



STEPHEN ALTHOUSE

relics

Biggs Museum
of American **Art**

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STEPHEN ALTHOUSE

Stephen Althouse (b. 1948), the creator of the Biggs Museum of American Art's latest exhibition marries craftsmanship to the conceptual beautifully and thoughtfully in his large-scale still-life photographic works. In his exhibition *Relics*, on view from February through May 2020, the artist features highlights of images produced between 2003 and 2017. In these works, Althouse presents his subjects - utilitarian and decorative objects of the early - industrial age-in formats that beg for intense study and offer the promise of revelation. Seemingly hidden importance is unearthed in ordinary objects like farming tools and old wooden chairs. This mysterious sense of consequence is compounded with the artist's visual layering of text in many formats. The presence and elucidation of these embedded messages reinforce the notion that Althouse's tactile subjects are meant to be read as communication.

Stephen Althouse memorializes common, broken and often shabby antique objects through the manipulation of their contexts, visual surfaces, seemingly delicate conditions and embedded modes of communication. The visual drama he adds to these subjects places greater attention on their history, social relevance and symbolic power. Originally trained as a sculptor, Althouse once created large-scale representations of tools and similar objects that caused his audiences to reassess their understanding of the ubiquitous materials surrounding them every day. Perhaps even more powerfully, Althouses's photographic imagery reminds viewers that much of the mundane conveniences on which their lives depend, and now take for granted, began as a human achievement. The artist actively elevates the ordinary to the sublime, the ruined to the refined, and discarded to the divine.

Stephen Althouse was raised in rural Bucks County Pennsylvania and studied sculpture in Philadelphia, Virginia and Florida ultimately receiving fine art degrees from the University of Miami and Virginia Commonwealth University. While receiving an influential Quaker education, Althouse and his parents bonded over exploring new cultures around the world and the stories about the past that old objects could tell. They found early inspiration at the nearby Mercer Museum, a treasure house of objects of everyday life. Althouse recalls that later he worked in memorable and back-breaking professions of farming, stone quarrying, and concrete construction as well as the railroad industry. These early interests and labors had a profound effect on his sculptural subjects. He was drawn to creating works that embodied the form, textures and materials of the tools he utilized in the trades. At the same time, he started collecting curious and storied examples of tools and farming implements that would soon be the essential subjects in his studio experimentation with the photographic medium, which he discovered to be the most effective vehicle to bring his creative ideas to realization.

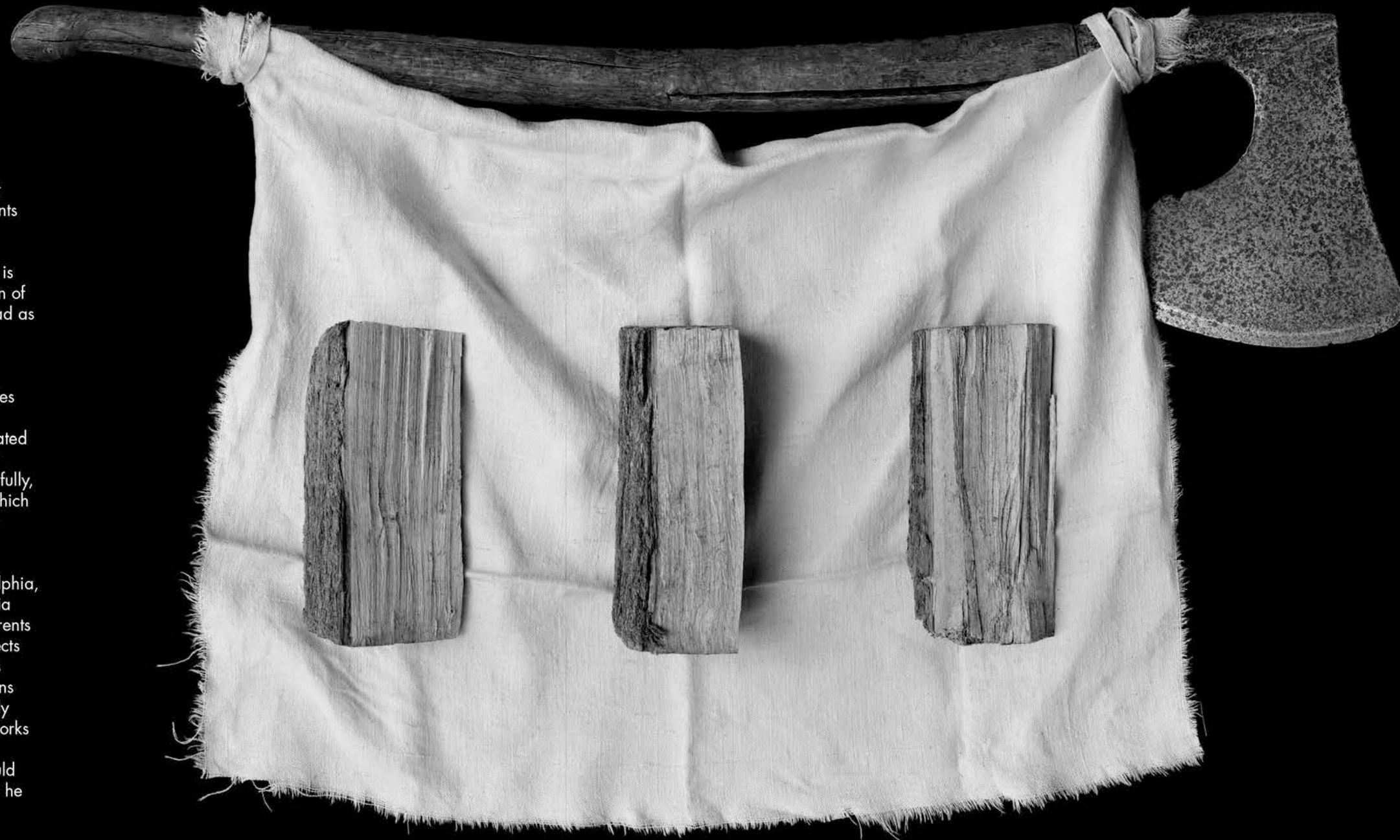


Illustration 1 - *Axe, Wood and Strawl* (2003), pigment print, 59.5" x 88". In the collections of the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago, Illinois and the Musée d'Art moderne et d'Art contemporain, Liege, Belgium

Althouse taught art at Barry University in Miami, Florida and also presented courses and lectures in England, France, Spain and Ecuador. He received a Fulbright Research Fellowship for a nine-month artist-in-residence in Belgium in 2003. The residency had exhibition requirements and, for the first time, the art teacher who rarely shared his work outside of class began to consider a new professional direction in which he would work to travel his artworks in museum exhibitions internationally. Althouse and his growing family relocated to rural central Pennsylvania because it reminded them of their time in Belgium and it gave the artist the opportunity to explore new inspiration of the Amish community that befriended them. Althouse still considers himself a sculptor piecing together his digital compositions in an additive process often from several detailed scanned large-format film images. He evolved professionally to master his unique approach to photography while retaining his interest in reinterpreting metal, stone, wood and leather objects of industry into aesthetic representations reflecting the various cultures he admired.

THE BIGGS MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

The Permanent Collection of the Biggs Museum of American Art is interpreted on a timeline starting around 1700 and leading to the present, in which the fine arts, such as painting and sculpture, are displayed alongside the decorative arts like furniture and ceramics. While designing the museum, its founder Sewell C. Biggs (1914-2003) wanted to demonstrate what this range of artful objects held in common within style periods through time, such as American Baroque and Impressionism. The related objects on view in each gallery focus attention on the notable innovations in craft, technology, technique and style that characterize each period of production. Ultimately, exploring these aesthetic choices helps to understand the people who made, used and cherished these rarified objects. The photographic works of Stephen Althouse project from the same philosophy that defines the Biggs Museum –human experiences, both good and bad, can be understood through the study of their accomplishments



Illustration 2 - Pick with Braille | (2006), pigment print, 42" x 31". Translation from Braille, German: "Give us."



Illustration 3 - *Iron Wedge* (2011), pigment print, 35.5" x 48". Translation from Braille, Pennsylvania German: "For everyone who has been given much."

relics

With Stephen Althouse, nothing is as simple as it seems. Neglect and separation from daily use permeate the presentation of many of the artist's subjects. His *Relics* are presented as monumental archeological finds on dark backgrounds. His images, such as *Pick with Braille I* in illustration 2, depict objects at larger-than-life scale that invite close examination and feelings of awe. The artist dramatizes the hand-crafted quality of many of his subjects and magnifies the ways that they have been altered through human use as in the heavily beaten head of the *Iron Wedge* in illustration 3. The artist is drawn to capturing and enhancing the worn surfaces of materials that appear to have barely withstood much of what time diminishes such as steel, iron, leather and wood. These objects often look freshly reclaimed from the ground, as in *Adjustable Wrench* pictured in illustration 4, and covered with the evidence of the mysterious life from which they were discarded. When looking at Althouse's images, viewers are often confronted with what has survived.

