

THE SHAPE OF THE MIDDLE

FEATURING:
SHANNON GARDEN-SMITH
JENINE MARSH
TANIA WILLARD
FAN WU

CURATED BY:
DANILELLA SANADER

May 11 – June 9, 2018

Opening Reception

Friday, May 11
6:30-8:30 pm



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THE SHAPE OF THE MIDDLE

BY DANIELLA SANADER

Anna Atkins first published *Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions* in 1843, only one year after the invention of the cyanotype technique by Sir John Herschel, her family friend. While Herschel had perfected this camera-less printing process—making a piece of paper light-sensitive with a coating of ammonium ferric citrate and potassium ferricyanide, then placing it in direct sunlight with an object atop it—he had only intended to use it for reproducing notes and diagrams. It took Atkins to see the technique's illustrative value to her scientific practice: recording the shapes and taxonomies of different species of algae and seaweed.

Of the seventeen or so copies of the three-volume book known to exist, Atkins' *Photographs of British Algae* remains an important document for many. There are those who will tell you she was the first person to publish a book illustrated with photographs, six months before William Henry Fox Talbot's canonical *The Pencil of Nature* in 1844. There are those that will hail her groundbreaking work in botany—a daughter of a scientist forging a robust research practice beyond avenues she could traditionally access. Others will speak of the distinct aesthetic of the text—beautifully-arranged clippings of dried seaweed emerging crisp and white from an expanse of deep cyanotype blue. *Photographs of British Algae* stands for all of these things and more. Yet, the more I stare at these saturated pages, the more I am seduced by them. Ultimately, this exhibition is an effort to follow that desire.

Atkins' cyanotypes don't simply document the empirical form of each species she studies, they also register something of the possibilities of touch. Each image is generated by an object—a body, a specimen—pressing against a surface. It's in these moments that sight and



touch—two of our primary modes of perception—seem inextricably tied together. It's photographic image-making as direct, unmediated contact; collapsing the so-called objective distance between a camera and its subject. Cyanotype techniques also gesture towards the deeply-entwined materialities of printmaking and photography: two practices that share long histories yet are often considered distinct. It's not insignificant that Atkins refers to her work as impressions, and I'm reminded of another researcher thinking multi-sensorially through marine life: "If species are impressions, they are also mediations," writes Eva Hayward in her deeply queer account of interspecies entanglements amongst scientists and coral specimens in a Santa Cruz laboratory. "Impression registers the reciprocal nature of being touched in the act of touching, as well as the double meaning—as in 'having an impression of' or 'making an impression on me'—of knowing and being."¹

The following projects by Jenine Marsh, Tania Willard, Shannon Garden-Smith, and Fan Wu each emerge from these junctures of touching and being touched—entwined frameworks for knowing and being, as phrased by Hayward. Each artist's work stretches at the limit of what a photograph—a print, an image, an impression—can mean. Each imagines what new knowledges, sensualities, politics, and collectivities can be found within this middle place, this meeting-point between an object and a surface—the charged point of contact between Atkins' seaweed and her paper.

For Jenine Marsh's new sculptural work *starfish (one who digests externally with salty-lipped thirst, and drunk on seawater, regenerates a self-savoring palm of dry tongues)* (2018), a pair of red velvet pants stretch across the floor. They are weighed down by flat pieces of air-dried clay, which have been moulded with pressings of flowers.

Marsh's practice is centered around her curiosity for the haptic potential of relief sculpture—of work that is flattened and printed upon, shapes forged in the negative space of casting and pressing. Working with materials like latex, cement, and air-dry clay, Marsh's work transforms these malleable substances into new forms of flesh. Indeed, the pinkish pieces of clay scattered across these pants seem almost scab-like; some new growth forming to protect otherwise vulnerable skin.

I had mentioned the seductive quality of Atkins' cyanotypes; there's an undeniable eroticism to *starfish* as well. Beyond the immediate inferences of a discarded pair of pants, Marsh's work flows easily between interior and exterior states—between simultaneous positions of contact and distance. I'm thinking about how film critic Laura U. Marks discusses the erotic as an oscillation of what's near and far, an ongoing reciprocity between touching and being touched: "Life is served by the ability to come close, pull away, come close again. What is erotic is being able to become an object with and for the world, and to return to being a subject in the world."² It feels impossible to ground myself alongside *starfish* at its immediate, bodily scale; while its insides and outsides continually fold together, I am similarly undone, unfolded. The lining has even been separated from each pant leg's velvet exterior, stretching the points of contact further across the floor.

You could say that Marsh's botanical matter has been preserved through this air-dried clay, but the opposite is also accurate: every pressed flower is also already dying, already cut from its roots. This contradiction rings true for Atkins' cyanotypes as well—as documents designed for study and longevity, her images were predicated on extracting and destroying the very bodies she aimed to depict. Yet if the erotic is a fluctuation of opposites—closeness and distance, sex and death—*starfish* weaves these reciprocal conflicts into every wrinkle, crease, and seam.

