

IS WATER THE SAME
AS YESTERDAY

by Lesi Chen

CRITICAL RATIONAL

Reflecting on the significance of water is essential for us to envision the path ahead. This project stemmed from my deep personal bond to water, where serene streams evoke visual and mental pleasure for me. The impetus behind my exploration of water was further fueled by the recent global event of Fukushima nuclear wastewater being released into the ocean in the summer of 2023, a process expected to span at least 30 years.

Water is never singular; it cannot be examined independently. Circulating globally, water perpetually absorbs and accommodates various substances, including metals, sewage, plastics, chemicals, and even nuclear waste. Nature, as a whole, is an intricate entity composed of numerous elements whose identity is constantly altered.

Water is opaque; water is shadowy. When its darkness reflects our human visage, it leaves an enduring mark that cannot be erased.

As a Chinese photographer, a London-based artist, and an inhabitant of Earth—our shared home, I felt the impulse to address those environmental impacts induced by human activity through visual language rendered by lumen prints and chemigrams. My project delves into the planetary water cycle and the ever-evolving nature of water in the Anthropocene era. Therefore, Sellafield, Europe's most hazardous nuclear site located in northwest England, serves as an accessible location for my visual exploration.

This photography series focuses on Sellafield and the repercussions of nuclear waste on water, visually represented through lumen prints and chemigrams.

My objective is to capture images of the Sellafield site from both a neutral outsider's viewpoint and an artist's perspective infused with critical and personal empathy. While often perceived as an unstable and dangerous source by the public, nuclear energy is in fact, one of the most efficient and cleanest channels of energy, crucial for human development. However, the multiple stages of the nuclear fuel cycle produce large volumes of radioactive waste. Until now, no government has yet resolved how to manage this waste safely, including the UK. Our knowledge is limited as individuals and the secrets buried beneath this vast nuclear waste site are beyond my capacity to uncover. Nevertheless, according to a scientist (reported by The Guardian) advising the UK government on radiation health effects, concerns regarding leaks and chemical releases at Sellafield have been largely overlooked. As an artist, my role is to engage with the timely issues and make things visible, illuminating the true repercussions of nuclear energy.

I chose to document Sellafield, an important nuclear facility on the Cumbrian coast, using a digital medium format camera to obtain high-resolution images intended for lumen prints. Lumen prints, similar to other cameraless techniques such as cyanotypes, entail exposing a digital negative onto photosensitive paper in sunlight. Frankly, it was the unforeseen ethereal colors and X-ray-like effects

that inspired me to interpret this project through lumen prints. Lumen prints demonstrate significant color instability, influenced by exposure time and the type of photographic paper utilized. Traditionally, photography emphasizes permanence, a trait less emphasized in other art forms. As photography transitions into an interdisciplinary field, the need to stabilize our images is being re-evaluated. In this project, it may be more pertinent to address the high sensitivity of UV light and its impact on the evolving colors of lumen prints, reflecting the profound effects of human activity on nature. Therefore, I do not intend to fix my lumen prints, allowing the colors to darken over time, mirroring the continuous altering of water in the anthropocentric world.

When the exposure time between the digital negatives and the photographic paper (B&W ILFORD MULTIGRADE DELUXE PEARL) is long enough, a distinct neon orange-pink x-ray effect emerges, directly evoking associations with nuclear power. The nuclear site, formerly known as Windscale, experienced a catastrophic fire in 1957, marking the UK's worst nuclear accident to date. In a 2001 EU report, it was warned that an accident at Sellafield could surpass the magnitude of the Chernobyl disaster in 1986, which exposed five million Europeans to radiation. Sellafield houses a significantly larger amount of radioactive material than Chernobyl, making the area heavily irradiated. In a hypothetical panoramic view of Earth with environmental radiation levels as the backdrop, Sellafield would stand out vividly, resembling a fluorescent beacon emitting an eerie blue light, like the x-ray effect surfaced in the lumen prints.

Finally, I aim to emphasize the concept of contamination by employing the chemigram technique on the lumen prints. Chemigram involves applying different chemicals to photographic paper. In this case, I simultaneously poured fixer and developer to produce ammonia(burnt)-like effects, symbolizing the vulnerability of nuclear energy to accidents, reminiscent of the fire incident at Sellafield.

In the era of the Anthropocene, I am motivated to broaden the scope of image practice by exploring avenues for fostering ecological consciousness. By employing alternative photographic processes beyond traditional methods, such as emphasizing consciousness and abstract indexical factors, image practice can continue to engage with the anthropocentric world. While the current look of some pieces features light pink and yellow neon hues after being fixed, the lumen process will continue to evolve and be altered by the time of exposure to light; hence, it continues to darken. Therefore, what is currently visible represents just one phase of the process and not the ultimate appearance of the series. Echoing the title of my project, the series is in a constant state of flux, which is always evolving. My work combines fixed and not-fixed images to show the possibilities of lumen prints and create a unique visual experience for viewers. This approach is particularly valuable in a world where few works combine lumen prints and photographs.

