

Sean Alward:  
Subterranean Rainbow

Support Material

APR 5 - JUL 29, 2022

SFU GALLERY

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Each element of our environs, whether animate or inanimate, contains evidence of its own history and alludes to the conditions that shaped it. Sean Alward's painting practice is an imaginative, research-driven inquiry that extends from these facts. For several years the artist has mixed his own paints from materials he has gathered on exploratory hikes around Coast Salish territories, including Burnaby Mountain. He animates these materials, which include coal dust, clay, minerals, algae and pollen — each with its own natural and social history — as a means to interrogate his own implication in their transformation into economic “resources,” and to consider his relationship to both human and non-human agents of change. Alward works with matter to think critically about it, so his paintings are both physical objects and conceptual tools with which to shape questions about humankind's entangled existence within our environment.

One of Alward's points of departure for the new works comprising this exhibition was *Condensation Cube*, a sculpture created between 1963 and 1968 by German conceptual artist Hans Haacke, with whom Alward studied in New York. A sealed, transparent acrylic cube holding about one centimetre of water, *Condensation Cube* responds to the environmental conditions in which it is placed. Because of the temperature differential inside and outside of the cube, water vapour condenses into droplets and runs down the inside walls in ever-changing patterns. In this early work, which would prepare the ground for his later critique of institutional systems,

Haacke was informed by the ideas of Austrian biologist and philosopher Ludwig von Bertalanffy, who argued that every living organism is an open system that continuously changes depending on its dialogue or interaction with its environment.

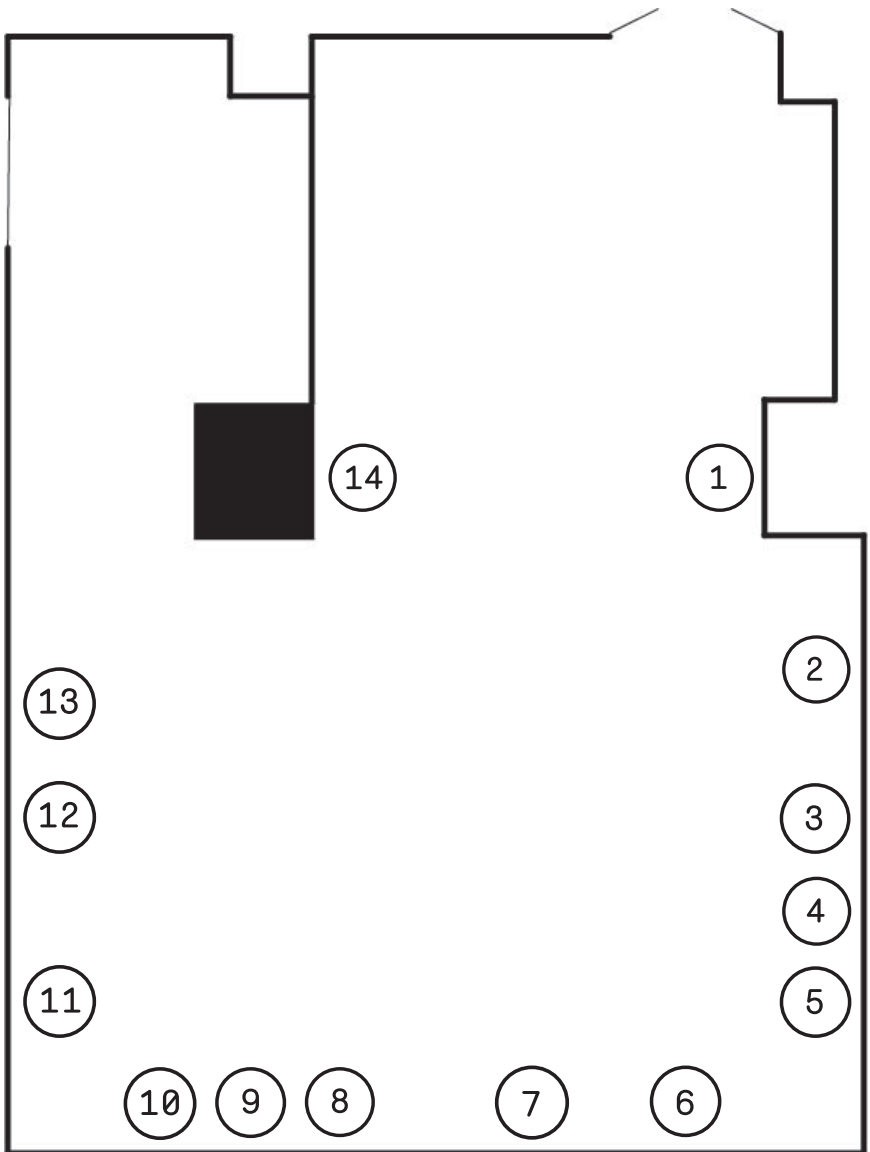
The paintings of *Subterranean Rainbow* propose further speculative iterations of Haacke's cube, to imagine highly charged conceptual and physical spaces — compressed and enclosed environmental and social systems — where the materials used to render the imagery are themselves also the subject of the work. Ferns, for example, one of the most ancient surviving flora with an unbroken connection to prehistoric times, are depicted with pigment made from the dust of metallurgical coal, which itself is formed as that same plant matter decays into peat and is transmuted by the heat and pressure of deep burial over millions of years. Alward gathered this coal along the rail line near the Port of Vancouver, after it was blown from the freight cars as the trains snaked from the Elk Valley mines in Ktunaxa territory to the coast for export. Even the extremely bright commercially purchased acrylic paints that are visible in several of the artist's compositions, including the vivid purple, carbazole dioxazine, are themselves the result of carbon-based chemistry. All painting practice, as Alward suggests, is entangled with non-sustainable resource extraction, and the modest space of his canvases, with their inscriptions of real sites through imagined forms, ultimately describe the entirety of geologic time.

