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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Imaging the Garden

By

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Thesis Proposal

The goal of my thesis is to create a multi-media dance theater production. An interdisciplinary approach will be required to achieve this result.

Collaboration with a number of people is expected. A composer, videographer, dancer-choreographers, and technicians will comprise the team of collaborative artists.

The project I envision will be evocative of a garden. This will be read on multiple levels. The superficial impression will be provided by the set design. Fragments of information supplied by the set design, video, animation, choreography and musical composition will encourage layers of interpretations. A rich multi-layered experience will be the ultimate result. The performance will be in a proscenium theater at SUNY Brockport as part of the Image Movement Sound Festival.

In addition to the theater performance, material will be recontextualized in the Bevier Gallery as an installation. Documentation of the performance will play on a screen. Further, fragments of the performance will be presented as an extension of visual works.

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I am indebted to Nancy Ghertner, who contributed her time and energy to producing the documentation of the performance. Rachel Smith's recommendations and editing helped me complete the digital video portion of my thesis project. Narin Hassan gave her all in the recordings of movement for the video. I truly appreciate her influence and counsel. Colleen Hendrick has been a mentor and friend. Gavin Chuck was a pleasure to work with as music collaborator.

I thank my committee, Linda Hightower, Ed Miller and Peter Byrne for their recommendations and insight towards the overall development of this thesis. The faculty at the School of Art at RIT provided encouragement and critical commentary towards my visual work throughout my years as a graduate student and I thank them for their support.

Finally, I have Narin to thank once again for her patience through this process, and my parents, who let me be everything I needed to be.

Preface

Imaging the Garden has been a labor of love. My project involves many layers of disciplines, which have interested me for a long time. I think that the master's thesis process has enabled me to combine many interests, which have remained separated by traditional boundaries. I am grateful for the opportunity to explore the full scope of my proposed thesis.

This project entails the longest sustained effort, with which I have ever been involved. I am ready to move on to the next effort and complete this phase of development. I hope that this will provide a thorough record of my work and inspirations.

Introduction

The thesis project I have produced has traversed many different realms and disciplines. I will describe the contents and techniques of my project and then follow with some notes on my successes and improvements, which I could make. I will provide a brief section with historical research and the influences and background, which played a major role in the direction I followed.

The title of my thesis, *Imaging the Garden* refers to the botanical unit as a trope in the historical timeline of art and imaging. Description and recording of the botanical world has occupied the minds of many artists and scientists through the centuries. The way that artists, naturalists, and modern scientists map and manipulate these "botanical units", the term I will use to refer to the subjects/objects of botanical research has left a rich visual heritage to be mined by contemporary visual artists.

The historical timeline of imaging to which I have referred is simply the history of visual technologies, like drawing, frescoes, painting, photography, and imaging. If one looks at the history of the arts and sciences, one sees the progression of technologies impacting the means of visual expression and record. This history represents the combination of tools, which has provided the means of

examination for artists and scientists. These visual technologies are simply crucial to all that has been produced. Of course, the above would not be possible without the combination of ideas and spirit of the times.

Once, I realized that painting and drawing were just two groups of technologies existing in a much larger category, or imaging timeline, I began to examine how some of the techniques in this timeline could contribute to my vocabulary. For instance particular methods of early photography like sun prints used by William Henry Fox Talbot and Anna Atkins in early Botany. I had used mixed media for a number of years and came to relish using various techniques to remain inspired. This kind of approach to art-making eventually led to a larger understanding of past techniques. This lineage of imaging became a database that could be tapped at random to create visual works of art.

Botanical Illustration is a kind of mapping of information. Relevant information is recorded in a standardized format. Naming conventions are established through nomenclature, so that all resources belong to one family. Drawing is harnessed to produce the most focused database of technical drawings ever in the quest for information and wealth. I see a continuation of this goal in the following centuries with all technological breakthroughs. Staying focused on the botanical realm I can trace a continuum, which leads to the more recent

technological means of visual expression. Utilizing and quoting many of these frames of time (etchings, early photography, and digital video to name a few), I chose to express a kind of moral tale rich in visual references and mediums. A personal historical realm inspired me to find deeper connections to history and the world at large. I will describe that subtext here.

