

Esther
Teichmann

Drinking Air

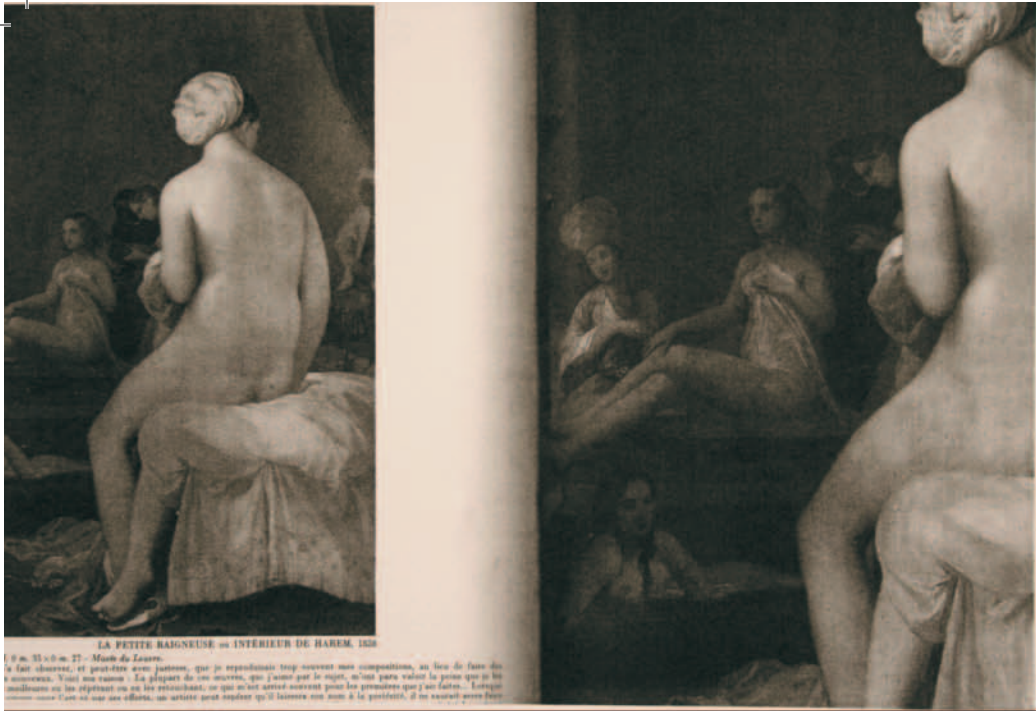
|



Mythologies







LA PETITE BAINNEUSE ou INTERIEUR DE HAREM, 1826

19 n. 35 v. 0 m. 27 - Musée de Louvre.
Le fait observé, et grand-être sans justice, que je reproduisais trop souvent mes compositions, au lieu de faire des nouveautés. Voilà ma raison. La plupart de ces œuvres, que j'ai vues par le regard, n'ont pu valoir la peine que je les méditasse ou les dépeinsse ou les peinsse, ce qui m'est arrivé souvent pour les premières que j'ai faites. Lorsque l'on se voit par son effort, un artiste peut espérer qu'il donnera son nom à la postérité, il se verra avec honneur.





The darkroom gives birth to the material photograph within the space of a red night, within a space of liquid, altered temporality, an unstable space of inverted, luminous non-fixity; a feminine, maternal space. The darkroom is an enclosed space we enter, stepping from the light of day, from a linear temporality, into this other parallel modality of time. Photographic time, mythical time, collapsing the past and the present into the futural — that which is about to appear and perhaps eclipse itself, appearing only to disappear, promising a reawakening of the lost body of desire, requiring a work of mourning at every moment. Bathed in the silent darkness of night, half-light of red liquid as though I am opening my eyes within my mother's womb, tinted light seeping through blood vessels and capillaries. I see differently here — half blinded there is a clarity within the inverted hovering projection, within the floating shivering movement of the image appearing upon its material support.

Anxious expectation — the image appears slippery and fragile in its wetness, only to watch it disappear into black nothingness, still contained somewhere within the depth that consumed it. The shimmering red liquid laps onto the overexposed image, burnt by too much light it resists being pinned down, fixed as image. Unstoppable movement.

The darkroom is a space to fall into; like the cinema, a space to cry in, bathing in the image.

