

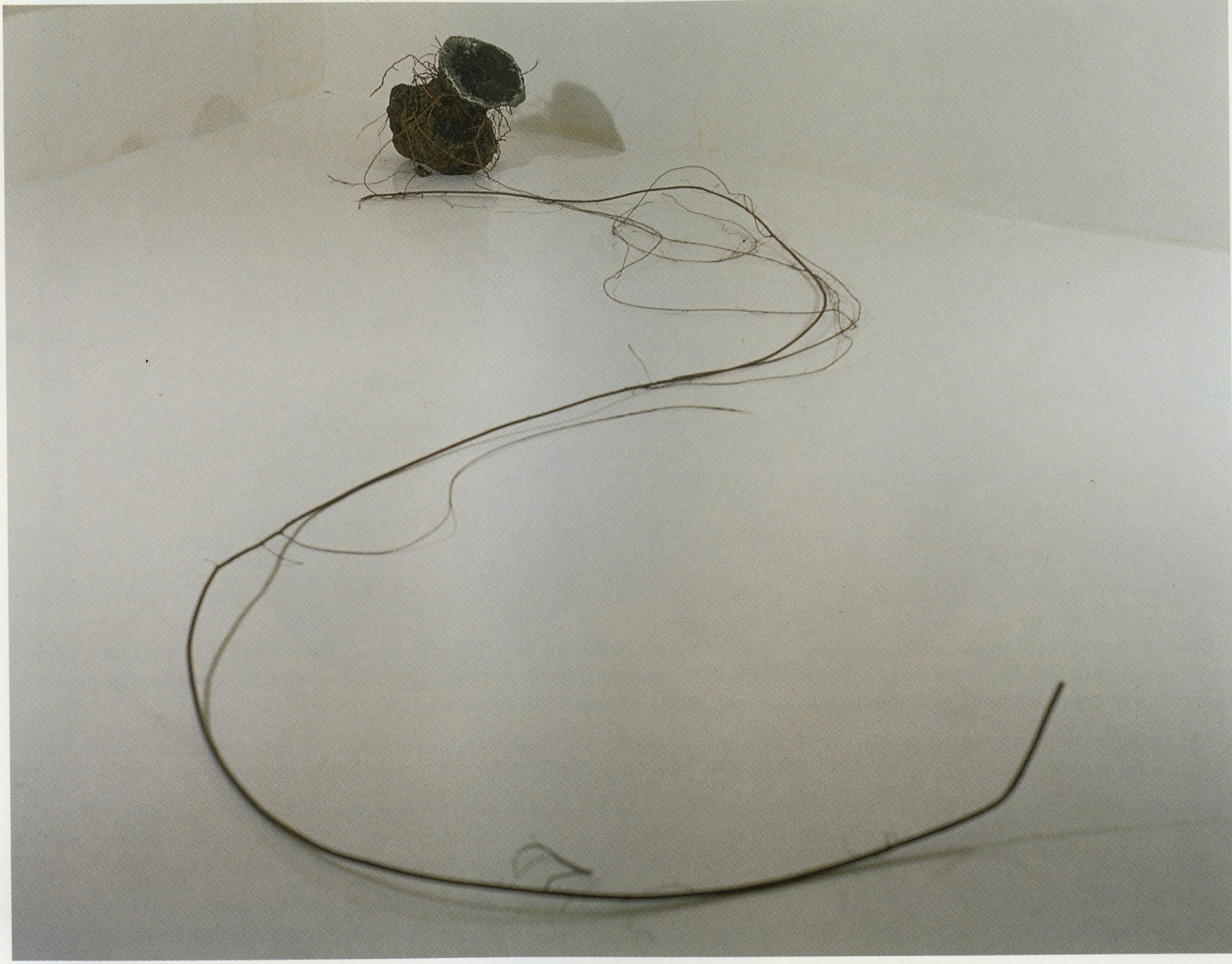




Left: *Hole #16*, (detail), 1999, resin, dirt, roots, rocks, 14" x 58" x 28" (variable); Right: *Hole #18*, 1999, resin, dirt, roots, rocks, 13" x 38" x 133" (variable)



Left: *Hole #16*, (detail), 1999, resin, dirt, roots, rocks, 14" x 68" x 28" (variable); Right: *Hole #18*, 1999, resin, dirt, roots, rocks, 13" x 38" x 133" (variable)





Nick Debs: There's a lot in your work which is scientific looking, for want of a better phrase. Sometimes the holes look like geological samples, and the large fiberglass pieces could be ballistics tests. It also seems that you're fascinated by forms in the natural world; you're using roots and things like that. What do you think about science?

David Nelson: I wanted to be a bug scientist. I could train praying mantis to peer into crystal balls, push marbles, and walk upside down on tightropes.

You're kidding.

I think they do it on their own, but I believed that I could make them do that.

Did you raise them? Did you hatch mantis eggs?