Historical Research

Now, I wish to describe the origins of the subtext, or historical background, which has driven me in my recent project. I found the need for a deeper understanding of history, above conventional art historical concerns.

I was born and raised on the island of O'ahu in the state of Hawaii. I found inspiration to explore art history in the voyages of Captain Cook. My readings of this history has given me the broad base of knowledge, which has enabled me to ask the questions needed to find the right resources for understanding the philosophy behind world conquest and botanical hegemony. In terms of my timeline concept, this particular period remains the starting point to gain insight to the various persons, nations, and concepts involved in the larger context of botanical research and history.

My rekindled interest in Captain Cook¹ started when I discovered Sydney Parkinson, the watercolor artist on board the *Endeavor* voyage of Captain Cook, charged with the task of representing and mapping the plant, which could not endure a long sea voyage. I realized connections to art history that had eluded me. Previously my interest in Captain Cook

¹ Beaglehole, JC. For a more detailed view of this history, read Beaglehole's *The Life of Captain James Cook*. There are many interesting stories involving the British Empire, Cook, and the three voyages. Reveals the stories of the explorations, which helped to change the face of the planet. I continue to be amazed by the implications of these events.

resulted from his connection to Hawaiian history. The story was part of Hawaiian Mythology and an integral part of our island education. I have lived with images of this time for the majority of my life. In family prints the events of this time were represented and have intrigued and haunted me for years. Now, in my possession are six of these etchings from John Webber, another artist from the third Cook voyage, on board the *Resolution*. These images portray natives and explorers set among local flora and environs. Created after watercolors, these images were produced shortly after the voyages. I find that all of this provides a deeper response to Colonial history, than any academic reading. Though, this is only a specified time period, it helps to inform my inquiries in the historical timeline of imaging.

My intimate understanding of Captain Cook helps me to understand the larger historical issues, which are represented by various colonial enterprises. The members on board Captain Cook's voyages were the prime members of their disciplines. The artists were hand picked by those higher up in the English Academy, who understood how they could be used to enrich the crown. I believe the spirit of this particular group of people can be found in the various groups of any other time period. Progress will always require the applied and useful arts.

Botanical illustration is the mapping of an ephemeral form, the plant. Long voyages made by global powers had as an aim the desire to collect, map, and organize the global botanical world. In recent centuries, great empires understood that control of these resources could guarantee dominance on a global level. I have looked at England more closely because of my personal interest in the geographical region of Hawaii. In particular, the British Empire sent Captain James Cook on a mission to track the transit of Venus. The Royal Society was exhorted by Edmond Halley² to observe from as many points of the globe the transit, so that the distance from the earth to the sun could be ascertained. The directive given to this great navigator under the guise of astronomy urged Cook to make note of coveted lands and resources, like the fabled *Terra Ingognita*.

The importance of botany has been understood for centuries. Early philosophers, artists, and healers observed plants and biological organisms for description and characteristics. The botanical specimen became the subject of mapping long before the voyages in recent centuries. The ancient Chinese *Materia Medica* and Greek records compiled by Dioscorides, Theophrastes, and Pliny provided some of the earliest treatises on botanical knowledge. These early compilations were accompanied by drawings from nature. Early naturalists

² Sobel, Dava. *Longitudes*. A description of the events, which led to Cook's involvement with the observation of the transit of Venus and the additional motive of exploring the mythological *Terra Incognita*, described by mapmakers.

used botanical dyes to describe herbs used in the healing arts. Some of these pages were painted using the dyes produced by the very plants described. These images were painted in the field from life.

