



# AEON

ann hamilton

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In commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the Oriental Institute *AEON* was installed in the glass dome of the Grand Reading Room of the Joe and Rika Mansueto Library on the campus of the University of Chicago, September 18 to December 15, 2019.

## FOREWORD

May of 2019 marked the one hundredth anniversary of the Oriental Institute (OI), commencing a year-long celebration of our Centennial. A highlight of those celebrations was our collaboration with the world-renowned contemporary artist Ann Hamilton, who presented *AEON*, a new work inspired by our ancient Middle Eastern collections—the largest in the United States with more than 350,000 artifacts mainly excavated by OI archaeologists and some 5,000 on display to the public.

For *AEON*, Hamilton produced a series of translucent images of our ancient artifacts, affixing them to the massive glass dome in the Grand Reading Room of the Joe and Rika Mansueto Library. After several thousand years entombed underground, and nearly a century

after they were excavated, these ancient artifacts were illuminated and animated through her ethereal images.

The OI Centennial was a time to reflect on a century of accomplishments. Just as importantly, it was an occasion to look to the future, set new, ambitious goals, and expand our scope. Fostering greater engagement on campus, particularly with the arts, continues today as a major aspect of that vision. We are delighted that Ann Hamilton partnered with us on this evocative installation, which has connections with our collections and research while transcending the boundaries that often separate the ancient and modern worlds.

— Christopher Woods

John A. Wilson Professor, Director, Oriental Institute

— Jean M. Evans

Deputy Director and Chief Curator, Oriental Institute

when above

temple statues

found

in fragments

heads separated from bodies

in earthen ground

substitute images

offerings to the Gods

sacred gifts

for a prosperous life

hands clasped

large inlaid eyes

wearing fleece garments

made of stone

in households and in institutions

the spinning and weaving of flax and wool was a female craft

the spindle whorls held threads in tension

crossing distance

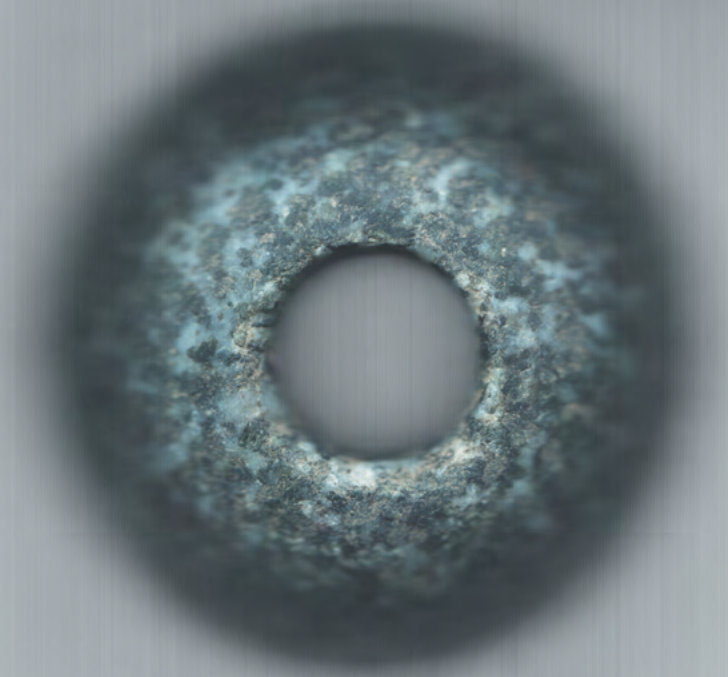
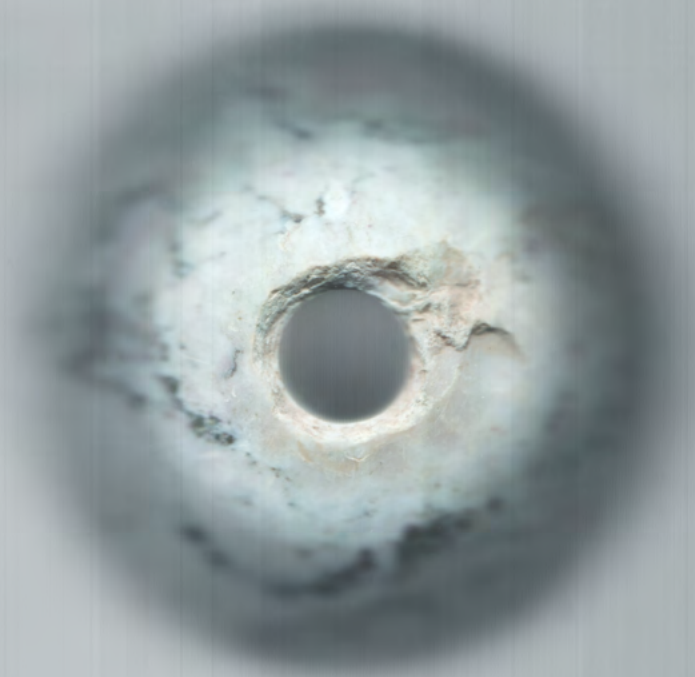
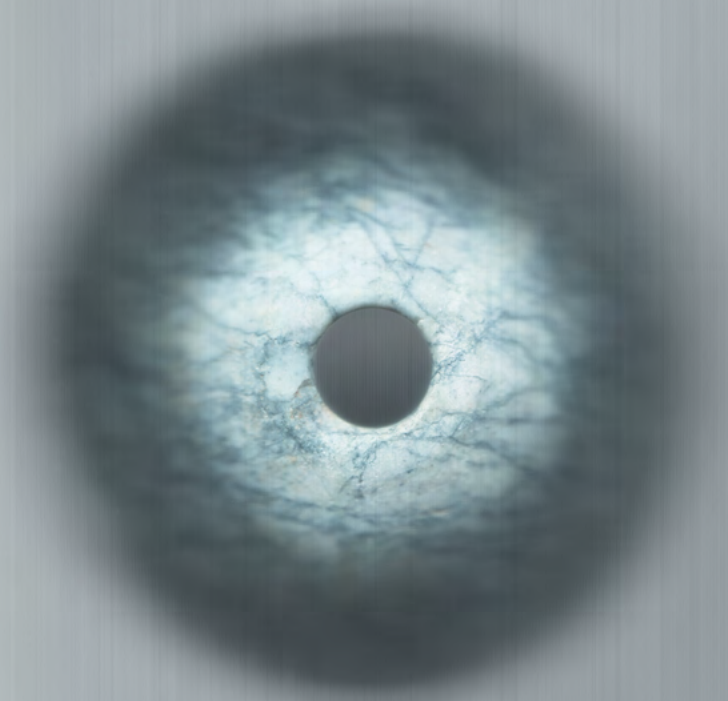
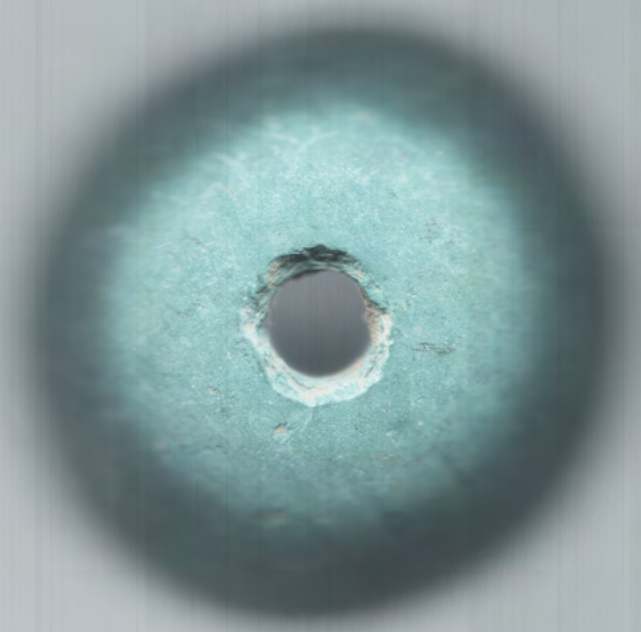
stone figures

