



TRANSPARENCY OF A DREAM ILLUMINATED

by Alexander J Hamilton

'The great leveller' dated 2010 .

TRANSPARENCY OF A DREAM

text by Jessica McBride, founder & curator Dellasposa Gallery, London.

An iridescent chorus of butterflies appear as apparitions in Alexander James Hamilton's spellbinding series *Transparency of a dream*. Continuing the artist's interest with Lepidoptera, this series depicts several generations of butterflies delicately overlaying one another. Inevitably the celestial beauty of these Menelaus blue Morpho species have been catching the attention of collectors.

Multiple layers of reference are rife in *Transparency of a dream*, with allusions to the transmission of light passing through the photographic medium, the series serves as a meditation on the most important on-going themes of life and mortality within the artist's oeuvre. An investigation of the later is of particular note, for the idea of photographing generations of butterflies was triggered by the artist's discovery that his estranged father had passed away and had been buried 2 years before he had ever been made aware.

In Hamilton's highly developed artistic lexicon, the presence of butterflies has come to signify the fleeting, beautiful and ultimately tragic nature of life and mortality. With a strong spiritual dimension inherent within the series, the association of the butterfly with religion and spirituality is a venerable one: symbolising love, regeneration, fortune, freedom, spirituality and death. In Greek mythology, butterflies symbolise the souls of those who have passed away, whilst in the Christian tradition, the rebirth of a butterfly from its cocoon symbolises the miracle of resurrection.

Observing this delicate creature undergo an incredible metamorphosis offers great hope to Alexander. Just as the butterfly embraces both itself and the changing environment, the artist wonders whether we can accept the changes in our lives as abiding as butterflies do.

Transparency of a dream explores this subject in a hyper-real and painterly aesthetic created through the interaction of water's mechanics to paint the subject in light. Moreover, through the introduction of water, Alexander draws upon water's transient and destructive nature both as nurturer and destroyer, it exposes the fragility and temporality of our existence, having the power to cleanse and reinvent or to drown and disappear.

The work of Alexander James Hamilton involves more than photography, as his process operates in a dimension that presents profound difficulties: he has to bring these works into physical existence before it can even begin; effectively to create his canvas. Rather than capturing a moment in time spontaneously, Hamilton creates intricate sculptural compositions submerged in vast tanks of purified water as the object for his camera. The effect of light passing through, heightened against a darkened background, gives the resulting works a painterly appearance. In so far as his process of creation involves the use of photography, allusions to painting, performance and sculpture. Alexander James Hamilton's work defies category.

In order to create this surreal sensation of butterfly descendants dancing with one another - something that never occurs in nature - Alexander had the idea of laying generation upon generation of butterflies within a single transparency. This required the artist to breed several generations of butterflies over a period of two years.

Starting with a parent butterfly specimen, he captured the original scene using a Sinar 8 by 10 inch plate camera, loaded with a single A4 sized sheet of film. In order to create the effect of the butterfly being suspended in a dreamlike state in the studio, he used a highly scientific process to place the butterfly in a temperature-controlled coma - something that occurs in the wild. He then places the butterfly in a specially devised tank of precisely cooled water. The butterflies are photographed underwater alive but in a coma; a state is a natural occurrence in nature for the south American species. Their heart rate stops completely; their respiratory system shuts down - they are completely unaware and unharmed in the process.

The subtle distortions of light and movement from the water's own wave energy creates a unique effect. The subjects appear to be floating in a void that neither interferes nor disrupts, conveying a serene and dreamlike sensation of the butterfly dancing as it moves with the motion of the water. The surface of the water can create a great deal of tension of movement; lighting is designed and directed specifically to catch these deviations in liquid mechanics. These movements catch and refract the light onto the subject, which is where the painterly quality of his work comes from: literally painting the subject in light.

A butterfly's wing comprises thousands of light prisms. If a camera fires a flash directly at a butterfly, it simply reflects white light. However, as the water neutralises these prisms, this allows their full colour depth and luminosity to shine through. Once the initial parent butterflies had been photographed, the plates were annotated and stored until their offspring were born. Hamilton passed through four full cycles of breeding descendants of parent to child, to grand child and great grand child to complete the series.

