



The Amber Room

*Tie Me to the Earth*

Rob Branigan

28 March – 3 May 2026



# Tie Me to the Earth

Rob Branigan

*‘Instead of forever hovering above I’d like to feel a weight grow in me to end the infinity and to tie me to earth. I’d like, at each step, each gust of wind, to be able to say “now, now and now” and no longer “forever” and “for eternity.”’*

– the angel Damiel,  
*Wings of Desire*, dir. Wim Wenders  
(1987)

Any tethering inevitably restricts. There are those who can, to varying degrees, overcome the bind of their tethers, or may have more urgent tethers to worry about. Prometheus probably found gravity to be his most significant physical restraint until he was chained to a mountain with an eagle pecking at his liver. But a tether can generate a freedom too. Damiel, the angel in Wim Wenders’s *Wings of Desire*, desires a physical connection to earth that is ultimately a temporal one. As he soars for eternity over Berlin, his desire to be tied to the earth is a wish to be human, mortal, and therefore in the orbit of death. Yet there is hope in his doom. He wants love, and therefore needs life. To live in the present moment requires the knowledge that these present moments must come to an end.

In Rob Branigan’s recent works, the hope of life and the doom of death seem inextricably intertwined. There is a sense that the present moment is always pregnant with the possibility of both growth and decay. *Desire for Desire* features two carriage clocks ticking away, ‘now, now and now’, forever marking the present moment and serving as the metronomic timeline of *Tie me to the Earth*. As for Damiel, the hope of the present is perhaps best exemplified by falling in love, and these carriage clocks are bound face to face, as if they’ve tied the knot in a smothering embrace, now counting their suffocating seconds together. And yet, they also seem to reflect each other, no longer two bodies but one, doubled in their mirror image. This shifts the ideal of love of the other to the horror of self-love and its inevitable doom, best exemplified by Narcissus and his inability to untether himself from his own reflection.

The Austrian psychoanalyst and writer Otto Rank’s *Der Doppelgänger* (The Double) explores narcissism and

doubling, a theme taken up by Sigmund Freud in *Das Unheimliche* (The Uncanny) where he notes that the double creates ‘a preservation against extinction’, or death. On a collective level, we might consider that this is simply the reproduction necessary to keep a species alive. On the individual level it can provide the hope of an immortal soul that survives beyond our transient bodies. However, as Freud notes, the double’s existence inevitably also then becomes ‘the ghastly harbinger of death’. In *Tie me to the Earth*, this hope and fear of doubling shifts back and forth in the works. In *Self (Double Portrait)*, two steel figures sit in the room. But we do not sense these two figures as truly individuated. As the title suggests, we are witnessing a single ‘self’ portrayed twice, or doubled. As in the clocks of *Desire for Desire*, this is something closer to a reflection, or an incomplete disambiguation, where two bodies remain tied to each other, marking each other with the hope of procreation and the doom of mortality.

The steel figures are composed of multiplied circles the size of the head. As such, they strike me as psychologised models of bodies, or how a head might (narcissistically, perhaps) think of its body purely as an extension of itself. The figures here gaze not at each other, but themselves, now fixed in a process of eternal navel-gazing as personal analysis. They appear so self-absorbed they no longer detect the butterflies perched on them. Here, the doubling runs rampant. That the butterflies are multiplied across the room (*Specimen*) suggests a form of proliferating life, but given they now appear weighty, frozen, with a verdigris decay, they seem to reach back in time to a distant death. Their proliferation suggests a flourishing that might breed the hope of new dawn, but equally it prompts the terror of an uncontainable and overwhelming life-force, as in a swarm of locusts, or the menacing hordes of crows, rooks, gulls and sparrows in Daphne du Maurier’s short story ‘The Birds’, subsequently adapted by Alfred Hitchcock. The dispersal of Branigan’s butterflies and the positions of their wings makes them look mobile, untethered and free, but only in the way those petrified by Medusa might look liberated for an instant. Of course, Medusa’s petrification is the lethal price of seeing. In *Wings of Desire*, Damiel no longer wishes to simply bear witness – he is willing to pay the price of life, which is a date with death, to be truly seen by the object of his love, the trapeze artist Marion.

Branigan’s butterflies are versions of Vanessa atalanta, the Red Admiral. These are some of the earliest

migratory butterflies to fly northward in spring to reproduce, and therefore signal the emergence of life and regrowth. But they also arrived in Russia in 1881 following the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, granting them the additional status of harbingers of doom, a theme taken up by the writer and lepidopterist Valdimir Nabokov, who regularly deployed them in his writing for their sinister omens. In his memoir *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov recalls seeing a girl in Paris prior to the Nazi invasion holding a length of string tied to a fluttering Red Admiral. Red Admirals are particularly likely to rest on people, as they do in Branigan's *Self (Double Portrait)*, and in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, where a Red Admiral is perched on John Shade's arm immediately prior to his assassination.

