

Imagining the Artifact

Collaging Blue and White Chinese Pottery



HARLEY NGAI GRIECO

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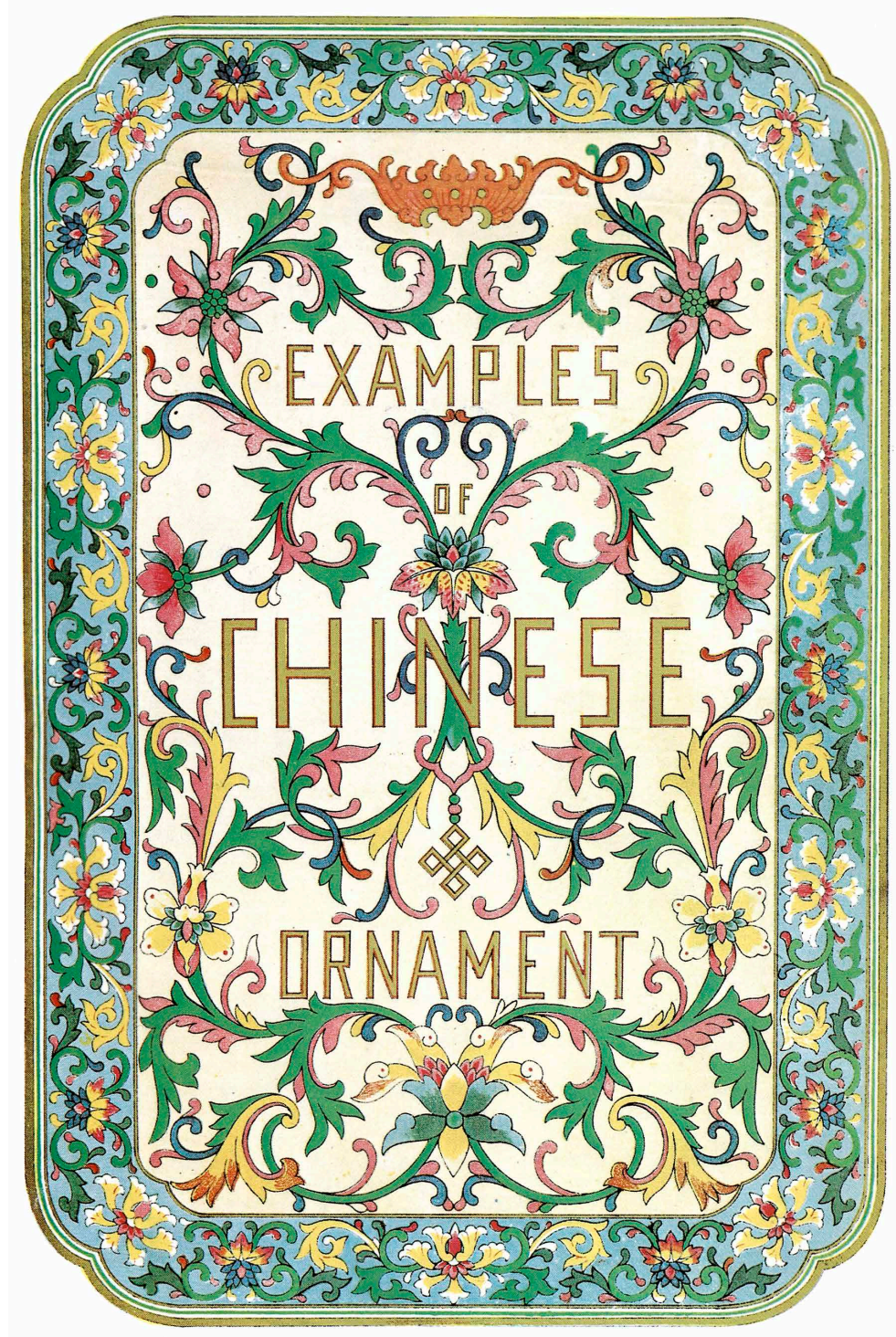
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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this project is to analyze how depictions on Chinese porcelain vessels represent, or misrepresent, concept of place, an idea stemming from my interest in European chinoiserie, the remnants of my grandparents' Chinese gift shop, and a desire to understand the effects of the global porcelain industry. The project explores designs in Chinese blue-and-white porcelain (qinghua, 青花), Owen Jones's book *The Grammar of Chinese ornament*, and the collage practice of a Chinese art form known as Bapo.

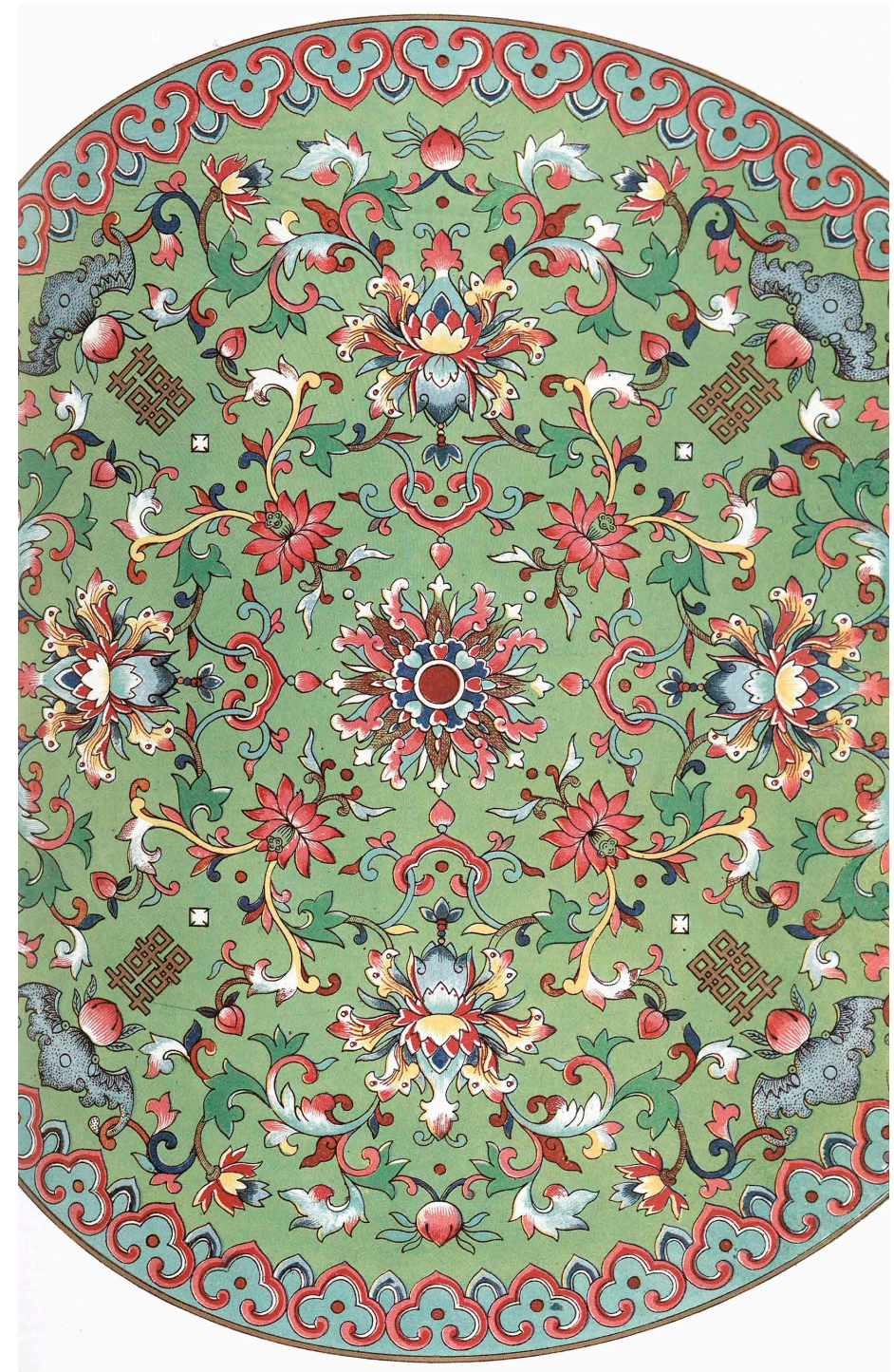
The project has two forms: *Reconfigure* (a cyanotype photographic series) and *Remnants* (a photo-sculptural series). These two series explore the material and artistic kinship that a ceramic surface can be treated as a photographic surface, where memory can be seen, felt, and held. I explore the visual language of archaeology and the photographic document to question how Chinese blue-and-white porcelain is studied and understood. I have found parallels between the practice of archaeology and the function of abstraction in photography, where fragmented pieces are both complete and incomplete. As a Chinese American artist educated in Western art history and eager to learn more about Eastern art history, I found the opportunity to research Chinese porcelain at the Bard Graduate Center to be an invaluable experience. I have included my research and in-process photos to elucidate my thought and image-making process.



Pages 2–7: Jones, Owen. *The Grammar of Chinese ornament: selected from objects in the South Kensington Museum and other collections*. London: Studio Editions, 1987. Plates: 9, 20, 67, 86.

Owen Jones (1809–1874) was an influential English architect and designer who explored the design principles behind decorative objects and architecture throughout the Eastern world. He worked during the Qing dynasty, at the height of chinoiserie production in England, and published his magnum opus, *The Grammar of Ornament*, in 1856. He also published many subsequent “ornament” books, including *The Grammar of Chinese ornament: selected from objects in the South Kensington Museum and other collections* in 1866. These books utilized the printing technique of chromolithography, an expensive but precise method of reproductive printing invented in the early nineteenth century. The mass dissemination of these designs made it possible for students of the West to study designs from China, Japan, India, and the Islamic world. His impact as a leading figure in design history is undisputed.

