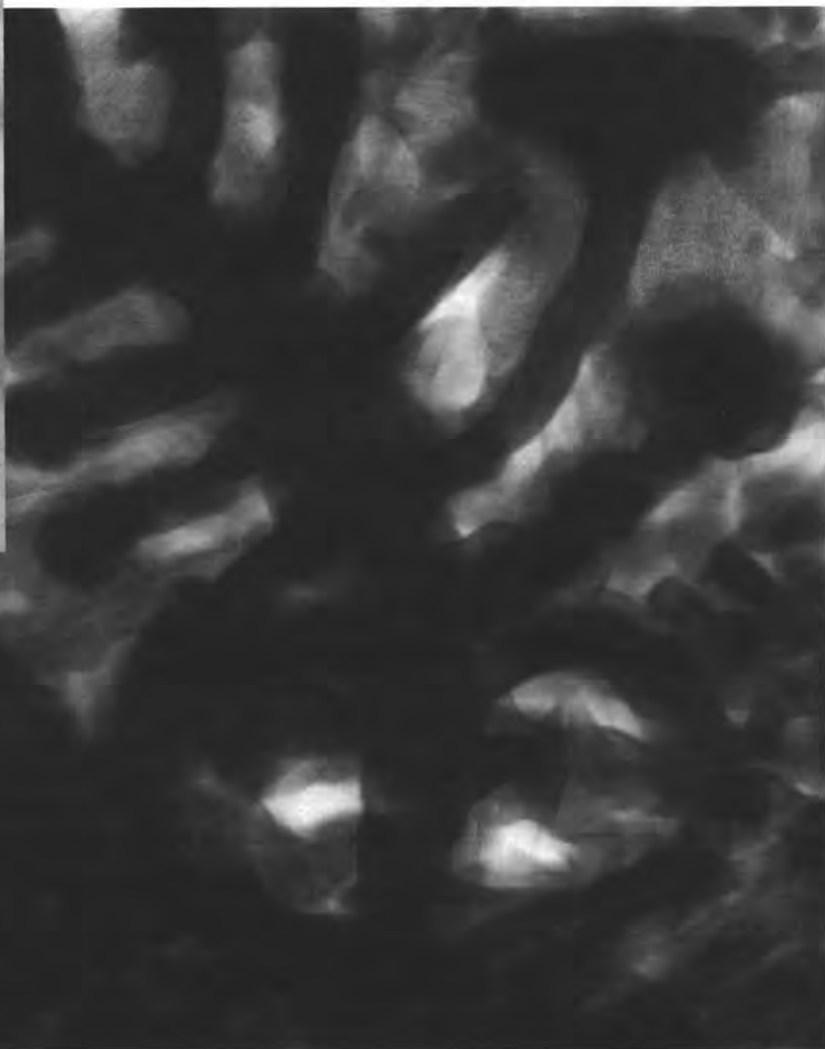
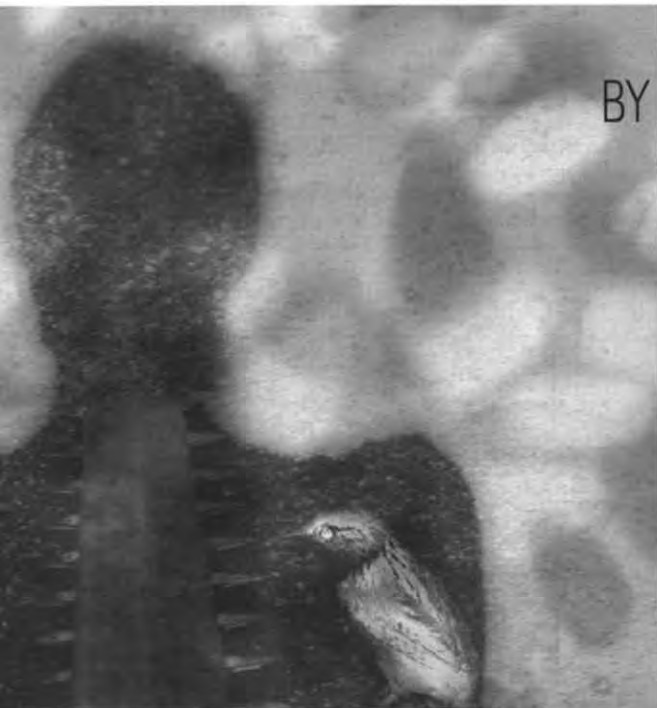


