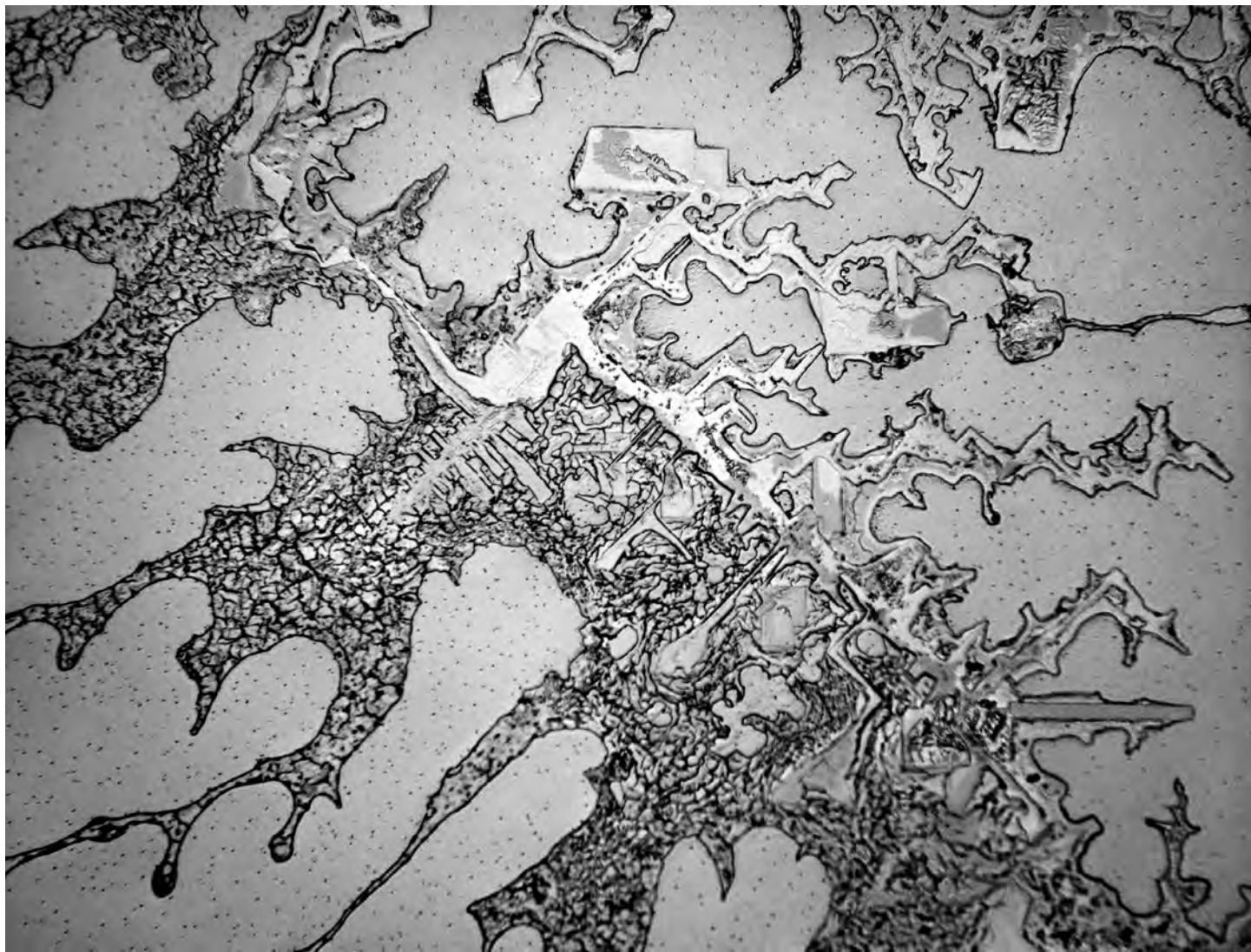


INTERVIEW

TOPOGRAPHY OF TEARS

During a period of intense grief, photographer **Rose-Lynn Fisher** began to wonder what tears of emotion, irritation and lubrication might look like. The results are fascinating, as Tracy Hallett discovers.