broken in time

alive in light we can not touch

— Ann Hamilton















## AEON

by Laura Steward

Curator of Public Art, University of Chicago

Ann Hamilton's project *AEON*, made in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago, is presented in this book.

The OI is one of the world's leading interdisciplinary centers for the study of ancient Middle Eastern civilizations. Its museum houses the largest collection of artifacts from the ancient Middle East in the United States, including more than 350,000 artifacts with roughly 5,000 on display. The majority of the collections were excavated by OI architects in the early twentieth century. The occasion of the centennial provided an impetus for a major reinstallation of the objects on display. For this reason, many of its most extraordinary small objects, especially its millennia-old Mesopotamian temple figures, were out of their cases and available to Hamilton for this project.

In the fall of 2018, Hamilton spent a week in residency in the OI's storage area working with curators, conservators, registrars, and studio assistants to image hundreds of objects, mostly from Iraq and Egypt and mostly made of stone and ceramic. One year later, these images were printed on translucent polyester film and adhered to the massive glass dome of the Grand Reading Room of the Joe and Rika Mansueto Library.

The temple figures pictured in *AEON* are mostly fragmentary, as is to be expected in millennia-old objects, and are very small remnants of a civilization that is no longer whole and hasn't been for a very long time. The images are not intended to be documentary. They suggest, invite, evoke, but don't tell, describe, or fix. They are more expressive of the experience of touch than that of sight. They seem to show only what one hand could feel, rather than a unified whole comprehensible to the eye.

The ancient temple figures, the novel method of creating their images, and the installation of the images, soaring above readers in the Mansueto dome, combine to constitute the work.

## THE FIGURES

Henri Frankfort, an important scholar of ancient Mesopotamia, became the field director of the OI's excavations in Iraq in 1929 and was responsible for the excavation of many of the figures included in *AEON*. Describing these figures, he wrote: "Mesopotamian statuary was intended for temples: the human form was translated into stone for the express purpose of confronting the god. The statue was an active force; it was believed to possess a life of its own."

The Mesopotamian figures were deemed so much alive by their makers and original users that they were given food and drink. The care and feeding of these effigies had direct consequences for the people who dedicated them to the temples. The Egyptian Ushabti, in contrast, were placed in tombs in larger numbers, journeying with the entombed person to the world beyond, ready to spring to life as servants.

The fundamental liveliness of Mesopotamian votive portraits, in particular, distinguishes them from Western portraits in a profound way. In her 2014 book, *The Infinite Image*, Zainab Bahrani demonstrates this liveliness with textual, visual, archaeological and other evidence. She describes this process as *Methexis versus Mimesis*: The individuals depicted are *present* rather than *represented*, they are capable of direct participation rather than symbolic action. *AEON* calls out to that quality, reaching through the millennia to revivify and restore agency to the individual essences fixed in stone so long ago.

Bahrani writes:

*A votive portrait is an image that represents the worshipper in an act of prayer before the god for all time. Because, according to the Mesopotamian system of belief, the image was a valid substitute for the person, a place in which the essence of the represented person was manifest, the votive portrait became a double of the individual represented and could become a form of presence, a substitute, praying in place of that person, for all time.*

(Zainab Bahrani, *The Infinite Image: Art, Time, and the Aesthetic Dimension in Antiquity*. Reaktion Books, 2014)

## METHOD

Hamilton's photographic process was unusual. Rather than a camera, she employed two kinds of decidedly low-tech scanners: a small flatbed desktop scanner and a handheld wand scanner, both designed with a shallow depth of field for documents, not three-dimensional objects. When using the flatbed scanner, Hamilton placed small figures—the Egyptian Ushabti and Mesopotamian temple figures, as well as vases, net sinkers, and spindle whorls—on its glass platen, which she then tented with paper to control ambient light, and scanned. The handheld wand scanners, in contrast, allowed Hamilton to freely move around the objects to produce unique images, in a hybrid of

gestural drawing and lensless photography. The constraints of this medium—the shallow depth of field and the movement of the scanner—are visually manifest in the images. Because of the shallow depth of field, the parts of the figure that touch the platen (usually noses or hands) are in sharp focus, while more distant parts (ears, shoulders) are blurred. The moving scanner head, in contrast to a stationary camera, leaves its trace in multiple ways that are crucial to *AEON*'s ability to produce meaning.

The scanners used to make these images are the descendants of the attendants in Hamilton's pieces of the 1990s. Early writers about Hamilton's work placed it in a space between performance and installation, comparing it to that of the experimental theater director Robert Wilson and choreographer Pina Bausch, for example. As the work gradually became more installation-like and less object-based, Hamilton integrated "attendants." The role of the attendants was to enact small, repeated gestures. For example, in *tropos* at the Dia Center for the Arts in 1993, an attendant sat at a small table in a vast room and, using a small wood-burning stylus, methodically burnt line after line of text from a book.

A decade later, the role of the attendants was assigned to different sorts of machines, such as the "breathing machines" in *corpus*, a 2003 work at MASS MoCA. Mounted to the rafters in MASS MoCA's giant Building 5, these mechanisms consisted of small pneumatic devices that lifted a sheet of translucent onionskin paper from a stack (*inhale*), rolled on a short track, then released the paper (*exhale*), which fell to the floor. Over time, the floor was completely covered with these papers, traces of breath.

Now, in *AEON*, the scanners have taken the role originally given to attendants, and the images they make are traces of gestures, records of the repeated movement of a hand across an object. It is for this reason that the viewer should experience the images not only visually, but also as the memory of a gesture. The somatic responses and wide-ranging metaphorical associations engendered by Hamilton's earlier installations persists in these images.