Freshwater, comprising just 3% of the Earth's total water, remains a limited and precious resource, largely locked away in ice, glaciers,

and groundwater. In this project, my intent as an image practitioner is to shed light on radioactive contaminations that may elude direct observation by human eyes. Through the use of lumen prints, I seek to render visible those elements that were once hidden from our sight, casting them in neon hues that demand attention and can no longer be neglected.

(1025 words)



20 x 24 inches
ILFORD Multigrade Resin Coated Deluxe Pearl paper
Mounted on wall without frame



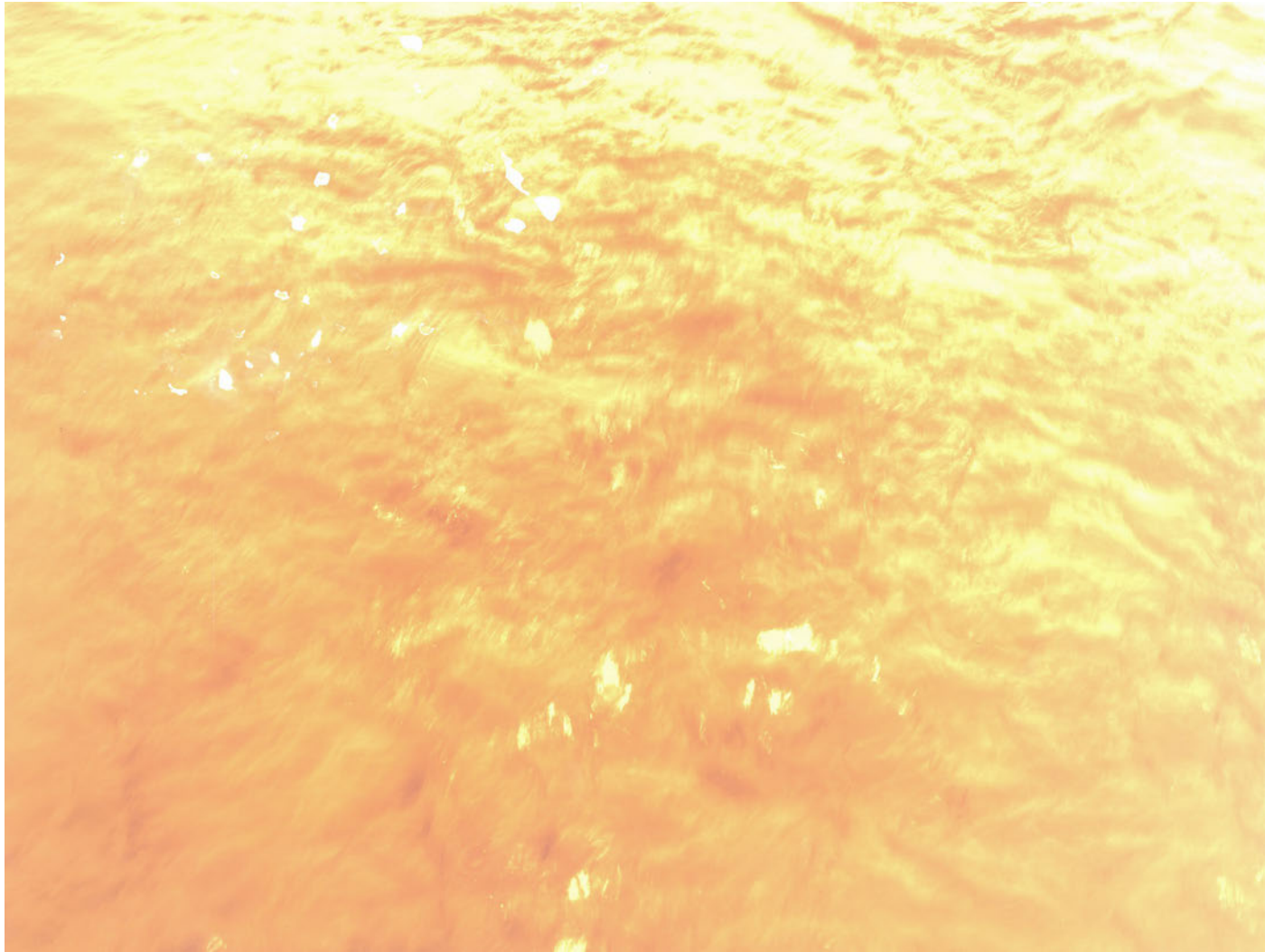
20 x 24 inches
ILFORD Multigrade V RC deluxe gloss paper
Mounted on wall without frame