Traces of this past life, before his objects became the subjects of aesthetic and symbolic contemplation, cling to the artist's relics like a residue not-yet washed off. The remaining threads wound around the central shaft of *Royal Spindle* (illustration 5) almost distract from the delicate arches that make up its form. Beyond offering a glimpse into the past, the inclusion of small crown within these remnants create a tantalizing narrative around the themes of reuse and reinvention. Many of his subjects appear heavily worn or even broken, such as in *Bound Hammer* in illustration 6, and later wrapped in fabrics that attempt to help make the object whole again. In other broken examples, such as *Axe with Braille* (Illustration 7), the binding cloth is used in an almost decorative manner that hints at the new purposes this fragile piece of metal may now perform.

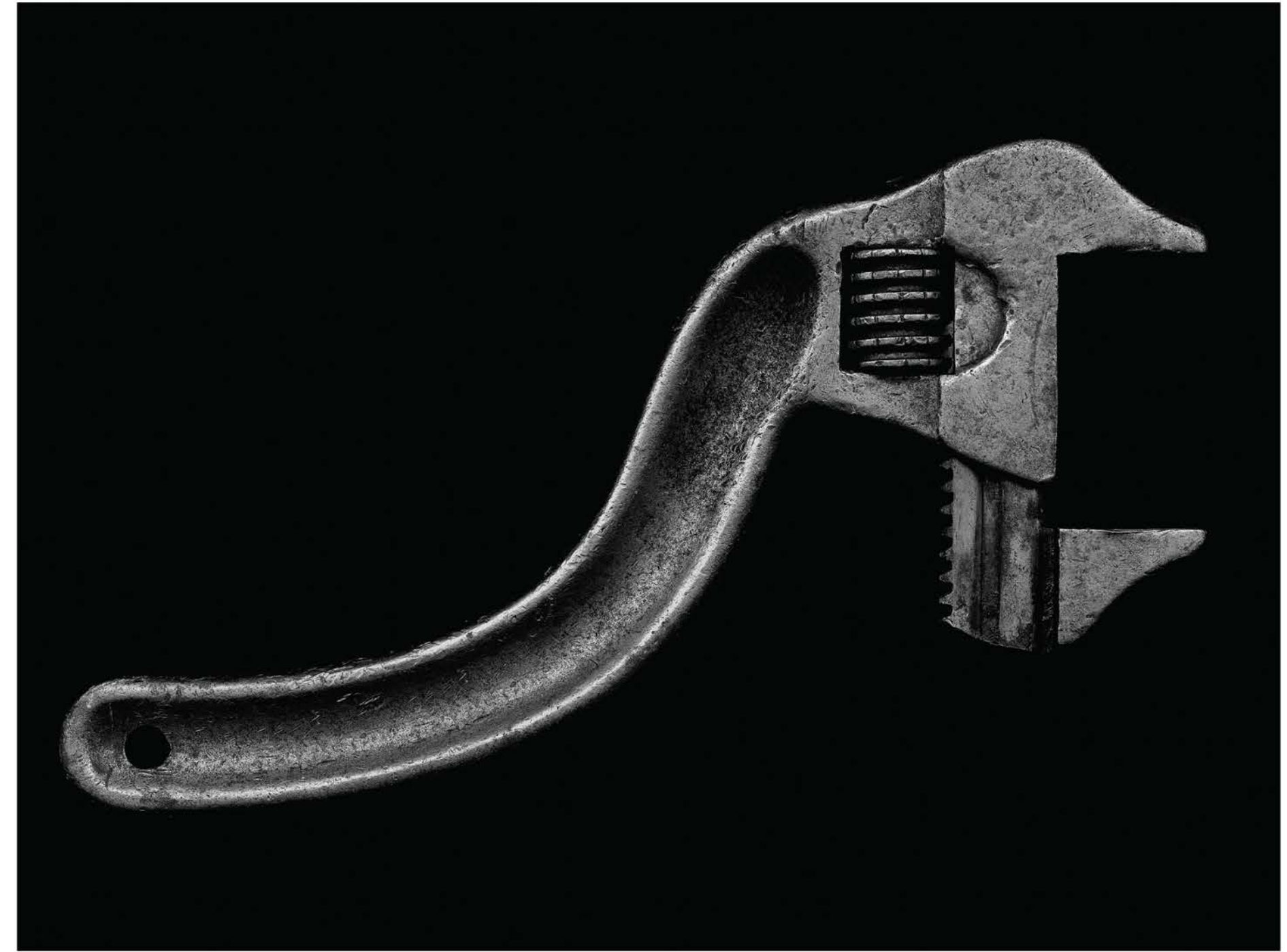


Illustration 4 - *Adjustable Wrench* (2003), pigment print, 42" x 62".

Illustration 5 - *Royal Spirals* (2003), pigment print, 42" x 31". In the collections of the Museum of Art - Deland, Florida and the Musée d'Art moderne et d'Art contemporain, Liège, Belgium.

Illustration 6 - *Board Hammer* (2017), pigment print, 42" x 31"

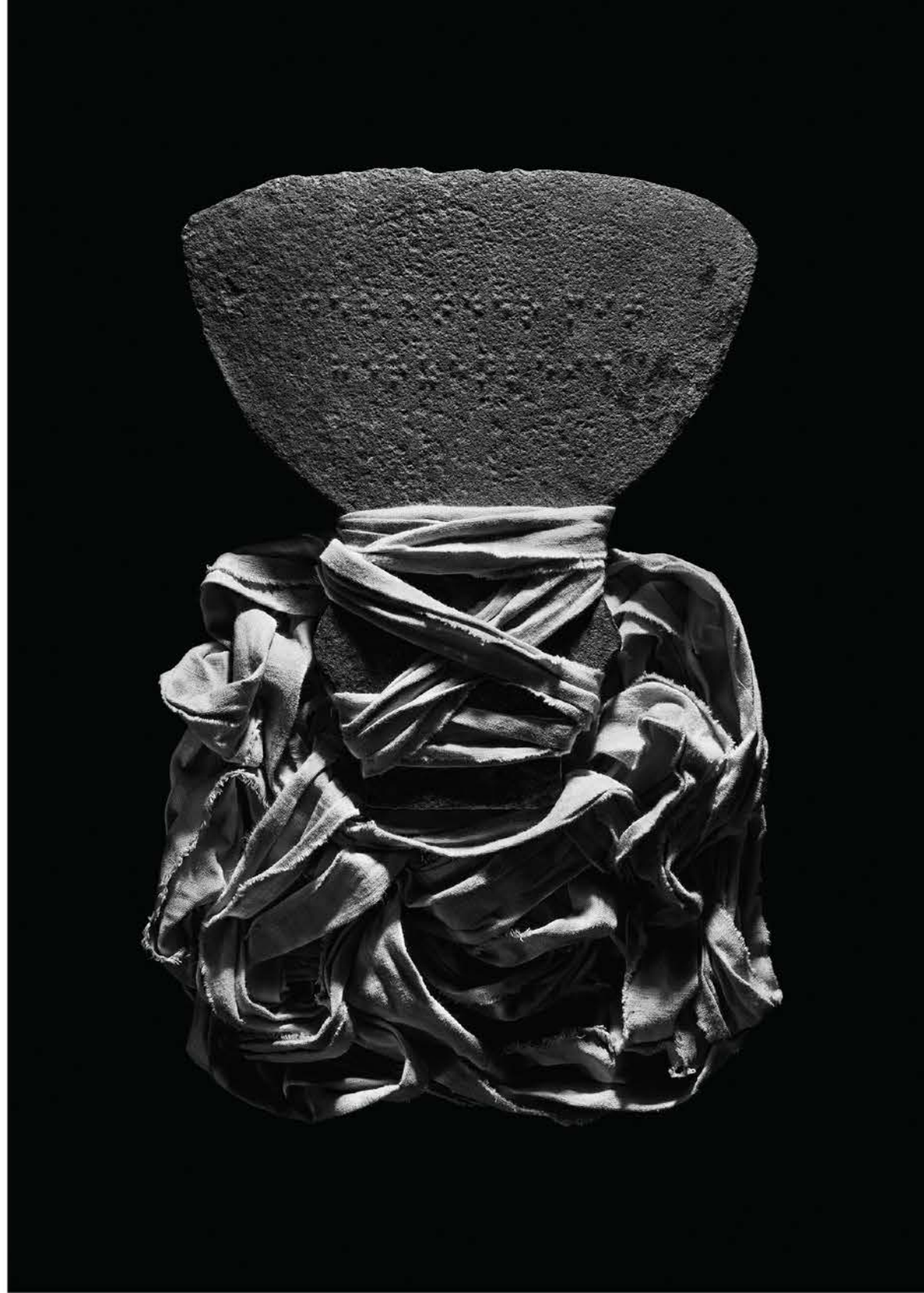
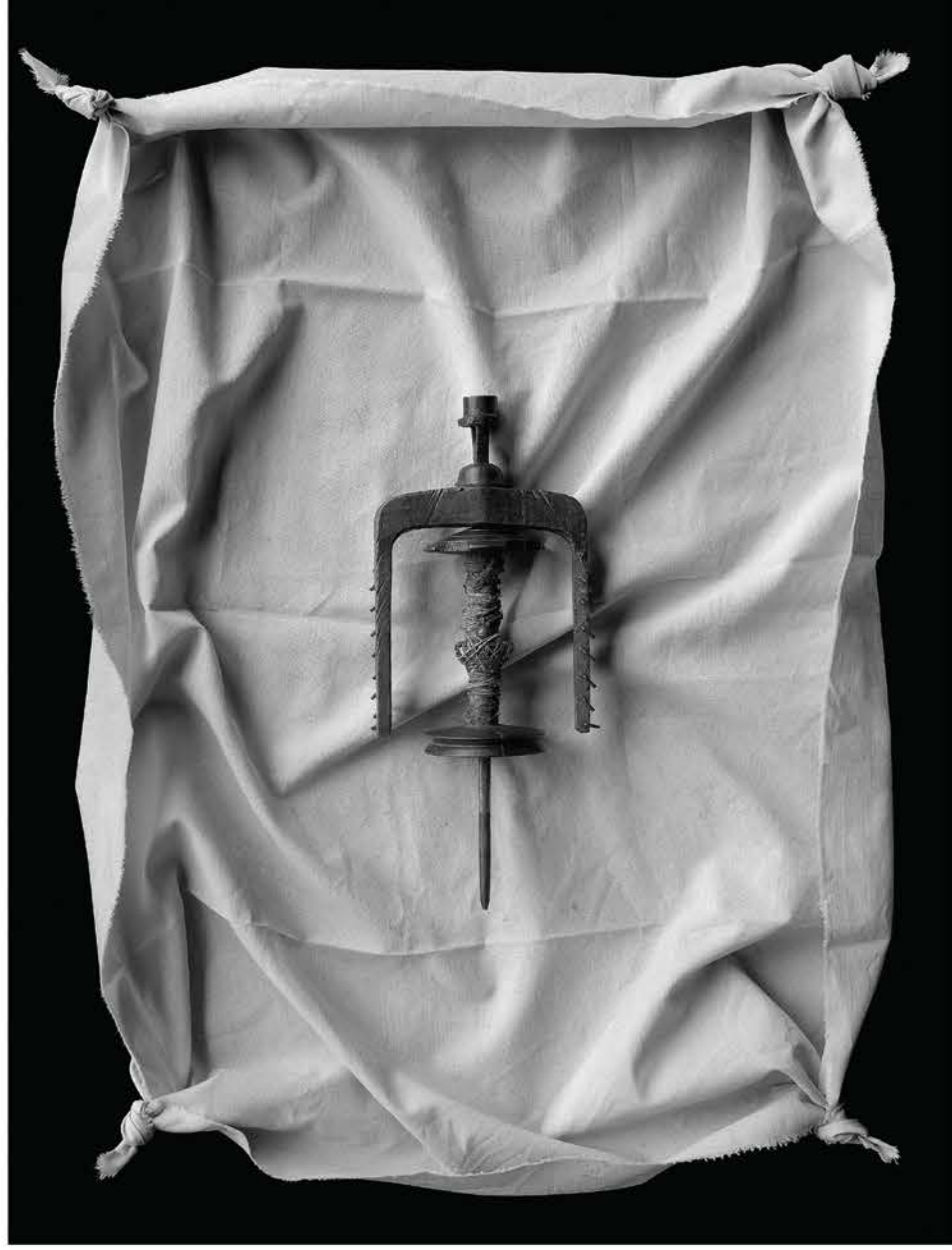


