

***Frisos***

Tatacoa desert

FLORA ars+natura (Colombia)  
July – August 2015

During my residency at FLORA ars+natura, Colombia, I focused on two very different yet connected topics as well as two contrasting landscapes, the Tatacoa Desert and the Armero ruins. Although dissimilar in form, the appearance of both is the result of fascinating geological events. I approach them with the same impulse—to examine their natural structures.

The Tatacoa Desert is the second largest arid zone in Colombia. It occupies 330 square kilometres. This semiarid region is located north of Huila Department. It is a rich deposit of fossils and therefore an important landscape for paleontological studies. The Tatacoa Desert has two distinctive colours: ochre in the area of Cusco and grey in Los Hoyos.

The Tatacoa, or the Valley of Sorrows, as it was called in 1538 by the conquistador Gonzalo Jimenez de Quesada, is not just a desert, but also a tropical dry forest. The name ‘Tatacoa’, also given by the Spanish, refers to rattlesnakes. During the Tertiary Period it was damper than it is today, with flourishing fauna, but since then, it has been gradually drying up to form a desert.

The Armero ruins are the result of the Armero tragedy—a major consequence of the eruption of the Nevado del Ruiz stratovolcano in Tolima, on November 13, 1985. After 69 years of dormancy, the volcano’s eruption caught nearby towns unaware, despite the government receiving warnings from multiple volcanological organisations to evacuate the area when activity was detected in September of the same year.

As pyroclastic flows erupted from the volcano’s crater, it melted the mountain’s glaciers, sending four enormous lahars (volcanically induced mudslides, landslides, and debris flow) down its slopes at 50 kilometres per hour (30 miles per hour). The lahars picked up speed in gullies and coursed into the six major rivers at the base of the volcano. It engulfed the town of Armero, killing more than 20,000 of its almost 29,000 inhabitants. The Armero tragedy had a huge impact on Colombia’s collective psyche, as people since learnt that the high death toll could have been avoided and many lives saved, had the government acted differently at the time.

Tatacoa Desert



Armero ruins



The Tatacoa Desert is an enormous landscape —intimidating and overwhelming; it exceeds our capacity as humans to comprehend it. The heat and the sun hypnotises and sometimes blinds us. Deciding what to draw was not easy, as everything my eyes encountered was equally impressive. Much of my learning process can be attributed to Lina Perez Angel, a young geologist who helped me understand some of the ‘language’ of the landscape. Without Lina, I would not have had the tools to read it.

Lina not only showed me the landscape and explained how it was formed, but together, we collected stones and materials that she taught me how to classify. My perception of the place continued to change as the days passed. Then one day, when I looked down at the ground, I no longer simply saw stones as objects that were foreign to me, but materials composed of one thing or another that I could start to classify myself.

I began to understand factors about those stones that mattered. Angles, movements formed thousands or millions of years ago, formations that were caused by reasons that could potentially be inferred (provided the geological knowledge). Ways of learning that I did not know existed were now at my fingertips. For example, I discovered that by feeling the texture of the material with my teeth I was able to better percieve its thickness than by eye or hand. The same was possible by listening to the sound it makes when hit with another object.

Tatacoa has a peculiarity in the composition of its land, which is made up of sand, creating alien-looking forms. These took thousands of years to form, but if one would walk on its surface or touch it, it would easily come apart in their hands. I became interested in drawing forms that were slightly more compact and defined. Those that could be seen between these sand formations. They looked like some kind of natural frieze, sustained between a soft cocoon of sand. Approaching the landscape hand-in-hand with a geologist helped me to focus (and draw) aspects of this scenery I wouldn’t have otherwise noticed. The results of this process are drawings that were made directly in the field.