No, I never hatched them. I put them on string, they'd do their thing. I had a little stage set with curtains, do little shows.

Did you charge admission?

No.

That's interesting, I didn't know that about you. So when did you stop?

Training praying mantis? 13. I've tried raising them since, but not with much luck. I collect a lot of natural history things. I've never been able to memorize what rock is what, and I try hard to, but I can't remember what bird nest goes with what bird, or what's

Left: Hole #11, 1998, resin, dirt, roots, rocks, 10" x 22" x 11". Right: /is #2, 1999-2000, silver gelatin contact print (from found glass negative, cross-section of eye), edition of 5, 8" x 10"

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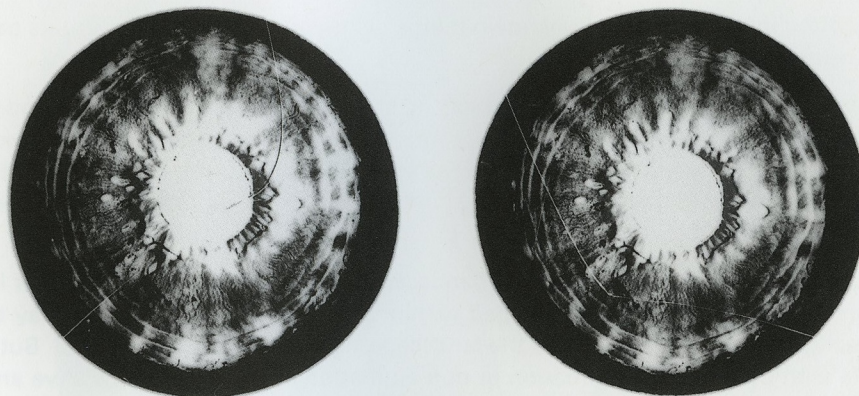
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igneous and what's metamorphic, that part doesn't stick for me. But I like to look at an object that comes from the natural world and see its evolution. I think it's probably that observation that's influenced me, the organic aspect of my work. Like the fiberglass sheets are totally organic and about the natural world even though they're terribly inorganic material. I know when I first started doing the holes I was nervous that they might look like weird rocks or something. And I didn't want to make art that looked organic but I wanted to use the natural reality of things, like gravity. I wanted to have more of a psychological twist than a natural science twist. I think of the holes as being a psychological experience. I wanted to understand something I didn't know, there was some unknown that I wanted to cast and make real and put on a table and polish and look into.

Digging holes is something kids do all the time. And when I first started doing it, I would go in the garden and do it at night because I was too embarrassed, I'm a 38 year old man with his arm in the ground. We become ashamed of things we did as little kids, a kind of mystery that was magical. I feel when I dig them it's very private and I want to get lost in it. So I wear earphones and play music really loud and try to distance all those hundreds of windows that surround my garden.

When I did those holes out in Montauk I went off-season so I could avoid people, and this woman came up to me on the beach, there were very few people on the beach, and she said "What are you doing?" and I had my arm all the way in the ground, and like a little kid, I said "Nothing," and she said, "You're digging a hole." and I said "Yeah."

What a witch.



Yeah, go away! It's private.

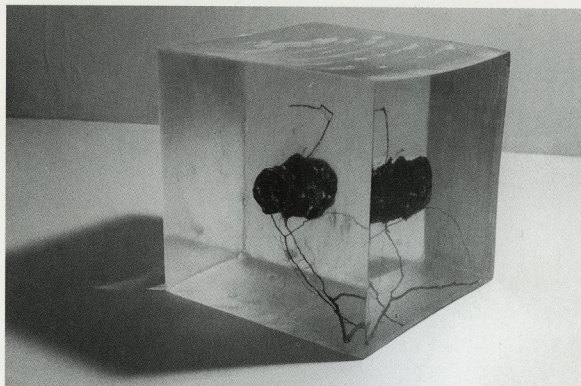
We were talking the other day about seriality and repetition. How does that figure into your work?

I guess I see seriality as sort of the opposite of repetition. Seriality is like bracketing a possibility, seriality is like an idea, repetition becomes an experience. In the recent work, the idea of landscape is serial, while certain projects I do, like the holes, are repetitions, they're repeating something that's a little out of my control.

If I pour resin on a piece of suspended fiberglass, I know it's going to drip through. And depending on the temperature and the humidity, these drips end up having their own character and nature. It's a process that allows for transformation and observation. I would never cast a drip, I only set up the circumstance for the drip to happen.

What about the holes?

I guess with the holes, it's like starting with the notion of a surface, of breaking a surface, and then encountering whatever it is when you get below, all the rocks and roots and stuff like that. And navigating through that space, but without really knowing what to expect. With the holes I try to keep the ground opening small, because I don't want to see what it is I'm dealing with, I want to feel it. If I see, I would start making decisions that are aesthetically based. The act of digging a hole is very quiet, very intrusive and invasive.