I have found that artists like Parkinson, the artist of Cook's first voyage have been consistent contributors to science and exploration. Albrecht Durer and Leonardo da Vinci contributed with paintings and documentation in their sketchbooks. Artists were often (unknowingly) the agents of this campaign of global botanical dominance, contributing their knowledge and allegiance to certain schools of thought and nationalities. Sometimes in the case of Indian botanical studies, counterpoint to these influences, Mughal artists³ trained in the ways of Islamic and Asian traditions were more inclined to render in a flat, pattern based approach. Sometimes, Western artists trained in Dutch still life traditions were apt to show the individual aspects of the plants they portrayed. This went against the universalizing goals of those such as Sir Joseph Banks⁴, the amateur botanist overseeing the British botanical empire. Banks, as adviser to the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew and head of the Royal

³ Tobin, Beth Fowkes. *Picturing Imperial Power*. p.195-199 As president of the Royal Society he appears again, influencing and effecting the production of botanical illustration. Listed are some interesting facts about the hiring of local artists and the problem of making them conform to the more standardized approach to mapping the botanical world.

⁴ Beaglehole, JC. Ed. *The Endeavor Journal of Joseph Banks*. Sir Joseph Banks, traveled on Cook's first voyage after lobbying as the President of the Royal Society. Daniel Solander, a favorite pupil of Linnaeus the man responsible for the revolutionary changes in botanical practice. The collection of minds on this initial voyage is remarkable and sets the tone for much of what follows. Parkinson's growth as an artist seems to be aligned with this collection of influences.

Society, was most influential to those in power when the Crown made its most significant strides.

The above represents only a particular part of the history of botanical illustration and global exploration, but I believe it to be indicative of many such enterprises. These incentives continued in many ways, for example as early corporations like the Hudson Bay Company. Organizations like these continued to collect information and images to compile resources, which enriched the crown.

In observing current events today, in agricultural communities miles from the theater in which I presented, farmers use satellite technology, which enables them to map soil samples on their land, so that they might manage chemical fertilization and seed "broadcasting" by the foot. Here, I might argue the aperture and the botanical unit have come together to empower certain interests to manipulate the global botanical balance of power. Additionally, seeds such as those labeled the "terminator seed" are produced to create the type of relationship, which requires dependency on the type of large multinational corporations that came into existence in the twentieth century. Other organizations, which encourage free and global trade encourage this type of botanical unit. Legislature and international law create intricate and ornate rules to govern the global trade of the botanical unit. Seed packages and websites use images, which hearken back to earlier renderings of botanical images on

crate and seed labels. The story reveals the complicated nature of empire building and the hunt for botanical control. Organizations like the World Trade Organization, the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA), and recently the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) are large supranational projects which promote and organize controversial policies.

The dark side of science I refer to belongs to the unknown territories created daily by the interests of genetic technologies. Large collectives based on the large historical body of knowledge collected from the centuries of botanical research and colonial exploration, continue to build global bodies of hegemony. Scientific knowledge is harnessed to create new specimens, which have been labeled by those concerned as Frankenfoods. The allusion to the famous Victorian tale is telling. The kind of disruption caused by arbitrary transplanting of species by colonial powers is now located at a more minute level. The mapped genes of organisms are edited trans-species to invent new mutations, which once occurred only over long periods of time.

Influences and Background, Artistic Lineage

I will describe the events and influences, which led to this point of my development. I wanted to bring together all of the pieces of my artistic life. I had been painting, drawing and exploring forms of printmaking for over ten years. I had danced for about four or five years and had done some filmmaking, set design and scenic art.

After my experience with dance and movement studies, I found paintings too static and craved more dynamic dimensions. The answer to this predicament was not sculpture or ready-mades. Happenings, dada, and surrealist events brought many things together, as did opera, ballet, and contemporary dance theater.

