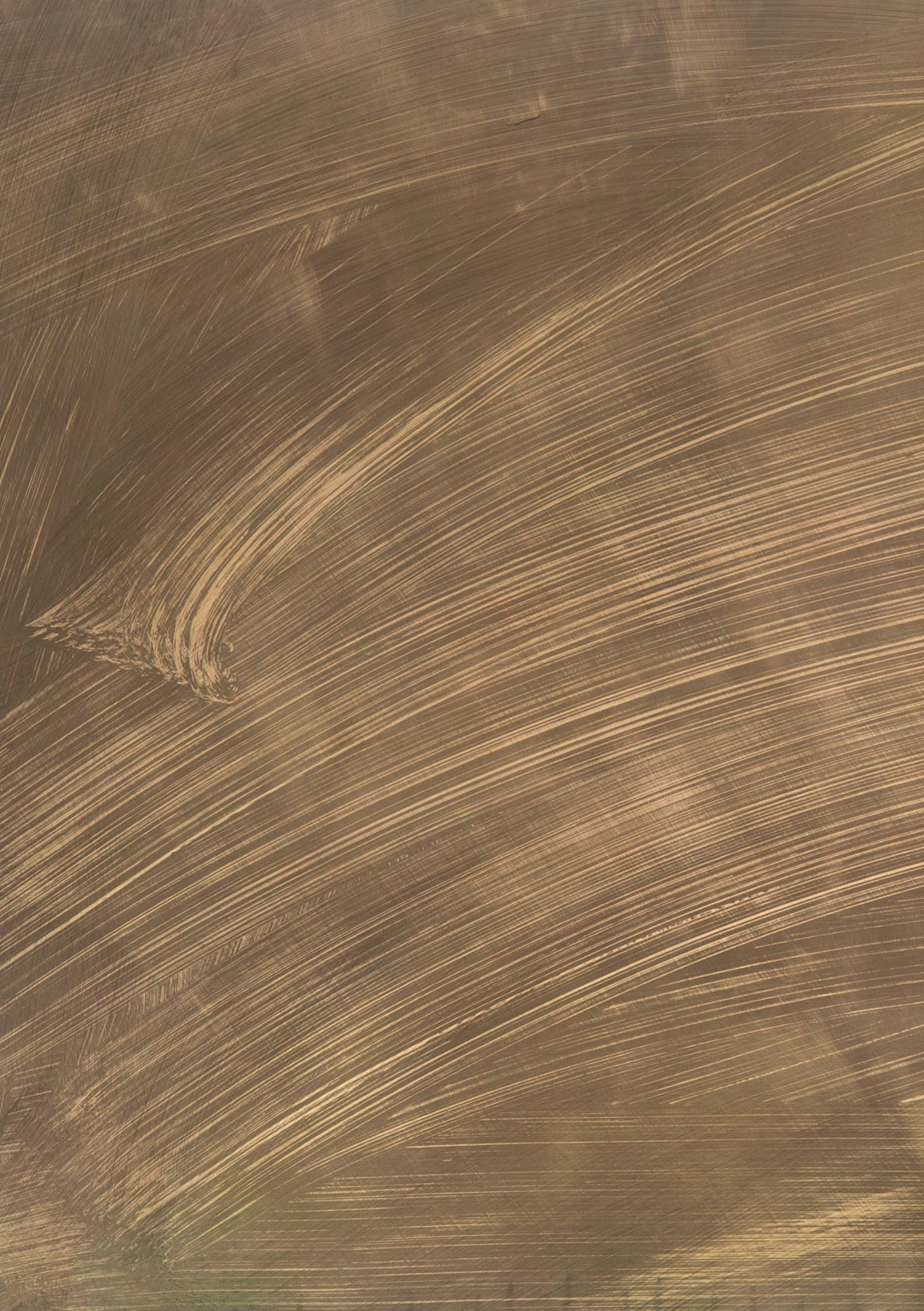




Helen Keller

Damian Taylor







Helen Keller

This group of works draws from archival images of the author and activist Helen Keller, who was born in Alabama in 1880 and died in 1968. As narrated in her first autobiography, published in 1903, Keller lost both her sight and hearing in infancy. At age six the realm of language and the possibility of conceptual communication was patiently unfolded to her through touch—through the hands of her new teacher, Anne Sullivan.

