



betancourt

the slick territorial pissings of carlos betancourt

Pedro Velez

Brazen bodies with black charcoal, ink, leaf, poetry, and otherwise ordinary earthly materials are a few of the tools Carlos Betancourt uses in the process of metaphorically tattooing restless models. These markings are presented in monumental banners in which the artists document his fixation with the symbols of precolonial Taino culture from the Caribbean and the contemporary world of advertising.

At first glance both worlds mingle and flirt in the surface of the glossy banners, but closer inspection reveals a clash of opposites, a forceful union of the irreverence associated with advertising and the humble grace of ancestral symbols. Betancourt's existential tantrums are channelled through hybrid texts he writes and draws obsessively on the human body. Although it has the form, feel and rhythm of poetry, the organic text functions as the documentation of an action – a sadistic gesture or intimate argument that the viewer will never be able to fully read or understand, but only experience. Such is the case in the *Interventions in Winwood, Series 1*, where a crestfallen brunette stands unclothed, completely covered in black scribbles but for her left hand, which has been rubbed with blue dust. In the company of the model are three odd and sarcastic-looking Christmas adornments, illuminated from their hollow insides, whose attire and posture resemble choirboys.

Another photo in the series presents the woman tired and lonesome, sitting still on a wooden bench and staring at the infinite while listening to the muted singing statues. As part of the scribbles that cover her pale leg one can read: Comandante Guevara. Not much of the revolutionary Che is meant as a political reference, but as a conscious, melancholic effort to trace his genealogical tree that spans from Puerto Rico to Cuba and Miami. By tracing his roots and his history Betancourt makes a mark or pees his territory as dogs do, leaving the scent of his cultural background, experience, taste and self.

Violence in product placement and the assault of the senses are tactics that Betancourt uses to perfection, not only in the epic scope of his work and quality in the image, but also in the subordination of his models, as seen in the series *Coupon Key: Bob's Storm*. Here a male model lays face down on a dirty sidewalk. With open legs, in a pose reminiscent of Ana Mendieta's *Untitled Rape Scene*, the victims seems to have been submitted to the irreverent, almost sadomasochistic scribbling and styling of the artist.

While the artist dresses his models, willing or not, in his signature style, other photo series have him as the subject. Example is *El Yunque: Casa Cubuy*, where the artist lays bare on top of a waterfall, naked but for dirty tennis shoes to which the gaze is drawn. The rapture of the gaze by such an ordinary object amidst the pure environment sends signals to the viewer that point to a campy and eerie reading of the piece. Here the artist performs the role of an afflicted contemporary cult leader, shaman, leper messiah or new age exorcist in waiting, just like the members of the New Millennium Cult, who so infamously awaited the Second Coming of the Christ wearing black uniforms and Nike shoes.

Dirty and obsessive, Betancourt's colonization of his identity and that of others sets him apart from the clichéd Latino aesthetic based on the glorification of the body and its relationship to nature and self. Instead, and more like Cindy Sherman, Vito Acconci and Vanessa Beecroft, Carlos Betancourt glorifies himself as a product and as a signature.

Pedro Velez is an artist, writer and curator. His reviews have been published in *Modern Painters*, *ArtNet* and *Sculpture Magazine*, among others.

the eye of the sky is open: the art of carlos betancourt

Robert Farris Thompson

The Yoruba of Nigeria have an idiom for good weather: the eye of the sky is open. This is the world of Carlos Betancourt, a world ruled by color, starting with blue, like Klein, like Matisse. Betancourt thinks cosmologically, too: the dome of the sky, the surge of the sea, and the straight-lined horizon are on his mind. This puts him in parallel with ancestral cultures, like the makers of the Nazca lines, or, more to the point, Ana Mendieta's fusion of body and landscape. This is an artist inspired by faraway epochs: sites and traditions where women and men paint on the canvas of body, looking like worlds aflame with red pigment, alive with dotted signs of kinesis and majesty.

This is the way we meet him, body cropped artfully, hands offering an object, biceps and pectorals curving with strength, skin dressed in jolts of blue and gold pigment, as if scratched by the forces of nature. This is his idea of a footnote, to pose at a spot near where his clearest and most constant influence, Ana Mendieta, once herself worked. He is holding in both hands a nest that had fallen from a tree in Little Havana, not far from where Ana Mendieta had famously fashioned one of her silhouettes. With this nest he is offering an architecture of life, meant for small creatures who, like the soul of Mendieta, eventually took flight.

