



ENDLESS
TRANSFORMATIONS:

The Alchemy of
Connie Imboden



Endless
Transformations:
The Alchemy of
Connie Imboden

Curated by Kristen Hileman

September 7 – December 8, 2024
American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center
Washington, DC



Self-Portrait, 1971
Gelatin Silver Print, 9 3/8 x 7 1/4 in. Unique Edition

FOREWORD

I was new to Baltimore in 1992, directing Maryland Art Place with only a limited understanding of the cultural life carousing around me... so different from DC's temperance. One of MAP's Board Members, José Villarubia, took me under his wing and opened the doors to two of Baltimore's underground art scenes: faux fashion—or glamour—photography and the world of graphic novels and comics, and their colorization by artists like Villarubia.

Shortly after I arrived, Villarubia brought fellow artist Connie Imboden onto the MAP Board. When I saw her work, my eyes were blown open to what photography could become when grown in such a hothouse as Baltimore. Its world-class art museums, performance venues, universities, and great art and medical schools rubbed up against Haussner's Ball of String, Billy Pappas' *Marilyn Monroe*, John Water's *Divine*, the National Great Blacks in Wax Museum, and the 14Karat Cabaret (somehow still operated after forty years by Laure Drogoul out of MAP's dank basement). Imboden's art flourished in this fecund petri dish.

Like the world, Imboden's work has only gotten deeper and darker in the intervening thirty-some years. I encountered her startlingly original underwater silver gelatin exposures soon after my arrival in Baltimore. Now her more colorful, complicated, and strangely narrative digital photographs are exhibited in conjunction with the American University Museum's *Endless Transformations: The Alchemy of Connie Imboden*. Her growth and accumulation of power is on display for all to see.

The critical contributions to the catalog (Kristen Hileman's *Alchemical Photography* and Jennie Hirsh's *Mythology as Medium and Motive: The Reflective Lens of Connie Imboden*) are so smart and provocative! We are grateful for their participation in this project. We are also grateful to have the complete support of Connie Imboden, who is only now just beginning to receive the exposure and acclaim that is her due. Imboden has generously donated the majority of works in this exhibition to the American University Museum, strengthening the Museum's photographic holdings and permitting us to share her art with students, scholars, and the wider public for years to come.

JACK RASMUSSEN

C. Nicholas Keating and Carleen B. Keating Director
American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center
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Alchemical Photography

KRISTEN HILEMAN |

Connie Imboden sees her photography as a manifestation of the alchemical imagination. Influenced by the psychoanalytic theories of Carl Jung (Swiss, 1875–1961), she analogizes the processes of photography with those of alchemy. A material transformation is sought: the play of light off her models is fixed into still images through chemistry (and since 2008 through the work of digital code and electronic firings). But more importantly, by repeating this alchemical quest devotedly and relentlessly, the photographer meditates on the nature of transformation itself and develops her own psychological and spiritual awareness. Photographs can at once be physical evidence of the world and mysterious artifacts of self-searching, especially within Imboden's oeuvre: a body of work in which bodies are transfigured into strange fragments and alluring aggregations that lay bare the hurt, beauty, and transcendence threaded through the human condition.

The artist began making self-portraits in 1971, while she was taking classes at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore. In this early work, Imboden overlays her face with the texture of tree bark, doubles her image, and even splits her face apart through darkroom techniques making overt the interior feeling of having a multiplied or divided self (figure 2). Although one might ascribe a biographical significance to this work, which was made during a period when Imboden was painfully conscious that her queer sexuality was marginalized by mainstream culture, it is also significant that layering, fracturing, and otherwise distorting the human figure through the dynamics of reflected light have remained central to Imboden's practice for five decades. Imboden frequently states that it is the pursuit of visual impact—an intuitive search for a forceful and harmonious alignment of formal elements within an image—that drives her art. It is only after she prints and reviews her compositions that their many metaphorical possibilities are revealed.



Figure 1

Untitled (11159), 2005

Gelatin Silver Print, 30 x 39 7/8 in. Ed. 1/3



Figure 2

Self-Portrait, 1971
Gelatin Silver Print, 8 1/2 x 7 1/4 in. Unique Edition



Figure 3

Untitled, 1975
Gelatin Silver Print, 9 x 9 1/4 in. Unique Edition

While most of her work from the 1970s has been lost, following a 1978 workshop with Minor White, Imboden produced exquisite studies of felled trees in a Baltimore lumber yard, allowing natural light to illuminate beautiful networks of lines radiating from the violent gashes of saw blades (figure 3). This is the only time in the artist's career when she excluded the human figure from her compositions. It is also a rare instance of Imboden—who has looked to paintings ranging from the spiritually earnest devotional panels of unattributed early Christian art to wrenching meditations on humanity by Michelangelo, Francisco de Goya, and Edvard Munch for inspiration—citing another photographer, White, as a direct influence. That being said, when one considers Imboden's work from the 1970s, as well as pieces shot with a Rolleiflex SL66 in the mid-1980s featuring dream-like visions of the artist's then-partner Christine Neighoff immersed in streams and crowned by the reflection of trees (*Visceral Thoughts*, 1987, page 41) or nearly subsumed by her shimmering surroundings (*Sainthood*, 1987, page 38), the images of the nearly contemporary photographer Francesca Woodman (American, 1958–1981) come to mind.¹ Although the young Imboden was not aware of Woodman's tragically short career as it unfolded, both photographers created a haunting, surreal world in which the female body enters and merges with environments that seem untamed by normative, patriarchal society (figure 4).

After receiving her MFA from the University of Delaware in 1988, Imboden staged her shoots in more controlled environments and evolved two distinct ways of working: outdoor shoots with models posing in pools of water and indoor studio sessions with models positioned amidst mirrored surfaces. Building on her work in streams, Imboden started photographing models in pools and hot tubs. These were lined with black materials that absorbed all light but that from artificial sources, which the artist focused on models to excise arresting abstractions from their bodies (figure 1). Starting in 1991, Imboden began to work with male models as well as female, with the gender of her subjects becoming less important to her images' content than each unique body's capacity to transform into



Figure 4

Francesca Woodman

Untitled, 1979

Gelatin Silver Print, 3 13/16 x 3 13/16 in.

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intriguing shapes. Nevertheless, there is a stark sensuality to the water images from the early 1990s that shares qualities with Edward Weston's (American, 1886–1958) lithe, glistening nudes, as well as the erotically classicizing images of Robert Mapplethorpe (American 1946–1989). In comparing Mapplethorpe and Imboden, their common interest in visually luxuriating in the forms of the naked body is clear. However, Imboden's approach appears more charged with emotion. In her *Untitled* (5414), 1993 (figure 5), the ribs and pelvis of a male torso delineate high-contrast areas, but this visual activity stems from an overstretched posture, one that infuses qualities of anguish, endurance, even crucifixion into the composition. Mapplethorpe's sculptural celebrations of the male physique admit no similar implication of vulnerability or symbolic narrativity.²



Figure 5

Untitled (5414), 1993
Gelatin Silver Print, 17 x 13 1/8 in.