Illustration 7 - *Axe with Braille* (2013), pigment print, 48" x 35.5". In the collection of the Museum Moderner Kunst Kärnten, Klagenfurt, Austria. Translation from Braille, 16th century German: "the other [goes] with grief [heartbreak]" from the Ausbund, song 138, v. 15 — funeral song.



monuments

Many of Stephen Althouse's photographic images capture relics that appear to have been intentionally, even lovingly preserved. Some of the artist's beloved themes of damaged and abandoned tools appear to have been reinvented as personal mementos and symbolic decorations. *Plumb Line*, pictured in illustration 8, is pictured tied into a loop and hanging on a wall where its owner can be reminded of its emblematic, if not practical, importance. Similarly, *Scythe I* in illustration 9 depicts the familiar farming implement of the type featured in many of the artist's compositions but, in this image, it has been draped with a bunting of strips of white fabric. The contrast of intersecting arches, between the metal and textiles, produces a dynamic sense of movement at the same time placing added attention onto the scythe's metal joinery strapping to its handle. The careful placement of these elements point to an aesthetic purpose far removed from cutting wheat and honor both the tool and the cloth.

Instead of demonstrating the ravages of time like an obsolete and discarded tool rediscovered by chance or even the collecting of a personal memento, many of Althouse's images seem to exhibit grand monuments that were intentionally protected. Long ago, these objects were removed from daily use and preserved to reflect the ideals of its owners. The artist treats some of these subjects with an almost religious reverence, as in the case of *Wheel I* in illustration 10. The wheel, a universal device of ingenuity and utility, no longer carries loads to far-off destinations. Instead, this unspoiled wheel is presented as a geometric symbol of intersectionality, balance and spiritual journeys. Similarly, the mysterious object pictured in *Iron Roses* in illustration 11 carries a strong decorative intent. Its delicate construction and ornament offer possible clues to its preservation. This decorative importance also elevates the symbolic power of *Door with Flames* in illustration 12. The design of this object, an unusual example of a subject constructed not found by the artist to be photographed, distinguishes it from other portals. Its hooded window and flame motif bring into question the type of transition this door regulates.



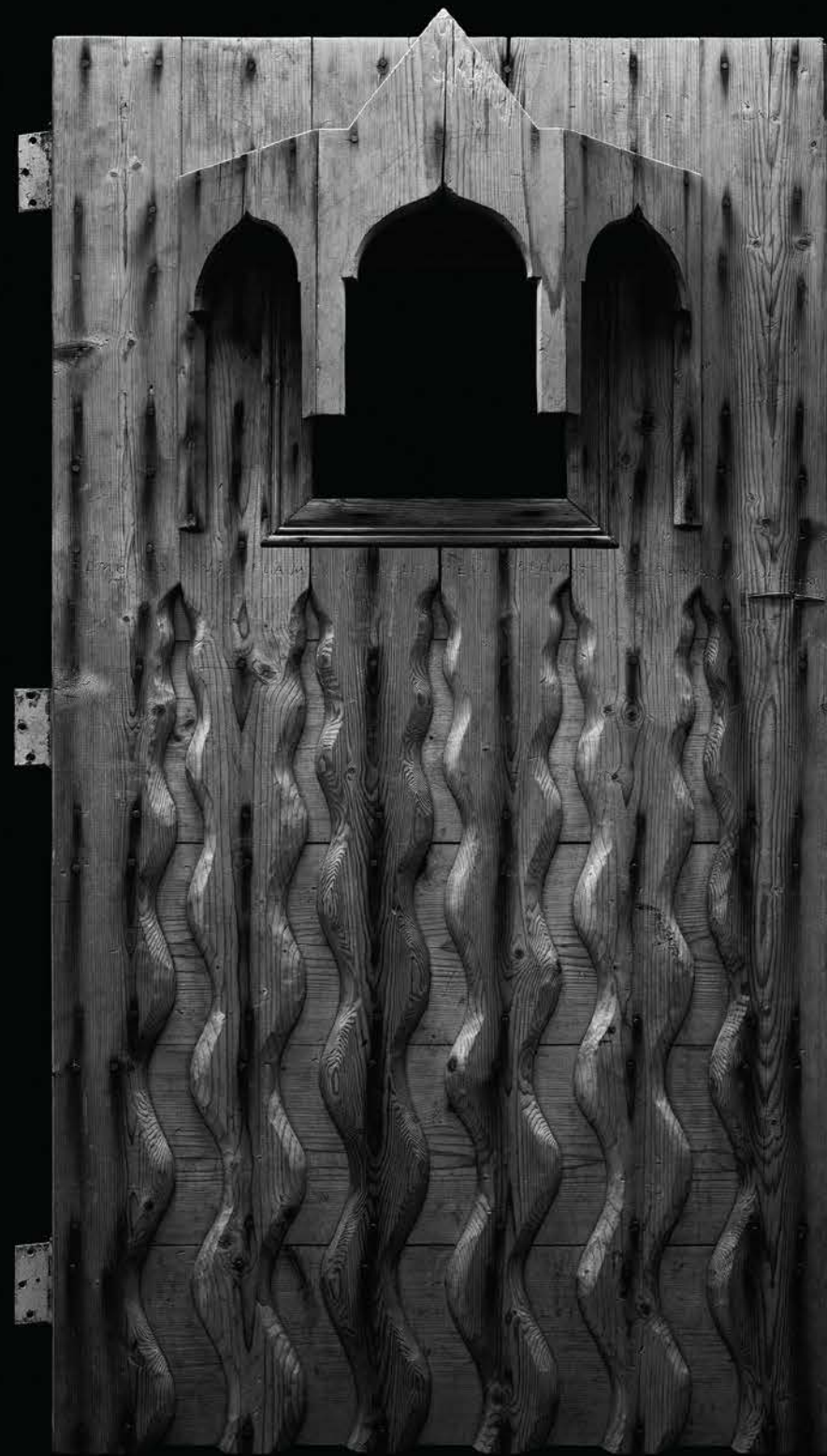
Illustration 10 - *Wheel* / (2008), pigment print, 59.5" x 88". In the collection of the Museum Moderner Kunst Kärnten, Klagenfurt, Austria. Translations from 16th century German: "Where shall I turn to?" and "The woods are barren of leaves" from the *Ausbund*, song 76 and 35, v. 1.