Betancourt's late colleague, Keith Haring, once said, "primordial styles make you new," and proved it with spaceships circling the pyramids. Betancourt, similarly, brings into consonance visions ancient and contemporary. Like the powerful silhouettes of Kara Walker, Carlos' work cries out for the wall, not the page. Caught in a catalogue, the sly promiscuities of Walker unduly are spotlighted by linear arrangements. This slows the art down. But march them around the white walls of a gallery and aesthetics take over, putting the obscene in its place.

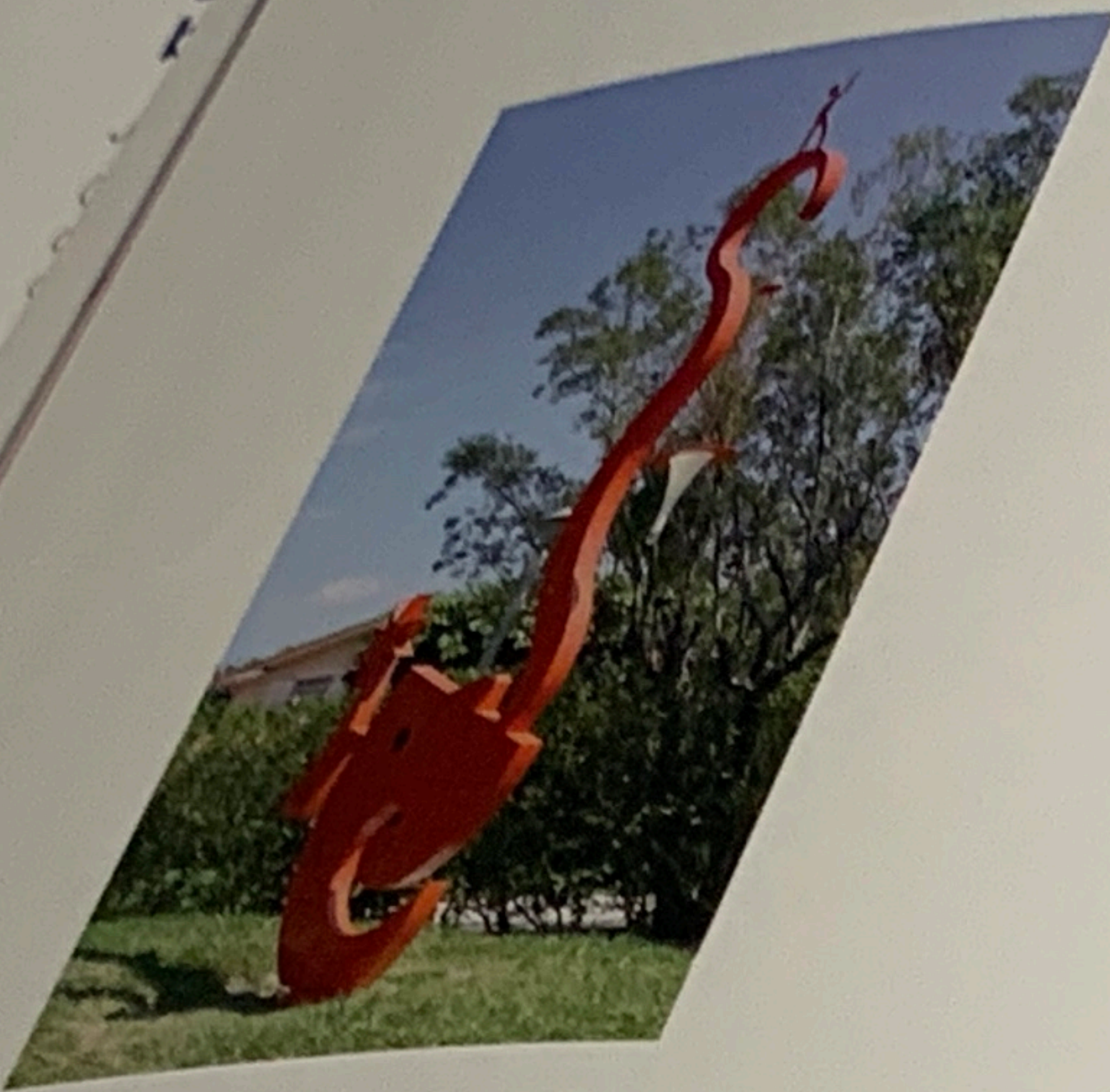
Similarly, Carlos loves to pose without clothes. White butt on white page accents a narcissist. But consider the mural, *Worshipping of My Ancestors*: five photographs of him bare-chested on a wall, body blazing lurid orange, pointing and signing in five different ways. By involving his body in a procession of gestures, things get serious: he's following the path of ritual, taking us back to women and men who believed they had a responsibility for bringing back Spring with motion and gesture, for lighting up winter with candles on evergreens.