Your work has a lot of surfaces: there's the surface of the cube, the surface of the interior hole, the surfaces of the fiberglass, and these surfaces all make some sort of division. Would it be that you're setting up separations between things and then puncturing them?

I think that's true. In an earlier work I used the '0' and the '1' and a quote from Zeno.¹ The '1' is a representation of something, and the '0' is everything before that—that's not known. It's also a universal code. And I think it's the difference between the two that I play with a lot. The hole starts out as an unknown, then I dig it and fill it with resin, and yank it out, and what I'm left with is a positive of a negative, and it's really only the thin skin of dirt that defines it as a hole, otherwise I just have a chunk of resin.

You're digging the hole, and in my mind the surface of the earth is the '0' and everything beneath it is all the negative numbers and everything on top of it is the positive numbers.

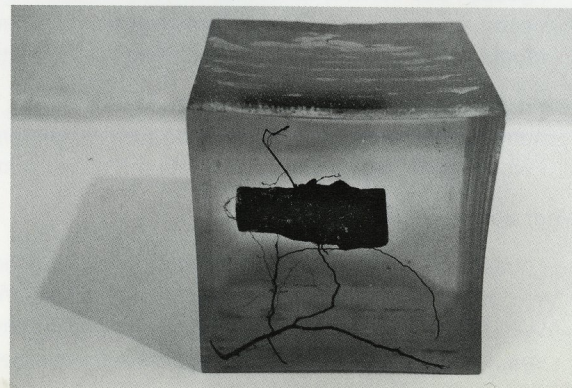
I guess I think that anything below the surface is '0'. I'm not interested in the '0' or the '1' *per se*, but in the crack in between.

Yeah, and you're digging around in that morass of unknown things, with your hands, pulling things out. It's much like the way you're making the knot drawings.

The knot drawings are really deliberate in that I play with one knot, the Thieves Knot, which sailors used to tie off their duffle bags, to tell if someone had messed with their stuff. I started using this knot in my work after my lover David [Knudsvig] died of AIDS. The knot is made from two pieces of rope and they have a relationship, they interact. I begin by setting up the rope on paper, trace it, and then put the rope away. I try and draw it into something that is believable, where it seems to have life, where it develops muscle and sinew, some kind of tension.

We've talked about the reverse landscape, or the mirrored landscape in your work. When I think of landscape I usually think of the horizontal and things being spread out and arranged within view, within a frame. If we say there's this underground world of '0' that you're investigating, then maybe that's the landscape that the Train Man inhabits. But is it a landscape? Or an anti-landscape? That falls in with the notion of animation or non-animation in your work, how alive are, or were, these things?

Yeah, when I decided to make the landscapes for the Train Man, it was about him trying to occupy a psychological space rather than a physical space. It was really a reflection of myself, my emotional state, my personality. The Train Man, which was an object of David's, was kind of a touchstone or talisman to him or with him, or some remnant from our relationship together. He was this little toy on the dresser that was enigmatic, none of us knew where he was from, but he was evocative. I think that's because he had dice inside his hat; that was important. He crossed all these lines, he has a very expressive little face, but also he's like a skull and he has these hollow eyes. And he was sticking out this bright red tongue and wearing this little dress and he has this big goofy Victorian top hat, which unscrews and inside are the dice. He flips all these boundaries, all these life/death boundaries. Actually, the first hole had a cast of the Train Man himself embedded inside the hole, and it was transparent, because it was clear resin floating within clear resin, and I don't think anyone would even notice it unless it was pointed out. It's very discrete. But it was about him inhabiting the space and I guess he'd begun to inhabit a kind of