I have already described the various directions I pursued. One of the biggest changes I made was entering the realm of modern dance. The beginning of this period was when I joined a dance class at the University of California, Berkeley. Marni Thomas and her husband David Wood founded the dance department. David was Martha Graham's rehearsal director and Marni, a dancer with the company. Graham worked with incredible artists including Isamu Noguchi, whose art I appreciated long before I had heard of Graham. I found the world I was looking for at that time. It brought together all of the things I understood and came to love about

artistic expression. There were at various times, levels of movement or static elements played against one another. It was dynamic unlike a painting, which had come to provide too little for my taste. Now, I believe painting and drawing exist at another level of dynamism.

This initial introduction to a new world of dance reconnected me with my upbringing in Hawaii. There were the hula lessons and performances of my youth. This Hawaiian ballet also had some of what I desired with story telling, gestural qualities and established vocabulary. The feeling of not knowing what was being said in the Hawaiian songs and cultural artifacts provided a rich mystery to me. The feeling might be likened to the Roman Catholic practice of using Latin in mass. Also, art forms like Wayang Kulit the Balinese shadow puppet theater, which is accompanied by a language archaic to most of the audience. Chuck's music provides allusion to this mystery tradition. Noh, Kabuki, and Butoh have brethren ties with Hawaii. The latter a response to atomic gestures on the fellow island and people of Japan was a contemporary extension of the other two classical forms of Japanese theater, which were part of my educational experience in Hawaii.

I met Garth Fagan at Berkeley, when his company was on tour with Griot New York. The score for the evening length performance was composed by Wynton Marsalis, whose music I

had already admired for several years. In fact, I had exhibited a film at the Pacific Film Archive at the Berkeley Art Museum, in which I performed to a piece by Marsalis. For me this was a very fortuitous connection and it excited me. Fagan invited me to Rochester for the summer of 1993 to take classes at his studio. I decided to return upon graduation from Berkeley. A year after school, Garth Fagan Dance classes provided the motivation to return to Rochester, where I had danced, maintained a studio, and taught at the Memorial Art Gallery and Rochester Children's Nursery. In 1996 I saw the Image Movement Sound Festival during the beginning of my residence in Rochester. It seemed that the artists involved had brought together so many of the things I had dreamt of. My strong impression of RIT was based on this experience. Other enthusiastic members of the audience were my mentors in the Fagan company. I decided to attend the Rochester Institute of Technology in 1998.

With all of the directions I am interested in now I find that drawing and painting provide the base of expression. Everything comes back to these two techniques. All sketches or proposals of exploration start on paper or canvas for me. Site maps, video sequence, set design, and narrative ideas started in my sketchbook. I find that I continually reference a Botanical and Zoological Illustration course I attended during my studies. All of the projects start with drawing.

The Work

Using the above interest and inspirations, I harnessed the energy of various artists and disciplines to enlarge the reach of my loose narrative. In my desire to bring together different disciplines, I decided to play the role of a director/producer, though this description is lacking. I became a collaborator with the other artists involved.

My decision to bring different practices together coincided with the planning stages of the Image Movement Sound Festival, a festival combining film and video, dance, and music. The very festival, which had inspired me so enabled me to achieve the expression I desired. The festival represented members from three different campuses in the Rochester area. Rochester Institute of Technology contributed film, video, and animation, the Eastman School of Music contributed music, and SUNY Brockport contributed dancers and choreographers. The result of my collaboration was a multimedia dance theater production. My collaborators included Colleen Hendrick (professional dancer and choreographer), Gavin Chuck (composer), Rachel Smith (video editor), and Narin Hassan (dancer in video).

At the early stages of the festival artists came together to share ideas and propose collaborations. During planning phases and introductions, I stated up front that my project

would entail the focus of my thesis project and I described the direction in which I was heading. When I proposed my project to composers and choreographers I presented my theme of fears associated with science, while exploiting the structure of dark and evil. This concept comes from a long lineage of artists questioning the use of science and technology, e.g. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. This theme supported by a fascination with the tools of science has led many artists to use the mappings and chartings of these scientific forces to gain more insight into scientific endeavors and to critique the unknown futures incurred by such.