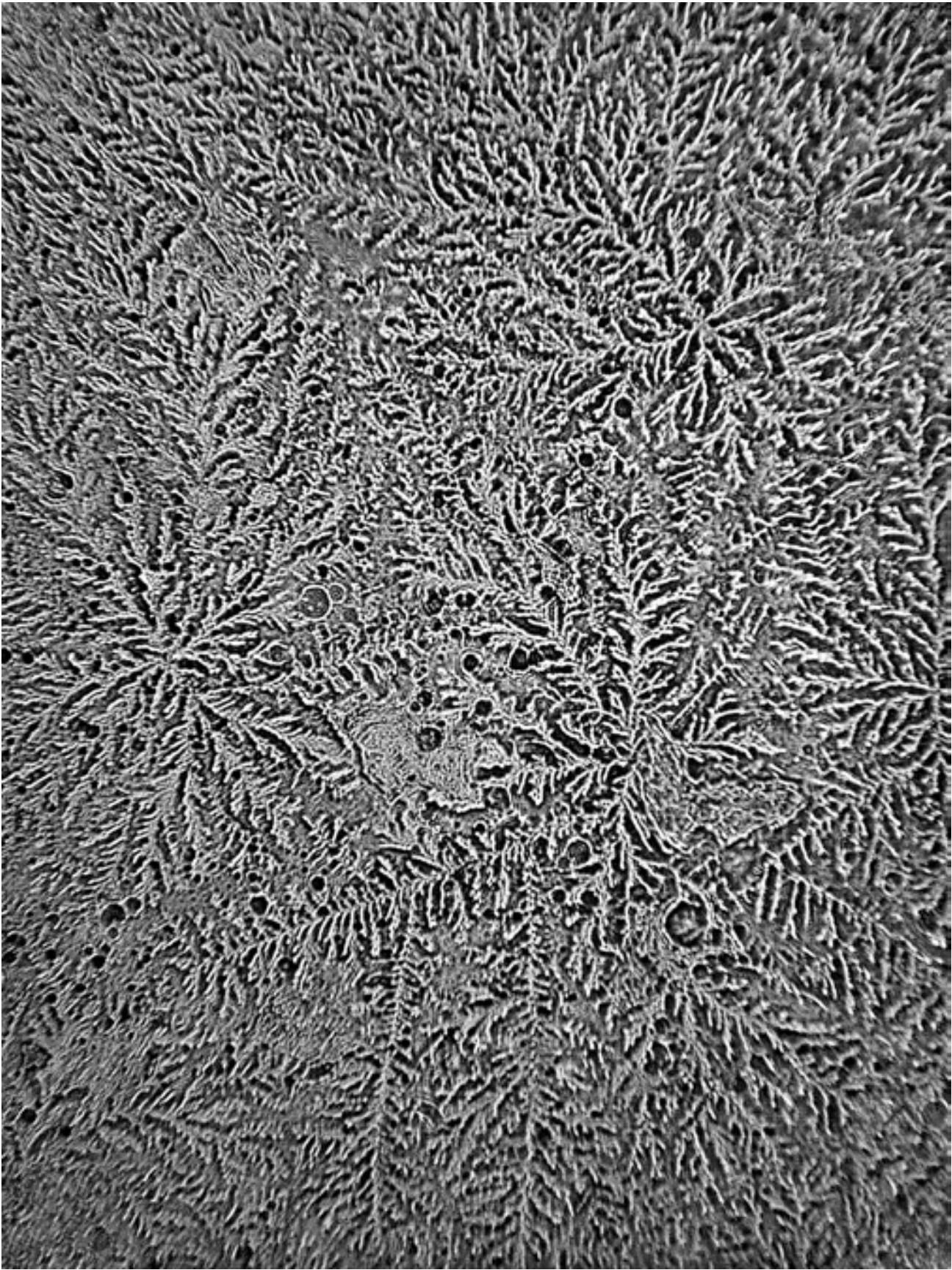


Possibility and hope All images from the Topography of Tears series © Rose-Lynn Fisher, reproduced courtesy of Rose-Lynn Fisher and Craig Krull Gallery, Los Angeles