By the mid-1990s, seams mark the bodies of many of Imboden's subjects, including the female torso in *Untitled (6256.26)*, 1995 (figure 6). The artist achieves this effect of severing and soldering back together by focusing on the meniscus, or distinctive curve, that water forms when it touches another material—in this case skin. Portions of subjects' bodies emerge from the water and are reflected on its surface, other parts are distorted by the meniscus, and still others remain submerged and partially lit. Once Imboden began shooting digitally and in color in 2008, these different spatial registers further manifested as shifts in color temperature as in *Untitled (04-24-08-152)*, 2008 (figure 7).³ In both her black-and-white and color images, the compression of space and optical effects within the camera's frame produces bodies that sprout uncanny protuberances or double themselves. These imaginative bodies—seen as the artist and her camera see and never further manipulated in the dark-room or digitally—are impossibly abundant and abjectly unsettling, yet visually resolved.⁴

Although, Imboden does not explicitly investigate feminist themes, the aggressive toothed mouth that replaces the head of a female model in *Untitled (5978)*, 1994 (figure 8), both roars with the force of a vagina dentata and howls in existential agony as if it were a female companion to one of Irish-British painter Francis Bacon's (1909–1992) screaming popes. In this and many of her works, Imboden brings to photography the qualities of fantasy and catharsis more frequently associated with painting. The artist observes that her work allows viewers to experience extreme feelings “without having to go through the trauma” that gives rise to these emotions in embodied reality.⁵ The dynamically cropped figure of *5978*, conveys the terror of unbridled experience and the empowerment of overcoming; conditions that are shared by all humans, but manifest in particular ways around the female body's traditionally subordinate social and sexual standing. Additionally, the sheer physicality required to make a water-based image like *5978* heightens its visual and psychological tension. In order to achieve a successful shot, models had to hold completely still in unusual poses, fighting against the fluidity of the surroundings, while Imboden, wearing weights and holding her breath, submerged herself, her Nikonos camera, and underwater lights to conduct a challenging aqueous choreography. The artist credits the extraordinary efforts behind these precisely aligned compositions as helping her to overcome a long-term fear of water, which began after she nearly drowned in a neighbor's pool at the age of seven or eight.



Figure 6

Untitled (6256.26), 1995
Gelatin Silver Print, 17 x 11 7/8 in. Ed. 7/25



Figure 7

Untitled (04-24-08-152), 2008
Gelatin Silver Print, 16 3/4 x 25 in.

While Imboden stopped making work in water after 2015, she has photographed models (occasionally paired with mannequins) amidst reflective surfaces clamped to metal stands from the late 1980s to the present. Initially, the artist oiled Plexiglas mirrors to distort the models' appearances, but by the early 1990s, she scraped away areas of silvering, positioning models both behind and in front of the altered mirrors in her darkened studio to create varying degrees of reflection and transparency, which then translate to entwined layers of body and space within her prints. Imboden may retain a manipulated mirror for years. The mirror's patina evolves as she reworks its surface, and her understanding of its optical impact grows through the discipline of weekly shoots. Similarly, the artist works with models for extended periods ranging from months to years, gaining a profound understanding of the relationship between specific bodies and her camera and engaging in dialogues with the model before selecting final images from a shoot.⁶



Figure 8

Untitled [5978], 1994

Gelatin Silver Print, 35 1/2 x 43 1/2 in. Ed. 3/5



Figure 9

Untitled (3725), 1991
Gelatin Silver Print, 15 7/8 x 13 3/8 in. Ed. 5/25

Imboden describes her work with mirrors as less abstractly formal than her water imagery. Fragmentation of the human body still occurs, but the figures of the mirror pictures generally retain their heads, and therefore the capacity to react to their circumstances in a more actively psychological way. These works can have a narrative quality: while each story is open-ended (the numerical titles the artist gives her work are intended to defeat narrow readings), the figures appear as characters—activated, individualized, and potentially symbolic. In the unnerving *Untitled (3725)*, 1991 (figure 9), the subject expresses pained surprise as his eyes look out of the frame, perhaps an attempt at mental escape from the slashes across his chest, scars that sug-

gest a violent martyrdom.⁷ A later image, *Untitled (7502)*, 1998 (page 47), in which broken mirrors fracture a torso, conveys a distinctly forlorn melancholy as if the optically broken body represents internal hurt and disarray. Yet a third work similarly organized around an aggressive disruption to a figure's mid-section, *Untitled (07-12-12-027)*, 2012 (figure 10), reveals a body severed by a single adamant gouge. Its subject, with arm and head thrown back, is either about to move forward, tearing his body apart, or has just completed the step that reunited severed halves. This ambiguity of action is enhanced by a beatific face that transcends physical distress. Although the emotional tenor differs in each picture, the trio speaks to a world in which pain is an inescapable part of life. Imboden's figures, which stem from an encompassing desire to make work that enhances empathy, serve as companions, surrogates, and guides in navigating and enduring the hardships of being human.⁸

One might argue that these are roles that works of art have played for centuries; here, however, they are shaped through photographic technology and the experiences of a woman artist.

Notably, the emphatic rupture across the middle of *07-12-12-027* recalls the seamed images from Imboden's water series, establishing an important connection between the visual and metaphoric devices of her water and mirror photographs. However, in *07-12-12-027* and other color images shot with mirrors over the last 15 years, Imboden more openly embraces the qualities of art historical painting than she does in her water photographs. Many of these mirror compositions contain atmospheric space, richly colored draperies, and poses suggesting mythological couplings (*09-27-11-0057*, 2011, page 23) and biblical tragedies (*04-24-12-012*, 2012, page 62). Others are remarkable for flattened forms and precisely delineated shapes that reflect Cubist and Dada-esque re-imaginings of the figure (figure 11).

Hoods, helmets, and armor constitute another motif that Imboden revisits throughout her mirrored works. Goddesses and gladiators are channeled in images like *Untitled (10618)*, 2003 (page 49), and *Untitled (11-05-18-814)*, 2018 (figure 12). Imboden's interest in shields gained new resonance during the pandemic of 2020–21. After pausing her work due to social distancing restrictions, she resumed shooting with Cory Donovan, a studio manager and model with whom she had worked for 20 years. Donovan wore a blue surgical mask and plastic shield during their studio sessions, the latter element adding another surface, both reflective and



Figure 10

Untitled (07-12-12-027), 2012

Archival Inkjet Print, 24 x 16 5/8 in. Ed. 2/10



Figure 11

Untitled (11-05-18-814), 2018
Archival Inkjet Print, 25 x 14 in.