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CONSTANCE JACOBSON

AN ARTIST'S MICROSCOPE INTERPRETS SCIENCE

BY LOIS TARLOW



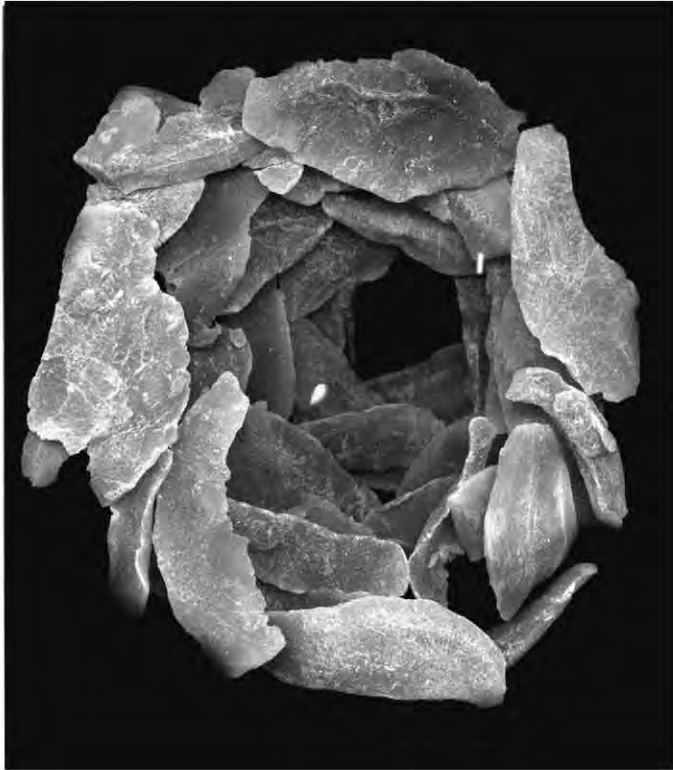
ABOVE: Constance Jacobson — *Pathogen 3*, inkjet print on paper, size variable.

RIGHT: Constance Jacobson — *Interior 2*, candle smoke and pastel on paper, 16 x 17".

OPPOSITE LEFT: Constance Jacobson — *Physiograph 2*, inkjet print, 15 x 17" (variable).

OPPOSITE RIGHT: Constance Jacobson — *Specimen 1, 2, 4, 5*, lamda print (film) on tempered glass, each 15 x 35".

With the Southern Graphics Conference in Boston and print shows proliferating like budding trees throughout New England, it seemed a natural choice to interview Constance Jacobson. She is fluent in all areas of printmaking. It is the primary visual language by which she translates a fascination with biology and the connectedness of all life forms into arresting and poetic images. Jacobson eschews the technical wizardry that often overtakes digital prints by using this medium with the same subtlety, simplicity, and ease as the traditional forms of printmaking.



Lois Tarlow: I've always known you as a printmaker, but as I look around this studio, I see there's a lot going on besides printmaking. What's the chronology?