The ancient Peruvians were unafraid to use whole valleys as canvas, making the famous lines of the Nazca. Betancourt lets a lagoon paint a backdrop for an ochre-marked, languorous portrait of his body. He reclines in a corner, gazing out at the water. One hand shows his heart, the other grasps a conch shell. Photography rules: cropping is all. The resulting one-corner composition recalls, to this art historian, a favored device of the painters of the Southern Sung.

Betancourt likes to work in series. In this way he is not so much portraying the rituals of Amerindian and Afro-Caribbean cultures, as casting them, like actors, in a vast photo-muralized show. An example: a thicket of trees frames the profile of a naked woman. Her breast is engorged, her nipple erect, and her belly protrudes with 'the obstetric line,' the curve of a woman come to full term. Framing thusly, as if in an improvised altar hidden the woods, he dramatizes her midriff as a vessel for children, and her nipple as a spout for their nourishment. He is playing with raw nature but his intention is love. He is saying with photographed body art what Neruda said with words: I want to do with you what Spring does with cherry trees.

In other words, he wants us to blossom, red warm and hot. Consider a photograph of an elegant woman with blue eyes whom he's covered with pink paint. She is the canvas, but the canvas stares back. In control of all this, Betancourt is not so much painting his subject, then photographing her,



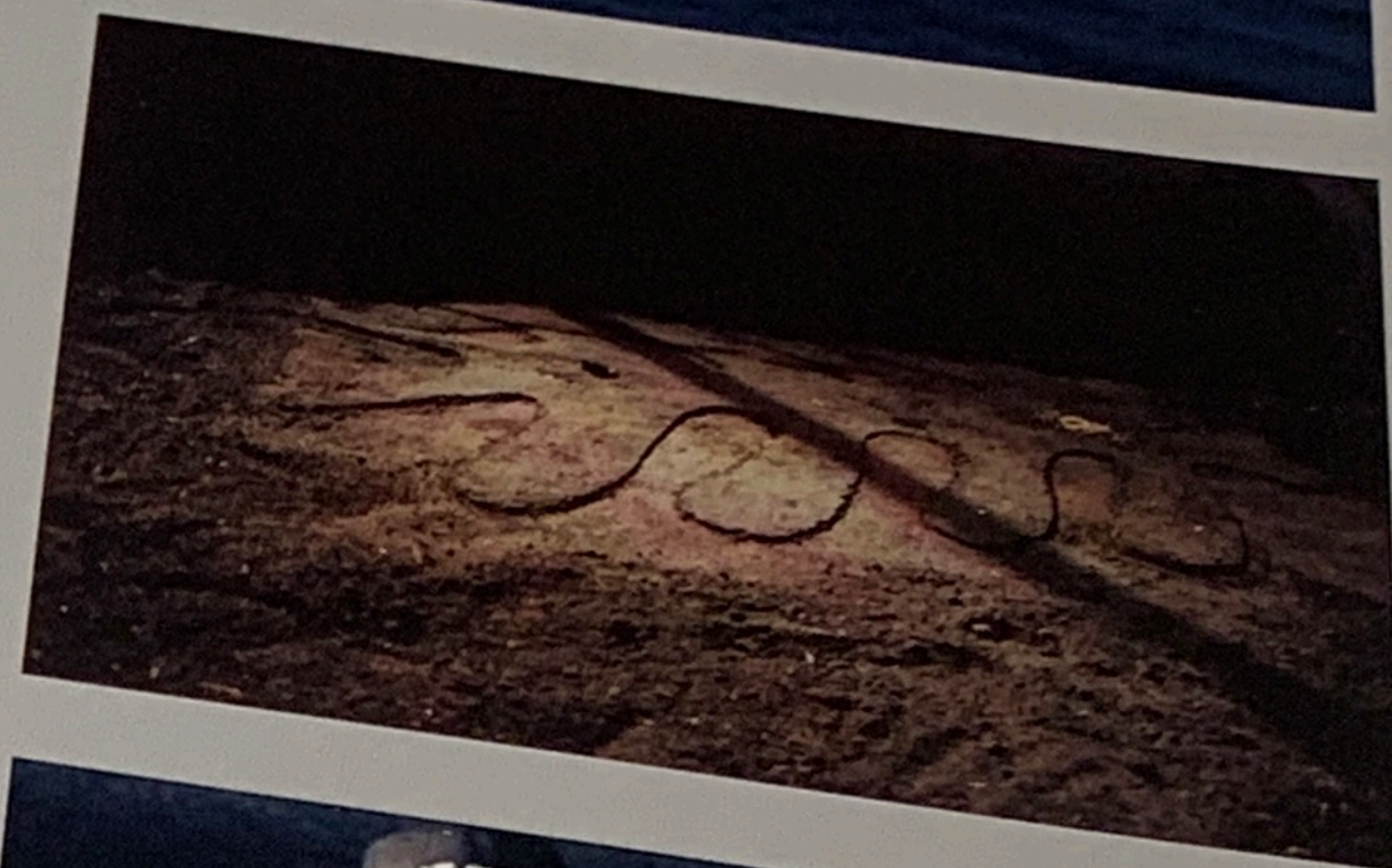
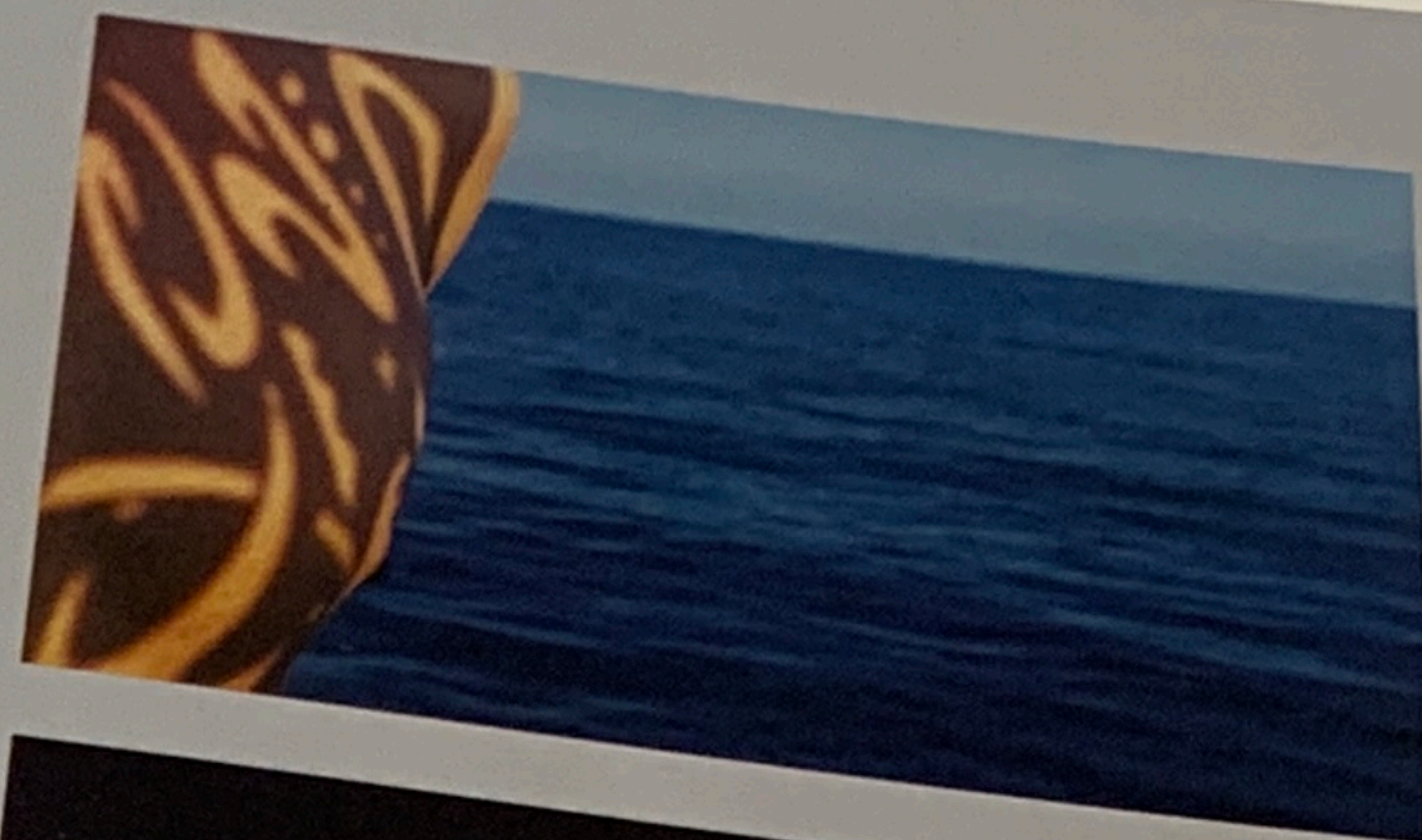


