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### Minutes, Days, Years

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**Minutes, Days, Years**

By

Lindsey Palmer

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Fine Art in Photography and Related Media

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences  
College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology  
Rochester NY  
April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2019

*Signature Page*

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## **Abstract**

### *Minutes, Days, Years*

*B.F.A., Photography, Point Park University, May 2015*

*M.F.A, Photography and Related Media, Rochester Institute of Technology, May 2018*

*Minutes, Days, Years*, is a body of photographic work presented in an installation format alongside a written companion book. In this work I seek to rebuild my mother's memories which were lost to electro-convulsion therapy that she received in January 2012. The images are 42 cyanotypes on glass, made from personal archive photos from the years 2008-2011; the time period which her memory is most damaged, and the time I began learning photography. These images are placed atop a 60-inch by 14-foot paper backing, made of two images from the same time period. *Minutes, Days, Years* references photography as manipulatable memory, the historical and contemporary usage of the cyanotype, color theory and the impermanence of memory and image.



Installation View, April 2019  
[Lpalmerphoto.com](http://Lpalmerphoto.com)

## *Minutes, Days, Years*

*Minutes, Days, Years*, is a body of photographic work presented in an installation format alongside a written companion book. In this work I seek to rebuild my mother's memories which were lost to electro-convulsion therapy that she received in January 2012. The images are 42 cyanotypes on glass, made from personal archive photos from the years 2008-2011; the time period which her memory is most damaged, and the time I began learning photography. These images are placed atop a 60-inch by 14-foot paper backing, made of two images from the same time period. This image creates a soft background, made of up the only two archive images not pictured in blue. They become the background to the work—yet they provide no specific detail to the small images, and in some cases, they obscure them even farther.

My earliest understandings of myself came from a collection of family photo albums that lived in a cardboard box, tucked in the crawlspace outside of my bedroom. These albums worked to point out my own falsified memories—made of images that “draw attention to the manipulability of the snapshot image and of memory itself.”<sup>1</sup>The albums I grew up with show birthdays, holidays, special trips and memories that one would want to remember; what was missing from them was 10 moving-days, divorces, infidelity, alcoholism, and mental illness. My mother spent years perfectly curating these snapshots that would form the ideal look into our family. She was not often found in the photographs, this curation and careful removal of herself would set me up to think about images, and the way memory works.

This project began with my return to Rochester, NY after having lived away from these albums and my family for six years. In the years that I was living away I'd come home to visit my mother, and I'd sit down with her as she'd tell me about the memories in them, often taking the time to tell me about the important memories that didn't live in the albums. This is a favor I would return, years later, as I began to sit down with her and tell her about the memories she's lost from 2008-2011. These memories live in my own archive.

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Zuromskis, *Snapshot Photography: The Lives of Images* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2013).

The images used in this project represent my first personal connection to photography, they were never intended to be used to tell anyone a story or fill in any missing moments. I photographed trees, fences, hands, sky, and water, obsessively looking for something, anything, that would be proof that the world grows and changes, and that things get better. When I began photographing it was ritualistic, and was a way for me to leave the house and connect to something other than the family turmoil that resided within. Selected photographs from this time are transformed from a printed 4x6 into a fragile cyanotype emulsion resting on a glass plate. The creation of the photographic plates, like the original creation of the images is ritualistic in nature and mimics the systematic procedure of Electroconvulsive Therapy that my mother endured in an attempt to wipe her mental illness from herself. There was no way for her to prepare for the things she would lose. I made the decision to treat my images in the same way, I removed all preventive variables from the process and allowed the images to become non-archival and let go of control. Much like how my mother's treatments allowed her to find new life through an inhibited memory, these images find a similarly damaged new life.

Each 4 by 5-inch plate is floating rested precariously on L-Pins in the wall, and when lit they project a shadow of themselves onto the grey matte paper image behind them. The soft details fall away ever further as the spread of the shadow leaks from behind the glass. Not all of the plates lean the same way, some from the top, and some from the bottom, causing the shadowing to be inconsistent, and varies per image.

The installation has no technical beginning or end, allowing the viewer to enter at any point and move in any direction. The paper backing of the installation is wrapped into one corner of the gallery. In her essay *The Corner in Contemporary Practice*, Hilary Barlow writes "A corner defines the convergence of non-parallel forms. Within every corner there are two distinct and often opposing conditions. A corner's interior tends to unify space, while a corner's exterior can divide space along its edge."<sup>2</sup> The installation of this work intends to bring together multiple forms of image-making to centralize one idea. By installing it in a corner, the various elements of the work are brought together on a foundational level.

The cyanotype's most identifiable quality is that it results in a bright blue image. Through visual culture and literature, the color blue has found a home within the saddest thoughts, and

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<sup>2</sup> Hilary Barlow, "The Corner in Contemporary Practice," Payette Architecture Group, *Architecture Forum* (blog), March 27, 2017, <https://www.payette.com/architecture-forum/the-corner-in-contemporary-practice/>.

artworks that are deeply rooted in learned behavior. In *Contemporary Color Theory and Use*, Steven Bleicher writes that color can be learned, it can be used to shift perspectives and place context to help viewers understand what they're looking at<sup>3</sup>. As time passes the color blue has had many associations, in Egyptian art in 1340 B.C. the blues were used to represent, gods and goddesses, manifestations of water, the heavens the Nile and thus fertility, Chinese blue and white porcelain was considered luxurious and was influence by early Babylonian art, in Ancient Rome the color blue symbolized the working class<sup>4</sup>. Our cultural understanding of the color blue is inundated with centuries of meaning.

Part of using a process that results in this complicated color is confronting how slippery the meaning of the images becomes. In *Blue Mythologies*, Carol Mavor writes, “the conflicting temperaments of the blues unravel easily.” To each artist and viewer, the blues contain something different. Mavor analyzes blue in paintings, photographs, flowers, unoxygenated blood and mourning. She writes, “sometimes, it seems, that everything is blue.”<sup>5</sup> As all of the images become the same color, printed on the same substrate the most identifiable parts of the images are removed, what is left of each is blue—tied up in the slippery meaning of the color. I chose to use the cyanotype for its color, because the color blue feels like what this time period in my life felt like. However, a viewer may fail to feel the same about the color. What remains as most important in this decision is that through color, the viewer can identify a specific emotion to link to the work, using it as an entry point.