However, Owen Jones is not unlike many scholars of his time who participated in what Edward Said calls “imagined geography.” This concept addresses how the objective perception of a geographical place is replaced by representations—images, text, pedagogy—that construct an imagined Orient. As a Chinese American, I am navigating my relationship to Said’s critique of Orientalism and exploring how I can make my own interventions as an artist. For my project, I am interested in re-imagining blue-and-white porcelain by abstracting Jones’s designs (created from collected Chinese objects and chinoiserie) and creating new images through the fragmentation of his drawings. The cyanotype process is further reference to the blue-and-white origins of these designs. Ideally, I would like to provide a space for the viewer to reconsider the history, popularity, and influence of Chinese porcelain.







Page 8: Liuzhou (1791-1858), *Picture of One Hundred Years*, 1831.

Page 10: Yuan Runhe (1870-1954) *Vertical Scroll with round fan painting, envelope, letter, book cover, and rubbing*, 1926. Ink and color on paper. 30" x 14". Yang Wei-quan (1885-1942?) *Vertical Scroll with bapo design forming a rock*, 1934. Ink and color on paper, 42" x 17".

Page 11: Chen Zhenyuan (dates unknown) *A Reincarnation of Ink Treasures*, 1935. Ink on paper, 34" x 18". Unidentified Artist, *Broken Bamboo Slips and Damaged Sheets*, after 1877. Ink, color, and gold on paper, 50" x 13".

Bapo is a genre of Chinese painting and drawing that is considered a folk art instead of a fine art form. Bapo compositions resemble assemblages but are, in fact, drawings or paintings depicting torn pieces of paper, calligraphy, poems, rubbings, and bronzes rendered in a realistic manner. There is no exact origin known for this art practice, but artist Qian Xuan (1235–1305) from the early Yuan Dynasty is cited as the first to use it. Bapo depicts broken ancient objects as part of a meditation on Chinese history and culture. The compositions imply movement and motion, as if pieces of drawings are being torn up and put back together. This was a way for artists to pay homage to literal pieces of China's cultural heritage, in a combined practice of reverence and mourning. Bapo represents a fragmented, subjective view of China's past, one that is incomplete but can be reconstructed.

Bapo influenced my practice of photographic and sculptural collage. Both the cyanotype and sculptural series share the sense of reconstruction that is present in Bapo. By studying the history of blue-and-white designs and imitations, I can pay homage to them by creating new objects out of pieces of the past. Bapo addresses the conceptual complexities of looking back on images of the past, while moving forward with artistic interpretation.





Page 12: Drawings on glass and ceramic reference Misugi, Takatoshi. *Chinese porcelain collections in the Near East: Topkapi and Ardebil v.1-3*. Hong Kong University Press, 1981.

Pages 12–17: In progress - photographic digital film, glass, resin, and copper-foil tape.

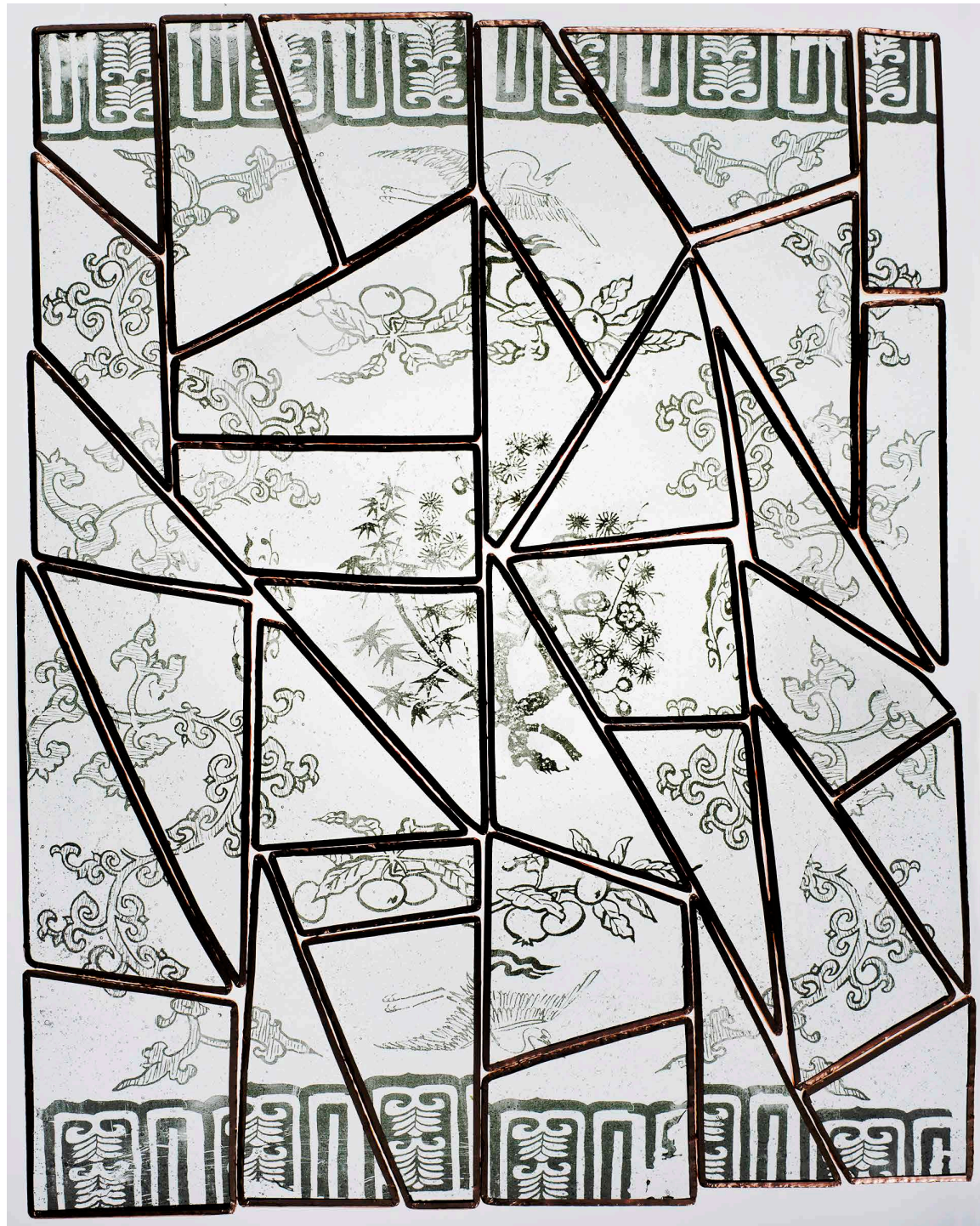
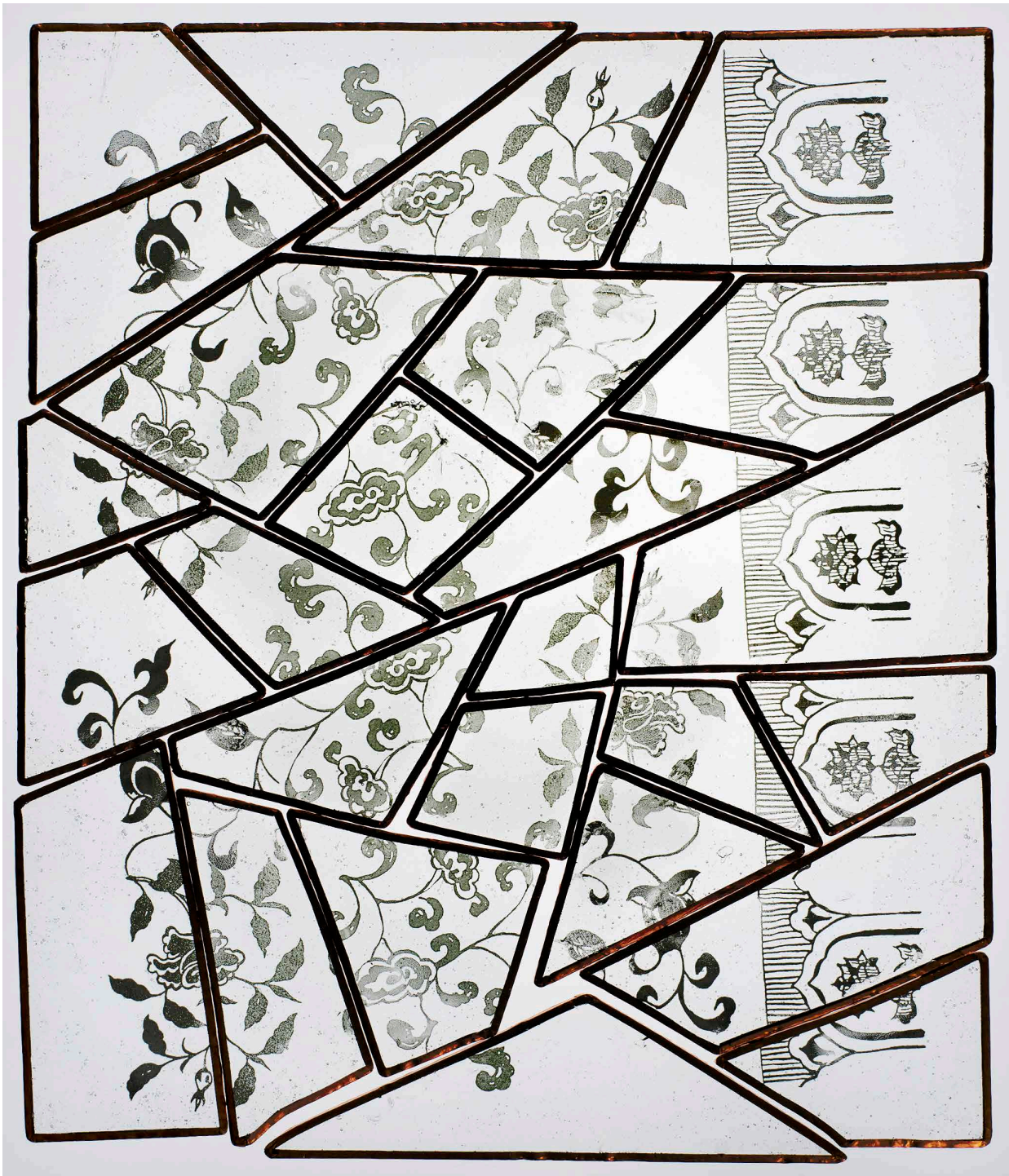
Pages 18–21: In progress - graphite, ceramic tile, resin (before adhesion of copper-foil tape).