Through her collaboratively-made *Sovereign Sunshine* (2015) prints, artist and curator Tania Willard considers how similar forms of image-making through impression—through touch—can record deeply-situated Indigenous relationships with land. Under the framework of BUSH Gallery, Willard has been hosting residencies with Indigenous artists on her land—located in Secwepemc territory, or interior British Columbia. Each *Sovereign Sunshine* image uses sun-printing techniques to document everyday objects and materials used in these gatherings: "a type of archive of photogram representations of the tools, items and encounters at BUSH Gallery rez-idences."³ As



such, each *Sovereign Sunshine* print is fundamentally collaborative: the three on display here were produced by Willard, Jeneen Frei Njootli, and Peter Morin.

In *Sovereign Sunshine*, networks of collaboration extend beyond the artists participating in each project, and I'm reminded that impression is a process of reciprocity. BUSH Gallery artists make records of tools and materials sourced from other projects on Willard's land—objects ranging from computer chargers to fly fishing lures, plant matter, records, books, bread tags, and knives—and each image is printed in open air on the very land it pictures, producing an interconnected, reciprocal cycle of image and surface, subject and object, land and sky. Willard likens this to a process of site/ation: a distinctly situated and Indigenous-led method of archiving a shared moment on Indigenous land.⁴ Yet *Sovereign Sunshine* also refuses the stability and authority promised by traditional archival frameworks. (Indeed, Atkins' own cyanotype work falls under this extraction-based, colonial-scientific logic.) Instead, the light-sensitive medium is left unfixed—subject to change under continued exposure to light—creating documents as fleeting and mutable as the experiences they record. For *The Shape of the Middle*, these prints are installed as they would have been out in the BUSH: stretched out to dry, weighed down under stones, changing slowly in the air.

Like Willard, Shannon Garden-Smith's work *Tending Toward (Curtain Wall)* (2018) also fluctuates between opposing states of stability and vulnerability. These hanging swaths of dyed polyester blanket resist easy classification: even now, I remain unsure as to whether to call them sculptural or printed, but any attempt at material-specificity would be beside the point. Garden-Smith has been experimenting with producing shapes



across these highly malleable and artificial surfaces. Earlier iterations of this process (such as *Untitled* from 2017) saw her pressing ornate floral swirls into an oblong piece of beige blanket, the “decorative” pattern almost dissolving into the other smears and finger marks appearing so readily across the tactile material.

Given the delicacy of her printing technique, much of Garden-Smith’s work with these blankets is done on site. As such, *Tending Toward (Curtain Wall)* remains partially unknown to me at the time of this writing, existing within the realm of unfixed possibility. Yet whether in a gallery, studio, or elsewhere, Garden-Smith’s work is never truly fixed, never final—like any mark-making process based in touch, it has the potential to produce something entirely new each time a point of contact is made.

Perhaps in opposition to the malleability of this process, Garden-Smith is increasingly interested in the brick as a unit of stability. *Tending Toward (Curtain Wall)* involves experiments in pressing brick-like shapes into the polyester; building soft architectures that fold and sag against the existing gallery walls. If walls support our bodies as much as they separate us, what kinds of support could Garden-Smith’s bricks offer up? Unlike Atkins’ work, which emphasizes the singularity of each specimen, perhaps Garden-Smith’s repeated, systemic impressions

produce a different form of fixity. Despite any attempts at uniformity, these bricks naturally wiggle, producing gaps and inconsistencies in otherwise-even lines. Despite any promises of stability, one light graze of a gallery visitor's hand or leg could cause this structure to crumble completely.

It's worth remembering that Atkins' cyanotypes were accompanied by text: small, hand-written notes that delineated each species. One could argue that language produces distance within a relationship based on touch, yet *Three Impressions of Touch* (2018) by poet Fan Wu explores how the process of writing can inhabit sensation, as opposed to simply describing it. With intense momentum, "First Impression" rushes over itself to describe uneasy moments of contact with a lover; moments where touch evokes distance as well as closeness. "Polysiphonia violacea (after Atkins & Dickinson)" uses a specific print by Atkins and the sparse, sweet voice of poet Emily Dickinson to imagine what lives may be possible within that deep cyanotype blue. Lastly, Wu's "Guide to Capturing a Plum Blossom" takes inspiration from a thirteenth-century text of the same name by Song Dynasty poet Sung Po-jen. Meticulous and empirical, Sung's book attempted to understand a plum blossom through highly-detailed descriptions of its stages and resemblances.

Commissioned for *The Shape of the Middle*, Wu's poems embody the oscillation between touch and distance that Marks understood to be central to the erotic. As they move between remarkably different structures and reference points, *Three Impressions of Touch* prompts a mode of reading that feels akin to gently grazing past something, as opposed to claiming ownership through understanding. Marks refers to this as haptic criticism: "I try to move along the surface of the object, rather than attempting to penetrate or 'interpret' it, as criticism is usually supposed to do."⁵ Reading Wu's texts, I recognize this stance as a deeply queer one; a mode of learning and feeling that can produce alternative pleasures and politics. Just as "First Impression" ends on a seemingly unfinished line—"and when he touches me"—so too does this queer potential of touch continue to unfurl, expand, engulf me.