Everybody cries. Few of us give it a second thought, but human tears actually fall into three distinct categories: basal, reflex and psychic (or emotional). Basal tears are the eye's natural lubricant, an ever-present liquid that prevents the cornea from drying out. Reflex tears are the type you expel when your eyes are irritated by an outside force – when you cut an onion, get grit in your eye, or face a cold wind, for

example. Psychic tears are the kind you shed when you are overcome by strong emotions such as anger, happiness or sorrow. In 2008 photographer Rose-Lynn Fisher shed a fair few emotional tears: a number of people close to her died, and she found herself entering a period of intense grieving. 'It was quite relentless,' she recalls. 'Someone would say "how are you?" and I would just cry.' At the same time she saw it as an opportunity to overhaul her life and question who she was and where she was heading. Part way through the process, she

received news of a friend's death and the tears she shed suddenly became even more meaningful. 'There was a sense of grief, but also of gratitude – a strange connection,' she explains. 'I began to wonder what my tears looked like, and whether tears of appreciation differed from tears of grief.' From the outset Rose-Lynn drew parallels with the pond-dipping experiment we carry out as children. 'I remember visiting a museum where they had a big display showing you all of the things you can see in a single drop of pond water under >



Onion tears



Change

◀ a microscope,' she said. 'That led me to question how much I might be able to see in a single tear.' She never intended to make the experiment scientific or diagnostic – if she'd gone down that route she would have been forced to work under controlled conditions, ensuring each step was repeatable. By exploring the subject without a set agenda, Rose-Lynn could make her own rules. 'Science is about validation,' she suggests. 'I wanted to approach the project from a more poetic angle.'

Despite favouring an artistic rather than a scientific approach, Rose-Lynn is no stranger to the workings of a microscope. One of her best-known projects features a dead honeybee that she found on her windowsill. 'I had a friend who worked in a laboratory,' she explains. 'I asked if I could look at something through the microscope, and he told me to bring something in, so I brought the bee.' But viewing an insect at

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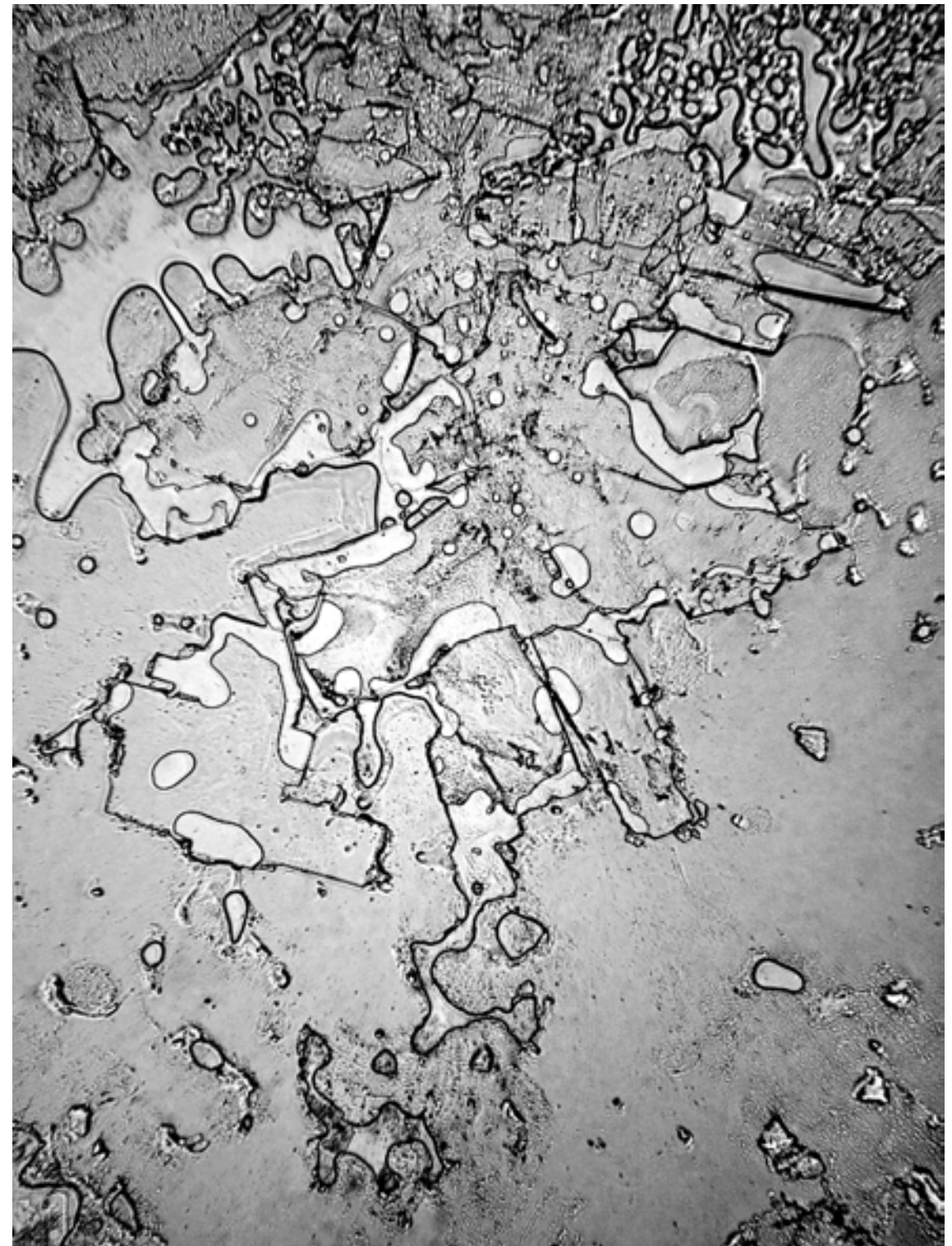
high magnifications proved disconcerting at first. 'I felt like I was sitting at the controls of a strange spaceship, driving around some other realm,' she said. 'I didn't know what I was looking at.'