Projections Pigments, 1999-2000
 Tetacomet Wampanoag (New England)
 print on aluminum light box
 (private collection)

Projections Pigments, 1999-2000
 Departing Perspectives
 oil, bird food, live birds

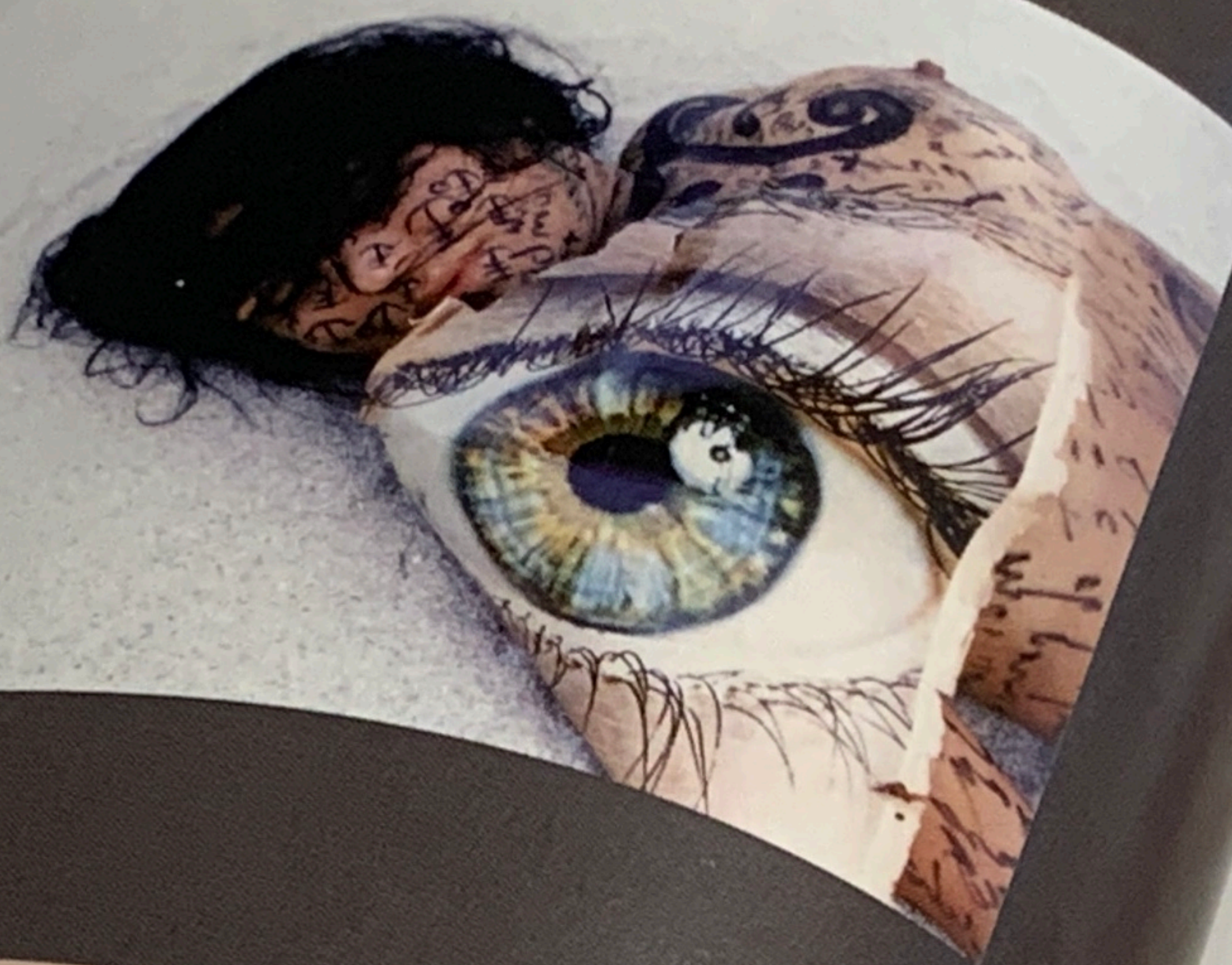
Projections Pigments, 1999-2000
 Aya
 mixed media
 (private collection)

