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WHAT IS ENLIGHTENMENT?

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Despite its title, “A Vaudeville on Mankind in Time and Space” was more of a poetic observation of our strange present moment on earth. To the right of the gallery’s entrance hung two shelves lined with Plexiglas plates that appeared to be smeared with a white substance, as if they were slides of bacteria being prepared for laboratory testing. These “smears” were in fact engravings, each spelling out a prefix or suffix for describing intersections of the body, politics, and the environment:

SOCIO-, -ROTIC, E-, -ZONE, POLY-, -TICAL, BIO-, and -DEMIC. This installation, *flexible fragmentation-compression process* (all works 2018), established the material and topical framework of the show, which featured fourteen specially printed photographs mounted on variously colored rectangles of Plexiglas.

At once forensic, intimate, political, and alien, Backström’s pictures—some of which she took with her own camera, or using a microscope, and some of which she found on the internet—juxtapose subjects ranging from “unknown content, extracted from gap between teeth” and “secreted nasal mucus” to “Nordic Resistance Movement march, Gothenburg, Sweden” and “toxic mining waste.” What unified the images were their titles—all preceded by the word *fossil*—as well as their method of production: paralyph printing, a relatively obscure process used to translate an image into something resembling a relief.

Another work in the exhibition was a significantly enlarged photograph of a fingernail cuticle, adhered as a mural-size print to the wall facing the gallery entrance. Up close, the delicate skin was nearly unrecognizable, glistening and abstract. On top of and next to the image hung three thermographic contact prints on parchment, each of which was created by placing objects on top of the paper and then heating it all in an oven.

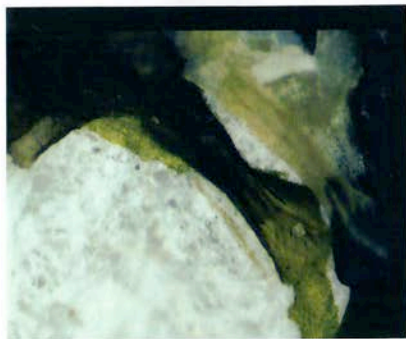
These disparate images and techniques were somewhat united by their underlying evocations of touch (an enlarged finger, contact prints, reliefs, and substances extracted from the body), a sensation that Backström also complicates by shifting the viewer’s relationship to the body’s scale. Snot becomes swamp; blood turns into galaxy.

Backström’s interest in the potential affects of images is fueled by the plot of *Aniara*, a 1956 book-length science-fiction poem written by Nobel laureate Harry Martinson, best known in his (and Backström’s) home country of Sweden. The text describes a doomed mission to Mars prompted by toxic conditions on earth, but Martinson was more interested in imagining different possibilities of what space itself might be. He questioned the mysteries of the cosmic unknown; Backström examines what is right here, in the body, on our planet. In a performance accompanying the exhibition, a dancer interpreted the spaceship’s motions of distress and orbital movement, while Backström narrated what was for her a key element of Martinson’s story: how the spaceship beams images from earth back to the people on board to comfort them, as if the sight of home could restore their faith in the promise of eventual return. Yet the routine backfires when those images become so distressing that the vessel’s onboard “proto-artificial intelligence,” Mima, self-destructs.

One might extrapolate that the images here were meant to represent a selection of such transmissions. Some were tragic: natural disasters, Rohingya villages burning in Myanmar (*Fossil; Satellite View [Rohingya villages being burned] September 15, 2017*), and refugees demonstrating at a camp in Lesbos (*Fossil; Partial View [Refugees protest at the Moria Detention Center, Lesbos], May 4, 2016*). Yet the printing transformed these difficult scenes into beautifully colored abstractions, so that the flames of smoldering homes echoed the forms in an adjacent image of a Staten Island marsh, and the helmets of Nordic Resistance marchers rhymed with the ruins visible in *Fossil; Record (6th Century St. Elijah’s Monastery, destroyed by IS) January 20, 2016*.

Our contemporary ability to beam images from home, or from anywhere, feels banal and yet is simultaneously a vital tool for activism and accountability. Backström’s decision to use the paralyph process gestures toward tactility as a different way of experiencing these disasters. Perhaps if we could *feel* what these images convey, we would be more inclined to act. Unlike on *Aniara*, it is precisely our distance from those disasters—our lack of contact—that protects us from being destroyed. To remain accountable is the more distressing, and urgent, position.

—Mira Dayal



Fia Backström, *Fossil; x4.5 View (Food remains, unknown content, extracted from gap between teeth)*, December 14, 2017, 2018, ink-jet print on Plexiglas, 17 1/2 x 20 1/2”.