That living beings might be weighed down with their pasts or the portentous meanings of their futures seems to reverberate throughout *Tie Me to the Earth*. The humanoid figures look burdened. Flying creatures are fixed. They all hold gravitas, or perhaps excess gravity. In *Imagine Darkness*, verdigris butterflies cling to the taper of a wooden candle with an unlit copper wick. The work is titled after the opening two words of Ursula Le Guin's novel *City of Illusions*, in which a man emerges from the dark into the light, laden with an unclear past and indeterminate future. *Imagine Darkness* also seems birthed in darkness, its potential for light as yet unfulfilled. In the related series of works titled *Longing*, the illusion of a dribble of soft, malleable candle wax is in fact meticulously carved lime wood. From the candle's base hangs a dangling cuckoo clock weight – a weight that seems to slow time itself. The cuckoo, another harbinger of spring, with its light and growth, never appears. The pendulum of this clock no longer swings, no bird emerges, there is no birdsong. And the flame on the candle, represented by Branigan as a copper and brass butterfly, does not flicker. In Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, before Shade's death, the Red Admiral flutters 'like a coloured flame'. But here, time stands still.

This sense of being stilled, or held in place, bears all the ambiguity that the word 'held' can hold. We can be both held like a hug (as in *Desire for Desire*), or pinned like a bug. Lepidopterists, Nabokov among them, will impale a flighty butterfly through its body in an act of preservation and display. And in *Tie Me to the Earth*, this act of impalement as a procedure of being tied to the earth operates at an array of escalating scales. Echoing the pinned butterfly is the photograph

*Nature of Things*, depicting a yellow-rumped warbler impaled on the spike of a cactus, suspended in a state of imposed stillness, and now destined to decay beautifully on full display, similarly to the verdigris rot of the copper butterflies. In the background of the image, flagging tape is tied around another limb of the cactus, and in the accompanying photograph, *Partisan*, tape is again tied around a tree. Both feature dangling loose ends. Marked for the unknown, as tethers they feel redundant, as if to say a plant being physically rooted in the earth is tether enough.

*Self (Endless)* is a further steel figure, though here standing. The head gazes down at a wooden candle attached to a stake that pierces its heart, and the carved dripping wax seems a proxy for the flow of blood from the wound. The figure bears witness to this impalement as if coming to terms with its own mortality, a memento mori for this abstracted human being. The pose and the mechanism of death reminds me of Chief Phillips in *Apocalypse Now*, who looks down at his own impalement through the heart, aware that his death is now imminent, and mutters 'a spear'. Impalement, in particular a stake through the heart, is an historic form of fixation – it will kill the undead vampire but also tie its body to the earth, preventing any future reanimation. That Branigan's figure is *Endless* prompts the sense that despite all the above, there is an immortality to our fixed and transfixed figure, in all its suffering. Perhaps at this stage, it is unavoidable to acknowledge this Self as Christ-like – pinned to the Cross and impaled by the Spear of Destiny through the heart. In a project addressing life and death, hope and doom, that there is a spiritual, even frankly religious parallel in the dual trajectories of paradise and hell feels unavoidable. And ultimately, we have orbited back towards where we all began, with a particular type of fallen angel, Damiel, a divine being who tied himself a little more tightly to the earth in the hope that life might just erupt in the face of death.

Essay by Adam Hines-Green

Rob Branigan (b. 1992, Liverpool, UK) lives and works in London. He earned his BFA Fine Art from The Ruskin School of Art, Oxford, in 2013 and his MA Sculpture from the Royal College of Art, London, in 2019.

Branigan works between sculpture, drawing and photographic processes. Bridging the handmade and found object, his practice inhabits a space between materiality and representation. Creating works that simultaneously shift and sit frozen, he gives life and form to a passing of time – disrupting the markers, moments, memories and turning points that signify being. The exhibition *Tie Me to the Earth* considers feelings of existential doom shaped by personal change, technological systems, and global uncertainty, and holds them in tension with a sense of hope, potential, and resilience.