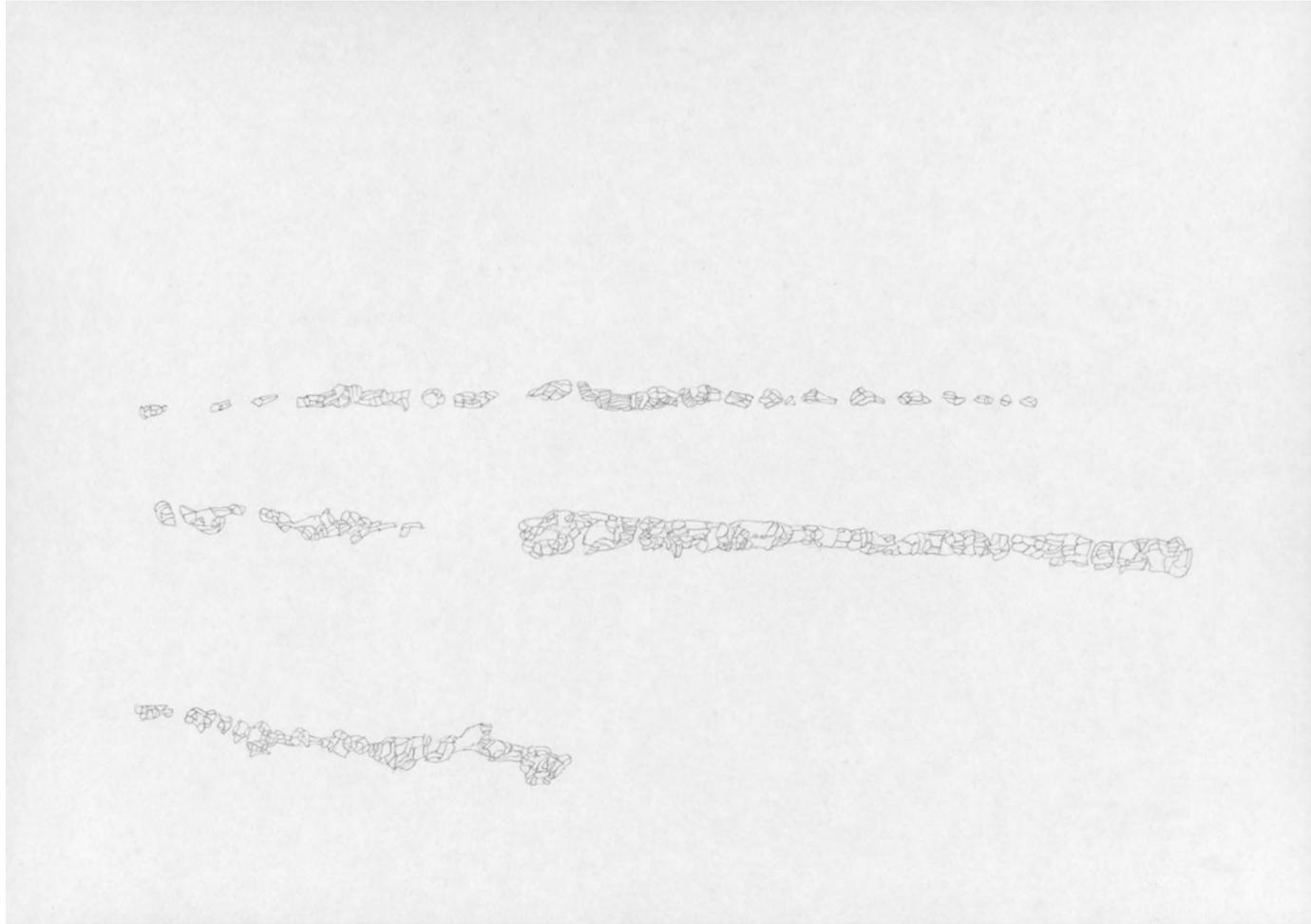


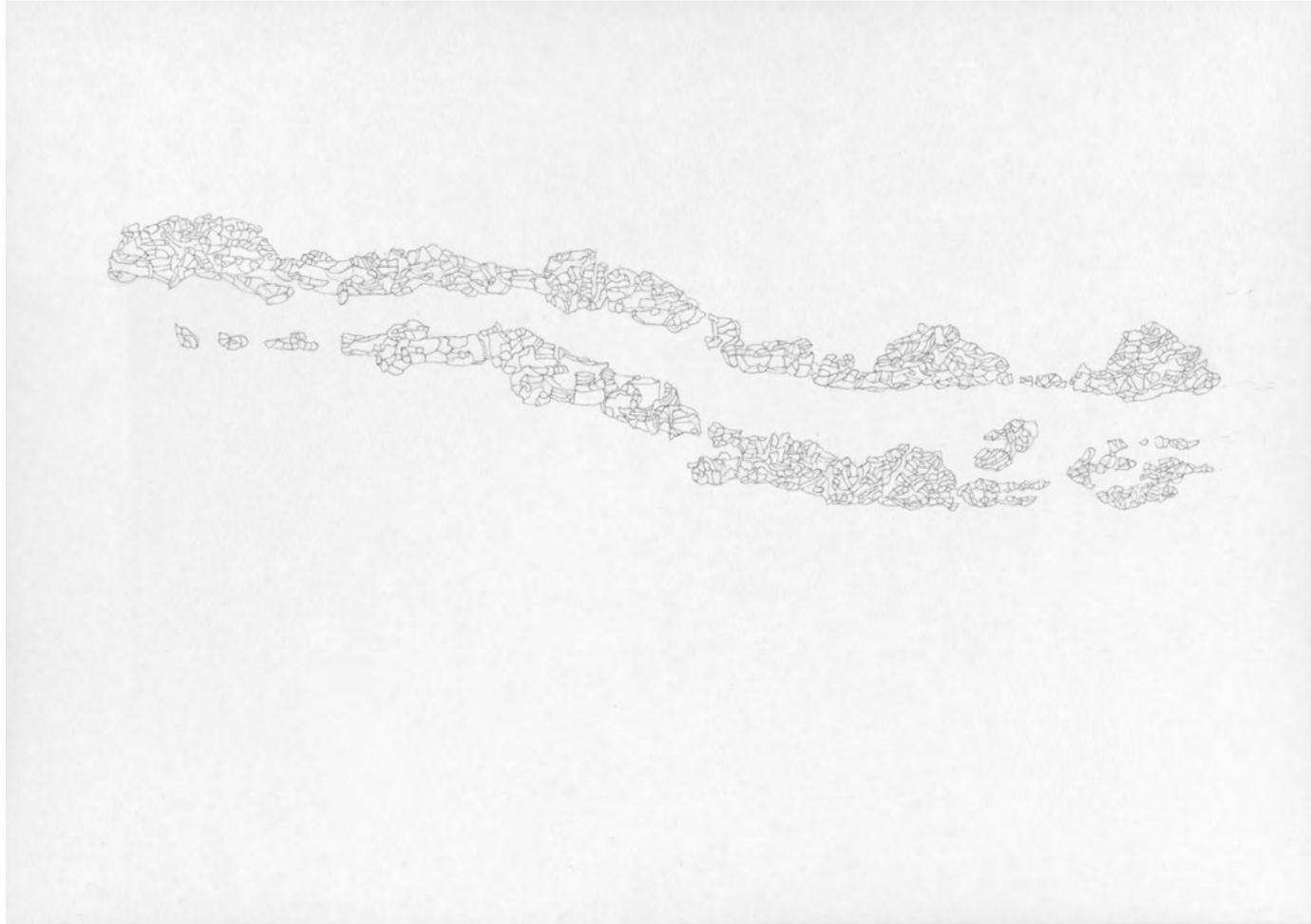
i  
5 drawings  
pencil on paper  
21 × 29 cm



