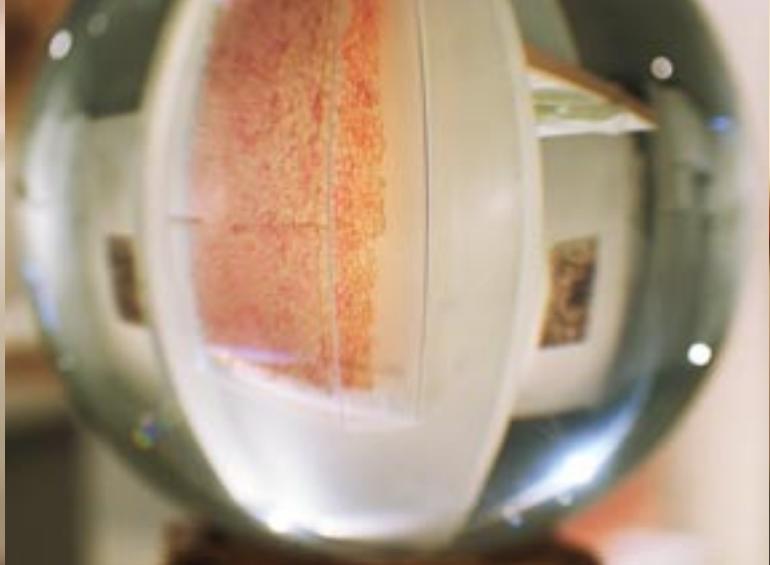


The Peculiar Intersection of
Matter and Meaning

Julie Anand

I am fascinated with the information contained within materials—with both the histories of particular things and with the connotations materials carry. This booklet describes works included in *The Peculiar Intersection of Matter and Meaning*, an exhibition held in April of 2005 at the Albuquerque Contemporary Arts Center [AC²]. The mixed media and photographic works explore the way that one thing becomes another through the cycling of matter and through art practice, turning ideas into forms. Organisms and environments are understood to converse across temporary membranes. Flesh, wood, water and dirt are used as history-rich materials in the service of the idea of interdependency. Land becomes skin, skin turns to land, trees keep time and leaves make rivers.





I think about things in terms of relationships. As a student of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, I found the seasons represented as light and dark bands of color in a seashell. I began to think about the ways that experience of our environments is recorded in our flesh. Environments become part of the material of our bodies, just as we are eventually absorbed into the nutrient cycle. We are constituted by the world, just as we are its constituents—a co-belonging:

The human body contains complex inner landscapes, and our shared environments are parts of a greater system I imagine as a kind of superorganism. Developing in the uterus, we experience the human body as a world unto itself. We share another's' resources, breathe her air. Upon birth, our connections to other human beings and to our shared environments become more obscure. Though we freely move about, designing our own lives, we still occupy a shared space; we breathe the air that others breathe and we drink the water that once constituted another body. Upon maturity, our cells are constantly reworked within a cycling of matter that takes billion year-old carbon formed at the center of a star and makes us new again, bit by bit.

I question notions that support isolation wherever I find them. When is an artwork finished? Perhaps it is finished when we call it 'finished' though the process that produced it continues. I enjoy material investigations that transgress the conventional boundaries of my primary medium. What is a photograph? Do materials define it, or is it more generally an impression made by light from its subject? Is photography also an epistemology—a way of knowing? Might an adobe brick behave epistemologically like a photograph? Photography, like everything else, is what we makers make of it.



Like organisms, artworks are understood within a context or environment, whether an exhibition space or a book space like this one. Furthermore, meaning is continually reworked by the perspective of its viewers. Those perspectives are likewise shaped by a cultural climate defined by a specific time and place, not to mention by the artwork's scale, placement near other objects and associated text. Every artwork, every subject, every experience, is seen through the lens of perspective from which it is inseparable. Where would we stand to see things as they are in isolation? We cannot remove the subject from its representation, the perceiver from the perceived. Like an organism in an environment, like an artwork in an exhibition, produced within a creative process, things are defined by their relationships within a larger whole. I share a desire to look at the world through the airy voids between its discreet conventions. I find company in Pablo Neruda's poem *Too Many Names*:

I have a mind to confuse things,
unite them, bring them to birth,
mix them up, undress them,
until the light of the world
has the oneness of the ocean,
a generous, vast wholeness,
a crepitant fragrance.