Hamilton's images record the scanner's light moving across the still figure over time. For the viewer, the sense of movement accrues not the photographic process, but rather to the figures themselves. This imbues a spectral quality to the figures, an animation, as though they are moving forward through time and will recede the moment after the image is recorded. The images show figures surrounded by a strange kind of space, a foggy atmosphere, rather than a blank backdrop. Occasionally, in the space around a figure we can see faint bands of fine straight lines, which are an artifact of the scanner's back-and-forth movement across the platen as it searches for information to record. The result is that the ancient figures emerge from a digital ether.

In physics, motion is the change in the position of an object over time. Nothing moves in isolation, things only move relative to other things. Motion requires a frame of reference. In these images, we perceive the motion of the scanner, but have a difficult time understanding the frame of reference. Lacking that frame, we speculate. What is the cause of the appearance of movement in objects we know to be stationary? Despite knowledge to the contrary, we feel a quickening in the figures.

There is an Italian phrase—*dare alla luce*—“to give to the light”—which means to “give birth to.” In this case, the scanner head truly gives light to the figures, and seems to give them life as well. When the images were installed in the glass dome of the Manseuto reading room, this “giving to the light” is repeated by the life-giving sun itself.

But this life was always there, as Frankfort and Bahrani explained, the statues were imbued with it by their creators. In this way, the images do not imbue the figures with life, rather, they reveal its presence.

Artists have used the implication of movement to conjure emotional reactions in their viewers since classical antiquity. The great art historian Aby Warburg wrote his doctoral dissertation, published in 1893, about this very topic. In particular, he considered the early renaissance painter Sandro Botticelli and his use of “fluttering garments” for the beautiful nymphs he painted, which distinguished them from earlier figures in static poses. Warburg argues that the fluttering garments, set in motion by the movement of the nymphs and the breezes, induce a particularly keen kind of attention in the viewer—that motion is linked to emotion. This attention is ancient and fundamental, like the alertness of the hunter or the quarry. The perceptual trace of movement in *AEON* invites this keen attention.

These photographs—the word comes from the Greek, *drawing with light*—present the figures as they exist over a period of time, and invite us to ponder their periodicity more generally.

They speak for an eternal divine.

They were in active use for the express purpose of confronting the god for perhaps a hundred years.

They were lost, buried, or otherwise obscured for several thousand years.

They were recovered, brought to the OI, and kept there in cases for nearly a century.

They spent several long minutes being scanned.

They were illuminated by the sun every day for several months.

Now, they appear as images that evoke that transit through the fourth dimension.

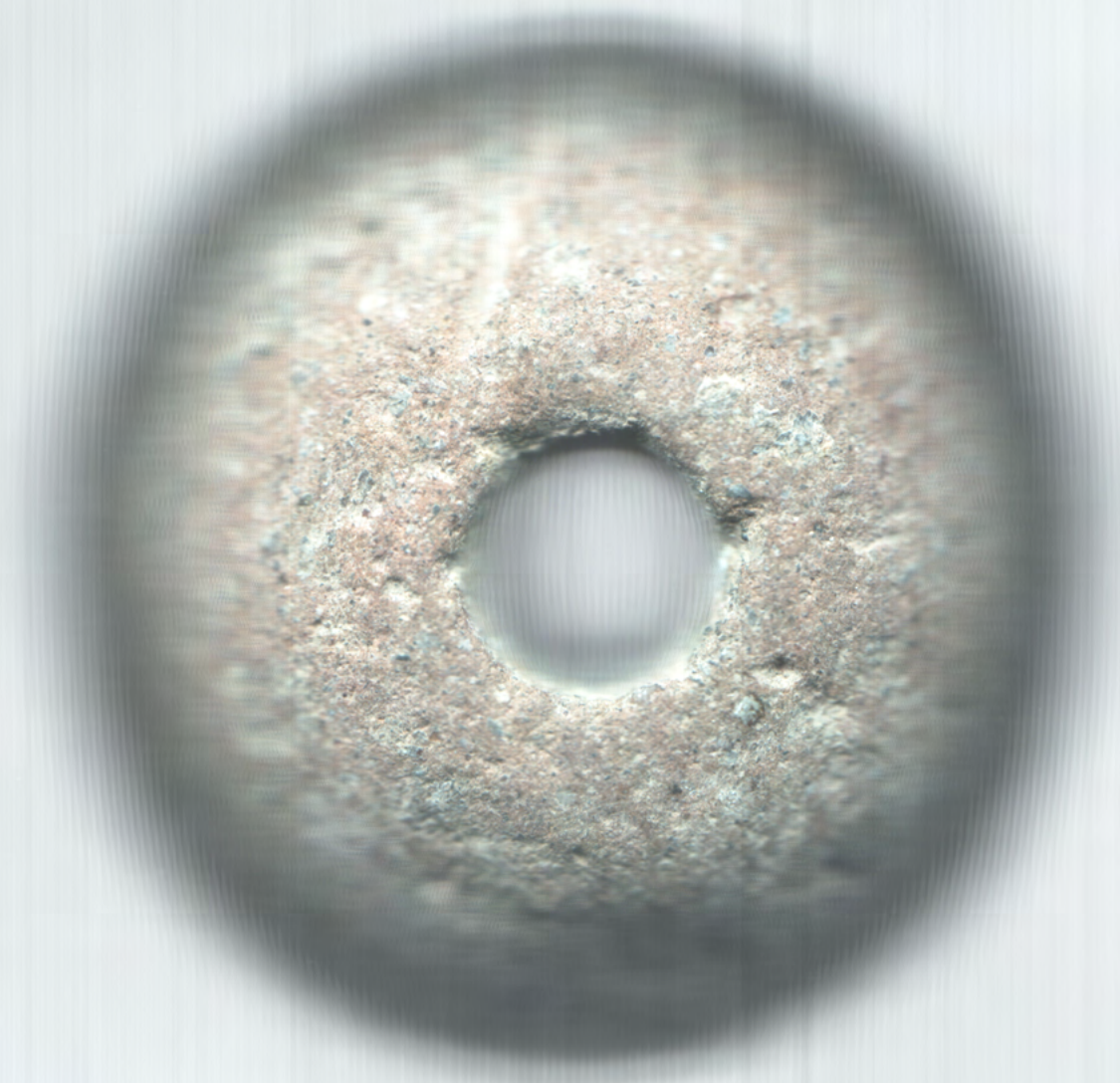
“A photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask.” When Susan Sontag described what differentiates photography from painting in her 1977 essay “On Photography,” she stressed its proximity to touch. She wrote that a photograph is “directly stenciled of the real” and “like a footprint.” She implied that photography is a tactile experience made visible. The kinesthetic transference of one sense to another, particularly of touch to sight, is a motif that recurs in Hamilton’s work and is especially apparent here. What the scanned image manifests is the presence of touch, like a footprint.