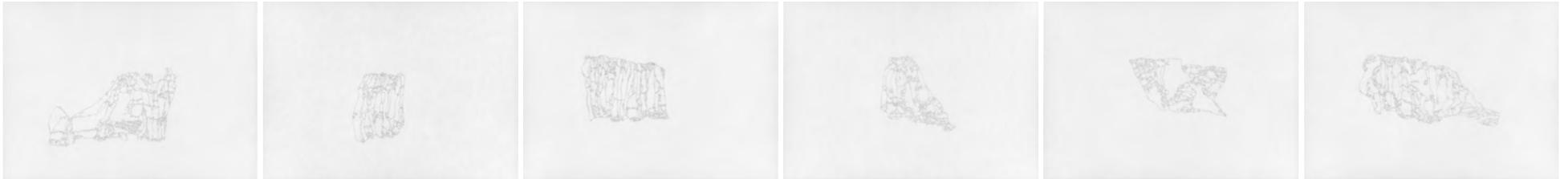
landscape







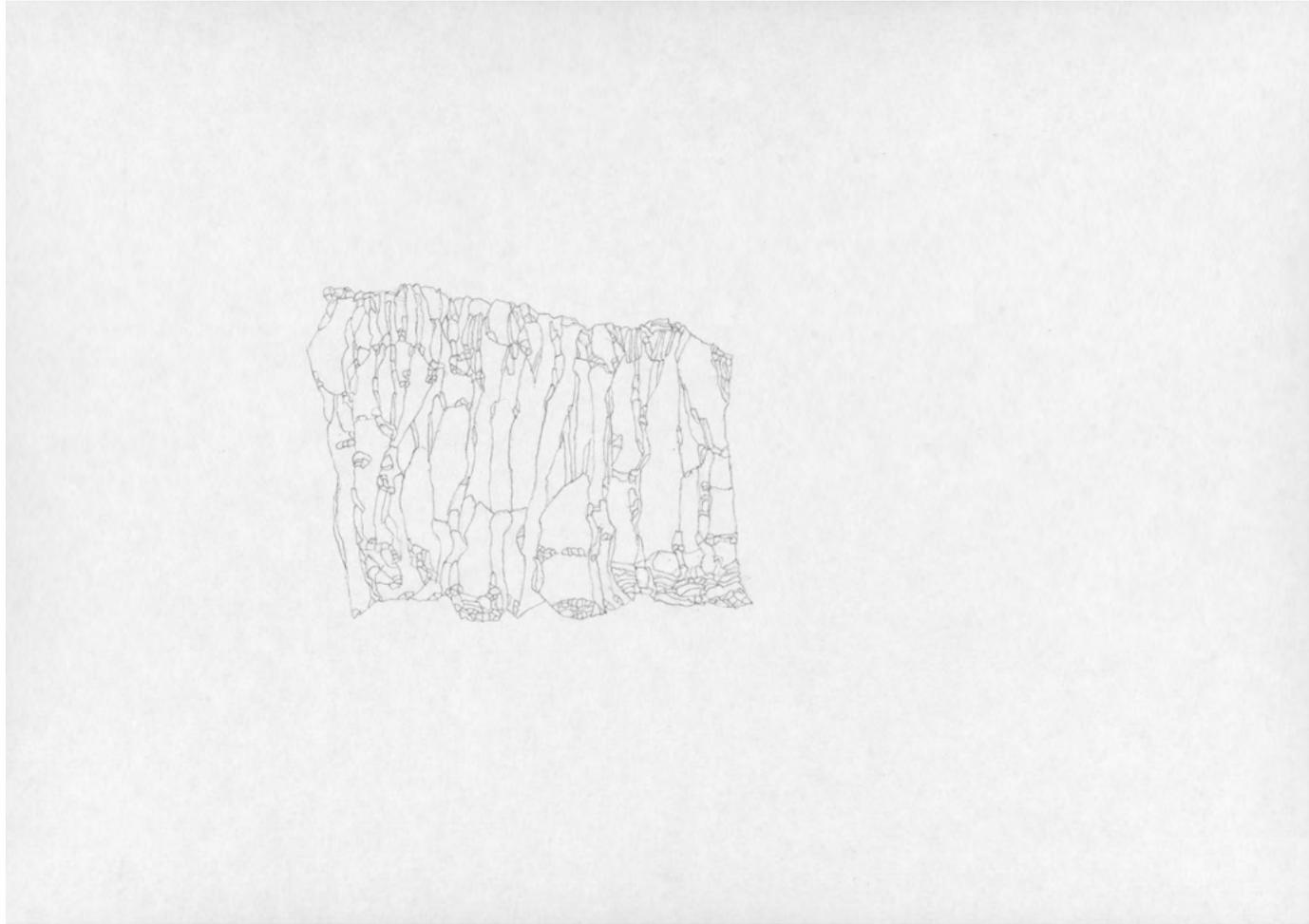
ii  
6 drawings  
pencil on paper  
21 × 29 cm



