape work from then on. How Conniff’s work shifted from black-and-white to vivid color and from expansive vistas to the surface of a single reflecting pool in a public garden is a story of artistic discovery and evolution, of completion, and of a startling revival.

Conniff remembers part of what began his career as an artist growing up in Montclair, New Jersey. Full of what he calls early-teen hostility, he thought he could avoid acquiring the half-closed eyes of know-it-all adults by trying to see one new thing everyday. “I practiced on shapes of hedge and types of leaves, patterns of brickwork, bark, and roofing.... And I watched in fascination the year-by-year takeover by trees and bushes of the property of a neighbor...” (*Common Ground*, p. 19). So began his study of a world shaped by human presence and the pressure with which nature countered with its own forms and patterns. It was in the spaces in back of and between the houses of his hometown and Atlantic shore

cottages that Conniff found a photographic home by reclaiming grounds familiar from childhood explorations. It is a subject that many Americans unknowingly share. He calls it “common ground.” As a photographer, he sensed an organizing structure gardeners would appreciate in these marginal places. He discovered that they contained visual signals that gave him what on a nautical chart is a position fix.

In both ancient and modern celestial navigation, the mariner accepts the notion that the Earth is the center of the universe and that the stars and planets move in predictable tracks around it. It works because the measurable discrepancies are far too fine for recording by a hand-held sextant. Those who master all the mathematical manipulations on a sight reduction worksheet can pinpoint themselves on the Earth by latitude and longitude. Knowing the bearing and height of at least three stars at a given time places the navigator in a unique spot within the universe. The realization that there is an absolute “here” and that through the picture you are there with the photographer is what Conniff’s exacting photographs of the late 1970s and 1980s explore. The measure of the shadows of eaves, the angle of porch steps, and the alignment of picket fences become visual elements of a pictorial sight reduction accurate enough to guide us back to the very spot the photographer placed his lens and found an awareness of this homing sensation of being in the center of the universe. Although Conniff’s places are personal, idiosyncratic sites, when we see his perceived lines of position they look back on us like stars.

For Conniff, these photographs were not merely exercises in composition. These visual nests came into being through “a sense that did not require language to frame what it knew...” (*Common Ground*, p. 14). For him, “language expresses a way of thinking that generalizes the things of the world, and which we permit to place us at a distance from experience.... Photographs, on the other hand, are the product of a way of thinking that deals in specifics and represents a direct experiencing of facts” (*Common Ground*, p. 13). Thus, the essence of his sight reduction was to show there were special places where one could experience what he calls the “connective tissue that holds the world together” (*Common Ground*, p. xii). Perhaps it is a useful Romantic notion that the plain sense of things can be so available as to tell us where we are and give it spirit. The mystery is always why. Conniff is in good company in wondering what he needs make of it. Walt Whitman (Whitman 1993, p. 239) in the

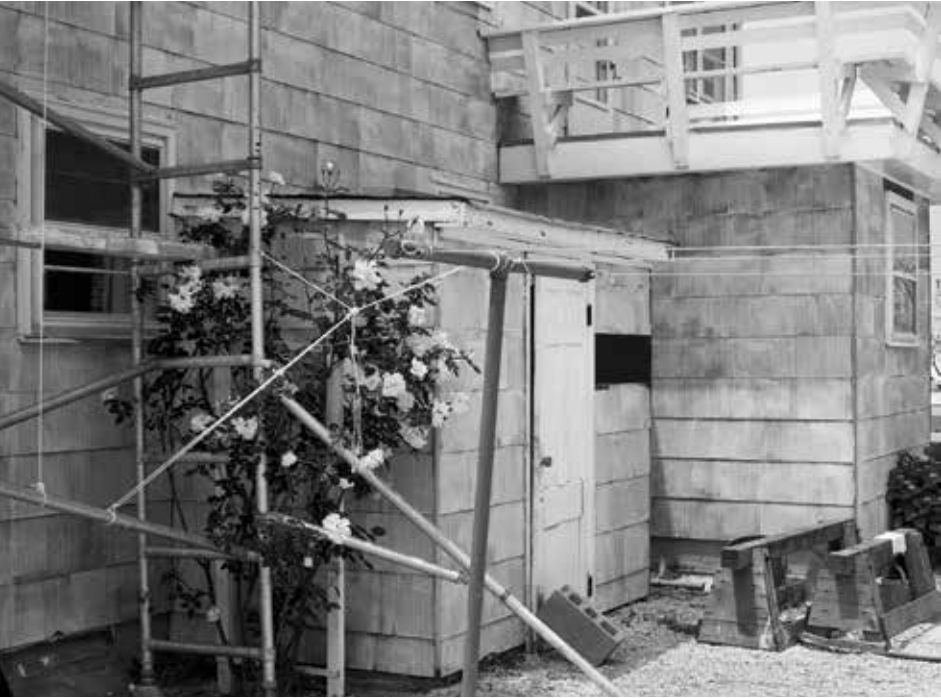


Fig. 1. Gregory Conniff, *Loveladies, New Jersey*, 1979.

sagacity of his old age simply wrote:

.... *What good amid these, O me, O life?*
Answer:
That you are here—that life exists and identity,
That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.

Conniff’s photographs are his verses. Each pretends an answer as it conceals another question, and work begets more work. His alignment of locatable man-made structures gave way to the shaded wildness of the undergrowth. He accommodated the intrusion with nuanced compositions, sometimes of weeds, sometimes of gardens. As new pictures evolved, Conniff kept one thing the same: finding scenes in which the viewer’s eyes are never urged to look beyond what is framed by the camera. His photographs are their own completions; even if their subjects are of tangles, they are

part of what he feels may be a deliberate universe. Keeping the viewer's eye contained did not devolve into using clever tricks of optical incarceration, but insisted on the existence of a nameless something that the poet Wallace Stevens (Stevens 1997, p. 435) recognized for the artist who saw:

*How he had composed the pines,
Shifted the rocks and picked his way among clouds,*

*For the outlook that would be right,
Where he would be complete in an unexplained completion:*

*The exact rock where his inexactnesses
Would discover, at last, the view toward which they had edged,*

*Where he could lie and, gazing down at the sea,
Recognize his unique and solitary home.*

Gardeners have an appreciation of the wild and the tamed. By his third season of gardening behind the bungalow, Conniff divined that "gardening is not so much the imposition of order as it is the inviting of the unknown...places that welcome surprise" (*Common Ground*, p. 13). In his photographs, we see the inverse: from surprising places he uncovered a visual order. The more he learned about these two fields, the more each passion entrusted the other with new purpose and joy.

Conniff's regard for gardens began tentatively when he was about eight, encouraged by a neighbor who took a liking to him. This interest faded though, as his first bicycle allowed him to escape to the forest preserve that capped the hills a few miles from his home, from which he could see the city of Manhattan spread out along the near horizon like a vast granite dream. Then came cameras, a darkroom, and finally universities, leading him farther and farther away from any direct involvement with the soil of gardens or landscapes. This began to change in the late 1970s as he spent more and more time in Sondra Freckelton's gardens along a trout stream in Oneonta, New York. It was there that he found his bearings as an artist. Conniff's early photographic

successes had been portraits, the best of them of artists, but now he was enthralled with landscape. And the seeds had been planted for developing views of his own.

What followed were bouts of picture-making of the built environment that extended from backyards to steel mills, from New Jersey to the Pacific West Coast as Conniff worked with a personal fervor to absorb everything he could see. The work from 1978 to 1983 culminated in the major book *Common Ground* (1985), featuring his backyard explorations and a discerning essay on visual thinking, "Why a Camera?" This book was to be the first of a quartet that would take decades to complete. Pacing the pictures were gardens with his own aspirations spreading out at home. "My gardens and how people have engaged with me in them are as important to me as an artist as are my pictures. An artist increases the potential for vital living in others" (Conniff 2016). Through gardening, Conniff found that he worked best as an inhabitant or neighbor, not a roving stranger. He had to have some sense of being home. He had to be in love with where he was.

In 1989, after a number of applications built around ideas, Conniff received a Guggenheim fellowship for what he described to the foundation as less a project than a "life work." This honor revived the predicament that is a gnawing part of any artist's life: What to do next? How are you certain what your "life work" is, now that you can suddenly afford to do it? For Conniff, the answer appeared in the pages of *The New York Times*, where in a matter of a few days he saw reference to Oxford, Mississippi, multiple times. He decided to drive south. There he found welcome and a lasting friendship that gave him a place to stay just outside the city. He returned to the hill country of northeast Mississippi and the Delta twice a year for a decade and a half as he learned to love another place and to photograph it as if he lived there, as if in his repeated visits he could "persuade the trees and light to show him the small revealing moments of grace that made it home to its people" (see Fig. 2). He called it "photographing from the other side of the fence" and it "revealed a place that though riven with difficulties of poverty and race was, nevertheless, possessed by a beauty that was there for everyone" (Conniff 2016).

In 2006, the Chazen Museum of Art at the University of Wisconsin–Madison mounted an exhibition of eighteen of Conniff's landscapes taken in the two previous years. All the photographs in the spacious galleries were large, generally 30-by-36 inches.

They were printed by digital inkjet technology, which allowed the photographer to inspect every detail of his film negatives and meticulously adjust the brightness, depth, contrast, and tone at an obsessive level that had been impossible before. The process allows the ink of the image to fuse with the paper as opposed to being held above it in a gelatin emulsion. Palpably sensuous, like a gravure print, and lacking no minutiae from enlargement, they were tacitly resplendent. The catalogue's text was Conniff's second major statement of what photography could touch deeply. In *Common Ground*, he had written of fact and truth, now he wrote of the work of beauty by addressing photography and gardening. It did not bother the photographer in the least that the notion of beauty in his discipline was passed over when attention was increasingly being directed to political, cultural, gender, and identity issues. His voice spoke of aesthetics, but underscored an ethical situation, as well. "Beauty is part of the pattern language of our environment. Paying attention to home ground leads to the love of place and eventually can bring us to take responsibility for its condition" (*Wild Edges*, p. 30).

Photographers have had a long history with gardens and parks, devoting years to the study of their favorites. One of the first examples came a scant decade after the medium's debut: Gustave Le Gray's forest boulders and portraitlike studies of famous trees in Fontainebleau made between 1849 and 1857. In the twentieth century, natural preserves and man-made landscapes served an additional purpose for photographers who moved beyond making scenic settings into pictures. Gardens and parks became psychological havens as well as symbols of states of mind for four great photographers as they entered the last stage of long careers. In the mid-1920s, Eugène Atget documented the neglected Parc de Sceaux near Paris as the dying dream of a garden of the old regime he admired. In the early 1930s, Alfred Stieglitz began photographing the withering of the stately poplar trees nearly his own age on his family's summer estate in New York at Lake George. In the 1940s, Edward Weston returned to Point Lobos, California, recording its darker psychological moods as well as his own. And in the early 1970s, Paul Strand took his last photographs of veiled sorrow in his private garden in Orgeval, France. The retreat into garden may serve as a convenient art historian's trope, but getting old was not a theme. It was real and final. Vital ambitions and beliefs were at stake. The cyclic seasons of death and renewal, a somber vision of familiar places, and weathering blight all served as metaphors for imminent exits.



Fig. 2. Gregory Conniff, *Lafayette Co., MS*, 2005

Not all artists in what the French kindly call the third period are trapped within the furrows of human decline. Vitality after the age of sixty is more common now, and artists have time to venture toward other horizons, essay new subjects, or adopt different techniques. Their freedom is often more daring than their youthful exploits as they now light their own pathway forward and care little about the critique of others. But the world can still burst wide open in revelation for the perseverant veteran. At seventy-two, Gregory Conniff is experiencing the surge of a revival. The evolution of his work has not come to an end, but to a partition.

Thirty years after his 1985 book *Common Ground*, Conniff took the opportunity of an exhibition at the James Watrous Gallery in Madison to take the measure of nearly four decades of work to see if he had achieved the life at which he had aimed. He declared from the outset that this was his last show. At the gallery, he developed an installation built around his older prints borrowed from the homes of people he knew. He set up a mid-century modern seating area to distance the exhibition from the standard walk-around-the-walls experience. He wanted viewers to experience a space infused with the spirit of pictures that others had made part of their daily lives and that he lived with in his own home. It had long been one of Conniff's beliefs that work that is slow to reveal itself has a greater long-term influence than work whose primary energy is shock. He spent many days in the gallery talking with visitors and reflecting on the life he had fashioned from his times and opportunities. Whether he admitted it or not, around him was an understanding of landscape that will be seen to rank among the best in our American photographic arts. At the end, he concluded that he had worked a fair balance of success and failure and was ready to think about something else.

Two years later, when Curator Graeme Reid offered space at the Museum of Wisconsin Art for an exhibition of his past work, Conniff deflected the invitation. He had already begun traveling on the East Coast in search of a subject and a way of seeing that might reignite a desire to explore; "looking for a way to a new place" is how Conniff phrases it. But no real breakthrough had occurred and the idea of hanging old work felt like a hollow endeavor. Then the curator deftly altered course, proposing a larger exhibition arrayed to argue that Conniff's picture-making had shifted radically several times in a sequence of resets. The proposed exhibition would end by introducing astonishing new pictures yet to be taken.

The offer now had the challenge of a commission—with the quickening terror of a deadline—to produce something completely unexpected and museum-worthy. That the museum was willing to take a chance with him on the unknown focused Conniff's spirit, leading him to abandon four decades of self-directed limits and traditional techniques. He found himself in one of those all-encompassing, rule-breaking, twisting, perceptual convulsions that artists risk to escape the pull of past successes. Leaving behind his tripod, medium-format camera, black-and-white film, and a list of his obsessive rules including full framing printing, he went full digital, hand-held, and began to see if he could speak in color. It was a gamble that paid off.

Conniff chanced upon the subject for *Watermarks* in a "new place" that had been part of his neighborhood life for decades. When the reflecting pool of the Olbrich Botanical Gardens became a hypnotic portal of luminosity, Conniff felt a resurgence of purpose as his new pictures—abstracted but specific reports of water marked by motion and light—began to look like what he terms "whole sight." His obsessive nature took hold of him again, commanding him to return over and over, enduring rainy weather, early mornings, days of humid sunshine, and the vanishing light of perfect evenings. The water works multiplied, crowding out the examples of Conniff's former successful resets and prompting museum director Laurie Winters to devote the gallery solely to the first flourish of this next chapter of Conniff's long career.

As with the Watrous show, Conniff considered the site of the exhibition as a fundamental factor in determining the selection, size, and sequence of the photographs. He insists that the experience of the viewers' encounter is what matters more than anything else. He laid out the gallery so that upon entry we are greeted by a prelude of sizzling, vibrant yellows and luscious, buoyant greens that surround human figures. Our curiosity is aroused upon discovering that in this otherwise conventional garden subject, all the images are upside down. That is what reflections do; they reverse directions. Following an exacting sequence of forty-two lyrical images, the photographer leads us to other abstractions and curiosities. A carnival ride of ocular thrill ensues. He sets landmark references aside and zooms in closer to the water's surface, leaving the eye to hover above a fluid cauldron of color. Below, he orchestrates the waves and ripples of the gleaming surface. Closer still and more curious, the aqueous branches and foliage are further stretched in the distorting spectacle and disintegrate. All sense of orientation vanishes in the glaze until, in a cluster of prints, leaves settle in their upright position floating on the autumn pool, a stone reemerges, and we regain a sense of place and a time in season. On that final note, we sense the structure and tempo of a song voiced in hues. It is a sensation unlike any of his earlier work.

To begin to see anew, the photographer was wise to start with light, the best place to create his new world. In this lyric mode, color commands us more than shape as its vivacious saturation carries us away from earth and stone into the realm of light. We may pause in our modern life to wonder for a moment if the ancient path to beauty ends here in a reflection of and on its nature. Such questions should haunt us every day.

Author's Note: I am grateful to Gregory Conniff for supplying the essential wording for his experience in regard to the James Watrous Gallery exhibition. The assessment of his achievement is mine.

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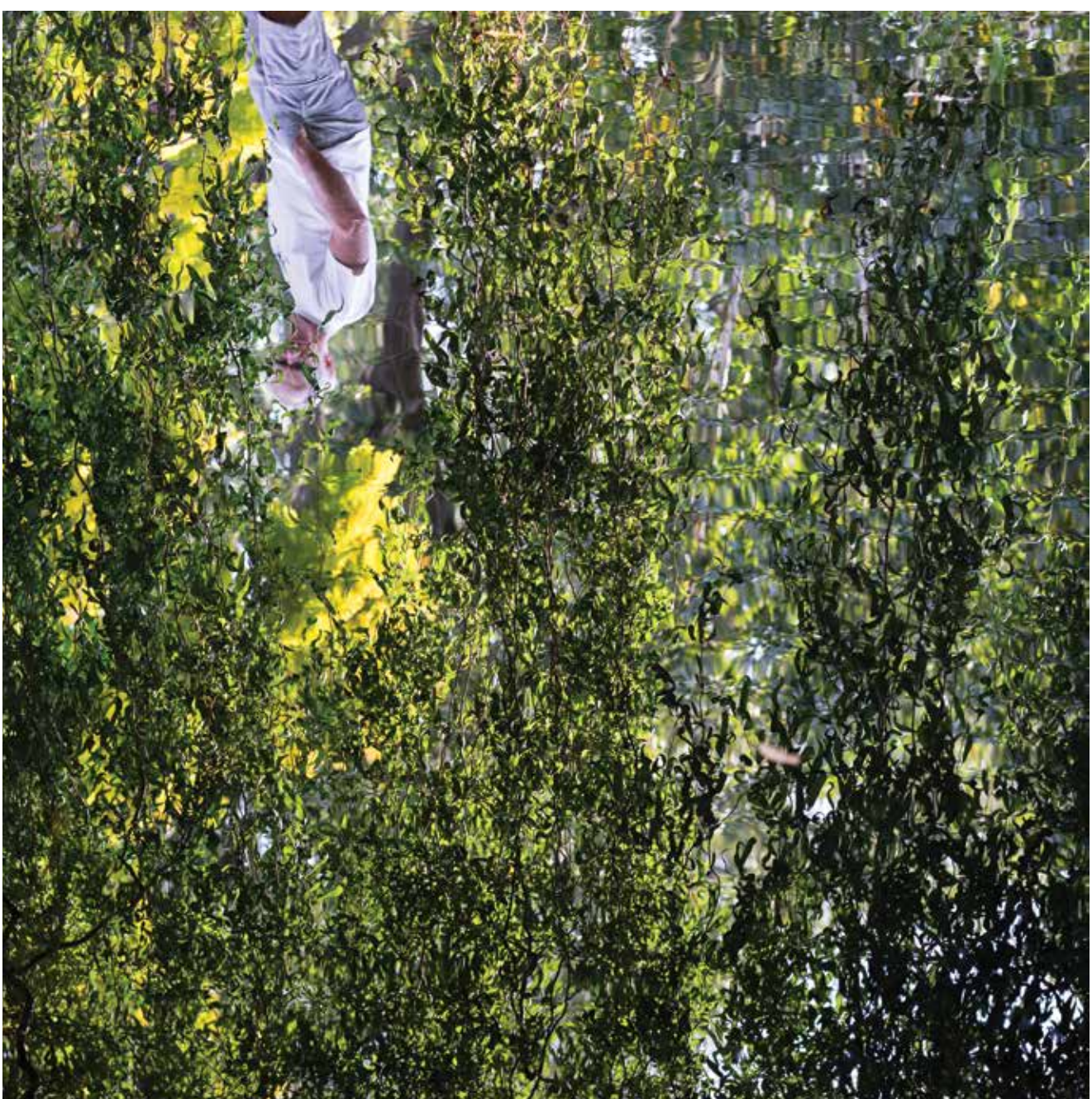
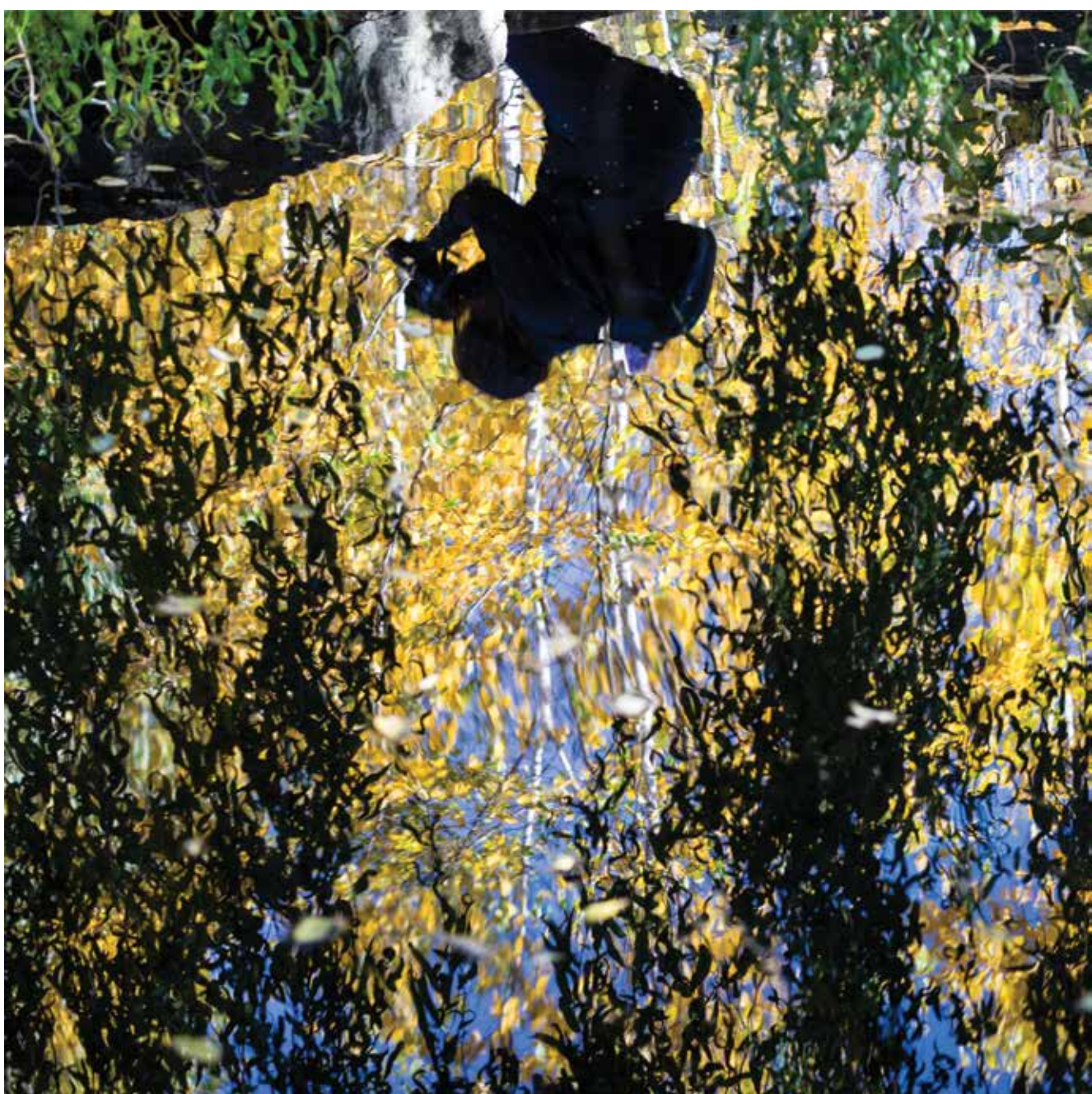
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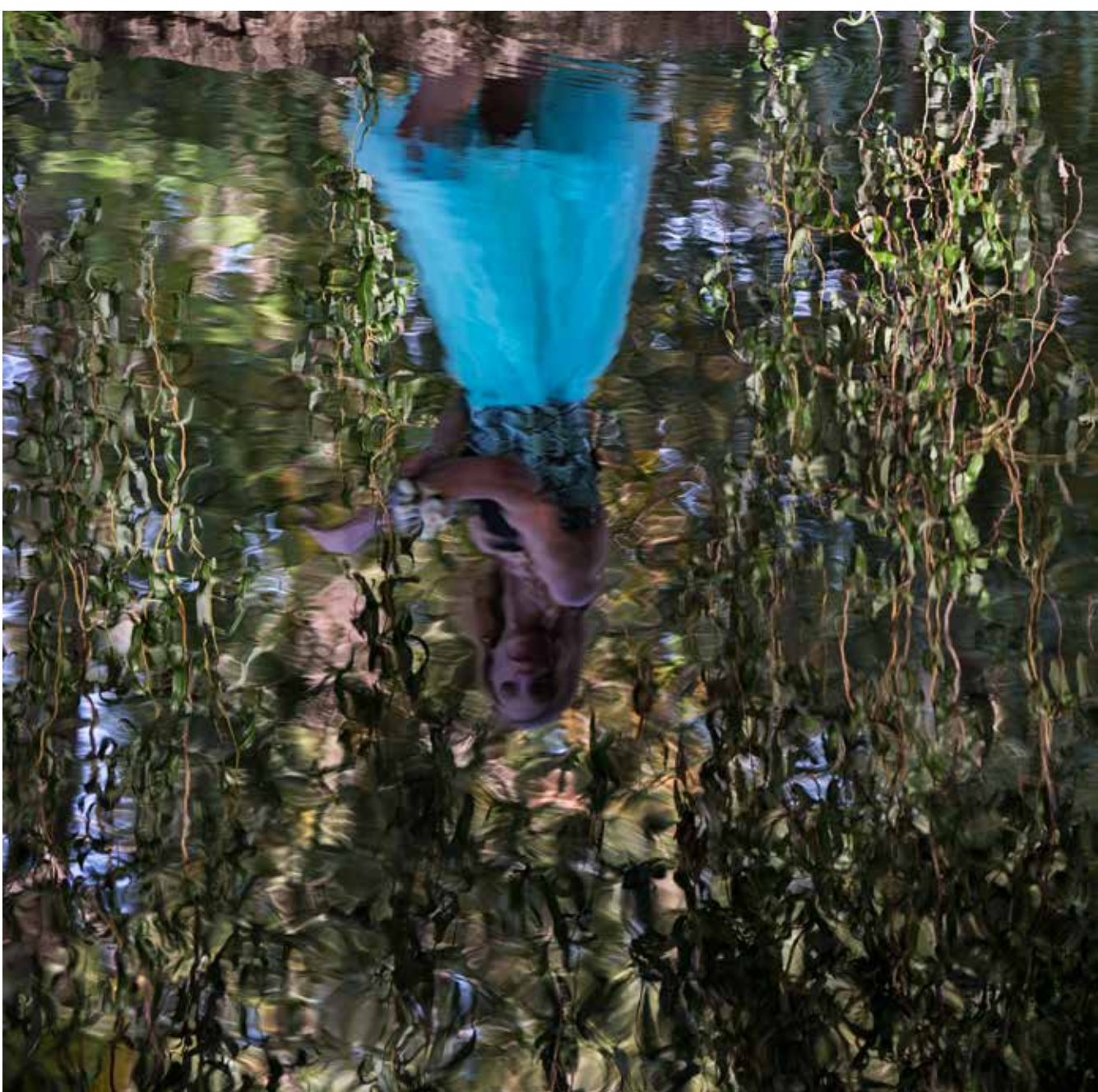