Figure 12

Untitled (06-08-16-429), 2016

Archival Inkjet Print, 22.2/8 x 34 in. Ed. 3/10

transparent, to the compositions. Vibrant flares of color, resulting from fabric pulled into the frame, emanate from Donovan's head as he transforms into an electrified but isolated warrior confronting an obscure enemy on a pitch-black field. *Untitled (09-25-20-38)*, 2020 (figure 13) presents an erect amalgamation of a contemporary cyborg-gladiator, yet places that figure in a void as inscrutable and uncertain as the future feels at the outset of the third decade of the twenty-first century.

As with the alchemist, Imboden's search to harness the visual energy of models moving through fields of light and offer a cathartic presence through the expressive capacity of the human body is endless. And for viewers, the shifting contexts of culture—inexorably generating new conditions of exclusion and pathos, synthesis and perseverance—and the physical wonder of optics, sinew, bone structure, and gesture combine and re-combine as one is continually startled and consoled at recognizing one's experiences in the artist's poignant and powerful imagery.



Figure 13

Untitled (09-25-20-38), 2020

Metal Print, 52 x 36 7/8 in. Ed. 2/10

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Many of Imboden's works from this period were shot north of Baltimore near the Gunpowder River.
- ² See for example Robert Mapplethorpe's *Charles Bowman*, 1980. <https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/109GQ8>. Accessed June 12, 2024.
- ³ Imboden has used a variety of digital cameras since 2008, among them a Canon SD Mark ii, Fuji X-E1, Sony ILCE-7R, and Sony Alpha A7R III.
- ⁴ While Imboden used darkroom techniques to alter her works of the early 1970s, she abandoned this practice in subsequent work. After making the transition to digital photography, she has used applications to make adjustments to qualities like color and contrast, but the distortion and fragmentation in these images is entirely the product of the different degrees of reflectivity of materials used in staging each photograph and the ways in which Imboden positions her camera during shoots.
- ⁵ Imboden, interview with Kristen Hileman, November 9, 2020.
- ⁶ If a model was uncomfortable with an image shot on film, Imboden gave the model the corresponding negative. See Imboden interview with Hileman, November 16, 2020.
- ⁷ The subject of this work is Imboden's first male model, an acquaintance diagnosed with schizophrenia who approached Imboden about modeling for her. They worked together for approximately a year and a half. See Imboden interview with Hileman, November 16, 2020.
- ⁸ Empathy is an important motivator for Imboden who is an activist on behalf of artists and community in her home town of Baltimore, where she serves as the president of the board of governors of the William G. Baker Jr. Memorial Fund, which has provided financial awards to individual artists in and around Baltimore for nearly fifteen years as of 2021.



Figure 14

Untitled (04-14-09-462), 2009
Metal Print, 52 x 42 in. Ed. 5/10

Mythology as Medium and Motive: The Reflective Lens of Connie Imboden

| JENNIE HIRSH

Since its invention, photography as a medium has been celebrated not only for its ability to capture reality but also for the camera's capacity as an illusionistic instrument, adept at manipulation, permutation, and variation, allowing it to depict as much, if not more, than what the naked eye can see. Whether as portraits, landscapes, or still lifes, photographs document and deliver information, often incorporating narrative content. And, at the same time, photography, like all art, can explore and even emphasize its inherent pictorial parameters *as* content. In short, photography records information, preserving instants and telling stories, as well as staging *new* encounters that shift our perspectives and perceptions by mapping out new pictorial possibilities.

For the past five decades, Baltimore-based photographer Connie Imboden has produced enigmatic images by deftly engaging in a range of photographic practices and styles, generating compositions that are at once inventive and illusive, figurative and abstract. Moving inside and outside her intimate studio, Imboden has devised complex shots suspended from reality that range from fragmented and mask-like self-portraits to curiously abstract closeups and mashups of other bodies. Perhaps most strikingly, and of interest in this essay, her shots feature enraptured human figures suspended in arresting episodes seemingly plucked from classical mythology; indeed, Narcissus, Andromeda, Orpheus, and Apollo and Daphne, to name a few, seem to haunt her photographs. At the same time, the very *production* of her more abstract pictures connects to classical mythology by virtue of their design. In other words, myth subtly permeates Imboden's oeuvre not only as dramatic content but also as form through the dynamics of her artistic practice, one that has long relied on the reflective surfaces of water and other devices to induce the unexpected and uncanny alike.



Figure 15

Untitled (3572), 1990
Gelatin Silver Print, 21 3/8 x 16 3/4 in. Ed. 7/10

Historically, classical myths have sought to explain curious natural phenomena, offered advice for averting disaster, and, by extension, proposed rules to shape—and in most cases curtail—human behavior, especially when hubristic. Of course, the specifics of mythical content differ according to cultural context, and the anxieties they alleviate (or exacerbate) reflect concerns tied to the ethos of the historical moment of their recounting and inscription, though most myths, whatever their source, are likewise steeped in issues that endure. In other words, myths are temporally and culturally specific stories that achieve mythical status precisely because of their universal quality *to mean* over time and across space. Entertaining while also pedagogical, their characters enact the most primal urges that motivate human behavior, such

as desire, greed, jealousy, resentment, rivalry, and anger. Put otherwise, classical myth offers juicy stories with compelling characters, hence offering ideal material for art, which has long been in the business of representing stories about memorable figures, events, and more. And each time art endeavors to translate myth, there is always more and less to the story—a twist or a tweak, an omission or elision, what we might call a pictorial permutation that emphasizes a particular moment, offering the spectator an alternative, either to the story or the insights that it may provide about looking itself. Myth offers fertile terrain for art—as *narrative content* in the form of recognizable stories, as *medium* in terms of artistic processes that mimic artistic actions, and, finally, as a *method* through which we can interpret the premise of an artist’s activity.

Consider, for example, Imboden's *Untitled (04-14-09-462)*, 2009 (figure 14), an image that offers a fruitful portal into understanding her practice. Simply put, a balding male figure longingly probes and penetrates his aqueous reflection, at once touching his own likeness and triggering its destruction. Echoing the predicament of Narcissus, best known in Ovid's cautionary tale as told in Book III of the *Metamorphoses*, the image warns, like so many Ovidian myths, against inappropriate looking as enacted by the protagonist who falls in love with his own visage, an image that appears on the surface of a pool and one that he fails to recognize as produced by his own body.¹ And yet, at the same time, by perforating the liquid field with his finger, Imboden's subject recalls the very nature of how traditional analog photographic images work, captured and then suspended in emulsion. A modern-day Narcissus, the figure contemplates his own image, perhaps questioning the lessons of the original myth's prescription against illicit viewing—or at least obsessive reflection—while simultaneously cleverly drawing our attention to the very nature of this artist's craft.