In addition to the festival, I presented six paintings and a video documentation of the performance. I think of the paintings as images, which reflect on the act of botanical mapping and the historical context described above. Some of the images originate from illustrations of plants found in Hawaii, which have been of interest to the world. I do not necessarily think they capture any particular mood or technique, but stand alone as a painting contemporaneously with other works of the time. I continue to explore the direction I presented in my stills. The botanical and organic world and its diagrams and illustrations continue to fascinate me. The inclination to map and diagram all aspects of the world attracts me with its potential, rich legacy, and troubling consequences. Painting and drawing in reference to

these images allows me to retrace these steps. I feel a little closer to the stories, which accompany the voyages of discovery.

Digital imaging enabled me to bring together different disciplines and cross-pollinate my various ideas. One of my main tenets has been that an artist has many tools. I might say that printing and communications have brought to the stage many civilizations worth of artistic ideas and heritage for the world's cultural creatives. The level of control, layers of production and compositions possible has enabled the individual to bring together a myriad of sources and ideas. The random reception/perception of traditions led to (postmodernism's) quoting of works. My introduction to digital video led me to find that I could stage the various elements of my creative life. DV can capture dancers, painting, still images and visual imaging and put them all into a mix. This is the concept of Chop Suey, a kind of Chinese meal, a contemporary Hawaiian term, which refers to multiculturalism and its cultural artifacts. The editing process led me to use Photoshop to stitch the various frames of reference together, creating a moving sketchbook with images from the field.

I wanted to play with the concept of light and dark, or good and evil. A simple theme, I used it to hint at the dark side of science. Though, one of the most widely used themes I

chose this approach to look at a world produced by technology getting ahead of humanity's control. The dark side of science and technological control provided a perfect backdrop for theatrical production. The life of botanical and organic subjects was mediated by technological means. The hand of science and digital imaging was revealed by a choreographed breakdown, whereby pixelation and bits of information revealed the nature of the medium. These digital units captured the essence of current imaging and artistic production, by exposing the "microscopic" level of digital imaging.

On a similar note, the music was composed with selections from a large database of music and ideas prescribed at the outset of the collaboration. The parallel timeline of musical production and techniques is stored in a digital collection of "world" music. A world without hierarchy is peered into via technological and scientific means. The dance and choreography was approached in a much simpler manner. Though, the concept of a timeline can be applied to dance, I think of this part of the process as the most organic. The resulting movement in reaction to the music, the story, the video projection and set design seemed to be synonymous with the botanical subject.

In my desire to critique technology, I realized I must master the medium myself. I chose to consider the process of the

editing, whether musical, video, or theatrical as analogous to the dark side of my theme. The ability to take quotes out of context puts the producer in the role of potential imperialist and colonizer. I considered this power to be less organic and more systematic or analytical, taking units and manipulating them for other means. My question is what difference is there between the subject I critique and the contemporary artists, who capitalize on this position of expressive power.

This description accompanied the production:

"Imaging the Garden" is an exploration of an organic and botanical space. The garden is the culmination of centuries of the human instinct for charting and mapping the known world.

Maritime exploration led to the collection and cataloguing of the known plant kingdom. In the process cultures cross-pollinated, diseases spread, and the world eventually became what it is today. Now our exploration of the heavens has lead to digital imaging techniques, which have provided unimaginable views of the planet and our garden. The artistic tools we have are a direct descendent of these travels. The resulting images have influenced our perception of our world and our place in it.

Botanical illustration accompanied a figure that represented a kind of birthing and unfolding. Botanical mapping focuses on the various stages of a plant's life. Hassan, the dancer on screen performs what can be seen as the translation of a single image. Forms in space and time are delineated and charted in all the codification of the time, e.g. the latest drafting techniques, the academic language of the time, classification names, and old engravings, out of which the dancer emerges. Sources of imagery were borrowed from botanical engravings, which produced a kind of forest from which a figure is birthed. Stages of development are a key element of scientific illustration. These stages are a part of the larger classification system, which feeds commerce, science, and medicine. The various dance movements of Colleen Hendrick (stage) and Narin Hassan (screen) are a contemporary interpretation of these stages. These elements were less a part of my work in that the performers were free to express themselves and react to music and ideas. The stage performance was a direct result of Chuck's score. The screen version was based on music completely unrelated. The rhythm was matched to the score via the digital video editing process. The project was a highly orchestrated event.