The joy of discovery proved addictive, and Rose-Lynn soon found herself marvelling at the insect's body parts using magnifications as high as 5000x. The eye of the bee, for instance consists of thousands of hexagonal lenses, which together form a pattern strikingly similar to honeycomb. 'There was an obvious connection between the structure

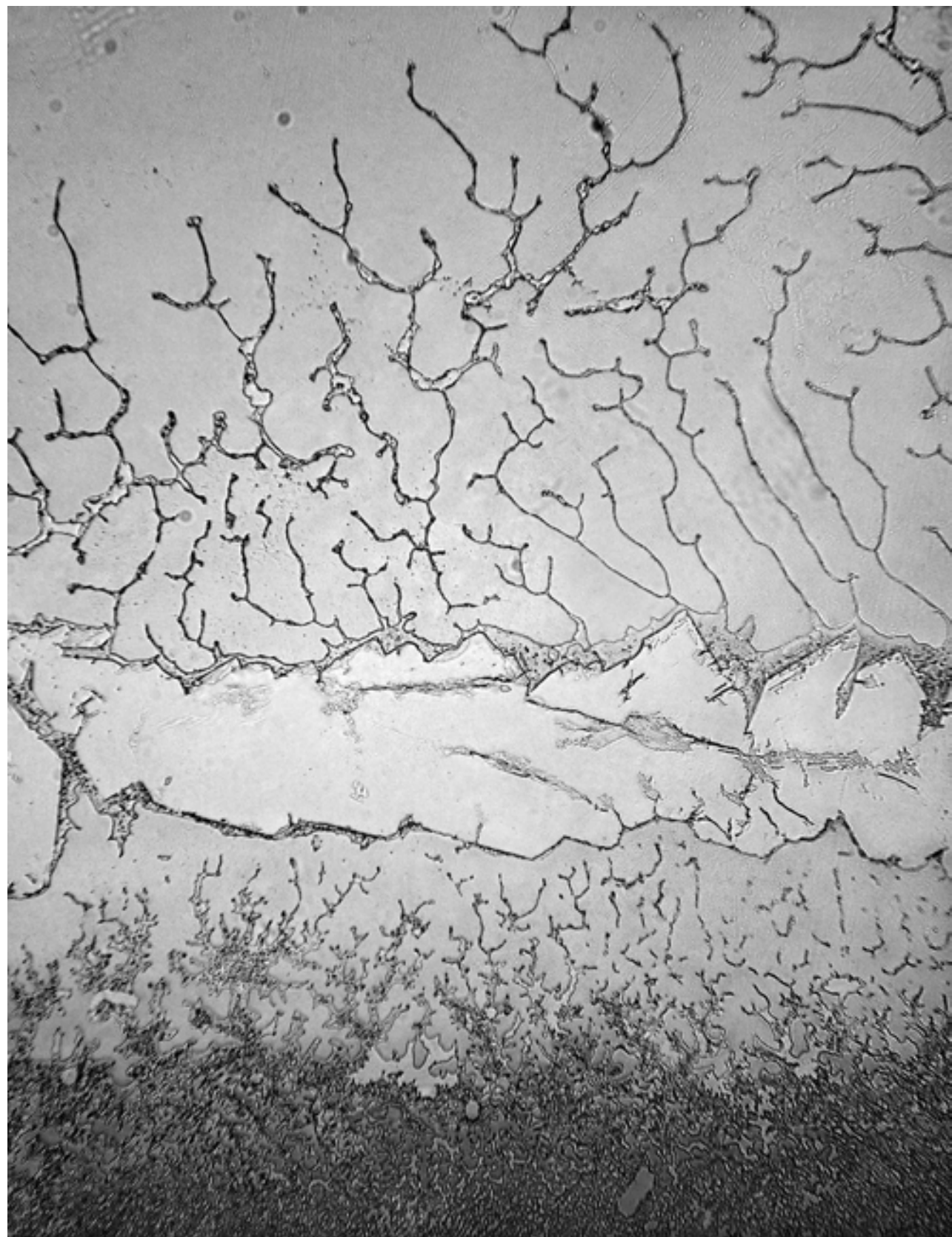
of the bee's vision and the structure it makes – a correlation between form and function,' she enthuses. 'This was a real "wow" moment for me, and it encouraged me to keep going.' The project lasted for 17 years and resulted in *Bee*, a book published by Princeton Architectural Press in 2012.