If the earth's atmosphere begins at the ground, do we stand in the sky? If light that fell on my great-grandmother's face meets my eye through a photograph, do we share that candle? If I touch these pages to bind them, might I hold your hand?



Canyon Translation

Photolithograph with chine collé 14" x 18"

Extracting the Essence of a Root

Mazanita root, waxed cast paper, light, glass, air, alder 16" x 7" x 12"



Two projects set a playful tone of alchemic transformation through a ‘before’ and ‘after’ diptych structure. In *Canyon Translation*, an abstract biomorphic slot canyon mimics an interior and otherworldly kind of flesh. The high and narrow stone walls that rose up on either side of the image-maker, containing her as in a birth canal, are reinterpreted through tonal inversion and a shift to color.

Extracting the Essence of a Root pairs a heavy, gnarled wooden burl with its airy, fiery counterpart. Just as the canyon is animated, the weight of dead wood is stripped away leaving only the shell of a life or its combustive potential. These works begin to demonstrate an investment in how context—the way that things are brought together—and materials—bell jars, stone, wood and light—contribute to meaning.



Sum of Parts

Radish root slices, glass rods, air, Plexiglas 30" x 7" x 40"



Sum of Parts transforms opaque and buried earthen radish roots into delicate luminous membranes. Pores of radish slices bond with one another like paper fibers when treated with heat and dried under pressure. This treatment reveals the intricate interior structure of each individual root, all the while obscuring the boundaries between individuals. The legibility of information is a question of scale, which depends on the perspective of the viewer. Just as cells become tissues that become organs, at the heart of this art process and its metaphoric potential is the tendency of small things to combine to make something greater than their sum.



From the *Landskin* series (4 of 15)

Van Dyke prints on tracing paper each roughly 23" x 27"



The *Landskin* series uses aerial maps of New Mexico cleansed of all superimposed information including grid lines, numbers and place names. Geologic content remains after political and geometric overlays are digitally removed. Without a proper guide for context or scale, the earth surfaces become abstract fields of texture that share dendritic patterns found at the skin surfaces of the human body. The shared patterns on macro and microcosmic scales reinforce a kind of super-unity expressed through compliance with physical forces. These common physical rules give the same shape to rivers of water as to arteries of blood or veins of a leaf.

To accentuate skin-like qualities, the *Landskin* images are printed using warm brown emulsion on thin and delicate tracing paper. The fragile paper is highly distressed as it receives hand-painted emulsion, dries, and soaks in a water bath for an hour following exposure. Thus, the art



Landskin

Installation view



process involves repeated wet / dry cycles mimicking the erosional role of water in creating the geologic patterns imaged. The paper distress results in a warped three-dimensional surface with stretch marks, tears, and wrinkles—material distortions harmonious with a visual metaphor for skin.

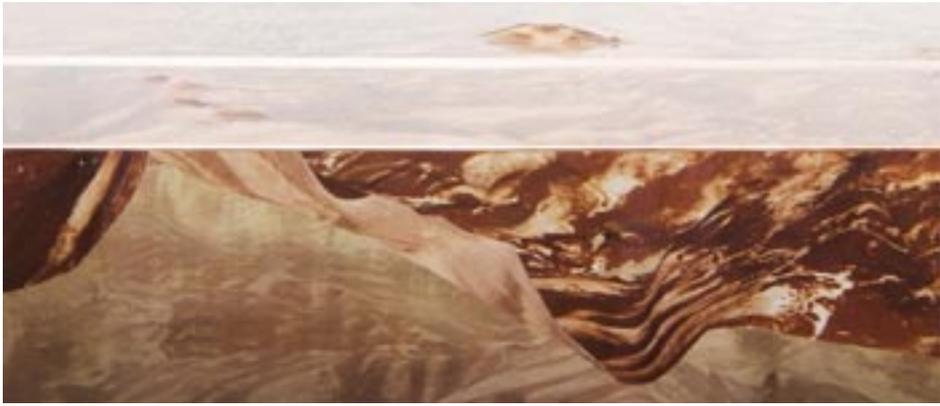
Studying the distribution and cycling of the chemicals in the earth's atmosphere, scientist James Lovelock suggests that the earth's gaseous composition is regulated by life at its surface. He further suggests that this process is so integrated and dynamic that "the entire planetary surface is best regarded as being alive." From this perspective, through a lens of gases sensed from outer space, perhaps soil need not even require translation to become skin.