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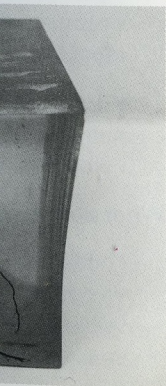
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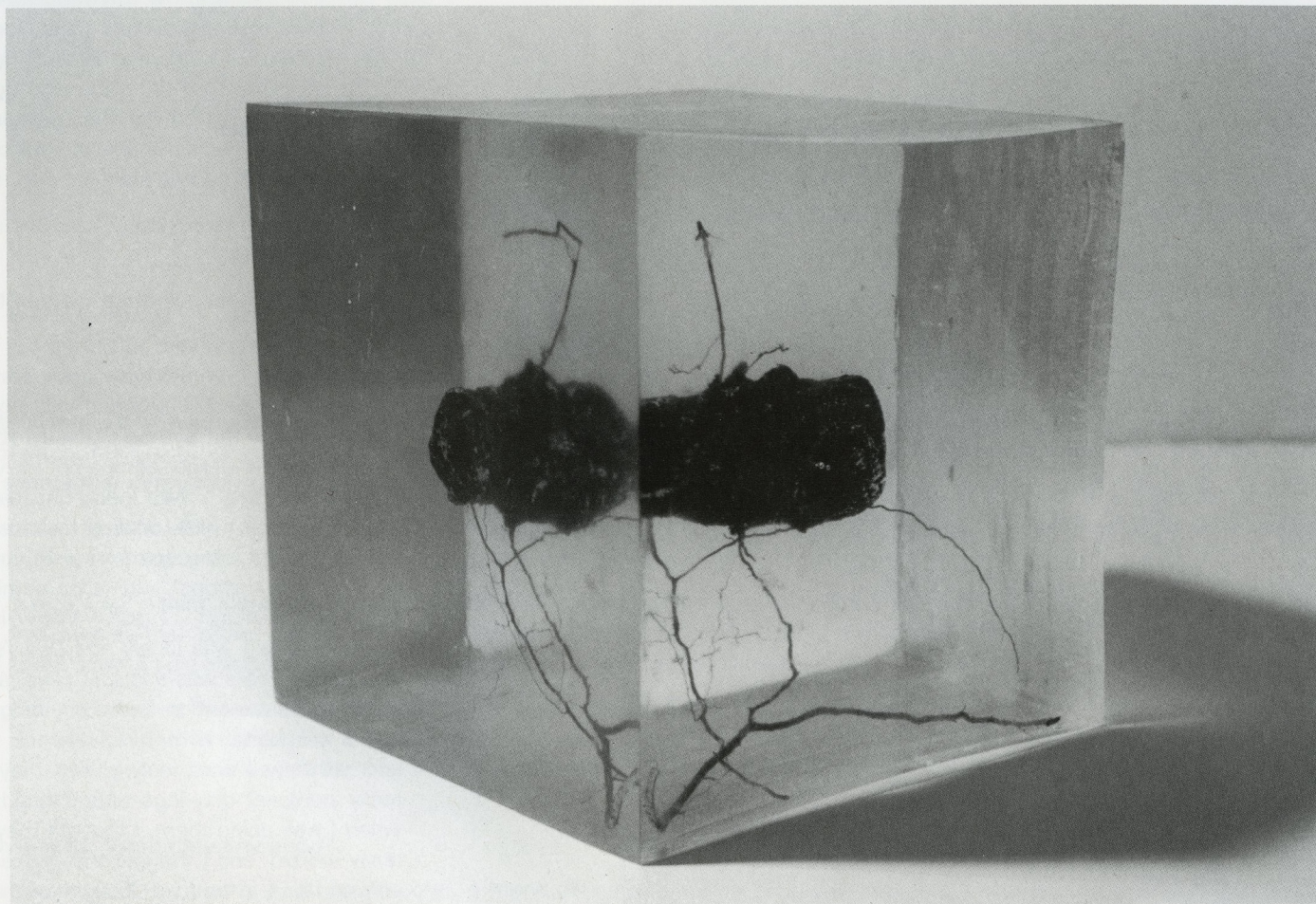
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Left and Right : Cube #2, 2000, resin, dirt, roots, 10" x 10" x 10"



space for me inside my head. So I guess that was sort of the beginning of the landscape.

The Train Man had a landscape, a place to live. I remember seeing the drawings and recognizing him, and you didn't know anything about his identity; it's a representation of Papa Gédé, the Voudon god of the dead, and by making sand drawings of him in the dark, the photograms, you were doing something that people who worship him do. This is not part of your culture. The intuition involved has always struck me.

Well, I'm glad I didn't know what his cultural significance was.

Oh, absolutely, because that wouldn't have been real.

Because then it would have been a symbol. When David died, I stopped making work because all of the symbols that I had been using became dumb compared to what I was feeling and I was really incapable of expressing that. And I think it mattered a lot to me at the time to do something that was representational, not to do something that was abstract. I don't know if that was because I was lonely and David's body was gone. There was a lack of physical presence, and I wanted to find something that I could associate with him, and to try to address how I was feeling, and they were really personal drawings and I hated them when I was doing them, I thought they were really morbid, and I thought they were just a way of filling in time. I thought of them as drawings coming out of boredom. I would just sit down with the toy and draw it until I didn't want to draw it anymore, I wasn't trying to accomplish anything that was interesting in aesthetic terms, I wasn't trying to achieve a good drawing. I was just trying to look at this thing and make something, do something. I guess the need to do something...

Make a figure.

Left: Part #2, (detail), 1999, pencil on paper, 38" x 26"; Right: Hole Reflection #2, 1997, silver gelatin print, edition of 5, 28" x 41"; work in progress (Hole #17)

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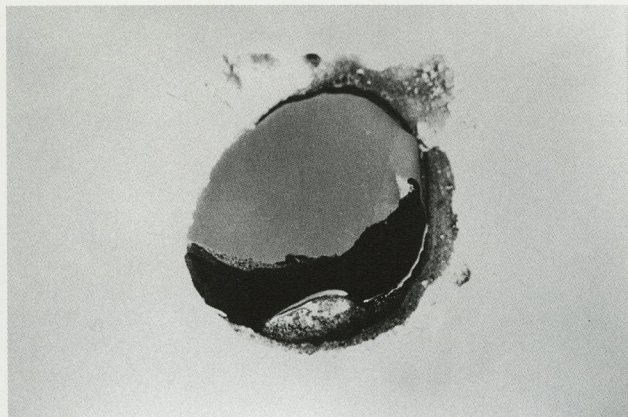
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But they ended up being really frightening, which, in retrospect, makes perfect sense. I think they were all I could do at that moment. But they do feel like a diary for me, they do feel like a figure in the process of disappearing, remaining, pulling apart, coming and going.