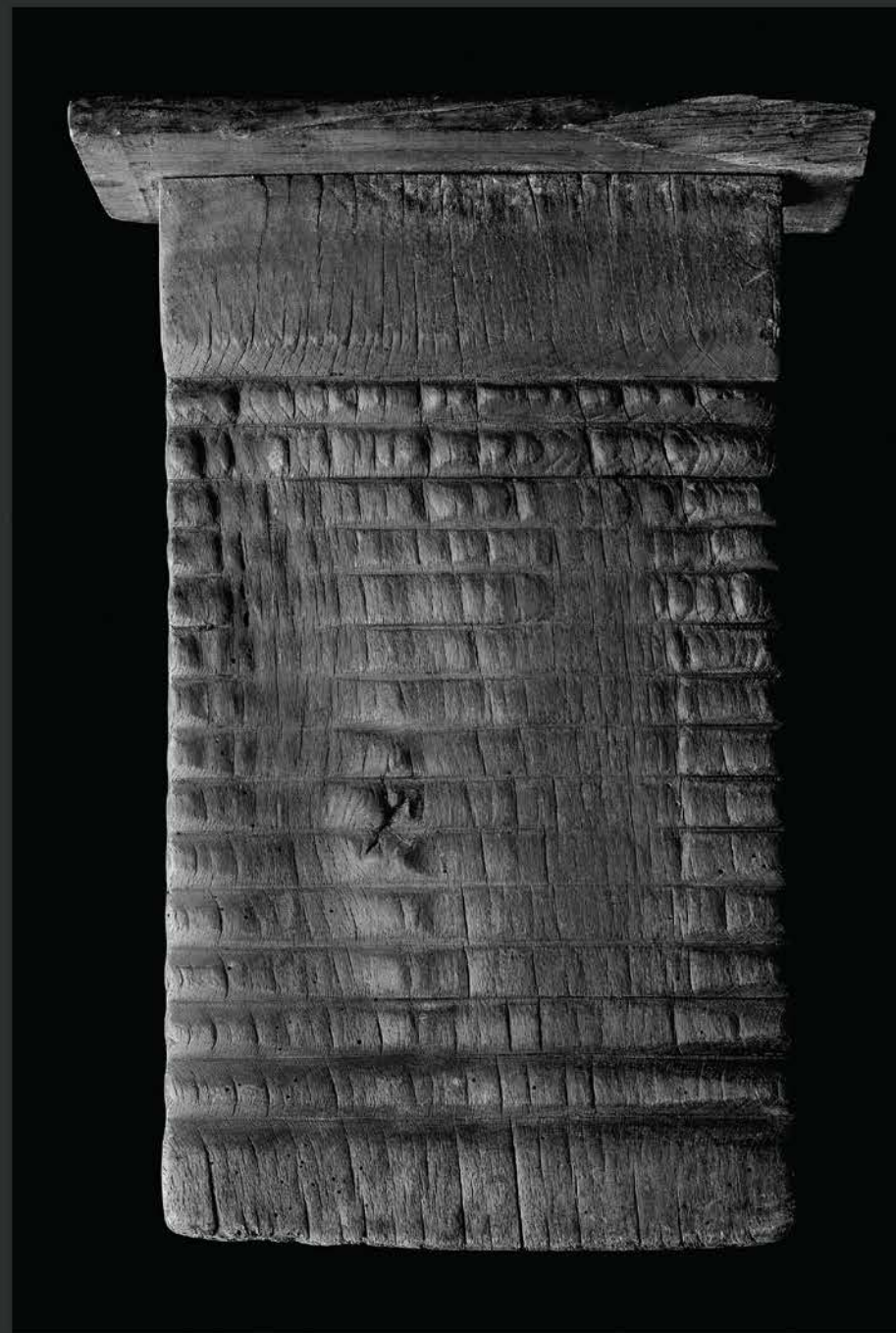


Illustration 11 - Iron Roses (2004), pigment print, 42" x 31". In the collection of the Musée d'Art moderne et d'Art contemporain, Liège, Belgium. Translation from Braille, Wallcott: "Be patient, someday this pain will be worthwhile."



Illustration 12 - Door with Flames (2017), pigment print, 96" x 59.5". In the collection of the Museum Moderner Kunst Kärnten, Klagenfurt, Austria. Translation from Catalan: "I fear its flames but my questions beg me to open it."





rituals

While much of what the artist has collected and now features in his photographic compositions are common objects of household utility, many demonstrate the manner in which they had been used. The ritual of their usefulness, the ways that they were activated in the daily habits of their owners, is written into their appearance. These objects often connect viewers to the humanity of the past. The physical effect of former ownership is imprinted over the surface of these objects like a fingerprint in an investigation, the brush mark of a painting or the footprints of a ceremony.

The *Wash Board* in illustration 13 is an effective evocation of pre-industrial daily labor. The wash surface has nearly been worn flat with the rhythmic grating of generations of clothing and offers the viewer a clear understanding of this ritual of toil. The repetitive motions of folding and binding are visualized in *Clamp with Shroud* in illustration 14. The tight bundle of fibers held by the clamp reminds one of pressing paper, ironing cloth into starched shapes or squeezing fibers dry. Perhaps the most dramatic visualization of the objects of habitual use is *Broken Bow* in illustration 15. The horse hair of the string instrument bow, broken and cascading down, is a theatrical conclusion to intense playing. The same romanticism permeates Althouse's other images of musical instruments as in *Broken Cello* in illustration 16. The broken neck of this string instrument under a death shroud. While some of the artist's images give clear evidence on how the object were used, others seem more like props in formalized rituals. *Axe and Tapestry* in illustration 17 appear plucked from some public event in which decorated objects were held aloft for their symbolic importance. Althouse's appreciation of the ritualized behaviors he has observed through his travels, or at least the devices used in both mundane and more rarified rituals, is not always so picturesque. At times, the artist appears to offer a moral censure to certain behaviors, such as in the ghoulish imagery of *Weaning Halters* in illustration 18. His association of these objects with the ritual of separation is dramatized with the inclusion of a small message in braille from the 16th century hymnal, called the *Ausbund*, used by the Amish community surrounding the artist's home.



Illustration 15 - Broken Bow (2013) - pigment print, 59.5" x 88". In the collection of the Museum Moderner Kunst Kärnten, Klagenfurt, Austria.

