

figments & phantoms



JANUARY 10 – APRIL 20, 2025 | JOHN BRADY PRINT GALLERY | DES MOINES ART CENTER

Fragmented, distorted, or noticeably absent, the body haunts the prints and photographs in this exhibition. Together, the artists featured in *Figments & Phantoms* present an expansive vision of portraiture that engages issues of identity and social criticism, raising specters that trouble and complicate contemporary representations of the self and body.

Across this exhibition, artists explore how the body (or its absence) serves as both artistic subject and medium. For female artists, in particular, self-portraiture becomes a way to redefine their relationships to their own bodies and the objectifying clichés common in representations of women.

The photograph *Eye Body* (1963), taken by the Icelandic artist Erró, under the artist Carolee Schneeman's direction, shows Schneeman inside a purpose-built environment filled with broken mirrors, glass, lights, and motorized parts, her body covered in paint, grease, chalk, ropes, and plastic. As Schneeman explained, "I decided to be combined with my work as an additional 'material'—real, physical: to let my body be a further dimension of the tactile, plastic character of the constructions."

Similarly, Ana Mendieta defines her body as well as her relationship to the natural world in the "Silueta (Silhouettes)" series (1973–1980). Mendieta traced her shape in gunpowder and set it alight, capturing the flames on film. One of more than 14,000 children sent to the United States as part of Operation Peter Pan, a program that relocated the children of Cuban citizens who had actively opposed the regime of Fidel Castro, Mendieta emigrated to Iowa, where she grew up in multiple orphanages and foster homes. In 1969, she enrolled at the Center for the New Performing Arts at the University of Iowa. By imprinting herself upon the landscape, she sought to reconnect herself with the natural environment, forging a relationship to the Iowa landscape and, later, her native Cuba.



ABOVE
Carolee Schneemann (American, 1939–2019)
Eye Body #24, 1963, printed 2004

ON THE COVER
Kiki Smith (American, born 1954)
My Blue Lake, 1995

Laura Aguilar explores the relationship of her body to nature and the history of photography in *Grounded #109* (2006–2007, printed 2018), including herself as an element of the sparse desert of California’s Joshua Tree Park. Self-taught, Aguilar sought to question the white male gaze through the depiction of her own larger body, suggesting the natural world as a welcoming space for those who are rejected by mainstream conceptions of beauty. She staged her body with her head and face concealed so that her shape appears like that of the rocks in the environment. This composition mimics the style of male 20th century photographers associated with the Modernist movement who composed images of female nudes that made women appear as if they were objects or even abstract forms. Aguilar references this history and reimagines this style of photography, appropriating it to celebrate the shape of her body and its connection to the landscape.

Other artists use optically illusive staging, photographic editing techniques, or unusual technologies to present fragmented and distorted images of bodies. Kiki Smith envisions her distended self-portrait, *My Blue Lake* (1995), as a form of landscape photography. The artist employed a rare 360-degree peripheral camera from the collection of the British Museum to create this piece. Designed for geological surveys, the camera flattens three-dimensional forms into two-dimensional images. From the resulting large-scale negative, Smith made a photogravure printing plate, then hand-colored the resulting prints so that her figure appears as a topographical map in which her body looks like an ocean and her hair appears as mountains or a shore.

Ana Mendieta (American, born Cuba, 1948 – 1985)
Untitled, from the “Silueta” series, 1977

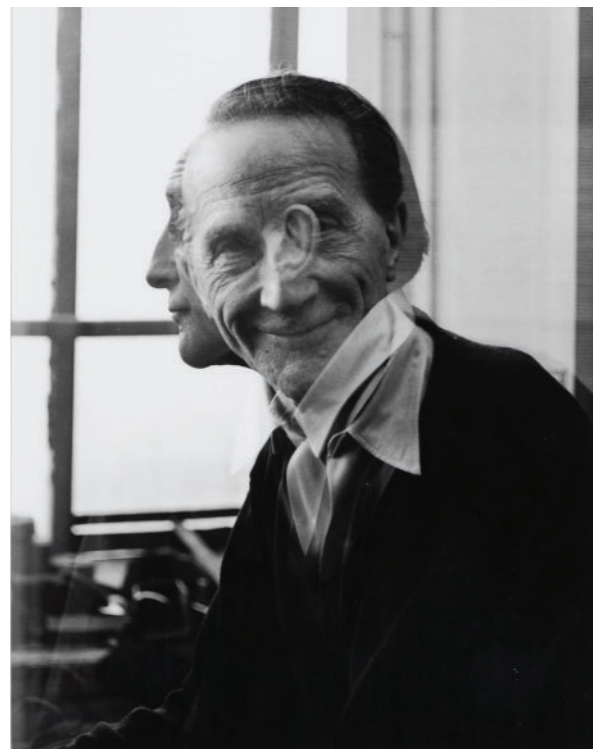


Laura Aguilar (American, 1959–2018)
Grounded #109, 2006–2007, printed 2018

RIGHT
Victor Obsatz (American, born 1925)
Portrait of Marcel Duchamp, 1953, printed 2006