The cyanotype was invented in 1842 by sir John Herschel, and the first photography book was subsequently published in 1843 by a family friend, Anna Atkins. The process was used scarcely until 1872 when the first commercially made cyanotype papers were invented in France. And even then, it was used as a copy tool for education, architects and engineers<sup>6</sup>. Beginning in the 1960's Artists like Betty Hahn resurrected the cyanotype, among other alternative processes in their practices<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Steven Bleicher, *Contemporary Color Theory and Use* (Clifton Park, NY: Thomson/Delmar Learning, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, ed., *Blue: Cobalt to Cerulean in Art and Culture* (San Francisco : [Boston] : The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: Chronicle Books, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Carol Mavor, *Blue Mythologies: Reflections on a Colour* (London: Reaktion, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Dusan Stulik, Art Kaplan, and Getty Conservation Institute, *The Atlas of Analytical Signatures of Photographic Processes.*, 2013, [http://hdl.handle.net/10020/gci\\_pubs/atlas\\_analytical\\_cyanotype](http://hdl.handle.net/10020/gci_pubs/atlas_analytical_cyanotype).

<sup>7</sup> Lyle Rexer, *Photography's Antiquarian Avant-Garde: The New Wave in Old Processes* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002).

In Photography's Antiquarian avante-garde, Lyle Rexer identifies that the term "alternative process" was coined in the 1960's to classify mediums presented in opposition to the ever-growing Kodak. In his forward for "Betty Hahn: Photography or Maybe Not" Steve Yates writes:

"she has repeatedly used the lone ranger—an American icon whose image she appropriated...in variations exploring numerous ideas and materials...Her flexibility of purpose cannot be satisfied within a single medium...she develops her ideas through various photographic and non-photographic means using a process that only partially relies on what the camera records."<sup>8</sup> .

In the 90s the process was also adopted by artists like John Dugdale to show an artist's hand in photographic print making and dealing with painful life experiences.<sup>9</sup> In his book *Lengthening Shadows Before Nightfall*, Dugdale uses the cyanotype to depict loss and remembrance. The color tone washes over the bodies of himself and his subjects, washing them in a sea of blue. For Hahn and others, the cyanotype was a tool in re-envisioning fine art, and she was imperative in bringing the idea of "alternative process" back into contemporary art.

For me, the cyanotype works a bit differently. It is already contemporary. Artists like Megan Rieppenhoff, Christian Marclay, Annie Lopez, and the multitude of others have brought this medium to the forefront<sup>10</sup>. For me the cyanotype transforms for a different purpose. Marclay and Lopez' work juxtaposes analogue mediums with the cyanotype in a contemporary light—tapes for Marclay<sup>11</sup>, and X-rays for Lopez. Rieppenhoff work deals with the temporality of nature, time and the human relationship to nature. Her cyanotypes are made in the landscape, where precipitation, waves, wind, and sediment physically make marks into the photo chemistry; the prints react to sunlight and wash in the water surrounding them<sup>12</sup>. Her work allows the subject to be present in the process.

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<sup>8</sup> Steve Yates et al., *Betty Hahn: Photography or Maybe Not*, 1. ed (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> John Dugdale, *Lengthening Shadows before Nightfall* (Santa Fe, NM: Twin Palms Publ, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Claire Voon, "Photography's Blue Period Gets Its First Major Show in the US," *Hyperallergic*, *Hyperallergic* (blog), February 25, 2016, <https://hyperallergic.com/272915/photographys-blue-period-gets-its-first-major-show-in-the-us/>.

<sup>11</sup> Christian Marclay, David Louis Norr, and Noam Milgrom Elcott, eds., *Cyanotypes: Christian Marclay* (Zürich: JRP Ringier Kunstverl, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Meghann Rieppenhoff and Meghann Rieppenhoff, *Littoral Drift ; Ecotone*, 2018.

In her book *A Spectacle and Nothing Strange*, artist Ahndraya Parlato also deals with the skewed perspective of a mentally ill mother.<sup>13</sup> Her images are unsettling moments where the viewer is left to question what is real and what is not. Asking questions about truth and sanity Parlato's work calls on the qualities of photography that ask us questions and push us to search for truth. This work was a large inspiration for me when thinking about how to handle these memories. While her mental illness is not the same, the discomfort, the disassociation of one's own memory and the loss of connection are themes that we are both working with.

My work functions differently than these works in that the color is what is being operationalized most obviously—while the substrate that the image is on solidifies it more as an art object. The conceptual basis of my work is most similar to Parlato's—where we both deal with mothers, with memory and the disparate space in-between them.

One piece of this work titled “Hope” is a photograph originally taken of my mother's new forearm tattoo of the word “hope” in 2008, and in 2018 turned into a 4 x 5-inch cyanotype on glass. It is a thin, wispy, flaky image that appears to be slipping away at each edge. She got this tattoo after returning home from being hospitalized for mental illness. When it healed, I took this photograph to document what a moment of her frantic search for hope felt like. In the original image, the dominant color is red—the blanket behind her arm, and part of the text of the tattoo itself. She's wearing a delicate Claddagh band bracelet that was a gift from her partner when they went to Ireland together. The details that become most important to this image are the ones that last through the reprocessing of it. You clearly see her tattoo and her arm, but smaller details fall away and are replaced by the visible traces of the material process.

Much like how my mother's treatments changed the shape of her memory, the chemical process of this work changes the shape of the images. The glass becomes this metaphor for a strong but breakable foundation, shifted by what is behind it, and partially hidden by what covers its surface. The transparent quality of the substrate hints at the possibility for honesty, but the way the chemical sticks to the glass, obscuring it aesthetically hinders the glass' transparent possibilities.

In *Suffering, Death, and Identity*, Robert Fischer identifies the mediation between your own suffering and someone else's as empathy; empathy does not allow one to directly

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<sup>13</sup> Ahndraya Parlato et al., *Ahndraya Parlato A Spectacle and Nothing Strange*, 2016.

experience another's suffering.<sup>14</sup> In the case of my mother, the source of her current suffering is her loss of memory. Our grief is born of intangible moments, represented by images that cannot truly express to her what she lived through. In much the same way that I, as a teenager, learned how to associate myself with my family through the snapshot photos of my family album, my mother must now re-associate herself with me based on my images from a time she cannot remember.