Constance Jacobson: I stopped doing only prints about three years ago. I had been drawing, of course. Printmaking was just an extension of drawing. I worked part-time as a graphic designer for many years to support myself. I've been working with computers since the mid-eighties and finally decided to use them for my art. About three years ago, I started working digitally. I recently went to the Maryland Institute College of Art to finish my MFA, which I had started twenty-three years before at Cranbrook. They have a two-year program spread out over four years. You go for four summers. I worked here during the school year, but during the summers I worked there in a studio setting and had weekly critiques. The work that kept coming up at school had to do with scientific and microscopic imagery. I did a lot of digital work using transparencies, translucent materials as collage on the scanning bed, and then developing images that looked very microscopic. I did a series of five specimen slides that are 15 by 35 inches each. They're done on tempered glass and are meant to be very large specimen slides. This is an image I did on the scanner with pieces of paper, sticks, and a latex glove. You can't recognize what they were. They were output on Lambda film, and then adhered professionally onto the tempered glass. I showed five of them together in Maryland.

When the glass rests on an edge, it looks very different from when it's against a surface. The freestanding piece seems to be more three-dimensional with both diffused and more defined areas.

The film itself gives the glass the diffusion, too, because it covers the entire surface—even where there's no image.

Would you consider displaying them out in a room so that both sides are visible?

Sure, I displayed them for my Maryland show in a very expedient way. I had wall holders, so I had them going up the wall. The ambient light really came through from behind, but I knew that I wanted to experiment more with how to light them.

They're really elegant.

I probably shouldn't tell you, but these are Asian rice noodles.

So, it's really a scanned collage process.

It is, and you can preview it on the scanner. If it's not right, you just delete it.

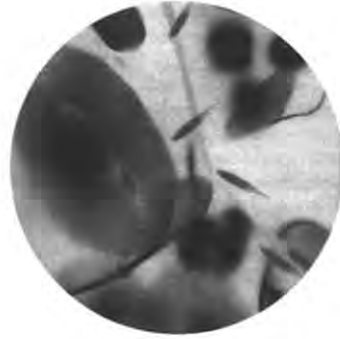
Why the circular format?

The circular format is very much like what you'd see in a light microscope.

They're very beautiful in the range of values and the variety of marks.

They are actually very close to some of my woodcuts, some of the shapes and the value range. I'd like to read you a little bit about the specimen

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series, the paintings, and the digital images, which I call "physiographs" because it's just a sort of fake scientific name. The exhibit I did was called *Almost Biology*, and it refers to fabricated scientific imagery and an imagined parallel universe. These fantasy images are not concerned with strict biological verisimilitude but do make references to cellular morphologies and cellular communities as well as to views of the interior body cavity. While viewing these images after completing them, I was struck by the essential difference in perception between the scientist and the artist: When looking through a microscope at a dissection or an X-ray, a scientist asks, "What is the content of what I am seeing, and what are the implications?" while the artist asks, "How does this appear, and how can I transform this into an aesthetic, personal, or historical/cultural statement?" The phenomenology of viewing is paramount for the artist, and veracity means only that the subject matter be visually believable within the imaginary world the artist has established for the viewer.

My interest in the biological sciences has grown out of reading and course work in biodiversity and a lifetime of observation and experience in nature. I have been circling around this subject for some time, and what you see are the forms it has taken at this particular time in my life. On the one hand, there is my fascination with the microbial world, born of a recognition that it's really the microbes (bacteria, archaea, viruses, fungi, and protists) that run the show. I have included here several of my images of their world. They have inhabited earth for billions of years and are the most genetically diverse life-form on the planet. Without them, all life on earth would cease to exist. On the other hand, I have come to believe that only when humans see themselves as a part of nature, connected to all other living things, will they do everything they can to preserve it. The images that resemble X-rays of the human body suggest this connection of humans to all other vertebrates—from fish and reptiles to marine mammals and nonhuman primates. I am trying to convey in this work the central importance of understanding these relationships.

That was the background for doing these images. They all go back to printmaking except for this piece here. It's a whole wall piece that I made from tire shards, bits of tires that had exploded and that I picked up from the side of a highway. They acted almost as active microbial characters.

It's a fascinating use of detritus, and you've managed to relate this work to your salient themes. Now here are wood reliefs—they're exquisite.

