

Mathias Kessler

After Casper David Friedrich

*Das Eismeer,
Die gescheiterte Hoffnung*

Commissioned by Kultur Vorarlberg and the Bundesministerium für
Kunst, Kultur, öffentlicher Dienst und Sport (BMKÖS) Vienna

The melting landscape functions as both a climatic process and a historical metaphor, tracing how the ideological promises of modernity—like the ice itself—fractured and dissolved under the pressures of war, industrialization, and environmental change.

This project reinterprets *The Sea of Ice* (1823–24) as a historical, political, and climatic model. Painted in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, the work has long been associated with the collapse of Enlightenment and nationalist hopes that military conflict might lead to German unification. The shipwreck at the center of the composition can be read as an image of ideological failure—of aspirations immobilized and crushed rather than fulfilled.

Positioned at the onset of modernity, Friedrich's painting precedes the industrial transformations that would eventually bring German unification, while also setting in motion the conditions that led to two World Wars and the ecological crises of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The frozen landscape thus operates as a suspended historical threshold, holding together political disappointment, technological emergence, and the early stages of human impact on the environment.

By overlaying the painting with two centuries of climate data, this project extends Friedrich's historical condition into the present. A three-dimensional reconstruction of the image is gradually altered according to recorded temperature increases and glacier retreat, allowing the landscape to melt from 1824 to 2024. The resulting transformation collapses historical time, aligning ideological erosion with environmental degradation.

The use of charcoal drawings as translations of the digital simulation reinforces this parallel. Each drawing marks a specific decade, functioning as both an image and a document of loss. In this framework, melting becomes a dual process: the physical disappearance of ice caps and glaciers, and the dissolution of political and cultural narratives that once promised stability, progress, or unity. The work proposes climate change as the material consequence of a modern history whose foundational ideals have steadily eroded.

The Movie:



Animation Film

After Caspar David Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice*, 1824–2024, 2026
3D animation based on climate data and historical visual research
5 min

Click on image or [here](#) to view the Movie

Charcoal drawings

1823-24



After Caspar David Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice*, 1823-24, 2026
Charcoal on paper, framed with passe-partout and oak frame
100 x 130 cm

1880



After Caspar David Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice*, 1890, 2026
Charcoal on paper, framed with passe-partout and oak frame
100 x 130 cm

1910



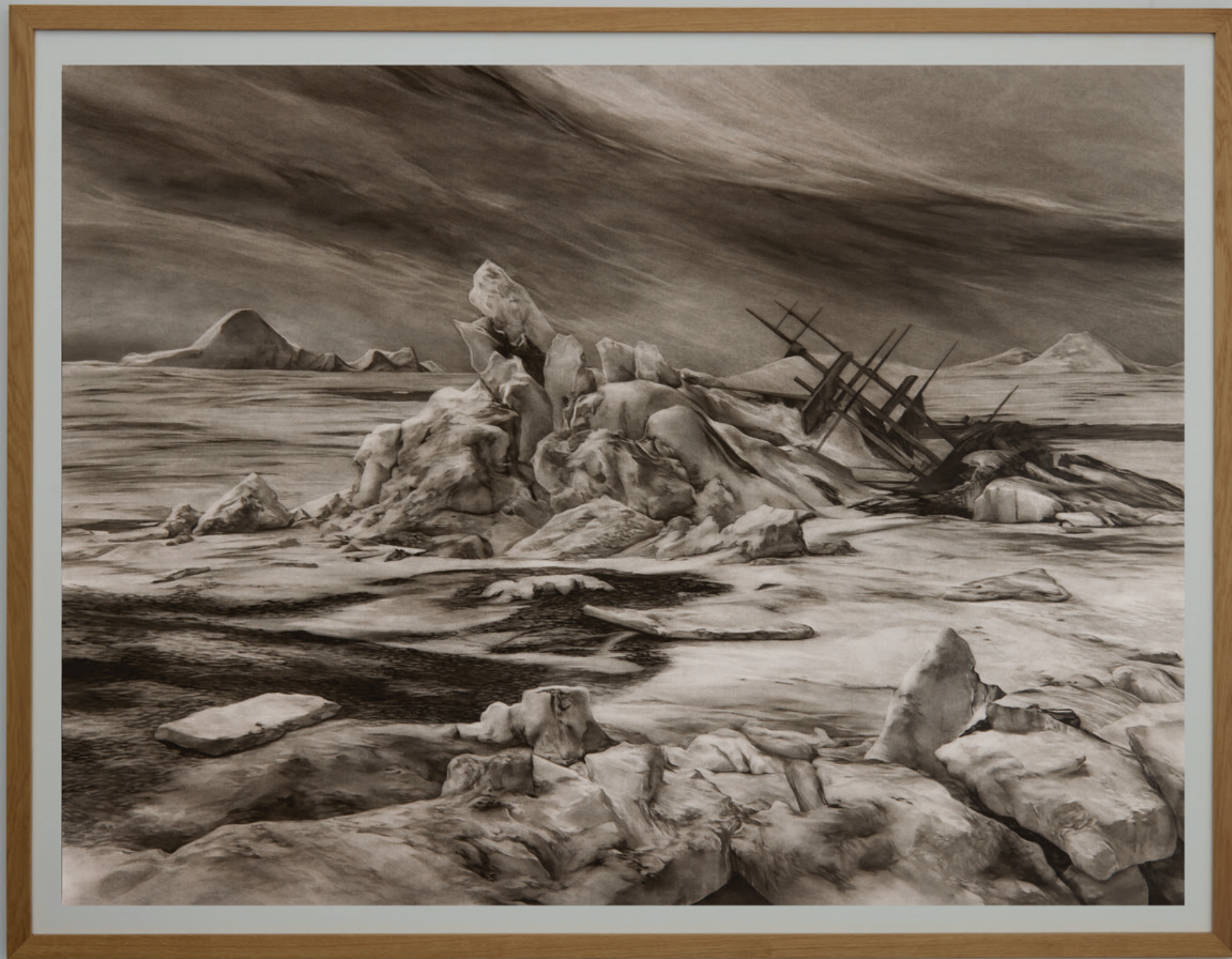
After Caspar David Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice*, 1910, 2026
Charcoal on paper, framed with passe-partout and oak frame
100 x 130 cm