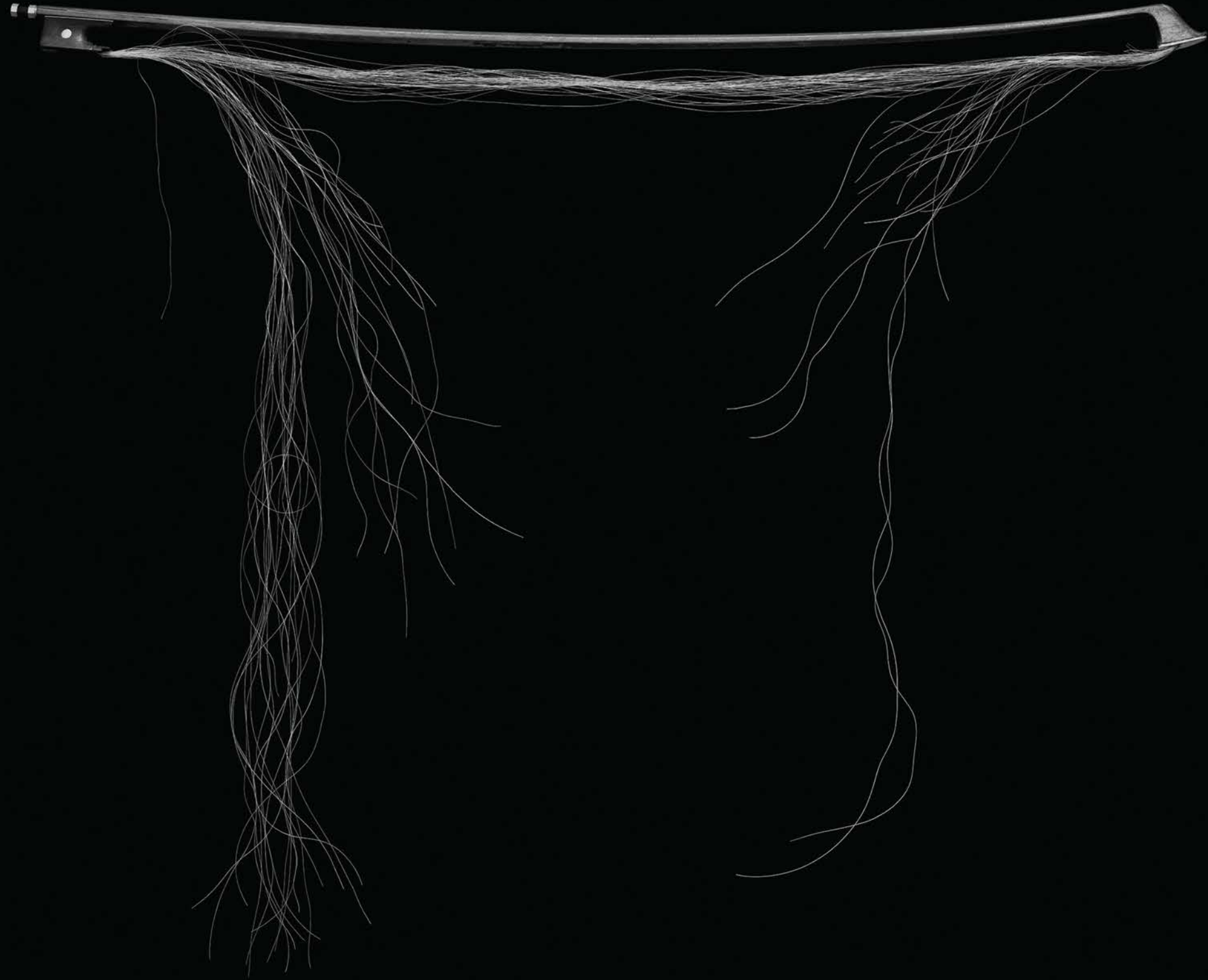


Illustration 16 - Broken Cello (2005) - pigment print, 59.5" x 88". Translation from Braille, Latin: "It was the way it is when I arrived."

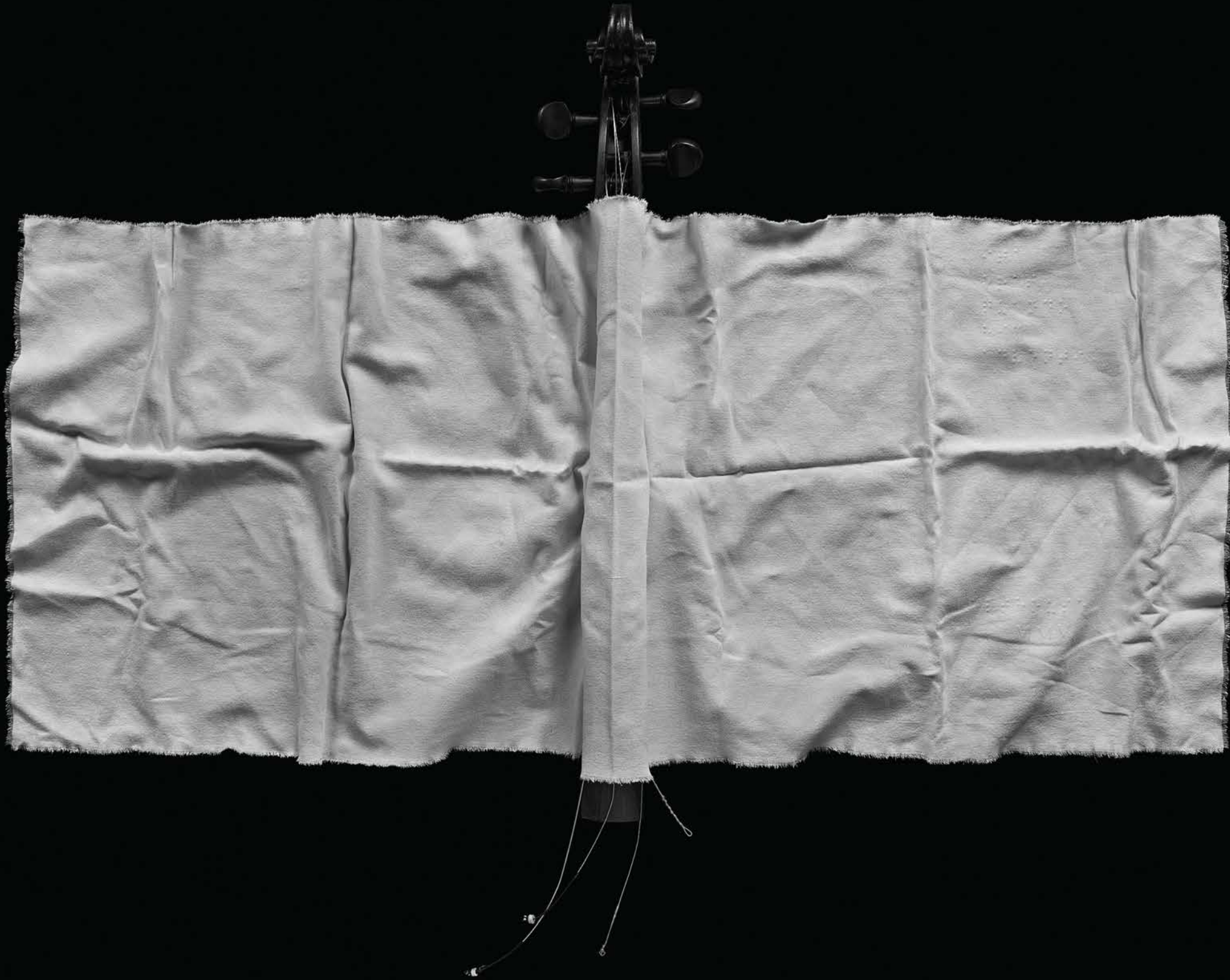


Illustration 17 - *Axe and Tapestry* (2003), pigment print, 42" x 31". In the collections of the Art Museum, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio and the Musée d'Art moderne et d'Art contemporain, Liège, Belgium. Translation from Latin: "I'm holding the wolf by its ears."

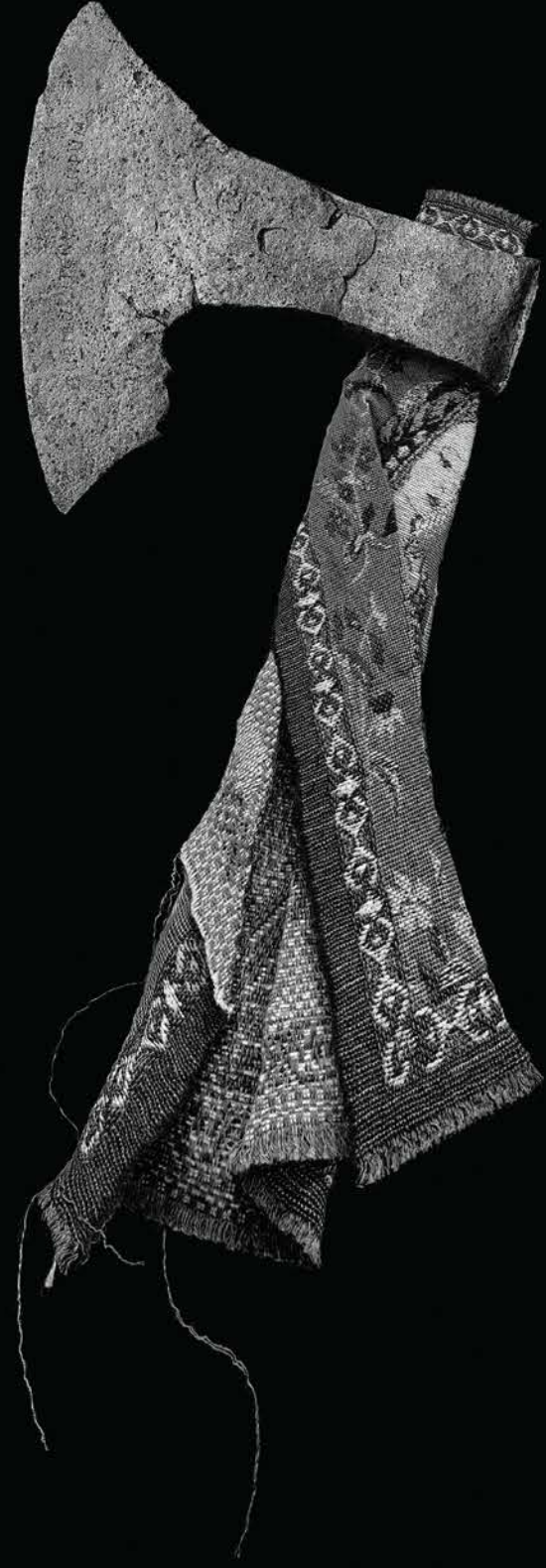
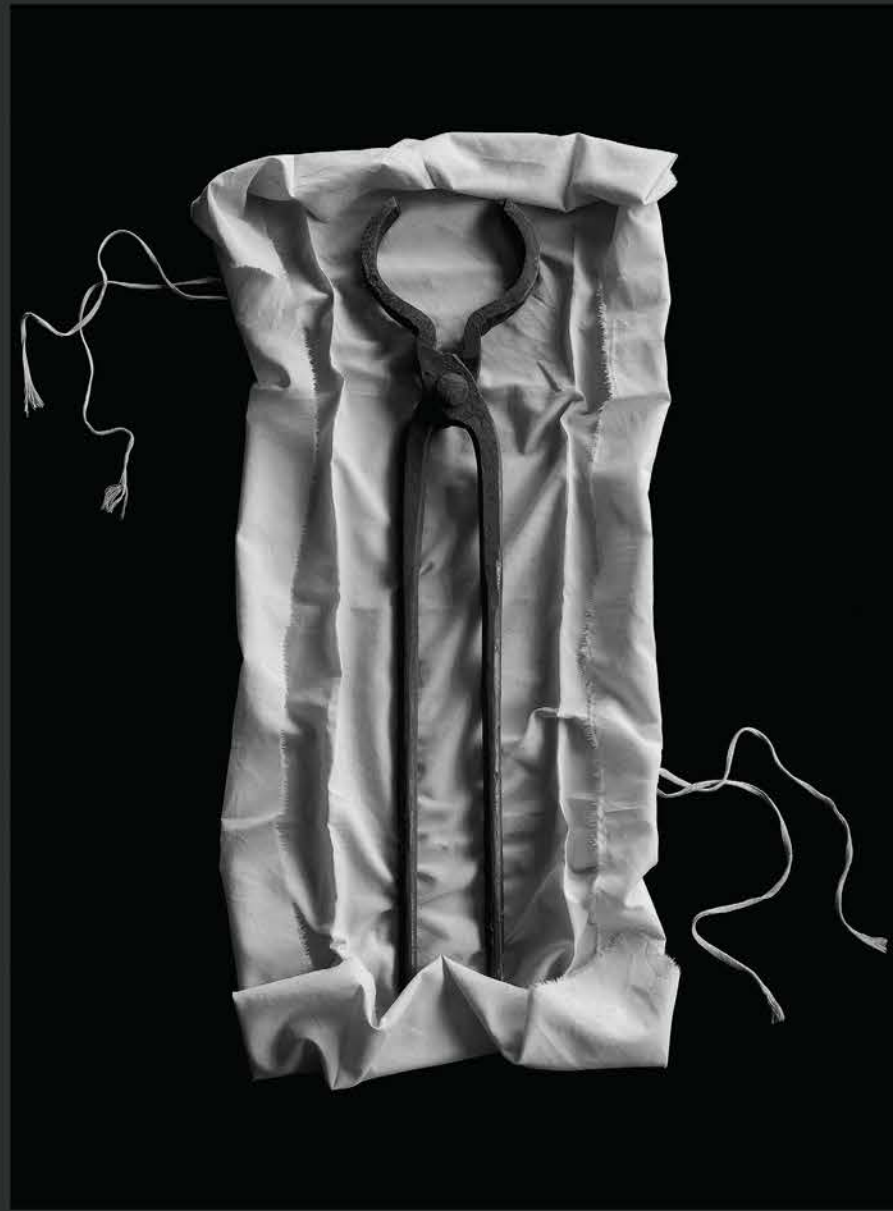