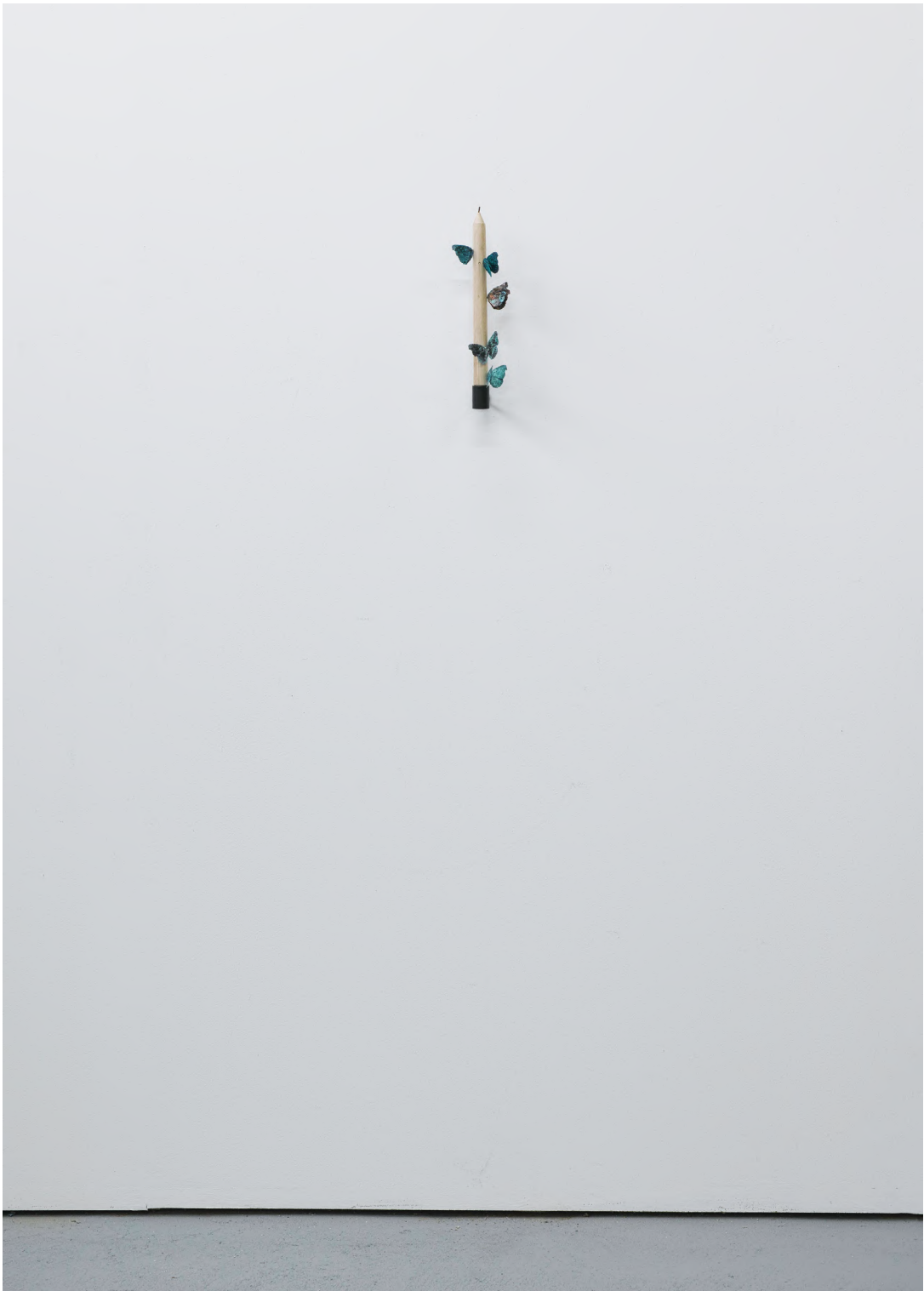
Past exhibitions include *Annotations*, Sherbet Green & AIFA, London (2025); *Sticking up for Soft*, Cedric Bardawil & The Amber Room, London (2024); *Est-Ce Celui-ci d'Escargot Qui Renaît ou Bien Un Autre*, DS Galerie, Paris (2024); *Apricity pt. II*, 12.26, Los Angeles (2024); *Apricity*, 12.26, Dallas (2024); *The Last Train After the Last Train*, Public Gallery, London (2023); *Lost in a Just-In-Time Supply Chain*, Hypha Studios, London (2022); *Companions*, Union Pacific, London (2021); *Salon ACME*, Mexico City (2020); *Under the Volcano*, M74, Mexico City (2020); *At Odds with Everything We Touch*, Standpoint Gallery, London (2020).