Conclusions

The successes and my areas of concern follow. I am happy with the subject of the piece, the complexity of techniques, and the overall results of the dance theater production. The areas of concern happily are the result of many consequences out of my control. The costume was the most neglected and disregarded element of the project. I realize in hindsight that the costuming is an integral part of the whole. I believe that the clothing did not reflect the feeling very well or complement the set and video. As for the dance portion, I might have worked more closely with the dancer/choreographer to ensure a tighter integration of elements. I should have created a better ending for the video with more change and movement. Or, I should have ended the video sooner. The nature of the festival was very makeshift. Two graduate students from the State University of New York, Brockport dropped out after committing to my project as dancers. My plans for the set design and staging suffered due to the lack of time for dress rehearsals. We had ten minutes on stage to work on spacing, stage elements and lighting. The background that I painted to give the impression of perspective, a reference to a portion of my timeline, was inadequately lit and paired to the screen, which was to be united with the vanishing point. Next, I will describe my intentions and then follow with what was actualized.

There was criticism that the music was not rhythmic enough. My response is that the piece was not a music video; it was more of a theatrical narrative based on deeper concerns than pop culture. I was satisfied with the result of agitation, unrest, and implied dynamism that is created by Gavin Chuck's score.

Some of the other directions I pursued on the path to completing my thesis project were intersections of the following interests. One direction I thought to include in the video was a stop motion charcoal drawing of a dancer that I had created. The process of drawing and erasing reminded me of the ephemeral nature of theater and Tibetan Mandalas. At a more basic level it really represents the result of my background. It forced an element I had found static in drawings to become like the dynamic elements I admired in theater. Similarly I liked the idea of a shadow play on the screen during the performance and video, a technique which is the oldest of all in the idea of an imaging timeline. A little anecdote, which draws a connection for me is that while teaching children in a Digital Art class I noticed something which continually excited them. They loved making shadow puppets on the wall from the projector's light. One day while playing the animations the children created we turned the projector onto the face of one student. Our attraction to the simple shadow and the digital animation was

very similar. It is clear that the effect is not very different (shadow puppets and digital projection), though the birth of each is centuries apart and represent a huge difference in complication and technology.

My project enveloped a large scope of information. I hoped to create a humanistic look at our state of technology and current world. Pulling from various sources and inspired by a complicated story, I wanted to simplify a technically and ethically mired state by presenting a world of good and evil. Like a tale from a Wonder Book, the stage and walls were graced with snapshots of moral tales and illustrations. The theater production enabled me to combine various media and play the role of director. With this role I feel I was able to experiment and try things that I could not have accomplished otherwise. The exhibition of paintings and the video documentation of the production proved to be somewhat disjointed from the ephemeral form of theater, but significantly worthy. It was not the perfect project, but it does represent my most ambitious one to date. I hope to have given an historical subtext, while communicating as a visual artist with roots in contemporary theory and art practice. I certainly will continue the process of curiosity and art making.

Appendix A

Set design: Oil, Acrylic, Theater Foam, Muslin

Exhibition: Oil, Acrylic, Paper, and Panel

Video: Digital video camera, Macintosh Editing suite: Adobe Photoshop and Adobe
Premiere

Editor: Rachel Smith

Compostie Editor: Nancy Ghertner

Composer: Gavin Chuck

Dancer and Choreographer: Colleen Hendrick

Dancer in video: Narin Hassan

Appendix B

Video documentation of "Imaging the Garden" (Image Movement Sound Festival)

Images from Bevier Gallery MFA Thesis Exhibition

figure A.