Figure 16

Untitled (8619), 2000
Gelatin Silver Print, 45 X 33 1/4 in. Ed. 2/6

Untitled (3572), 1990 (figure 15) and *Untitled (8619)*, 2000 (figure 16), are more subtly mythological. Each of these two vertically oriented, black-and-white photographs resembles a critical instant in the story of Apollo and Daphne. In the Ovidian account, the Greek god Apollo experiences unbridled passion for the woodland nymph Daphne who

Opposite:

Figure 17

Untitled (09-27-11-0057), 2011

Archival Inkjet Print, 32 x 22 2/8 in. Ed. 7/10

just barely evades his lustful advances, saved by her father Peneus who, answering her prayers to escape Apollo's advances, transformed her into a laurel tree with legs becoming roots, arms becoming branches, and hair becoming foliage.² In *Untitled (3572)*, the fleshy female nude protectively wraps her arms around her torso, clutching herself and tilting back her head in a gesture that teeters between resistance and rhapsody. Intensifying the image is a second, shadowy figure who advances from behind to overcome her. As they vacillate between physical resistance and sexual release, a cross-hatching, branch-like pattern bleeds across both bodies, entrapping not only the figures but also that just-before moment that is critical for Daphne to prevail in self-preservation. Only by embracing her dendritic death—one subtly referenced by other images of tree trunks in the show—can Daphne preserve her chastity, having hubristically rejected divine desire.

Created a decade later, *Untitled (8619)* is likewise entangled in the same myth, although rather than emphasizing the myth's moment of failed copulation, this image seems to meditate on Daphne's transformation by incorporating a thick contour that traverses the image from its upper left down to its lower right to slice the composition into two parts, leaving in its wake a Daphne-like figure split into her two requisite forms. To the left, we find a composite wooden body that is more trunk-like than human, while to the right, we see an elongated and languid female nude. In other words, Imboden stages both a before and an after for this transmutation in a work that at once separates and fuses together two instants critical to this traumatic tale. But as a classic-made-contemporary, the image expands the myth's meaning into a celebration of Daphne's emancipation-as-ecstasy.

The more one looks, the more one realizes how much mythology permeates much of Imboden's oeuvre, though I will limit myself to a third and final example: Perseus and Andromeda, whose story can be seen embedded in *Untitled (09-27-11-0057)*, 2011 (figure 17). Familiar for his feats in Book IV of the *Metamorphoses*, Perseus leverages his reflective shield to access an oblique glimpse of Medusa, the gorgon whose serpentine tresses turned to stone anyone who dared look upon her. By strategically deploying a reflection, Perseus decapitates Medusa and hence disables her capacity for enacting this destructive, petrifying behavior.³ Traditionally understood as the ultimate punishment for the sin of voyeurism, or what Sigmund Freud labeled scopophilia, the sight of Medusa literally



stopped in their tracks any being caught gazing directly upon her. But Perseus does not slay Medusa in Imboden's photograph; instead, we find a cluster of spectral characters. Most prominently, we find a voluptuous, naked woman whose arms disappear behind her body affixed to a precipitous, craggy backdrop. A monstrous, red presence, not fully visible, holds her in check, hotly restraining her while the barely visible equine head—a form that evokes Pegasus—floats in the upper left area of the composition. Murky and gray, the overall impact of the work suggests the moment just before Perseus arrives to slay the sea monster and rescue Andromeda, the classically charged damsel-in-distress. Staging her anguish, Imboden thrusts her viewer into this incredibly fraught moment of a myth that has a positive outcome: Perseus will save the day.⁴

But like so many of her photographs, *Untitled (09-27-11-0057)* is not about relief or release: it is about living in and with discomfort or trauma. In that sense, this image aligns with so much of Imboden's work, which manages to isolate those most difficult moments familiar not only from these myths but also as universally experienced emotional (and physical) extremes that relate to the broader human condition. In life, we purportedly plow ahead in search of something better and avoid prolonged reflection on the discomfiting effects of whatever trials and tribulations we may confront, whether by choice or chance. Like classical myths and, indeed, art more generally, Imboden's reflective lens offers the opportunity to instead slow down long enough to sit with, contemplate, and process trauma that occurs time and again. In so doing, she takes advantage of photography's ability to still an instant, whether to prolong pleasure or process pain.

* * *

But I want to take a step back to investigate mythology in Imboden's pictorial practice from a different angle: *myth as medium*. As Arthur Ollman has astutely observed, she regularly employs mirror-like surfaces to conjure her ethereal and otherworldly images.⁵ Submerging her subjects in reflective pools of water or manipulating their forms in her studio, Imboden casts mirrors as central players in the staging of these pictures, replete with extreme and intense emotions as fraught as the bodily contortions in the shots that she captures by viewing them through and amongst mirrored and translucent surfaces. Moreover, working with such surfaces unlocks not only unexpected juxtapositions of multiple bodies but also the fabrication of composite bodies, illogical hybrids

whose extraordinary anatomies represent fantastical terrain. And so she produces a range of oddities, from doubled bodies, at once hermaphroditic and fragmentary, to fleshy, illegible landscapes that resist purely human identification.⁶ In other words, she maps out new corporeal terrain precisely predicated on displaced digits and excised extremities. Indeed, over time, she has built an oeuvre of bodies that are akin not only to those made by the surrealist convention of the exquisite corpse but also the mutilations endured by medieval martyrs.

These conflations of disparate characteristics—smooth and rough, vegetal and human, male and female—emerge again and again. But rather than understanding their affect exclusively through their appearance, I would like to turn

back to their site of conception. In particular, I am interested in the large-scale, vertically oriented Plexiglas board that sits at the heart of her studio, a weathered and cracked pictorial plane that recalls Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*, 1915–1923, itself an object that remains amongst the most enigmatic icons of art-historical modernism (figures 18 and 19).⁷ Split into two registers, with the “bride” and her entourage on top and her “bachelors” below, Duchamp's two-paned, window-like sculpture with portrait orientation holds in balance female and male desire. Damaged in 1926, in transit after being exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum, *The Large Glass*' gendered premise cannot be understood without recalling Duchamp's own frequent gender-bending as seen, most famously, in his photographic portraits in drag whereby he appeared as Rose Sélavy, his female alter ego whose name phonetically echoed the sentence: “Eros, c'est la vie,” or “Erotic love, that's life.” Indeed, a century ago Duchamp disrupted the binary construction of gender by not only relegating the sexes to different spheres in this work but also physically transgressing those boundaries in his own persona, real and imagined, in life and in photography.