landscape

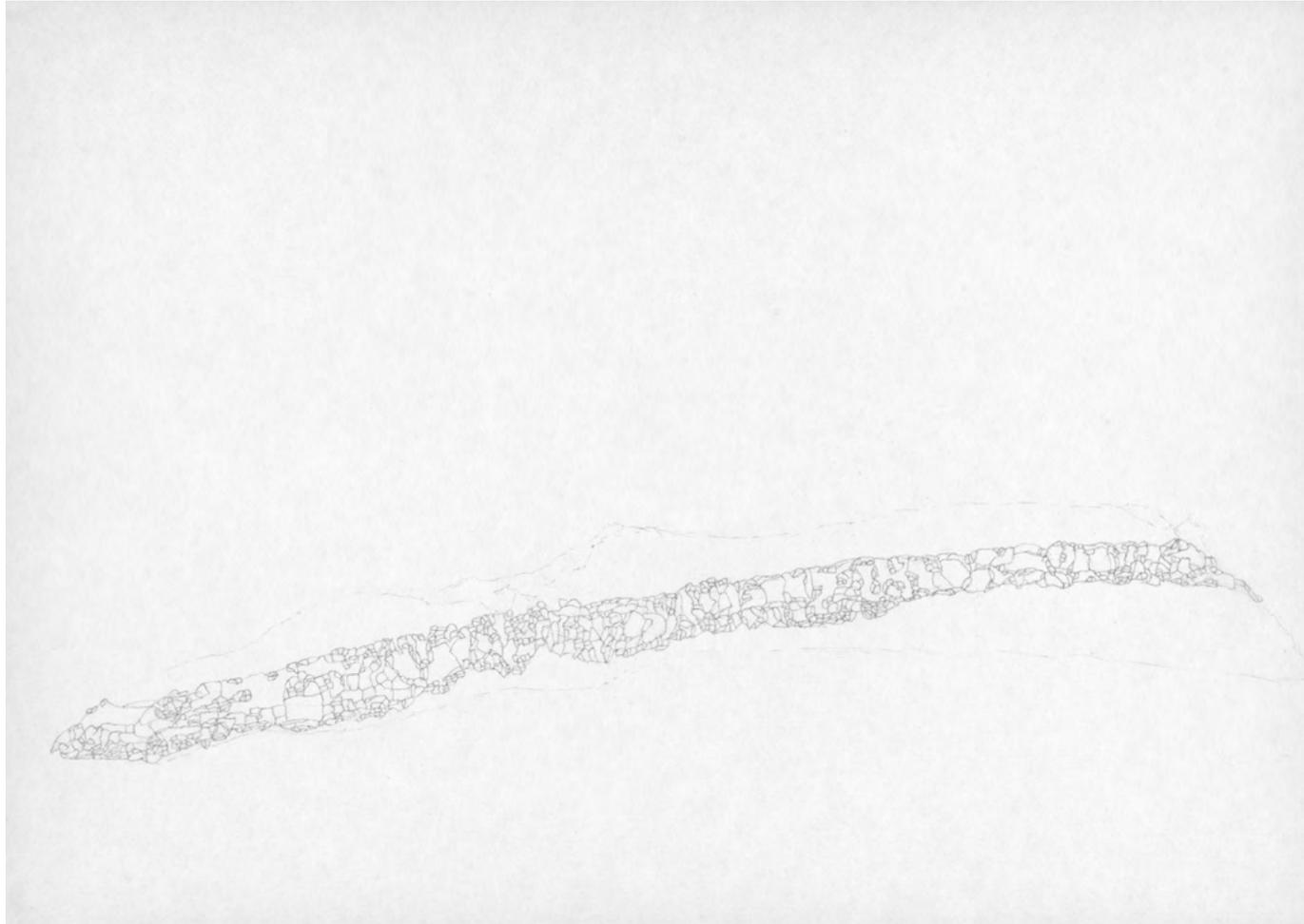




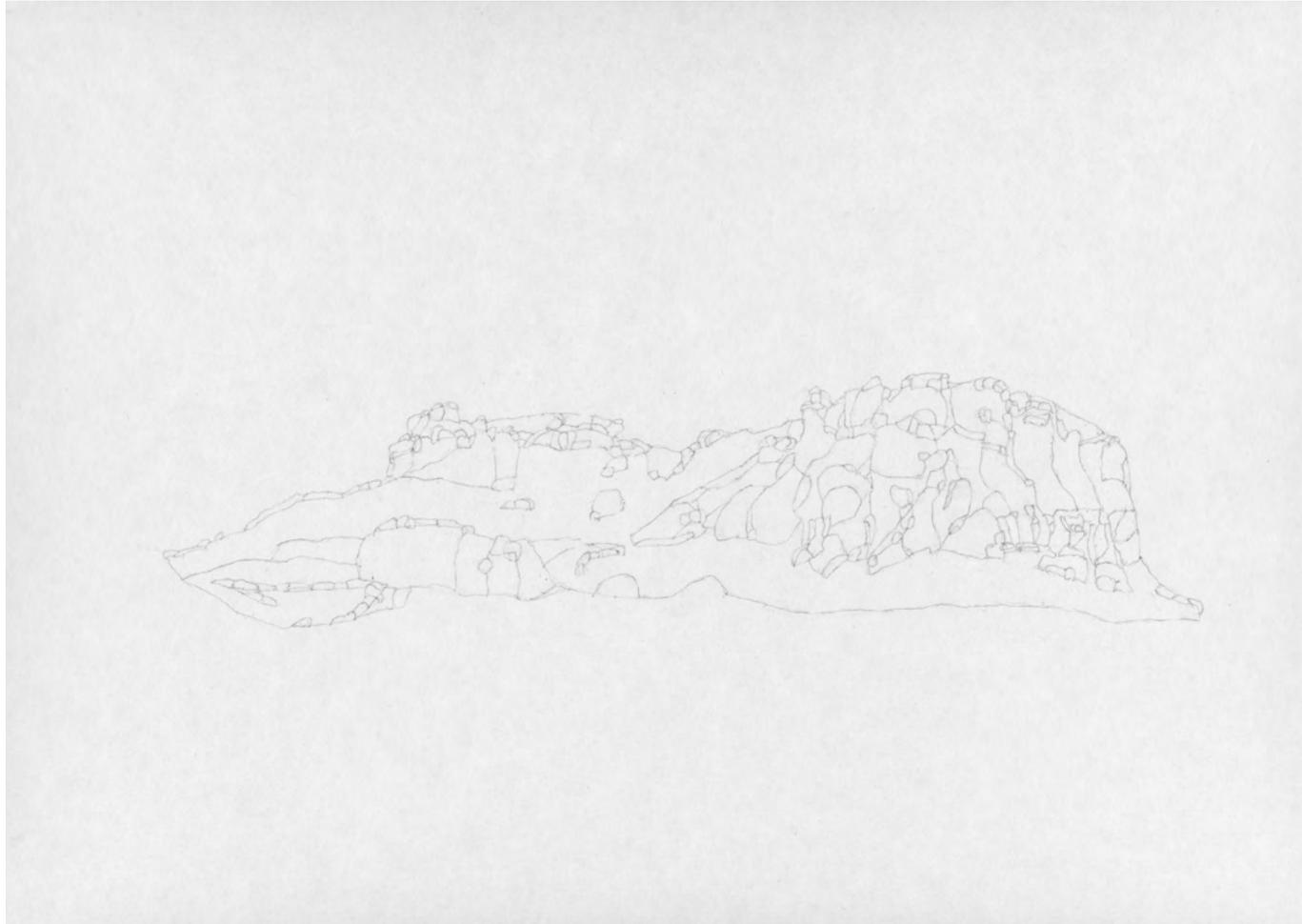




iii  
1 drawing  