BELOW
Rachel Cox (American, born 1984)
Untitled 36, from the series "Mors Scena", 2019

OPPOSITE
Hans Breder (American, born Germany, 1937–2017)
Cuilapan, Mexico, from the series "Body/Sculptures", 1973



In *Cuilapan, Mexico* (1973) from his "Body/Sculptures" series, Hans Breder employs mirrors to create reflections that shatter the body of his model into a disconcerting jumble of limbs. Victor Obsatz photographs the artist Marcel Duchamp twice — once in profile and once facing the viewer — on the same piece of film, creating a double exposure. This playful portrait seems to depict the artist occupying multiple perspectives simultaneously and references the style of experimental photography practiced by Duchamp's Surrealist peers in the early 20th century.

In some of these images, the artist evokes an absent body. In *Untitled 36* (2019) from her "Mors Scena" series, Rachel Cox constructs a cryptic still life

consisting of a flower arrangement and urn against pastel curtains. The work reflects Cox's interest, catalyzed by personal experience, in the décor of funeral homes, specifically, the role that aesthetic choices such as color, light, and staging play in the rituals we create to process grief. Cox conducted research at small, independently owned funeral homes to capture the uncanny atmosphere of these spaces and delve into examining how elements of class, culture, and social expectation all impact how such places come to look and feel. The resulting photos are part documentary and part arranged fiction, all working together to reference the immensity of death and loss through banal, everyday objects.





In *Gladiators* (2013), Mitchell Squire portrays an array of black and gray figures that reveal themselves to be human-shaped targets used by law enforcement for shooting practice. The white spots on each form are bullet holes, a reference to the tragic deaths of a growing number of Black Americans in police shootings, many of whose deaths did not receive significant media attention or judicial scrutiny.

Other artists consider how the circulation of images through mass media networks affects our perceptions. Cindy Sherman's anonymous femme fatale in *Untitled Film Still #50* (1979) appears in a scene that replicates visual tropes from mid 20th century

American Film Noir and European New Wave films. The artist plays the part of photographer, costumer, set designer, and lead actor. This image is based on the format of a film still, a publicity photograph created by a studio to advertise an upcoming movie. Sherman mimics this style of photograph, but provides no accompanying narrative, allowing the viewer to draw upon their own knowledge of films from the era to imagine a story for the photograph's protagonist. When asked why she stopped making her "Film Still" series, Sherman explained that she had "run out of clichés."

In *100 Boots* (1971–1973), Eleanor Antin documents the adventures of 100 empty army boots as they march from the beach in San Diego to the streets of New York. Antin staged a series of 51 scenes, which she printed as postcards and mailed to 1,000 artists, writers, and institutions around the world over a two-and-a-half-

OPPOSITE
Mitchell Squire (American, born 1958)
Gladiators, 2013

ABOVE
Cindy Sherman (American, born 1954)
Untitled Film Still #50, 1979



Eleanor Antin (American, born 1935)
100 Boots, 1971–1973

year period. This piece is one of the foremost examples of Mail art, a type of Conceptual art in which artists used the postal system to create a network of creative exchange. Though intended to be humorous and lighthearted, the piece also contains a pointed critique of the Vietnam War, as the empty boots stand in for fallen soldiers.

In screenprints from Andy Warhol's "Electric Chair" (1971) series, the artist replicates a 1953 stock photograph of the empty death chair at the Sing Sing Correctional Facility in New York. The bright and garish hues of the prints are a jarring contrast with the empty room that waits for the next execution. The repeated image speaks to the transformation of tragedy into spectacle through its constant coverage in the news media.

In various ways, the nearly two dozen artists

featured here create photographs and prints that are technically and formally experimental, including the use of unusual technology. They reference and reframe the history of art. By co-opting the visual language of the mass media, they unearth and transform imagery from our collective cultural consciousness. Through the figments and phantoms they raise, these artists redefine the genre of portraiture and compel us to imagine the body and its representations anew.

OPPOSITE ABOVE
Andy Warhol (American, 1928–1987)
Electric Chair, 1971
Screenprint on paper [light yellow, blue]

OPPOSITE BELOW
Andy Warhol (American, 1928–1987)
Electric Chair, 1971
Screenprint on paper [dark purple, orange]



EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Marina Abramović (Serbian, born 1946)
Ghost, from “Art for Arts Sake Calendar 2000” (November), 1998
Photography
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Gift of Zoe and Joel Dictrow, 2005.15.1

Laura Aguilar (American, 1959–2018)
Grounded #109, 2006–2007, printed 2018
Archival pigment print
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Purchased with funds from the Rusty Hubbell and Ellen and Jim Hubbell Photography Acquisition Fund, 2021.15