Illustration 18 - *Weining Halteres* (2009), pigment print, 59.5" x 59.5". Translation from 16th century German: "The one goes forth with joy, the other [goes] with grief [heartbreak]" from the Ausbund, song 138, v. 15 - funeral song.



Veneration

Throughout his life, Stephen Althouse has held a deep appreciation of the ways that people express their spiritual identification and their varying reliance on mysticism. The artist expresses an almost religious reverence for the connections his subjects have with the past. The artist achieves this sense of importance through the dramatization of his subjects' contexts.

Much of Althouse's artwork borrows religious symbolism to elevate his simple subjects to venerated emblems. In some examples, he evokes the divine with the contrasting color and textures of strips of white cloth, woven tapes and draped shrouds. The aptly titled *Sacred Tongues* in illustration 19 is enshrined in white fiber that billows around the tool's contour. The play of light and shadow heightens the dramatic contrast of this framing device against the roughened metallic texture of the tool. Sets of delicate ties trail from each side like ties that could secure the object in its own liturgical covering. The package-like framing of *Shoe I* in illustration 20 similarly contrasts against the slipper's protruding toe while reminding viewers of soft wrappings used to preserve rare objects. The artist attempts to visually preserve this object within the minds of his viewers and thereby imply that the saved object is inherently valuable. The white contrast can also render an object more fragile, like in *Rusted Maille* in illustration 21. Although made of metal, the links of this chain maille appear delicate when cradled in a delicate cotton cloth like something that could be damaged if not handled with extreme care.

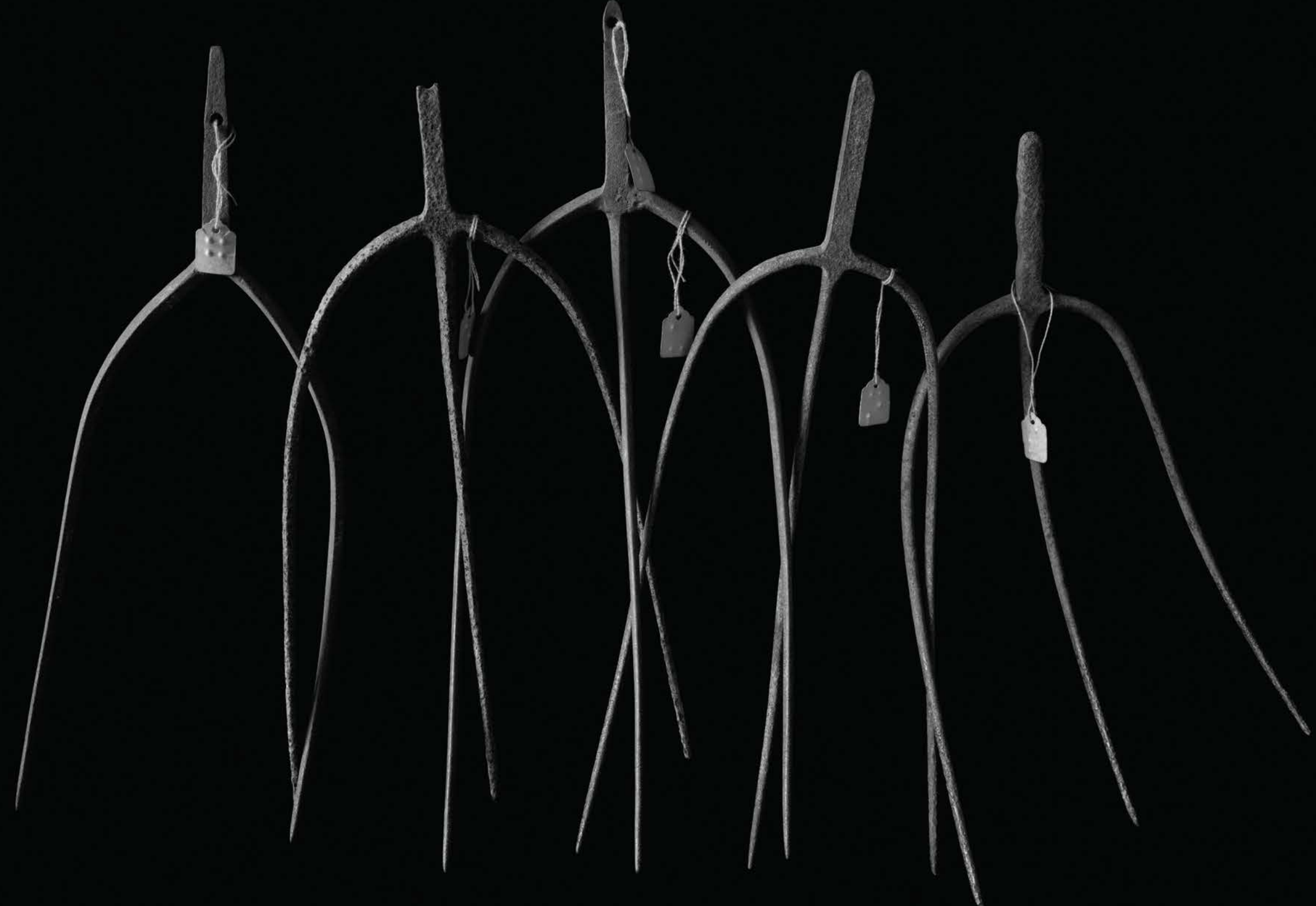


Illustration 20 - Shoe I (2006), pigment print, 42" x 31".

In other cases, the artist uses other very literal framing devices to increase attention upon the subject of the work as in *Pick with Braille II* in illustration 22. The gilded picture frame offers a second symbol in the composition that refines the tool by association. A rare but equally important form of the artist's veneration of his subjects comes in the form of repetition. In *Forks with Braille* in illustration 23, the intertwined subjects appear like a series of people with locked arms and implies a type of human interconnectedness. Althouse's reverence of the past is usually achieved in his artwork by making his discarded object into something better. However, the artist's *Forks* is elevated because he turned them into an abstraction of a positive human behavior.



Illustration 23 - Forks with Braille (2011) pigment print, 42" x 62". In the collection of the Museum Moderner Kunst Kärnten, Klagenfurt, Austria. Translation from Braille, Pennsylvania German: "Give us."



status

Althouse's exploration of symbolic associations to venerate his subjects is meant to shift his viewers' interpretation of status and to raise their estimation of the object's historic, religious, cultural and intrinsic value. The artist often channels this sophisticated notion of value into specific compositions in order to discuss empowerment. Interestingly, his images of objects that deal most acutely with status often reveal a complicated assessment of the power they represent.