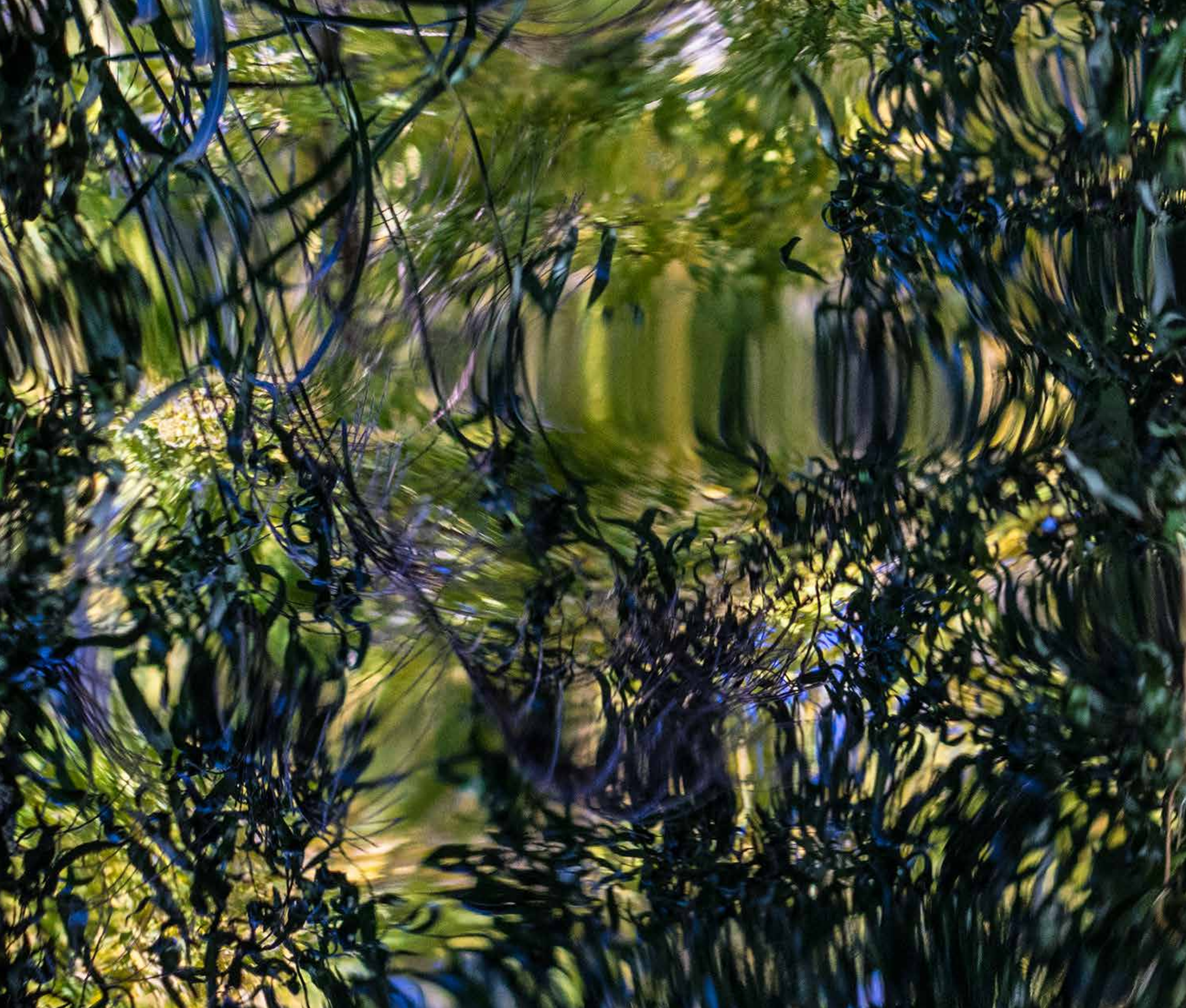
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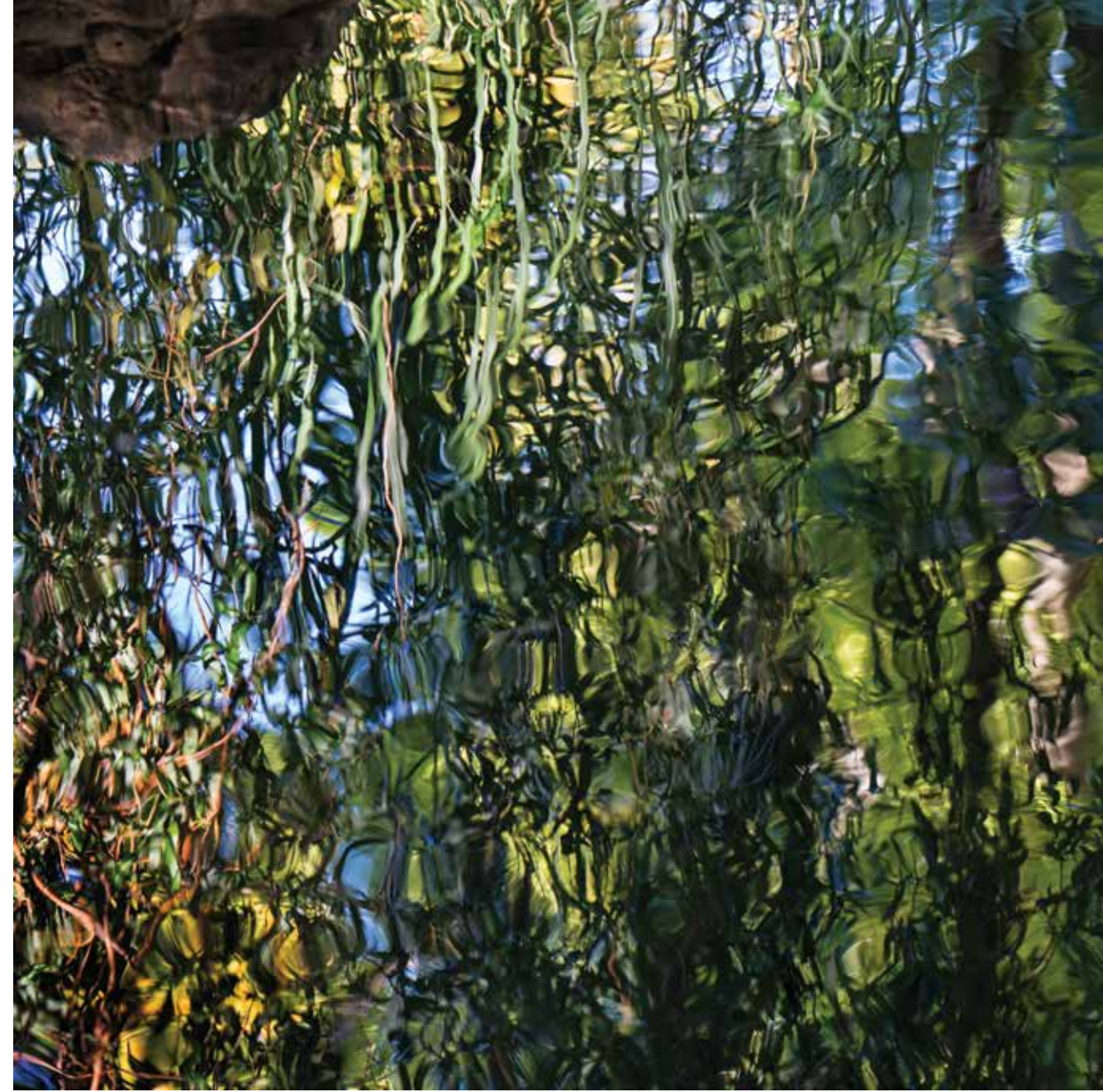
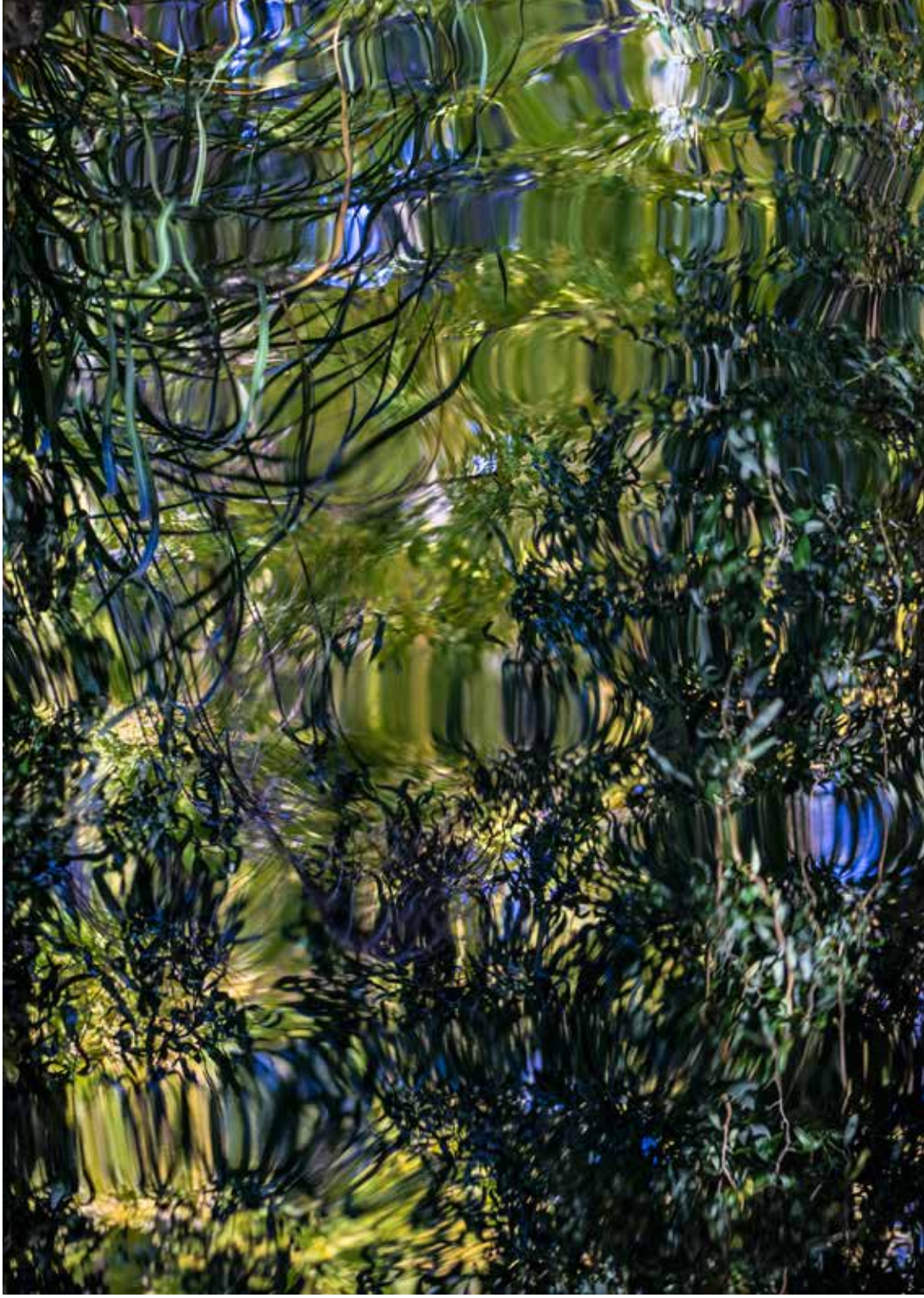
Gregory Conniff: Watermarks presents color photographs that Conniff made of the reflecting pool at the Olbrich Botanical Gardens in Madison, Wisconsin. Conniff found his subject in September of 2014 shortly before the pool was drained for the winter. He reengaged with the subject in April of 2015 and concluded the series in October. The installation of forty-two large-scale images is meant to be an immersive experience.

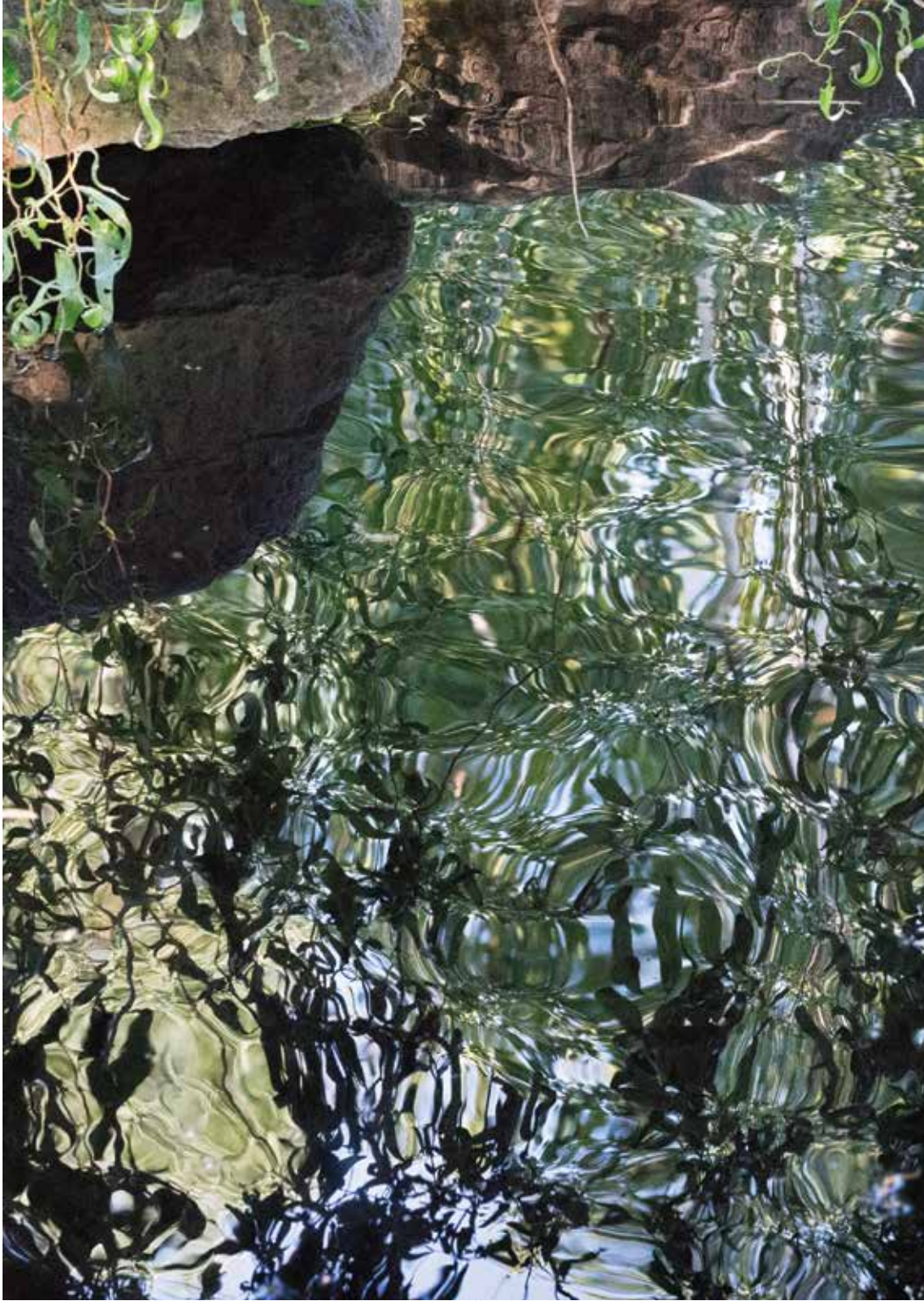




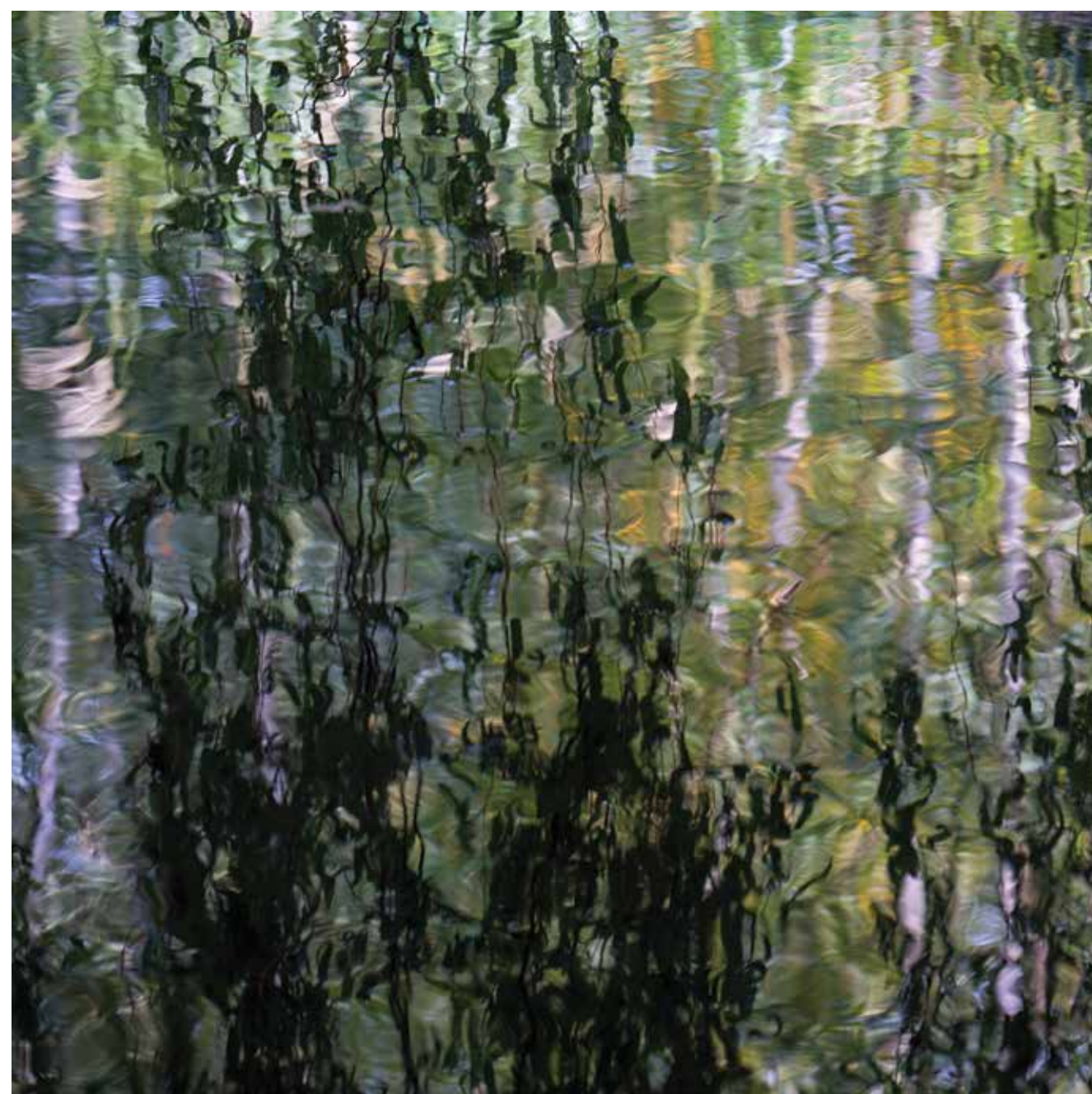
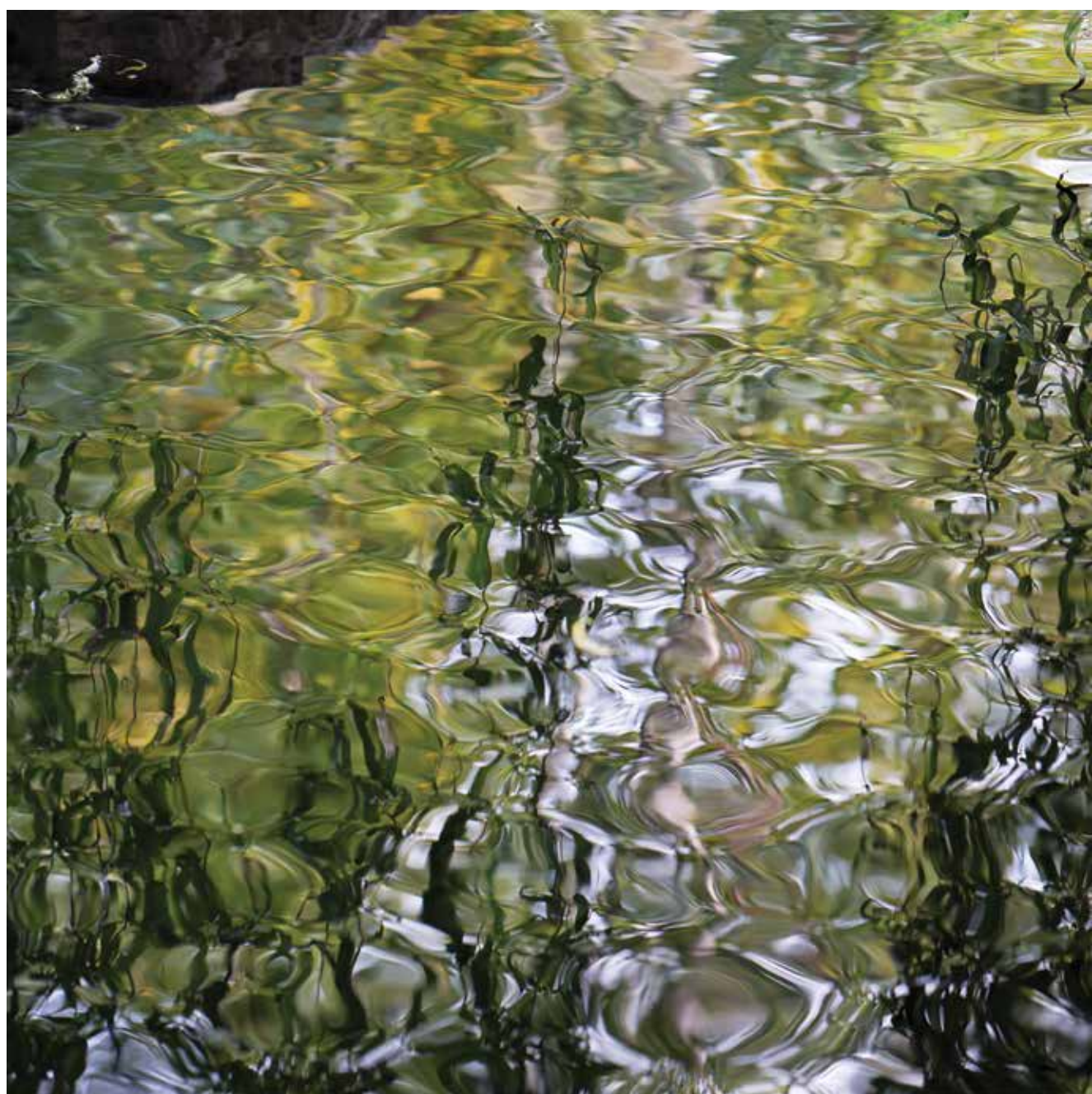