A self-reflective undercurrent exists in *Transparency of a dream* by investigating the photographic medium itself. Presents works of breath-taking complexity and beauty in a sequence of singular unique works of art, the artist felt compelled to examine the reproducible capacity of photography in this series as a response to an ongoing debate of the aesthetic distinctions between photography and painting, and the intrinsic value of art.

Throughout his practice, Alexander James Hamilton has adhered to a doctrine of 'in camera purity', eschewing digital film and post production editing in favour of 'the caustic chemicals to which you expose these delicate strips of celluloid - all of which are unrepeatable moments in time.' Indeed, if post production were to be employed, the image would no longer be considered 'unique'. Having redrawn the parameters of photography, the artist has brought the painterly quality of his work into the realms of traditional works of art. For this reason, each image within *Transparency of a dream* exists as only one unique piece of 8 x 10 inch acetate and one single edition, 160x160cms print; along with two artist proofs each a different size and execution. Making each piece entirely unique with no editions ever to be released.

Representing the very apotheosis of the artist's critique, *Transparency of a dream* is a poignant celebration of life. It is a series that invites mediation and contemplation, encouraging the viewer to focus on the extraordinary and fragile beauty of the natural world, the power of metamorphosis, and the ethereal sense of the passing of time.



No other photographic artist uses the surface tension of water to paint the subject with light.

‘ Rather than capturing the moment spontaneously, James creates intricate sculptural compositions submerged in huge tanks of purified water as the object for his camera. The effect of light passing through, heightened against a darkened background, gives the resulting images a painterly appearance, recalling Dutch vanitas still life. This blurring of boundaries between photography, painting and sculpture renders Hamilton’s works un-categorisable and eerily beautiful. ’

[Anna McNay, Arts Correspondent, Studio International Magazine.](#)



close up view of framed ' *Transparency of a dream illuminated - Plate I* ' 2014
original 8 by 10 inch plate, mounted between museum glass
backlit with archival 0% uv light panel & remote dimmer
framed in black cotton velvet & American walnut
finished size 52.3w x 44.7h x 5d cms



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[view on your wall](#)



' Transparency of a dream illuminated - Plate I ' 2014

[check availability](#)



[view on your wall](#)



' Transparency of a dream illuminated - Plate II ' 2014

[check availability](#)



[view on your wall](#)



' Transparency of a dream illuminated - Plate III ' 2014

[check availability](#)



[view on your wall](#)



'Transparency of a dream illuminated - Plate IV' 2014

[check availability](#)



[view on your wall](#)



' Transparency of a dream illuminated - Plate V ' 2014

[check availability](#)

‘ The consistency of his artistic vision is one of the most remarkable things about Alexander. Having discovered his voice in the late eighties, he has devoted himself to articulating it with the lifelong self-discipline of a medieval monk. In our publicity chasing era, such conviction commands respect. He is an oak tree in the landscape of contemporary art, not some lesser rooted being that bows to wherever the wind of public opinion takes it. ’

letter of introduction from Andrei Tolstoy to the Russian Academy of Arts

Andrei Tolstoy 1956-2016. Russian Academic, Professor Of Arts & President AICA Russia.



[view on your wall](#)



' Transparency of a dream illuminated - Plate VI ' 2014

[check availability](#)



[view on your wall](#)



' Transparency of a dream illuminated - Plate VII ' 2014

[check availability](#)