Projections Pigments, 1999-2000
 Tomochichi Yamacraw Bluff (Savannah, Georgia)
 print on aluminum light box
 (collection Frost Museum of Art, Miami, Florida)



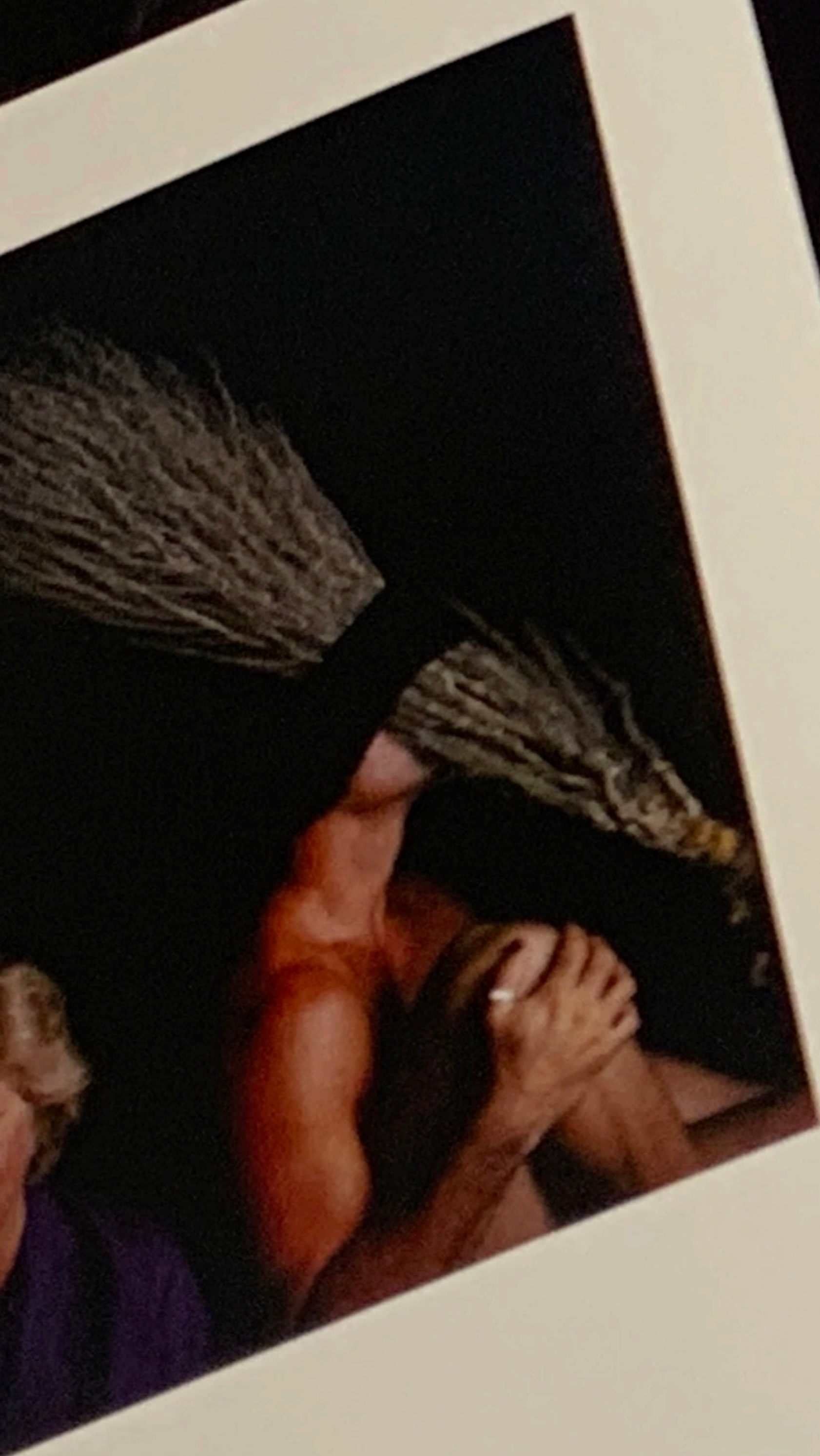