I remember developing a film of you afterwards — the final frames taken the day you died. Months later in a red darkroom in another place, I dared look at them, witness to deferred action from the past. Projecting them, I sat beneath the baseboard, breathing in the detail of the enlarged, inverted image. Later I would print hundreds, cropping different areas and watching them emerge from nothing. Some overexposed would be visible only for an instant before disappearing into a dense black. Others, given too little light would appear only faintly, teasingly hovering between visible and invisible. These images were for this blackened room only, I feared taking them out of this space of possibility, this fantasy space of refinding. Their state of fragile wetness seemed the only one bearable, moving, animated within the containing liquid.







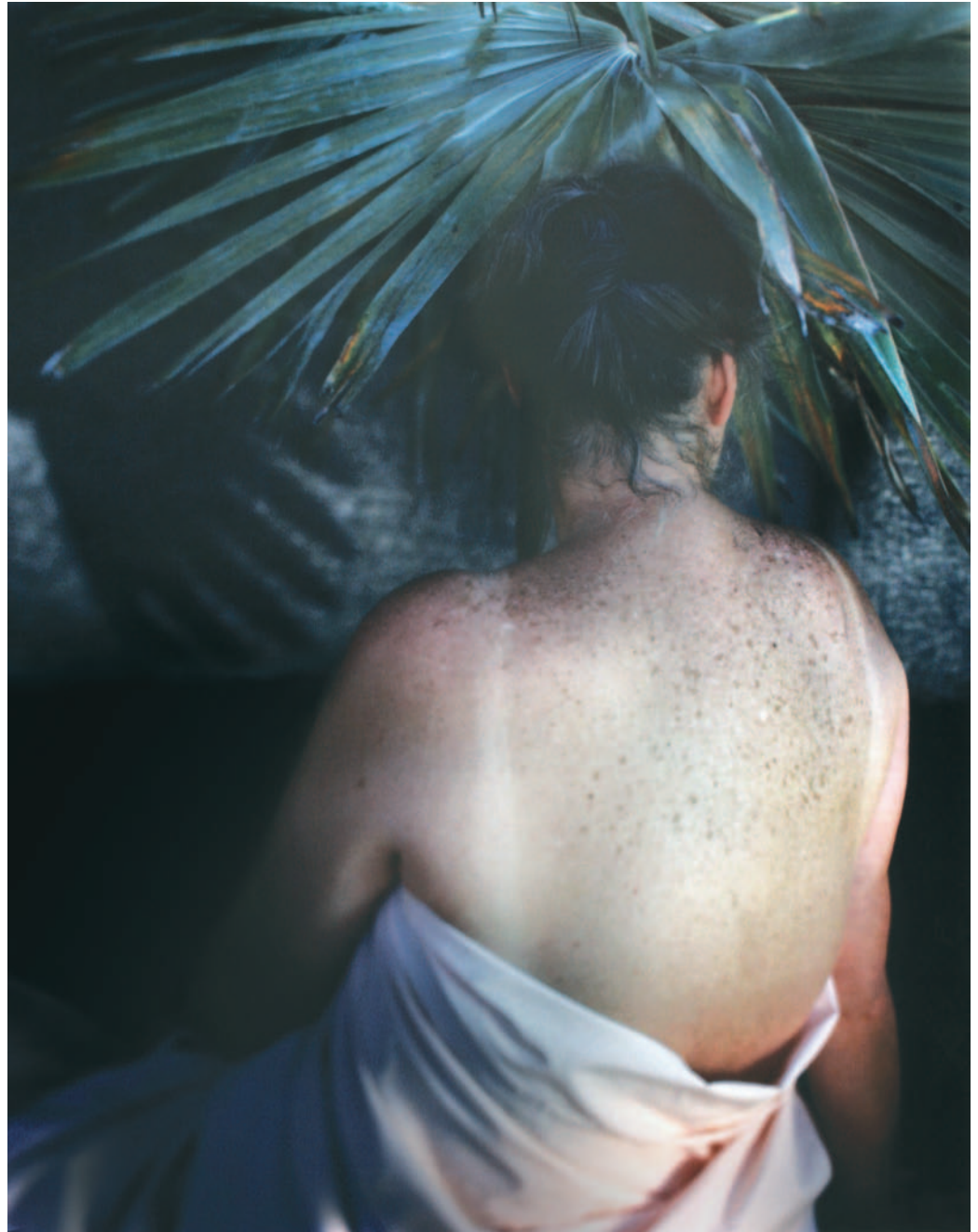






Plate 8





Plate 9





In the darkroom I float, I fly, my heart races at the inverted image, so precise I feel the strands of my mother's hair, more tangible in monochrome projection than in print, so accurate I feel the pores of my lover's skin, so immaterial I am overcome by dread, yet pinned down, exhilarated by the luminescence of insubstantial possibility.