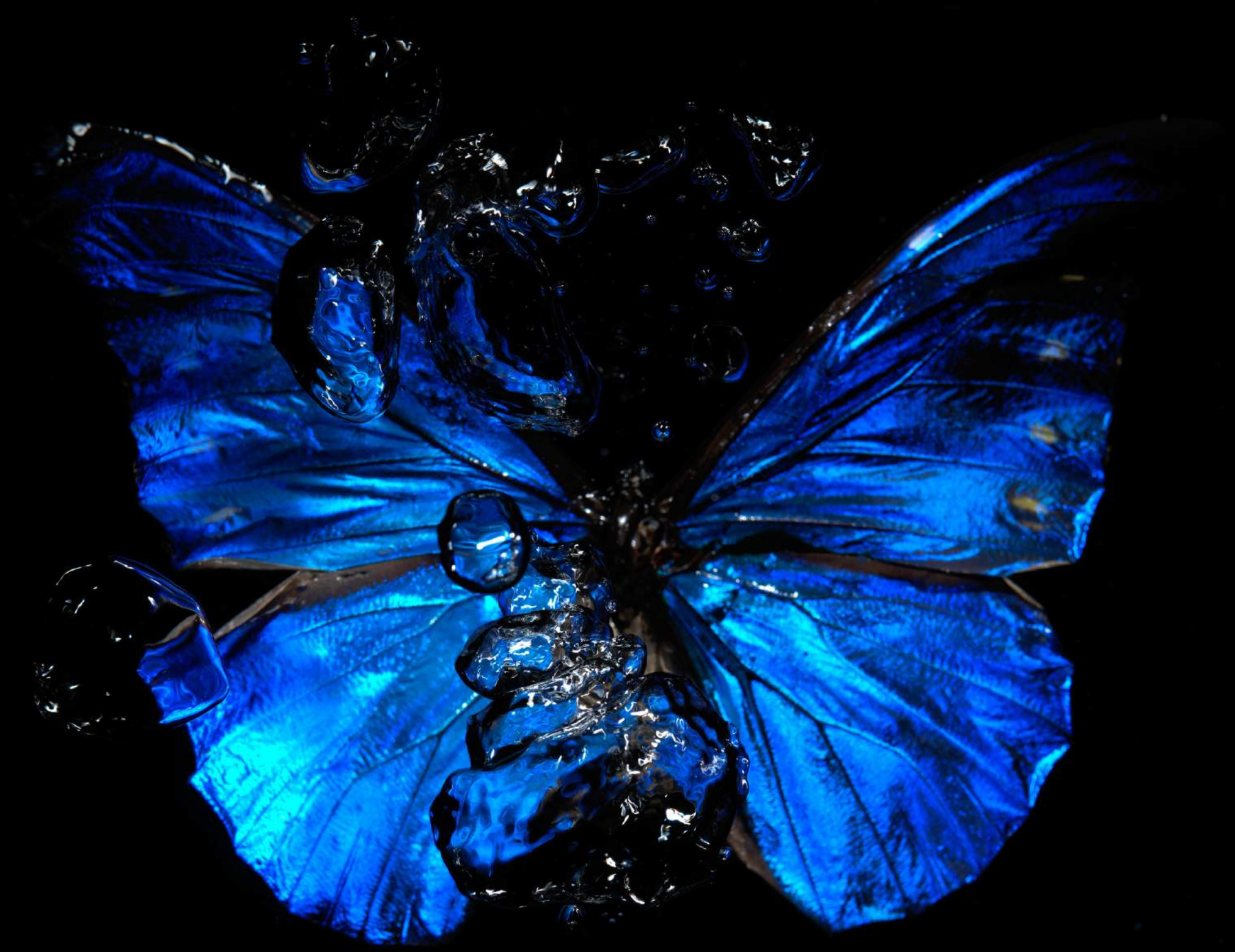


[view on your wall](#)



' Transparency of a dream illuminated - Plate VIII ' 2014

[check availability](#)



[view on your wall](#)



' Transparency of a dream illuminated - Plate IX ' 2014

[check availability](#)



[view on your wall](#)



' Transparency of a dream illuminated - Plate X ' 2014

[check availability](#)

‘ James’ fanatical insistence on being involved with every aspect of his creations is awe inspiring, and is perhaps only matched by his disdain for the easy route.’

[Dominic Perry, Culture Critic, Philistine Magazine.](#)



[view on your wall](#)



' Transparency of a dream illuminated - Plate XI ' 2014

[check availability](#)



[view on your wall](#)



' Transparency of a dream illuminated - Plate XII ' 2014

[check availability](#)



[view on your wall](#)



' Transparency of a dream illuminated - Plate XIII ' 2014

[check availability](#)



[view on your wall](#)



' Transparency of a dream illuminated - Plate XIV ' 2014

[check availability](#)



[view on your wall](#)



' Transparency of a dream illuminated - Plate XV ' 2014

[check availability](#)

‘ The works of artist Alexander James Hamilton are beyond the time and trends of todays modern art world. They are deeply personal, sensitive and yet interwoven with layers of strength whilst being so tragically beautiful, causing an immediate catharsis effect which we discovered in his studio with our own eyes. ‘

[Arts Critic Daria Gorshkova for BURO 247](#)



Installation at the exhibition 'Death of the dream' showing a selection of 8 x 10 inch original film plates in backlit museum frames.