pencil on paper  
21 × 29 cm



iv  
1 drawing  
pencil on paper  
21 × 29 cm



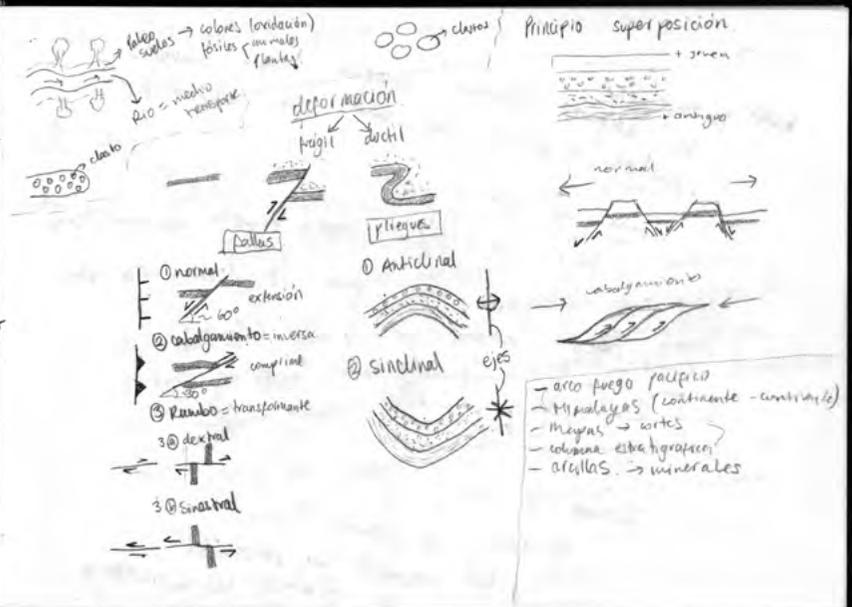
