

# BEYOND MIND-BODY DUALITY: MERGING PERFORMANCE AND VISUAL ART PRACTICES

By

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

School of Art & Design

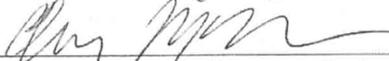
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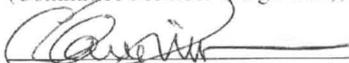
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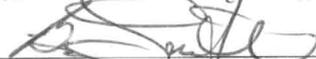
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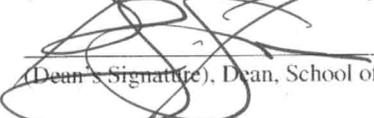
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A Master of Fine Arts thesis giving an explanation and description of the creative work and process of performance and visual artist Melanie Manos: physical interventions, photographic and video work, digital collage and animation. Included are references to other visual artists and performance artists, art historical precedents, and the philosophical teachings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty with regard to phenomenology and the perceptivity of the body.

Keywords: Visual Art  
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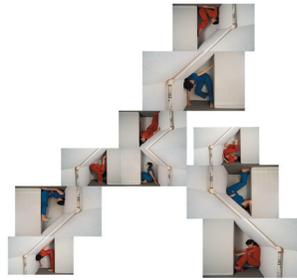
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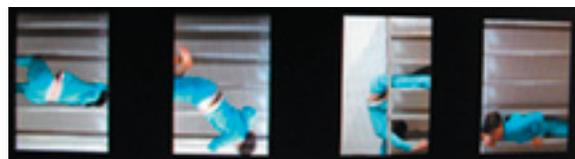


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## Introduction

As an artist that crosses genres, my work includes performance and visual art, utilizing and balancing equally extroverted and introverted tendencies in my personal nature. Like many artists of the post-modern era, I intuitively reject sharply defined art genres and strict self-categorization; yet I embrace traditional methods and standards of craftsmanship. Trained as an actor first and visual artist second, my performances have evolved from theater-based first-person monologue to spoken and non-spoken physical endurance pieces. Living and working amidst a community of conceptual artists in Los Angeles in the 1990's influenced my work, and encouraged me to take creative risks in performance, but also in visual art. Now, the meticulous work of detailed drawings, paintings and digital collages occupy the majority of my art-making practice, though often still having their genesis in performance or performative action.

In the past seven years physical interventions have become the basis of much of my performance and visual work. I have bodily explored a refrigerator, an oven, closets, stairways, stairwells, cabinets, bookcases,



Untitled, 2007

shelving units, pillars, beams and an attic nook, making performance events and photographic and video studies of these interventions.

In exhibiting the work, I've experimented with projections, live-feed video, photographs,



photographic collage, paper sculpture, and various types of live performance both interactive and non-interactive. In live performance I have balanced on a pillar, hovered between walls, and positioned myself under a low punched-metal ramp over which viewers were invited to "walk all over me." In creating this body of work, I have been investigating the relationship between the animate and inanimate, between human structure (the body) and human-made structure (buildings and objects) with the goal of generating a sense for the viewer of both balance and imbalance, of the familiar and the fantastic, unusual, unstable.

*Rehab*, live endurance performance, Detroit 2007

## Legs

When I am working in a physical way, engaging my body with a structure or object that has particular shape and surface, my ambition is often implausible and situations are at times perilous. Concentration and deliberate movement are required, perhaps analogous to the deliberate moves of a rock-climber. My motivation is simple: to relate and respond to the chosen shape and surface of a structure or object with my body; to discover how parts may connect, communicate, interface, support or contort – like a child finding ways to fit shaped blocks together, with complete focus and intrigue. The experience for me at times is playful, but is mainly one of physical endurance and effort, which I liken to the practice of yoga and to other meditation and body-related rituals practiced in many cultures and religions of the world.

Visual art such as drawings, costumes and installations have always played a role in my live and for-camera performances. Some of the performance installations have been rather elaborate, involving metal sculptures, oscillating fans, and, for one performance, at least a dozen boxfuls of electronic cords, cables and connectors. For other performances I've held simple hand-drawn diagrams or projected appropriated imagery, used props made from found objects, and worn clothing which I collected and made into costume. In these performances my physical presence as an artist is central, whether in a seemingly passive mode or a vigorously active one.