‘ This method of exploring the subtle distortions that water makes on light is painstakingly exact and the results are simply quite extraordinary. ’

[Bob Chaundry The Huffington Post.](#)



artist Alexander James Hamilton photographed at the exhibition 'Death of the dream'

Transparency of a Dream

by Alexander James

Alexander James discusses the lengthy process behind his surreal image of several generations of butterflies. He explains all to **Jade Severs**

This image is taken from the series 'Transparency of a Dream', where I placed butterflies underwater and photographed them suspended in a dream-like state. When removed from the water they were unharmed. I was inspired to do this project when I was working in Moscow and found out that my estranged father had died and been buried for two years before I'd known about it.

It was this knowledge that triggered the idea of photographing generations of butterflies and was a project that would take two years of my life to complete.

Breeding butterflies

In order to create this surreal sensation of butterfly descendants dancing with one another – something that never occurs in nature – I had the

idea of layering generation upon generation of butterflies within a single transparency. This required me to breed several generations of butterflies over two years.

Starting with a parent butterfly specimen, I captured the original scene on a Sinar 10x8in plate camera, loaded with a single sheet of film. In order to create the effect of the butterfly being suspended in a dreamlike state, in my studio I used a highly scientific process to place the butterfly in a temperature-controlled coma – something that occurs in the wild. I then placed the butterfly in a specially devised tank of cooled water.

The butterfly is tied with a piece of black silk thread and the water gently moves; it is this arrangement that gives the illusion of them dreaming and dancing as they move with the motion of the water.

Capturing the scene required lighting that was handmade in the studio. A butterfly's wing is made up of thousands of light prisms. If you fire a flash directly at them they just reflect white light.

However, the water neutralises these prisms, allowing their full colour depth and luminosity to shine through.

Painting in light

Because of the complexity of the situation, I had to create lighting from aviation-grade aluminium that is very specific to this type of underwater set-up, and which I have been perfecting for 30 years.

The surface of the water can create a great deal of tension of movement, so the lighting is designed and directed to specifically catch these deviations in liquid mechanics. These movements catch and refract the light onto the subject, which is where the painterly quality of my work comes from: I am literally painting the subject in light.

Overlaying generations

Once the initial parent butterflies had been photographed, the plates were annotated and stored for several months until their offspring were born.

I went through four full cycles of breeding descendants of butterflies. These were then re-shot over the top of the original plates in the same manner, overlaying mother with daughter, father with son and so on.

It was very challenging and of course, had I wanted to, I could just have used some kind of post-production manipulation that I would be able to repeat. However, to me that would be horrific as the

pictures would no longer be unique. This is why I have produced each plate only as a single-edition print.

This reverses the usual parameters of photographic works. I have taken the

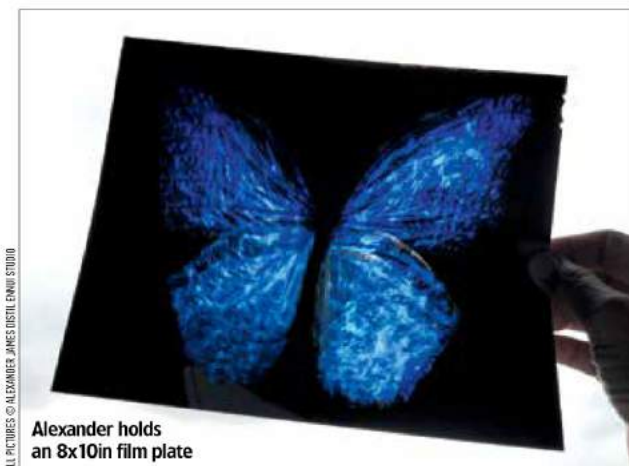
painterly quality of my work into the realms of traditional painting. For this reason, each butterfly piece exists only as a piece of 8x10in acetate and one, single-edition, 160x160cm print.