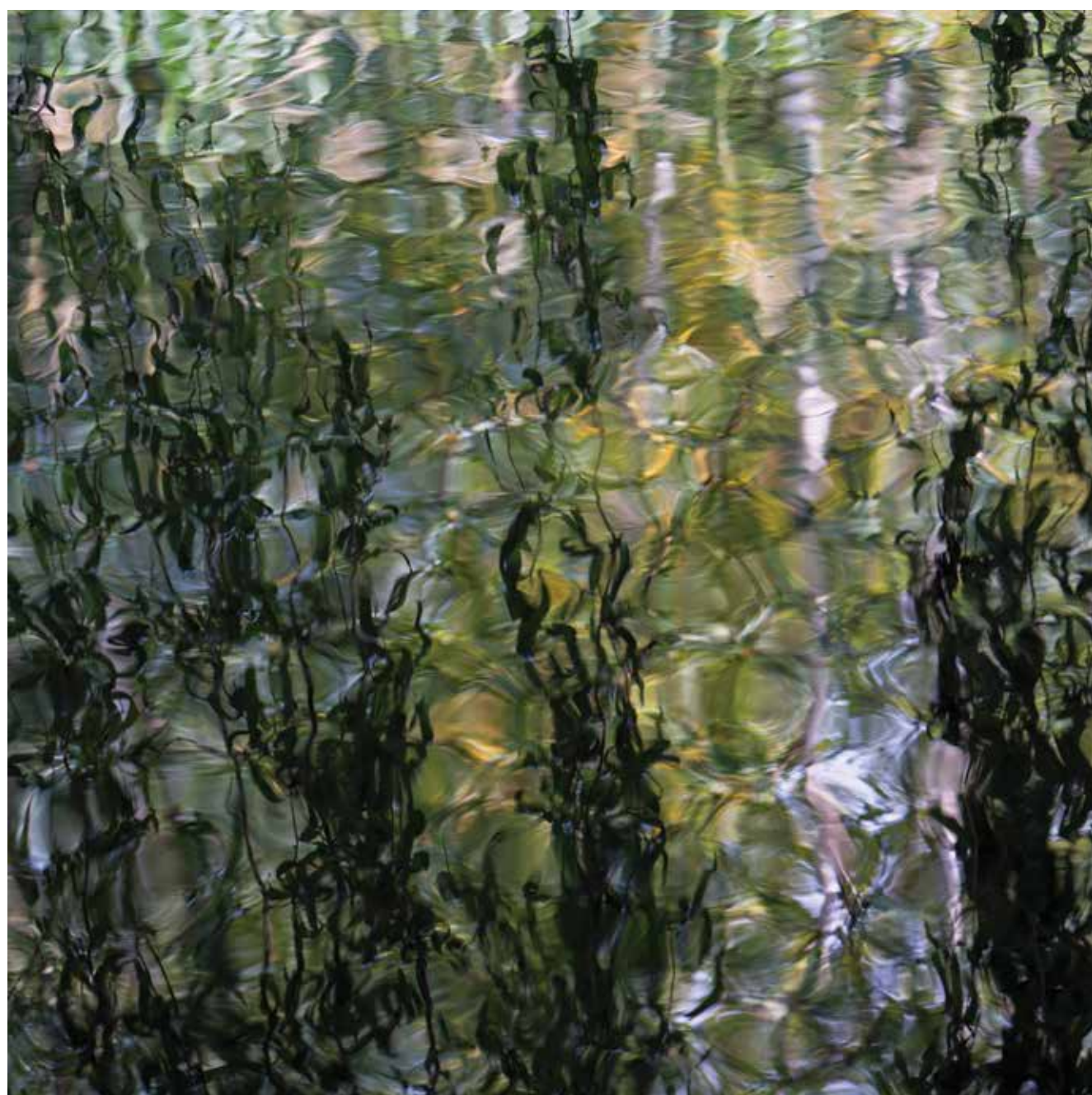
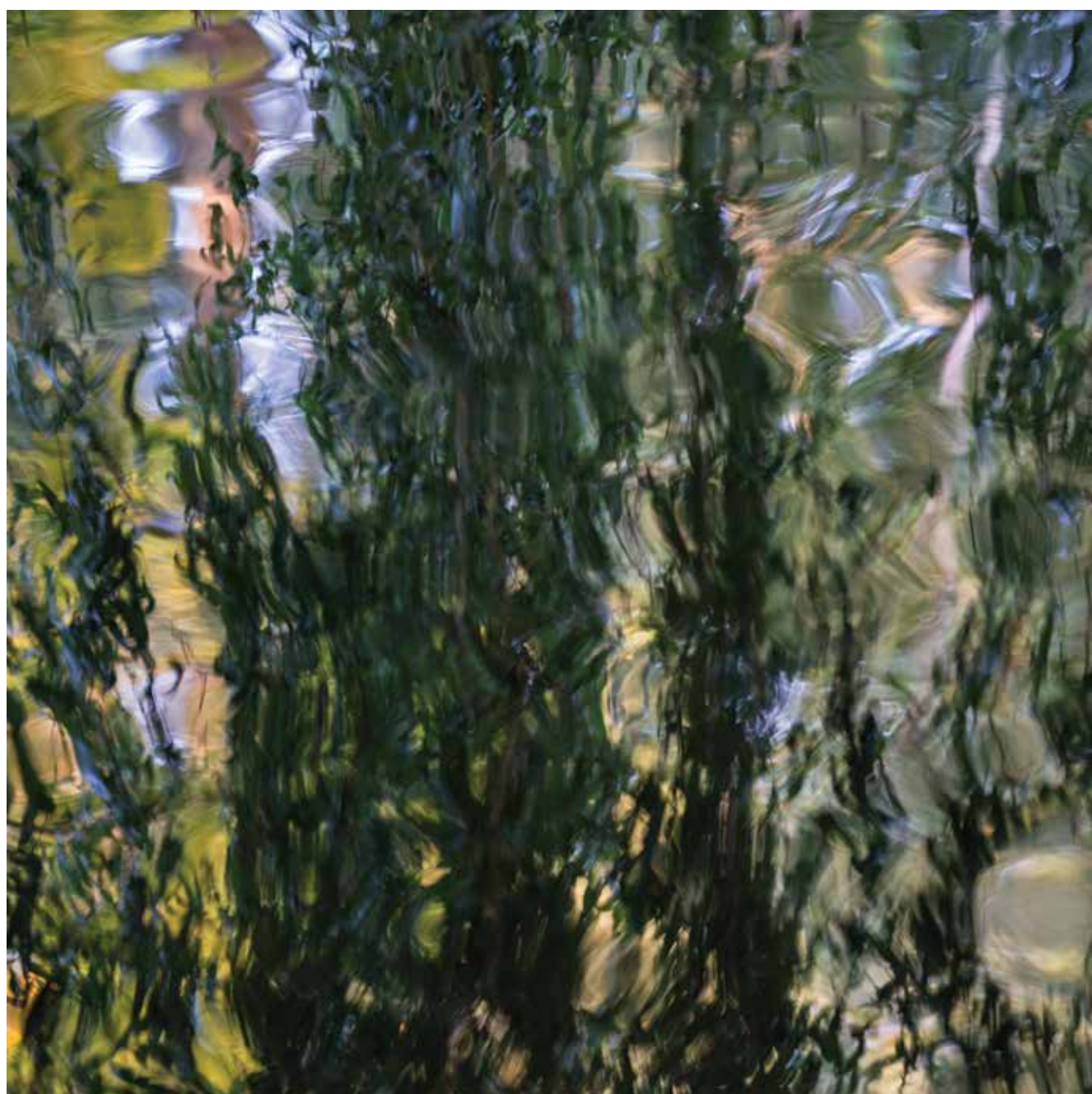


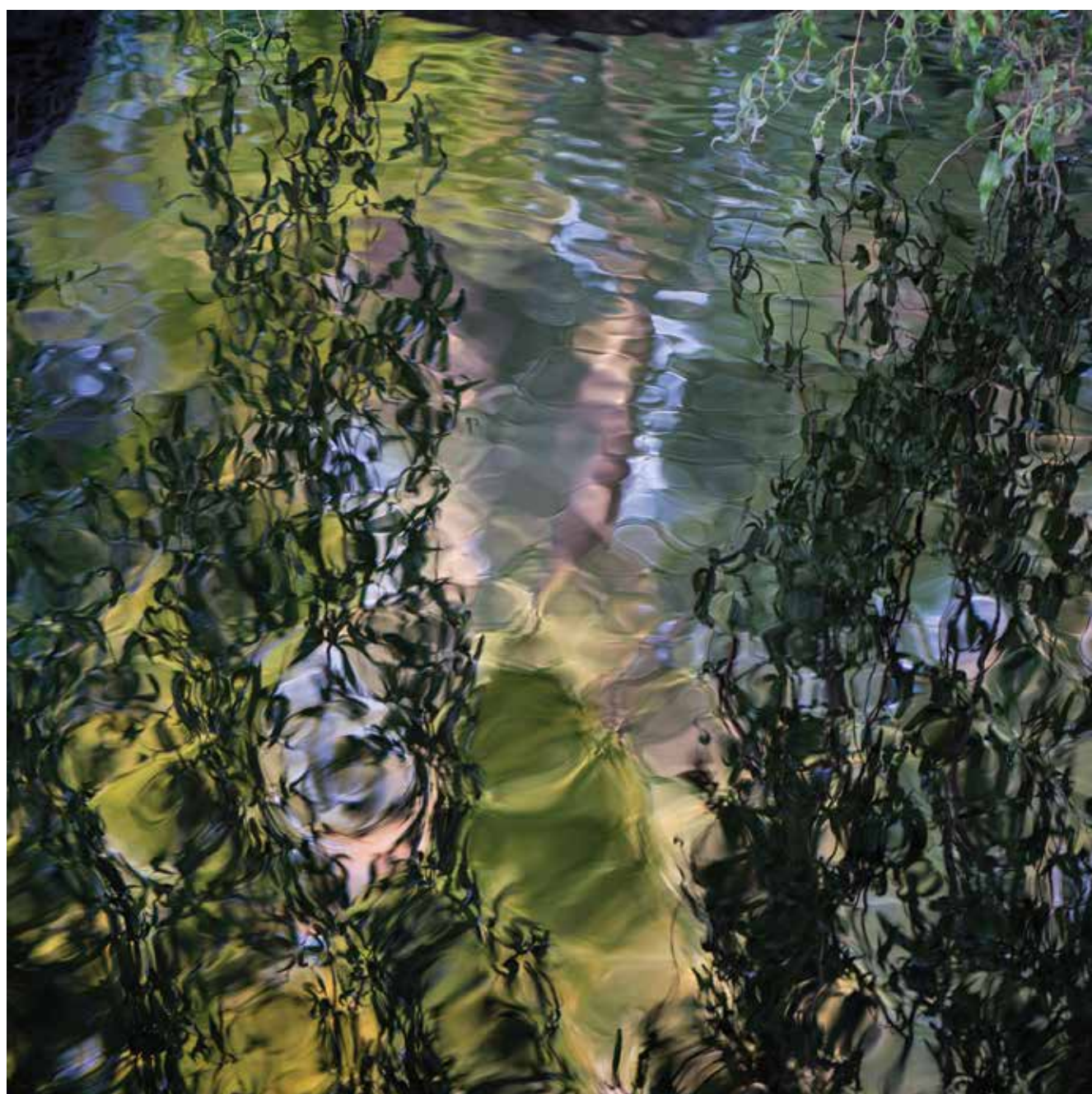




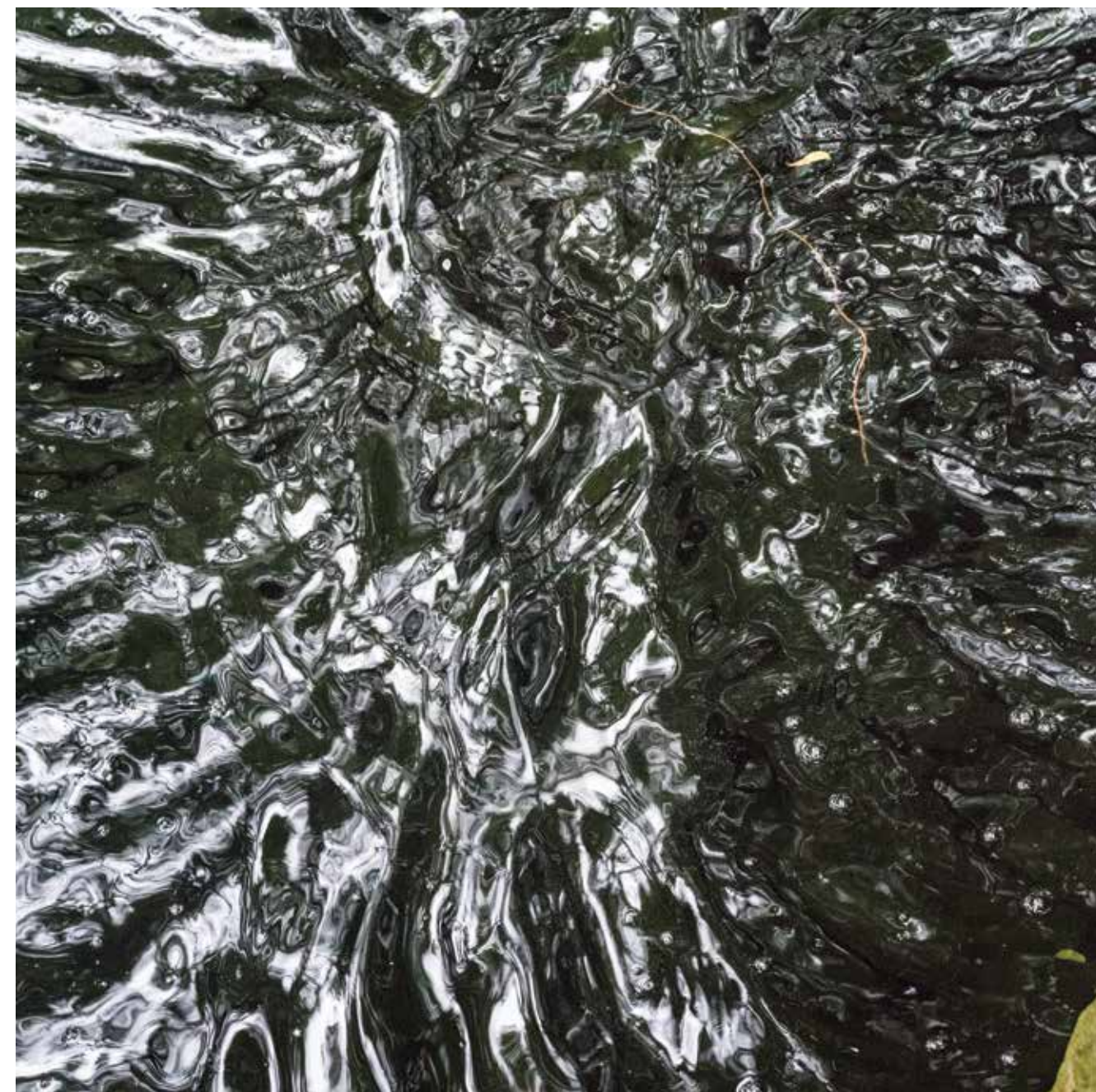
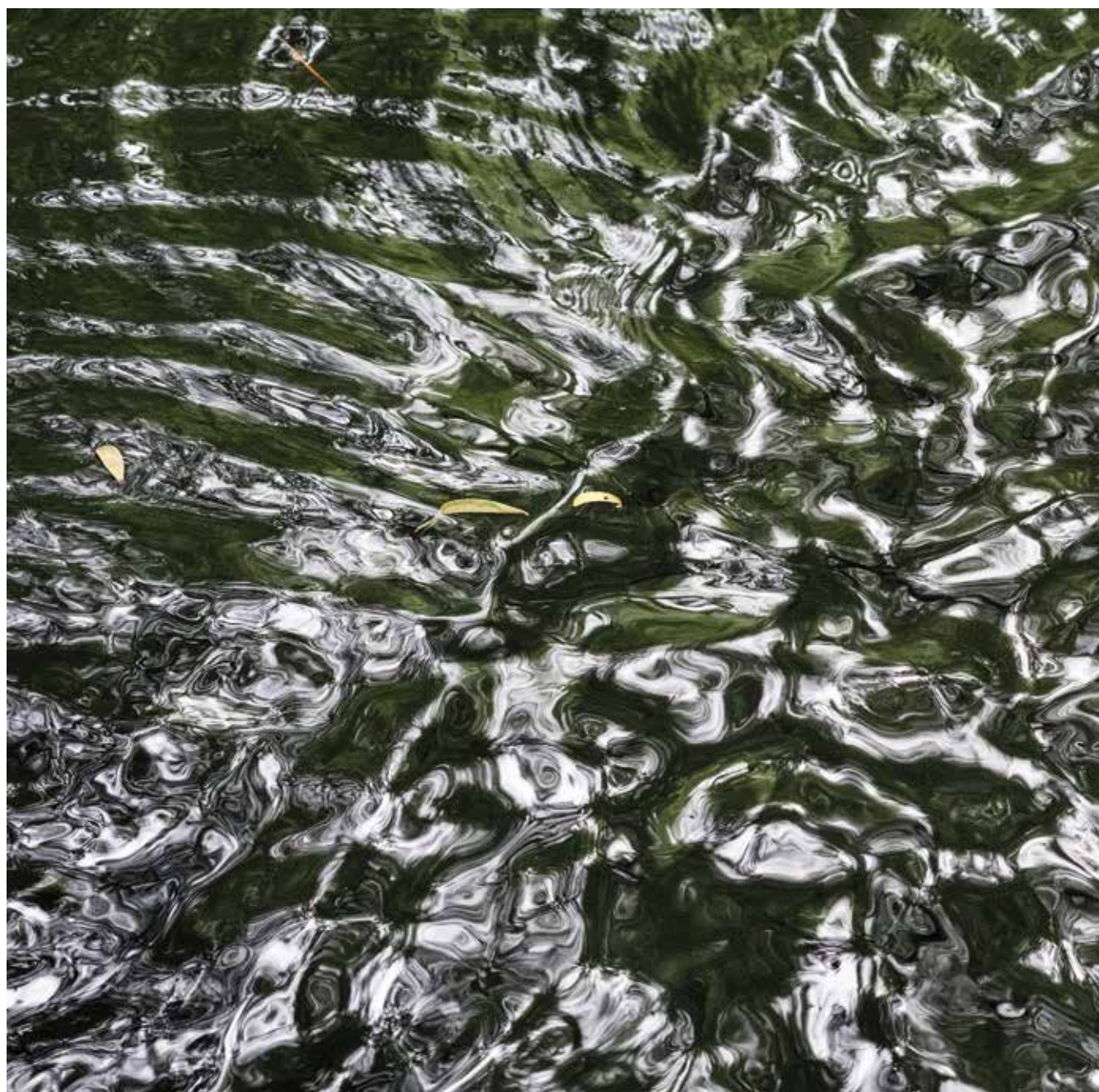


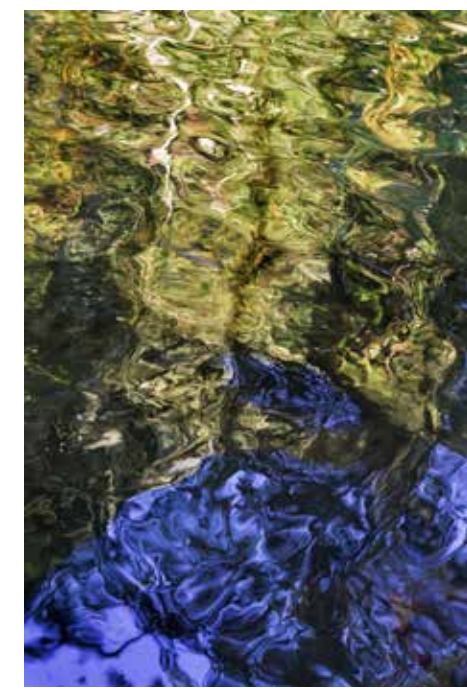
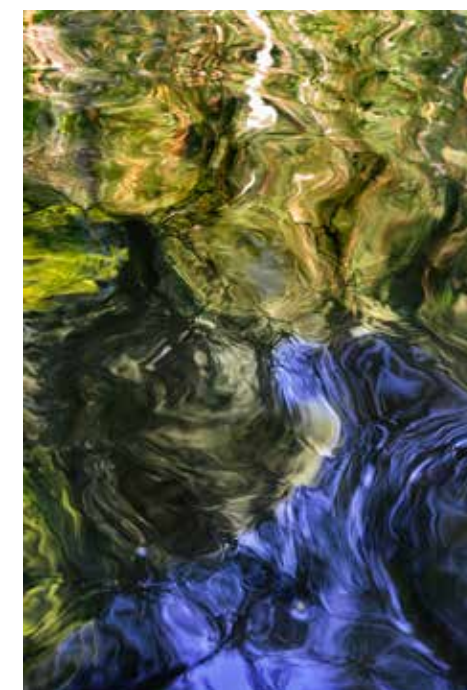
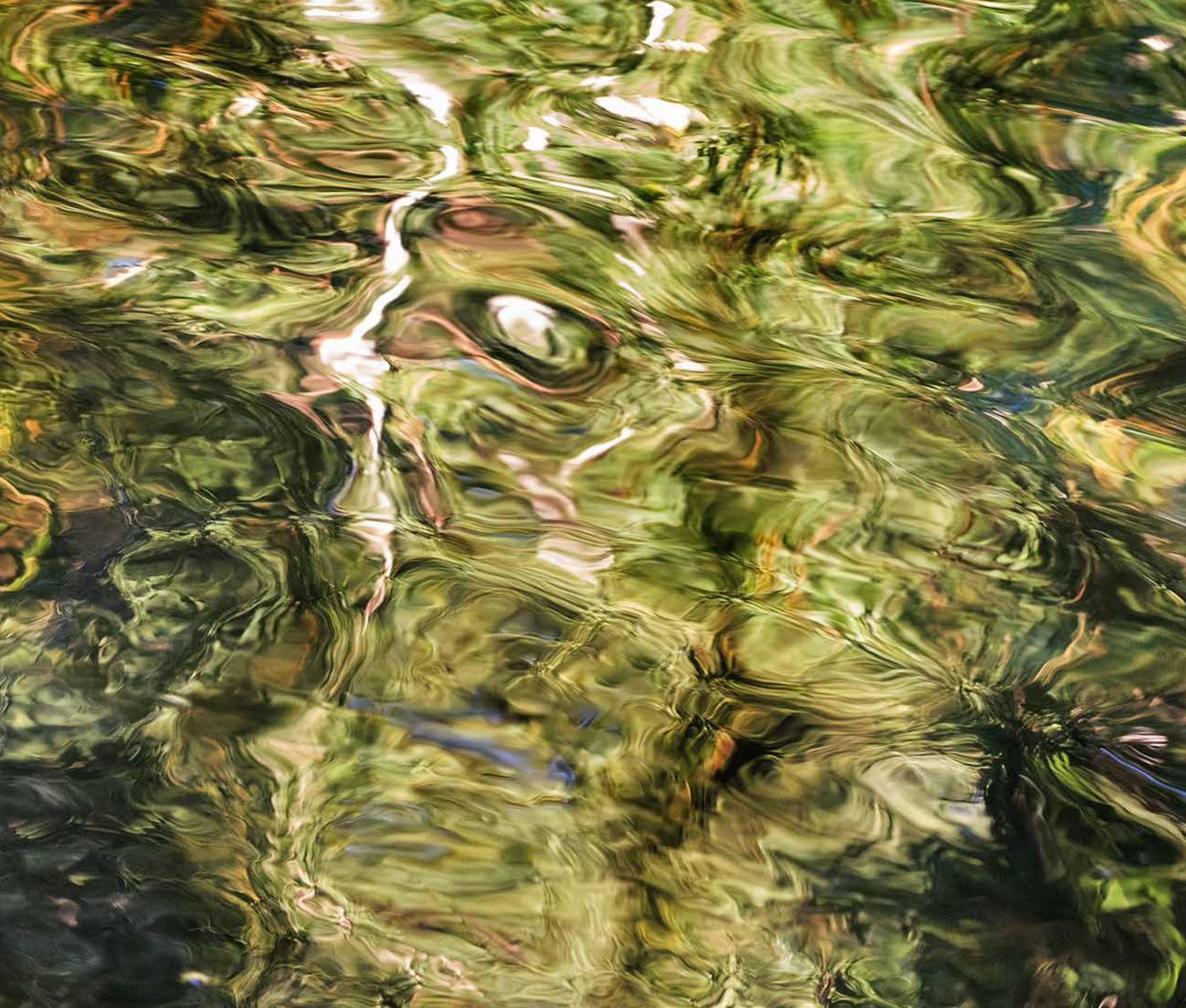