More recently, performance as a medium for expressing and communicating my ideas has migrated toward the non-public – akin to Bruce Nauman's *Theaters of Experience*, a series of movement and kinetic studies Nauman conducted in his private studio, and video-documented for later viewing. Nauman's *Walk With Contrapposto* - is an example: the artist recorded the swinging movement of the hips while walking away from the camera; he then drew diagrammatical notes onto the printed image of his swishing backside, which then became a visual artwork as well as documentation of the physical activity. Can we call something "performance" if it is done without an audience? I would argue yes, in the sense that the body is involved – not in the task of making or fabricating work, such as handling a paintbrush or hammering nails – but as subject and object, tool, medium, and result.



Bruce Nauman, video still

*Walk With Contrapposto*, 1968

## Torso

In my practice of situating my body on, inside, beside, or in some type of physical relation to objects, built structures, architectural features, and furniture, I have also kept a record of observations and research with regard to compartmental and consolidation strategies used in the modern world. Such strategies often dictate our human, physical relationships to our environment, and include:

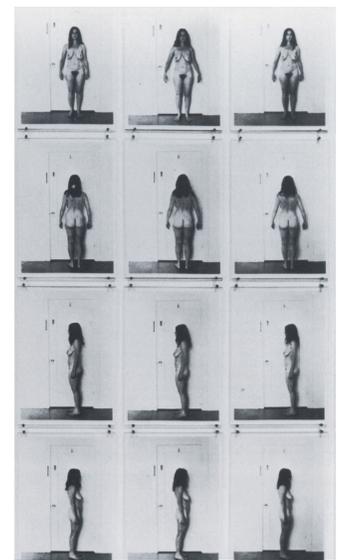


boxes, bins, cases, cabinets, closets, rooms, houses, apartments, subdivisions, high-rises; offices, cubicles, lavatory stalls, elevators; airplane cabins, automobiles, train cars, subways, fenced-in backyards, The Capsule Hotel, The Pod Hotel, mri machines and flotation tanks; as well as forms of social and psychological compartmentalizing, such as stereotyping, pigeonholing, and profiling.

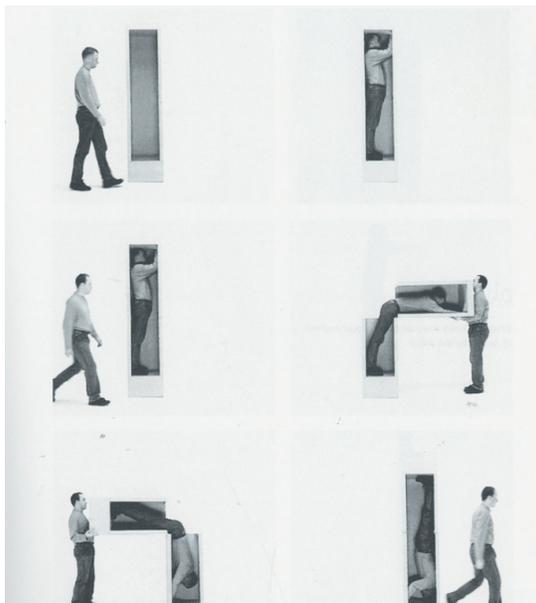
The Capsule Hotel, Osaka, Japan

I've also studied contemporary performance and visual artists whose work relates in a variety of ways with architecture, structure and the body. Rachel Whiteread, Gordon Matta-Clark (architecture) John Wood and Paul Harrison (structure, the body), Marina Abramovic, Eleanor Antin, Bruce Nauman, Chris Burden, Yoko Ono (performance, endurance, the body) Francesca Woodman and Cindy Sherman (the body, photography), Ed Ruscha, Dan Graham, Olafur Eliasson (serialism, architecture, photography) and Michal Rovner (projected images).

Many performance artists have used their own bodies as medium, taking the subjective experience of the artist into the realm of live performance or performance for camera. Abramovic is particularly known and lauded for her endurance performances and exposure to extreme physical conditions, at times making viewers unexpectedly active participants. Eleanor Antin used weight loss as a method of sculpture, using photography to record the process.