Dissolving. They're very much like a diary... seeing them all on the wall is like looking at a calendar, or journal. They're much more about the fact that you were going through this, than the finished product. They're not end-driven. They're the remnants of a state that everybody goes through; mourning.

Actually, I want to ask you about the performative aspects of your work, like making the holes, and not wanting to be disturbed, and going into some sort of trance. Not that you're a performance artist.

Trance... no. I think there's an active part of it, when you dig below the surface of the soil, and you start bumping into things, how you navigate that terrain. There's a thought process, I'll feel a rock, and I'll think, is this a big rock or a little rock? Is this rock going to fall down if I dig around it, or is it so big that I won't be able to get the hole out of the ground? That's performative in a loose way.

Did you ever see those ocean prints I made? For a few years I would do this thing where I took a clay-coated paper and blacked it out with ink, right at the edge of the shore, where the water would lap up and I would just sit and wait and it would either stay black or it would record a wave coming over it. It had this weird photographic quality to it. And that was embarrassingly performative. And organic-ey.

Soy-based. Were they any good?

Yeah. I still like them. At a certain point, a friend of mine, Brandon Krall, she took one and wrote this Latin phrase, *omnis determinatio est negatio*, which means as soon as you determine or recognize something, you've destroyed it. You negate it.

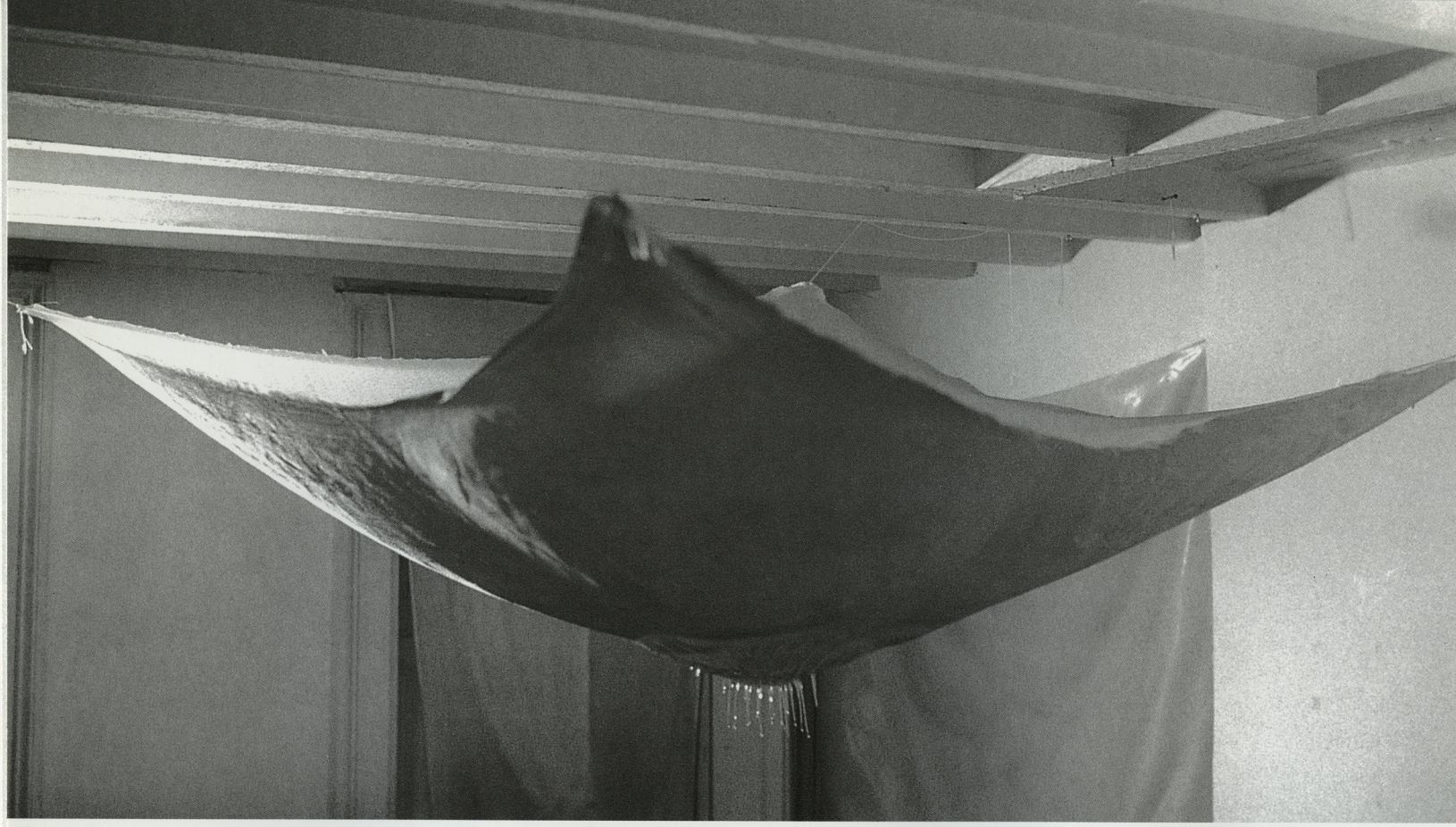
Just like Heisenberg. You look at something and you know its mass or you know where it is. And once you observe it, you change it. The wave prints are photographic, and in a weird way, a print is a print is a print and it doesn't matter what the process is, the specifics, the chemistry, the image that you get is an impression.