## INSTALLATION

Designed by architect Helmet Jahn, the Joe and Rika Mansueto Grand Reading Room opened in 2008. The ceiling of the room is a vast oval dome—240' long, 120' wide, and 35' high—made entirely of glass panes. Installed high on the glass sections of the dome, Hamilton's 28 gigantic figures were enlivened by the play of light and shade, as well as the movement of the sun through the day, which augmented the sense of movement already present in the images themselves. On days when abundant cumulus clouds rolled in fast from Lake Michigan, it seemed as though it was the figures themselves that scuttled past, carried in a great current coursing along the spine of the oval dome.

Hamilton is keenly attuned to the quality of “frame of mind” in her viewers, and it is for that reason that she was drawn to install *AEON* in the Mansueto Grand Reading Room. The telescopic mental state of the reader—at once present in the room and far away in the world of the book—toggles between those two realities and is well suited to viewing these images, which invite us to do the same.

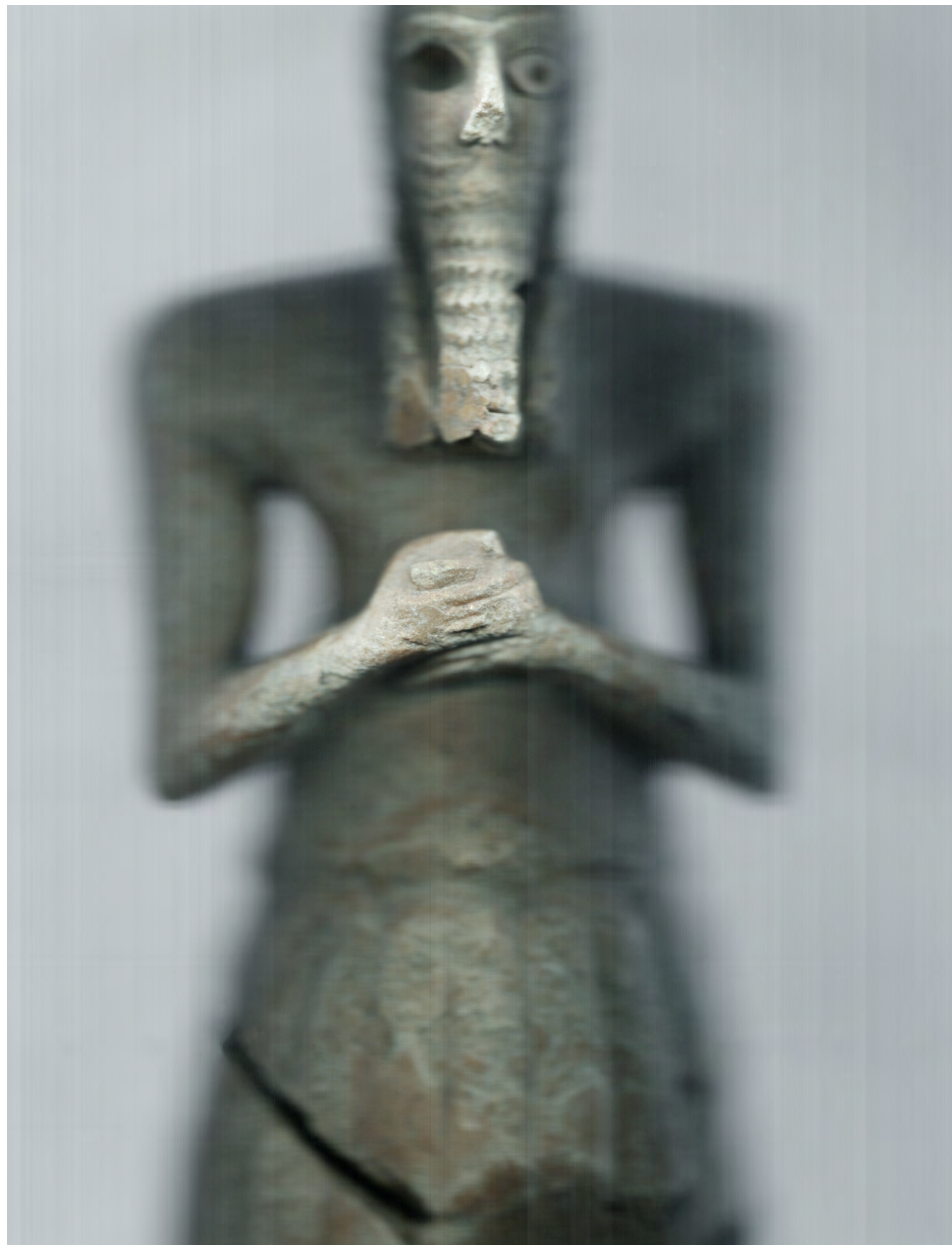
*AEON* adjusts all the dials of our perceptual faculties, inviting us to see the world through a different filter, to feel aspects of the world, or potentialities of the world, that are new to us. The images of these ancient figures, inscribed by light, time, movement, and touch, invite a particular kind of poetic attention. Walter Benjamin, in his seminal 1931 essay, described photography as a “strange weave of space and time.” *AEON* does exactly this, weaving together the precise moment and place of the viewer's experience, the ancient Mesopotamian moment of the figure's creation, and their numinous presence, which stands outside of time.