Eleanor Antin, *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*, 1972

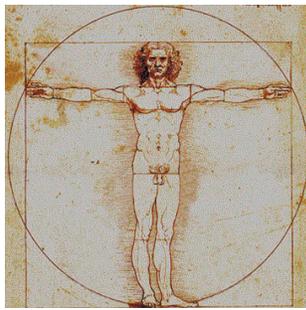


John Wood and Paul Harrison, *Headstand*, 1995

The team of John Wood and Paul Harrison offer photographic and video works in which they place themselves in aesthetically formal yet odd positions with various objects, exploring the spatiality of the body. Like Wood and Harrison, my body-related works have an afterlife as photographic and video pieces that are not merely photo-documentation of the performance or action. In fact, my thesis exhibition did not include live performance; however, the body-structure studies I had made in the autumn were the basis of the intricately patterned photographic re-presentations through digital collage that became the thesis work exhibited in the spring of 2008.

## Head

In his 1962 book, *Phenomenology of Perception*, philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote “Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it, and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system.” (quoted in Townsend 88). Merleau-Ponty argues that the mind and body are inseparable, and rejects the Cartesian concept of duality. He advocates a “non-dualistic exploration of our embodied experience...and enriches the concept of the body to allow it to both think and perceive...referring to the individual as not simply a body, but as a body-subject.” (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/m/merleau.htm>) Echoing Merleau-Ponty’s non-dualistic approach, I am interested in honoring and working with the body’s limitations, rather than trying to overcome or deny them. As the work of “body artists” such as Abramovic, Flanagan and Burden has crossed into sado-masochism, my work has been more in the realm of athleticism.



Leonardo da Vinci, *Vitruvian Man*, 1492

My work references a long line of visual artists who have focused on the human body as subject: Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*, 1492, illustrated the relation between architecture and the human body put forth by the Greeks and lucidly defined by the Roman architect Vitruvius. Michelangelo's painted ceiling murals for the Sistine Chapel, feature colorfully clad figures placed between beams, seated in niches made by triangulating beams, or reclined across adjoining beams.



Sistine Chapel, ceiling detail

Michelangelo, a sculptor as well as a painter, engaged the architecture of the Sistine Chapel's ceiling so that the painted imagery works together with the architecture to create a two- and three-dimensional mural. Mary Cassatt's intimate portraits of women and children in domestic settings convey the body language of everyday ritual. Photographer and filmmaker Man Ray blurred the line between the animate and inanimate object, using surreal combinations of both.

In discussing my work with others, it is clear that there are myriad and multiple readings of the work: psychoanalytic (*going into the womb*), psychological (*when I was a child I was pushed through the milk chute when we were locked out of the house*), geometric, formal, absurd, etc. I do not have a simple answer for my compulsion to climb into spaces except to call it an unusual case of *horror vacui* (loosely translated as a fear of empty space coupled with the need to fill the space). Freud might have diagnosed it as a peculiar case of penis envy. "To Aristotle, an empty space (or rather 'place' *topos*) was nothing other than the limit of bodies." (Minnasale 2).



Why, in fact, am I compelled to measure structural space with my body? From my own journal:

*The walls confine me and support me. They restrict and enable movement. They give me a solid surface to push against, to push off and up. I can balance between them, pushing against two opposing walls. Opposing forces pushing against each other and I lift above the ground.*



The work begs the question of how we “fit” in a structured world, or not. Do we fit, but with discomfort, by doing whatever we can to squeeze, squish, stretch or reach a goal or ideal, whether physically or socially imposed, whether an internal or external imperative? Do we hover near an edge, taking unnecessary risks or do we retreat to a nest or womb-like place? As a woman, am I confined by domestic or societal expectations of gender, or do I take refuge in them?