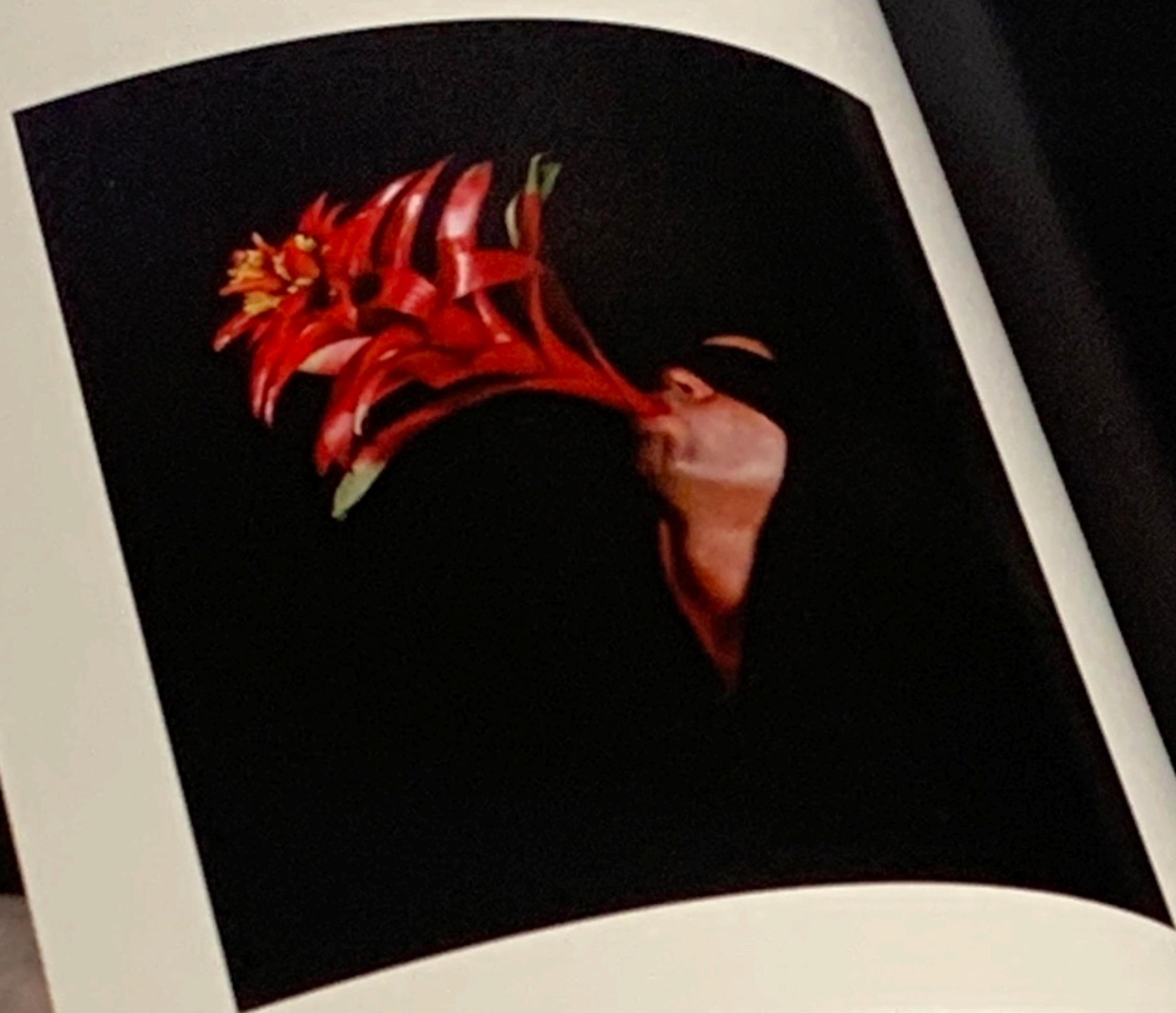


Worshipping of My Ance
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(collection Museum of Latin American Art, Long Beach)