Flying, falling between home and nowhere I think of him. It pierces my throat, takes my breath away. I remember a moment so exactly, so precisely, that I reel from shock, squeeze my eyes to hold it in, afraid it will fall away should I open them. I remember the mattress on the floor, his weight upon me, open window, warm breeze. I remember the blue light from the neon sign outside making his pale skin luminous. I remember the metallic clanking from some unknown source in the near distance. I thought I might have forgotten, was sure I had, but up here, above an ocean in the dark, I remember. I remember the same but so very different glowing blue of his skin when they brought me to him. Lying stretched out on the cold metal, hardened skin glowed again in the flickering strip lit room, clothes cut off, covered only by a sheet. I thought if I climbed up and covered you, cloaked you with my body, the blue would go away. The climb was steep and after a while someone lifted me off — still blue. I sink into the hum of the engine or was it the projector. I fall into the image, into sleep.

As the image disintegrates and tears when attempting to peel it from the material that contains it, so, skin also retracts and loses form when peeled from the flesh that holds it stretched and smoothed. Suddenly brittle, it falls away, translucent film to dust. And yet the surface of the image as soon as it becomes object, becomes the untouchable. Its surface becomes like the stretch hardened surface of corpse, no longer a skin that invites touch, held at a distance now.

I think of the careless imprecise stitches running the length of his body, thick, waxy black threads circling skull, zipping torso, holding together that which will no longer heal, skin that no longer has the function of containing. These stitches pierce me as though my own body were being pieced back together so roughly that all excess seeps from every puncture wound, no longer a containing enclosure; unzipped.

The softening and warming of the skin both terrifying and hopeful, the colour changing from the bloodless translucence to earthier tones mirror something previous to death. And the body which for several days was closed to me, shutting me out, now opens up and becomes liquid again — an ecstatic moment and one of terrible foreboding at once. For the face which has become warm and soft again, and the pores which have begun to weep slightly as though with a different kind of sweat, all, in one sense, mirror life, whilst telling me of something very different. Of that which I cannot stop happening, of an ageing process so rapid that soon I will be left with nothing graspable before me. And as tears cannot escape and are indistinguishable under water, so the corpse is unable to release tears from its eyes, weeping through pores and ruptures instead. Water and viscous liquid filling in words the body is no longer able to utter.









Plate 14

II

Stillend Gespiegelt











Plate 18

In observing the lover, the mother, in minute detail, in this slow deliberate examining, they are already image, are image before a camera is even considered, before the image is created and fixed. Like the corpse, these bodies exist as surface, as resemblance, as a strangeness floating out of that, which is the familiar, the known. The image of these bodies then is an image of an image. One skin holding another, contained within the other.

Waiting for and anticipating the return of the mother, of her touch, her skin, is a delirium first experienced in childhood fascination with the image of the mother, and reencountered later with that of the love object. The mother and lover are both Image; distinct matter observed as whole at distance and at absolute proximity, fragmented.

The body of the mother and that of the lover evoke fears of loss, even abandonment. Both bodies physically are or become extensions of our own, creating the illusion that to survive without the existence of the other would be an impossibility. Both bodies remind me and assure me of my own separate existence; exactly at the point of contact with the other, I become most acutely aware of my own skin, my own boundaries. One skin becoming momentarily another triggers a yearning for the lost skin and a confusion between presence and absence. I recall the mother slipping to lover, the brief refinding in one skin, that of the other. In the embrace, the two subjects momentarily become one.

On the night that he died, I had asked her to come. By the next morning she had somehow managed the journey and came to lie down next to me. Rather than the physical pain, in which grief had manifested itself, subsiding, it intensified in her presence. Relieved she was there, suddenly however the realization that this unbearable thing would one day be repeated swept over me. I could not stand her touch and yet wanted nothing more. Asleep I wrapped myself around her, holding on with ferocious determination, burying myself within her skin — dreams of searching in vain. Worse than these nightmares, and worse than the insistent drone of everyday life around us, however, was the shattering of that brief moment of ecstatic refinding upon waking. For the most fleeting instant before opening my eyes, I thought her to be him. For a second, their bodies had collapsed into one and the same. For a moment, nothing had been lost. And then it came back to me and smashed into my neck like a wave catching you off guard, knocking all breath away. And I opened my eyes to hers in horror, angered by her skin's trickery.