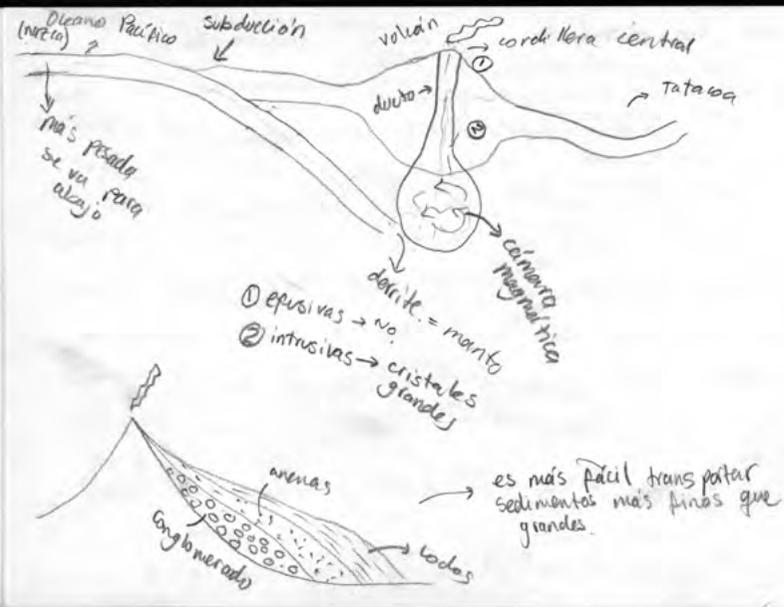
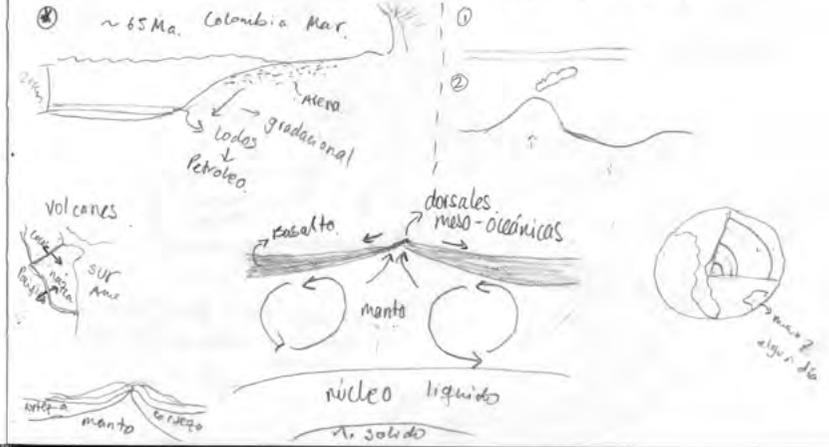
v  
1 drawing  
pencil on paper  
21 × 29 cm