Pages 22–23: In progress – photographic digital film, ceramic tile, resin, and copper-foil tape.

I chose to focus on Chinese export blue-and-white porcelain and to study designs specifically produced for foreign trade. During my research, I came across the Chinese porcelain collections of the Topkapi Palace Museum in Istanbul, Turkey. This museum houses about 12,000 pieces of Chinese porcelain, ranging from the thirteenth through the nineteenth century. The collections specialize in blue-and-white porcelain from the early Yuan dynasty through the Qing dynasty, with an emphasis on objects collected and imported by Persians. My research in the collection catalogues revealed many drawings and renditions of blue-and-white designs: plants, flowers, fruits, animals, mythical creatures, people, and landscapes.

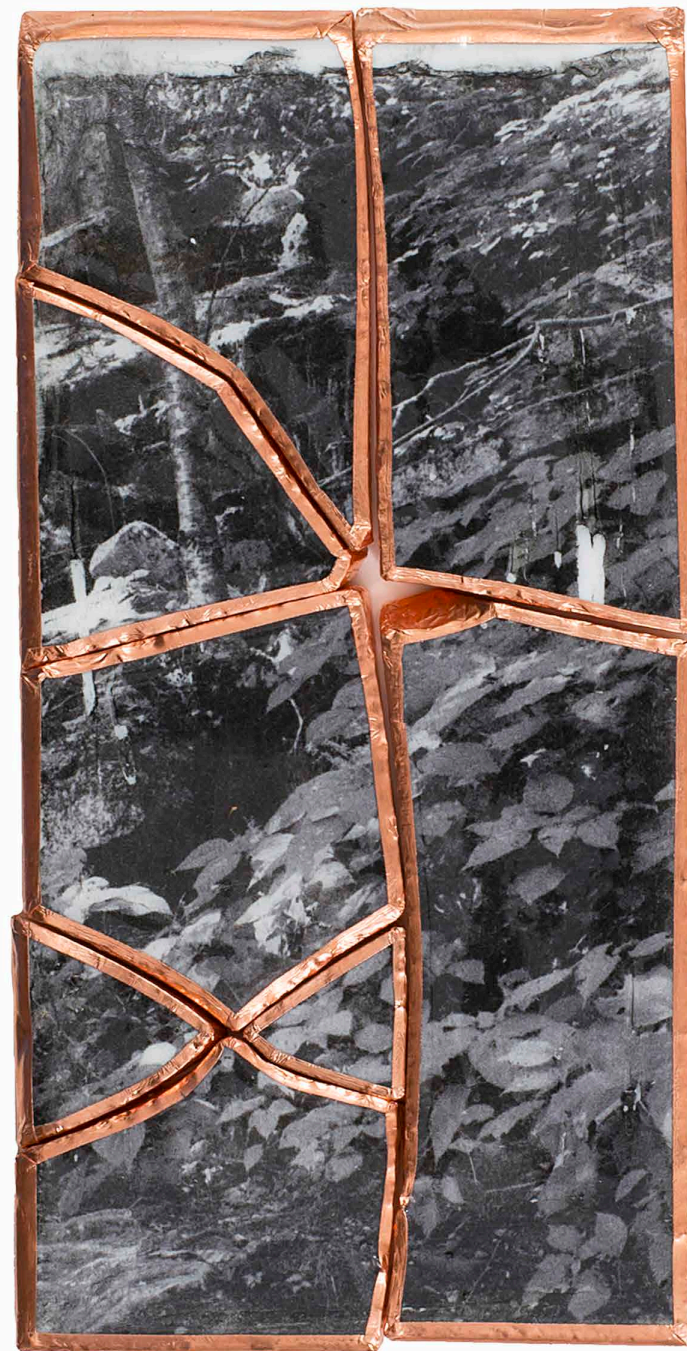
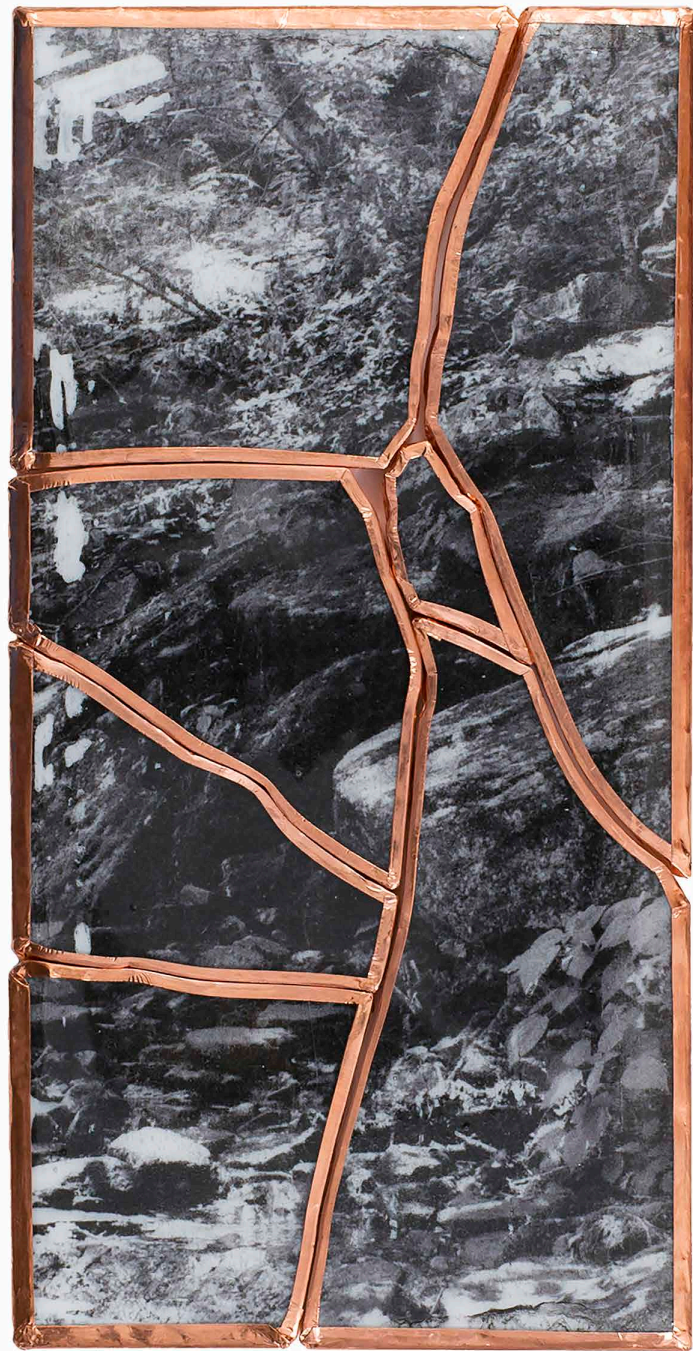
I gathered many of these drawings, converted them to digital photographic transfers, and fused them to sheets of glass. I also made graphite drawings directly on ceramic tiles, using the catalogue drawings as guides. Part of my process for collaging the sculptural series involves transferring a whole image to be broken up and collaged together with other images. The glass sheets contain a multitude of designs, while the ceramic tiles portray sections of drawings and my landscape photographs. The following images show all three sculptural components in process. I use a stained-glass soldering method to connect the sculptural pieces. I wrap each piece of glass and ceramic with copper foil tape, to which the lead can physically adhere.