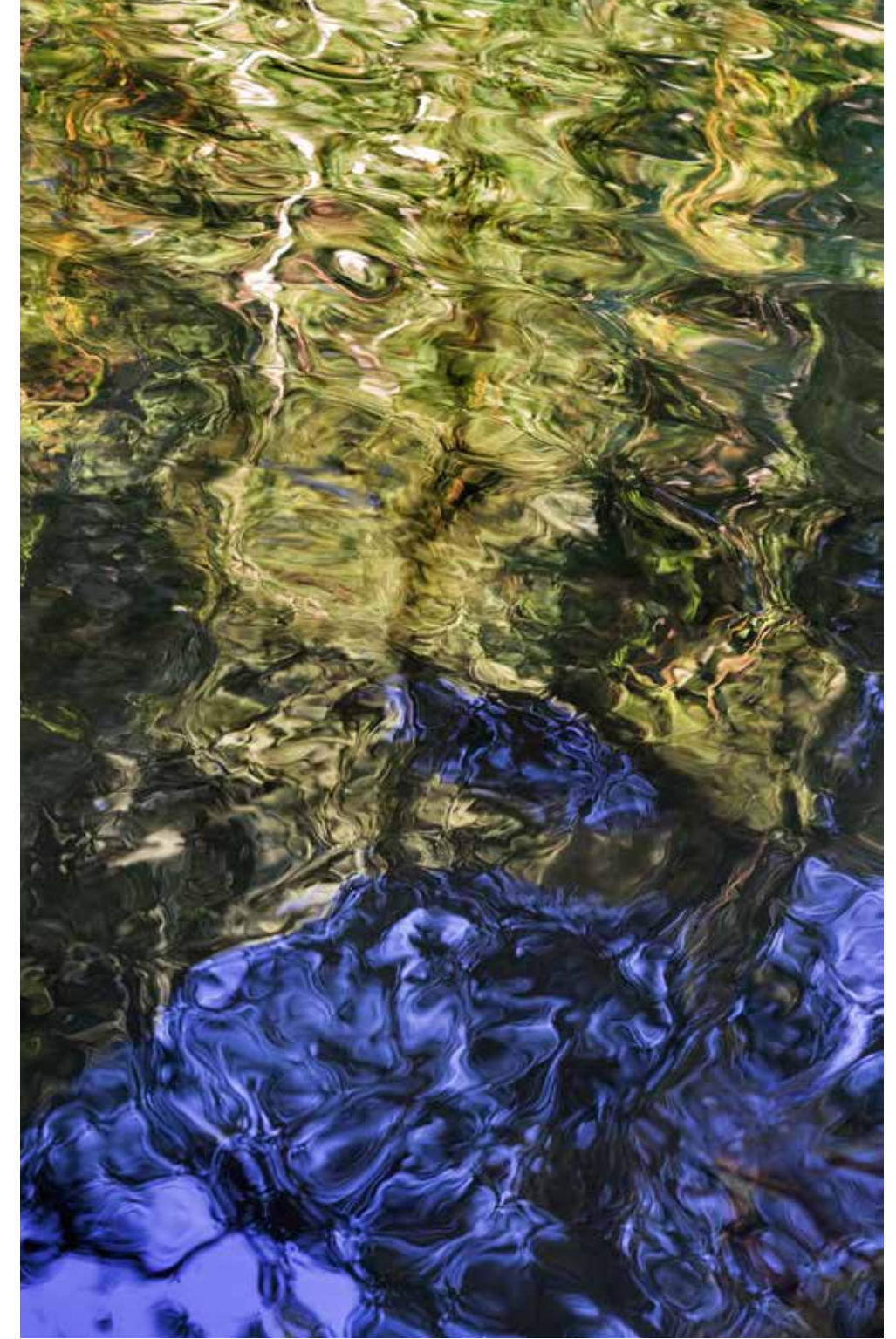
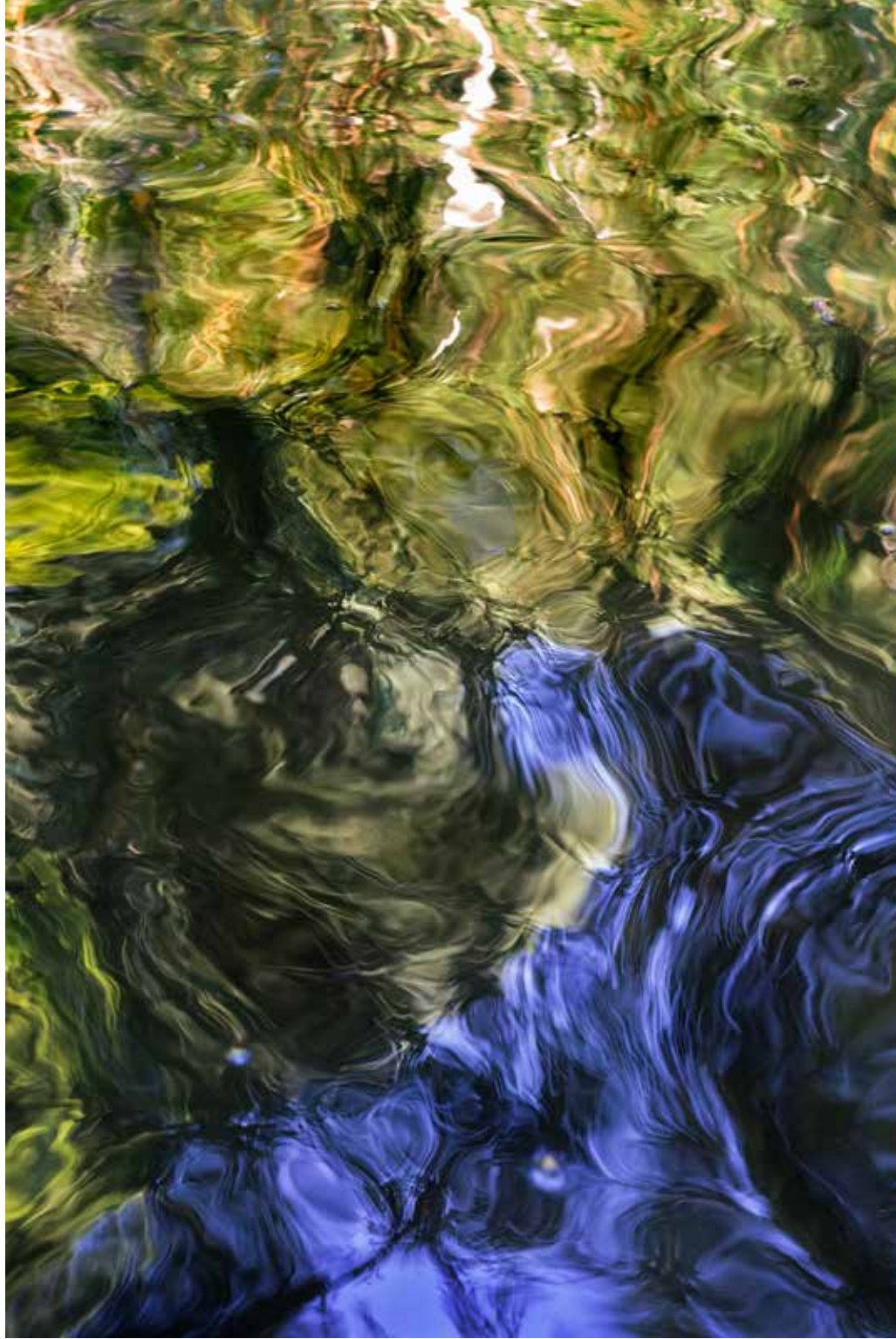


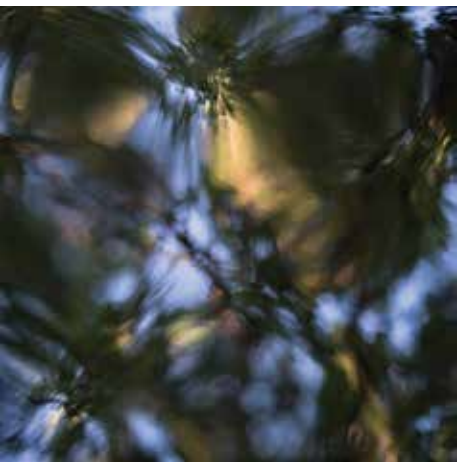


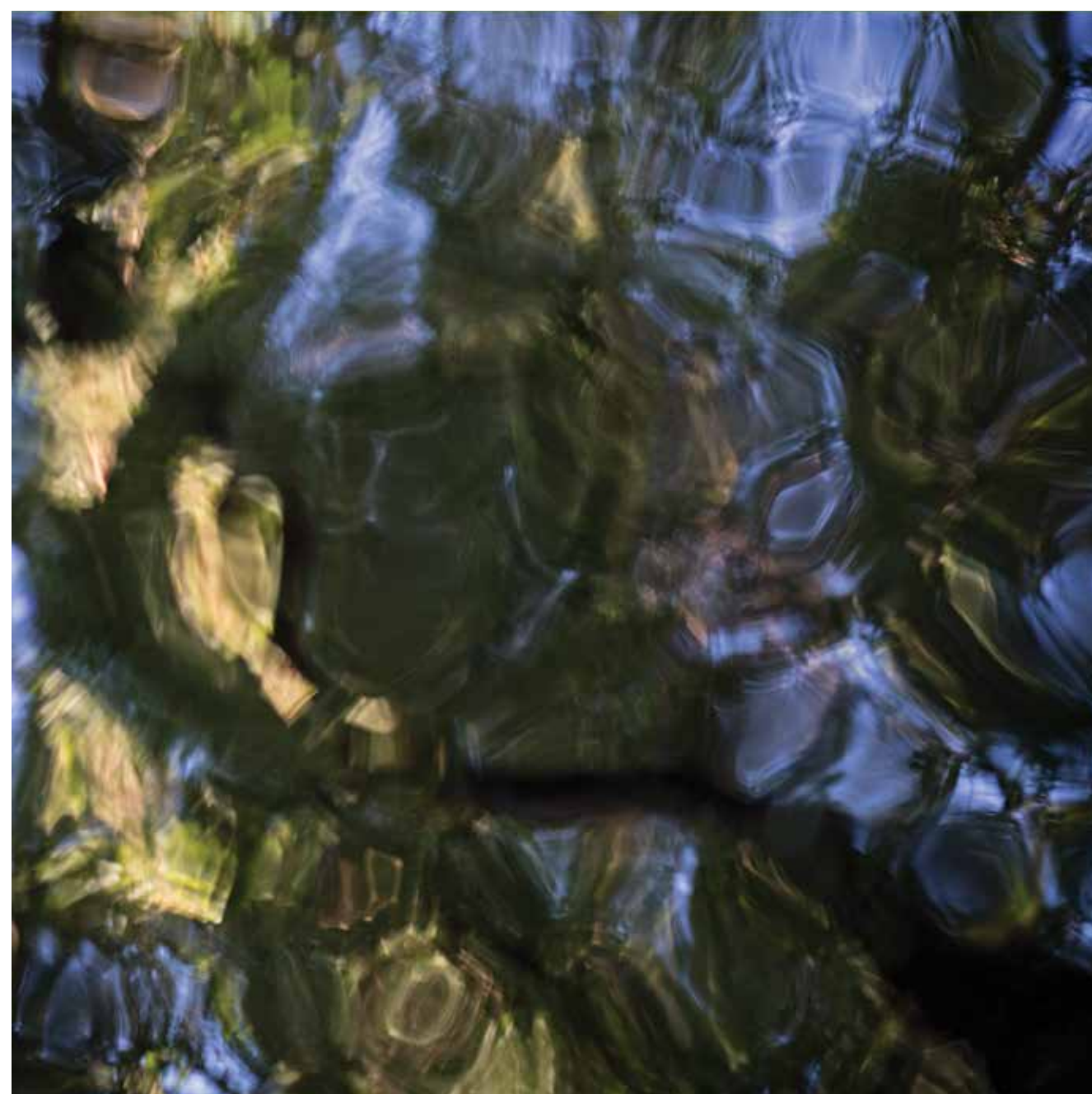
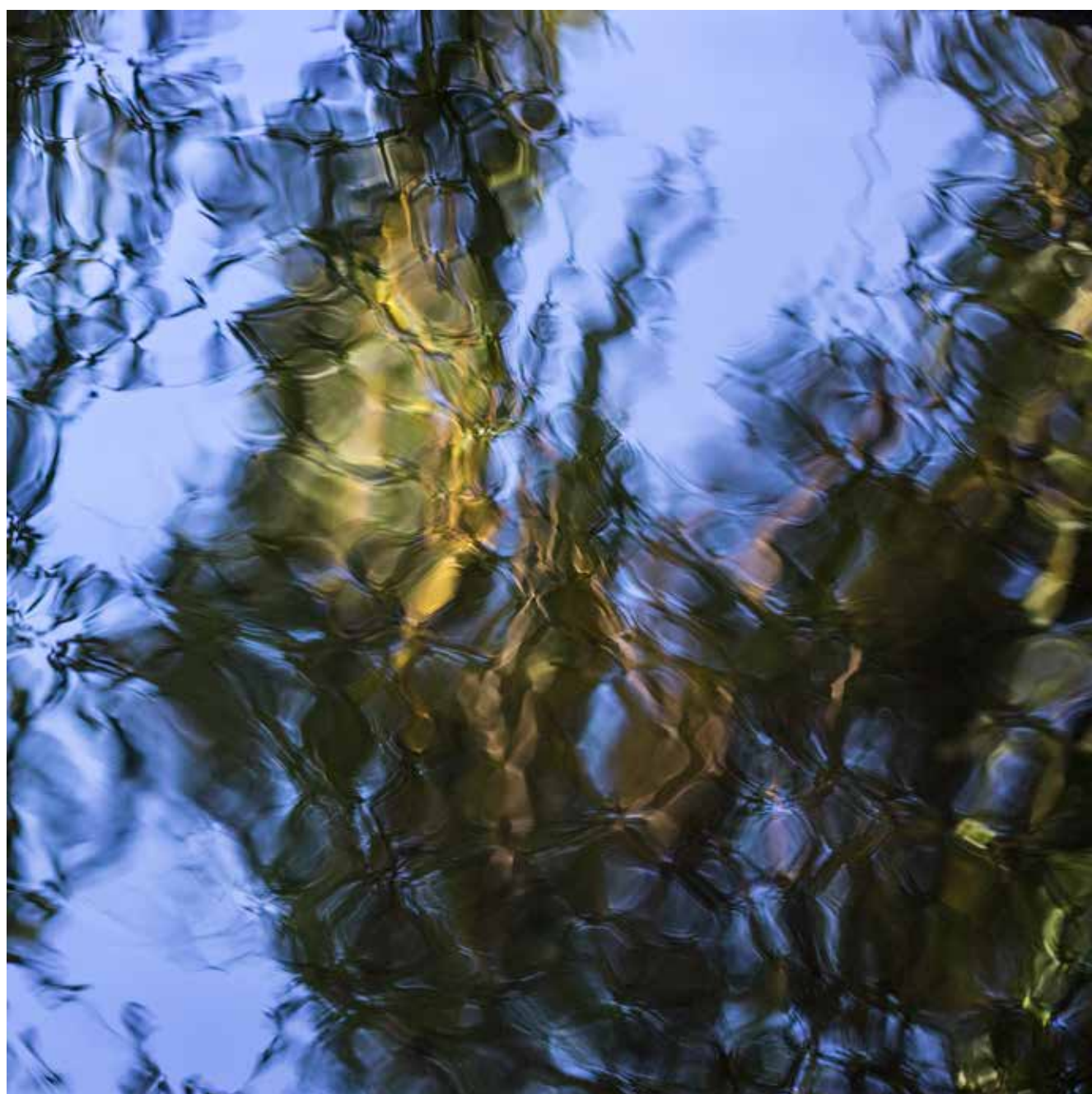


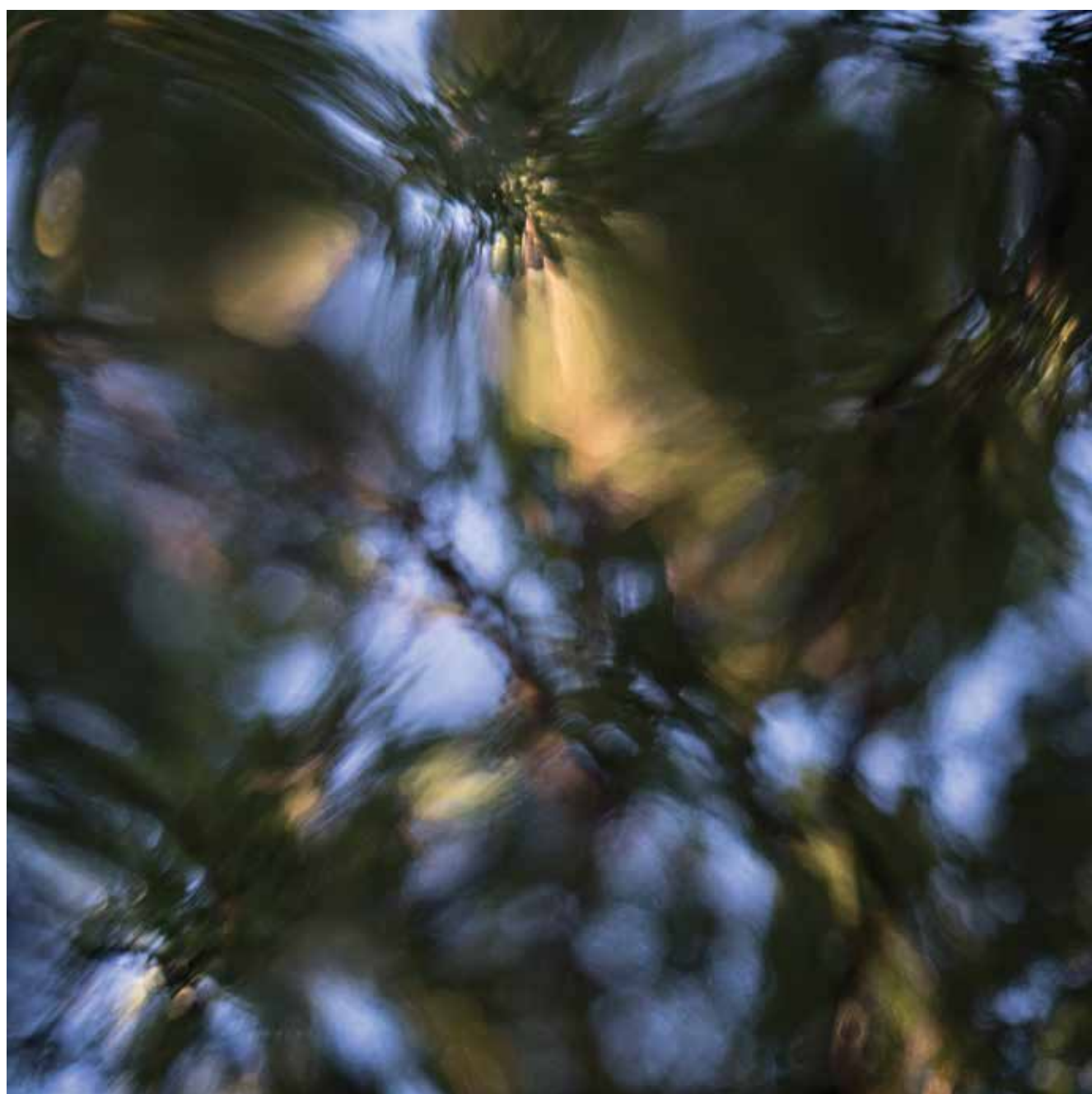


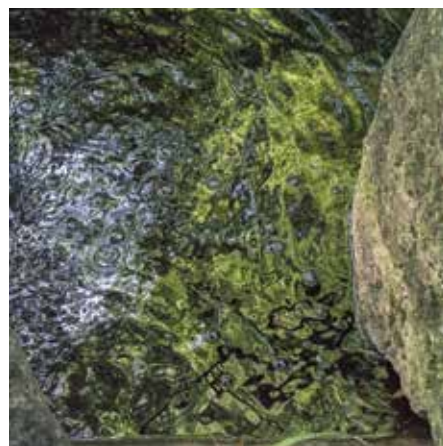
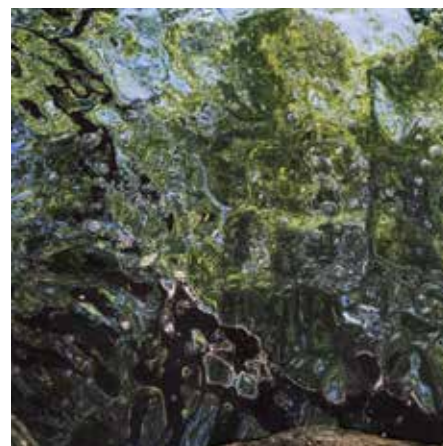