20 x 24 inches
ILFORD Multigrade V RC deluxe gloss paper
Mounted on wall without frame



20 x 24 inches
ILFORD Multigrade V RC deluxe gloss paper
Mounted on wall without frame



12 x 16 inches
FORTE B&W glossy coldtone resin coated paper
Mounted on wall without frame



12 x 16 inches
FORTE B&W glossy coldtone resin coated paper
Mounted on wall without frame



12 x 16 inches
FORTE B&W polywarmtone glossy paper
Mounted on wall without frame



12 x 16 inches
FORTE B&W polywarmtone glossy paper
Mounted on wall without frame



12 x 16 inches
FORTE B&W glossy coldtone resin coated paper
Mounted on wall without frame

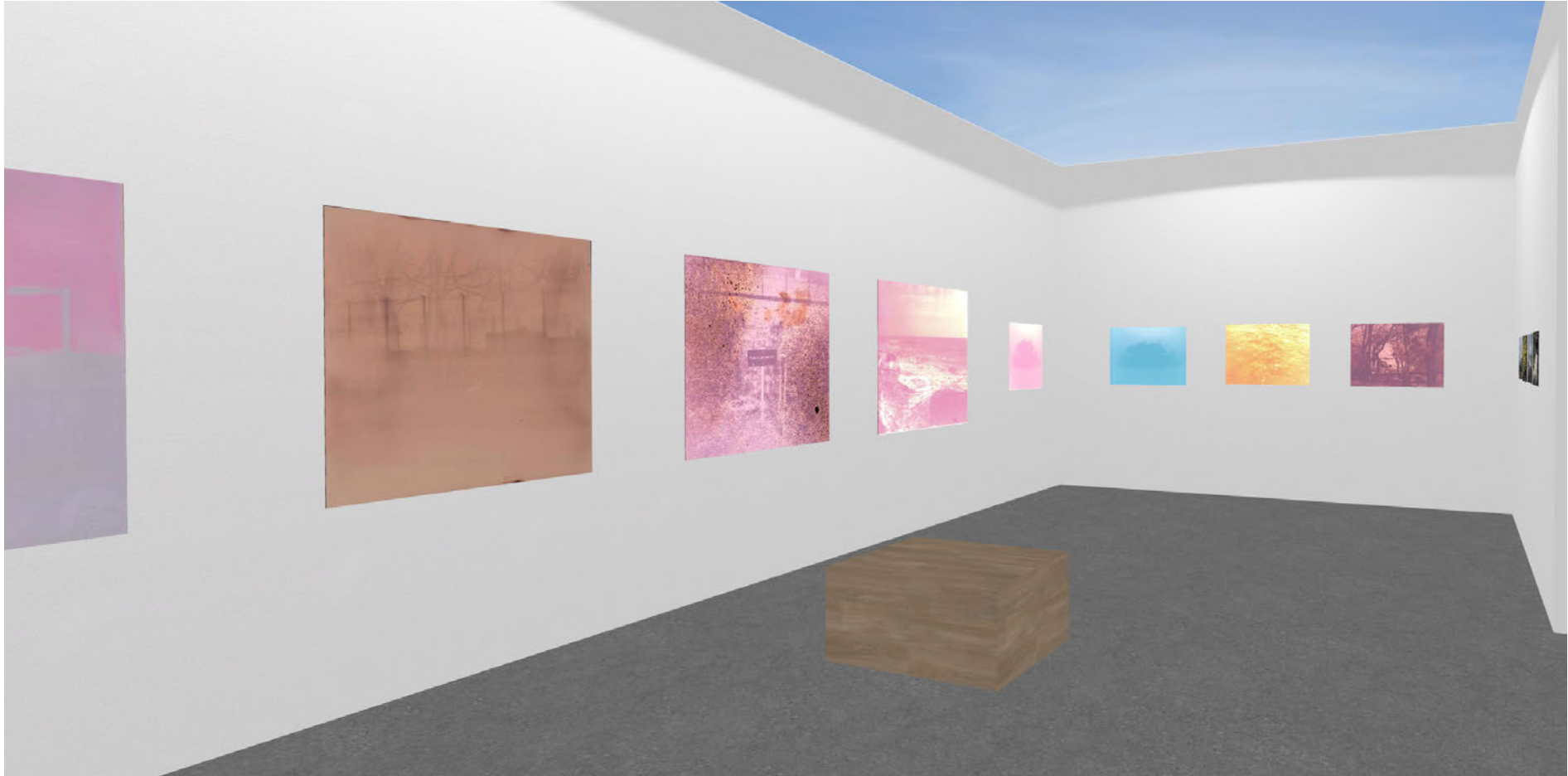
I also want to show the digital versions of Sellafield and the coastline where the nuclear leak water may have been emitted to give viewers an authentic experience. These are shown alongside the lumen prints on a much smaller scale.