*Longing (together)*, 2026  
Lime, copper, brass, pine cone weight, chain, steel  
87 x 10 x 8cm





*Imagine Darkness, 2026*  
Lime, copper, steel  
32 x 9 x 10cm







*Partisan, 2025*  
Digital c-type print from scanned negative  
Framed edition of 3  
70.5 x 60.5 x 3.5cm





*Nature of Things*, 2025  
Digital c-type print from scanned negative  
Framed edition of 3  
70.5 x 60.5 x 3.5cm





*Desire for Desire, 2026*  
Carriage clocks, flagging tape, steel  
30 x 35 x 17.5cm





*Longing (alone)*, 2026  
Lime, copper, brass, pine cone weight, chain, steel  
105 x 4 x 8cm





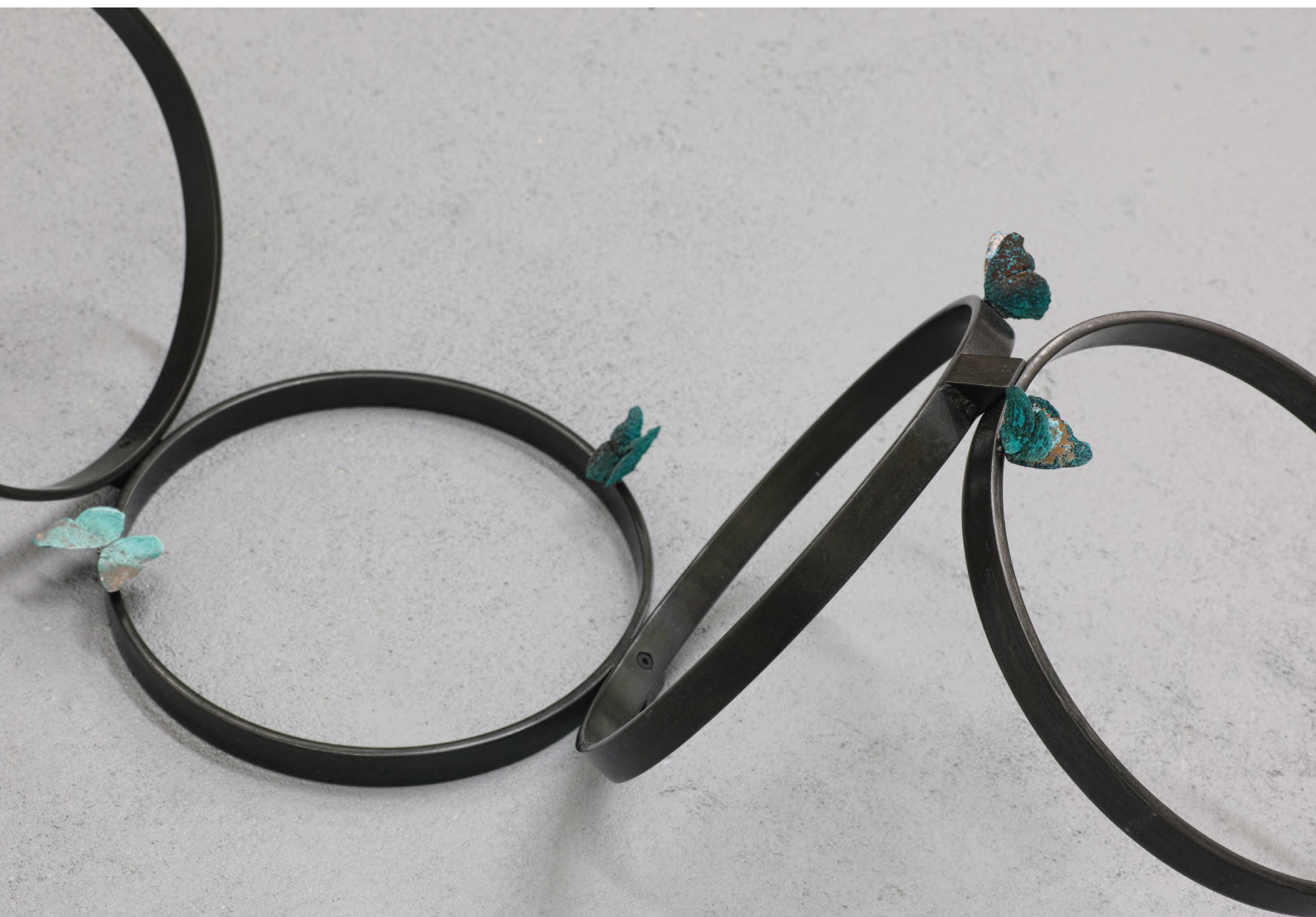
*Longing (as one)*, 2026  
Lime, copper, brass, pine cone weight, chain, steel  
175 x 13 x 13cm