By using archive images, I am coming as close as I can to an actual representation of this time period. However, the images also fall grossly short, due to my own bias in image-making. The first half of *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes dissects the ontological meaning of photographs. Barthes creates and decodes the terms *studium* and *punctum*; the *studium* being the understood meaning of images—and the *punctum* being the part of the photograph that successfully 'pricks' the viewer. He also discusses the indexical quality of the photograph; its link to its subject.<sup>15</sup>

Barthes points out the paradox of the photograph: it is something and nothing at the same time. It is its history, its referent, and the viewer's interpretation of it. This paradox creates a place where photographs of memory or archive photographs may live. While some may 'prick' others may not. Metaphors can grow and the incompleteness and flawed nature of memory can be exploited. In my work I aim to use archival photographs that become inaccessible and speak incomplete sentences, as the viewer is missing the part of the image that pricks. What unifies the range of photographs is one color, all reproduced on glass, reducing the possibility for interpretation by assigning a specific tone and tactility to the image.

Choosing these images also comes from this theory presented by Barthes. In sifting through a digital archive of tens of thousands of images, I looked for images that for me as a maker represented a specific feeling, one that is difficult to articulate. Each of them, for me, represents this trauma and this time we lived in. Pedantic images of hands, trees, sky, and houses visually evoke for me my relationship to my mother, but for any other viewer, they may fail to 'prick', as Barthes describes it. The subject in many of these photos is a home that my mother and I shared together. The images I chose to use are from a summer when the insulation of the

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<sup>14</sup> Robert N. Fisher, ed., *Suffering, Death, and Identity*, Value Inquiry Book Series 135 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Pbk. ed (New York: Hill and Wang, reprint 2010, 1981).

house caught fire causing structural damage. In choosing these images, I chose a moment in our life together where what I felt was reflected directly in what I was photographing. By reclaiming these images to represent this time period I can appropriate the ‘index’ of the home, as a metaphor for my mother, and the destruction as a metaphor for her treatments.

As I was taking these photographs in 2008, I was living a very specific experience that cannot be communicated in an image. The work in *Minutes, Days, Years* translates this archive of images through the color blue becoming more skewed version. In further exploring the complications of using images to represent an inexpressible time, I am met with an impossible task. In my work I am creating a tone, or mood not a precise recounting of a time or a history. There is no way to accurately recount this time for me or my mother.

The companion to this work is a handmade, hand written letter in the form of a dos-á-dos book, titled *sincerely*. It is presented next to the wall installation on a pedestal. One half of the book is a segment of short, incomplete ideas written in phrases. “Forgive me”, and “you were so angry,” are among the ambiguous one-liners. As a counterpoint, the opposite side of the book tells the whole story from beginning to end—but the text is written on the inside of folded flutter pages, which must be pulled out entirely to read.

In his 1988 book, *Memory Loss*<sup>16</sup>, Scott McCarney reflects on his own personal connection to traumatic brain injury, suicide, mental institutions, and family. There are two sides to McCarney’s accordion book. The blue side has block text with clinical terms relating to memory loss. Giving off a coolness, and some semblance of disconnection with the personal topic of the book. While the pink side, or the warmer side, is riddled with hand written notes addressed to Mr. Scott McCarney in Rochester, NY. Reading the two sides together tells a story of a loved one suffering from memory loss, and all of the complexities that come with it. McCarney uses fragmented and scattered texts and visuals in a visceral way. There is repetition that references routine, the different texts show different voices in the story, and the colors indicate different moods. The book folds down, in a way reminiscent of blinds over a window as if to block the light from coming in, a string pulls it closed, and the titled is embossed into the

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<sup>16</sup> Scott McCarney, “Memory Loss /c[Scott L. McCarney],” no. Generic (1988), [http://rit.summon.serialssolutions.com/2.0.0/link/0/eLvHCXMwY2AwNtIz0EUrEwyTQdNNKanmScIjPibGZkmpicZmacYWySnA6sE0FbRvODLMJMrPPCjI2BdpTQ3onKcSPWA3Gb6mBjxuATpSGXR7NbMJeGo2zB9UNRTB9r-DqwY3QQZ-6NJ\\_BQ\\_IRI4QA1NqnjADd1hmcWlIjJUUmxCIOiL2hFa6VCDrBOUtBPjgbfI6\\_go6fgm-ycWJSXWhkryiDj5hri7KELtCAeOqgSD3ODuZEYA28iaDF6Xgl401qKBIMCsBQBNrwNk82Tgak9Nc0UWAskp pgbJVqmgRosqeaSDKJYzZLCIS7NwGVoaWEB6fnLMLCmAVNmqizYx3Jg3wMADQVkpA](http://rit.summon.serialssolutions.com/2.0.0/link/0/eLvHCXMwY2AwNtIz0EUrEwyTQdNNKanmScIjPibGZkmpicZmacYWySnA6sE0FbRvODLMJMrPPCjI2BdpTQ3onKcSPWA3Gb6mBjxuATpSGXR7NbMJeGo2zB9UNRTB9r-DqwY3QQZ-6NJ_BQ_IRI4QA1NqnjADd1hmcWlIjJUUmxCIOiL2hFa6VCDrBOUtBPjgbfI6_go6fgm-ycWJSXWhkryiDj5hri7KELtCAeOqgSD3ODuZEYA28iaDF6Xgl401qKBIMCsBQBNrwNk82Tgak9Nc0UWAskp pgbJVqmgRosqeaSDKJYzZLCIS7NwGVoaWEB6fnLMLCmAVNmqizYx3Jg3wMADQVkpA).

cover. On the warm side, in the fragments of letters addressed to McCarney, there are moments where the writer repeats simple questions like “huh?” or “remember?” They feel unanswered and transform a simple statement into a complex and heartbreaking distance from understanding ones’ own mental condition. *Memory Loss* highlights how the simple act of not remembering, can be so impactful.

Like the dual sides of McCarney’s book, *sincerely*, references the duality of language and of memory—there are at least two sides to every moment. The harder you look for the memories that exist in the images, the more distorted they become, and the harder you look for the truth in the book, the more painful it becomes. It becomes apparent in the work that the story cannot be punctuated with images, or periods alone.