### **MFA Thesis Exhibition: [niche]**

It may or may not be outlandish to describe the visual work of my thesis as a pre-partum carnival funhouse in the hallways of the Hotel Mondrian on Sunset Boulevard. Red, black and blue bodies in symmetrical womb-like settings move about in twisted positions dividing and multiplying into a kaleidoscopic infinity; straight lines parallel straight walls and straight or bending limbs; scale becomes indeterminable, repetition is both clear and confusing - like the passageways in a game of Ms. Pacman or a Piet Mondrian painting – and body, place and space co-mingle into metamorphic pattern

For my thesis project I rented a vacant house in Ann Arbor, Michigan, for several days with the idea of interacting with it's unique architecture in physical ways using strength, balance and endurance. Spending time there, alone in the house, I allowed myself to freely respond to the space and explore what the unique structure of the house would suggest to me in terms of shapes, angles, spaces and surfaces, and to see how my body was capable of responding. At times I was a mimic, bending to the shape of a corner, making limbs parallel to walls; other times I tried to act as a human connector between beams doorframes and walls. 10

I found myself most intrigued by a trapezoidal “nook” in the attic of the house, and a series of exposed wood beams above the second floor. For the nook shots, I worked with a slanted wall, parallel walls, and the depth of the nook, as well as the angles of a nearby pipe. I recorded my movements on video to review before taking still photographs, with the intention



of possibly exhibiting video and photographs. I experimented with different clothing and color, and natural and artificial lighting. Artist Sarah Buckius, who is also my collaborator in The ManosBuckius Cooperative, shot approximately five hundred digital photographs and assisted with lighting.



### **Arms**

Once I had the digital files in front of me on my laptop computer, I soon realized that I wanted to find other layers and possibilities for the work beyond printing individual images. I had made and exhibited photo-collages during my second year of the MFA program. The process I used was hands-on and non-digital, folding and layering actual photographs, using scissors and tape as tools. I had previously made an attempt at photo-collage in Adobe Photoshop that was somewhat successful aesthetically and conceptually, but not at all satisfying for me artistically – I felt frustrated by Photoshop, and had to rely on others to do the work. I began working with Adobe Illustrator to create collages, and found it to be a much more intuitive program for me than Photoshop.

As I worked with the new photographs digitally, I began to move and place individual shots in different series’ based on color, symmetry, opposition and pattern. The lines of the walls and the shape of the pipe began to dictate the pattern of the composition, as much if not more than the positions of the body. During the collage process, I thought about Buddhist and Hindu imagery that I studied as a history/art history major at UCLA, and have continued to study. The multiplicity of images within a single painting always resonated with me - seated Buddha figures repeated hundreds of times, making patterns when seen from a distance and coming into focus as individual figures on closer inspection.



*Diamond Sutras*, is an eight foot by sixteen inch digital inkjet print mounted on gatorboard and incorporating thirty-four different digital photographs, combined and printed as one piece. The title refers to the Sanskrit word for a rule or set of rules on a particular subject: sutra. Most people are familiar with the Kama Sutra (rules for love-making). The word sutra also means ‘thread’ in Sanskrit, and is the root of the English word ‘suture’. I felt this was an apt title for this collage that took on a diamond pattern and appears to be threaded together by the lines of the pipe in each photo.

Another collage, *Pipe dream: This is not a pipe dream!* is one of eight variations of “building block” pieces that unfold along connected “pipe lines”. (The title is a humorous nod to *Ceci N’est Pas Un Pipe* by Magritte, the master surrealist, who challenged the viewer’s sense of perception by elegantly pointing out that the image of a pipe is not a pipe.) For the gallery installation, I



decided to experiment with scale, and enlarged the collage from being an entire composition printed on one 13” x 19” piece of paper, to each element of the collage being printed onto 13” x 19” paper. There were nine pieces in total, like building blocks, that were cropped slightly, mounted onto

gatorboard and then “built” onto the wall as a collaged, single work.

A third collage, again incorporating images of my figure in various positions in the trapezoidal nook, was this time created in a linear fashion, akin to a filmstrip. Images are flipped or inverted, but are equal in height and continuous, so that the strip is one long printed image, ten feet long and 2.5” in height. I printed the narrow strip of image on a 17” wide paper leaving white, non-printed paper on either side of the print. The entire piece was then carefully folded in long horizontal lines and shaped into a three-dimensional trapezoid, mimicking the nook in the image. On the wall the image faces outward toward the viewer, and the



empty space of the sculpted paper can be seen from the side, like a long trapezoidal tunnel. For added dimensionality, several of the “nooks” open like doors into the tunnel, like an inverse Advent calendar. The work is titled *Inside, a blissful niche*, to convey a meditative state of looking inward.