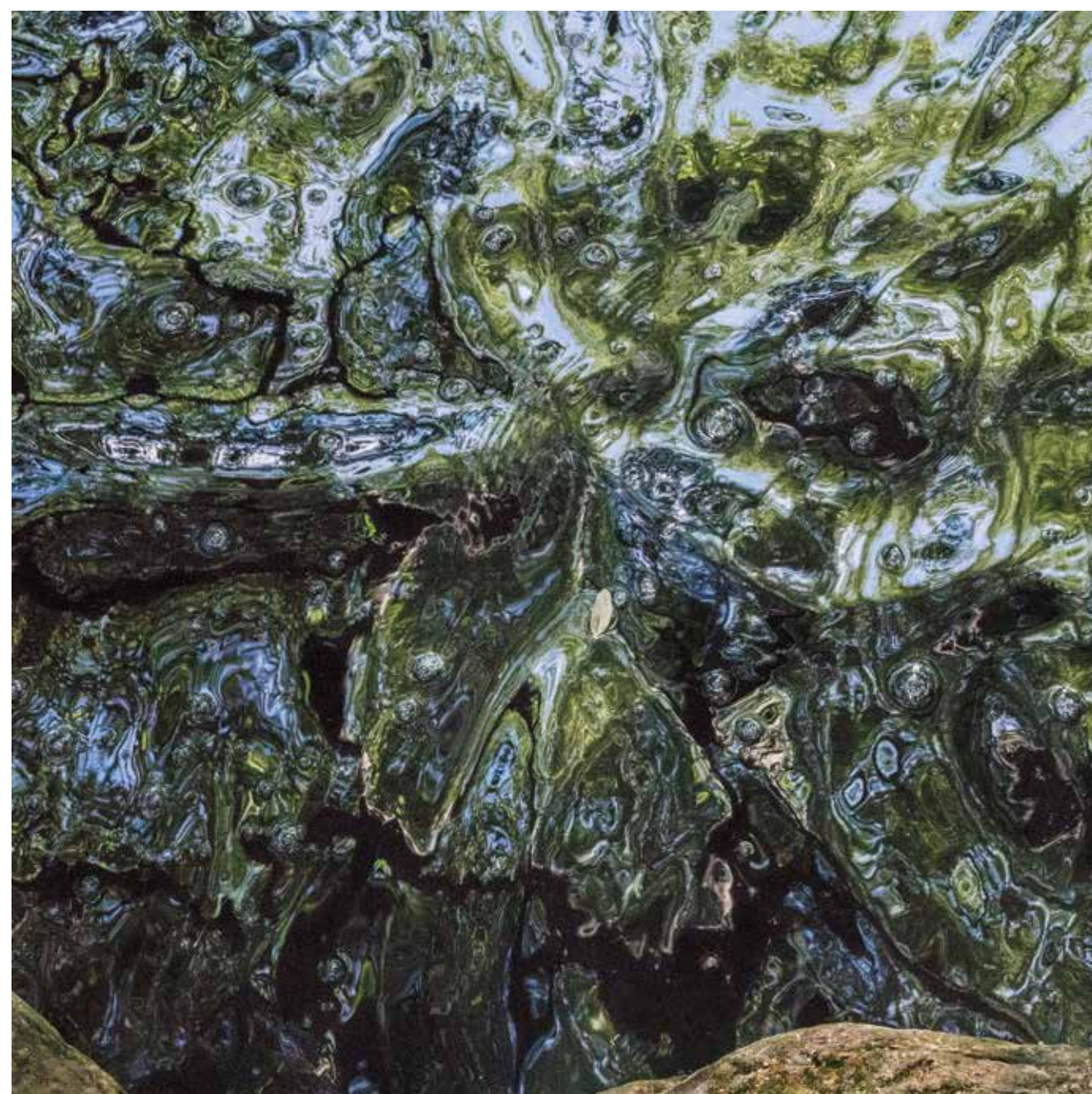
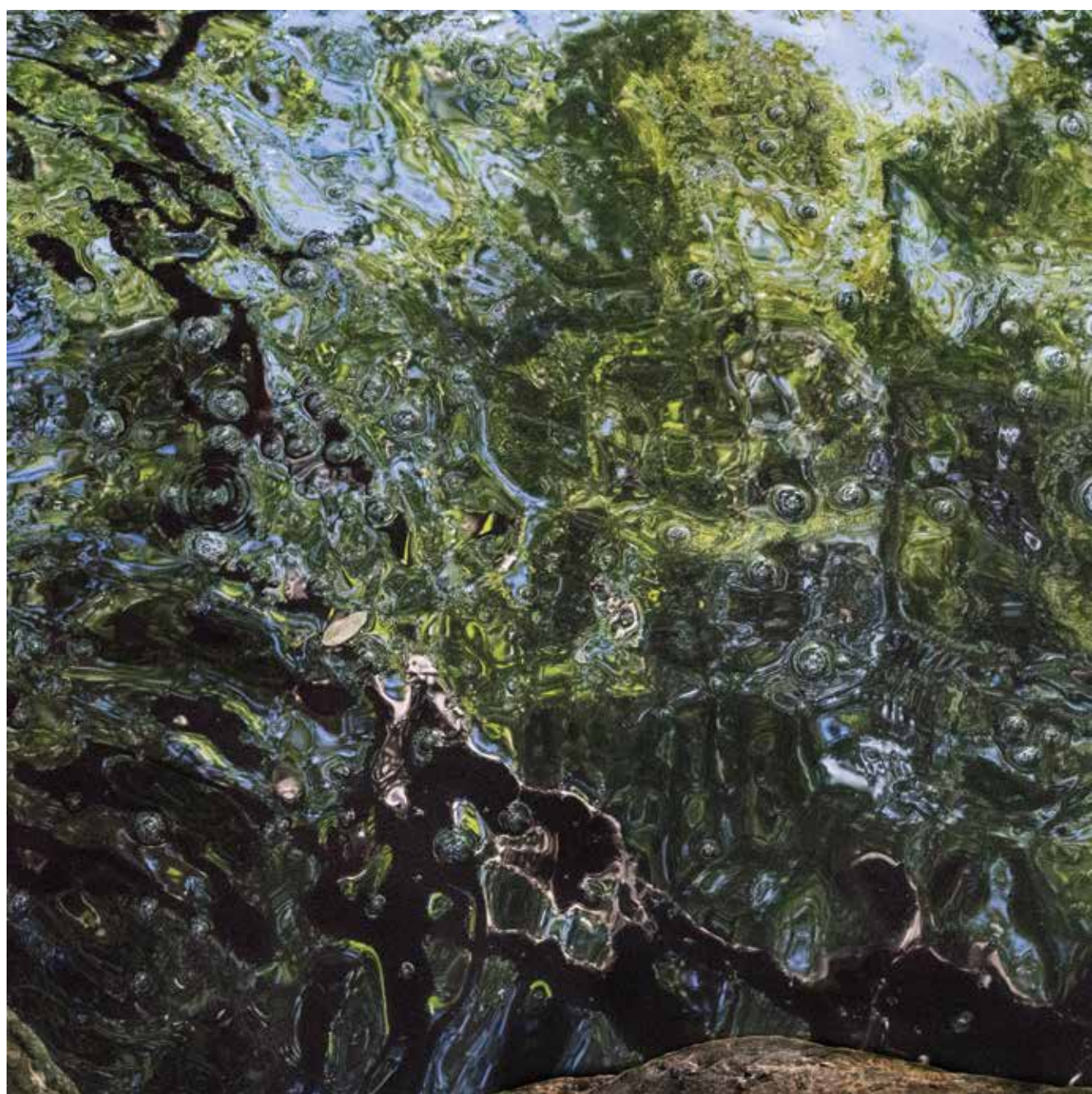


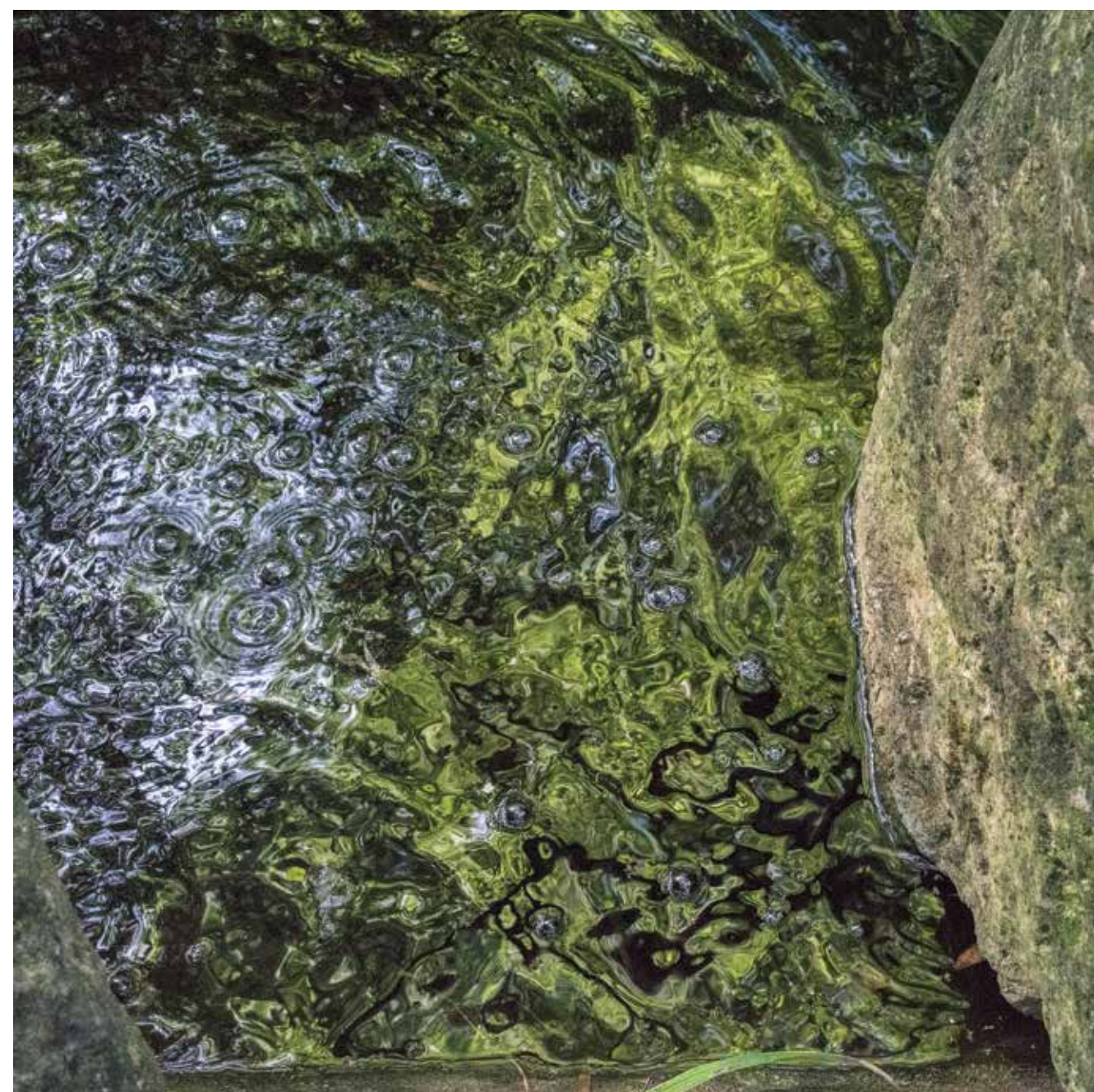
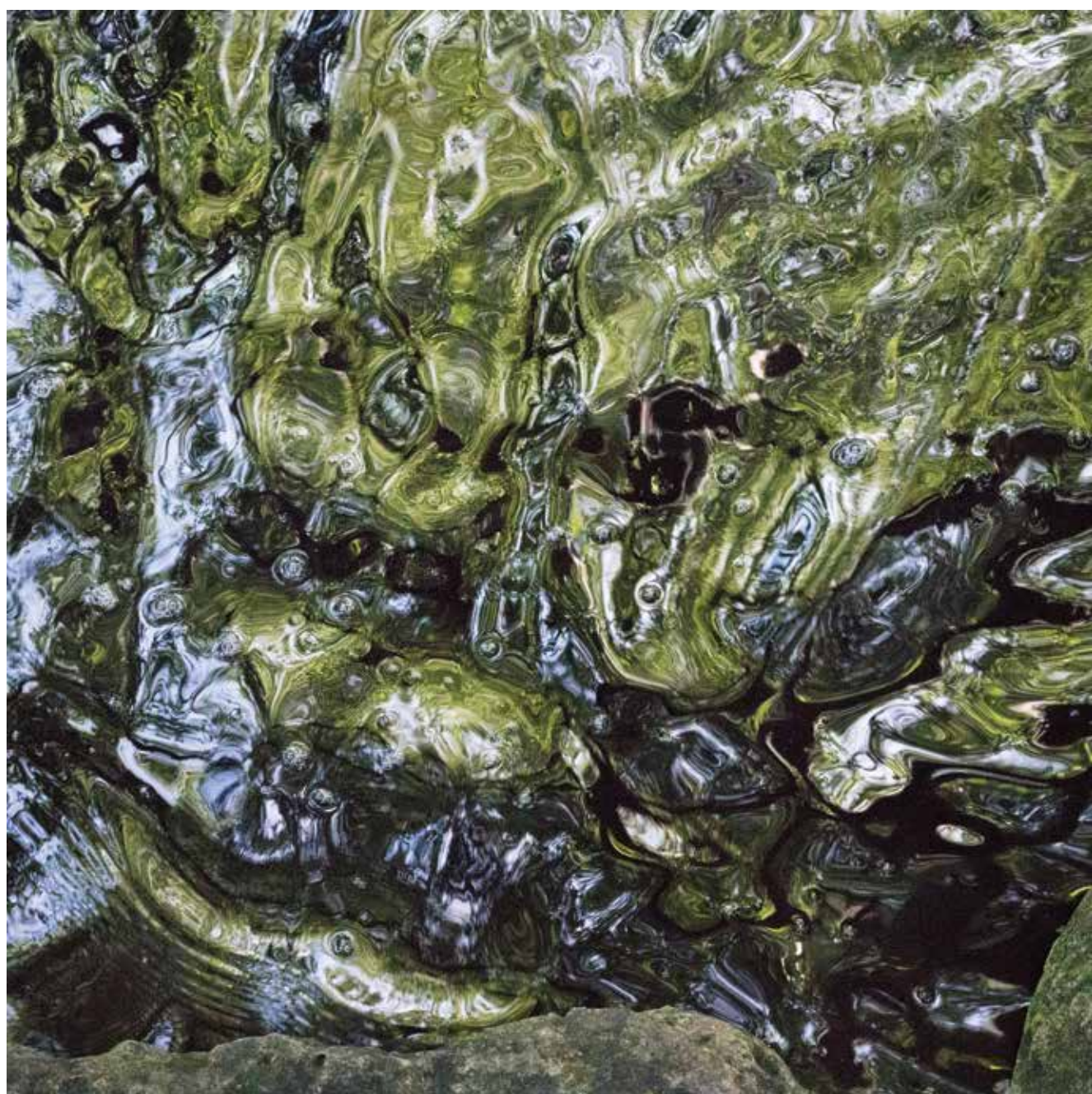




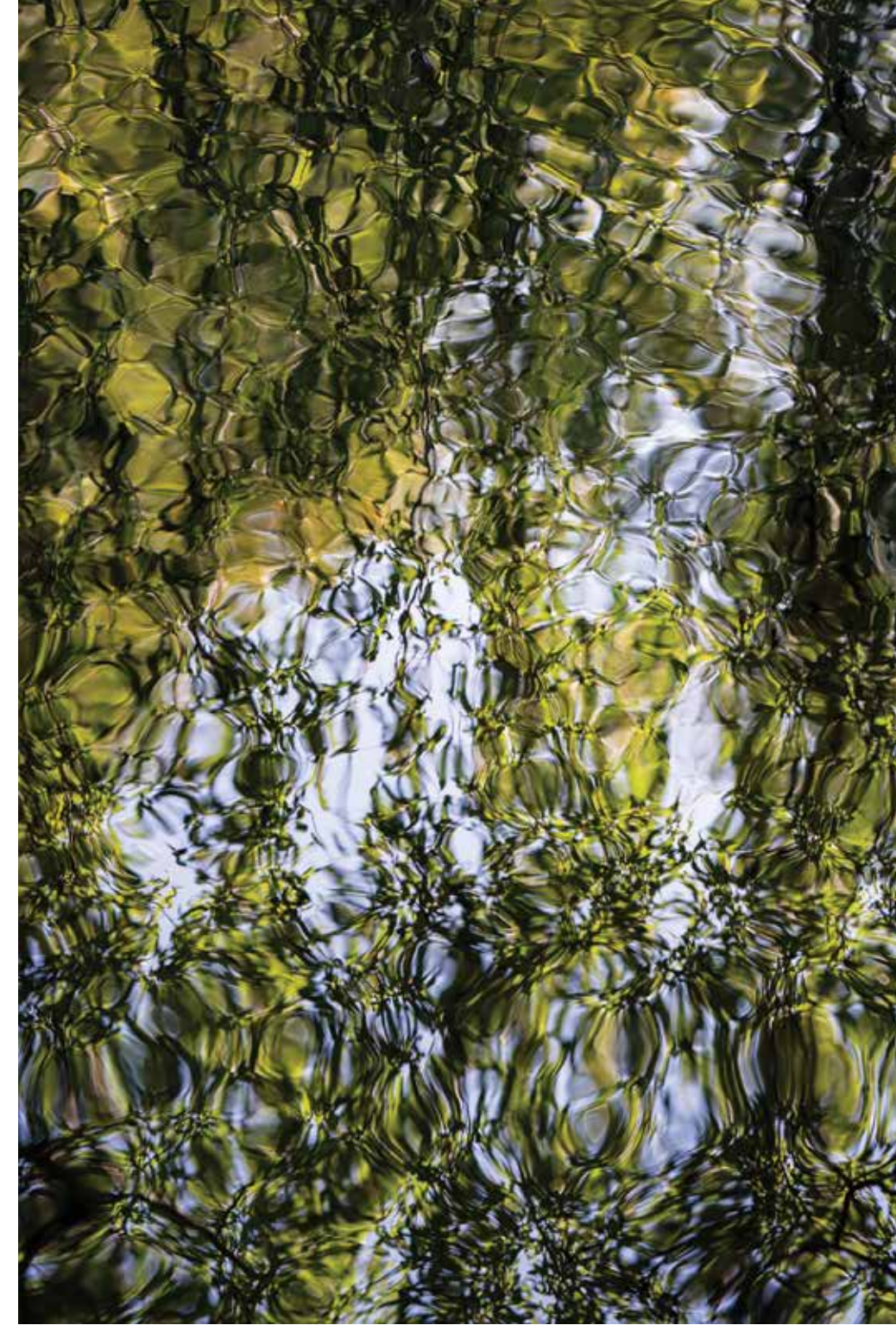












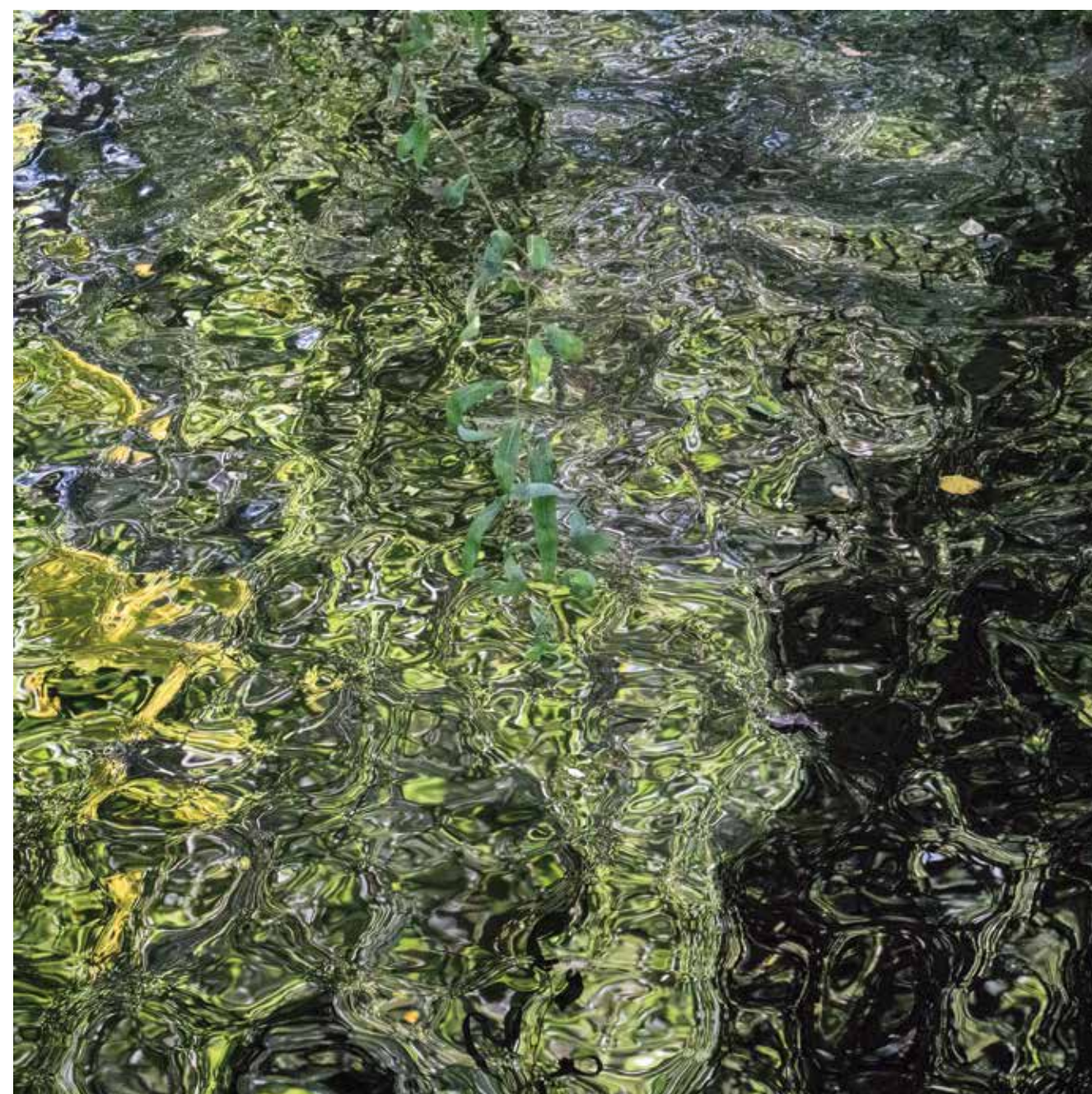
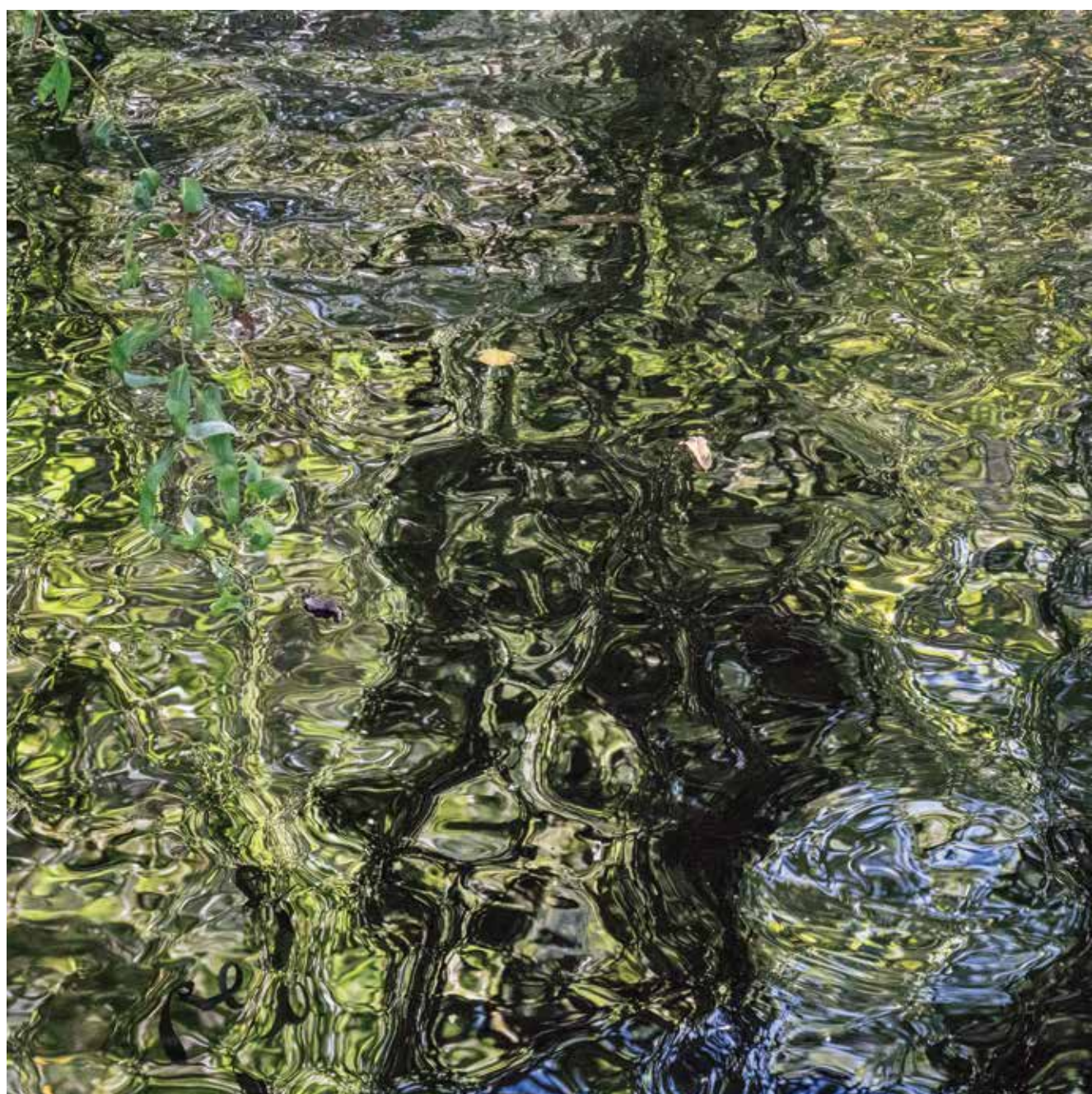