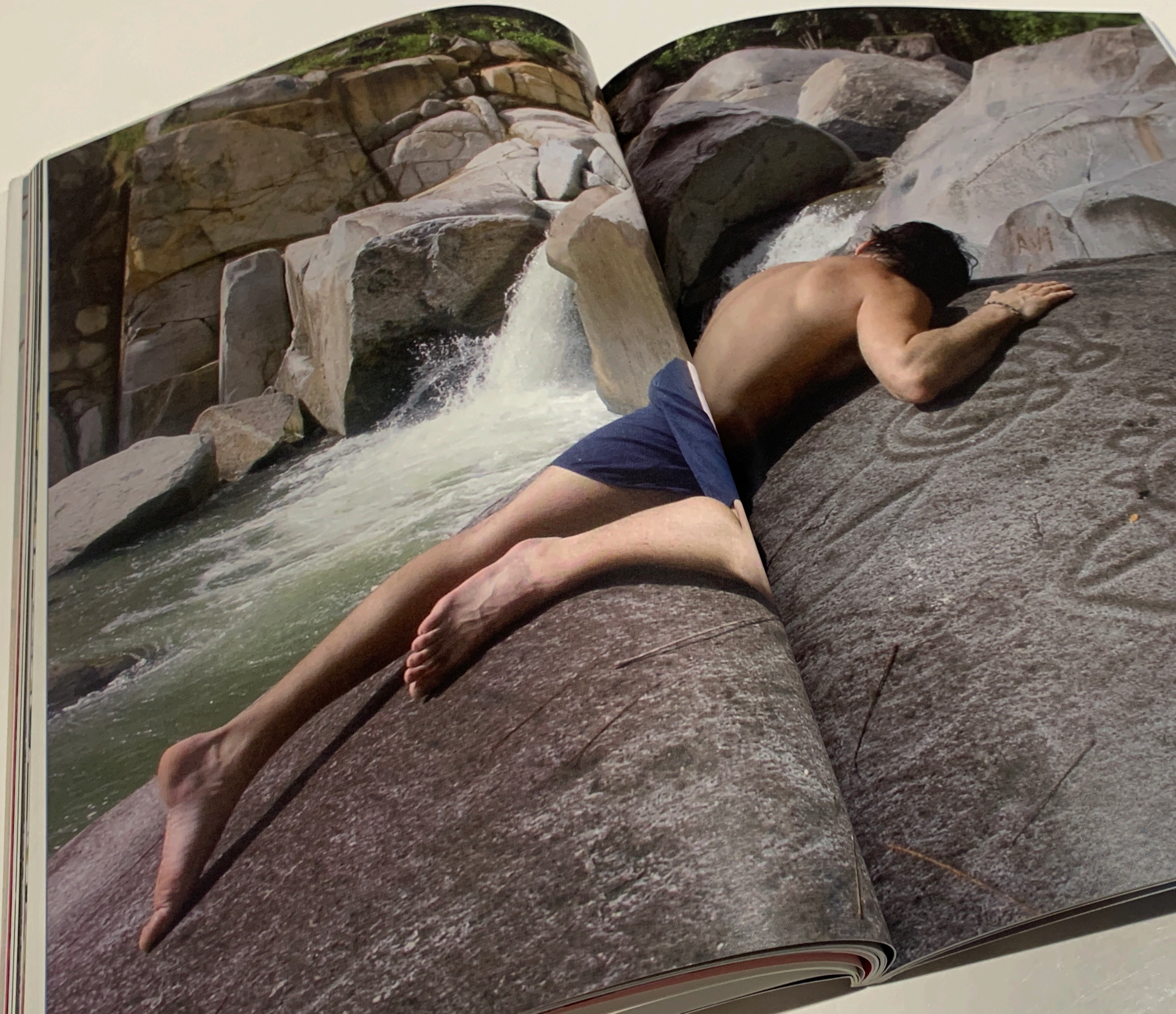
Lowe Art Museum
Coral Gables





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Interventions in San Antonio
Untitled Fall
metallic texture
(private collection)

2005
 rima Ballarina de Flamenco, Nietzsche y Paya Paya



Rincon Famboyant Series, 2005
 Alberto con la Tuna de la Trastornada Sexual Entregada a Cristo
 metallic lambda print
 (private collection)



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En la Arena Sabrosa II, 2004
Untitled (Flamingo)
metallic lamda print
(private collection)



Interventions in Wynwood I, 2003
Hood on the Hood, with Sunflowers
metallic lambda print