No, it's really true.

And that gets back to the surface question, because you make a print with a surface, or something coming off a surface, i.e., light, that is ingraining itself into another surface. There's something about print-making which has always struck me as being alchemical. There's something odd about it; metaphor is too weak a term, it's more a kind of demonstration of one of the ways that the

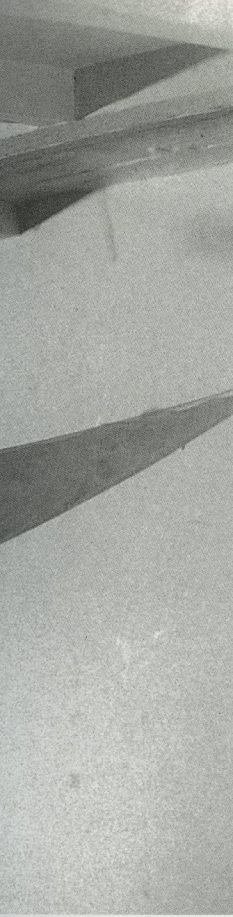




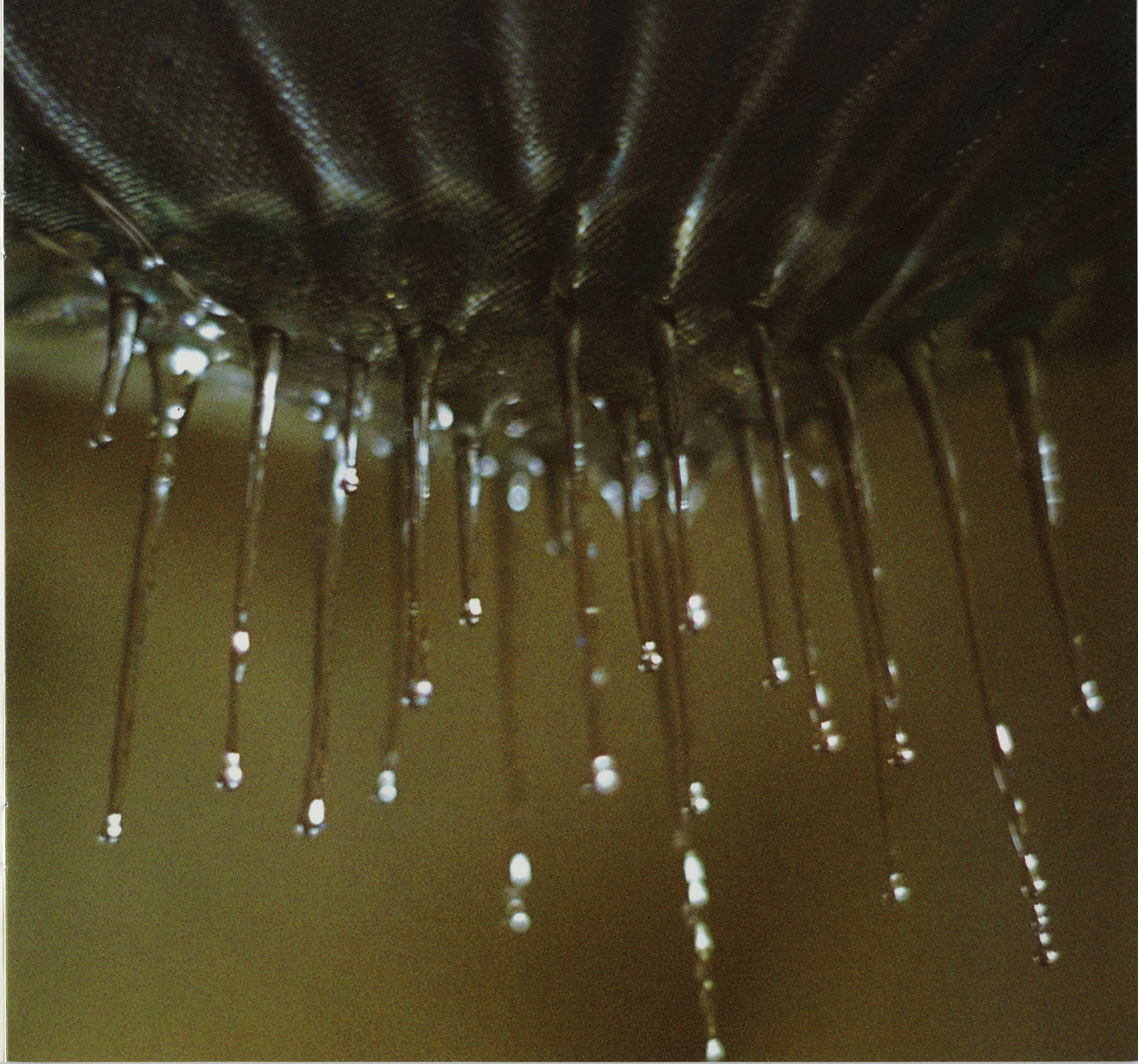


Previous page: *Hole #19*, (detail), 1999, resin, dirt, roots, rocks, 10" x 41" x 25" (variable); Left: *Drip suspended #2*, 1999, fiberglass fabric, resin, string, 23" x 65" x 60"; Right: (detail)