Figure 18
Connie Imboden's studio, 2024



Figure 19

Marcel Duchamp
The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors,
Even (The Large Glass), 1915–1923
 © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP,
 Paris / Association Marcel Duchamp.

By working with a similar structure as the central prop in her studio, Imboden transforms modeling sessions into what I see as photographic performances that feature models-turned-actors who enliven her poignant, mythological photographs that appear like records of theatrical productions. In other words, by refracting the bodies and objects on set, in the privacy of her studio, and seeing them through the transparent plane within the field of her lens, Imboden implements her own gendered critique, albeit one that is as classical as it is contemporary. In so doing, Imboden enables her models to perform otherwise impossible couplings and mergers facilitated by her camera and way of seeing rather than by any sort of post-production editing. We need only think of the so-called Speech of Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*, whereby he describes humans being whole but then splitting into halves, divided pairs that then spend their lives searching for their original partners, whether heterosexual

or homosexual.⁸ In acknowledging Imboden's feminist and queer perspective, I see Duchamp's *Large Glass* as offering a productive framework for thinking about works by women artists who react against the past and especially the parochialism of much of modernism, a period whose history is mostly written in terms of its male protagonists.

It is worth noting that Imboden was preceded by two other women artists whose respective practices more self-consciously engaged with *The Large Glass*. Clad in an androgynous white pantsuit, Hannah Wilke performed a striptease behind Duchamp's work in her erotically feminist *Hannah Wilke Through the Large Glass, 1976*, literally and figuratively layering her moving body onto Duchamp's piece the way that Imboden layers and synthesizes models into sensual, iconographically charged images (figure 20).⁹ Wilke dramatically disrobed to lay bare not only the shortcomings of Duchamp's vision but also the problematic championing



Figure 20

Hannah Wilke

Hannah Wilke Through the Large Glass, 1977

Still from filmed performance.

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Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix, NY.

of his persona as a male modernist. At the same time, she continued her fight for a feminism that did not abandon the erotic dimension of female agency.¹⁰ Notably, prior to Wilke, conceptual artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles declared her own artistic autonomy when she created her protest piece, *Now that you have Heirs/Airs Marcel Duchamp: Maintain the Ties that Bind*, 1973 (figure 21). In a dramatic, Oedipal artistic gesture, Laderman Ukeles cut the umbilical cord linking her to an overbearing conceptual art parent by walking a string from Duchamp's work at the Philadelphia Museum of Art a mile down the Benjamin Franklin Parkway to Moore College of Art (an art school with an all-female student body).¹¹ In this sense, Laderman Ukeles, too, infused her feminist practice with a touch of mythology-via-Freud, acknowledging that her self-distancing from the male origin story of Modernism inescapably remains entwined with the Duchampian lineage of conceptual art. This thematic complex of traumatic rupture and subsequent emergence is now familiar as one that Imboden more broadly explores in many of her compositions.

By subtly manipulating a prop similar to Duchamp's *Large Glass* to make her mythologically inflected works, Imboden opens up aesthetic as well as philosophical space for articulating her own mythology in what I sense is a critique that deflates the art-historical canon and its prohibitions by recalibrating it back to its more defiant and encompassing, if you will, classical roots, ones that insist on wedding agony and ecstasy



Figure 21

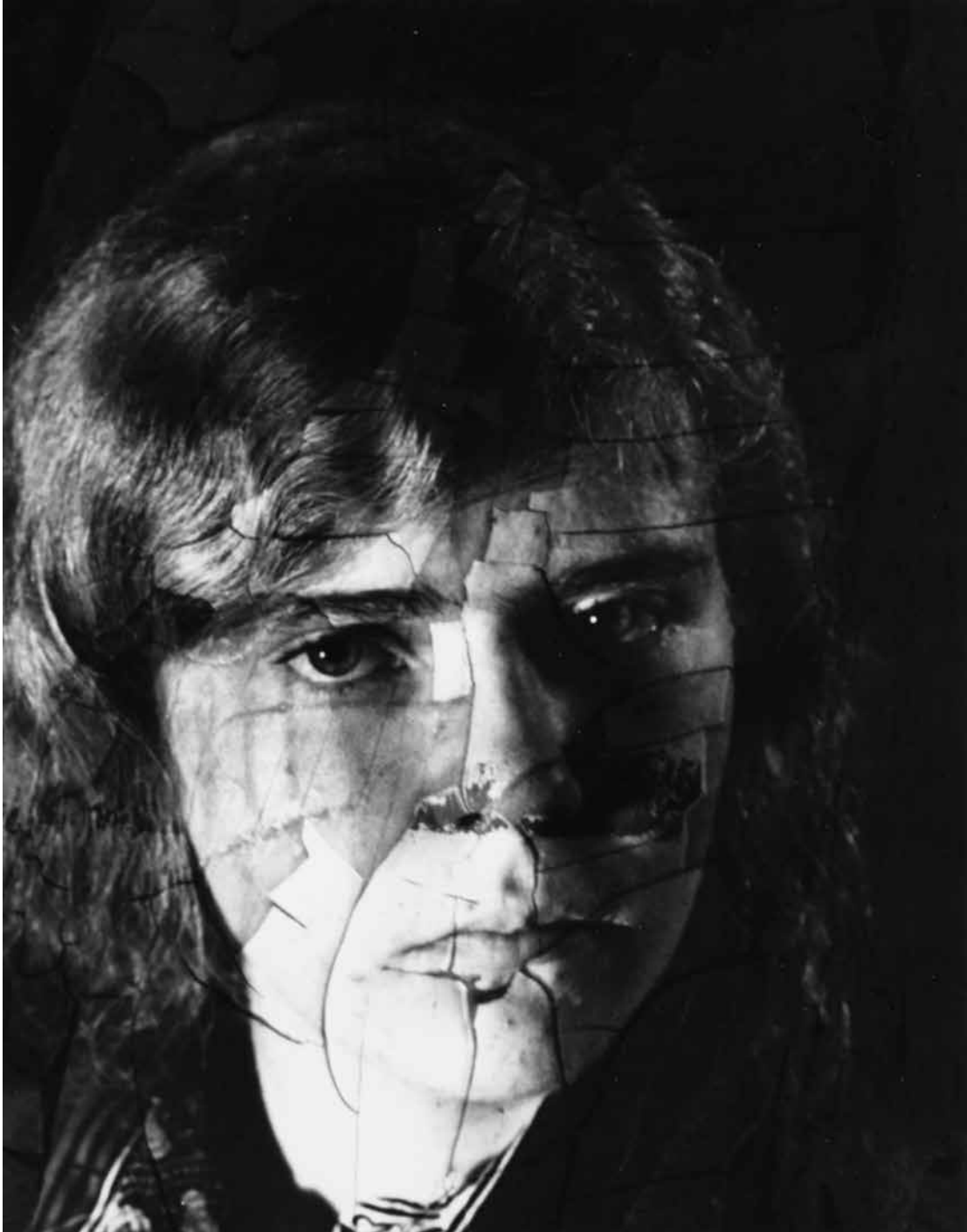
Mierle Laderman Ukeles
Now that you have Heirs/Airs, Marcel Duchamp:
Maintain the Ties that Bind: Carry the Burden of the Past,
 November 7, 1973
 One of eight black and white photographs, 10 x 8 in.
 © Mierle Laderman Ukeles
 Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York