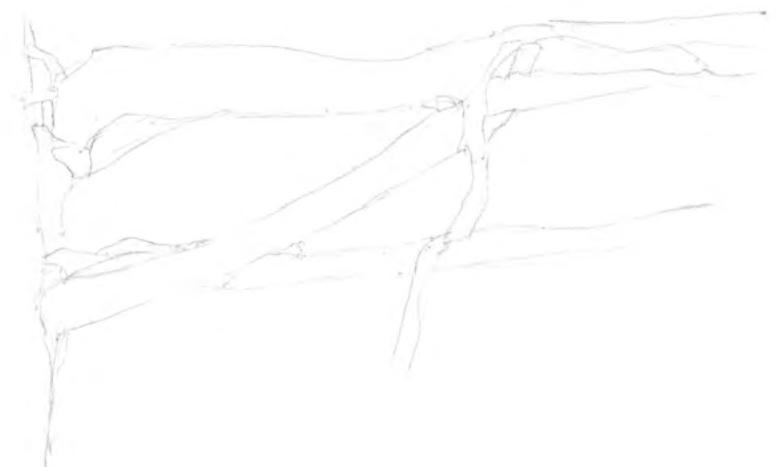


hacer columna?  
 cada en particular hacia arriba haciendo  
 descripciones cada vez que hay cambios de  
 capas. se describe en seco. Le dicen  
~~se~~ se ~~unen~~ se unen a la descripción sin  
 'sesgo' es decir tratar de dejar afuera  
 las ideas pre-concebidas. aunque creen  
 que lo que ven es tal cual está lo describen  
 como si no lo conocieran. piedra volcánica  
 arenosa. etc... etc...

cosas que dicen diferente al dato con la  
 mente,  
 o se sinten diferente al decirlo

con los datos  
 3 tipos roca  
 Sedimentarias  
 Igneas → volcánicas / ígneas  
 metamórficas → P/T (Presión y Temperatura)





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Armero ruins

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After a small break at Casa Deuxsoleils in Honda, Tolima, where FLORA holds its residency programme 'Permanent Summer' and by using this place as a base, I started exploring the region and thought about how to take the work further. About an hour away from Honda are the Armero ruins. Having a long-term interest in volcanoes, Armero sounded like an interesting spot to me. I visited the site not quite knowing what I would find—despite the images I had seen and the tragic stories I had heard, the experience of actually being there was incomparable.

The place is quite shocking and its history can be felt in the layout of the almost completely covered former city. One cannot stop thinking about the drama that took place below the landscape that is visible today. I found something that piqued my interest for a series of drawings—the trees that had started taking over the ruins of the city's walls. These *Ficus elastica*/rubber fig trees became part of the event's landscape—at any given time, the trees appeared to be creating further destruction and at others, holding and sustaining the memory of the tragedy.



4 drawings  
pencil on paper  
30 × 42 cm

process









Irene Kopelman  
*Frisos—Tatacoa desert · Armero ruins*

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