This wet installation of *Landskins* is an attempt to share part of the magic of the darkroom process with the viewer. Van Dyke prints soak in a gurgling tray of water for an hour to get rid of chemical residues that remain in the fibers. Typically artists use a robust paper substrate that can easily withstand soaking. Here above, the tracing paper skin is at an upper threshold of delicacy—nearly falling apart at the slightest touch—yet vibrant in color and elegant movement. It floats through the viscous medium trapping air, bubbling up to the surface and sliding along the bottom of the tray. During the eventual removal of these membranes from their water baths, my breath is held as I negotiate the tension between maintaining structural integrity and information, while simultaneously welcoming distortion.

From the *Landskin* series

Van Dyke prints on tracing paper, water, air





Imprint—After the Age of Discovery

Each photolithograph 15" x 19"

The work at left is one of several versions of an intimate geography—a map of the palm of my right hand. A shift in scale and appropriated context makes the information diagnostic of my unique body refer instead to larger shared land spaces. Our largest organ, skin stretches across the entire body forming a membrane that defines the conventional boundary of where we end and the rest of the world begins. Skin is the ultimate ‘medium’ or go-between, a primal intermediary of personal expression.

Roland Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida*:

...from a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being, as Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star. A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed.

I think about how this photographic image relates to the Paleolithic charcoal impressions of makers’ hands on cave walls. Geoffrey Batchen writes: “Photographs are primarily understood as indexical signs, as images ‘really affected’ by the objects to which they refer...as if the photograph has been physically bruised by a subject whose image now offers a kind of Braille for the eyes...vision as a form of touch.” This photogram impression of my hand is thus a trace of my body twice over—an index of an index, an imprint of an imprint. It is an image touched twice by its subject.

Contact across barriers of time and space (and even mortality) is a sort of primal motivation for making impressions from our bodies, photographically or otherwise. Like the cave markings in Lascaux, this impression of my palm expresses the desire to know myself, to leave my mark, to touch the world and to be touched. As people in the full-body Japanese tradition, *irezumi*, donate their skin to a library beyond death, I share a desire to become my own text.

Though we consider our bodies autonomous places—perhaps the only sites we ever really own—this autonomy is complicated by a body’s presence within a culture. The body is wrapped in representation, just as land becomes landscape. We are penetrated, restricted, and sometimes even destroyed by our States. The carbon and heavy elements in our bodies today become food for the earth that we claim.



Imprint—After the Age of Discovery

Installation view



Maps are like photographs. Often considered objective mirrors of a shared reality, maps are also portraits of their makers organized according to their biases and desires. In an appropriated graphic shown in the detail above, New World people are represented as cannibals. The makers of this seafaring colonial era therein reveal not only desire and wonder for the land they sought, but also intense fear of their conquests. Map-making is a creative and idiosyncratic mode of representation expressing world views and desired social orders. Just as histories are written by those with the power to record their own impression, the lines on a map assign and delineate space according to a subjective will to order.

The materials and appropriated graphics in *Imprint—After the Age of Discovery* situate the present body-mapping zeitgeist within a history of territorial claims. The ink on paper photolithographs are cased in book cloth, white oak and pigskin—precious materials connecting art connoisseurship with the commodification of land. The prints are meant to be touched, breaking down traditional boundaries with the viewer's body.



These adobe bricks are made using human hair as a binding agent in place of straw. I gathered hair clippings from members of my community for over three years and integrated their combined genetic material with soil, water, and sunlight from the Rio Grande basin. Individual differences in color and texture dissolve, each person's contribution adding to a bond-strengthening medium and metaphor for the refuge a community provides.

I am interested in hair as a material rich with chemical information. Hair is both biologically diagnostic of individuals and also telling of their interactions within environments—the food eaten, the air taken. I am further interested in hair's connection with photography. Geoffrey Batchen writes in *Forget Me Not* of the inclusion of human hair in vernacular photographic objects like locket often worn by loved ones. The hair is a common stand-in for the body. Like photographs themselves, this material provides the perception of bodily contiguity—a kind of contact akin to sympathetic magic.