in a delicate dance that leaves an indelible impression not only on the paper on which they are printed but also on the psyche of the transfixed viewer who does not quickly forget the convergence of passion and pain that characterizes these haunting works. As part of this project, like Perseus confronting Medusa, she conflates and renders visible otherwise unviewable bodies, putting in motion a viewing apparatus that enables her camera's lens to become a literal and metaphorical shield that reduces harm while augmenting vision. But if Perseus made it possible to see something frightful and dangerous, Imboden positions her photography to allow and encourage us to see more than what meets the eye. She pushes the boundaries of our physical world by imagining a more inclusive and expansive one that protects us from the dangers of provincial and parochial thinking. By fusing fragments, and even multiple sitters, these dense but celestial images forge beings whose stray limbs, torsos, and faces, now sutured together, complicate not merely our notions of anatomy but, more pointedly, subjectivity itself. In this sense, Imboden successfully extends and tempers the critical conversation opened up by feminists like Laderman Ukeles and Wilke, with a subtle but potent contribu-

tion that renews rather than resolves the complexities of how we can aesthetically address gender and other power dynamics in a more universal way. Imboden's mythologically inflected images intertwine the pictorial and even corporeal dimensions of myth through an artistic process that can be seen to instantiate the mechanics of myth and modernism. Her shimmering and translucent pools, planes, and other reflected surfaces come into focus through a lens that refracts not only its subjects—irrespective of their gender—but also our notion of what art, and its history, can do.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ See lines 402–510 of Book III in *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, trans. and with introduction by Mary M. Innes (Middlesex, UK and New York: Penguin Books, 1986 reprint): 85–87.
- ² See lines 442–552 of Book I in *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, trans. and with introduction by Mary M. Innes (Middlesex, UK and New York: Penguin Books, 1986 reprint): 41–43.
- ³ See lines 753–803 of Book IV in *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, trans. and with introduction by Mary M. Innes (Middlesex, UK and New York: Penguin Books, 1986 reprint): 114–115 for the story of Perseus leveraging his shield to kill Medusa.
- ⁴ See lines 663–752 of Book IV in *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, trans. and with introduction by Mary M. Innes (Middlesex, UK and New York: Penguin Books, 1986 reprint): 111–114.
- ⁵ See Arthur Ollman, “The Face of the Deep,” in *Connie Imboden. Beauty of Darkness* (New York & San Francisco: Custom & Limited Editions, 1999): 16. Ollman notes the ways in which the artist has manipulated mirror surfaces both in outdoor bodies of water and inside her studio.
- ⁶ For Ovid’s take on how the Hermaphrodite came out of the nymph Salmacis’ unrelenting advances toward Hermaphroditus until they merged into one being, see lines 274–388 of Book IV in *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, trans. and with introduction by Mary M. Innes (Middlesex, UK and New York: Penguin Books, 1986 reprint): 102–104.
- ⁷ For an interesting discussion of Duchamp’s own dramatic studio practices, see T.J. Demos, *The Exiles of Marcel Duchamp* (Cambridge: MIT, 2007), esp. Chapter Two, “Sculptures for Traveling.”
- ⁸ See the Speech of Aristophanes (189d–191e) in Plato’s *Symposium*, trans. by Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff as part of *Plato, Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997): 473–474. Thinking a bit further afield from the focus of this essay, what I might call Imboden’s “Large Plexiglas” likewise alludes to Felix Gonzalez-Torres’ *Untitled (Orpheus Twice)* and other paired reflective works from the 1990s as well as Jean Cocteau’s much earlier 1949 film *Orfée*, two other examples in which alternatively reflective and transparent vertical panels offer a route down to the Underworld, one that proposes access to love (and lovers) lost.
- ⁹ Wilke had an ongoing interest in Duchamp. Indeed, according to Marsie Scharlatt, Hannah’s sister, Wilke’s piece emerged following “discussions with the director of the made-for-German-television film, *C’est La Vie Rose*, an homage to Duchamp which includes Hannah’s performance.” See *C’est La Vie Rose*, directed by Hans-Christoff Stenzel (1976), in which Wilke starred alongside John Cage. Moreover, Scharlatt also explained that at the time Wilke was involved with Richard Hamilton, who “shared an interest in Duchamp [and] had worked on the restoration of *The Large Glass*.” Further, Hamilton “worked with Hannah on her Performalist Self-Portrait diptych, *I Object*, 1977–78, which references Duchamp’s *Étant donnés* and was photographed near Duchamp’s home in Cadaques.” I am grateful to Ms. Scharlatt for sharing this information with me via e-mail in April 2024.
- ¹⁰ For more on Wilke’s erotic feminism, see Anna Chave, “I Object’: Hannah Wilke’s Feminism.” *Art in America* 104–109+.
- ¹¹ See Sid Sachs, “Expanding the Expanded Field,” in Sid Sachs, *Invisible City* (Philadelphia: University of the Arts, 2000) for a thoughtful analysis of Hannah Wilke’s filmic work at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and also Rachel Churner, “Strange Bedfellows: Conceptual Beginnings in Philadelphia,” in Sid Sachs, *Invisible City* (Philadelphia: University of the Arts, 2020): 90–117, and esp. 102–103 for her excellent essay on conceptual artists (especially Laderman Ukeles) working in Philadelphia between 1956 and 1976.