AP

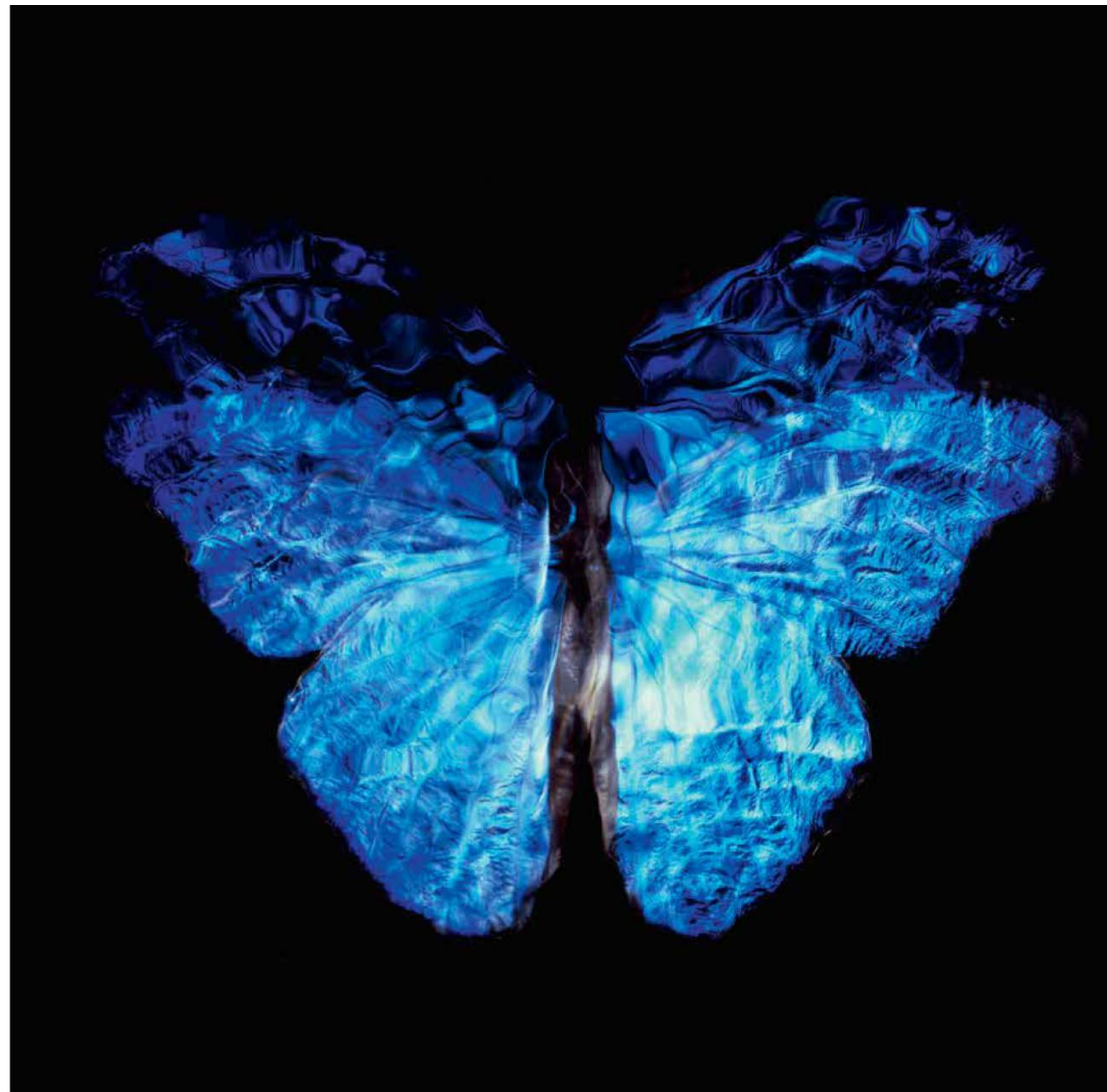


Alexander James

London-based photographer Alexander works largely with film techniques and is noted for his resistance to manipulating images in post-production. His work has been exhibited both in solo shows and as part of group exhibitions. To see more of Alexander's work, visit www.distilennui.com.