1930



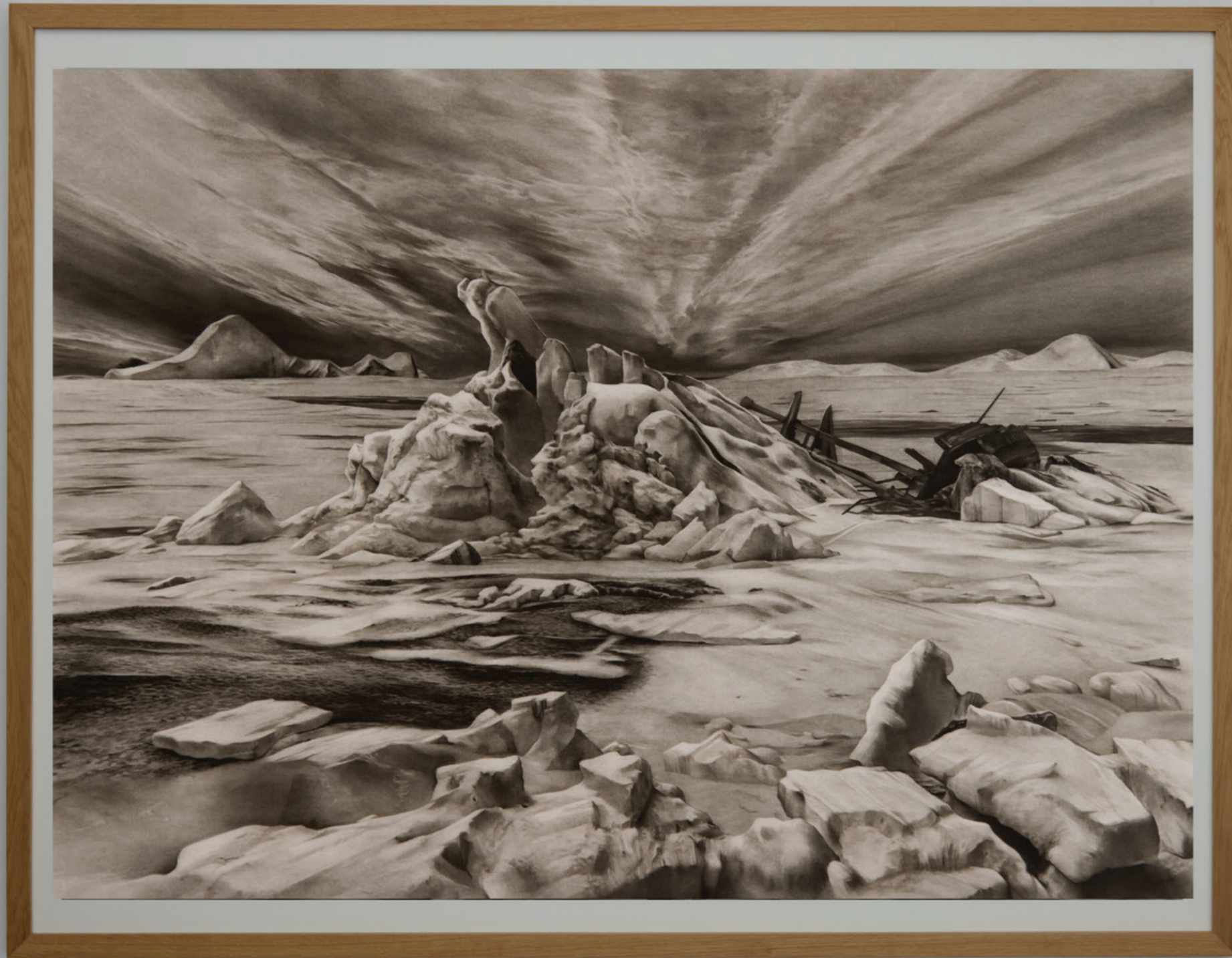
After Caspar David Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice*, 1930, 2026
Charcoal on paper, framed with passe-partout and oak frame
100 x 130 cm

1950



After Caspar David Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice*, 1950, 2026
Charcoal on paper, framed with passe-partout and oak frame
100 × 130 cm

1960



After Caspar David Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice*, 1960, 2026
Charcoal on paper, framed with passe-partout and oak frame
100 × 130 cm

1970



After Caspar David Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice*, 1970, 2026
Charcoal on paper, framed with passe-partout and oak frame
100 x 130 cm

1980



After Caspar David Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice*, 1980, 2026
Charcoal on paper, framed with passe-partout and oak frame
100 x 130 cm

1990



After Caspar David Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice*, 1990, 2026
Charcoal on paper, framed with passe-partout and oak frame
100 × 130 cm

2000



After Caspar David Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice*, 2000, 2026
Charcoal on paper, framed with passe-partout and oak frame
100 × 130 cm

2010



After Caspar David Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice*, 2010, 2026
Charcoal on paper, framed with passe-partout and oak frame
100 × 130 cm

2015



After Caspar David Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice*, 2015, 2026
Charcoal on paper, framed with passe-partout and oak frame
100 × 130 cm

2025



After Caspar David Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice*, 2025, 2026
Charcoal on paper, framed with passe-partout and oak frame
100 × 130 cm