Eleanor Antin (American, born 1935)
100 Boots, 1971–1973
Five photo postcards
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Partial gift of the Des Moines Art Center Print Club in memory of Keith Achepohl, and purchased with Director’s Discretionary Fund, 2018.17.a.e

John Baldessari (American, 1931–2020)
Paradise, 1989–1990
Photogravure with color aquatint
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Gift of the Des Moines Art Center Print Club in honor of Charles Anderson, 2001.20

Frank Big Bear (American, Anishinabe, born 1953)
Multiverse: Spin Off VI, 2013
Collage on found paper
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Gift of Jim and Ellen Hubbell, 2020.10.a.1

Hans Breder (American, born Germany, 1937–2017)
Cuilapan, Mexico, from the series
“Body/Sculptures”, 1973
Gelatin silver print
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Gift of the Estate of Hans and Barbara Welch Breder, 2023.9

Rachel Cox (American, born 1984)
Untitled 36, from the series “Mors Scena”, 2019
Archival pigment print
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Gift of the artist, 2021.2

Andy Goldsworthy (British, born 1956)
Too Difficult to Work the Round Pebbles, 1992
Cibachrome photograph
Des Moines Art Center; Paul and Anastasia Polydorou Collection, 2015.86.1

Nathan Lerner (American, 1913–1997)
Focused view for camera: Brown’s face, 1939, printed later
Gelatin silver print
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Gift of Jeff Perry, 2021.80

Glenn Ligon (American, born 1960)
Untitled, from “Runaways”, 1993
Lithograph on paper
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Gift of The Bohem Foundation, New York, 1994.19.3

Glenn Ligon (American, born 1960)
Untitled, from “Runaways”, 1993
Lithograph on paper
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Gift of The Bohem Foundation, New York, 1994.19.4

Ana Mendieta (American, born Cuba, 1948–1985)
Untitled, from the “Silueta” series, 1977
Unique lifetime color photograph mounted on board documenting silueta with fire and gunpowder, Iowa
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Purchased with funds from Rose F. Rosenfield, 1997.77

Laurel Nakadate (American, born 1975)
Tyler, Texas #2, from the “Relations” series, 2013
Framed Type C-print, laminated with UV protective film, mounted on Plexiglas
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Purchased with funds from the Kyle and Sharon Krause Family Art Acquisition Fund, 2016.2

Shirin Neshat (American, born Iran, born 1957)
“Rapture Series (Women In A Line)”, 1999
Color photograph
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Gift of the Des Moines Art Center Print Club and Stanley and Gail Richards, 2004.8

Victor Obsatz (American, born 1925)
Portrait of Marcel Duchamp, 1953, printed 2006
Gelatin silver print
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Gift of Jim and Ellen Hubbell, 2020.14

Susan Rothenberg (American, 1945–2020)
Yellow Spinner, 1988
Etching on paper
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Gift of John and Mary Pappajohn, 1991.83

Carolee Schneemann (American, 1939–2019)
Eye Body #24, 1963, printed 2004
Gelatin silver print
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Gift of Jim and Ellen Hubbell, 2018.23

Cindy Sherman (American, born 1954)
Untitled Film Still #4, 1977
Gelatin silver print
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Purchased with funds from the Edmundson Art Foundation, Inc., 1992.38

Cindy Sherman (American, born 1954)
Untitled Film Still #50, 1979
Gelatin silver print
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Purchased with funds from the Edmundson Art Foundation, 1992.39

Kiki Smith (American, born 1954)
My Blue Lake, 1995
Photogravure and lithograph on paper
Des Moines Art Center’s Louise Noun Collection of Art by Women, 1995.64

Alec Soth (American, born 1969)
Terrace Court, 2005
Chromogenic print
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Purchased with funds from Kenneth and Helen MacDonald by exchange, 2006.6

Mitchell Squire (American, born 1958)
Gladiators, 2013
Lithograph on paper, printed in multiple shades of black from two aluminum plates
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Purchased with funds from the Edmundson Art Foundation, Inc., 2014.5

Andy Warhol (American, 1928–1987)
Electric Chair, 1971
Screenprint on paper [light yellow, blue]
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Gift of Peter M. Brant, 1973.41.1

Andy Warhol (American, 1928–1987)
Electric Chair, 1971
Screenprint on paper [dark purple, orange]
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Gift of Peter M. Brant, 1973.41.3

Andy Warhol (American, 1928–1987)
Electric Chair, 1971
Screenprint on paper [purple/black, silver]
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Gift of Peter M. Brant, 1973.41.5

H.C. Westermann (American, 1922–1981)
Phantom in a Wooden Garden, 1970
Douglas fir, pine, redwood and vermilion wood
Purchased with funds from the Coffin Fine Arts Trust; Nathan Emory Coffin Collection of the Des Moines Art Center, 1976.89

This gallery guide is published in conjunction with the exhibition

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