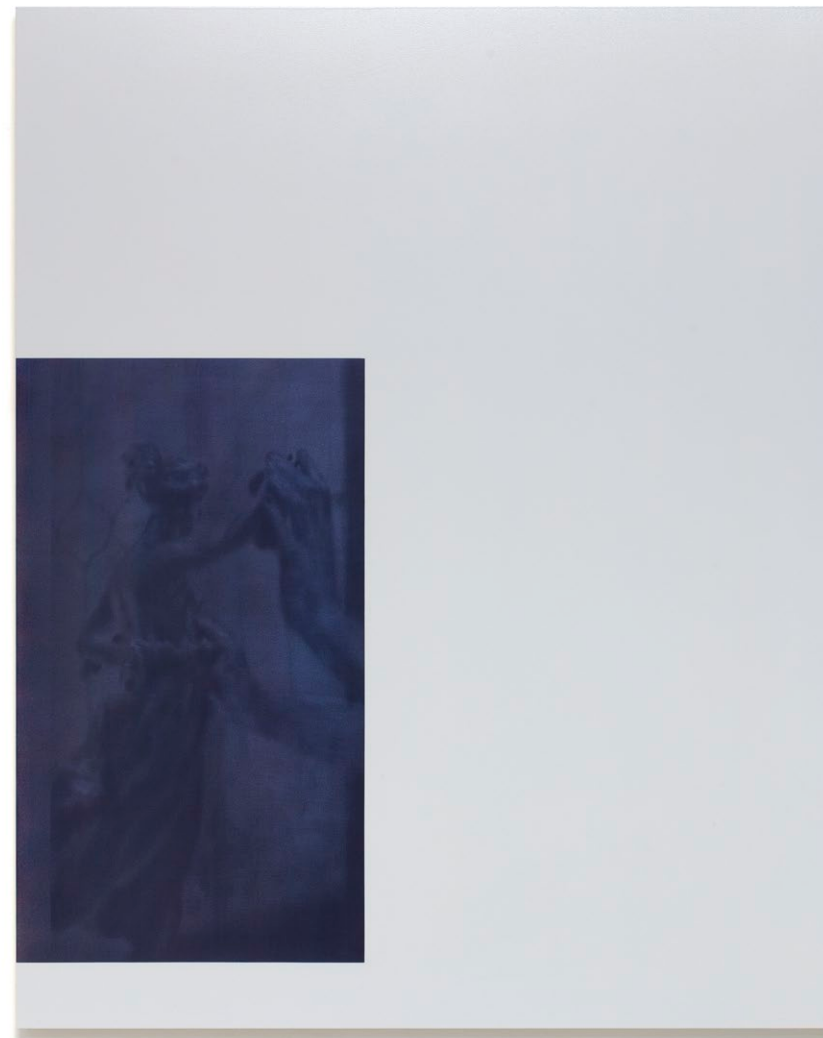
Keller's story of coming into language dramatises the miraculous nature of language acquisition more broadly. Initially, these works were my way to dwell within this marvel, as well as upon the moving beauty of Keller's narrative—a story of light and caresses, of novel negotiations of interiority and exteriority. These opened new perspectives on my longstanding interest in unfamiliar relations of the visible and the invisible; of vision, innocence, and insight.

In their permanently shifting appearance, the works themselves suggested unexpected positions from which to reflect on our evolving relationship with technology. They formed arcs that cut across time and space, establishing increasingly rich associative webs. Casting its shadow across the opening of Keller's life, for instance, we have the development of the first technology to separate voice from presence; Keller dedicated her autobiography to her friend and instructor Alexander Graham Bell, whose development of the telephone grew from his equally pioneering work teaching deaf children.

While the scope and promise of social connection opened by Bell's telephone rapidly expanded during the last decades of Keller's life—which closed with the dawn of the internet—these years were equally haunted by the growing spectre of societal annihilation. Keller was painfully aware of this. In 1948, as the first US Goodwill Ambassador to Japan following the end of the second world war, Keller returned to Hiroshima, a city that had warmly welcomed her eleven years earlier. Here, amid ruins and reconstruction, the visible and the invisible attained new valence; the dawn of the atomic age was written in the scorched silhouettes of the dead—photographs that made absence so palpable—as well as in the lingering presence of deadly yet invisible radiation.

Bell Labs made significant contributions to military research during the war, not least through the work of Claude Shannon, the pioneer of information theory who, posthumously, gave his name to one of today's most powerful developments in AI. In the immediate aftermath of the war Bell Labs continued to develop anti-aircraft missiles, among other technological innovations both military and civil. In 1947, for example, the first working transistor was demonstrated at the company's headquarters, an early anticipation the silicon age that was to come. It "scarcely seemed possible that mortal ingenuity could have devised" such wonders, Keller reflected after visited the site two years later. Then there were the "thinking machines," potentially so superior to the human brain in routine processes, yet, as she remarked, so deficient in spirit. Indeed, it is telling that, surrounded by such marvels, the most moving encounter Keller sought to express was the ineffable experience of isolation she had sensed in the vibrationless space of an anechoic chamber:

"Language has no equivalent for the absolute physical silence which burst upon me in that fantastic, bewildering chamber, suspended in what appeared to me an utter void. No, it did not disconcert me. I have known many kinds of silence—the silence of early morning, the silence of remote mountain summits, the silence of gently falling snow. I have been oppressed by the silence of a spiritual crisis, hushed by the silence of a great love and awed by the silence of friendships that had ceased to be. But in the Acoustic Dead Room I had a sense of complete disconnection with the life of the universe."