Alexander holds an 8x10in film plate



The line between art and science blurs when one considers the painstaking observations and critical timing Alexander James uses to create his work. "A scientist is as close a kin to an artist as you can get," James says. "Science is an important part of what I do, so if I am to start a new project, scientific research is profoundly important."

London-based James recently completed a new series of photographs titled "Transparency of a Dream." The collection includes remarkable one-off transparencies printed only as a single edition photographs. Building upon his 2010 "Swarm" series, in which he placed butterflies underwater in temperature-controlled comas and then revived them, James has captured butterflies and their offspring on the same plates in this astonishing new collection.

Explaining that one of his primary goals as an artist is to "preserve a memory before it fades and to perhaps save its tragic beauty," James was captivated by the idea of two generations of butterflies "dancing with each other."

The inspiration for "Transparency of a Dream" came when James learned of his estranged father's death two years after it happened. "It is a very personal subject," he explains, adding, "I only work on a deeply personal basis. I treat my studio as my church -- it is the place where I can deal with the many losses I have had in my life."

James is passionate about the art of traditional photography, and he says that the idea of "capturing something beautiful that will make people think" motivates him to get "out of bed in the morning singing and dancing" even when he has only had a few hours of sleep.

The immediacy of social media sites has changed the way we think of photographs, James maintains. "Between Photoshop and Instagram, when was the last time we really looked at something important? I want photography to be important again."

James is also passionate about the environment. He

has used water as his medium for 30 years, and he feels water is symbolic of many of the struggles we have on our planet. "We fight wars over oil today," he points out, "but disputes will inevitably erupt over water as a resource."

Butterflies are another symbol of our fragile environment. Stunned by the thousands of butterflies that are captured and killed throughout the world for use in what James terms "junk jewelry," the artist calls butterflies the "most hunted species on the planet."

"We travel as tourists on this world," he says, "but we do not have to destroy our environment in order to live here... We need to take an active role in defending our environment -- not as a fringe movement but as group of capable individuals. We all can do something to reduce our impact, but the problem is we are all having the wrong conversations."