Self-Portrait, 1971
Gelatin Silver Print, 9 x 7 1/8 in. Unique Edition



Self Portrait, 1990
Gelatin Silver Print, 16 3/8 x 13 3/8 in. Ed. 17/25



Untitled, 1979
Gelatin Silver Print, 9 x 9 in. Unique Edition



Self-Portrait, 1971
Gelatin Silver Print, 8 3/8 x 7 1/4 in. Unique Edition



Untitled, 1979
Gelatin Silver Print, 9 1/4 x 8 7/8 in. Unique Edition



Untitled (8295), 1999
Gelatin Silver Print, 17 3/4 x 11 3/4 in. Ed. 2/25

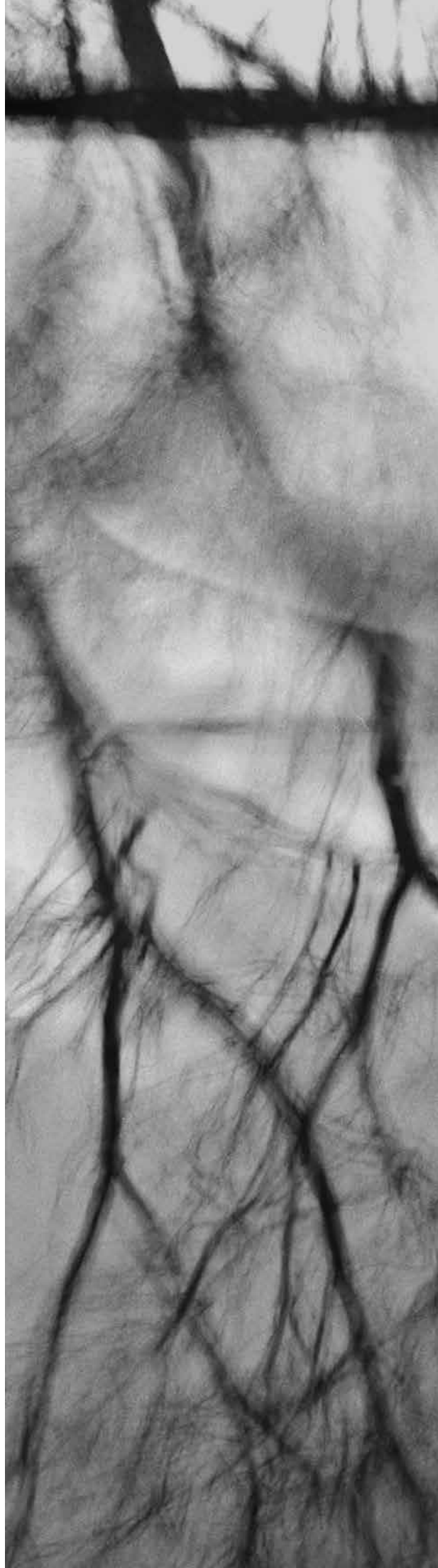


Untitled (1894), 1988
Gelatin Silver Print, 13 3/4 x 17 5/8 in. Ed. 9/25



Untitled, 1975
Gelatin Silver Print, 9 1/4 x 9 1/4 in. Unique Edition

Sainthood, 1987
Gelatin Silver Print, 19 1/4 x 17 5/8 in. Ed. 7/10







Fire, 1987
Gelatin Silver Print, 20 3/4 x 17 3/8 in. Ed. 1/10



Visceral Thoughts, 1987
Gelatin Silver Print, 20 1/2 x 18 3/8 in. Ed. 7/10



Dead Silences II, 1987
Gelatin Silver Print, 14 3/4 x 21 5/8 in. Ed. 1/10



Dead Silences I, 1987
Gelatin Silver Print, 21 3/8 x 17 1/8 in. Ed. 5/10



Untitled [1721], 1988
Gelatin Silver Print, 18 3/8 x 14 1/4 in. Ed. 16/25



Untitled (5677), 1994
Gelatin Silver Print, 15 1/2 x 11 5/8 in. Ed. 2/25



Untitled (4071), 1991
Gelatin Silver Print, 16 5/8 x 14 in. Ed 2/25

Opposite:
Untitled (7502.1), 1998
Gelatin Silver Print, 15 x 13 1/8 in. AP, Ed. of 25



Opposite:

Untitled (10618), 2004

Gelatin Silver Print, 19 1/4 x 13 5/8 in. Ed. 2/10





Untitled (4590), 1992
Gelatin Silver Print, 13 1/8 x 17 in. Ed. 11/25



Untitled (6653.2), 1996
Gelatin Silver Print, 17 3/8 x 12 in. Ed. 10/25



Untitled (7146), 1997
Gelatin Silver Print, 19 x 11 3/4 in. Ed. 18/25



Untitled [7885.18], 1998
Gelatin Silver Print, 12 3/8 x 17 7/8 in. Ed. 12/25





Untitled (9028), 2000
Gelatin Silver Print, 18 3/8 x 12 1/8 in. Ed. 24/25

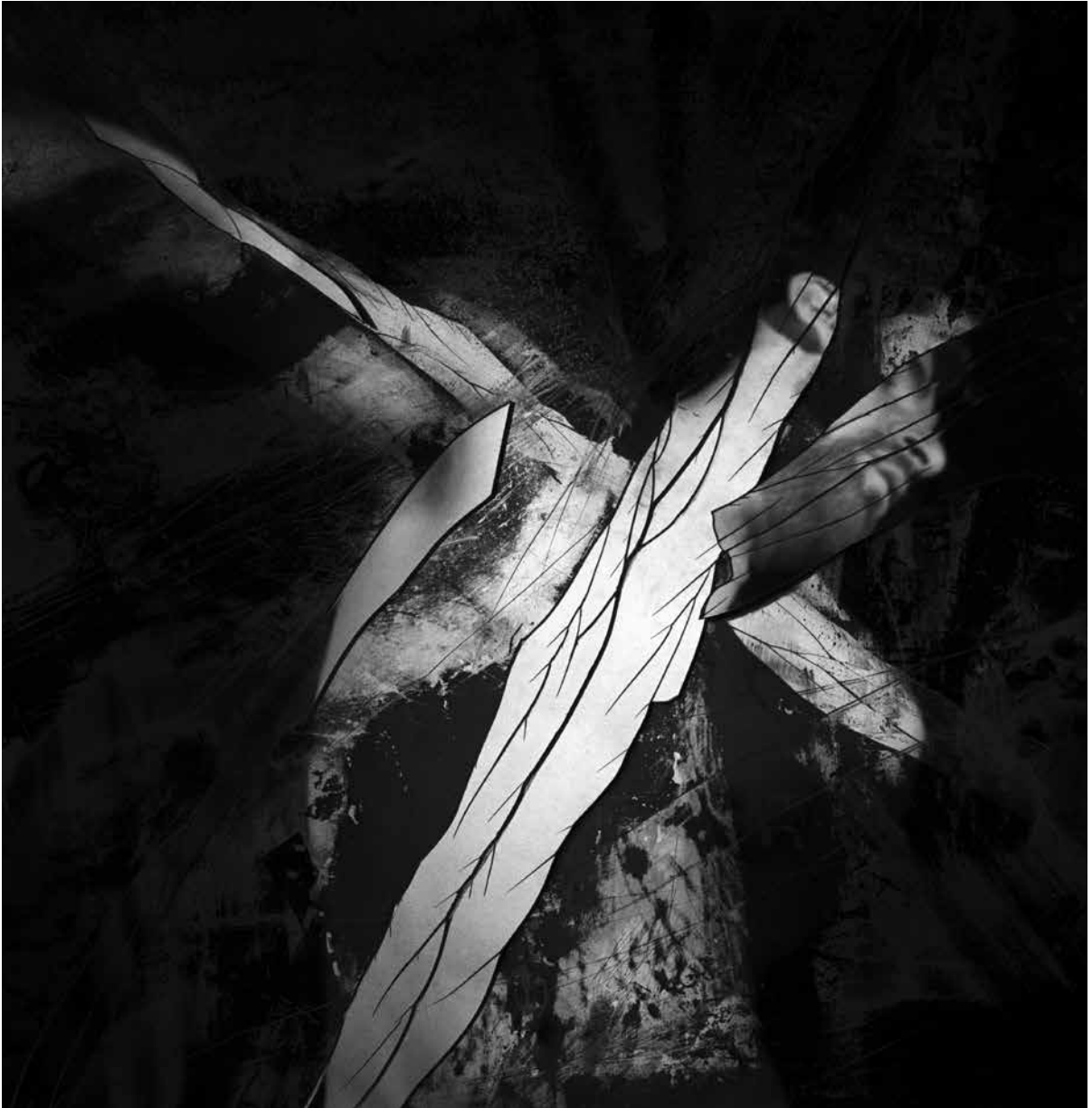
Opposite:
Untitled (7857.8), 1998
Gelatin Silver Print, 18 1/8 x 12 1/4 in. Ed. 3/25