The largest images in *Minutes, Days, Years* are the most obscured—no matter how close to them you get you can never see what used to be there. These plates are 8 by 10-inch, or 16 by 20-inch images and are made up of images that have been rinsed off, leaving only wisps of their original images behind. They are the parts of a story that cannot be told with images, or with words—the moments she can’t remember, and the things I can’t tell her.

In his book *Forget Me Not*, Geoffrey Batchen poses the question “Has photography quietly replaced your memories with its own?<sup>17</sup>” In understanding how I was taught to form memory from my mother’s photographic albums, blended with how I understand images from my formal photographic training, I am using this work to answer that question for both my mother and me. That yes, photography has replaced its memory with our own. To some extent intentionally and to some extent because it’s the only choice, but that it too will someday fail just as our memory has.

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<sup>17</sup> Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget Me Not: Photography & Remembrance* (Amsterdam : New York: Van Gogh Museum ; Princeton Architectural Press, 2004).

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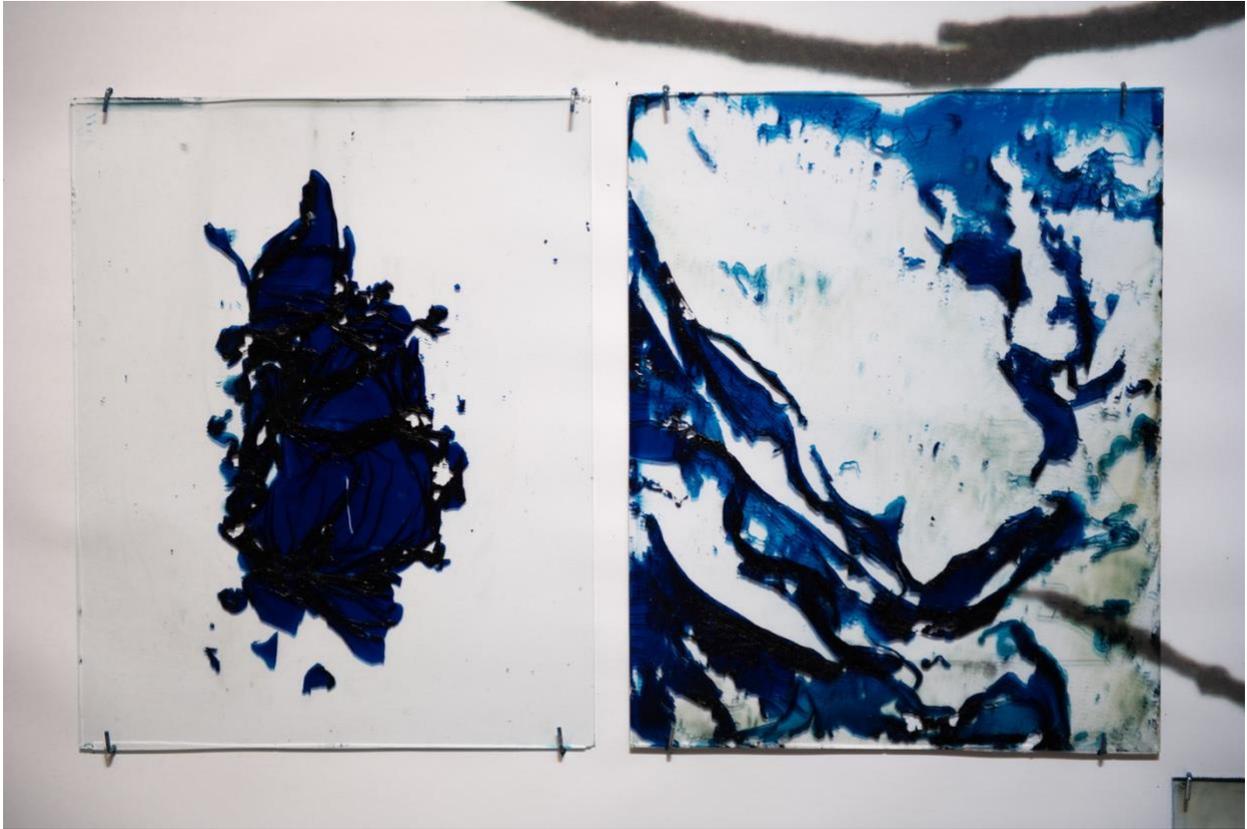
## Exhibition Documentation