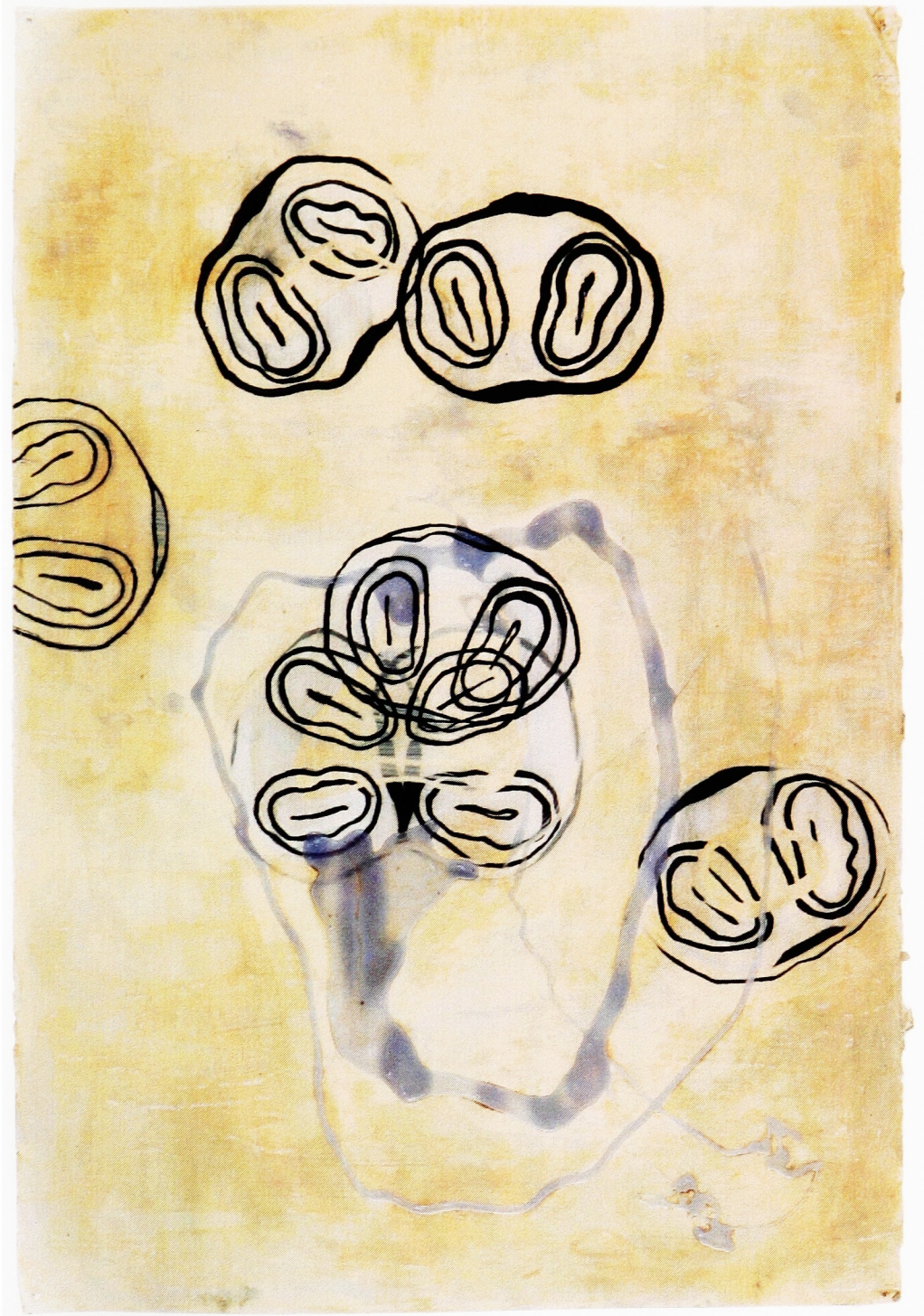


figure B.



figure C.



figure D.



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