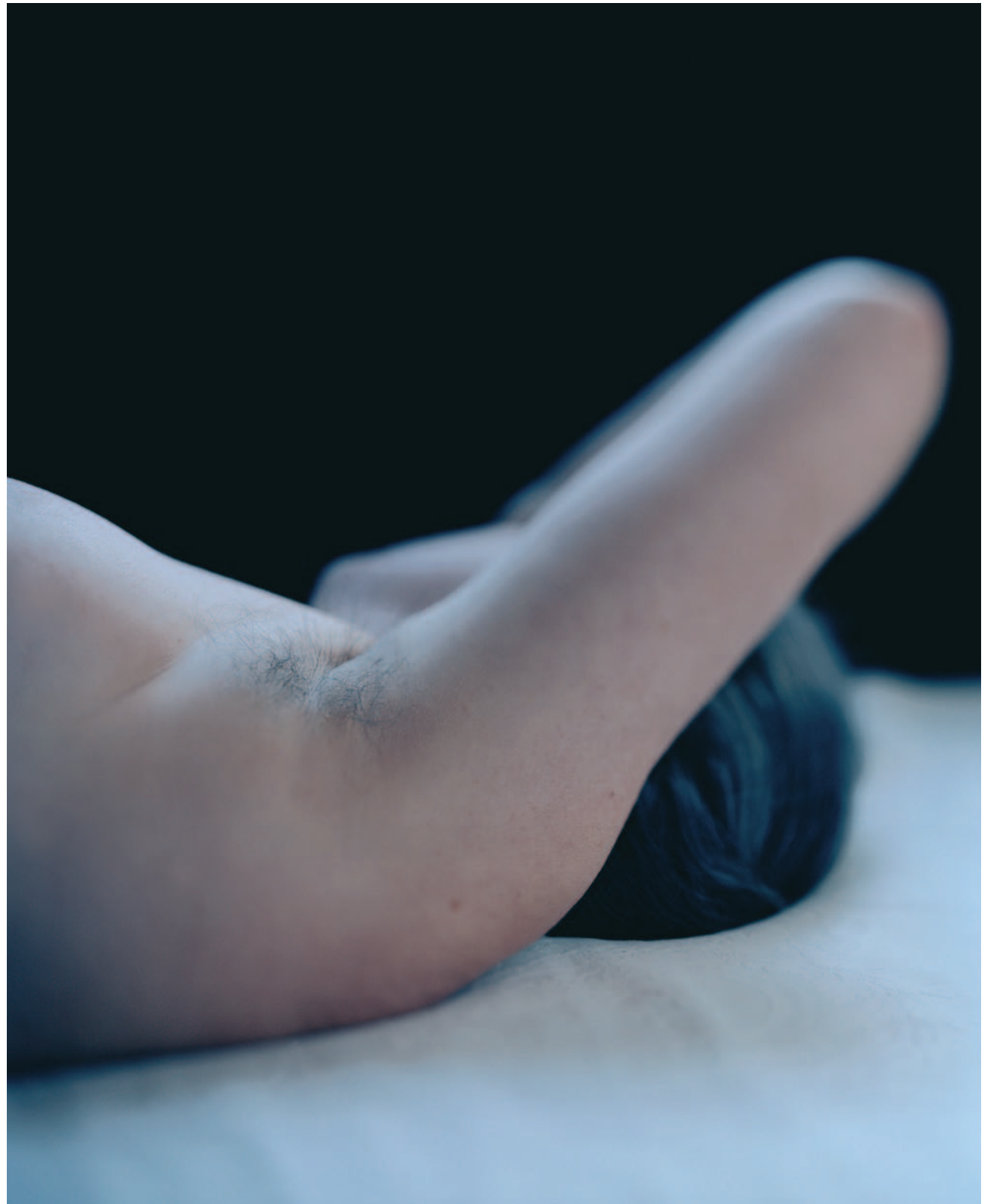
Plate 19















I think of the lover's skin as touch, as caresses and turned away blows, of the desire for his darkness and the mysteries the black of his skin hold. I desire the scars and blue of his teenage tattoo that tell me of places I have never been, of a life before this one, before me. His closed pores, his hardened back turn away from me and shut me out. It is then that I know that I will never be sure of his return, yet will always wait for it with anxious tremors, relieved each evening the key turns and his footsteps echo on the stairs. It is of those places I dream — the ones I have never seen and do not want to know lest they shatter these wondrous, conjured images. His anger always takes me by surprise, yet it should not, as it is always there beneath the surface — tense, coiled. And yet at night this same taut skin, this smooth dry rock, weeps and weeps, soaking sheet after sheet in sweat and tears.