*Minutes, Days, Years.* Installation View. 2019



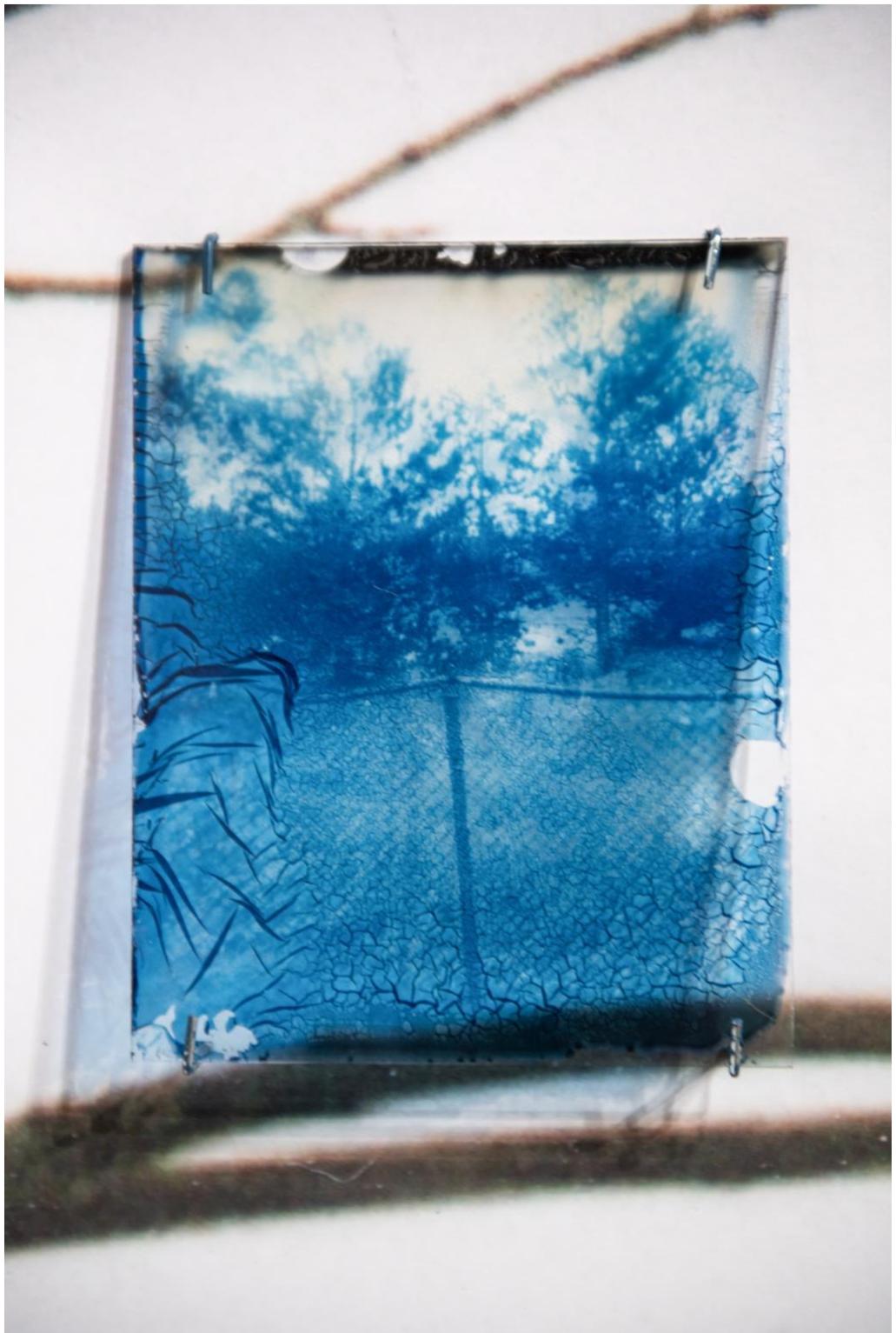
*Minutes, Days, Years.* Installation View. 2019



*Minutes, Days, Years.* Installation View. 2019



Detail of installation, 2019.



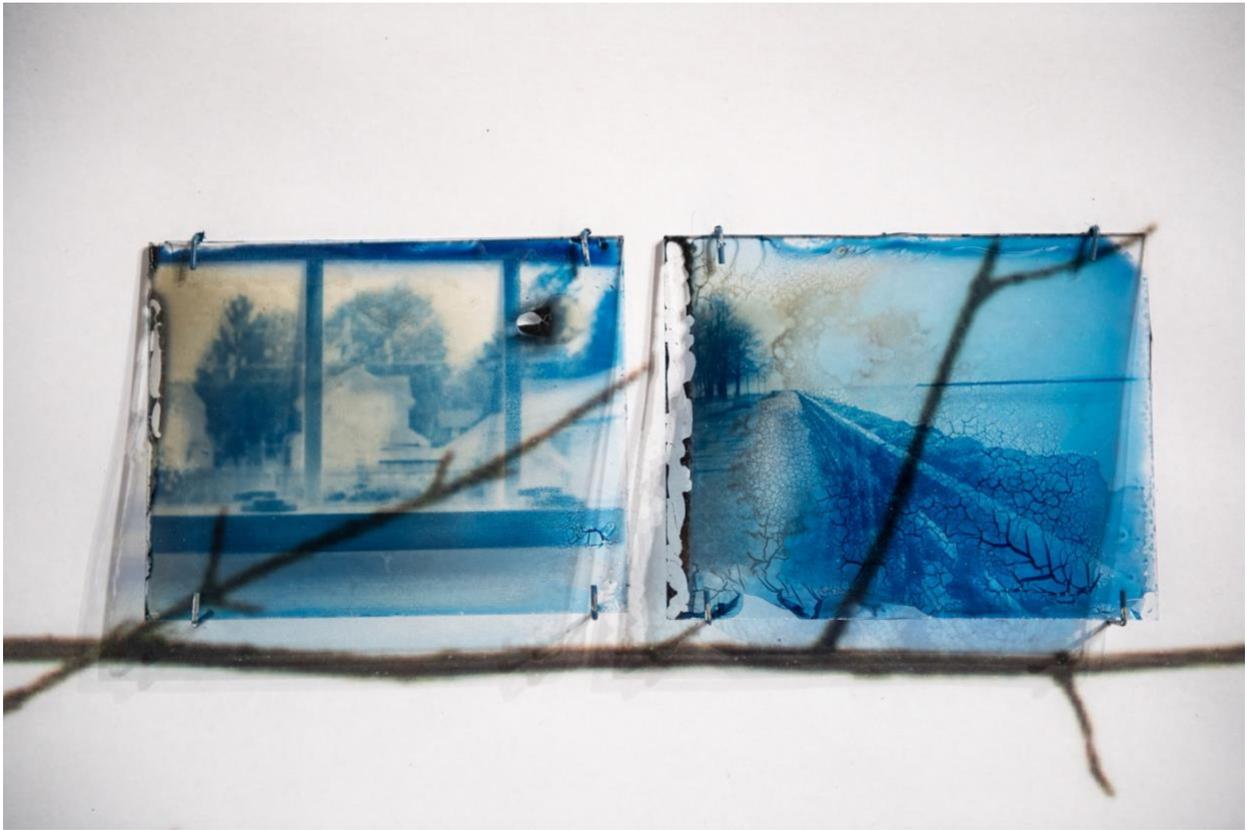
Detail of installation, 2019.