Rose-Lynn experienced a similar thrill when she looked at her tears through a microscope for the first time. 'They looked like aerial views of emotional terrain,' she explains. 'It was so cool.' The bee images were made using a scanning electron microscope, but for this project she chose to use an optical microscope. 'My uncle had an old Zeiss one that he used for his research,' she explains. 'When he passed away the family gave it to me, so it means a lot.' Once again, she relied on a friend to teach her the basics, but was soon perfecting her technique through trial and error.

What Rose-Lynn saw through the lens was ▶



Laughing till I'm crying



Watery eyes: a micro climate



The brevity of time (out of order) losing you



Tears and lace

‘They looked like aerial views of emotional terrain,’

◀ a landscape of rivers, islands and paths. Some slides resembled blueprints, others were reminiscent of frost on glass. One or two had the delicate tracery of fine fabric (something lace producer Darquer acknowledged when it asked her to collaborate on a lace collection in 2015). Just as a poem can be interpreted in myriad ways, these abstract images ask us to draw on our personal experiences to provide meaning. ‘Sometimes the patterns are really surprising,’ says Rose-Lynn. ‘I love the idea that they contain information, clues and mysteries.’

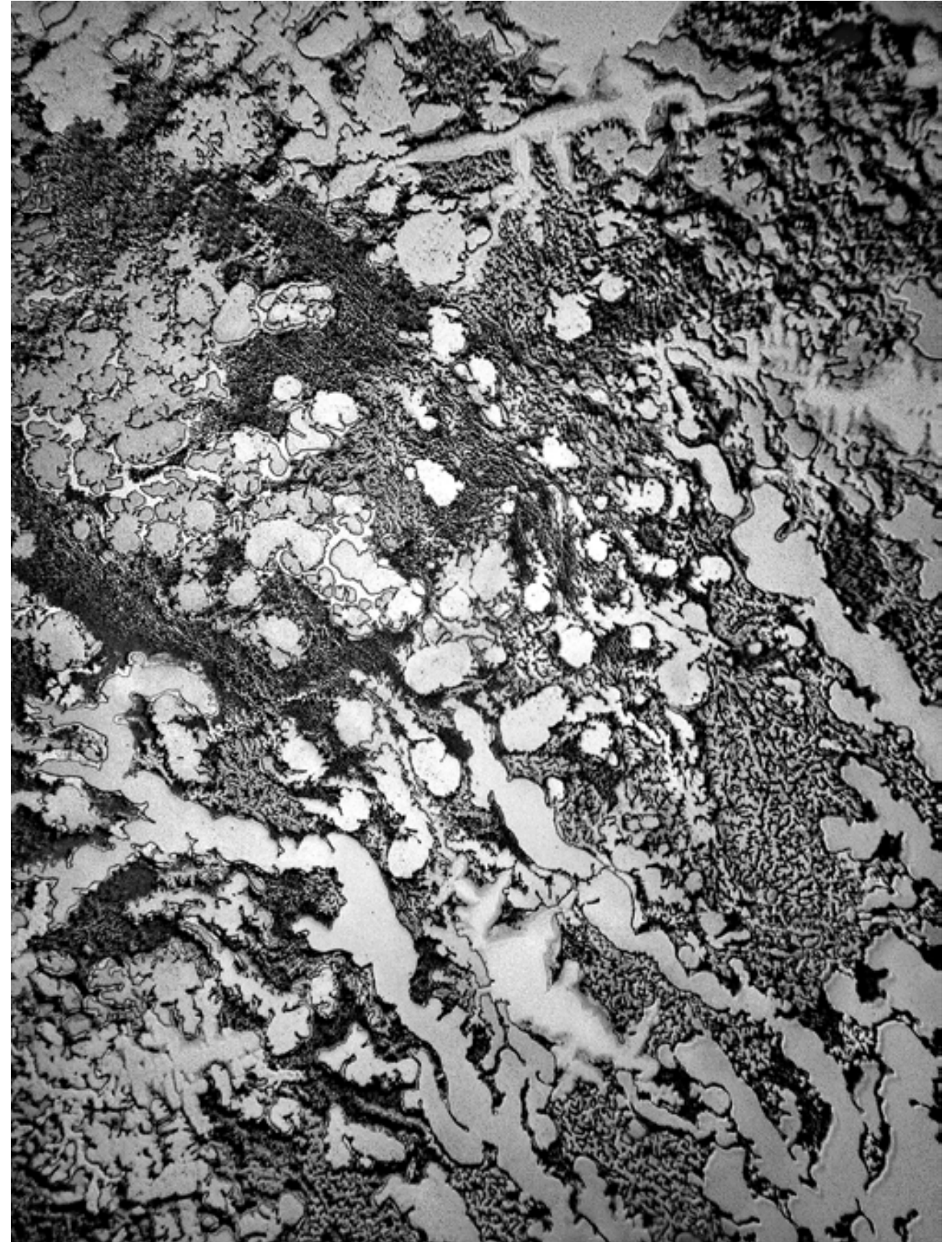
In reality, these patterns are the result of water, hormones, proteins, minerals, antibodies and enzymes. Scientific research suggests that some types of tear have a different chemical make-up – emotional

tears, for example, contain a higher percentage of protein than basal or reflex tears. Out of interest, Rose-Lynn collected samples from each of these three categories. Most of the raw material was her own; tears she shed at the loss of a much-loved pet, for example, but there were notable exceptions. Her slide collection also contains tears from a newborn baby, a subject yawning and another laughing. It’s a fascinating compilation. ‘Whenever I could I saved a tear and noted down the feeling associated with it,’ she explains.

There are no scientific conclusions to be drawn from this project; in truth, Rose-Lynn never really set out to prove tears of appreciation differ from tears of grief. Her aim, if anything, was to ask questions rather

than to answer them. ‘It’s tempting to try and reach a level of concrete understanding, but sometimes you just can’t,’ she says. ‘Tears do not have super powers, but they do bring forth something – they cross a boundary, they spill out. It’s this bringing up and out that really fascinates me.’

A book of the Topography of Tears project is due to be published in May 2017 by Bellevue Literary Press. In the meantime, you can see examples of Rose-Lynn’s work at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design (MassArt) in Boston, USA, as part of the Encircling the World: Contemporary Art, Science, and the Sublime exhibition (19 Sep-3 Dec 2016) or via her website – rose-lynnfisher.com.



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