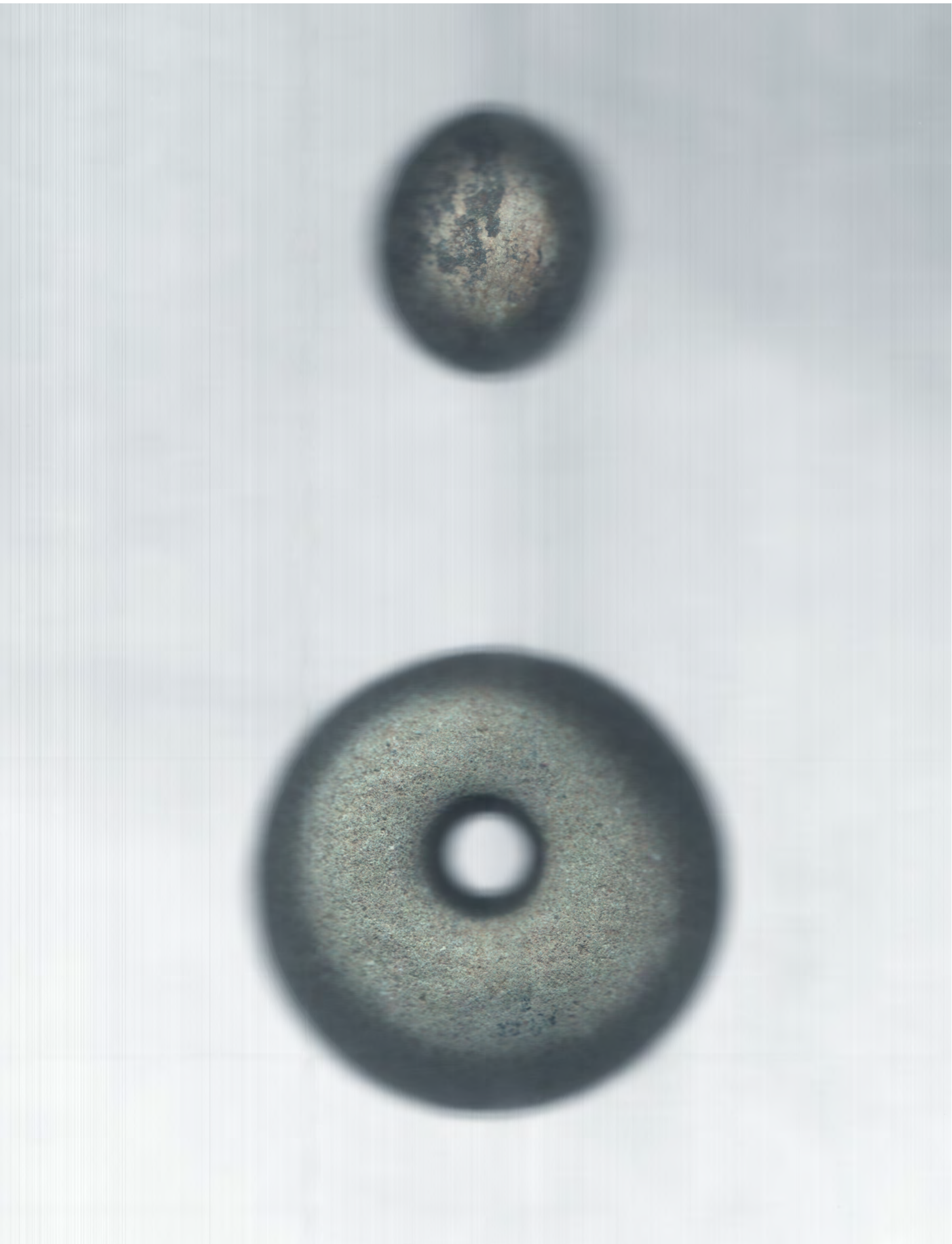


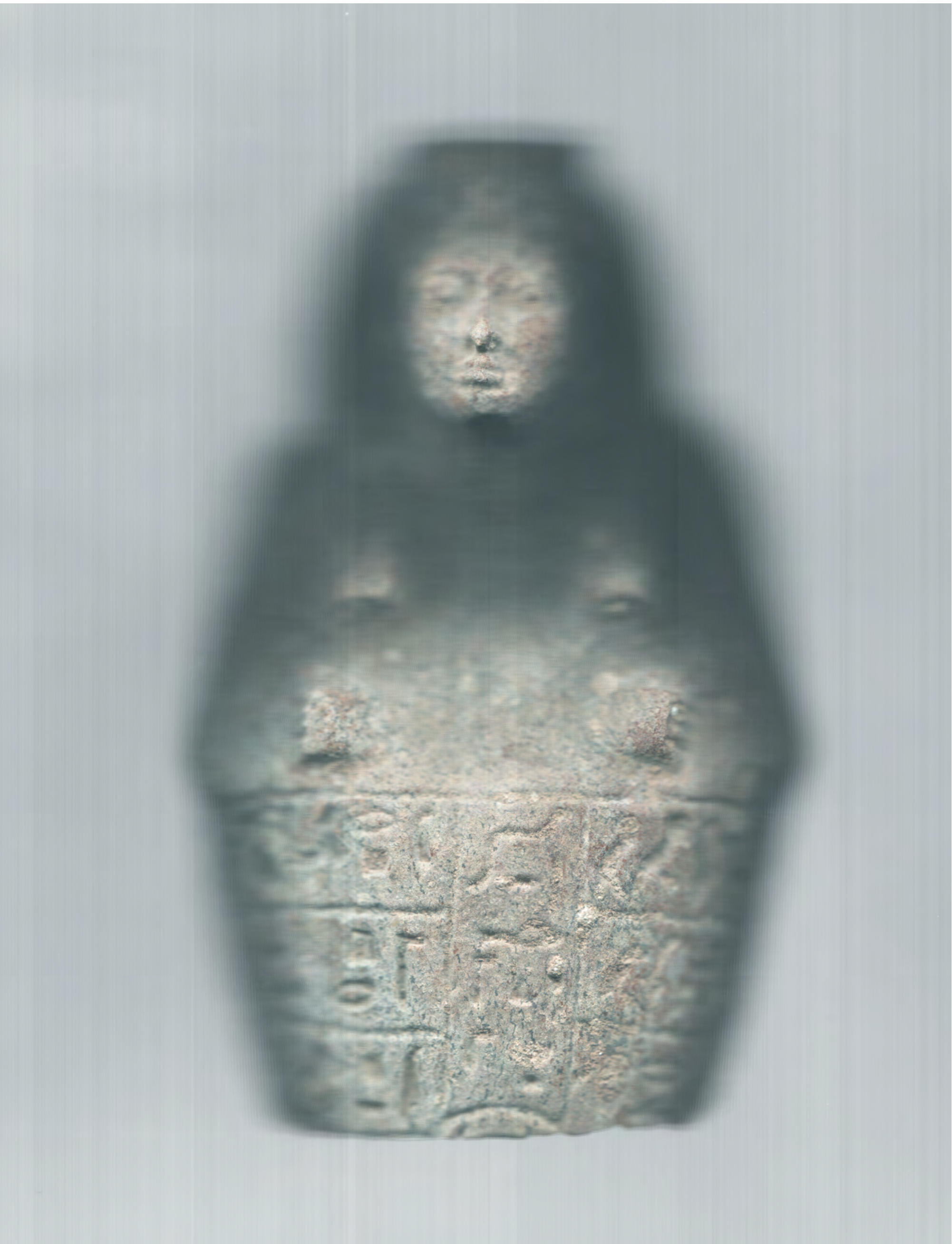






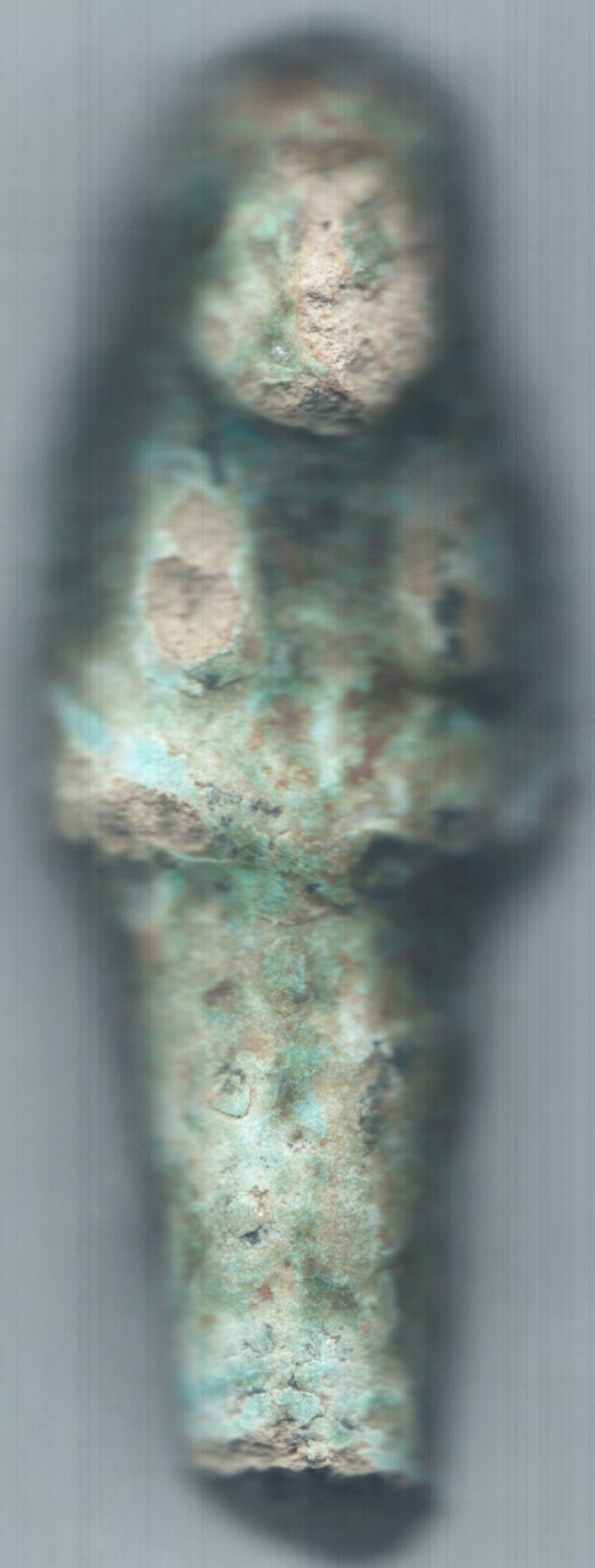






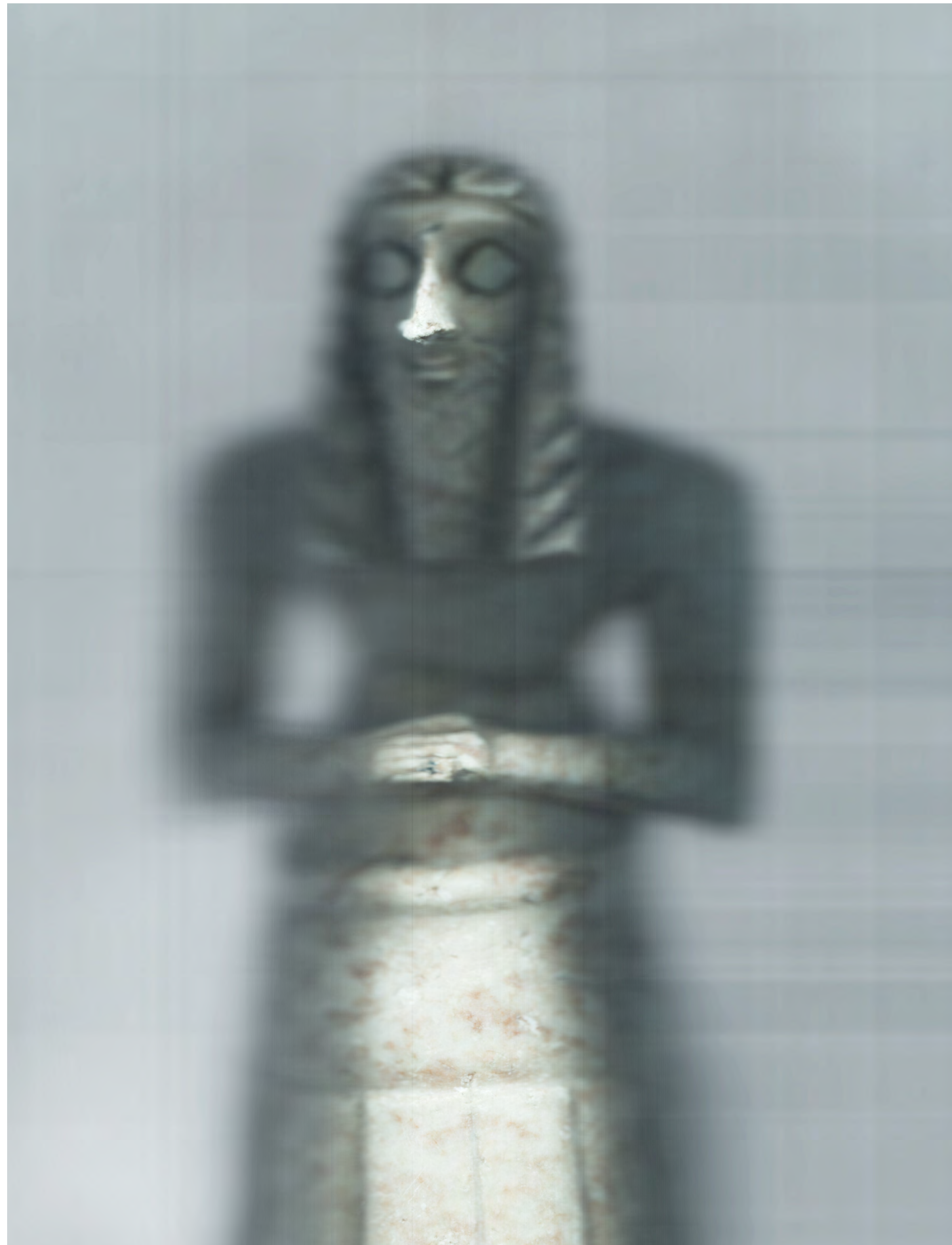


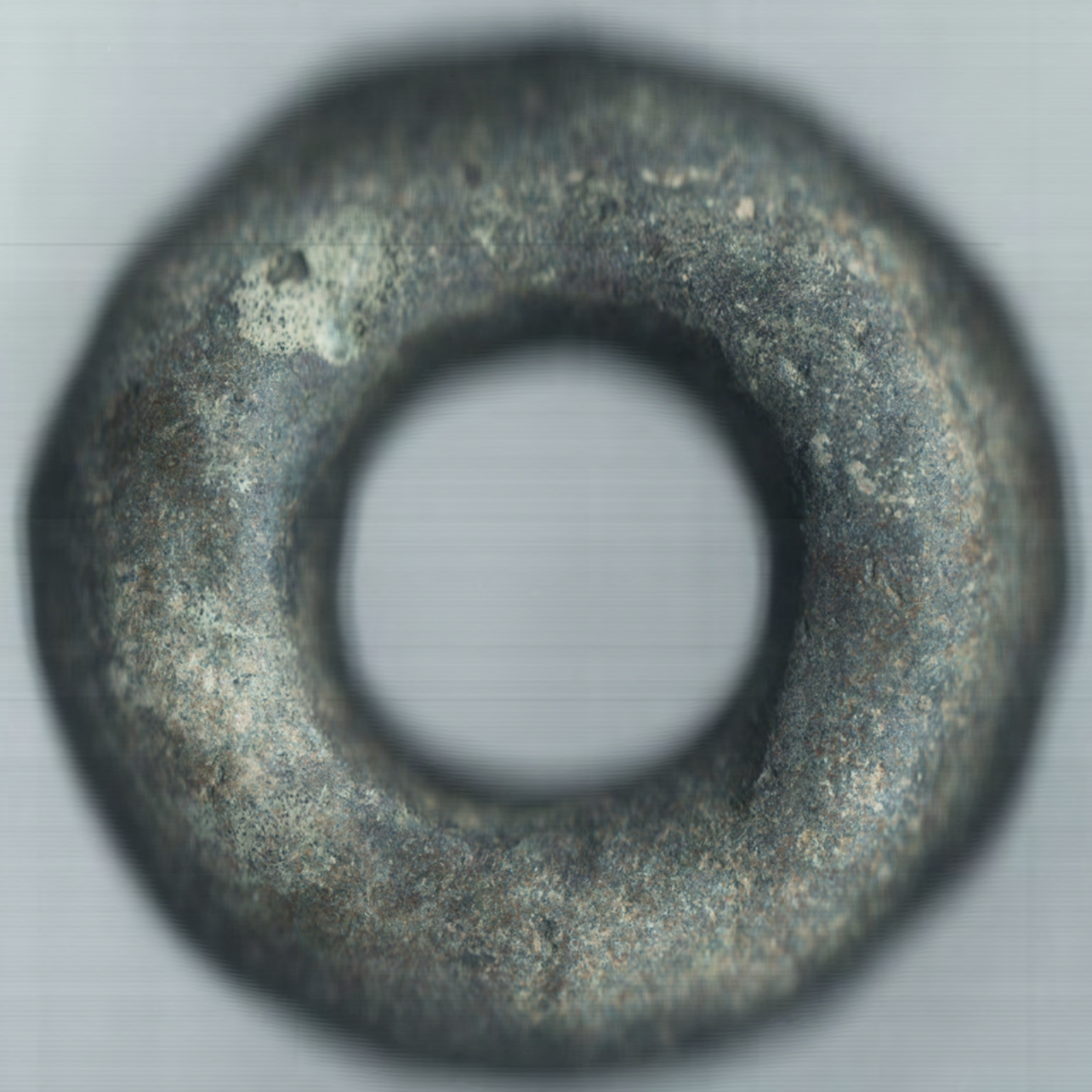






















PAGE 7

*Fragmentary female figure*  
Gypsum, shell, bitumen (with modern restoration)  
Iraq, Early Dynastic period (2600–2300 BC)  
A12337

PAGE 8

*Mace heads*  
Stone  
Iraq, Early Dynastic period (2700–2500 BC)  
A21608, A21611, A21613, A21637

PAGES 10–11

*Standing female figure*  
Stone  
Iraq, Early Dynastic period (2900–2300 BC)  
A31494

PAGE 13

*Mold-made female figurine*  
Baked clay, paint  
Turkey, Persian–Hellenistic period (550–64 BC)  
A17305

PAGE 14

*Inscribed cone of the ruler Gudea of Lagash*  
Baked clay  
Iraq, Lagash Dynasty, reign of Gudea (2141–2122 BC)  
A1447

PAGE 15

*Solid-footed goblet*  
Baked clay (with modern restoration)  
Iraq, Early Dynastic period (2900–2600 BC)  
A17168

PAGE 16

*Standing female figure missing the head*  
Gypsum, bitumen  
Iraq, Early Dynastic period (2600–2300 BC)  
A12435

PAGE 28

*Inscribed male figure*  
Gypsum, shell, bitumen, stone  
Iraq, Early Dynastic period (2600–2300 BC)  
A31491

PAGE 29

*Spindle Whorl*  
Stone  