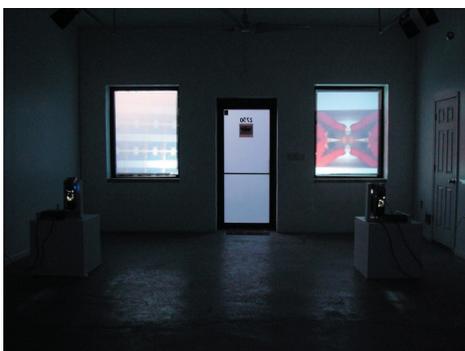


For the exhibition, I rented a gallery space in Hamtramck, Michigan, in part because of the interesting dynamics of the space (an L-shaped interior, skylights, front-facing windows). I installed *Inside, a blissful niche*, so that it makes a right angle turn around a corner of the L-shaped gallery, six feet on one side bending (but not breaking) to four feet on the other.

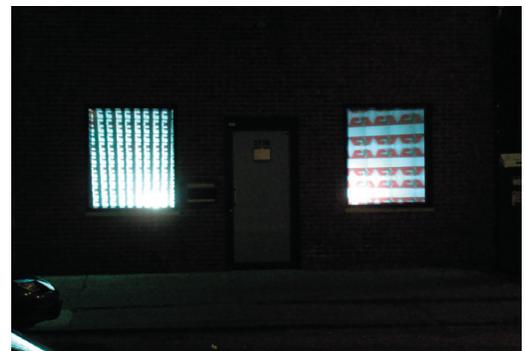
Using the imagery from my explorations atop the second-floor ceiling beams of the original site, I created an altar-like collage of parallel lines and non-parallel body parts that betrays my love of silent films and particularly the acrobatics of Buster Keaton. I titled this work, *Parallel Universe (beam me up!)*, with loose references to physics, metaphysics, and Star Trek (The Original). Like the other collages, the imagery creates a new structure or environment based on an actual place but with nonsensical or seemingly unstable configurations.



An additional element of the thesis project is digital photo animation. Two continuous loop videos (8:33 minutes and 8:37) were projected onto the windows of the gallery so that they could be seen from the outside and from the inside. In this way, the gallery – a small brick structure with a front door and windows on either side – became animated once the sun went down and the sky grew dark. The window projections cast their glow out to the neighborhood – to locals walking or driving by, and to frequenters of the pub across the street and the pizza joint next door.

