



## MORPHIC RESONANCE

### Geoffrey Batchen believes that the sculptural art works of Ellen Garvens preserve the identity of photography, but only as a fading memory

THE FIRST THING you notice is the sheer size of it. Hidden Fish (1980), a photographic assemblage by Seattle-based artist Ellen Garvens, comes in at 1.20 meters high and over 1.60 meters wide. It's the sort of work where you need to walk back and forth to take ever/thing in. This includes its depth, an extra dimension provided by the addition of chunks of weathered marble (which throw shadows back into the work) and the layering of images and surfaces over each other. So Garvens' photography has an edge, in both senses of the word, Generated from a single negative, the images in Hidden Fish are strikingly non-committal as pictures, although loaded with significance as signs. These signs include two examples of Coelacanth, the living fossil fish, their stolid photographic facades fissured and fractured with tears and abrasions, only to be stuck back together over sheets of roughly painted plywood. The other half of this photograph gazes down onto the checked floor of the natural history depository where these fish have been found. What can it all mean?

Let's look at another example. Hourglass (1991), almost 2.30 meters tall of an older woman (in fact, she suffers from a skin disease) laid over a skeletal gathering of angle-iron. One piece of this angle-iron continues down behind the photograph to poke out the bottom of the picture directly in line with an artery in the woman's neck. The upper portion of the work consists of a sheet of bent steel, dulled by use and inscribed with scratches and seemingly arbitrary patterns of lines. Like the piece of steel, the photograph curves forward into space, declaring itself as volume and making its materiality an overt part of our perceptual experience, in similar fashion, Egyptian Ibex (1992) combines two silver gelatin photographs of mummified animals with steel and crumpled graphite-coated paper. Duct tape helps twist the paper together to mimic the leg form of the ibex in one of the photographs, or at least to echo it in some way. Here, as in many other examples of her work, Garvens' photographs lazily drift in and out of focus, refusing the spatial and temporal certainty of a consistent gaze. They also remain monochromatic, their pervasive greyness sustaining each work's industrial tone. But this is not always the case. Green Heart (1992) includes two colour photographs of a heart sutured together to form an angled version of the whole organ. These overlap with a sheet of thick blue-green glass, its edges broken and chipped. The glass is bolted to a piece of steel angle-iron, itself intertwined with a tangle of metal tubing in which rests a crumpled swathe of metallic cloth. Bosque (1993) is organised around a sepia and rust toned silver gelatin photograph, this time showing the separated head and feet of two dead birds. A ventricular extrusion of copper tubing and angle-iron visually completes one bird's body. All this is hung by wire from a single point on the wall, creating a sharp angular line as its crowning feature.

There is definitely something calligraphic, perhaps even alchemic, about Garvens' choice and use of materials. They are, after all, the primary 'content providers' of her work. These materials are almost always found objects, often broken and abused, their surfaces (like her photographs) scarified by use and the passing of time. Starting from a theme suggested by a particular photograph, she builds around and onto it using the found materials as complementary elements, inevitably achieving a near-symmetrical balance of her various components, but also of the organic and the inorganic, of abstraction and order, image and metaphor. Often her materials are orchestrated

into curvilinear clusters suggestive of bodily organs such as skeletons, arteries or intestines (yet another example is the bundle of rubber tubing tightly bound with wire that is a part of 1998's Brooklyn Mosquito). In such cases, the negative space is as important as the actual objects, with the wall (and the shadows cast upon it) becoming an integrated component of the viewer's visual experience. Indeed, Garvens' work always clings to the wall as its ground and support (thus remaining a drawing more than a sculptural practice). At the same time, the strange morphologies of her objects disrupt the rectangular expectations we usually bring to the photograph; having broken these boundaries, photography is here rendered in more ways than one.

In his 1981 book, *A New Science of Life*, Rupert Sheldrake proposes a provocative hypothesis about morphogenesis, the process whereby things come to embody particular structural morphologies. He suggests the possibility of a 'morphic resonance' between forms and across space and time, a kind of interactive, multi-dimensional pattern of vibrations. Garvens' work suggests something similar. The easy slippage between one substance and the next, in particular from shards of photographic image to equally fragmentary pieces of metal, stone or glass, makes materiality - specifically, the matter of photography's physical identity - a central issue. A tension is proposed between the photograph's function as a transparent window onto another world and its opacity as an object, sitting before us in the here and now. The photograph is revealed as two kinds of object then, as simultaneously image and thing (a schizophrenia equally enjoyed by her non-photographic materials). In this aspect, Garvens' work joins that of an increasingly influential corpus of artists, from Mike and Doug Starn to Annette Messager. In all this work, the presumed distinction between the taking and making of photographs is carefully mired. We are asked to look at photography, rather than through it. If this body of work is to be taken as a sign of the times, it appears we have entered a moment after, but not yet beyond photography, a moment that might usefully be called post-photography.

With her consistent references to archaeology, preservation, ageing and mortality, Garvens' artefacts present photography as one transient entity within a history' of such entities. The photograph, she implies, is today as much a mummified effigy as the falcons and shrivelled hands she borrows from egyptology; both are things properly housed in a museum. Could it be that photography is just another of Garvens' living fossils, still endlessly reproducing itself but notable today primarily for the mere fact of its survival, for still obstinately embodying a certain attitude to the act of representation that is already two centuries old? One or Louis Daguerre's earliest photographs featured three ordered rows of fossilised shells, examples of nature representing itself in and as stone (just as his Daguerreotype process allowed it to do the same in metallic form), Garvens' work brings photography's historical self-consciousness full circle, preserving its identity, but only as a fading memory, as but one more morphic vibration even now being passed on from our modern epoch to its successor.

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