Helen Keller I (2023–24)
Pigmented alkyd on aluminium
120 × 96 cm

Helen Keller II (2023–24)
Pigmented alkyd on aluminium
120 × 90 cm



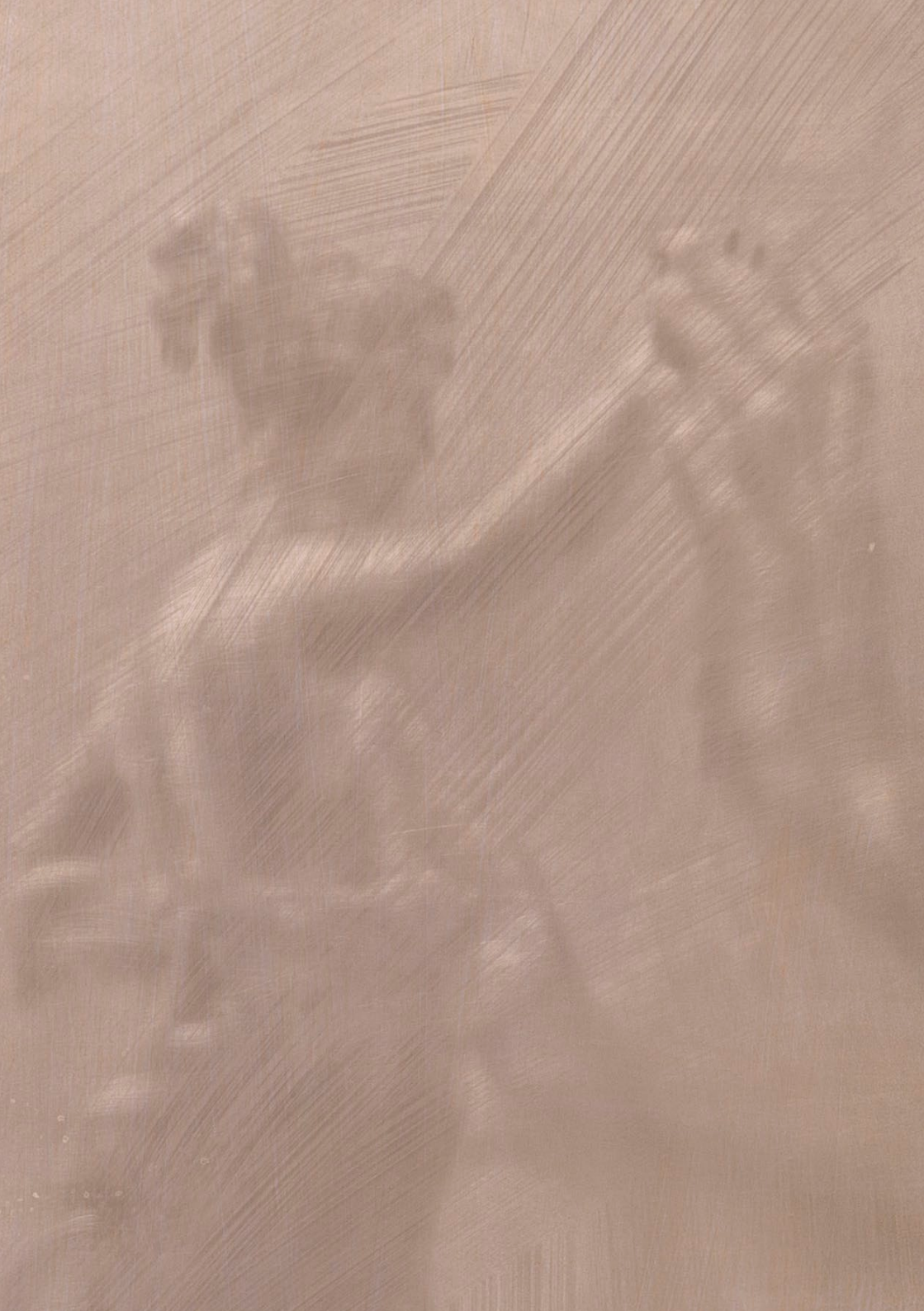


*Helen Keller, Anne Sullivan, Alexander
Graham Bell (2024)*
Pigmented alkyd on aluminium
80 × 120 cm



Helen Keller, dance (2024)
Pigmented alkyd on aluminium
72 × 32 cm







Helen Keller, Bell Labs I (2024)
Pigmented alkyd on aluminium
80 × 120 cm

Helen Keller, Sculpture (2024)
Pigmented alkyd on aluminium
64 × 96 cm







The Story of My Life

Helen Keller

The most important day I remember in all my life is the one on which my teacher, Anne Mansfield Sullivan, came to me. I am filled with wonder when I consider the immeasurable contrasts between the two lives which it connects. It was the third of March, 1887, three months before I was seven years old.