Untitled (9344), 2001
Gelatin Silver Print, 48 X 32 3/4 in. Ed. 1/6



Untitled (9607), 2002
Gelatin Silver Print, 14 x 10 in. Ed. 10/25



Untitled (9284), 2001
Gelatin Silver Print, 16 3/4 x 19 7/8 in. Ed. 1/10



Untitled (10412.3), 2003
Gelatin Silver Print, 16 3/8 x 10 3/4 in. Ed. 12/25



Untitled (05-01-17-819), 2017
Metal Print, 52 x 27 5/8 in. Ed. 2/10



Untitled (07-12-12-027), 2012
Archival Inkjet Print, 24 x 16 5/8 in. Ed. 2/10



Untitled (04-24-12-012), 2012
Archival Inkjet Print, 24 x 18 in. Ed. 5/10



Untitled (06-05-15-250), 2015
Archival Inkjet Print, 20 x 18 5/8 in. Ed. 2/10



Untitled (08-20-21-402), 2021
Archival Inkjet Print, 24 x 16 in. Ed. 2/10



Untitled (07-05-19-401), 2019
Archival Inkjet Print, 24 x 15 2/8 in. Ed. 2/10



Untitled (08-13-21-567), 2021
Archival Inkjet Print, 24 x 2.8 in. Ed. 2/10



Untitled (05-07-21-45), 2021
Metal Print, 52 x 28 in. Ed. 2/10



Untitled (01-26-2024-868), 2024
Archival Inkjet Print, 24 x 16 in. Ed. 2/10

Untitled (11-5-18-1079), 2018
Archival Inkjet Print, 24 x 18 1/8 in. Ed. 2/10



Opposite:
Untitled (09-04-13-287), 2013
Archival Inkjet Print, 24 x 15 1/8 in. Ed. 6/10





Untitled (12-29-2023-225), 2023
Archival Inkjet Print, 24 x 15 7/8 in. Ed. 2/10



Untitled (05-21-21-198), 2021
Archival Inkjet Print, 17 2/8 x 24 Ed. 2/10



Untitled [06-23-17-742], 2017
Metal Print, 52 x 29 2/8 in. Ed. 2/10



Untitled (01-13-2023-800), 2023
Archival Inkjet Print, 14 in. x 24 in. Ed. 1/10



Untitled [01-17-2023-298], 2023
Metal Print, 52 x 34 3/8 in. Ed. 2/10



Untitled (01-14-22-451), 2022
Archival Inkjet Print, 24 x 17.5 in. Ed. 2/10

ARTIST

CONNIE IMBODEN

Over her five-decade career, Connie Imboden has shown her photographs in an extensive range of group and solo shows at galleries and museums throughout the United States, South America, Europe, and China. She is represented in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Philadelphia Museum of Art; Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris; Ludwig Museum, Cologne; and many other public and private collections throughout Europe and the Americas.

Her first book *Out of Darkness*, with essays by Charles-Henri Favrod and A.D. Coleman, won the silver medal in Switzerland's *Schönste Bücher aus aller Welt* (Most Beautiful Book in the World) awards in 1993. Following this success, Imboden released two monographs in 1999. The first, *Beauty of Darkness*, features eighty images of her work produced between 1986 and 1998 and introductions by A.D. Coleman and Arthur Ollman. The second book, *The Raw Seduction of Flesh*, features work produced in 1998 with an introduction by Mitchell Snow. More recently, *Reflections: 25 Years of Photography*, was published in 2009 by Insight Editions with essays by Arthur Ollman, Julian Cox, and John Wood.

Imboden is also a distinguished teacher, with appointments at the Maryland Institute College of Art; Maine Photographic Workshops; NORD Photography, Inderøy, Norway; International Center for Photography, NY; Center for Photography, Woodstock, NY; Fine Arts Work Center, Provincetown, MA; Rencontres Internationales de la Photographie, Arles, France; Union of Arab Photographers Workshop, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates; and Sante Fe Photographic Workshops.

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JENNIE HIRSH is Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art and Architecture at the Maryland Institute College of Art. She holds a BA in Classics from the University of Pennsylvania, an MA in Italian from Middlebury College, and MA and PhD degrees in History of Art from Bryn Mawr College. Hirsh has received research fellowships including a U.S. Fulbright to Italy and a Gladys Krieble Delmas grant. Co-editor of *Contemporary Art and Classical Myth* (Ashgate/Routledge, 2011) and *Ventriloquism, Performance, and Contemporary Art* (Routledge, 2023), she also co-curated *Invisible City* (2020), an exhibition about visual culture in Philadelphia between 1956 and 1976. She has published book chapters, exhibition catalogue essays, and critical reviews on artists and filmmakers such as Giorgio de Chirico, Giorgio Morandi, Roberto Rossellini, Jean-Luc Godard, Yinka Shonibare, Regina Silveira, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres. She is currently completing a monograph on self-representation in the painting and writing of Giorgio de Chirico, and her book projects under development address fascist aesthetics as well as visual culture and the Holocaust.

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