The artist's monumental diptych, simply entitled *Chairs* in illustration 24, illustrates the ultimate symbol of authority: the throne. These Gothic-inspired oak chairs display his interest in religious ceremony while their tall proportions, angular severity and darkened surfaces impress with feelings of authority. Yet, representation of power split into two seats seems to dilute its importance. The related symbol of authority of the altar is composed with a threadbare shroud over a horizontal surface within *Mesa con Tricornos* in illustration 25. The series of hats displayed on the table's surface are part of the uniform worn by the Spanish military police and serve as a reference to the period when Althouse lived in Spain under the rule of the dictator Francisco Franco. The same oppressive strength was harnessed in the creation of the battle armor pictured in *Knot III* in illustration 26. This less ambiguous symbol of authority was meant to strike fear. However, the artist has emphasized the sensory depriving enclosures over the eyes and ears, as well as including the controlling reigns, that elicit sympathy for the charging horses that were once trapped inside. Few symbols relate personal power more effectively than a crown. Again, Althouse subverts this power by displaying it in a deteriorated state within *Rusted Crown* in illustration 27. Even more challenging is that the artist conceals the identity of this power, the wearer of the crown, behind a shroud obscuring recognition.

While the artist evolves his artistic subjects into symbols of human transcendence, he is periodically challenged to caution viewers about its opposite in people's ability to be destructive. This is often achieved with objects symbolizing war and death. Separating *Medal with Braille* in illustration 28 from its historic or social context, torn from its wearer and without a way to discern what act it once honored, heightens the viewer's concern over the worn and dirty condition of this discarded emblem. Similarly disconcerting is the image of the damaged *Sleeve Ribbon* in illustration 29. This commemorative badge of military rank lays across a stack of folded textiles with frayed edges. The badge is perhaps among a group of materials being tucked and compartmentalized away from sight in an evocation of loss.

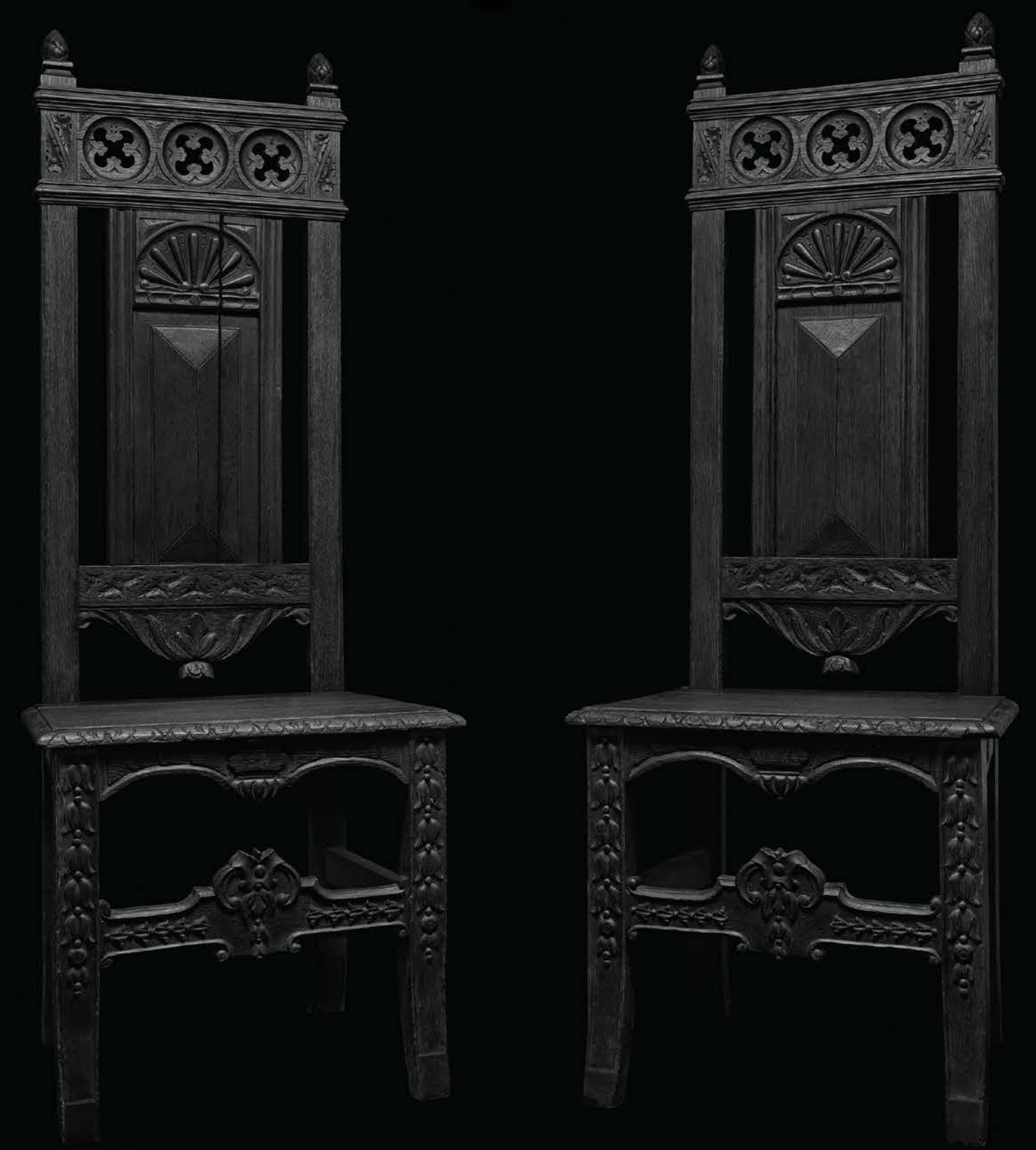
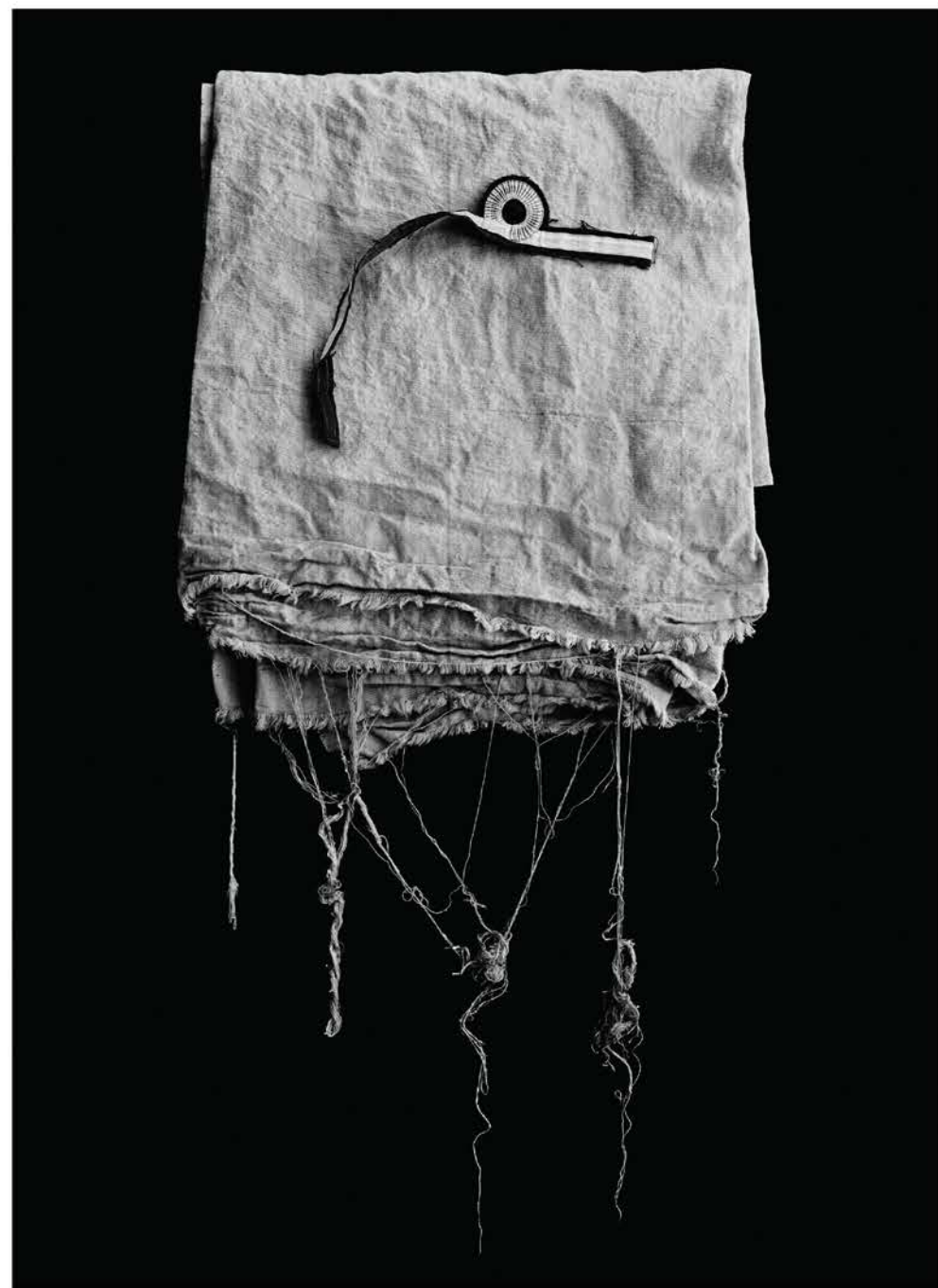


Illustration 24 - *Chairs* (2015), pigment print, 96" x 120". In the collection of the Museum Moderner Kunst Kärnten, Klagenfurt, Austria. Translation from Braille, German: "Give us."





communication

Since his earliest years in art school, Stephen Althouse has incorporated text ironically into his artwork. More than explanatory, the presence and meaning of this implanted text complicates and enriches the viewer's interpretation of the artist's historic subjects. In illustration 30 entitled *Book*, he uses the symbolically rich image of an open volume, implying an important message, and then obscures this reading by covering the exposed pages with braille, words read not through visual examination but touch. The viewer's inability to visually or tactically read the contents of the books reflects the artist's belief that there is much to humans that will never be understood.