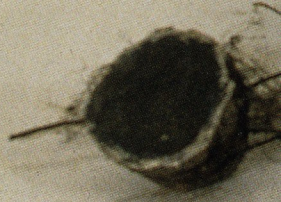


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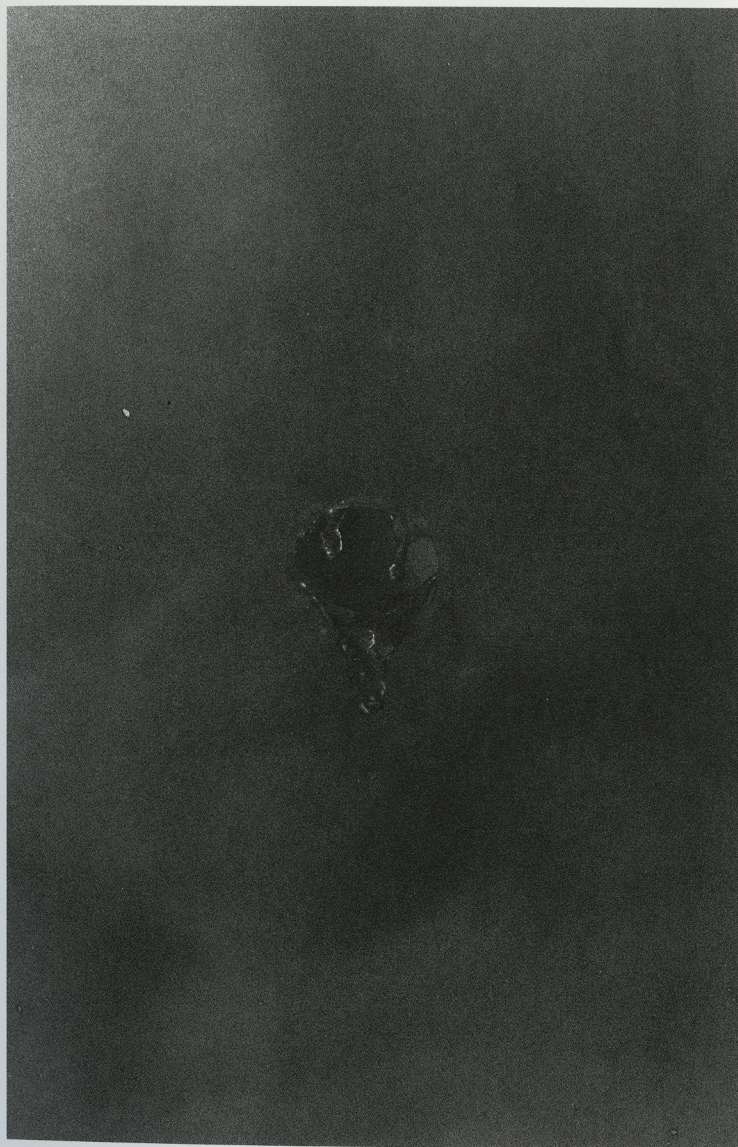
Left: *Digging*, 1999, silver gelatin print, edition of 5, 20" x 24"; Right: *Hole #17*, 1999, resin, dirt, roots, rocks, 23" x 48" x 64" (variable)



Left: *Digging*, 1999, silver gelatin print, edition of 5, 20" x 24"; Right: *Hole #17*, 1999, resin, dirt, roots, rocks, 23" x 48" x 64" (variable)









universe operates. Does any of this make any sense whatsoever? I suppose I'm talking about how information is transferred from one surface to another.

Like a fossil?