Our bodies are our houses. They are also the texts that record a conversation with our shared environment: the big house. I think about the ways that my life is lived within other lives and the way that the land, and the walls that surround me, and even the cells within me brim with the history of other lives.

Shelter

Installation of adobe with human hair each brick 12" x 3" x 7" 20lbs.





Veins of Petasites sp. Transformed into River System

Cyanotype prints, dirt, painted fiberboard, plywood, salvaged aluminum 70" x 44" x 40"



This project translates the leaf vein pattern of a water-loving plant into the blues of an imaginary river system. The cyanotype blocks made from enlarged photograms of the leaf veins are painted with dirt collected at the leaf site. A horizontal table orientation results in a kind of walking perspective—a staging of space to include the viewer's body that is an integral part of the work.

Pieces are moveable and rise up and sink down differently for each exhibition. This malleability of form and dissolution into parts refers to the way that matter breaks down. The leaf that grew by taking in water will become soil and travel downstream to feed another. This history of material cycles is embodied in the dirt used here as paint.



Like the skin and hair and soil used as both physical materials and also sources of content in other projects, wood is the material mined for meaning in this project. Wood embodies the material record of a life within an environment. This set of tablets explores multiple interdependent relationships with the rhythm of the water cycle recorded in tree rings as a conceptual connective tissue. *Madera*, the Latin root for both the words “wood” and “mother” uses visual analogy to open the viewer to forming connections between pages and across tablets. Reading enacts a kind of biologic / geologic dig. Pages, like so many layers of skin, or earth, or meaning are uncovered and connections revealed.

Though *Madera* uses some appropriated scientific imagery, I replace the burden of proof with the pleasure of suggestion. In the pages selected at right, an arboreal growth mark is compared with a cesarean section scar; a coral reef is juxtaposed with the interior of the human uterus.

Madera

Mixed-media wooden tablets each 5” x 7”



From the *Wood/Mother* tablet

Images of tree growth mark & cesarean section scar

From the *Mother/Water* tablet

Images of coral reef & cells of the human uterus



Blue Mesa, Painted Desert National Monument

Dancing Fountains of Bellagio, Las Vegas, NV

Inkjet prints

Fountain Wells Country Club, AZ

Gypsum Dunes in Rain, White Sands National Monument

25" X 26"



The *Water Lens* series draws attention to mediation, setting up a dialogue between a subject and its representation. A bowl of water acts as both the physical and metaphoric lens that considers water concerns in arid environments. Image place names provide information regarding each contextual environment. Some lenses celebrate the architecture of water—land that has been profoundly shaped by the presence and absence of water. Pictured at left are the colorful, ancient striped soils of the Painted Desert deposited when this site was a vegetated floodplain. The dunes of White Sands National Monument, composed of a salt mineral that crystallizes during evaporation, are likewise evidence of radical, if epic, climate change.

Some images feature sites chosen for their contemporary resource concerns and are necessarily political lenses. A water slide on a houseboat welcome center in Page, AZ ironically promises a

Grounded Water slide on Houseboat, Page, AZ

Inkjet print 25" X 26"



Continental Divide, Independence Pass, Co.

Inkjet print 25" X 26"



slide into dusty sagebrush with dam power lines in the background. Others lenses show a place where golf course turf meets indigenous Sonoran Desert species, and a palace of fountains choreographed to music for the entertainment of desert tourists.

I choose to use a cheap, flawed glass bowl for its emphasis on distortion as subject becomes image. In the detail above, an imperfection in the glass multiplies and inverts a shadow of myself pulling a dark slide from the camera.

I'm interested in the way that our subjectivity as observers makes every act of looking an act of representation. The etymology of the word *landscape* means both land and "composition". When we look, we compose. Making a picture of land, is thus a recognition of that landscape we've already made perceptually. In the *Water Lens* series, water refracts light inverting the landscape. The pictures are reminders that all images entering both the human eye and the camera enter upside down and are reinterpreted by mind or mirror, respectively. This inversion in the mind's eye implies that no image is objective. Every image seen is a creative act subject to interpretation within our value-laden, water-filled bodies. The lenses imply that "inside" and "outside" are in dialogue, not dichotomy.