For the most part, the artists included in *The Shape of the Middle* aren't directly responding to Atkins' cyanotype work. The majority of them are not even explicitly working within the photographic medium—a deliberately oblique angle chosen for an exhibition during a photography festival. However, the practices of Marsh, Willard, Garden-Smith, and Wu each carry a commitment to image-making as a process of touch, of producing a

meeting-point between an object and a surface. It's a relatively simple moment—to be sure, one that is central to both printmaking and photography—yet it's one that is charged with possibility: for queer forms of intimacy, deeply-rooted understandings of place, complicated sensations of stability/fragility, or a sensuality that collapses inside and outside. The more time I spend with the works in *The Shape of the Middle*, the more I recognize that learning from their malleability means accepting my own; it means allowing myself to be impressed upon as well.

Curator Bio

DANIELLA SANADER

Daniella Sanader is a writer, curator, and arts worker living in Toronto. She has curated projects for Vtape and Oakville Galleries and has written texts for numerous publications and galleries across Canada.

Endnotes:

¹ Hayward, Eva. "Fingeryeyes: Impressions of Cup Corals." *Cultural Anthropology* 25:4, p. 581.

² Marks, Laura U. *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*. University of Minnesota Press, 2002. p. xvi.

³ Willard, Tania. *Dissimulation*. Burnaby Art Gallery, 2017. p. 55.

⁴ See the amazing Winter 2018 issue of *C Magazine, Site/ation*, edited by Peter Morin and Tania Willard.

⁵ Marks, xiii.

Cover image:

Anna Atkins, "Gigartina confervoides", from *Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions* c. 1843-1853, cyanotype. Image courtesy of Spencer Collection, The New York Public Library. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-4b26-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.

Interior images:

Jenine Marsh, *Water Strider*, 2017. Clothing, air dry clay, acrylic varnish, ink, approximately 4" diameter. Image courtesy of the artist.

Tania Willard, from the *Sovereign Sunshine* series, collaborations from BUSH Gallery, 2015. Sunprint, 22" x 30". Image courtesy of the artist.

Shannon Garden-Smith, *Untitled*, 2017. Stamped polyester throw blanket, 24" diameter.

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SHANNON GARDEN-SMITH

Shannon Garden-Smith lives and works in Toronto. Her studio practice and writing pursue modalities of unproductiveness in order to imagine ways of doing/making/performing uncoupled from predetermined productivist ends. She received her MFA in studio art from the University of Guelph in 2017 and her BA from the University of Toronto in 2012. She has recently exhibited at Birch Contemporary (Toronto), Erin Stump Projects (Toronto), 8-11 Gallery (Toronto), Y+ Contemporary (Scarborough), Kunstverein am-Rosa-Luxembourg-Platz (Berlin).

JENINE MARSH

Jenine Marsh (b. 1984) is an artist based in Toronto. She has exhibited her work in venues including COOPER COLE, Toronto; Lulu, Mexico City; Gianni Manhattan, Vienna; Vie d'ange, Montreal; Entrée, Bergen; Night Gallery, Los Angeles; ASHES/ASHES, Los Angeles; Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles; CK2, New York; and 8-11, Toronto. She has participated in residencies at the Banff Centre (CA) and Rupert (LT).

TANIA WILLARD

Tania Willard (Secwepemc Nation) works within the shifting ideas of contemporary and traditional as it relates to cultural arts and production, often working with bodies of knowledge and skills that are conceptually linked to her interest in intersections between Aboriginal and other cultures. Willard's curatorial work includes *Beat Nation: Art, Hip Hop, and Aboriginal Culture* (2011), a national touring exhibition first presented at Vancouver Art Gallery and curatorial residencies at grunt gallery and Kamloops Art Gallery. Alongside Karen Duffek, she co-curated *Unceded Territories: Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun* at the Museum of Anthropology. As an artist, Willard's BUSH gallery project collapses boundaries between artist and curator while creating space for experimental contemporary art practice in a land-based, outdoor environment. BUSH gallery hosts an annual rez-idency on Willard's family land on Neskonlith Indian reserve, near Chase, BC, part of Secwepemculecw.

FAN WU

Fan Wu is always trying to catapult his mind away from his persistently mildly ailing body—but the lumbering body never fails to catch up. He holds an M.A. in Comparative Literature and an M.A. in Cinema Studies from the University of Toronto. His academic research explores the contradictions of friendship, madness, and the neutral. Perched as he is between love for the University and frustration at its limitations, he hosts Close Workshops, a series of intimate critical reading & creative writing workshops based out of art galleries in Toronto; past themes include translation, poetry, masochism, and mourning. He is the poetry editor at Impulse [b:] publishing, where he publishes the Decoys series, anthologies of free translations. His poetry & lyric criticism has been published in MICE Magazine, Prefix Photo, 4 Poets, C Magazine, Carousel, and Arc Magazine.

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