Yeah, like how a fossil is a print. Not just geologically speaking, but in general. In a more wide-open kind of way.

Like cause and effect. Like in my garden, I made a lot of holes, I tried to make them in the paths, because I didn't want to trash the plants; but I'd run into roots, and I'd wonder what are these voids that I excavate out, what happens? I mean, I try to put nutrients back into the soil. But something has been altered. I've explored the natural state, and tried to inhabit it in some kind of dumb, blind way, but I've also left a void. I don't know what the effect will be.

You're making a print. In making the holes, you're making a print in the real landscape, and you don't see it all in one shot. It's just as much a print as the Train Man photographs. One might think of it as operating in a temporal way. This print comes together over time. That has something to do with my question about the performative aspect of your work. Your work is so visually striking, but much of your process takes place in the dark or with your eyes closed. It has to do with chance, too. The operation of chance in time; the dice and the waves, for instance.

You mention the natural state of things alot. What does that mean? In my book, everything's natural. And nothing, nothing's natural, what the hell does it mean. It's an extremely loaded term. But with the landscape and anti-landscape you're playing with the whole notion of the natural and unnatural.

I guess this came up before about landscape and using the inverted landscape, upside down or inside out, trying to make something ephemeral and temporal, but real. That comes out a kind of uncertainty that many of us are living with, living through the AIDS pandemic, or living with medications that are suspending our lives. There's an abstract side to taking these meds that's unknown, that you don't look into, that's like a shadow behind you. I think that's a real aspect of the landscapes.

I guess I mean this in a larger way—than my taking meds for HIV. I see it as symptomatic of the larger culture we're living in. It's like a species learning to adapt to environments. And we're toying with all that and we don't know what the consequences will be; does it have anything to do with evolution? It all gets so complex.

—April 14, 2000

¹ G.S. Kirk, J.E. Raven and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge, 1983), 266.

'If there are many things, it is necessary that they are just as many as they are, and neither more nor less than that. But if they are as many as they are, they will be limited.' *'If there are many things, the things that are are unlimited; for there are always others between the things that are, and again others between those. And thus the things that are are unlimited.'*

DAVID NELSON

EDUCATION

1983 BFA, School of Visual Arts, New York, NY

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2000 Debs & Co., New York, NY
1998 Debs & Co., New York, NY
1993 Tracy Williams Gallery, Paris, France
1990 Petersburg Gallery, New York, NY
1987 56 Bleecker Gallery Ltd., New York, NY
1984 Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York, NY

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

2000 *Resident in Transience*, Marylhurst University, Portland Oregon
1999 *Stars of Track and Field*, Debs & Co, New York, NY
1997 *Selections Fall '97*, The Drawing Center, New York, NY
Very Large Array, Debs & Co., New York, NY
1996-97 *A Living Testament of the Blood Fairies*, Artists Space, New York, NY
1996 *AIDS' Communities/Arts' Communities*, Boston Center for the Arts, New York, NY
1990 *Selections 48*, The Drawing Center, New York, NY
1989 *Songlines*, Michael Klein, Inc., New York, NY
1987 *Consonance*, ISD Inc., New York, NY
1986 *Mainly on the Plain*, 56 Bleecker Gallery Ltd., New York, NY
Salon, Defacto Gallery, New York, NY
1985 ABC No Rio, New York, NY
Factura, Schlesinger-Boisante, New York, NY
Walls, Queens Musuem, Queens, NY
New York Invitational, Schlesinger-Boisante, New York, NY
1984 Katonah Gallery, Katonah, NY
Defacto Gallery, New York, NY
1982 Visual Arts Gallery, New York, NY

GRANTS

1997 Braziers Workshop; Oxfordshire, England
1985 Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant, New York, NY

REVIEWS & PUBLICATIONS

1998 Cotter, Holland, "In Brief: David Nelson at Debs & Co.," The New York Times, March 13, 1998
1997 Cotter, Holland, "The Stuff Life is Made Of," Art in America, April, 1997
Cotter, Holland, "In Brief: Very Large Array," The New York Times, September 10, 1997
Cotter, Holland, "Selections Fall '97," The New York Times, October 10, 1997
1996 Vojtko, Joe, "Blood Fairies vs. The Monster of Chaos," Art in America, December, 1996
1991 Johnson, Ken, "David Nelson at Petersburg Gallery," January, 1991
1990 Miers, Charles, et al, *New Art*, Abrams Books, New York, NY, 1990
1989 Mahoney, Robert, "Songlines," Arts Magazine, March, 1989

Overleaf: from Drip #1: #1, #2, and #3, 1999, silver gelatin prints, edition of 5, each 19" x 15"
Cover: Hole #18, (detail), 1999, resin, dirt, roots, rocks, 13" x 38" x 133" (variable)
Right: Train Man, 1997, cast in resin, 3" x 2" x 2"

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Right: *Train Man*, 1997, cast in resin, 3" x 2" x 2"



design/production: Joy Episalla
photography: David Nelson

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