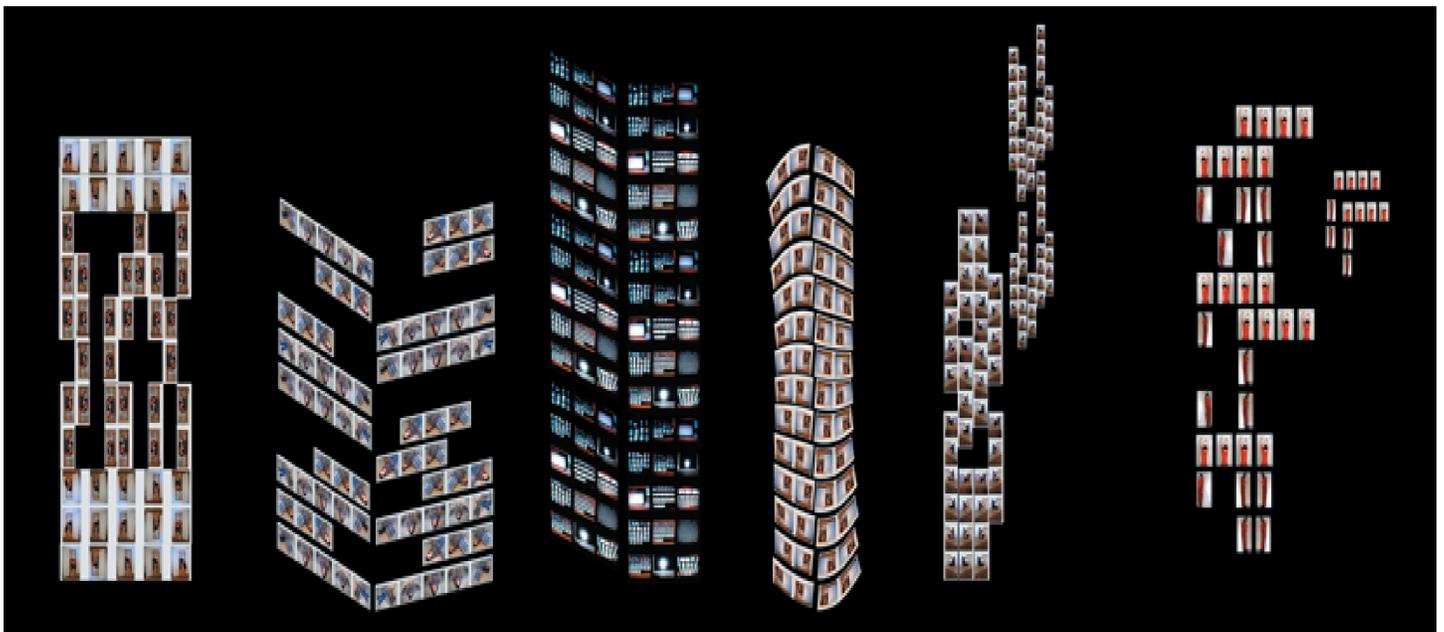


When animating the digital photographs I considered imagery of Shiva and Durga, the Hindu god and goddess who are represented, as



having four, six or eight arms and hands, as well as the intricately patterned non-figurative imagery of Islamic temples. In the videos *You never step into the same river twice*, and *Hundreds of thousands of millions of billions* the images multiply on the screen, and the recognizable figure of a human body becomes lost as color and shape take on kaleidoscopic patterns. The titles and continuously merging and dividing images reference a sense of the infinite, perhaps better expressed by the Greek word *kairos*, which translates as ‘being in time’. The concept of ‘being in time’ is closely related to a state of being one might achieve through meditation or mental/physical ritual and repetition.

I had hoped that the projections would be a something of a surprise and a lure; they also served as a prelude to a cityscape-at-night print set on a black wall inside the gallery. The work *I am you, you are me*, is a ten foot six inch digital inkjet print, incorporating hundreds of photographs, re-sized and collaged into the windows of buildings in a nighttime cityscape. The projections and



the cityscape both utilize the window, real and on paper, and both engage the idea of voyeurism. Interestingly, several gallery visitors suggested I provide a magnifying glass with which to view *I am you, you are me*, so that they could better discern each window-image that had been greatly minimized. From a distance the image appears as a brightly lit urban landscape at night. Close-up, tiny figures in each window start to become apparent, and the viewer can discern that the “buildings” are in fact groupings of photographs in different shapes and sizes.



The idea for the cityscape stemmed from the psychological meaning of projection, “when we project our unconscious attributes onto another, we behave as if that person is what we imagine him or her to be.” (Singer 361) The title *I am you, you are me* particularly references a concept from Hindu scripture, the BhagavadGita, which suggests that all humans are reflections in the eye of God (that which cannot be known), and therefore of each other.

As I designed and built the cityscape, I took cues from the clean, geometric lines of modernist architecture, including the cubicle imagery in Jacques Tati’s marvelous 1960’s film *Playtime*. Tati – as both actor and director – creates a laughably absurdist visual essay of the cubicles, rectangles, squares, doors, windows,



and grids upon grids of modern urban life and the denizens who daily negotiate and adapt to their hectic and geometric urban environment.

### **Concluding Remarks**

With the help of my advisors, I feel that my thesis project has helped me define myself as a visual and performance artist who explores space, structure and the body by experiential, visual and digital processes, and creates both self-reflexive and non-self-reflexive works which - when successful - contain within them a multiplicity of meaning without the weight of didacticism nor the frigidity of hermeticism. As stated so well by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Consciousness, the world, and the human body as a perceiving thing are intricately intertwined and mutually ‘engaged’...the body will draw to itself the intentional threads which bind it to its surroundings and finally will reveal to us the perceiving subject as the perceived world.” (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/m/merleau.htm>)



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