Turkey, Persian–Hellenistic period (550–64 BC)  
A10350

PAGE 31

*Fragmentary seated female banqueter*  
Stone  
Iraq, Early Dynastic period (2900–2500 BC)  
A7559

PAGE 32

*Male head*  
Stone, lapis lazuli  
Iraq, Early Dynastic period (2600–2300 BC)  
A9057

PAGE 34

*Standing male figure*  
Gypsum, shell, (with modern restoration)  
Iraq, Early Dynastic period (2900–2600 BC)  
A12328

PAGE 35

*Bag-shaped jar*  
Baked clay  
Iraq, Akkadian period (2334–2154 BC)  
A8316

PAGES 36–27

*Fragmentary male figure*  
Stone  
Iraq, Early Dynastic period (2600–2300 BC)  
A12387

PAGE 39

*Beaker*  
Baked clay, paint  
Iraq, Bakun A period (4500–4100 bc)  
A20289

PAGES 40–41

*Standing female figure missing the head*  
Gypsum  
Iraq, Early Dynastic period (2600–2300 BC)  
A12338

PAGE 43

*Perforated disks*  
Stone  
Iraq, Epipaleolithic period (14,000–9000 BC)  
A66600, A66601

PAGE 45

*Ushabti for Princess Nitocris*  
Faience  
Egypt, Late Period, Dynasty 26 (Saite) (664–525 BC)  
E14105A

PAGES 46–47

*Fragmentary seated female banqueter*  
Gypsum  
Iraq, Early Dynastic period (2700–2500 BC)  
A21481

PAGE 48

*Ushabti*  
Faience  
Egypt, Late Period (664–332 BC)  
E15775

PAGE 49

*Ushabti*  
Faience  
Egypt, New Kingdom, Dynasty 19 (1315–1201 BC)  
E11728

PAGE 51