On the afternoon of that eventful day, I stood on the porch, dumb, expectant. I guessed vaguely from my mother's signs and from the hurrying to and fro in the house that something unusual was about to happen, so I went to the door and waited on the steps. The afternoon sun penetrated the mass of honeysuckle that covered the porch, and fell on my upturned face. My fingers lingered almost unconsciously on the familiar leaves and blossoms which had just come forth to greet the sweet southern spring. I did not know what the future held of marvel or surprise for me. Anger and bitterness had preyed upon me continually for weeks and a deep languor had succeeded this passionate struggle.

Have you ever been at sea in a dense fog, when it seemed as if a tangible white darkness shut you in, and the great ship, tense and anxious, groped her way toward the shore with plummet and sounding-line, and you waited with beating heart for something to happen? I was like that ship before my education began, only I was without compass or sounding-line, and had no way of knowing how near the harbour was. "Light! give me light!" was the wordless cry of my soul, and the light of love shone on me in that very hour.

I felt approaching footsteps, I stretched out my hand as I supposed to my mother. Some one took it, and I was caught up and held close in the arms of her who had come to reveal all things to me, and, more than all things else, to love me.

The morning after my teacher came she led me into her room and gave me a doll. The little blind children at the Perkins Institution had sent it and Laura Bridgman had dressed it; but I did not know this until afterward. When I had played with it a little while, Miss Sullivan slowly spelled into my hand the word "d-o-l-l." I was at once interested in this finger play and tried to imitate it. When I finally succeeded in making the letters correctly I was flushed with childish pleasure and pride. Running downstairs to my mother I held up my hand and made the letters for doll. I did not know that I was spelling a word or even that words existed; I was simply making my fingers go in monkey-like imitation. In the days that followed I learned to spell in this uncomprehending way a great many words, among them pin, hat, cup and a few verbs like sit, stand and walk. But my teacher had been with me several weeks before I understood that everything has a name.

One day, while I was playing with my new doll, Miss Sullivan put my big rag doll into my lap also, spelled "d-o-l-l" and tried to make me understand that "d-o-l-l" applied to both. Earlier in the day we had had a tussle over the words "m-u-g" and "w-a-t-e-r." Miss Sullivan had tried to impress it upon me that "m-u-g" is mug and that "w-a-t-e-r" is water, but I persisted in confounding the two. In despair she had dropped the subject for the time, only to renew it at the first opportunity. I became impatient at her repeated attempts and, seizing the new doll, I dashed it upon the floor. I was keenly delighted when I felt the fragments of the broken doll at my feet. Neither sorrow nor regret followed my passionate outburst. I had not loved the doll. In the still, dark world in which I lived there was no strong sentiment or tenderness. I felt my teacher sweep the fragments to one side of the hearth, and I had a sense of satisfaction that the cause of my discomfort was removed. She brought me my hat, and I knew I was going out into the warm sunshine. This thought, if a wordless sensation may be called a thought, made me hop and skip with pleasure.

We walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Some one was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word water, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that "w-a-t-e-r" meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! There were barriers still, it is true, but barriers that could in time be swept away.

I left the well-house eager to learn. Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought. As we returned to the house every object which I touched seemed to quiver with life. That was because I saw everything with the strange, new sight that had come to me. On entering the door I remembered the doll I had broken. I felt my way to the hearth and picked up the pieces. I tried vainly to put them together. Then my eyes filled with tears; for I realized what I had done, and for the first time I felt repentance and sorrow.

I learned a great many new words that day. I do not remember what they all were; but I do know that mother, father, sister, teacher were among them—words that were to make the world blossom for me, "like Aaron's rod, with flowers." It would have been difficult to find a happier child than I was as I lay in my crib at the close of that eventful day and lived over the joys it had brought me, and for the first time longed for a new day to come.

Helen Keller, Hiroshima (2024)
Pigmented alkyd on aluminium
72 × 108 cm



Helen Keller, Reading (2024)
Pigmented alkyd on aluminium
64 × 96 cm



Helen Keller, Bell Labs II (2024)
Pigmented alkyd on aluminium
80 × 120 cm