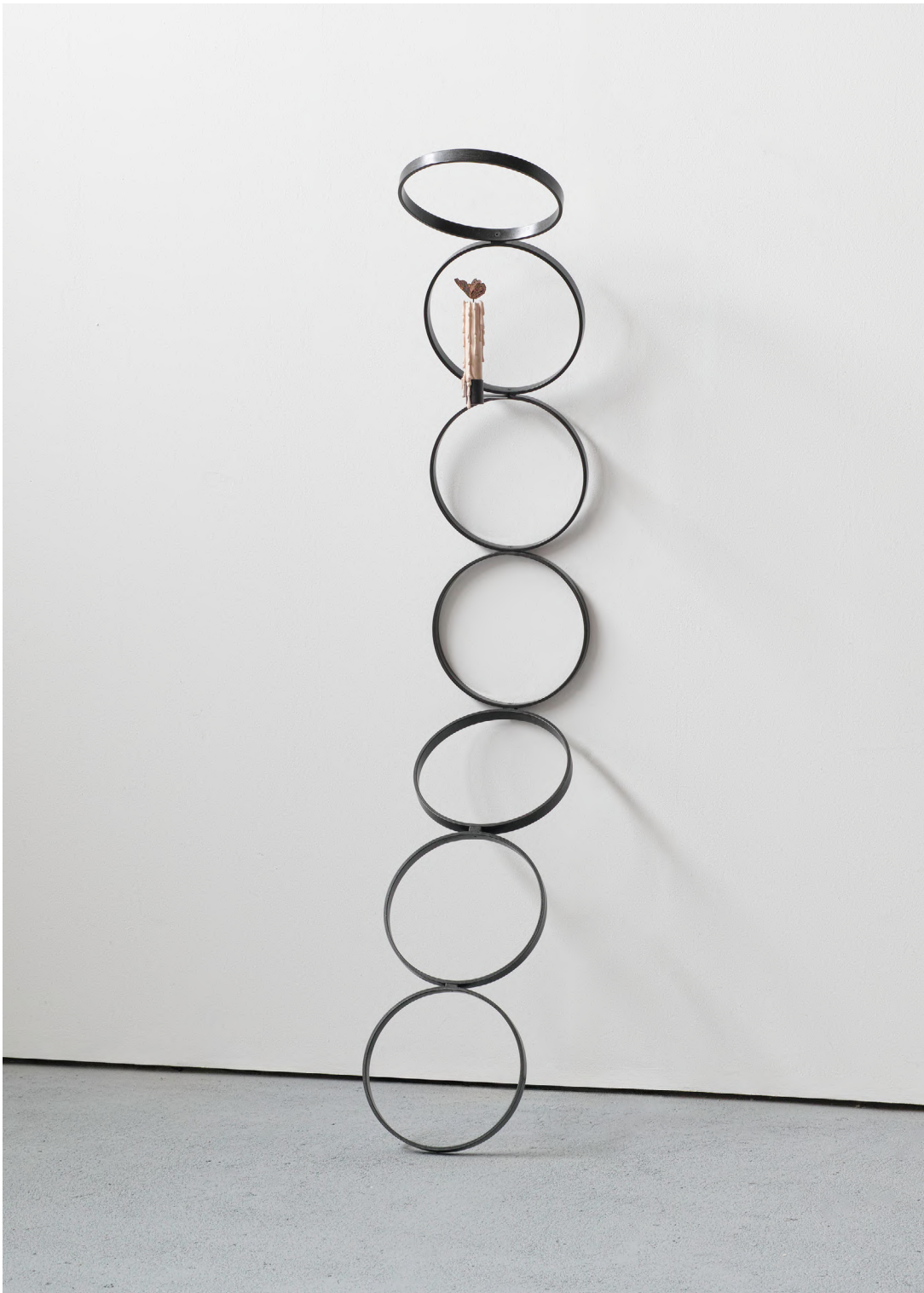




*Self (Double Portrait), 2025*  
Steel, copper  
70 x 150 x 150cm







*Self (Endless)*, 2026  
Steel, lime, copper, brass  
160 x 25 x 40cm







*Specimen*, 2025  
Copper  
Dimensions variable

*Specimen (pair)*, 2025  
Copper  
Approx 3 x 5cm





Installation Views. Photography by Ollie Harrop.







For all enquiries, please contact:

The **AmberRoom**

31 Ethelbert Rd, Margate, CT9 1SH

Rosie Reed  
[rosie@theamberroom.com](mailto:rosie@theamberroom.com)  
+44 7957 493 488