*Seated male banqueter*  
Gypsum, paint  
Iraq, Early Dynastic period (2700–2500 BC)  
A18108

PAGE 53

*Female figure holding a mirror*  
Baked clay, paint  
Turkey, Persian period (550–330 BC)  
A12590

PAGES 54–55

*Standing male figure*  
Stone  
Iraq, Early Dynastic period (2600–2300 BC)  
A12345

PAGES 56–57

Net sinkers  
Baked clay  
Iraq, Early Dynastic period (2600–2300 BC)  
A9088, A9089

PAGE 59

*Seated male banqueter*  
Gypsum, paint  
Iraq, Early Dynastic period (2700–2500 BC)  
A18108

PAGE 60

*Ushabti*  
Faience  
Egypt, Third Intermediate Period–Late Period (1081–333 BC)  
E17316, E17307

PAGE 63

*Standing male figure*  
Gypsum, bitumen (with modern restoration)  
Iraq, Early Dynastic period (2600–2300 BC)  
A12335

PAGES 64–65

*Standing male figure*  
Gypsum shell, bitumen (with modern restoration)  
Iraq, Early Dynastic period (2700–2500 BC)  
A18130





Ann Hamilton's *AEON* pushes boundaries in both content and location. As a library housing a representation of every subject, the Joe and Rika Mansueto Library evokes the cosmology of an ancient temple. The placement of her imagery in its glass dome raises these ancient Middle Eastern artifacts from the OI collections up and out of the ground from which they were excavated.