It is then, in the darkness and silence of night that he holds on to me as though in fear of my leaving, as though I, not he, were the one turned away, ready to go. I pretend to sleep, let him wrap himself around me, dripping legs and arms clutching my stomach and breasts, wet belly and chest soaking my back, until we are stuck together and I could not escape should I have wanted to.





III

Viscosity



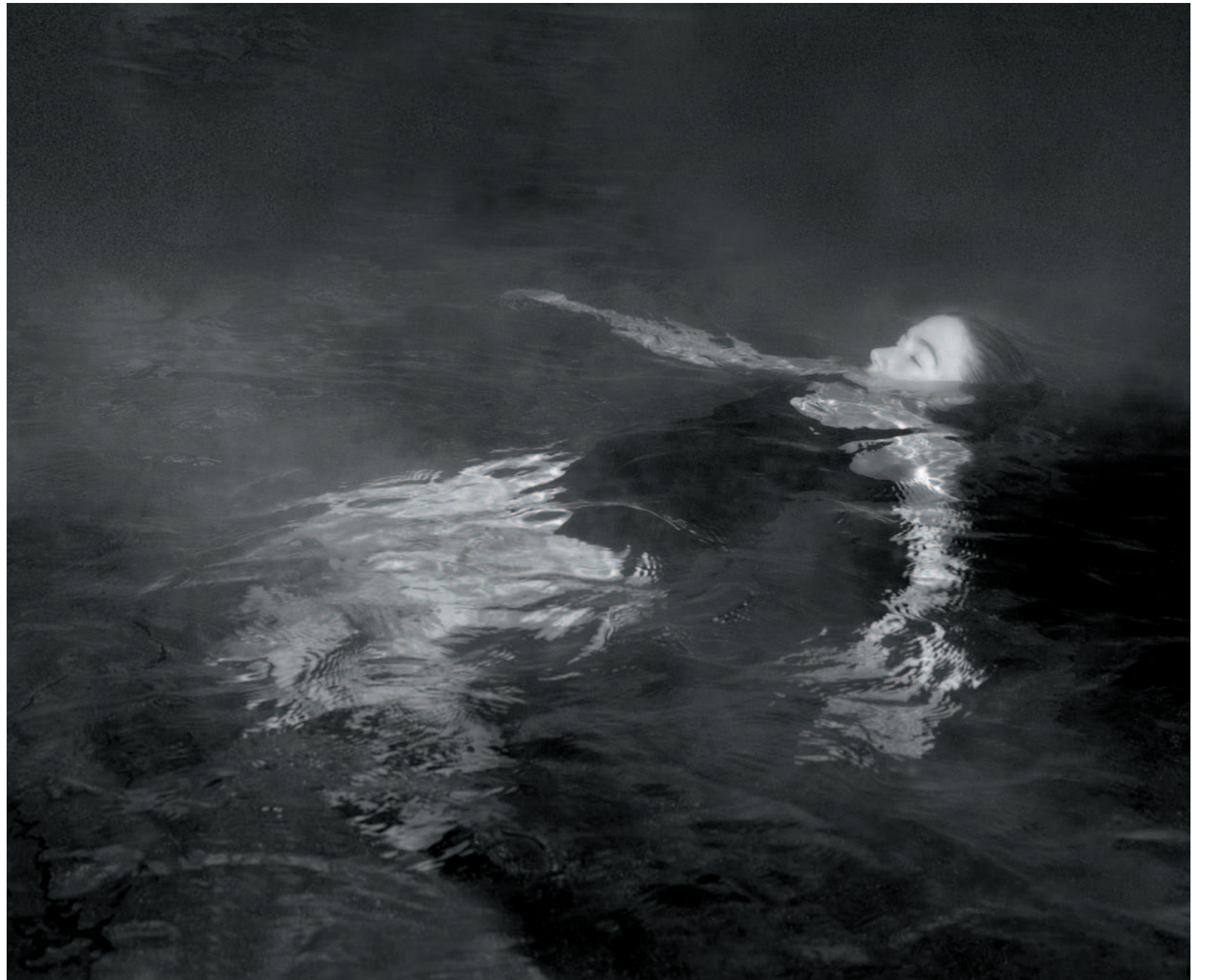
I remember another falling away, another skin peeled, a body burnt, an animal dying. His voice sank in his throat, reduced to a foaming puddle of saliva bubbling out of the corner of his mouth. Still within the space of sleep, this faint sound made me think of the neighbour's old horse. Made me think of lying next to him in the warm, moist stable, as he gave up trying to push himself up off his knees. His last moans and the dizzyingly hot smell of his struggle, pristine snow covering the ground only a few feet beyond us.