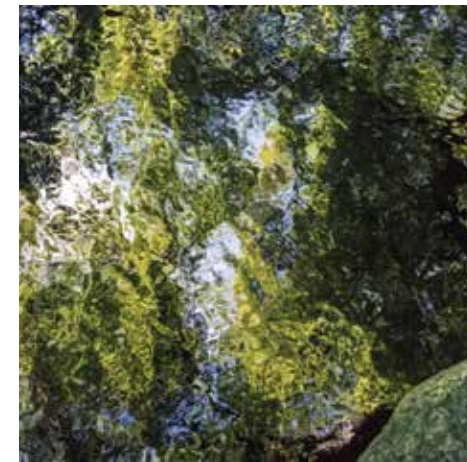
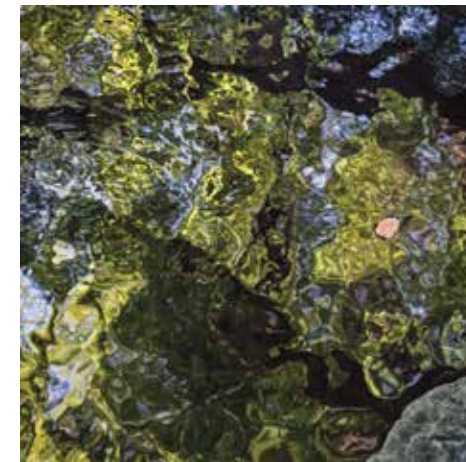


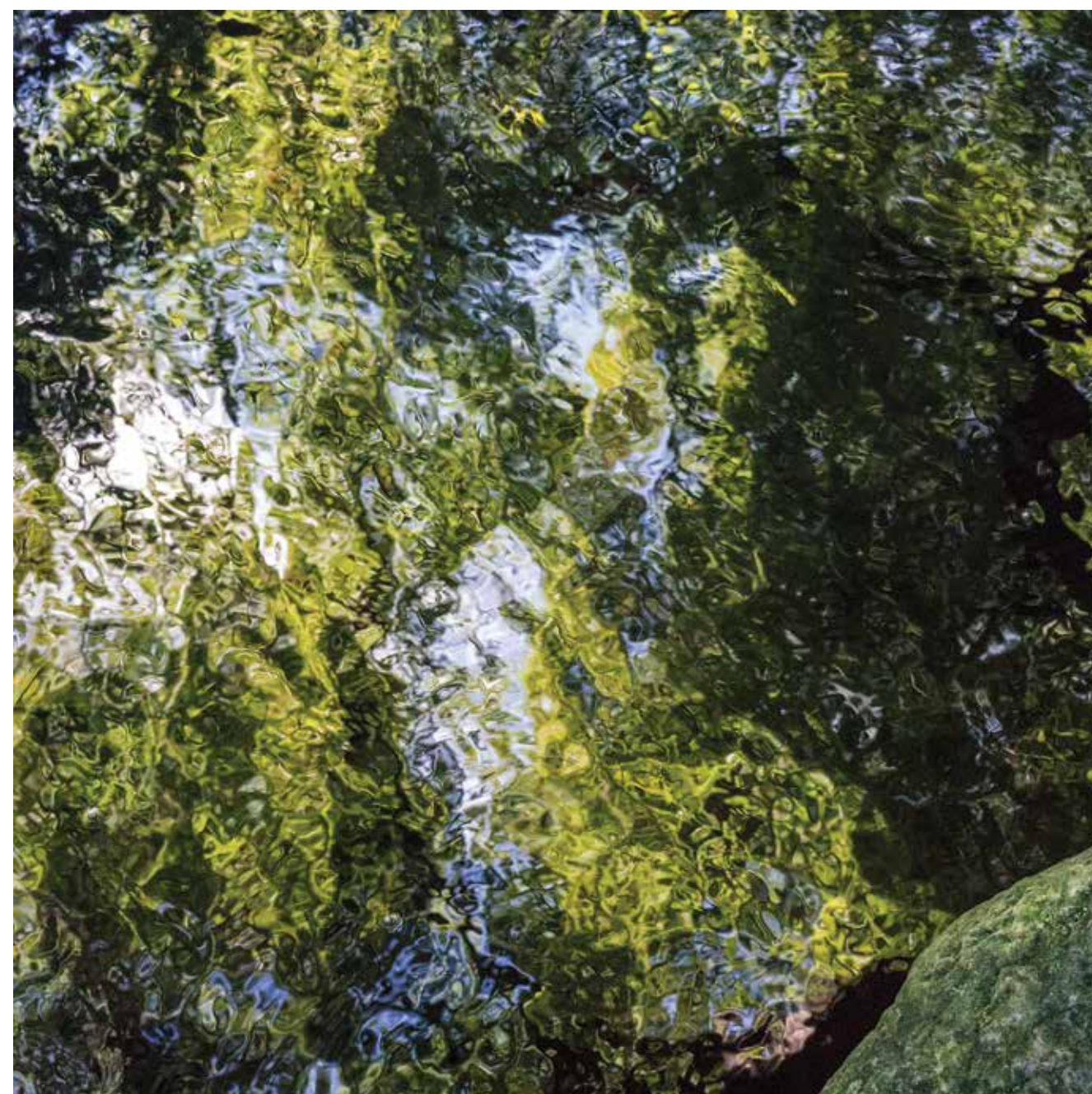
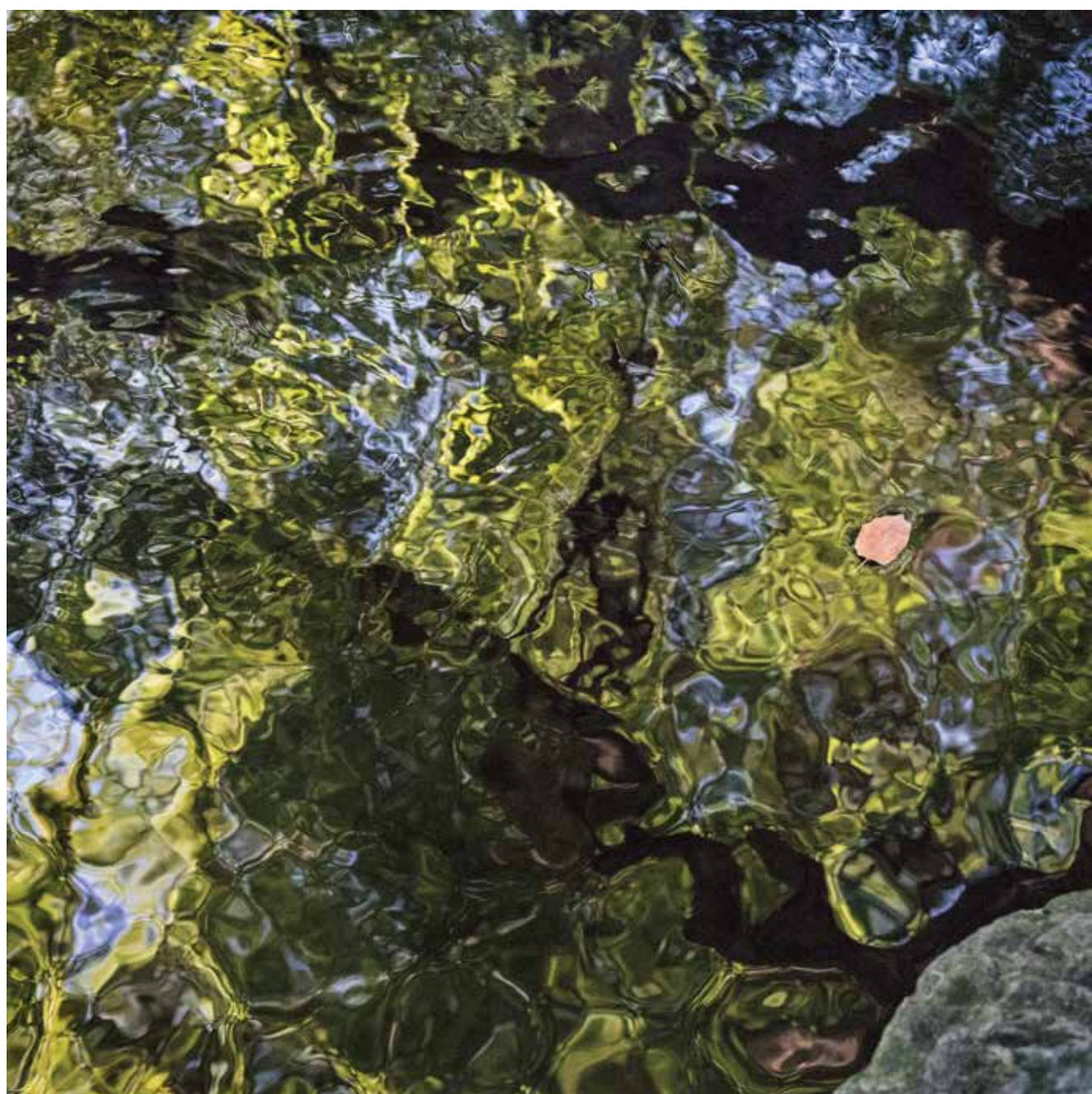


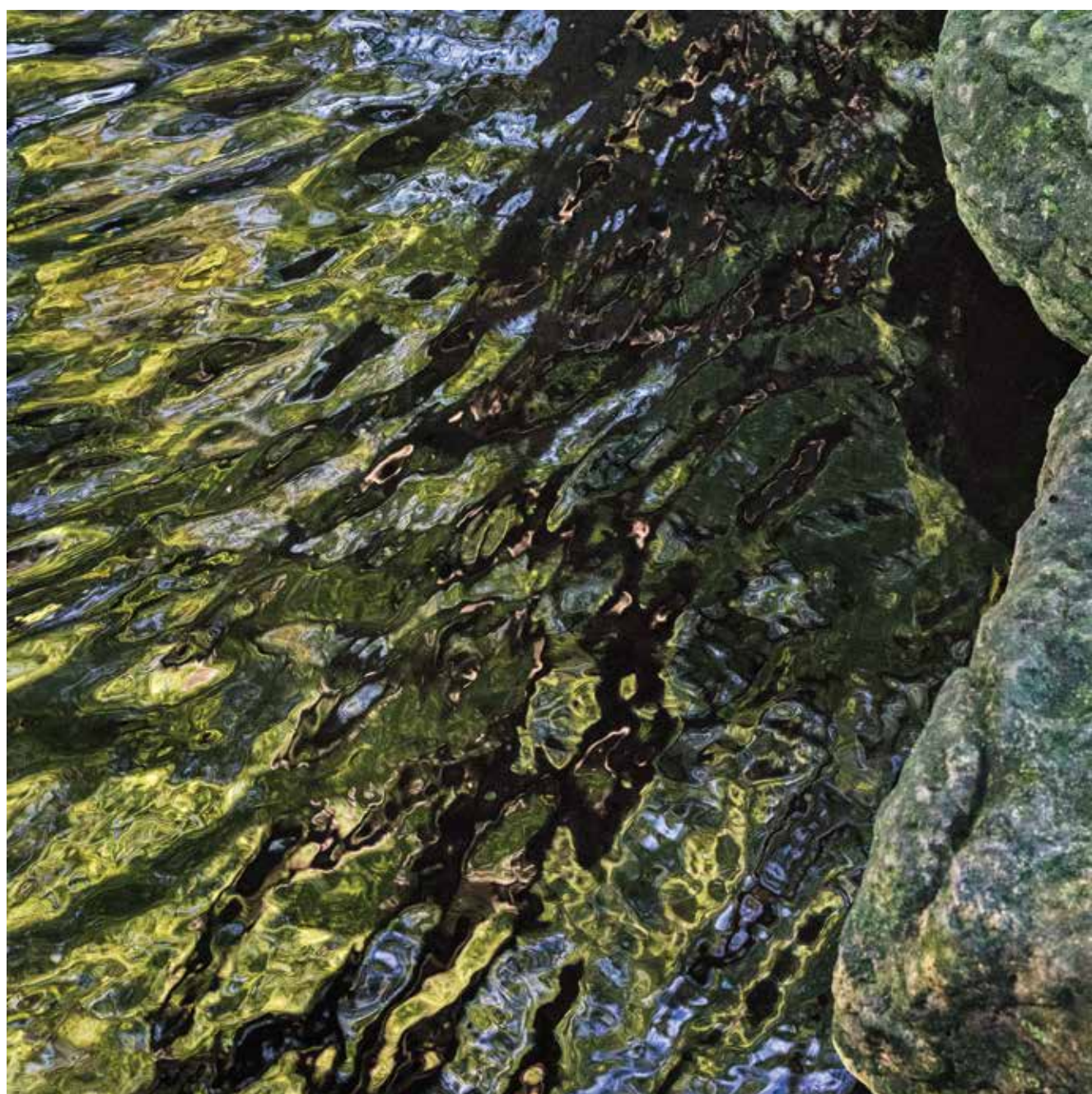


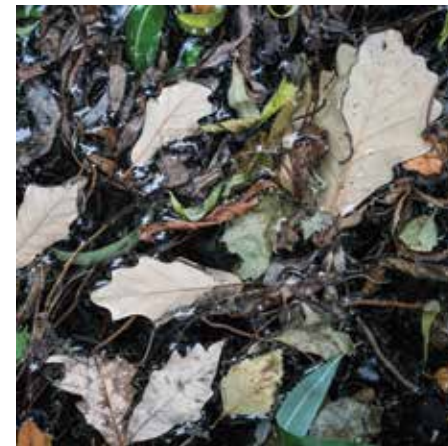


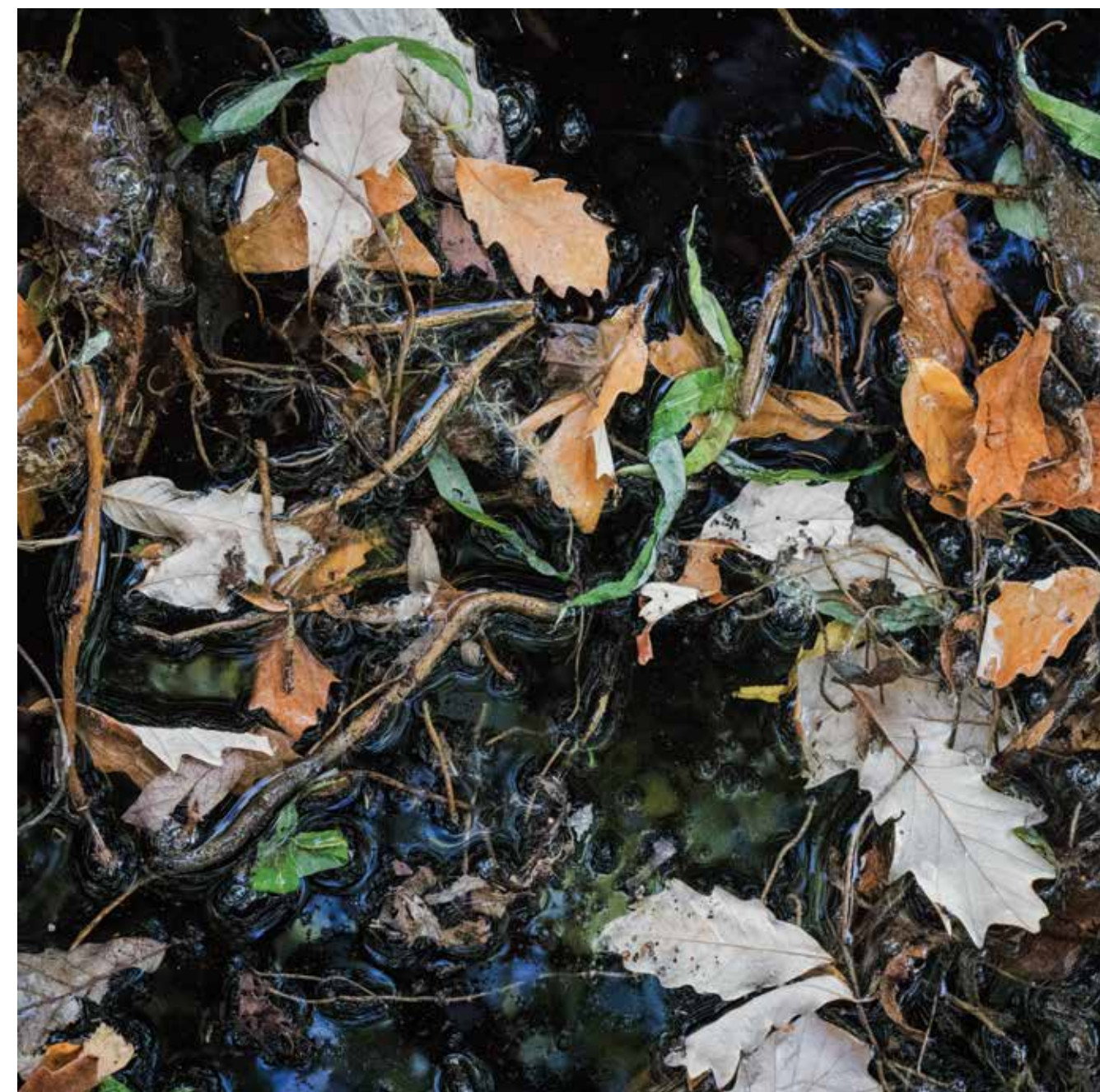
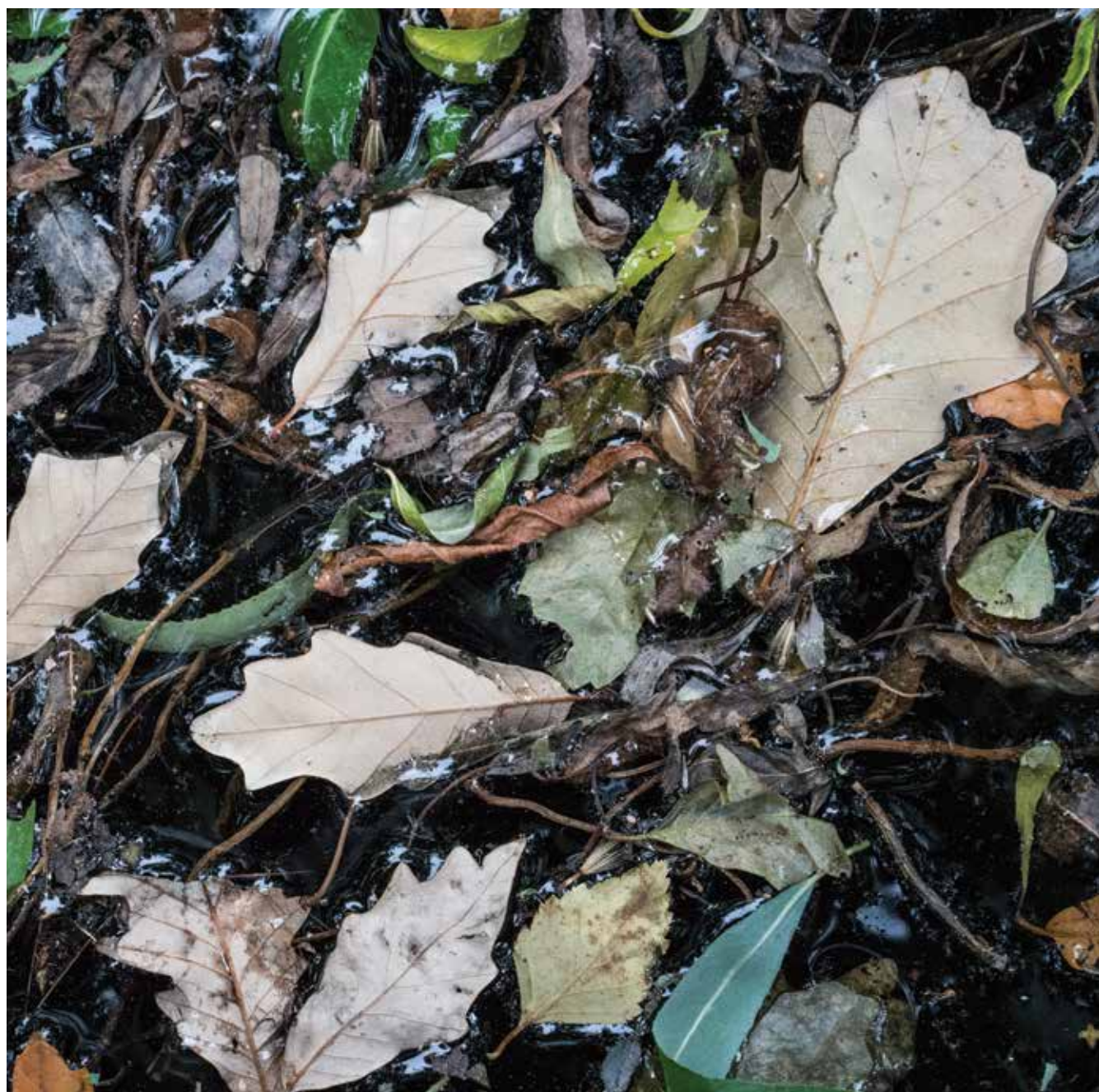