*Minutes, Days, Years. Installation View. 2019*



*Minutes, Days, Years. Installation View. 2019*



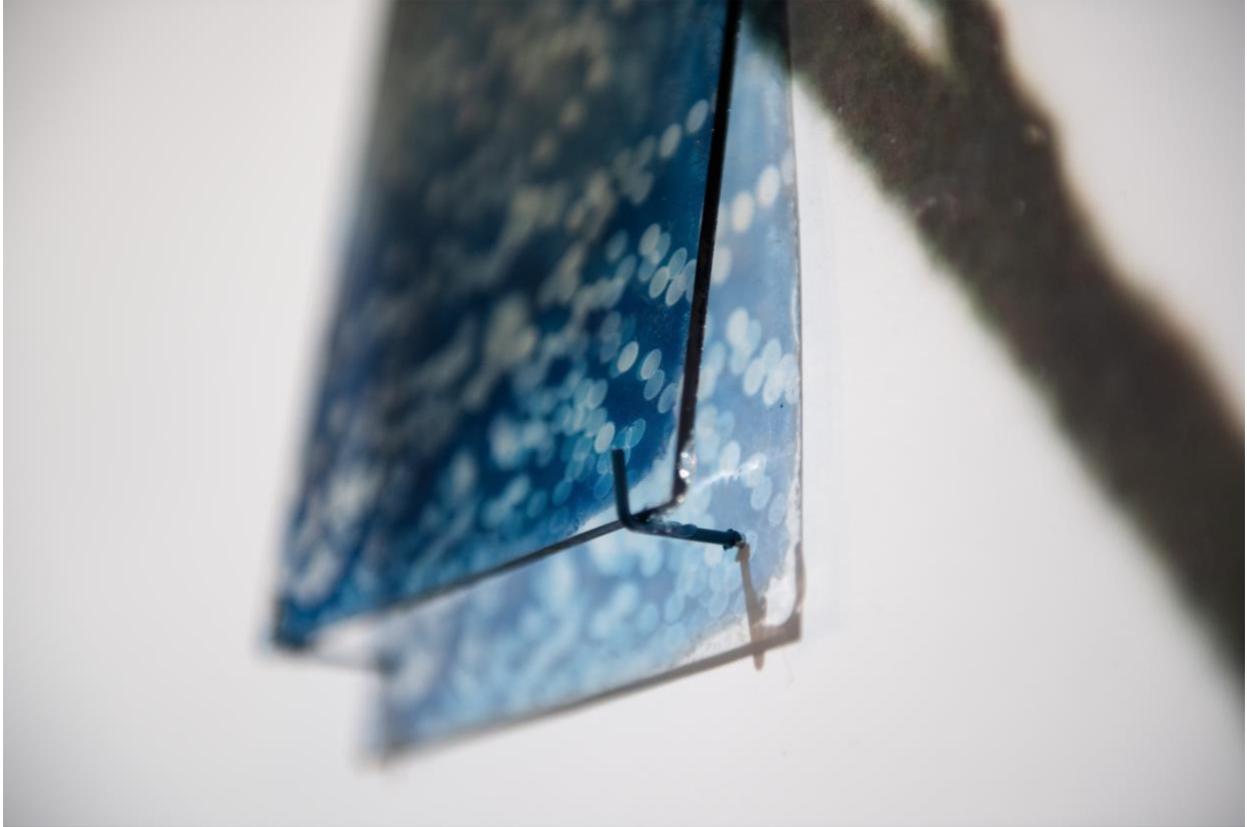
*Minutes, Days, Years.* Installation View. 2019



*Minutes, Days, Years.* Installation View. 2019



*Minutes, Days, Years.* Installation View. 2019



*Minutes, Days, Years. Installation View. 2019*



*Minutes, Days, Years.* Installation View. 2019



*Minutes, Days, Years.* Installation View. 2019



*Minutes, Days, Years.* Installation View. 2019



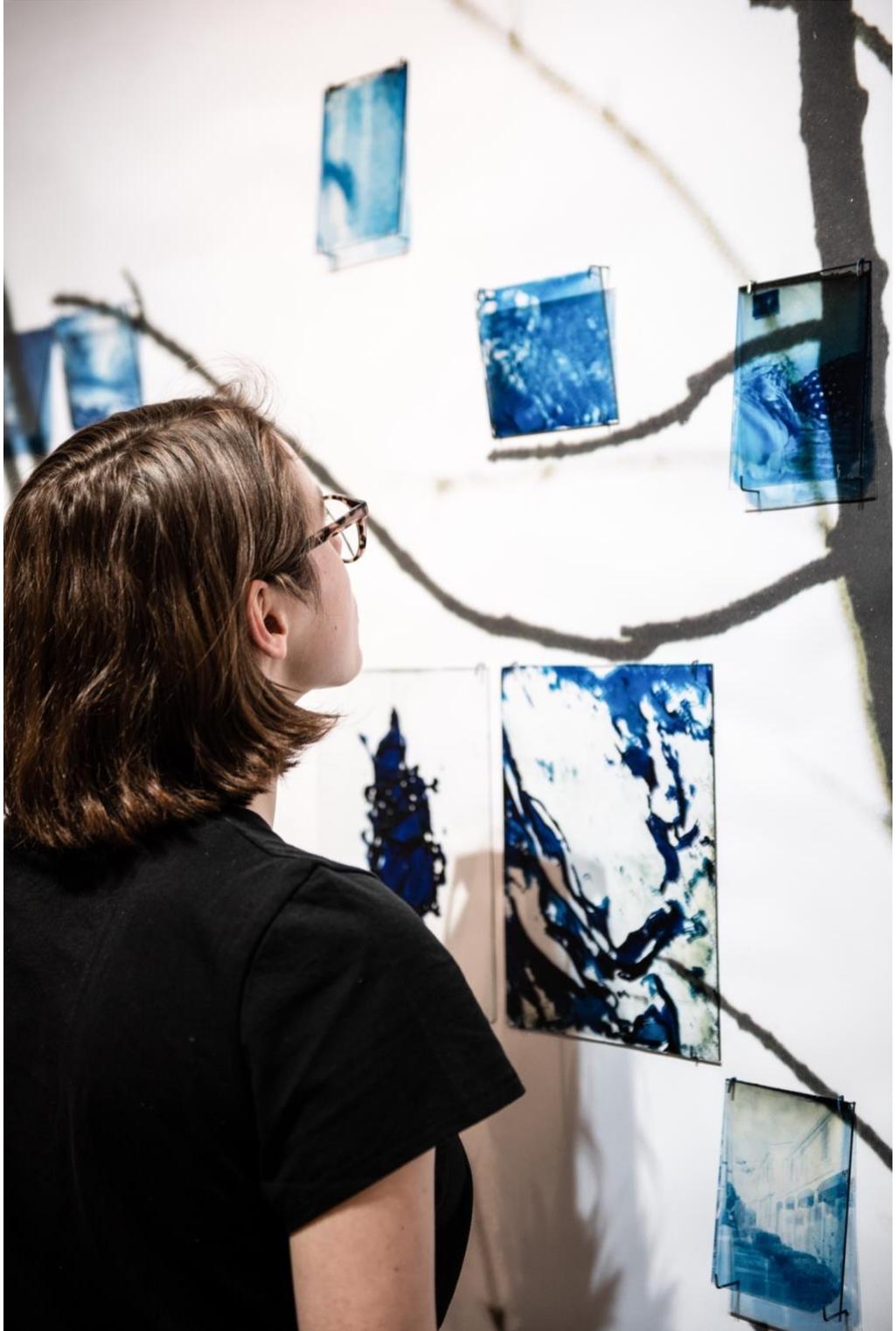
*Minutes, Days, Years.* Installation View. 2019