A library is a modern temple for its patrons, but the ancient temple was a place of limited access. In the ancient Middle East, only certain personnel devoted to the rituals centered on the care and feeding of the gods could enter the most sacred parts of a temple. Since these temples were not open for worship, donors hoped to gain the favor of the gods through gifting practices. Many of the ancient statues featured in *AEON* were substitute images of donors.

The mosaic of ancient imagery in the panes of the reading room dome was not entirely visible from a single viewpoint. The best way to view the installation was from inside the reading room. From the exterior, the view was abstracted and concealed by ambient lighting and the height of the dome. The residents of ancient Middle Eastern cities must have had a similarly view of the divine, both concealed and revealed. Only during certain

religious festivals—for example when the statues of the gods would have been brought outside the temple and carried in processions—did the residents have a glimpse of the divine.

*AEON* was an opportunity to recontextualize ancient artifacts. Every generation re-makes the past. We accept this, but we also maintain interpretations move forward only through a close relationship with this evolving past, changing with every renewed study. As a way to think about the past, *AEON* built upon a base of knowledge to find a new way to experience our collections.

The fragments of *AEON* visible from outside the reading room are similar to how we understand ancient civilizations. Only a small portion of the rich tapestry of the past survives. We are all the stewards of this knowledge, and the OI represents a century of vision, ambition, and persistence to reveal ancient civilizations. In our work, there are projects—because of their magnitude, because of the resources and time commitments they require—that can only be tackled at the OI. With this comes a responsibility, an obligation even, to undertake such projects. *AEON* is an ambitious endeavor because of the way in which it reimagines the past, creatively underscoring the range of experience in the ancient Middle East and what it means to be human.

— Jean M. Evans

Deputy Director and Chief Curator, Oriental Institute

— Christopher Woods

John A. Wilson Professor, Director, Oriental Institute

The importance of the Middle Eastern collection at the University of Chicago Library is recognized by scholars throughout the world, and the Library shares the Oriental Institute's commitment to rigorous explorations of the world's history. For that reason, we were pleased to celebrate the Centennial of the Oriental Institute by hosting Ann Hamilton's *AEON* in the Joe and Rika Mansueto Library and the exhibition *Discovery, Collection, Memory: The Oriental Institute at 100* in the Special Collections Research Center in the Joseph Regenstein Library.

We hope you will enjoy the extraordinary images of *AEON* included in this book, and that they will inspire you to visit the Oriental Institute and the University of Chicago Library's Special Collections Research Center on many occasions in the future.

— Brenda L. Johnson  
Library Director and University Librarian  
The University of Chicago Library



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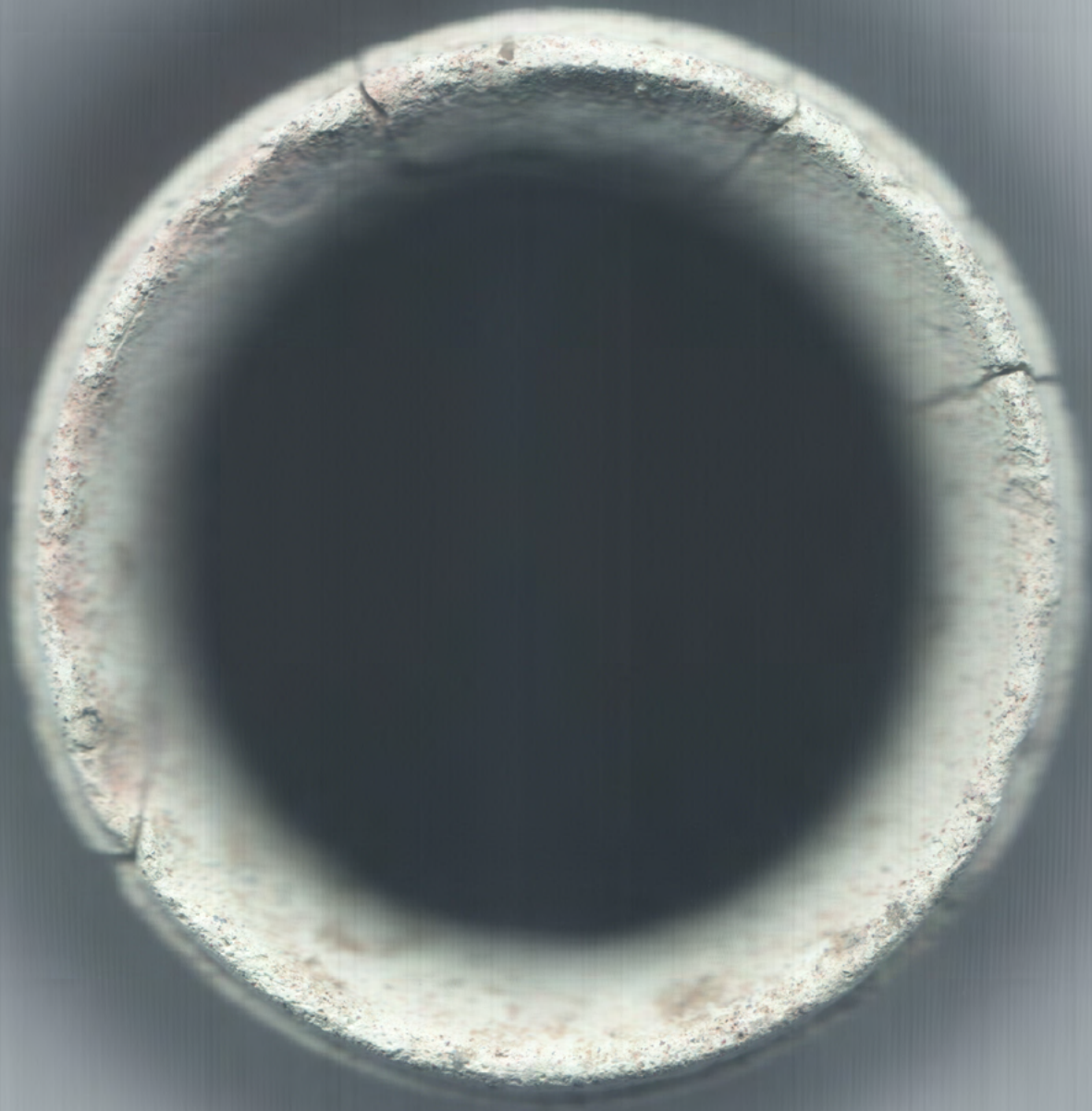
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