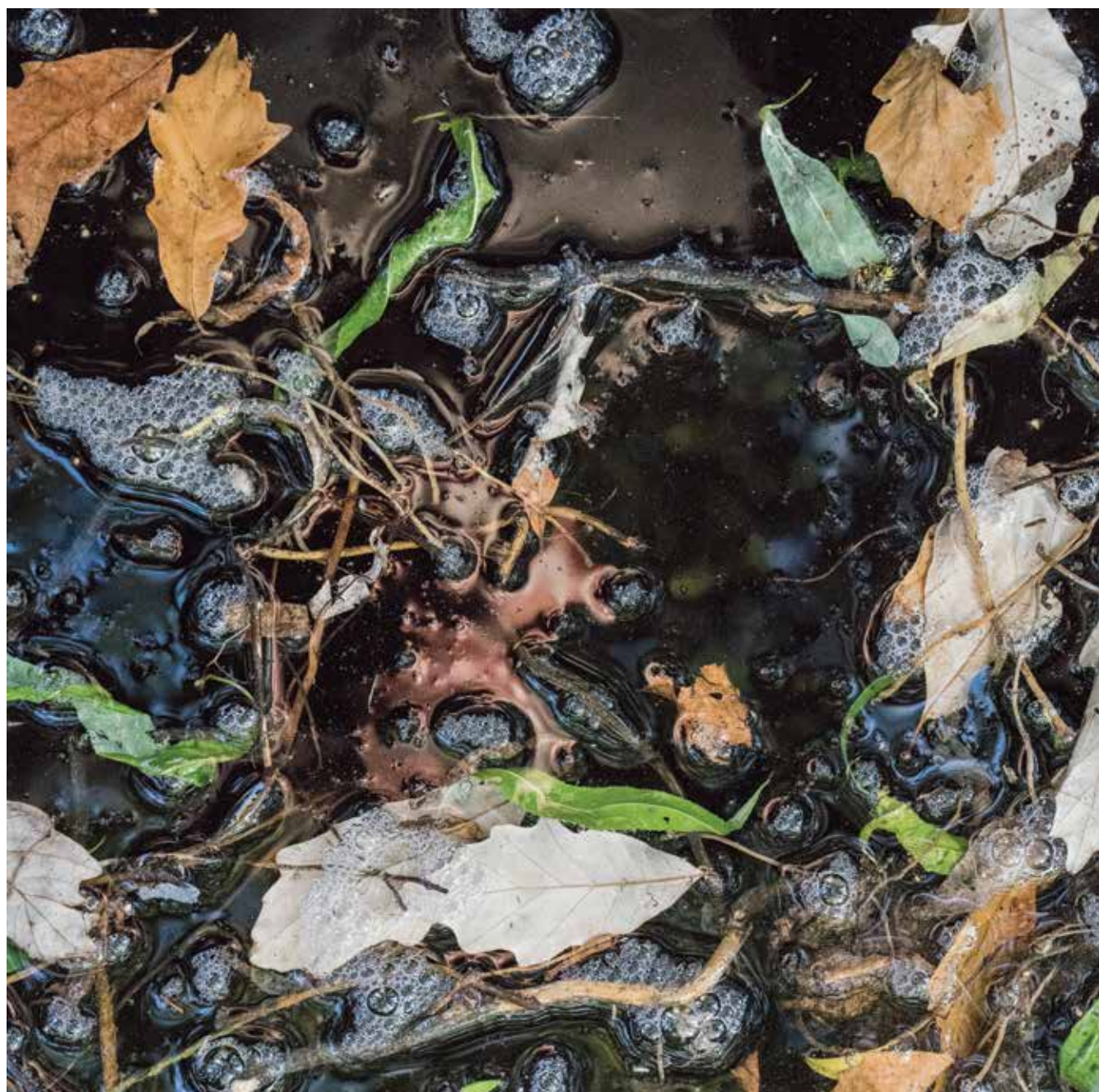


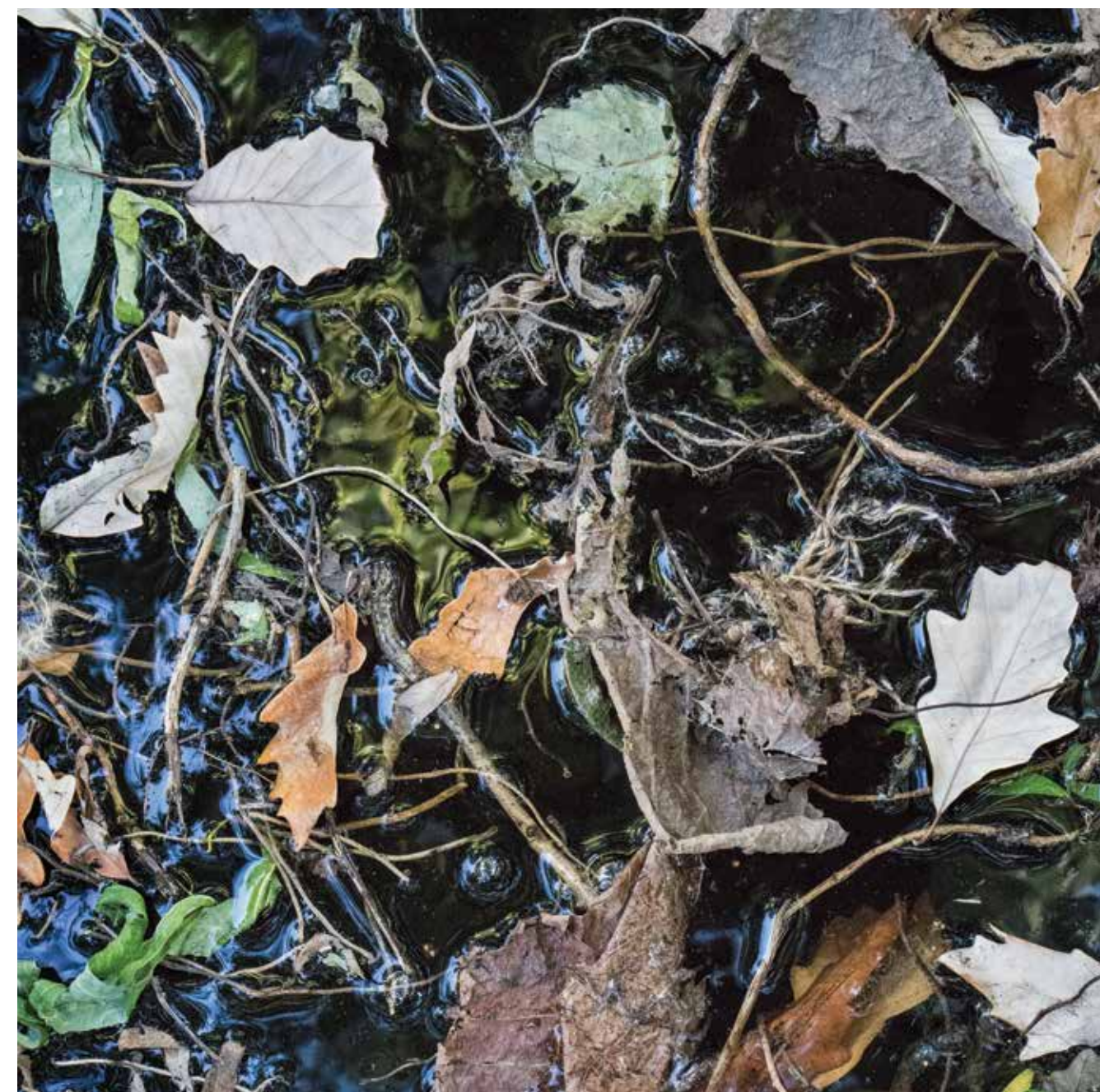


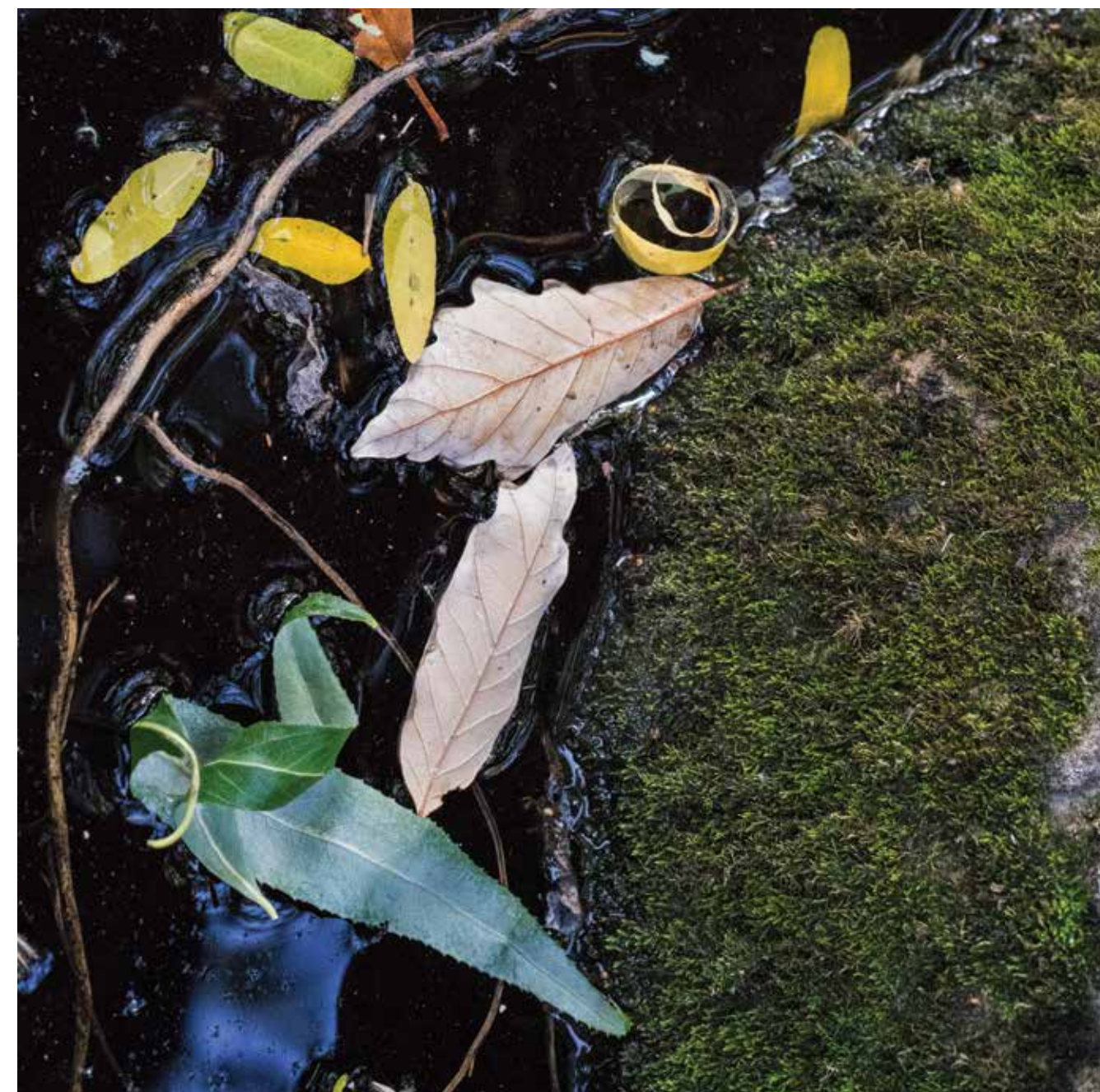
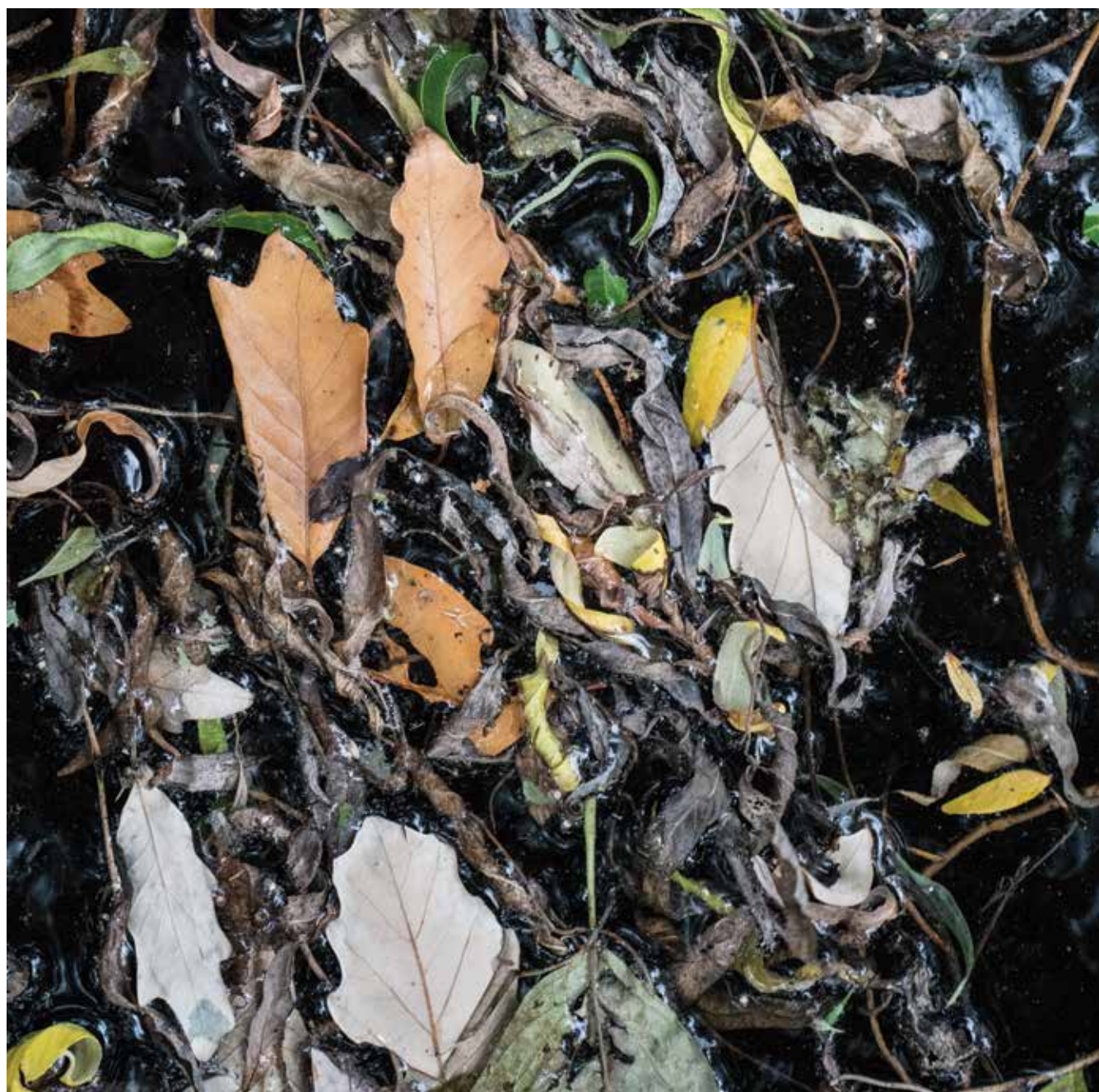












A close-up photograph of water ripples reflecting light, creating a complex pattern of green, yellow, and blue. The water is shallow, and the reflections are sharp. In the bottom right corner, a portion of a mossy rock is visible, adding a natural, textured element to the scene.

Gardens concentrate the senses
to locate us in our basic best selves.

THE WORK OF BEAUTY

Gregory Conniff

When I was in church as a boy, the priest would shift from the mystery of Latin to the dailiness of English for a series of prayers requesting, among other things, the conversion of Russia. I liked this prayer for Russia, with its goal both miraculous and attainable. The prayer that followed I did not like so well. It lacked the refreshing specificity of an attack on Godless Communism, veering instead into a lament that included a reference to our world as this “vale of tears.”

I had to look up “vale,” since I heard “veil” and that didn’t make sense, even allowing for the poetic locutions that marked my parish’s conversations with God. Once I had a grip on “vale” as a piece of geography though, it jarred me every time the priest brought it round. It troubled me that a “place of tears” was not an accurate description of the world I lived in.

Our church, a small, graceful wooden building built in the late nineteenth century, was beautiful. My town was also beautiful, having developed along the face of a ridgeline a dozen miles outside New York in the same years the parish was building the church. The town’s houses had great variety and character, and were substantial without being grandiose. I could see little to complain about and much for which we should be grateful. Even as a kid, it struck me as short-sighted to be signing off from services on a sour note to our Host.

It also troubled me that at the spiritual heart of my church community there was little interest in taking positive notice of the immediate and simple delights of the physical world we shared every day. If there were ever any ecclesiastical impulses toward joy in the everyday, perhaps they were repressed upon seeing the radical world-lover Francis of Assisi reduced to sharing gardens with bird feeders and plaster gnomes.

The Catholicism of my youth made the next life its principal focus. The nuns and the brothers in my schools wrung their hands over the temptations of the flesh and how they might lure us astray. And they were right, but overbroad in their anxiety. Even then I felt that to turn away from what we can know through touch and smell and sight and taste and hearing is to turn away from a full understanding of the gift of life, and beauty, in this world. That we might fall into hedonism while pursuing knowledge through our physical selves is less of a danger than missing out on life altogether while fattening our pride on abstemiousness.

It wasn’t wasted on me either, that in furthering its spiritual ends the Church made full and highly developed use of sensuality. I saw great theatrical knowingness in its ritual deployment of light, sound, imagery, scent, and in the spatial embraces of its holy places. It was possibly the very density of these elements that first drew me across the communion rail and onto the altar as an altar boy.

But outside church, out-of-doors walking alone after midnight mass through deep snow lit up blue under a wash of stars, I felt the reach of infinity. On the night I refer to, I was suddenly pulled out of myself and drawn briefly into something else of which I felt that I was a part, albeit an infinitely small part. And it was something I had experienced once before, years earlier. I felt overwhelmed by a sense of simultaneous, infinite largeness and infinite smallness and I knew that each contained the other. Somehow I had been absorbed into an unadorned mystery living at the heart of quotidian elements of winter. Half an hour later I was asleep.

This moment was memorable and part of an incrementally transformative series of moments out-of-doors that continues irregularly to the present. What drew me away eventually from altarplace religion was in substantial measure the difference between the tendentious and hermetic beauty of the temple of belief and the wild and open beauty of the world outside its doors. Even when looking at religious paintings from the late medieval period or the Renaissance, I would find my eye drawn past the principal figures and the message and into the landscape beyond. There seemed to be genuine affection in the rendering of the land and more room there for my imagination; it was the part of the painting that felt the least bought. Years later, visiting northern Italy, I would recognize these same landscapes and realize that what I had felt in the paintings was a subversive artistic connection to loving the world. Even when artists learned to fake their landscapes, the very idea of the depiction of geography still rose from someone’s paying attention to the locus of daily life, Hieronymous Bosch excepted.

For a time as a young adult, at an hour when I would ordinarily have been in church, I would wander in various nearby woods. While exploring the world firsthand, I was conscious of being more connected to a larger order of existence than I ever was while sitting through a round of worship that pointed my attention elsewhere. But this consciousness was not about a “larger order”; it was instead an unexamined awareness during these walks when my sense of autonomous self, the “I” watching, made itself absent, leaving only sensation and the ability to remain, somehow, upright.

What I found in the woods and by the ocean and walking city streets were places that were indifferent to my presence, unlike church, which was there precisely to serve me by directing my focus. The indifference I found in the world is the same, I think as the indifference described by scientists, although it felt benign, which softened the indifference, and which was not at all scientific. While I did not find nature’s disinterest any reason to reconsider my love for the world around me, I began to be aware that many people did not appear to experience anything like my sense of connection to the places that we shared. And it seemed that a large number of them did not appear to notice where they were at all, their attention taken by something I could not see.

A friend of mine, intending to drive three hundred miles south, instead drove three hundred miles , realizing his mistake only when he noticed that the sun was setting in front of him. My wife once walked blithely into the side of a bus with the same baffling ease that another friend, an Eagle Scout, drove into the side of a parked train. On my first trip to California, I almost drove a Volkswagen over a cliff because what I thought was a poorly maintained road was in fact a firebreak. In the dim reaches of prehistory, such lack of conscious attention to where one is no doubt eliminated numerous lines of genetic material. I think of this every time someone takes a late night snowmobile ride on river ice in early spring in Wisconsin and does not come back. Bliss can be an unforgiving element of natural selection.

By definition, our evolution as human animals has been in response to the world around us. Paying attention to that world has paid off in survival. Paying attention is adaptive behavior, some of which is hard-wired into us as fear and desire. Even babies turn from the smell of rotting meat and have an innate revulsion for snakes and spiders. Our personal survival requires that we know some things without being taught them. The fact that we are still here is in part because we have intuitive knowledge of what to run from and what to run to. Coupled with conscious attention through our evolved senses, an intuition of danger helps us navigate our environment.

What we run *to*—in the foods we eat, the textures that seduce us, the scents that arouse us, the colors and movement in the world—are the things of pleasure that ensure our health as individuals and encourage our procreation as a species. We have human history because desire draws us out of ourselves and into families, tribes, and culture. In tandem with deliberate attention, our innate appetites, our reasons for living, help us build lives rich with experience. In one form or another, the elements of the world that threaten us and the elements of the world that attract us are part of daily existence. They are day-to-day, they are common, and our body chemistry shifts in rapid response to their presence. My concern in this essay is with beauty as both an ordinary part of life and as a necessary part of human development.

A good part of what I think of as our relationship with beauty is, I believe, a wired response to the textures, flavors, sounds, smells, and spaces of the natural world. It is something the poet William Wordsworth described as “a pure organic pleasure.” This is the beauty that calls us to pay attention and has led us to see the satisfactions of order as a sign of merit, a concept that inhabits mathematics as naturally as it does a garden.

The inference for me, in the idea of a wired connection between our surroundings and ourselves, is that, underlying the human project, at foundation level, is one code that reads: “It matters how things look.” Beauty is part of the pattern language of our environment. We absorb it, paying attention to the details of our home ground. This attention in turn leads to love of place and eventually can bring us to take responsibility for its condition. Beauty as a part of ordinary life is a dependable outcome when culture and nature interact in an environment of attention and care. Commercial/industrial culture, like the Church of my childhood, has evolved by attempting to sever this “wired” connection to the world. This culture has replaced the patterns of nature (and the Church) with alternative patterns. Our culture has split off, almost with a sigh of relief, from the attention demanded by the unpredictable natural world. It has given us, in our cars for example, something very close to a private environment in the public world.

With the windows up, the climate control set, and the bass boosted, the experience is very much like traveling in a womb with an accelerator.

But when we live in a corridor of insistent billboards, characterless retail sprawl, and personal audio, we are, I think, close to the condition of cattle at an abattoir led to step along a wooden chute as if it were just another walk in a field. The numbing landscape isn’t pretty, so given our adaptation to the patterns of the industrialized world, it isn’t surprising that we, like cattle, often don’t notice or care where we are. The landscape of commercial culture conditions us to disconnect. This is as dangerous for us as a people as inattentive bliss is for us as individuals.

There was a time when we Americans could think of ourselves as “citizen farmers.” In today’s commercial culture, however, we have accepted the description of ourselves as “consumers,” something closer to “locust” than “citizen.” This shift in our sense of identity has accompanied a steadily attenuating relationship with the highly specific qualities of land, no two parcels of which are identical. We have altered land beyond recognition (Manhattan Island, first). We created abstract real estate by drawing grids upon the with concern for development but not topography (a project begun by Thomas Jefferson). And now we occupy, with so much life energy, a world sold to us as “virtual,” a diverting technological whimsy. With each step of revised self-consciousness, we have become less physically connected to the places we live in. As a result of this diminishing connection, this buffering, we have lost conscious sensitivity to the effect our immediate world has on our individual lives and our culture.

If beauty is a component of the shared environment within which humans have evolved, how will this continuing evolution be affected by manufactured landscapes increasingly devoid of beauty and increasingly not even shared? The wildfire spread of industrial culture, its expression of itself, its clutter and gossip, have become the hall-of-mirrors environment within which we are evolving as a

species. We may well be, as a species, branching off in response to a changed idea of beauty, one engineered and mechanical. Perhaps this is a stretch. Nevertheless, I think that it is a leap of hubris to dispense with the patterns of the world’s natural order whenever there is a profit in it or simply because we can.

My own cultural evolution is in reverse, in fundamental ways. My thought is this: for all our culture, for all our vaunted intelligence, for all our knowledge and machines, we are still animals in a habitat and this habitat, especially the visual habitat, matters. It matters in important ways that regulations on health and safety never address. We can monitor the quality of air, soil, and water in our ecosystem, but there is no equivalent scientific measure for beauty, which is nevertheless a part of our natural ecology. Nor can there be any such measure, given that every unbuilt place is unique, with a beauty that varies with every change in the elements.

In our culture, when we say “beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” we are usually taking the easy way to dismiss another’s taste (or to rationalize the destruction of a public view or the construction of one more eyesore). But in this gesture, in its very casualness, we dismiss as well the idea that beauty is significant to our shared daily life. And with this dismissal, we cede to economic forces those aspects of our home ground that are beyond price, that feed our hearts, that might open us to sudden unprogrammed insights. In the early nineteenth century, as this country began its commitment to industrialization and mechanical efficiency, arguments along these lines were dismissed as Romantic European affectations and inherently effeminate. Little has changed. Except how America looks. Think about it: next time you plan a trip—where would you rather go—northern New Jersey or southern France?

Whether or not the place we live inspires affection, we are nevertheless influenced by its physical nature, our evolved responses bathing our minds in their own reactive chemistry. Xenophobia aside, if we love where we live, I believe there is an internal mechanism that sweetens our living in that place. This is true for

gardeners who are, almost by definition, besotted with affection for this planet. But this is not so true for the rest of us—at least in our cars, in front of our televisions, on the Internet—when we pursue life through the medium of our machines, sitting still while they live for us, and faster, too.

For a rich, active life, we need to live in a world that reaches to the human animal with at least as much understanding as it now extends to machines. For one thing, we need a world that responds more to walking and standing still—with textures, details, spaces, and sudden juxtapositions that reveal themselves only to someone afoot. It is from walking attentively through a place at different times and in different light and weather that we can most assuredly come to know the character that abides within that place despite its changing appearances. Out of this direct knowledge almost inevitably grows understanding, affection, and an impulse to take some responsibility for where we are.

A world built truly for people would provide daily nourishment to the spirit from ubiquitous, subtle, and specific moments of lyrical reality, moments when we can see the world with clarity and recognize life as a stroke of good fortune. Our main source of this necessary human experience of lyrical reality ought to be the immediate world we inhabit when we step outside the doors of home and work. (Where else and why not?) Instead, what most of us encounter beyond those doors is a world where local and fragile beauty is displaced to ease the production and delivery of the rewards of a consumer economy. It has been a canny trade for industry, which promotes its products to us regularly as a means of deliverance from this selfsame commercialized environment.