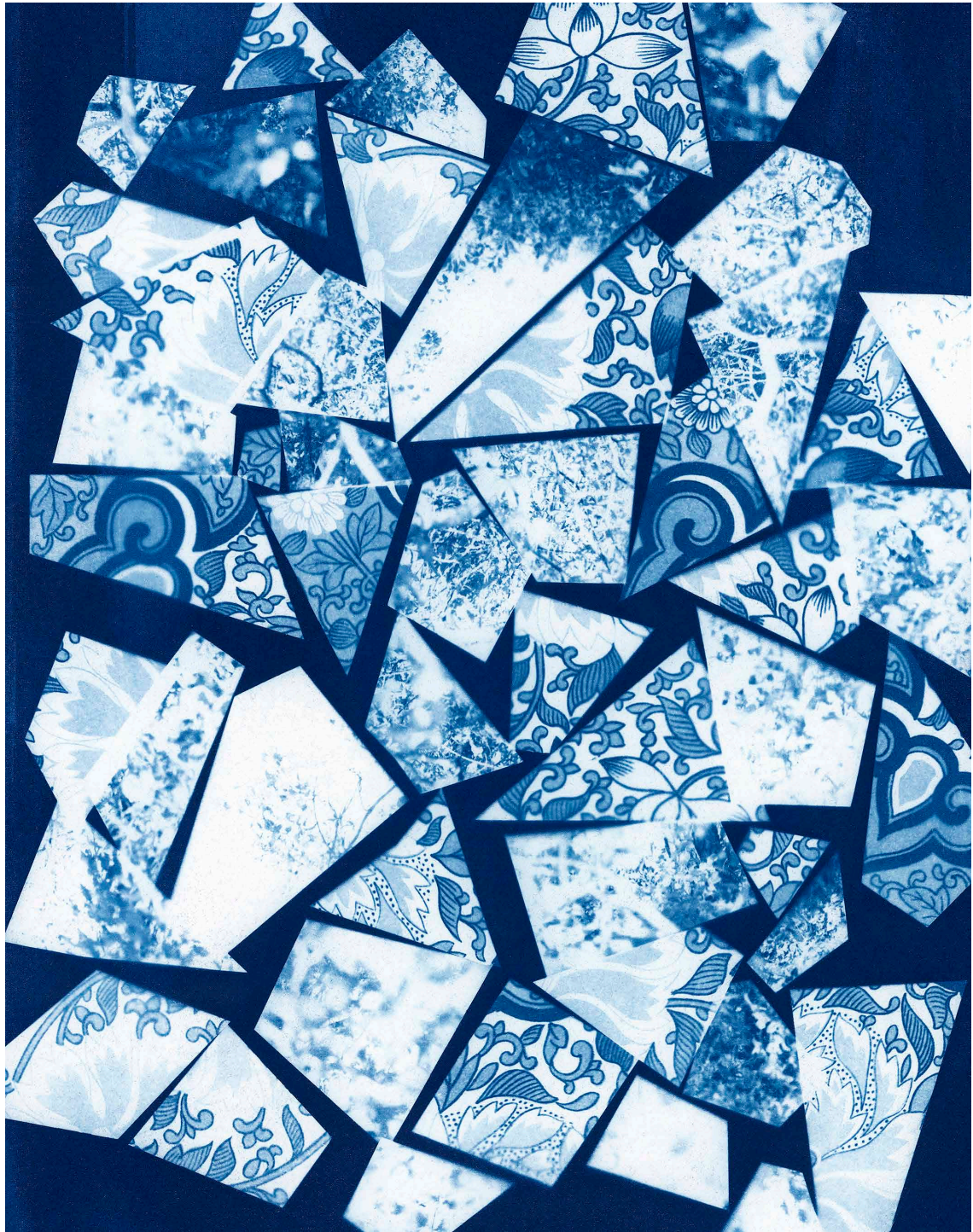


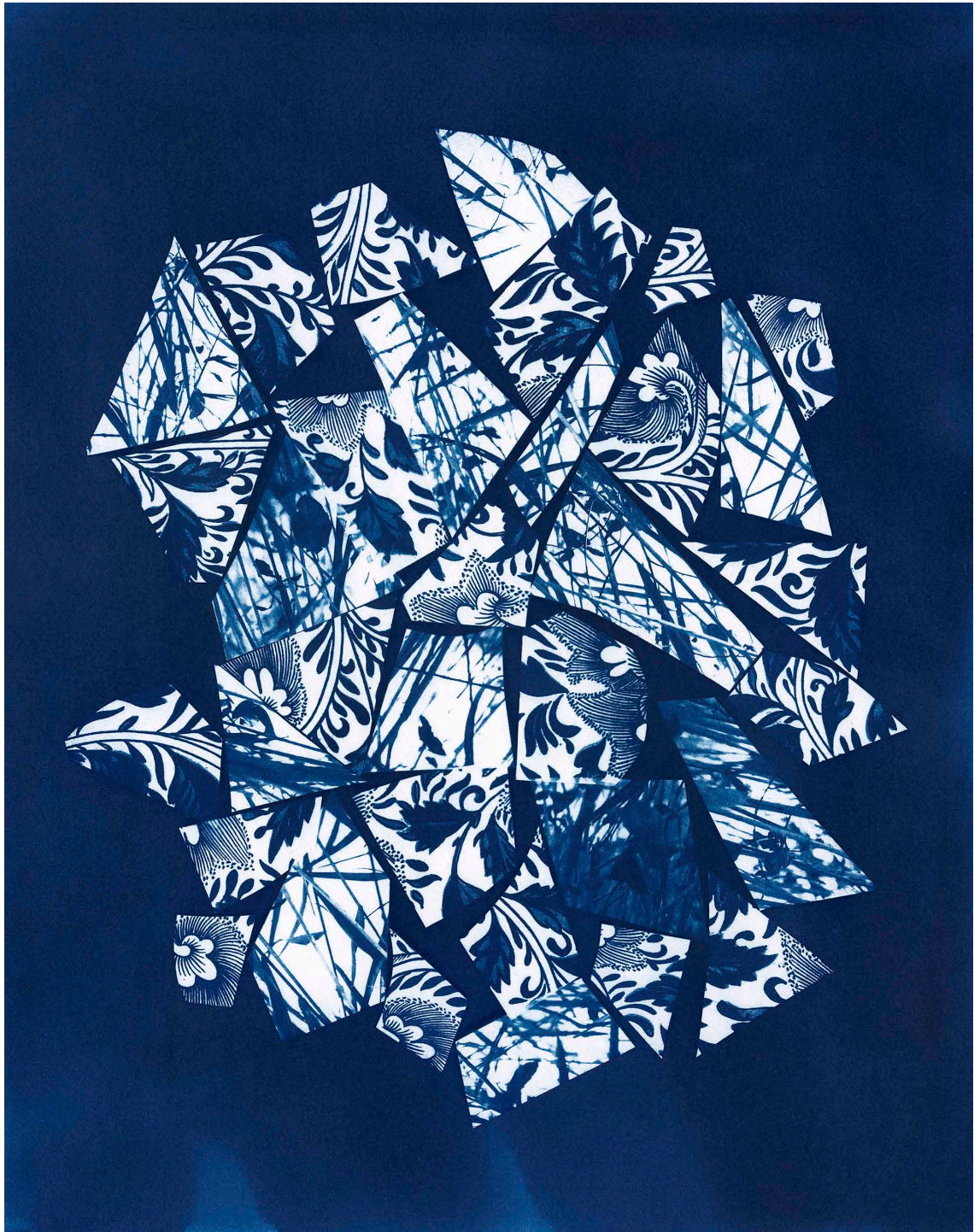
Page 24: Detail, *Reconfigure 3*, 2021. Cyanotype, 11" x 14"

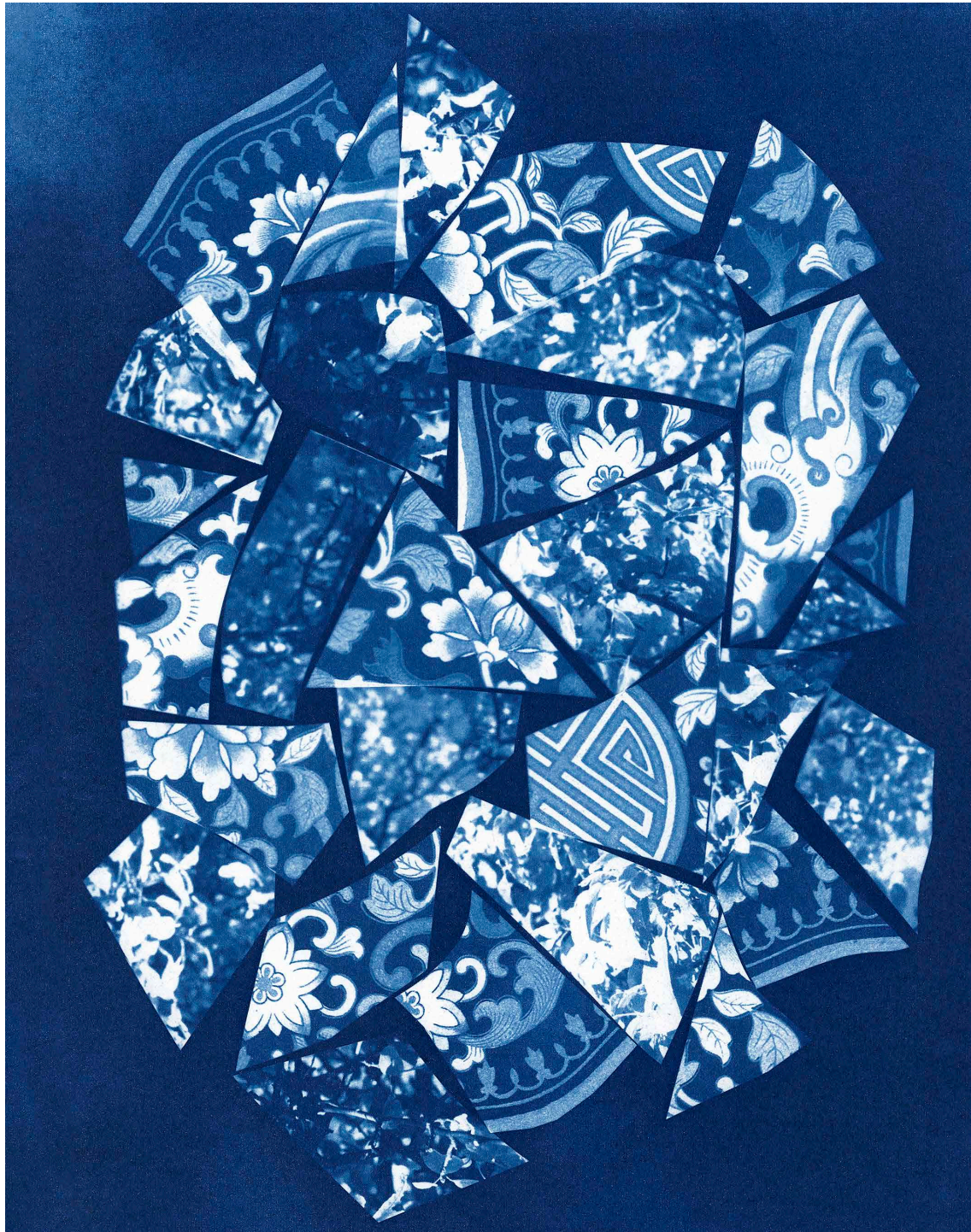
Pages 26–37: *Reconfigure 1–12*, 2021. Cyanotype, 11" x 14"

For each print in *Reconfigure*, I combined one of my own landscape images with a plate from Owen Jones's 1866 book, *The Grammar of Chinese ornament*. Each image is printed as a digital negative physically cut up into pieces and arranged on a piece of paper coated with cyanotype chemicals. The negatives are held in place by pressure (under glass) and exposed to UV light. The print is washed and dried in water, revealing the image. Since the pieces of negatives are collaged, there is no way to replicate the arrangements, which makes each print unique.