He stood there in the hallway, naked, his scrotum cupped within his right hand. He held onto the doorframe, skin turning ashen. Only as he slid to the floor did I see what he was displaying for me. The skin from his abdomen, inner thighs and penis peeled off, revealing glowing red flesh, startlingly luminous against the darkness of his skin. Filling pitchers and pans I poured and kept pouring cold water over the open wounds, ignoring his unsteady breath and shaking limbs. Swathing him almost entirely in wet towels I left him lying mummified in the hall, steam rising from the burning surface beneath. In the back of the ambulance his swaddled stretched out skin lay before me. Our joint exhaustion and his bloodied hooves from kicking against the walls came back to me. I remembered his angrily defiant pink penis, straining alongside every other muscle within his bony frame, fear betrayed only within his wild eyes. Speeding through the empty streets, the sirens blared a distant song in the thick summer air, as he raised his head and looked around for me. Our eyes met, and he sank back into the green plastic that held him.









The air has cooled now that the sun has set, the humidity having given way to a tepid breeze. Walking into the water, it feels as though I am lowering myself into something thick and warm. It sucks me in, pulling every limb under its cloak. Beneath the still membrane of the lake's surface boils a viscous liquid, covering every cell of my skin and penetrating beneath these, making it no longer clear whether it is my own heart and blood thumping within me as I dive deeper and deeper, farther into its centre, or whether it is the lake herself rhythmically pulsating. Layers give way to cooler temperatures, and the complete darkness seems to change to an even denser shade of black.

I am no longer sure whether my eyes are open or closed or how long and how far I have been swimming downwards. A burning in my chest demands that I turn back and let her push me out and pull me to the surface, yet this is entirely against all other instincts to continue into her. I let go and shoot up through layers of gradually heating liquid, until my head breaks the surface and my face is hit by the night air. Gasping to fill my lungs, I feel the bottom half of my body still within her warm grasp, separate from my head and shoulders so heavy and cold now above her protective surface. I let myself be pulled under once again, this time just hovering beneath, constantly anticipating the possibility of the membrane breaking and some part of me, a shoulder or a foot, becoming exposed.

Curled into a ball I tip and turn, swaying with the unified pulse, until again I have to break out and breathe. This time I stand up and begin to slowly, heavily and with difficulty wade against her resistance towards the edge. With every step my body becomes heavier, denser, separated and once again mine. I hover at the edge, my feet and ankles still firmly within her clutch. The air now cloaks me, but differently; where her touch was demanding and insistent, the air floats by, softly teasing. I drag my left then my right foot out and stand for a moment sinking into the soft sand filled with her yet beyond her reach. I could turn and run back in, shedding the weight and seclusion of my body as I dive towards her centre. But I am tired and now that I am comfortable and accustomed to my separateness, this state so fully and completely inhabited just moments ago feels suddenly distant and impossible.



Biography

German-American artist Esther Teichmann (b. 1980) received a Masters of Fine Art from the Royal College of Art in 2005. She continues to live and work in London where she is senior lecturer at the London College of Communication/UAL and is studying for a PhD by project at the RCA.

Teichmann's work has been exhibited and published internationally, with group shows in London, Los Angeles, Berlin and Modena and solo exhibitions in the UK, Australia, Germany and Switzerland including at Man&Eve (2007 and 2009) and Galerie Karlheinz Meyer in Karlsruhe, Germany (2008).