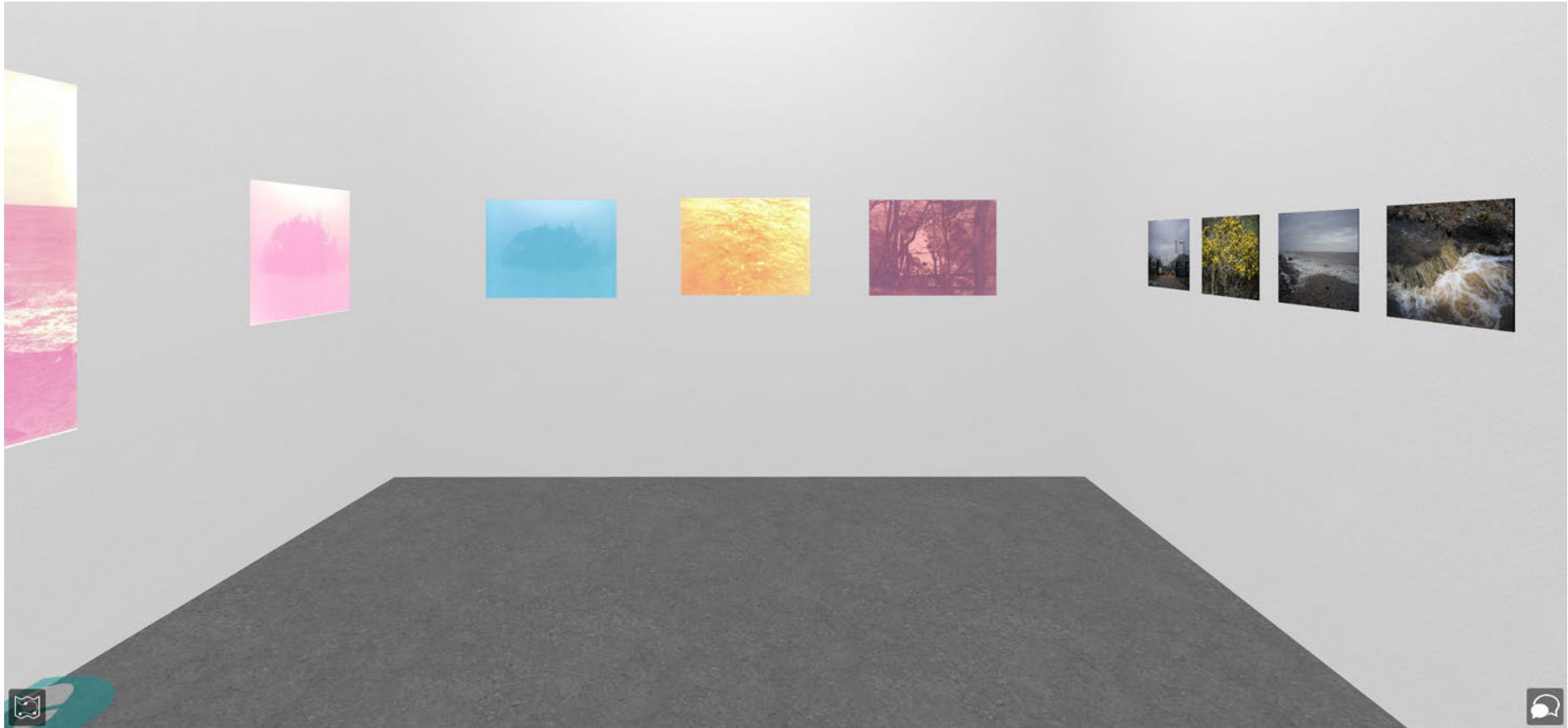


3.5 x 5 inches
C-type Digital Prints
Mounted on wall without frame

MOCK UPS

A gallery space is where I see this work out in the world. It is ambitious to want to open workshops and exhibit with LAPC (London Alternative Photography Collective), which was founded by Melanie King in 2013, and has evolved from a small group of analogue and alternative photography practitioners into a collective that produces large-scale symposiums, exhibitions, and workshops. Given the fact that my work combines fixed and not-fixed images to show the possibilities of lumen prints and create a unique visual experience for viewers. This approach is particularly valuable in a photography world where few works combine lumen prints and photographs. Most importantly, LAPC is an open collective, which anyone can inform and work within, and has always been about promoting the accessibility and creative possibilities of analogue and experimental photography.







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