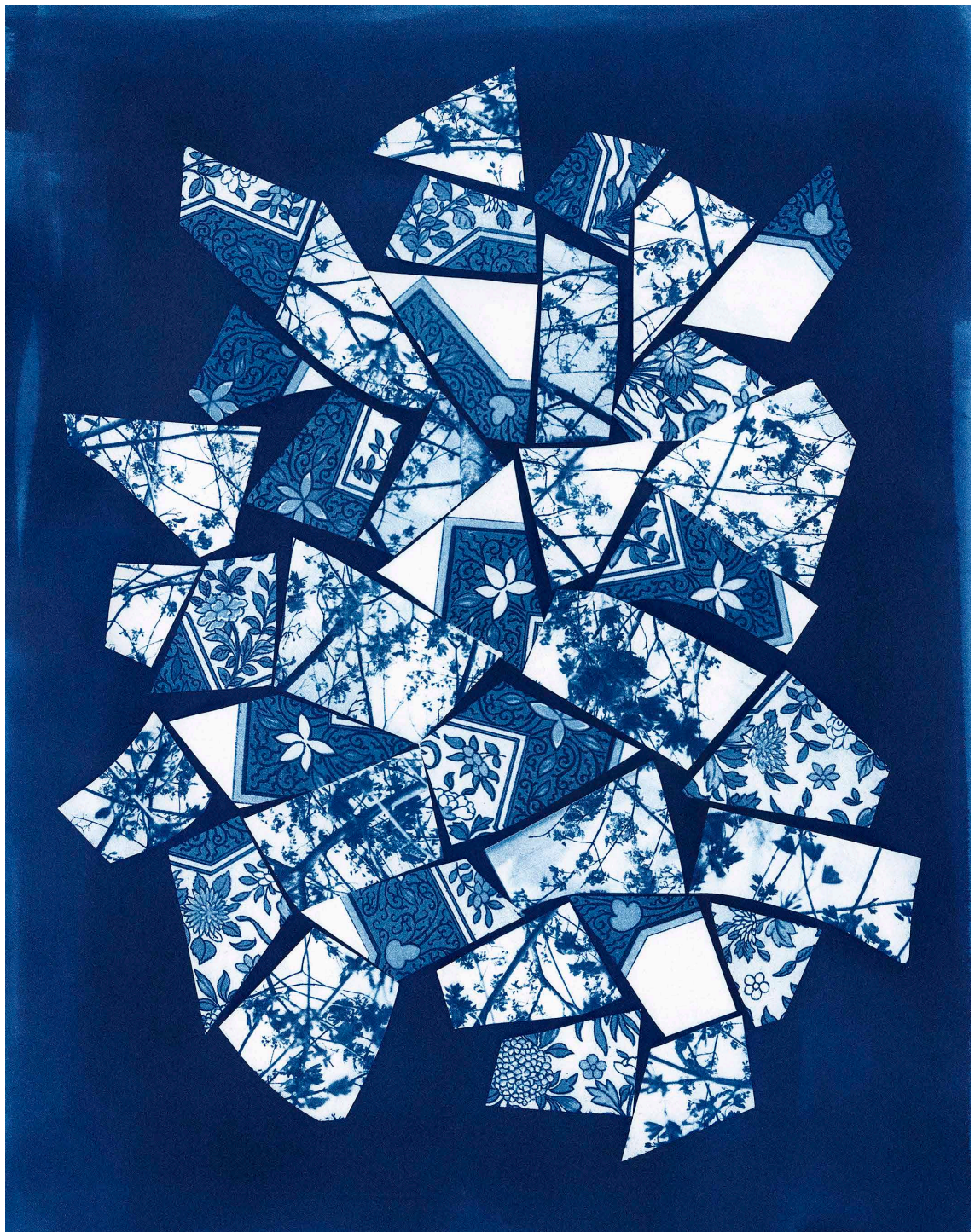
By comparing the cut-out negatives of porcelain and landscape, one can see that the pieces start to resemble a scan of ceramic shards; negatives imitate archaeological fragments. The visual weight of the negatives creates their own sculptural space within the photographic print. Joining the cyanotype process with the history of blue-and-white Chinese porcelain speaks to a pervasive life of cobalt blue in both photography and ceramics. Cyanotypes were invented to scientifically record the natural world, while cobalt oxide was introduced to China from Persia for ceramic production. By using both narratives of blue, I can combine a photographic archival practice with the speculative origins of blue-and-white ceramic designs.