A world in which beauty is absent, a world treated primarily as an economic arena, is home to chaos and conversation by bumper sticker. It is home to a parade of rude visual encounters that are a form of serial mugging. Power lines sutured thoughtlessly across the face of the land, the billboard jammed in the middle of the best view as you crest a hill, the alien microwave antennas in spiny mobs atop the heretofore unsullied ridge, the soulless malls and housing developments, are

blows to the spirit. The only escape is to disconnect, to withdraw into the radio, or the cell phone, or to become, in some way, blind.

For me, these blows activate an emotional wire to that reflex we describe as “fight or flight.” I doubt my response is unique. While some of us will react to visual insults by withdrawal, others will not and may lash out. I see “road rage” as an almost inevitable consequence of confining a person to an environment that a human animal perceives, reasonably I think, as an attack. We survive abused landscapes by hardening our minds to the spaces between our destinations and hardening our hearts as well to the people trapped there with us in traffic. Then, when we arrive at our destinations, the tension of that hardening persists as a hormonal hangover that poisons our work, our play, whatever we come to do. Beauty can be beyond price, but ugliness always exacts a toll.

I am a gardener and have been for a long while, but I have been driving a car far longer. When I am behind the wheel, I metamorphose, like you (and Mr. Toad), from a drifting pedestrian to an alert and decisive motorist. On the road and moving well (and disconnected from my relationship with the land), I think sometimes that I am in love with asphalt. But this is less love than an arrangement of convenience. I know that roads are not ethically neutral parts of the environment. I need the road to take me to my work—even though expanding roads help wear away the world I love, the world I photograph. My behavior and attitude are a conundrum I deal with less effectively than I wish, especially when I find myself reaching for a stone to cast. Decades ago I heard a man rattling on about his idea of beauty, which was a marsh with a road running through it. I thought he was joking as he reeled off one example of highway beauty after another, until I found out he was a lobbyist for the road-building industry and merely possessed by the energy of the happily employed.

For a long time I held this in my head as an angry buzzing example of what is wrong with our thinking as a nation. As industrialized Americans, we can rationalize the

destruction of nearly anything in the name of jobs and economic efficiency, with no sense of long-term consequences, no definable end. We build to tear down and build again, each time more careful than before to construct something no one will miss when it's gone—since to achieve something good might require that we take care of it, maintain it, love it. Better to keep dreaming forward than to reflect on where we are and how we got there. Having the road go on forever is a way to deny that we ever arrive, to be always some kind of pioneer, and in great measure never to have to grow up and love something outside of ourselves.

Later I got to know the highway lobbyist and discovered he was also a gardener (I had discovered by then, too, that a road running through a marsh is an effective way to organize a picture). His large property held sprawling and somewhat chaotic perennial beds that he worked himself, unlike his neighbors, whose hired landscape services yielded respectable gardens, but with a predictable order that is not beauty. It was here that I came to see him more clearly, especially through the lens of the two enormous beds of roses that were his pride and chief love. I felt chagrined that I had judged him on the one note of how he made his living. In that garden (and when he visited mine), there was generosity to him that eased the reckoning glitter I had seen in his eyes around his other enthusiasms of politics and the camaraderie of power.

In a garden that one works oneself, there is only the seasonal turning, round and again, of gardener and worked ground. When it is great, visiting a personal place such as this is to experience the world lit up from within. To work such a place as this is to be lit up oneself, as if the energy of its beauty inhabited one's labor in much the way current passes through the filament of an incandescent lamp. My gardener friend understood that gardens like his are outside the common ambitions of men of his achievement. He understood even better the necessity of their beauty to the fullness of his life and the complexity of his self.

Certainly it is possible to be lit up, to feel electric, in a car as well. When I was young and dating in New York I would make a game of racing up 10th Avenue above 42nd Street in my car, trying to see how far I could get before I was caught

by a red light. It was thrilling urban driving. It made me laugh and it made my blood hum and was, unfortunately, sometimes the best part of the date. This was not the New York I loved, however.

That New York was the one I walked: beginning in the 1950s, accompanying my father when he crossed the Hudson River on business, later as an undergraduate at Columbia, and still later as an outlander adult bringing my photographic work to interested people. What attracted me at first, I think, was the crazed, layered, saturating physical energy of life feeding accidents of beauty on all fronts. As a child, I had no context for this experience beyond immersion in a vortex of sensation, but even later, understanding better the character of this great city, this wild river of jazz in stone never failed to sweep me away on its currents. I imagine the great rivers of the West – the Missouri, the Colorado, the Columbia – must have had this addictive power before they were dammed, carrying in those days flecks of human consciousness through what must have seemed an incomprehensible vastness of grass, forest, and sky.

Today, of course, those rivers are mostly fat lakes and New York is steadily becoming more theme park and mall than complex metropolis. Part of the problem is the spread of chain stores, but in addition, a diminished vocabulary of building materials and surface detail has produced a city that increasingly fails to catch light in a way that engages the intuitive eye. And when we don't look, we don't pay attention, and then we don't care and, finally, we don't remember. And then where are we?

Even so, when I am in New York, I take time to walk late in the day from the Battery at the tip of the island north to about 100th Street on the side, hypnotized by the rhythm of the older buildings and the light playing over them, and later, in the dark, by the office lights within and the patterns of enterprise they represent. Each of these walks rekindles my romance with New York. I don't feel this way on the subway or on a bus or in a cab. Each motorized trip is about the destination, while the walk is about brushing up against as much of the city out-of-doors as I can. As I walk, the air blows over me and I am awash in sights and sounds and smells that soak the city into me through all my senses. But I am not drunk on

sensation. I retain enough alertness to avert a mugging. Even in a garden, there are things that bite and sting.

My reengagement with the city comes from moving through it with no other intention than being there and by the simplest means possible: using my feet and following my nose and eyes. And I pay attention to details. As a result of each walk, I know new temporary truths about some of New York's constantly changing neighborhoods. But more important than this to me is the renewed affection I feel for the city after I have moved my body through it, surrounded by New Yorkers, who are – in this place of stone – themselves the natural world. My high-speed drives up 10th Avenue left me in love with myself. At the end of my long walk, I am in love with the city. But this love, real as it is, is an affair and not a marriage. I do not live here. This is not my home any more. And that makes a difference.

To love a place as home is to develop roots. This means, in part, a sensory relationship with a landscape that has individual character and mystery, but that is usually neither wilderness nor park. The landscapes I am concerned with photographically are the rural middle landscape, the margins of cultivation, and the ordinary landscape of home and yard—where most of us live and dream and where we deserve a setting that strengthens us for the challenge of living well. I am interested in spaces where the human spirit can catch its breath.

I grew up in densely populated northern New Jersey. Although my town was beautiful, much of the region was not, having succumbed, in the twentieth century, to highways, industry, and dense, featureless housing—the sort of area that makes the phrase “beautiful New Jersey” an oxymoron. Fewer than seventy-five years before I was born, though, the region near my home was rural and the subject of paintings by the artist George Innes. His presence was strong enough that my town named a public school in his honor. His home was less than two miles from mine.

Today, Innes's paintings of Montclair and Bloomfield, and the landscape work of other artists, too easily finds itself grouped as nostalgic depictions of a world gone by or of a world that never was. Romantic twaddle, too sweet for thought. Never mind that these places *did* exist, and some still do, and that they have an intoxicating beauty. Rare is the museumgoer who will move past the brushwork and take the painter's vision as a suggestion of what the artist actually saw with pleasure, and what we might also see. A painting is not a report, but it does contain information about what its painter valued and at what emotional pitch. When I was young and living in his town, I was aware, despite the changes to the landscape, that I was living in the same light Innes did.

A century after Innes painted north Jersey meadows graced with mist, I moved to the upper Mid, to a part of the country where there were then more cows than people. It took me awhile, because the cultural shift blinded me, but eventually I realized that I had come to live in a place that looked like Innes's New Jersey in the nineteenth century—but with the winters of a planet farther from the sun.

Because I arrived in late fall, Wisconsin didn't offer my eyes a lush or physically gracious welcome. It was farmland, a working landscape, a harvested one at that. Life had retreated indoors or underground. But the region had, especially in its unglaciated folds, a plainish mystery that hinted at a beauty I could learn to see. What confused me, at first, is that I was unused to the cycles of a small-farm agricultural landscape and ignorant of its seasonal narrative. I was lulled into inattention by the fact that a well-maintained agricultural landscape was the norm. It was *everywhere*. And how could everywhere possibly be beautiful?

I was unconsciously in thrall to the idea that beauty must of necessity depart from the norm. I think I saw it, in landscape and in other things, as an inflation of desirable characteristics to the point where they made my heart beat faster in their presence. Think Frederick Church and the luminous mythic or Ansel Adams at Yosemite. In the Midern landscape, with its distinct absence of grandeur, this hyperbolic beauty is not available the way it is, say, among the Rockies or along

the Oregon coast. The Mid is mostly flat, and even when it rises a bit, that rise is just a roll of minor difference at highway speed.

In time, I learned that the Midern landscape, too, though spare and open, has a singular beauty. The origin of this beauty is in the land, as conservationist Aldo Leopold professed; the way it turns with the seasons and responds to light passing across it. It is the mind's job, as it reflects on the pattern of experiences with the land, to bring to consciousness the character of this beauty and its range. The body knows, however, as it knows how to breathe, that our grasp of the pleasure of this beauty begins with the flesh. It was my body in motion that first opened me to the large beauty of the place, as well as to the beauty of *being* of the place. Later, snow ducks made it local and brought it home.

Initially there was the bike, which took me into a landscape I had known hitherto only by car. Free of the car's cocoon, I began to experience familiar places as *terra nova*. I began to see Wisconsin for the first time, only two thin tires and a bit of fabric between the world and me. The cycling experience was (and is) that of me matching my body to the topography over and over again, across the seasons, balanced between sensory absorption and alertness (potholes, deer, turkeys). With each rise and descent and flat sprint, I took geography into my muscles, feeling the shape of the land in the pressure on my lungs as my new home place entered my blood and filled me with heat. This was the gift of a beautiful place, taking me out of myself, literally reshaping me, and then bringing me back to where I belonged now and as part of it.

On the bike, I found the world by meeting it halfway, touching it. But in that touching I found a different self, as well. It is similar to the way consciously touching someone else can help relocate one's center. It is not simply the reaching out, it is also the warm pressure flowing back. When it snows, I step into my cross-country skis and it begins once more. I am on fire in a cold and empty place. This is not 10th Avenue. This is home.

And where we are, most of us, most of the time, is home. The character of home is made of many things, one of which is local beauty, either natural or built. This came into focus for me late one night alone on a small bridge in my neighborhood during a glorious blizzard. There, along the bridge's familiar concrete balustrade, I was surprised by a row of ducks, a mother and her young, that someone had sculpted from the snow. They fluoresced in the glow of a nearby streetlight while the flakes, which continued to fall, fattened them with a glittering down. In the sculpture of the ducks I felt the presence of someone who had absorbed much local beauty and who, when circumstances allowed, passed the favor along. I went home and got my camera and woke my wife to come and see.

It is in our homes and in our hometowns, between work and family, that we live the story of our lives. Our challenge is to make a setting for that story so rich and sustaining that we won't want to seek relief from it by fleeing to some manufactured elsewhere—some tourist Eden, if you believe the brochures. Why not live in a place of the sort people travel to? We could do this if we understood better the sustaining relationship we can have with our local landscapes.

The injunction to tend one's own garden is a familiar one, which can be taken either as metaphoric counsel or as a literal invitation to act. Suppose we were to stop this useless religious fretting over our exile from paradise and instead see our relocation as an opportunity to garden for ourselves. Just that. No more. Suppose we were to ignore the American romance of a new Eden and simply love this imperfect world being itself—love it as if we truly loved ourselves as part of it. If we could love being here, where would we be then? And who?

My friend the lobbyist gardener is gone. And gone, too, are his rose beds, which he maintained on a bluff above a large glacial lake and smack in the middle of the view. Many of his other plants are in my garden now, in a neighborhood where there is no struggle with a large view. Where a view might have been,

I have neighbors, all of us on narrow, deep lots in bungalows built in the 1920s. The architecture is historic vernacular, which guarantees a certain character, but does not ensure a sense of beauty. So we garden.

The cultivation of the place where I live has grown slowly over a quarter century. When I arrived on the block, the only real garden was a small perennial one newly developed by the woman living in the house directly behind. The yard that is my garden now was overwhelmed with suckering elms, thorny black locust, goldenrod, white snakeroot, and an aspiring forest of maples. My first year of gardening was principally one of clearing space, the digging of a few small beds, and the planting of a double handful of plants assured of returning next year and not needing much immediate care.

The second year was one of staring at what grew. That fall I built more beds and the next spring ran the garden along the back property line underneath ancient and untended lilacs. When the neighbor in back saw this, she extended her plantings to that property line as well and *de facto* made one garden out of hers and mine. We talked as we worked and, stepping back and forth at one corner to consider our efforts, created a path between our yards that we use to this day. (Only many years after the fact did I learn that this neighbor was the sculptor of the snow ducks I encountered on the bridge.)

The third year I understood finally that gardening is not so much the imposition of order as it is the inviting of the unknown. The former is landscaping, the latter is weaving texture, volume, line, and color into places that welcome surprise. Gardens are invitations written on land.

The response to the gardens we built was a change in the nature of our place. The biggest initial change, as the gardens grew into their fourth and fifth years, was a return in quantity of songbirds and insects. I was startled to see how even a little bit of tending the earth had such a strong, positive effect on the life of a place, and an urban one at that.

And that life, over the years, began to include other neighbors, none of whom had been in the habit of spending time outdoors. It became easier for the couple next door to be in their yard after their view—my garden—improved. It became easier for me to get to know them in casual exchanges over yard work than it had been in the ritual of occasional social gatherings. In the garden, I became less likely to say something regrettable. Tolerance grew alongside the plants. And we have become friends. On their side as well, the property line is now a perennial bed of borrowed scenery and shared work. Today on the block there are seven properties linked consciously along the back property line as an extended garden, a visual commons—yards expanding into landscape.

Behind our homes we have torn out the fences, leaving lilacs, mock orange, honeysuckle, junipers, and one espaliered apple tree to mark divisions that are screen dividers rather than walls. We have wound paths across the property lines so that we can enter each other's gardens to visit, to cut across the block, or just to look. We exchange plants, advice, food, and stories. We share tools. We are not alike, but through a willingness to open ourselves through the medium of the garden there is respect and pleasure mixed with our awareness of significant difference. And under our gaze, children zoom through a small Arcadian wonderland as if it were simply natural, which it is.

The beauty of this place, a beauty we made, is the binding energy that makes my neighborhood a place people are reluctant to leave. The work of making this beauty, the planting, the weeding, the negotiating of borders, the reaching out to new neighbors, is what has given us knowledge of each other possible only from working physically side by side. The beauty of what we have made by thinking beyond our borders, by seeing our yards from our neighbors' point of view, is what brings us out-of-doors time and again for chance encounters that enlarge our lives in small but meaningful increments. It has been the work of beauty to make it good to be here. It has been our work to recognize the patterns of beauty and to extend them.

In my part of town, gardens are spreading—along terraces, on open land adjacent to railroad tracks, and, of course, in back yards. Beauty is evolving and we are changing with it. Some of us have formed associations that are restoring riverscapes in the neighborhood. Some of us are taking responsibility for parks. We are creating a culture here, even if it is a small one, and we have created it on our own. When we step out-of-doors, the world we see helps persuade us, day in, day out, that life is good and that there is hope for better if we will work at it—and if we will begin again daily. This is where we live, and it is not free of disagreement or trouble; but by working the ground together we have arrived at a place that is better for our having been here. And we are better, too, for the care we have taken of a piece of the ordinary world—the worker and the worked, the viewer and the viewed, all tangled together in a singularly full life. The tangle is inevitable. The fullness is the work of beauty.

Gardens are a small step; they are small fields, openings on the land. To Henry David Thoreau's sweeping insight that in wildness is the preservation of the world, I would add two ideas that these days fall closer to home: in open land we hold the health of our culture; in gardens we nourish the roots of community.

—————

I believe that beauty is in the world, not in the eye of the beholder. I believe that the eye is one window through which beauty reaches us, but it is the world itself that is the source even of the idea. I believe that when we recognize beauty and take responsibility for its increase, we are changed for good in the process—returned from exile and awakened to the knowledge that the world washes over us in never-ending transformation and renewal.

The background of the image is a dark, out-of-focus scene filled with numerous bokeh lights. These lights appear as soft, glowing circles in shades of blue, cyan, and yellow, scattered across the frame. The overall effect is dreamy and ethereal, suggesting a night scene with distant lights or a microscopic view of light particles.

We are an extension of the
light by which we see.



PROFILE

BIOGRAPHY

Gregory Conniff was born in Jersey City, New Jersey, on May 3, 1944. He studied political science at Columbia University (BA, 1966) and law at the University of Virginia School of Law (LLB, 1969). A self-taught photographer (he has had a darkroom since the age of twelve), he worked with the printmaker William Weege in the early 1970s to learn how to use ink. In the late 1970s, he chose photography as the focus of his professional life, concentrating on the vernacular American landscape, primarily rural. Conniff lives with his wife, Dorothy, in Madison, Wisconsin, where his interest in landscape carries through in his gardens and in riding a bicycle through the countryside west of the city.

EDUCATION

- 1971 Apprenticeship with William Weege. Jones Road Print Shop, Barneveld, Wisconsin
- 1969 University of Virginia School of Law, Charlottesville, LLB
- 1966 Columbia University, New York, BA

FELLOWSHIPS

- 1992 National Endowment for the Arts Photographer’s Fellowship
National Endowment for the Arts International Exchange Fellowship
- 1990 Dane County | City of Madison Creative Arts Fellowship
Wisconsin Arts Board Visual Arts Fellowship (also 1987 and 1979)
- 1989 John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship
- 1981 National Endowment for the Arts Photographer’s Fellowship

SELECT EXHIBITIONS

SOLO AND TWO-PERSON

- 2013 Joseph Bellows Gallery, La Jolla, California
- 2012 James Watrous Gallery, Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters, Madison, —30—
- 2006 Chazen Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin–Madison, *Wild Edges* (exh. cat.)
Candace Dwan Gallery, New York
- 2004 Milwaukee Art Museum, *Judy Pfaff – Gregory Conniff: Camera and Ink* (exh. cat.)
- 1999 Sordoni Art Gallery, Wilkes University, Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania, *Twenty Years in the Field* (exh. cat.)
- 1989 Milwaukee Art Museum, *Two Days in Louisiana* (with Frank Gohlke; exh. cat.)
- 1985 Madison Art Center, Madison, Wisconsin, *Common Ground* (exh. cat.; traveled to Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, Ohio)

GROUP

- 2008 North Dakota Museum of Art, Grand Forks, *Remembering Dakota*
- 2006 The Art Institute of Chicago, *Photographs by the Score*
- 2003 The Art Institute of Chicago, *Recently Seen*
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, *The Land Through a Lens: Highlights of the Smithsonian American Art Museum* (traveling exh.; exh. cat.)
Cleveland Museum of Art, *A City Seen* (exh. cat.)
Ludwig Museum, Budapest, *The View from Here: Recent Pictures from Central Europe and the American Midwest* (traveling exh.; exh. cat.)
- 2001 Milwaukee Art Museum, *Masterpieces of Photography*
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, *Ansel Adams at 100*
- 1999 Alan Klotz/PhotoCollect, New York, *Up from Down*
Pacifico Fine Art, New York, *Industry*
- 1996 High Museum of Art, Atlanta, *Picturing the South* (exh. cat.)
Milwaukee Art Museum, *American Landscapes*
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, *Crossing the Frontier: Photographing the Development of the West 1849 to the Present* (exh. cat.)
Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, Lawrence, *Western Waters* (with Terry Evans and Wanda Hammerbeck; exh. cat.)
- 1994 American Embassy, Oslo
National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, *Between Home and Heaven* (exh. cat.)
University of Nevada, Reno, *Water in the West*
- 1989 Milwaukee Art Museum (also 1972, 1978, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2001)
- 1984 Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, New York, *The Lens in the Garden* (exh. cat.)
- 1983 Baltimore Museum of Art
- 1982 Minnesota Museum of Art, Minneapolis
- 1981 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
- 1980 Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts
- 1978 High Museum of Art, Atlanta

SELECT COLLECTIONS

- The Art Institute of Chicago
- Baltimore Museum of Art
- Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson
- Cleveland Museum of Art
- Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC
- Chazen Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin–Madison
- Federal Reserve Bank, Chicago
- Fidelity Investments, Boston
- Frances Lehmen Loeb Art Center, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York
- High Museum of Art, Atlanta
- Joseph E. Seagram Collection, New York
- LaSalle Bank, Chicago
- Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Madison, Wisconsin
- Milwaukee Museum of Art
- Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago
- Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
- The Museum of Modern Art, New York
- Paine Webber, New York
- San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
- Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC
- Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, Lawrence
- Stein Roe Farnham, Chicago

PUBLICATIONS

- A City Seen: Photographs from the George Gund Collection.* Essay by John Szarkowski. Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 2002.
- A River Too Far: The Past and Future of the Arid West.* With photographs from the Water in the West Project. Reno, Nevada: University of Nevada Press, 1991.
- Common Ground.* Vol. 1 of *An American Field Guide.* Photographs and essay by Gregory Conniff. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1985.
- Dugan, Ellen, ed. *Picturing the South.* Atlanta: High Museum of Art and Chronicle Books, 1996.
- Foresta, Merry et al. *Between Home and Heaven: Contemporary American Landscape Photography.* Washington, DC: National Museum of American Art and University of New Mexico Press, 1992.
- Goin, Peter, ed. *Arid Waters.* Water in the West Project. Reno, Nevada: University of Nevada Press, 1992.
- Gregory Conniff.* Essay by Jane Livingston. Washington, DC: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1979.
- Gregory Conniff and Frank Gohlke: Two Days in Louisiana.* Essay by Verna Curtis. Milwaukee: Milwaukee Museum of Art, 1989.
- Grundberg, Andy. *The Land Through a Lens: Highlights from the Smithsonian American Art Museum.* Washington, DC: Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2003.
- Judy Pfaff – Gregory Conniff: Camera and Ink.* Essay by Sarah Kirk. Milwaukee: Milwaukee Art Museum, 2004.
- Mitchell, Ben. *Wild, Broken, Lovely: Narratives of the Midwest.* Nextmonet.com.
- Phillips, Sandra. *Crossing the Frontier.* San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Chronicle Books, 1996.
- The Print.* Life Library of Photography. New York: Time Life Books, 1981.
- Raitz, Karl, ed. *A Guide to the National Road.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.
- Read, Michael, ed. *Ansel Adams/New Light, Essays on His Legacy and Legend.* San Francisco: The Friends of Photography, 1993.
- Thompson, George, ed. *Landscape in America.* Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1995.
- Twenty Years in the Field.* Essays by Tom Bamberger and Stanley Grand. Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania: Sordoni Art Gallery, Wilkes University, 1999.
- The View from Here: Recent Pictures from Central Europe and the American Midwest.* Essays by Katalin Neray and Catherine Evans. Budapest: Ludwig Museum, 2002.
- Western Waters.* Essay by John Pultz. Lawrence, Kansas: Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, 1996.
- Wild Edges: Photographic Ink Prints by Gregory Conniff.* Introduction by Russell Panczenko. Essay by Gregory Conniff. Madison, Wisconsin: Chazen Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2006.



Sometimes we fall in love with a place,
returning again and again, simply because
of how light fell on it the first time.

Gregory Conniff: Watermarks has been published on the occasion of the exhibition *Gregory Conniff: Watermarks*, organized by the Museum of Wisconsin Art. The exhibition is on view at the Museum of Wisconsin Art from April 9, 2016 to June 19, 2016.

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Gregory Conniff: Watermarks presents color photographs that Conniff made of the reflecting pool at the Olbrich Botanical Gardens in Madison, Wisconsin. Conniff found his subject in September of 2014 shortly before the pool was drained for the winter. He reengaged with the subject in April of 2015 and concluded the series in October. The installation of forty-two large-scale images is meant to be an immersive experience.