Curated by Kimberly Phillips

## List of Works

1. *Black Ferns on a Glass Planet*, 2018  
carbon acrylic ink on paper
2. *Ballad of Organic Chemistry (Record)*, 2022  
carbon and carbon-based pigment with acrylic resin on linen
3. *Bell Chamber*, 2021  
carbon and carbon-based pigment with acrylic resin on linen
4. *Carbon Life (Gingko)*, 2021  
carbon, carbazole dioxazine, titanium dioxide, and acrylic resin on linen
5. *Stardust Web*, 2022  
carbon with acrylic resin on linen
6. *Generator (Purple Swamp)*, 2022  
coal dust, carbazole dioxazine, benzimidazole, mineral clay, titanium dioxide, and acrylic resin on linen
7. *Lavender Filter*, 2022  
coal dust, carbazole dioxazine, carbon, glauconite, titanium dioxide, and acrylic resin on linen
8. *Condensation Chamber*, 2021  
coal dust, carbazole dioxazine, mineral clay, titanium dioxide, and acrylic resin on canvas
9. *Purple Rain (Carbazole Condensation)*, 2021  
coal dust, carbazole dioxazine, mineral clay, titanium dioxide, and acrylic resin on linen
10. *Black Cube (145 Million Year Purple)*, 2021  
coal dust, carbazole dioxazine, clay, titanium dioxide, and acrylic resin on canvas
11. *Pigment Bible (of Organic Chemistry /Carbon Based)*, 2021  
carbon and carbon based pigment, titanium dioxide, and acrylic resin on linen
12. *Ballad of Organic Chemistry (Stardust)*, 2022  
carbon and carbon-based pigment with acrylic resin on linen
13. *Ballad of Organic Chemistry (Box)*, 2022  
carbon and carbon-based pigment with acrylic resin on linen
14. *Black Box*, 2021  
coal dust, carbazole dioxazine, glaucosite, mineral pigment, titanium dioxide, and acrylic resin on linen

# Exhibition Map



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## Biography

**Sean Alward** is an artist based in Vancouver. His paintings explore the intersection of materials and historical consciousness. He received his MFA from the University of British Columbia and BFA from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. He has exhibited across Canada and in the U.S., most recently at CSA Space, Vancouver; Art Gallery at Evergreen, Coquitlam; WAAP Projects, Vancouver; Vacation Gallery, New York; AHVA Gallery at UBC, Vancouver; Surrey Art Gallery; and Nanaimo Art Gallery. He has published writing in *Canadian Art*, *C Magazine*, and *Border Crossings*.

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