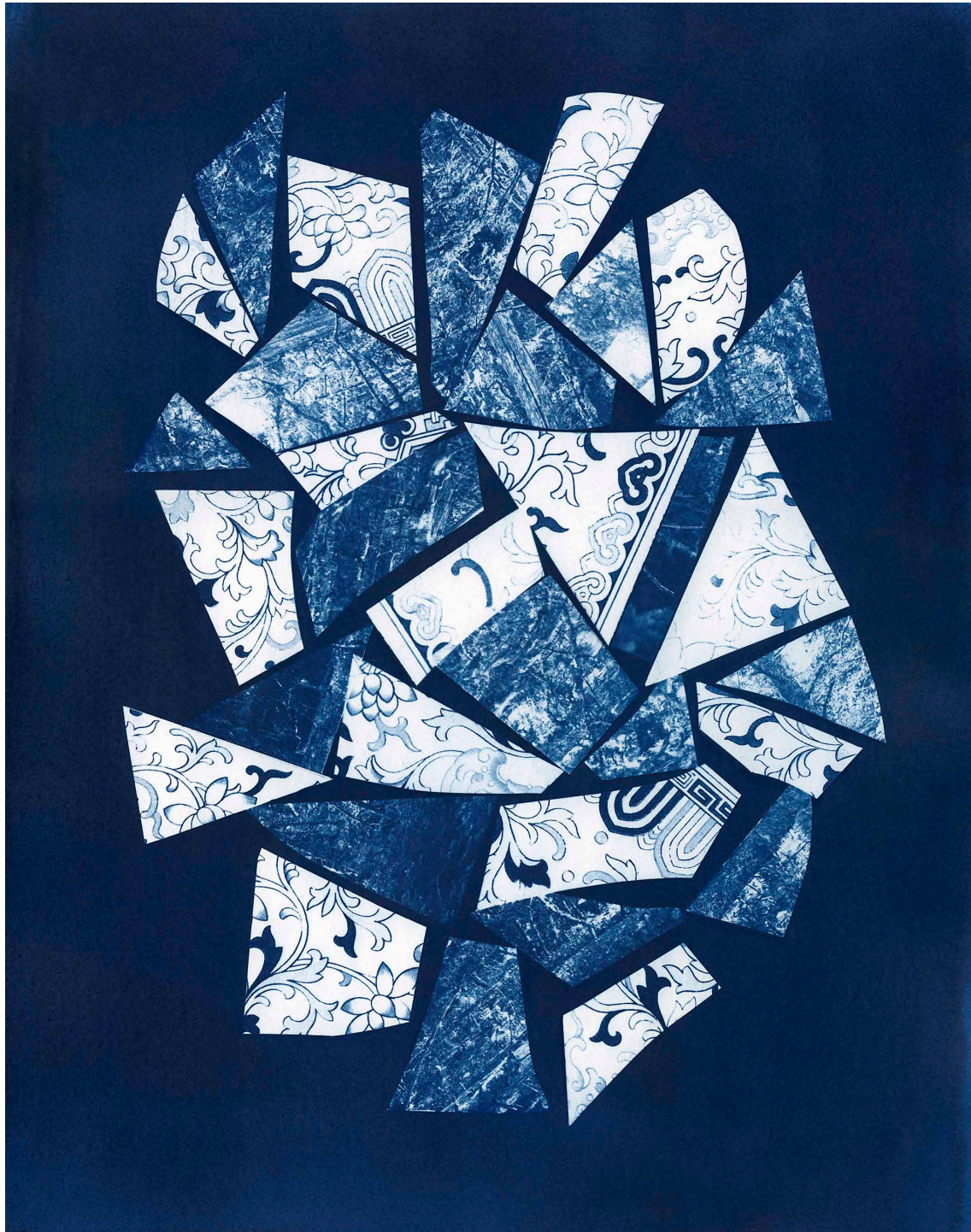


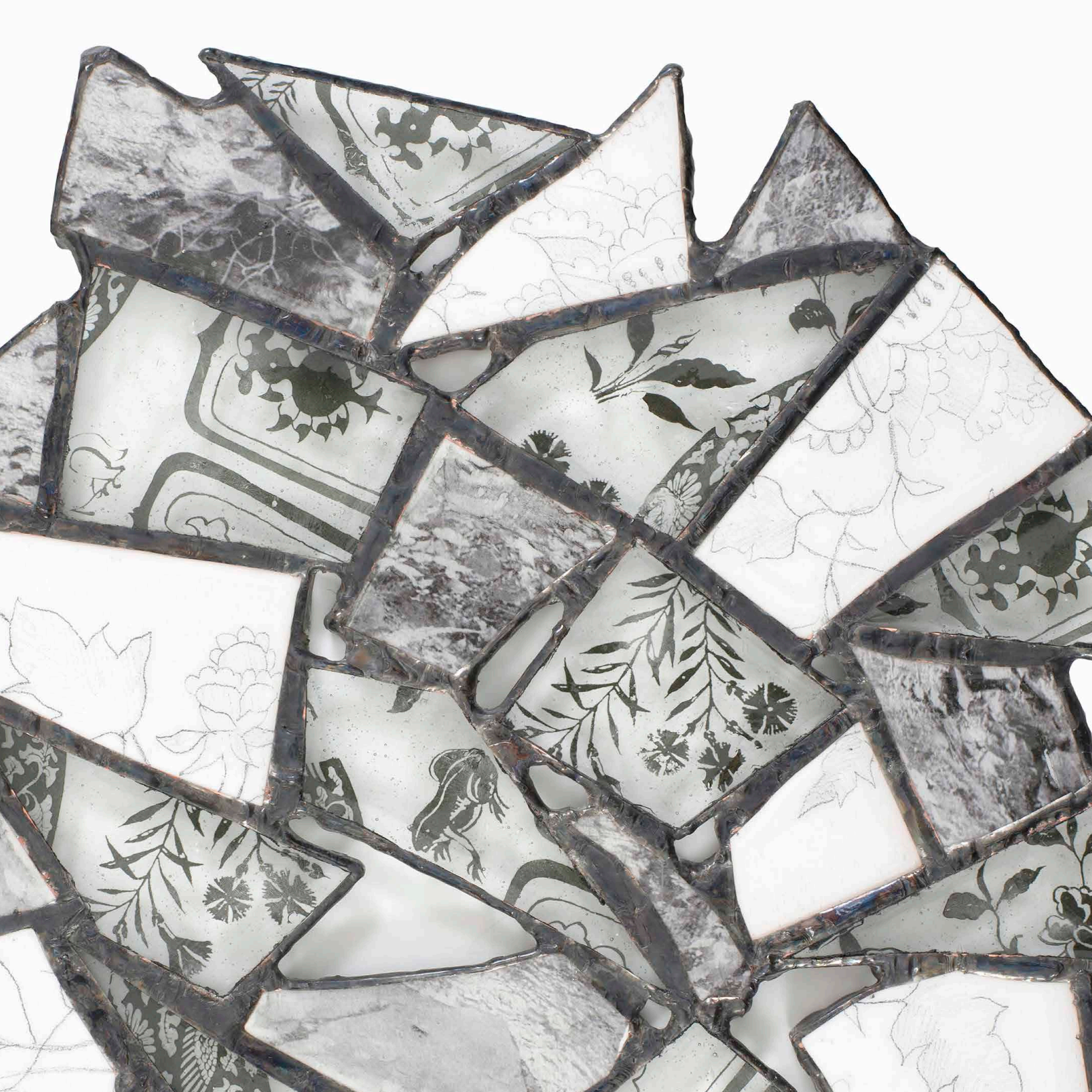












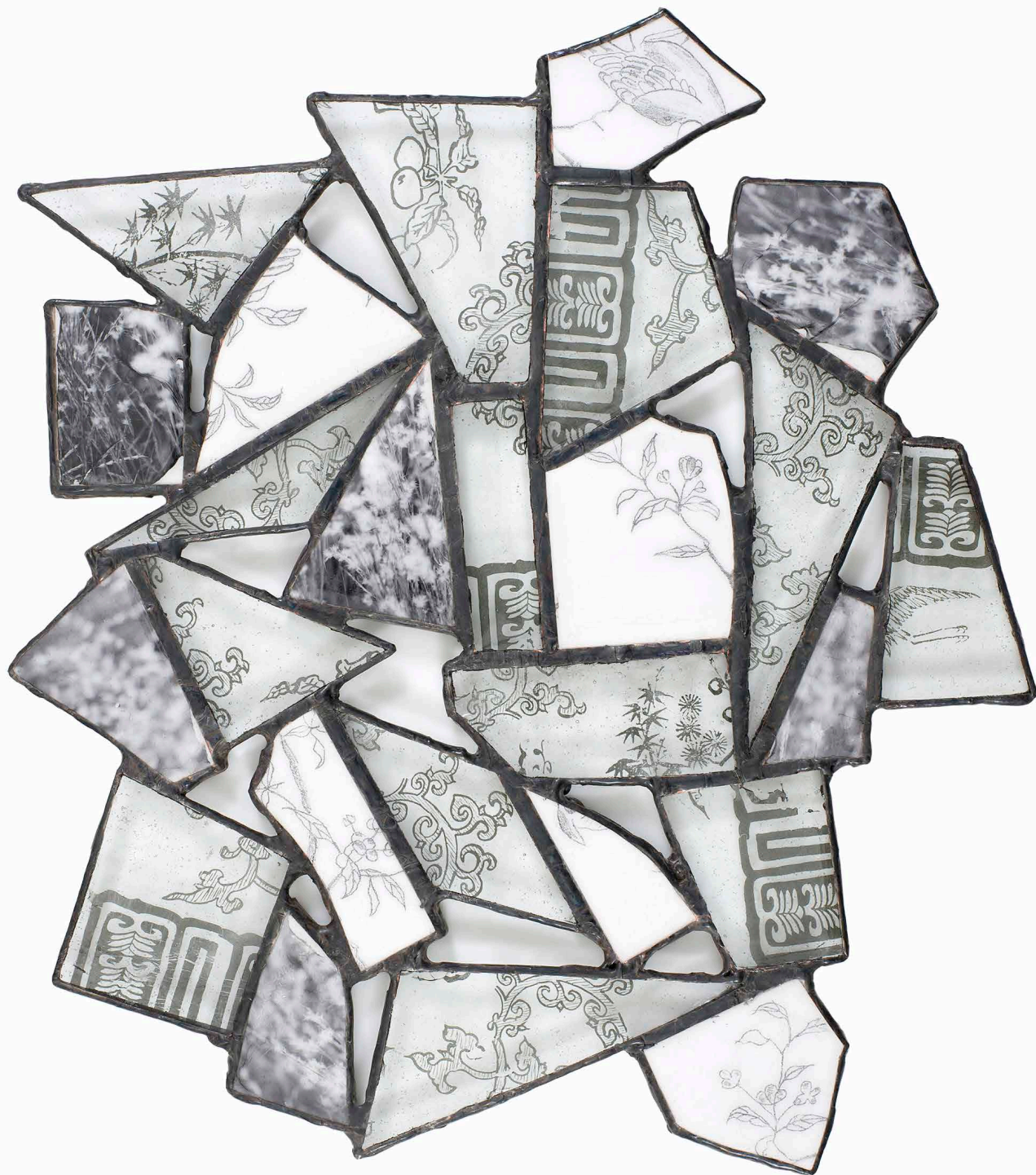
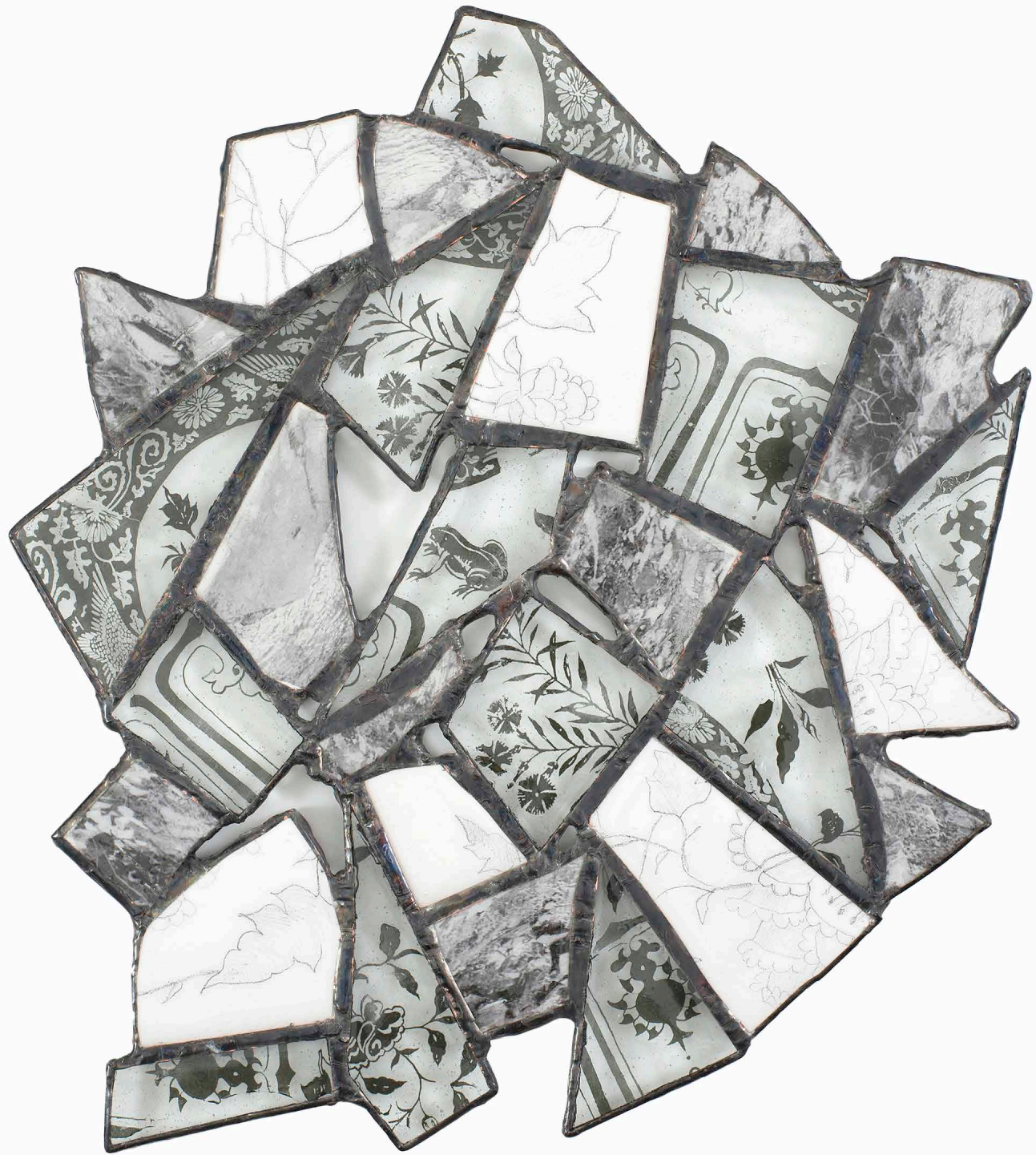
Page 38: Detail, *Remnants* (piece 1), 2021.
Ceramic tile, glass, graphite, lead, photographic
digital film, resin, 12" x 12"