The wood grain comes from rolling on very cheap plywood. Then, I place sticks over that and carefully roll it through the press. The sticks act as a block-out for the ink. When I remove the sticks, there's a ghost that always stays behind.

These large figure drawings are striking. They also have the look of prints.

They were done with paper stencils. After drawing this figure, I just cut out the shape. Then I went back in with charcoal. These are very personal drawings. My husband is an



avid gardener; his religion really is about gardening and the earth. I wanted to do a series about that. I think these reflect the organic matter.

The organic matter seems to come from within and is growing out all over him.

These are the pieces that were in Hall Space. It's a series of six. These 2-by-2-foot paintings were also produced using stencils. They utilize all the things that interested me in printmaking—layering, areas that come through, and areas that are obscured. Those are very constant interests.

With your years of printmaking, you're so fluent and articulate in it.

It's like anything else, once you've become familiar with the equipment, it disappears into the background, and you can really focus on the image.

Please talk about your digital inkjet prints.

For this one, first there was the crinkled velum, then I arranged bits of cotton on top and pulled them so they would be different translucencies. Then I scanned it. There's no Photoshop trickery. It was important to me that they be connected to the way actual prints look, the way etchings look. There's none of that superlayered look that you get in Photoshop. These were meant to be very simple. The middle one is translucent, candied mango that has been arranged on the scanner bed. This other one is sort of an egg series. These happened to be partially degraded grapes that were glued to a board. And these are dust masks. They look like mitochondria—the little powerhouse within the human cell that has different DNA than the nucleus does. Scientists feel that it really was cyanobacteria or some other bacteria that made its way into the human cells in a symbiotic relationship and then stayed. So it has a very interesting background.

As scientific as your interests are, you transform your imagery into very esthetic results. I'd like to see more.

This is a dead bird series. When the West Nile virus was really prevalent, I was at school for my first week. I found eight dead birds on the way to my studio. They inspired some digital prints. These are earlier, little soft ground etchings, some with drypoint. One is *An Ode to Meryl Brater*, a dear friend of mine, who died from breast cancer. Others combine a linoleum print with etching, monoprint, and stencil, and this next one is an open bite. I created a big faux aquatint by using a lithography stone and carborundum to get the black on a copper plate. These pieces are old.

They're much more about image than the later work.

Right, the fundamental change in my work is that it has become much more process-oriented. Now, I'm responding to the materials rather than imposing an image onto the material. Do you think you've seen enough?

Yes, and sometime, I'd like to see them all over again. Now, for the paintings. There's a real sense of the journey in this triptych.

How do you mean that?

I see the decisions you made en route. I can see cognates of earlier ideas that you're responding to in the upper layers.

I'm still undecided about whether this is a way to go. I'm right at a crossroads. I don't mean to be melodramatic, but this is very much a modernist idea, where the interior of the artist is what's being expressed. The outside concept is coming more to bear on the imagery, even though there is a real response to the medium still.

I'm really attracted to these mysterious pieces propped against the wall.

It's a series that I consider drawings, which are done with candle smoke and pastel. They look very much like prints, and they're very hard to make, because you have to have the paper above you. I did them outside, and I taped the paper underneath a table and smoked them. The hot wax would drip on my face. There had to be no wind, so I had blankets draped over the table.

They feel like they were done in an ancient cave among the fossils.

They're archaeological in that sense and are tied to our Neolithic past, but they're also archaeological in a medical sense, because they feel very much like X-rays of vertebrae.

You make good use of science as inspiration.

However strong the theoretical underpinnings are for me, they fade quickly into the distant background when I'm actually planning and engaging in the work. In fact, it's the materials and methodology I choose that inspire and guide me. □

LOIS TARLOW IS AN ARTIST, WRITER, AND TEACHER.

ABOVE: Constance Jacobson—*Planting 2*, charcoal, 30 x 44",