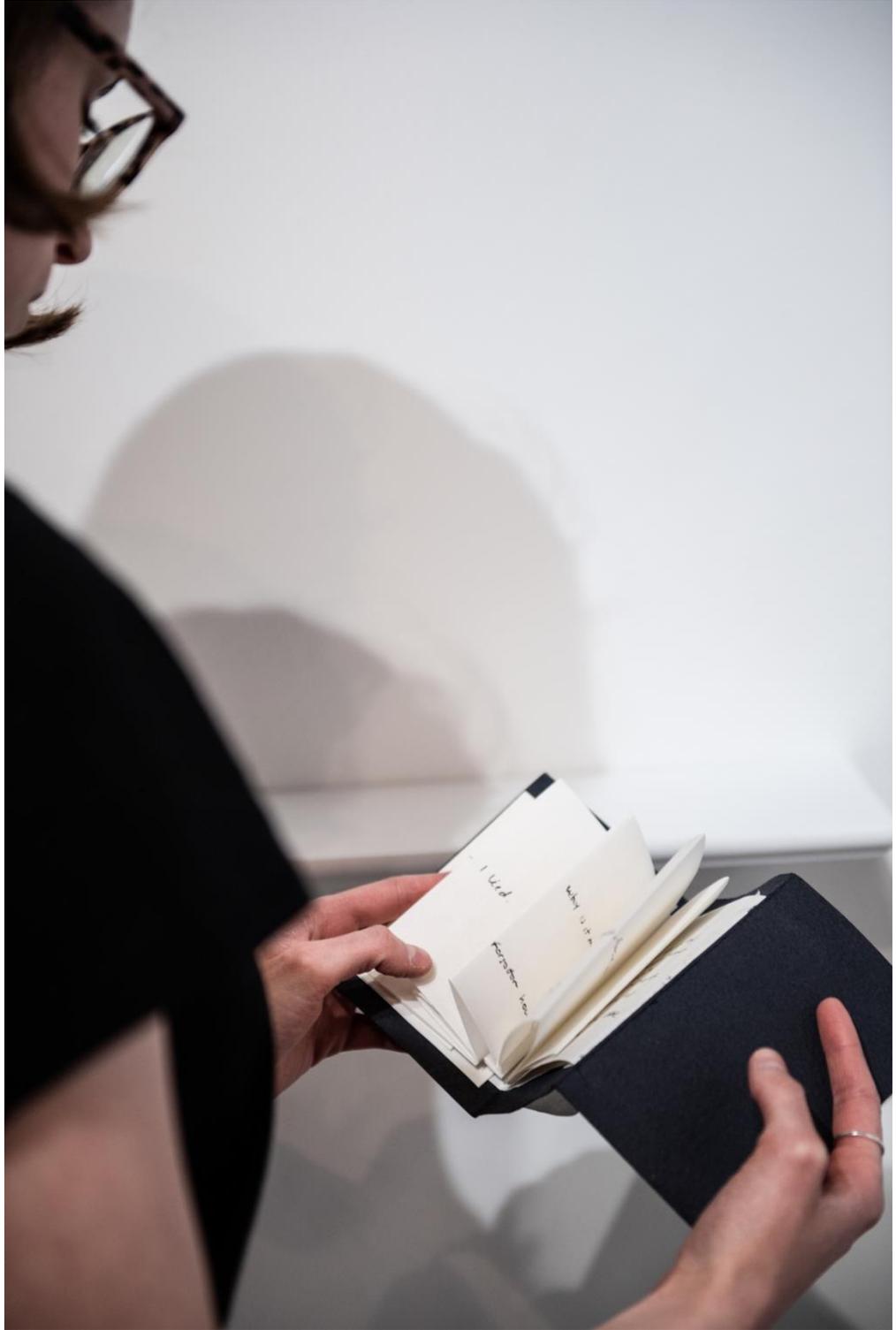
*Minutes, Days, Years.* Installation View. 2019