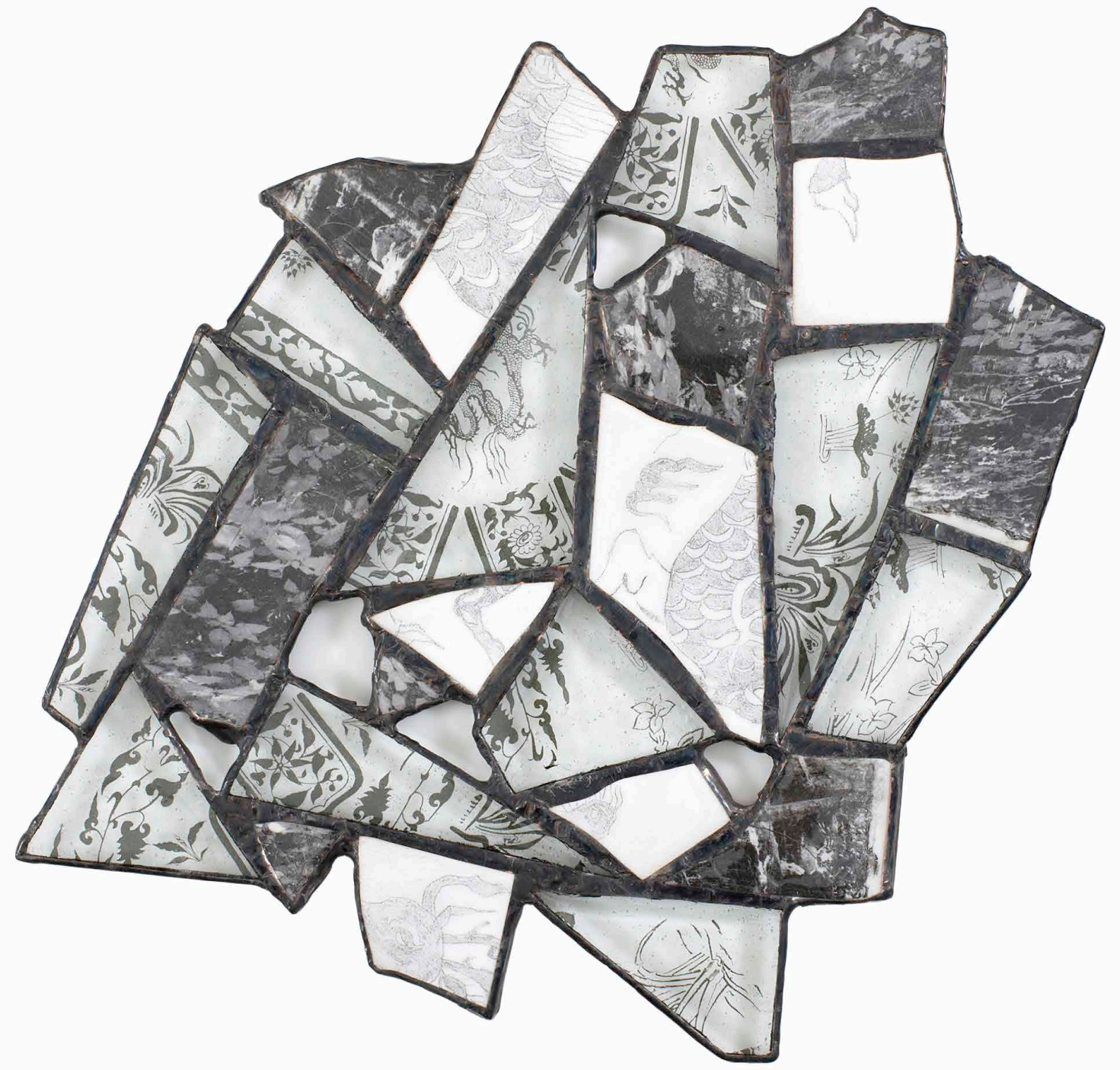
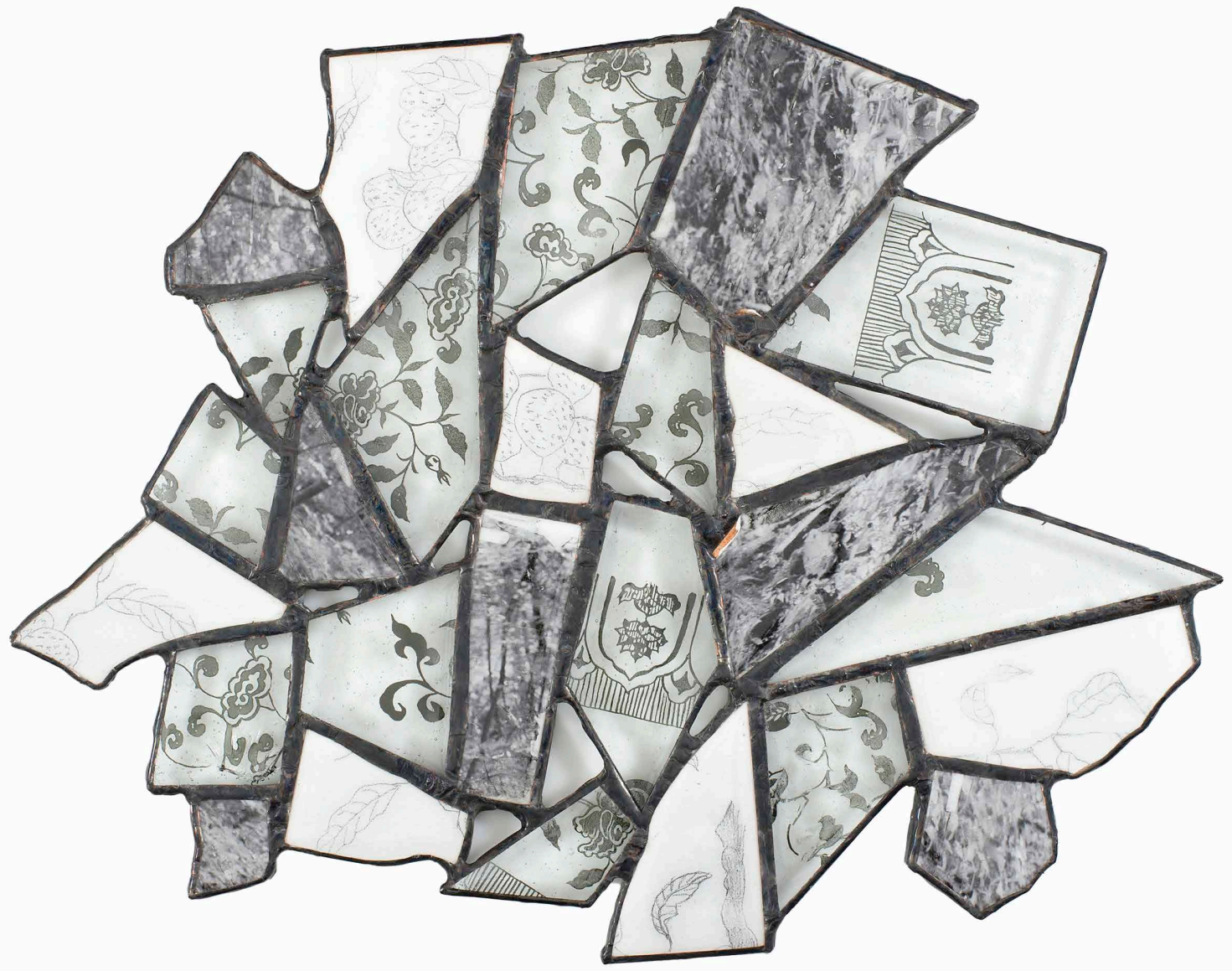
Pages 40–45: *Remnants* (piece 1–6), 2021.
Ceramic tile, glass, graphite, lead, photographic
digital film, resin, 12" x 12"