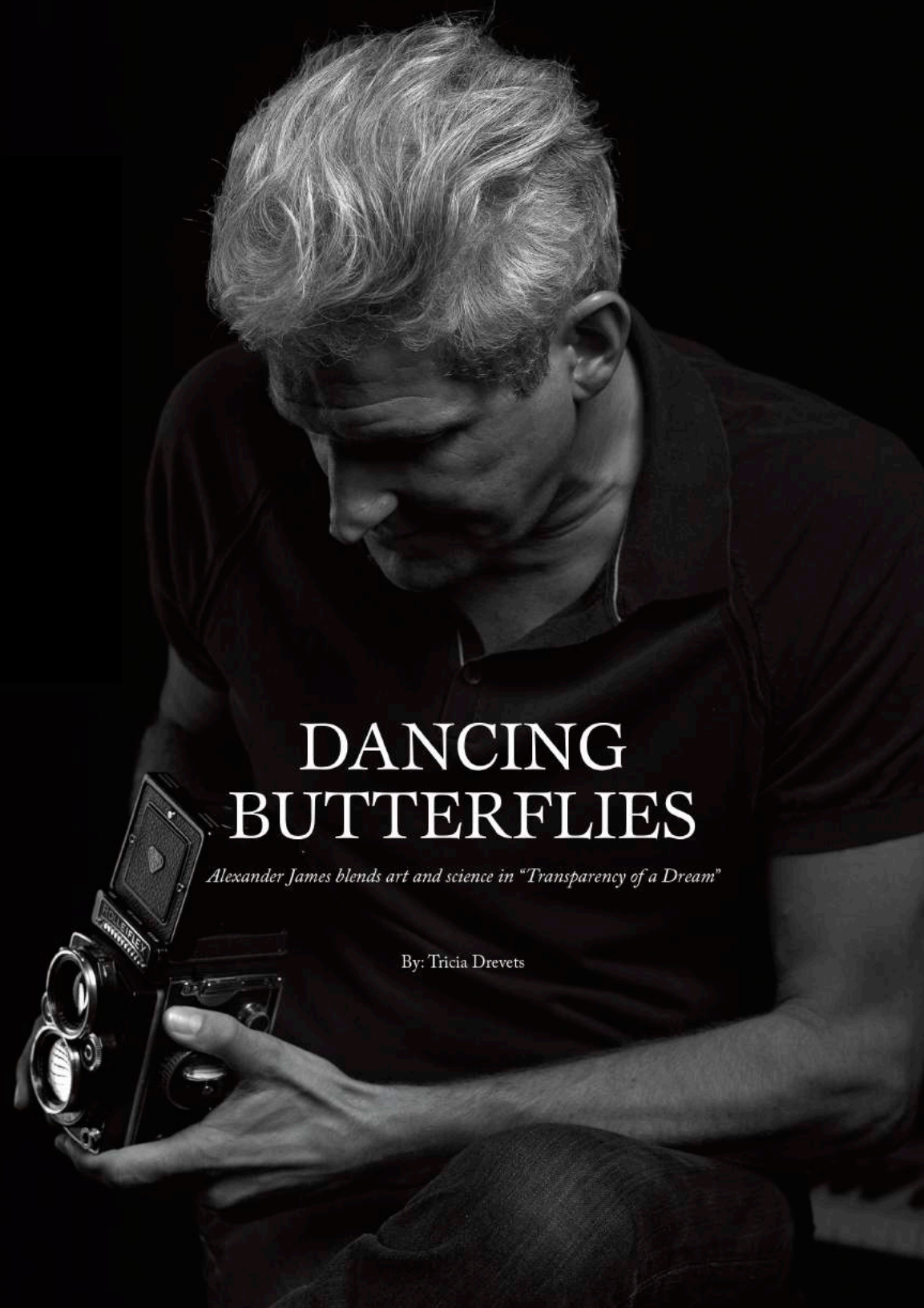
As an artist, James feels it is his responsibility to start the right conversations. "Perhaps as an artist, my role is not to be part of the conversation but to raise the flag that there is something that needs to be discussed."

James has plans to travel to Siberia within the next year to work with butterflies again. "I am preparing for something important," he says, admitting, "I just don't know what it is yet. Perhaps I will be able to create an environment where they can live where previously they could not."

A self-described workaholic, James worked seven days a week and often 20 hours a day for two years on "Transparency of a Dream." He even set up special sensors to waken him when the butterflies went through their metamorphosis, so that he could capture every detail of their brief lives.

"Every moment was an absolute privilege," says James. "It is really important that people take a look. Let's get photography important again." ✈

The entire "Transparency of a Dream" collection can be viewed at www.distilennui.com



DANCING BUTTERFLIES

Alexander James blends art and science in "Transparency of a Dream"

By: Tricia Drevets



darkroom print, with signature recto & NFC encrypted tag verso.

PROVENANCE.....

09-2017 Exhibition 'Death of the dream' Dellasposa Gallery, Piccadilly, London.

Frames are custom made exclusively by the artist to perfectly compliment each work. All elements from the original film plate to the photographic print, mount and framing is made to the highest conservation standards. By containing every element of the production process in-house, you are assured of a circular execution while enshrining the archival provenance of the artwork.

Works from this series are available framed in a range of designs including a backlit velvet frame for the original film plates to a range of exceptional [Shuo Sugi Ban](#) frames that are sustainably harvested from cedar wood by the artists hand alone.

All works are delivered with an [encrypted NFC provenance tag](#) with the artworks signature biometrics recorded in Catalogue Raisonné. This NFC tag can be scanned by any mobile phone to offer uncompromising artwork provenance verification without the need to download a special application. The system is future proof and operates without the heavy carbon footprint normally associated with blockchain type authentication systems. This unique artwork verification platform was developed in collaboration with [123Automate.lt](#) & the [Distil Ennui Studio™](#).

Augmented reality function in this catalogue is in collaboration with [Nvzn Easy ARt Viewer](#).