*Minutes, Days, Years.* Installation View. 2019



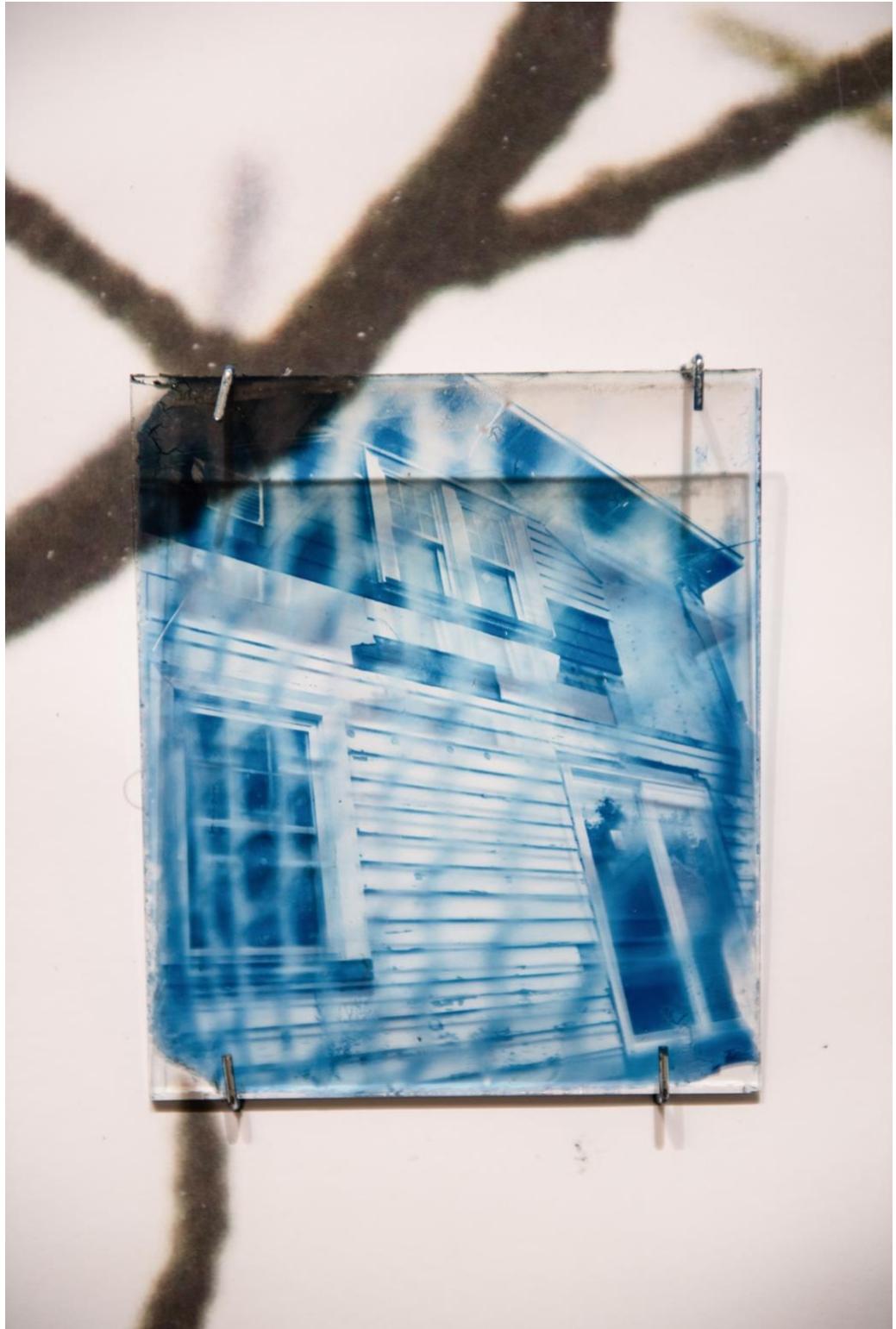
*Minutes, Days, Years. Installation View. 2019*



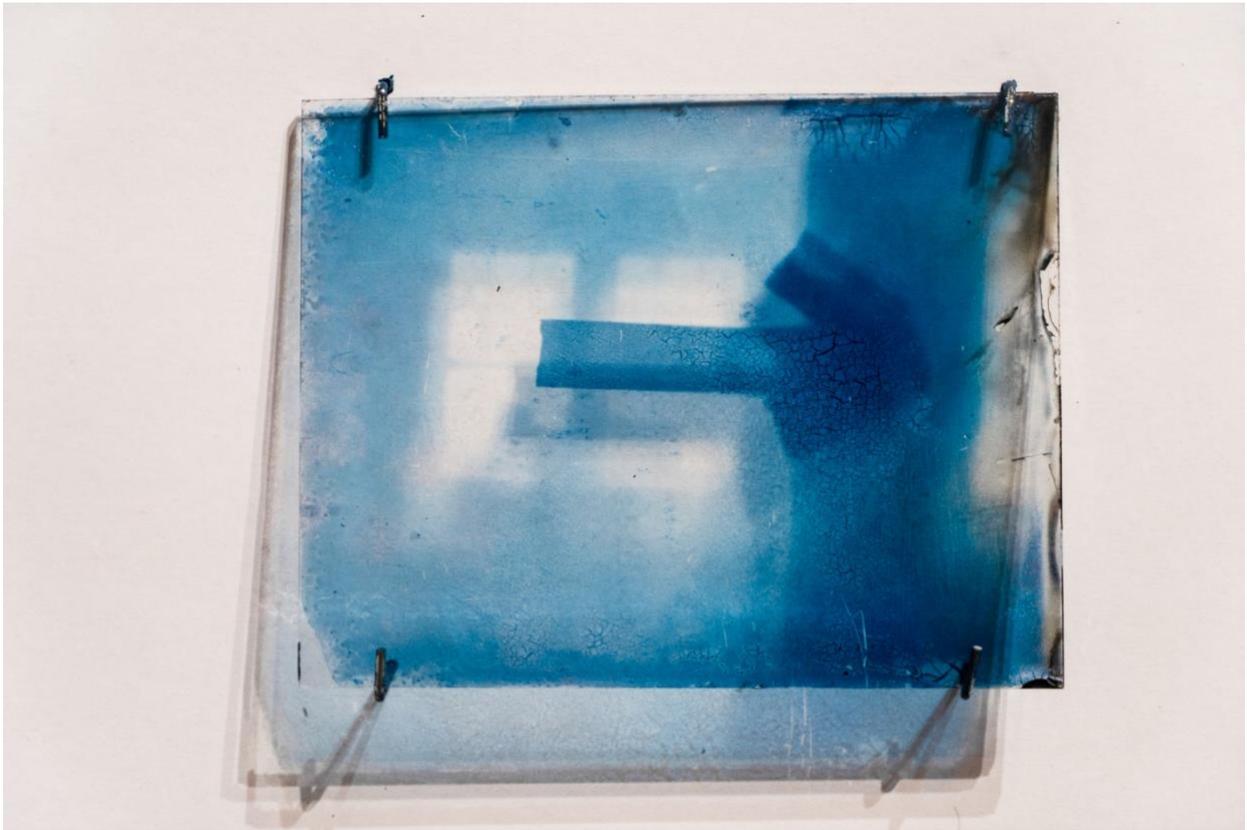
*Minutes, Days, Years.* Installation View. 2019



*Minutes, Days, Years.* Installation View. 2019



*Minutes, Days, Years.* Installation View. 2019



*Minutes, Days, Years.* Installation View. 2019



*Minutes, Days, Years.* Installation View. 2019