The visual texture of braille has shown up in many of the artist's works, since his years in college, as an enigmatic and elusive layer of symbolism in his compositions. His placement of braille is rarely as rationale as displayed in *Book*. For example, Althouse drapes the antlers in *Massacre Ardennais* in illustration 31 with textiles covered in braille. On the surface, the image communicates a type of nature-based spiritual practice but the closer reading of the braille, pictured in the detail in illustration 32, heightens the surreal otherworldliness of the subject even though its meaning is intangible for most. Even less related is the addition of this form of communication on the surface of *Shovel with Braille* in illustration 33. Althouse seems to distance his viewer from a simple romantic association with this antique tool with the implication that much of its history is unknowable.

The artist also incorporates other languages into his compositions, many representing locations he has lived. In addition to Latin, the artist also draws upon texts in English, Catalan, French and dialects of German. Althouse lived extensively through Europe, but utilizes the language of his current neighbors in more recent works, the Pennsylvania Amish. Along the back edge of the *Broken Wagon* in illustrations 35 and 36, the artist has visually embedded text he had translated by his neighbors. These words poetically describes the broken condition of the wagon as a kind of self-portrait of the artist. At the same time, it reminds the reader to examine his work more closely for the elusive clues that tie his subjects to particular places and times of the past.

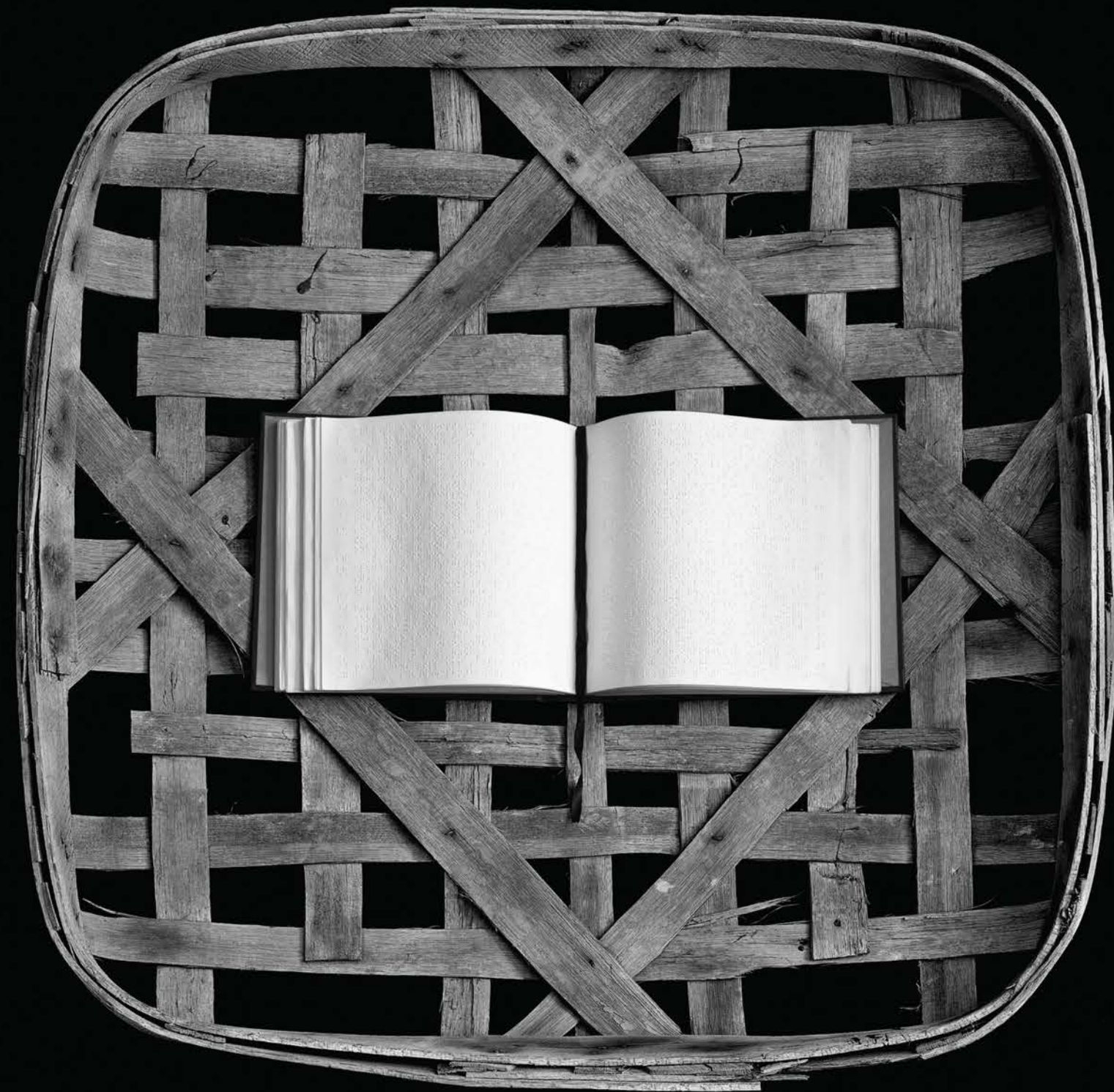


Illustration 30 — *Book* (2009), pigment print, 61 3/4" x 61 3/4", image courtesy of the artist.

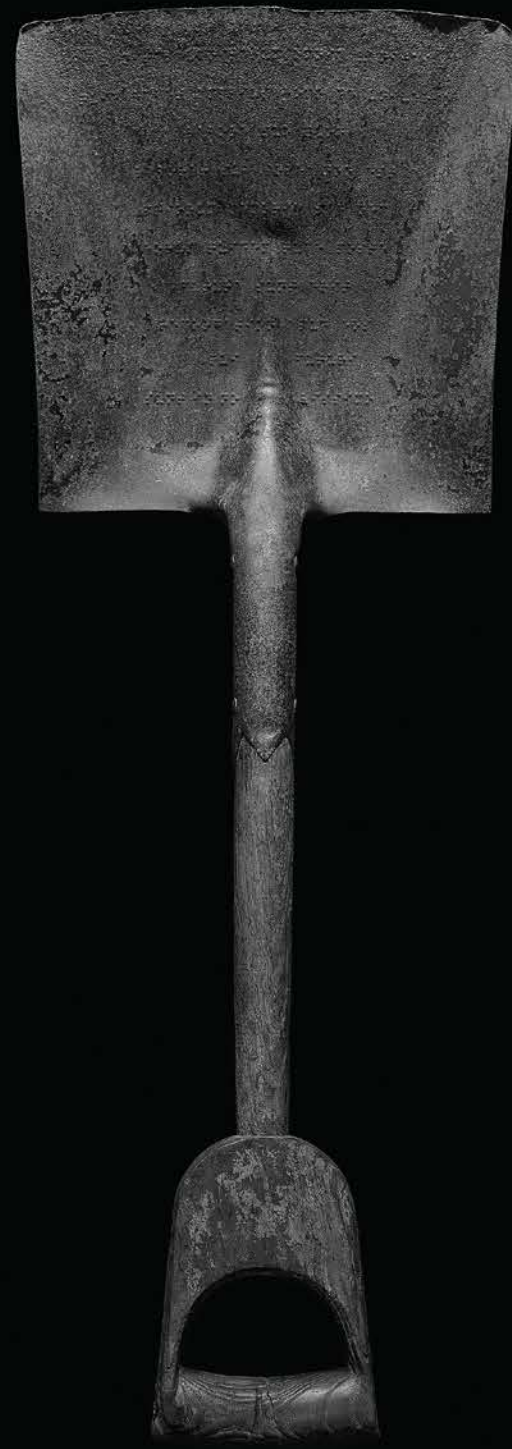




Illustration 35 - Broken Wagon (2017), pigment print, 59.9" x 96". In the collection of the Museum Moderner Kunst Kärnten, Klagenfurt, Austria. Translation from Pennsylvania German: "To carry the heavy load I was willing and still am willing, but I am now unable."

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Biggs Museum
of American **Art**