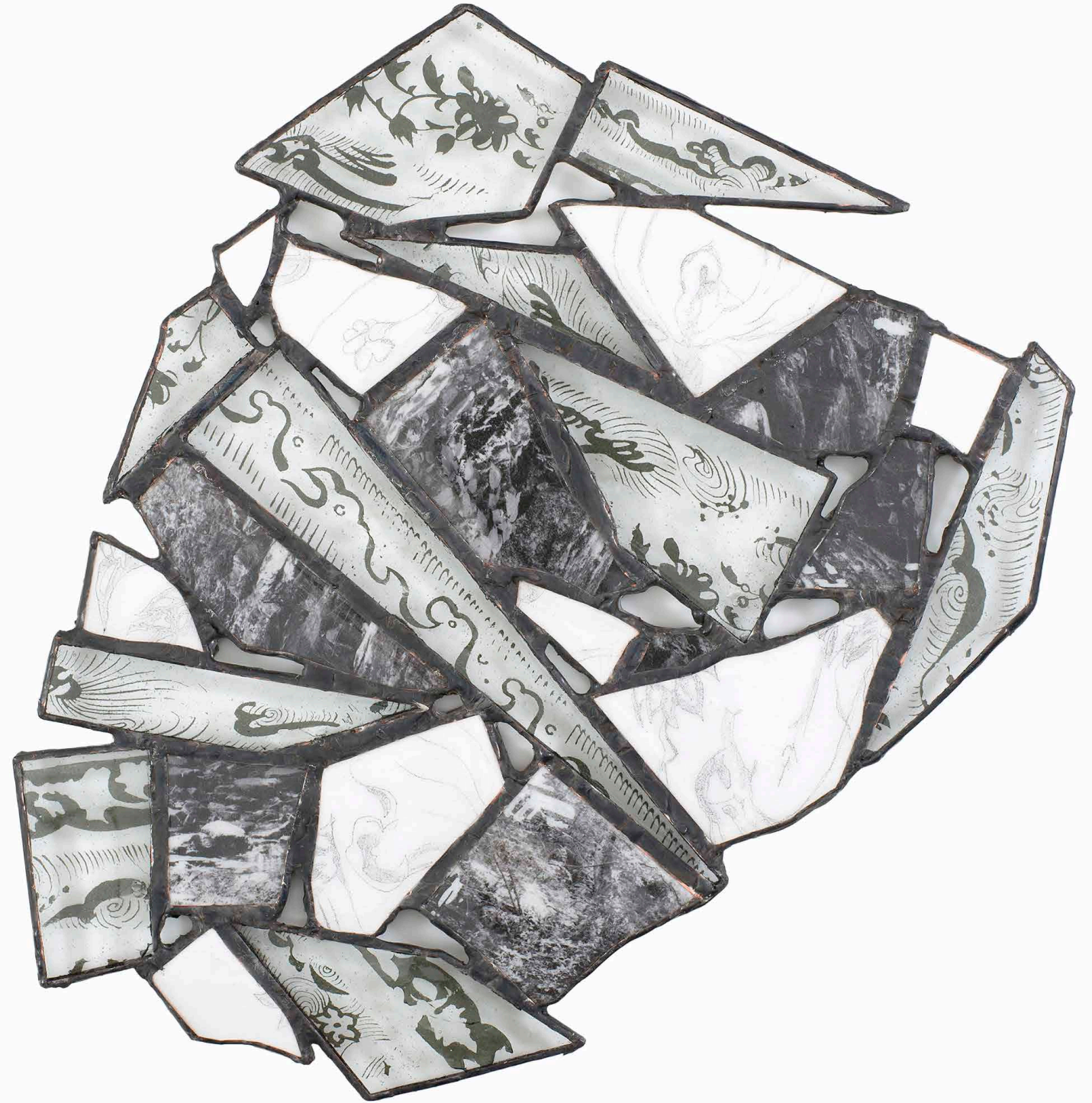
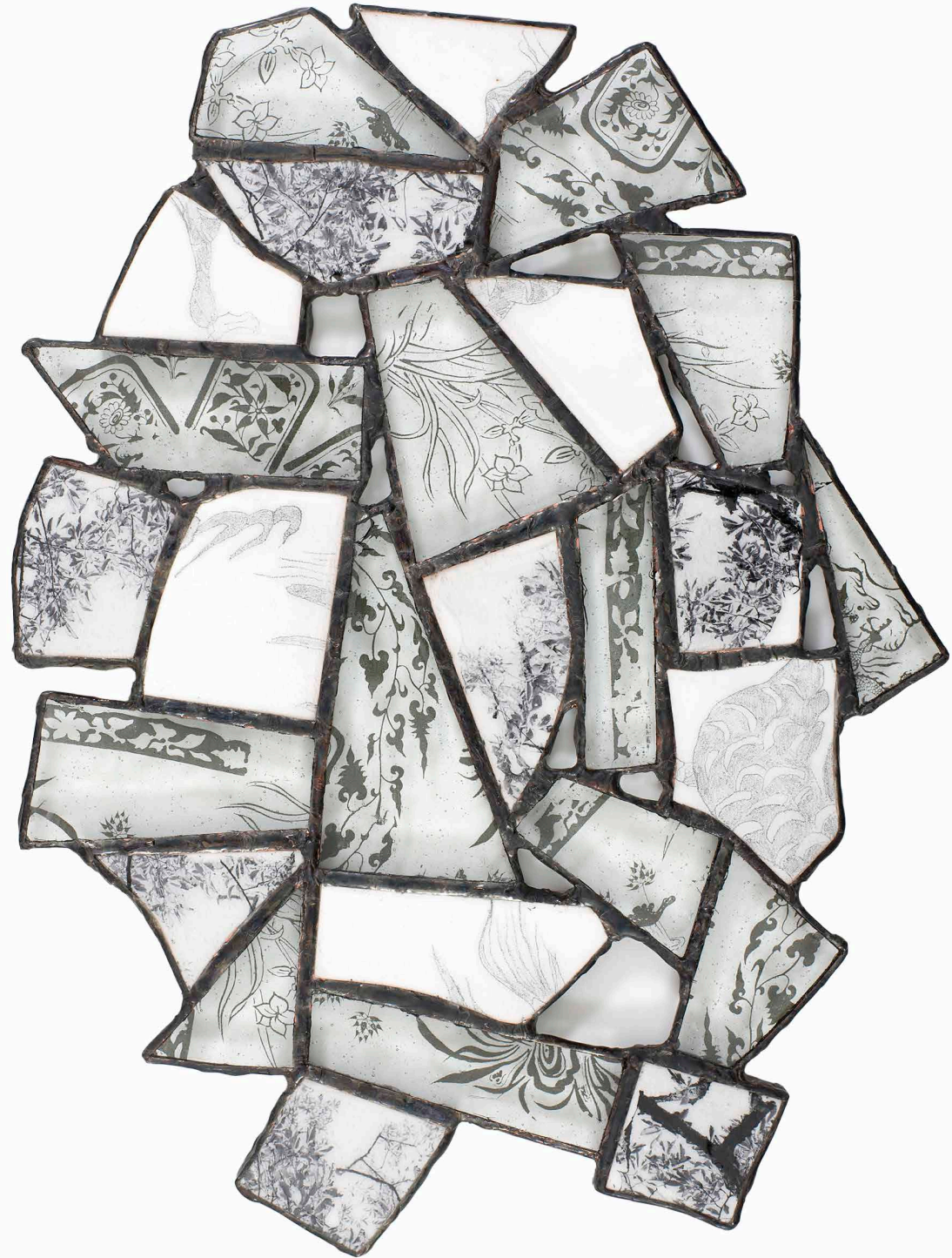
PLATES | Remnants

For each piece in *Remnants*, glass and ceramic fragments depict blue-and-white designs from the Topkapi collection and my landscape photography. These photo-sculptures reference black-and-white photography and abstraction of photographic surfaces. The glass pieces resemble glass negatives, while their ceramic counterparts act as a sculptural “positive.” The photo-sculptures resemble a mixture of stained-glass objects, Chinese ceramic rivet repairs, and Japanese ceramic repairs (*kintsugi*). The pieces are attached with lead solder and expand beyond their pictorial borders.

The leading itself is both a drawing and a frame, which highlights the malleability of the pictorial and sculptural frame. Each iteration is pictured separately in the catalogue but is installed as an organic group in the exhibition. By exploring the malleability of these designs, I am observing the interactions of the cultural memory and abstraction. According to Edward Said, “invention must occur if there is recollection,” and my photo-sculptural collages speak to the spirit of this sentiment.







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BIOGRAPHY

Harley Ngai Grieco (b. 1991 State College, PA) is a Chinese American lens-based artist. By using sculpture and analog photography processes, her practice explores the intersection of decorative art history, conceptions of belonging, and traditions of landscape photography. Harley earned a BFA from the Cooper Union School of Art in 2013 and received the Vincent J. Mielcarek Jr. Memorial Fund Prize and the Sara Cooper Hewitt Fund Prize. She has participated in residencies at the Bard Graduate Center, Trestle Art Space, and the Vermont Studio Center, in addition to completing a fellowship at the Bronx Museum of the Arts. Currently, she is a photography technician at the Cooper Union School of Art and is based in Brooklyn, New York.