Reviews, interviews and portfolio features have appeared in ArtReview, Bedeutung, Camera Austria, Capricious, Dazed & Confused, The Guardian, Piktogram, Qvest Editions, Source, Time Out, Wallpaper*, 032C amongst others. This year will see Teichmann's work included within several publications, published by Duke University Press, Laurence King and Reaktion Books, whilst new works will be shown in London, Dublin and Paris.

Plates

Plate 1

Untitled from 'Mythologies'
2006
C-type, 76 x 100 cm

Plate 2

Untitled from 'Mythologies'
2009
C-type, 76 x 100 cm

Plate 3

Untitled from 'Mythologies'
2009
Hand tinted C-type, inks and acrylic, 128 x 100 cm

Plate 4

Untitled from 'Mythologies'
2008
C-type, 100 x 76 cm

Plate 5

Untitled from 'Mythologies'
2007
C-type, 76 x 100 cm

Plate 6

Untitled from 'Mythologies'
2008
C-type, 76 x 100 cm

Plate 7

Untitled from 'Mythologies'
2009
Hand tinted C-type, inks and acrylic, 100 x 128 cm

Plate 8

Untitled from 'Mythologies'
2007
C-type, 100 x 76 cm

Plate 9

(Part of) Diptych from 'Mythologies'
2010
Fibre-based print, collage with C-type prints, acrylic and inks, 40 x 50 cm each

Plate 10

Untitled from 'Mythologies'
2009
Hand tinted fibre based print, inks and acrylic, 50 x 76 cm

Plate 11

Untitled from 'Mythologies'
2008
C-type, 100 x 76 cm

Plate 12

Untitled from 'Mythologies'
2008
Hand tinted C-type, inks and acrylic, 100 x 128 cm

Plate 13

Diptych from 'Mythologies'
2009, photocopied C-type and circular slide projection onto gessoed cylinder, A3 and 40 x 10 cm

Plate 14

Untitled from 'Mythologies'
2009
Photocopied C-type, 21 x 30 cm

Plate 15

(Part of) Diptych from 'Mythologies'
2010
C-type, 40 x 50 cm each

Plate 16

Untitled from 'Stillend Gespiegelt'
2004
C-type, 100 x 128 cm

Plate 17

Diptych from 'Stillend Gespiegelt'
2006
C-type, 100 x 76 cm each

Plate 18

Untitled from 'Stillend Gespiegelt'
2007
C-type, 50 x 76 cm

Plate 19

Untitled from 'Stillend Gespiegelt'
2004
C-type, 50 x 60 cm

Plate 20

Untitled from 'Stillend Gespiegelt'
2010
C-type, 100 x 128 cm

Plate 21

Untitled from 'Stillend Gespiegelt'
2005
C-type, 100 x 76 cm

Plate 22

Untitled from 'Stillend Gespiegelt'
2007
C-type, 100 x 76 cm

Plate 23

Untitled from 'Stillend Gespiegelt'
2005
C-type, 100 x 76 cm

Plate 24

Untitled from 'Viscosity'
2004
C-type, 100 x 76 cm

Plate 25

Untitled from 'Viscosity'
2004
C-type, 100 x 76 cm

Plate 26

Untitled from 'Viscosity'
2004
C-type, 100 x 76 cm

Plate 27

Untitled from 'Viscosity'
2004
C-type, 100 x 76 cm

Plate 28

Sketch from 'Viscosity'
2005
Fibre based print, 50 x 60 cm

Plate 29

Untitled from 'Viscosity'
2004
C-type, 100 x 76 cm

Credits

With thanks to Carol, Chris, Dean, Edmund, Ephraim, Francette, Ginger, Hannah, Hartmut, Jonathan, Maia, Sarah & Virginia, Luke, Ben and Paul at DesignStudio and Keith at Ubyu.

Printed by Ubyu in an edition of 200
(50 with limited edition print)
www.ubyu.com

Designed by DesignStudio
www.wearedesignstudio.com

All images and text
© Esther Teichmann 2010

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system without permission in writing from the publishers.

Published by Esther Teichmann
June 2010
ISBN 978-0-9556751-2-6

Edition

_____ of 50

Signed

**Limited edition print
for 'Drinking Air'**

Untitled from 'Mythologies'

2010

20 x 25 cm

Fibre-based paper

© Esther Teichmann 2010