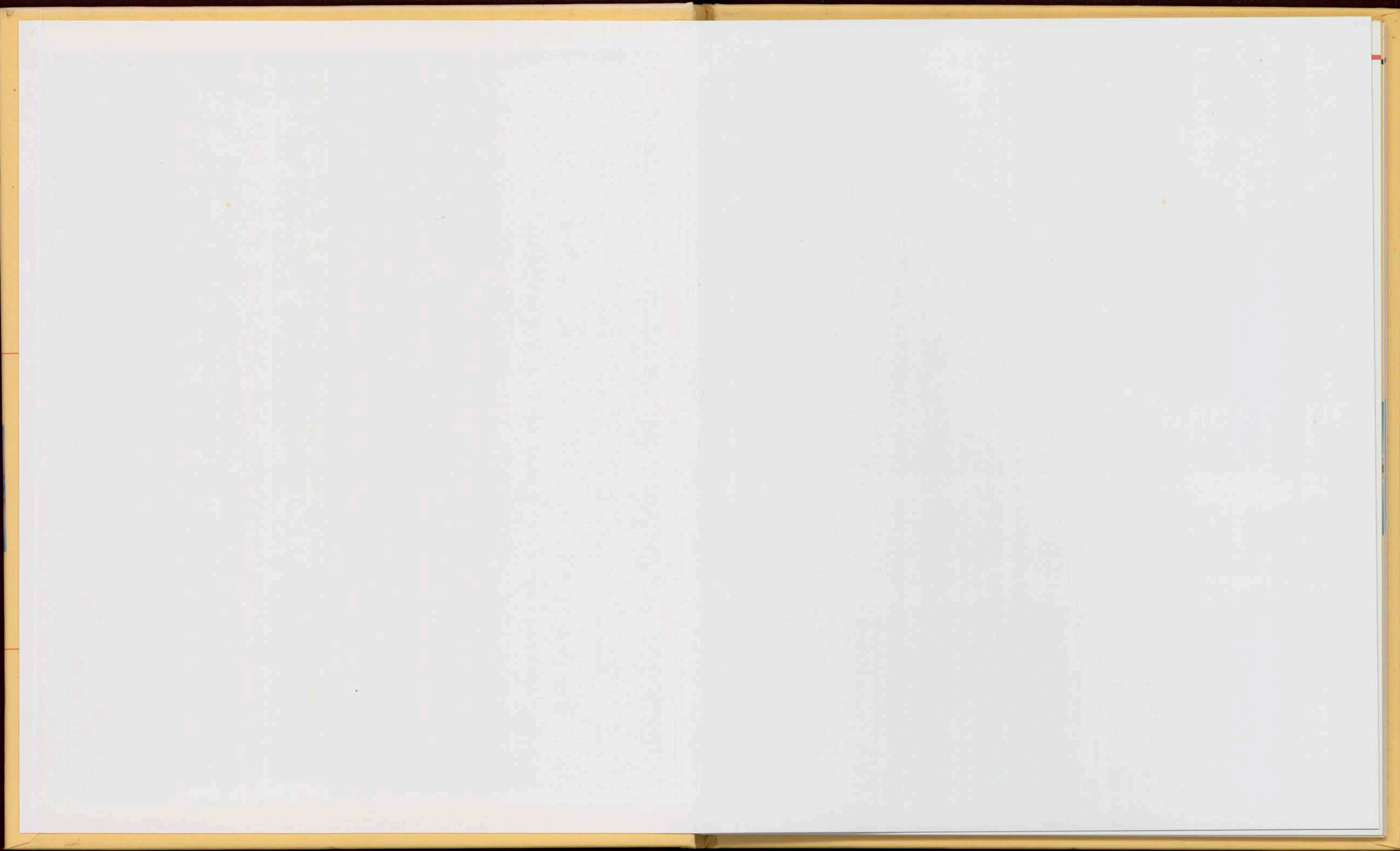


an imagining landscape



Jessica Bronson



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The central North Island of New Zealand is a region of volcanic intensity. In many places the ground is literally hot; vaporous gasses and minerals from beneath the earth's surface vent themselves, forming spectacular crystalline blisters. In many places, fenced off from the intense heat, visitors can witness boiling water and mud seething from the ground. Occasionally dark toxic plumes of smoke can be seen rising from the mountain cones only to dissipate in the sky. The Volcanic Plateau, as it is known, consists of several major volcanoes, Ruapehu, Tongariro and Ngārahoe among them. A vast plane of rivers and lakes, themselves magnificent examples of geographical diversity, surrounds them.

During her New Zealand residency at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, Jessica Bronson visited this region and has since made DVD pieces relating to the geography of the area. Specifically she filmed the massive outcrop of the volcanic plateau, which, covered in snow but also expelling hot smoke, is a spectacular subject. In recent works, Bronson has been developing a form of optical striation through which images harvested from video footage are elongated and doubled back on themselves in the process of editing. She has produced landscape studies of both urban and rural spaces and in each case images are doubled back on themselves with kaleidoscopic effect. The body of work produced in New Zealand is exemplary of this direction.

The effect of Bronson's DVD's can be disorientation, but they also produce a clean and clear replicating picture. The images move across monitors or screens in rhythmic pulses, often accompanied by electronic soundtracks. The effect conflates a destabilization of a sense of gravity with a sort of speed mosaic, through which the characteristics of the landscape are reconfigured in terms of patterning, elongation, and striation. Two forms of movement, natural and electronic, are joined to create a kind of musical composition, for which landscape is the basis of notation. The land is transformed into an electronic reflection of itself programmed in sequence.

Bronson's works are frequently discussed in relation to electronic art forms, such as 'video art' including its precedents in structuralist cinema, and a generalized idea of technology, most fatuously understood as an artistic response to our apparently 'media-saturated environment'. That said, Bronson has expanded this dialogue in recent pieces to include references to the history of landscape painting and photography, using examples from 20th century modern and 19th century art. *Heaps, layers and curls* 2001, a 3-D animation of cloud formations, makes reference to JMW Turner's cloud studies as emblems of romantic subjectivity. Bronson also invokes Alfred Steiglitz's *Equivalents* series of the 1920s, which are photographs of clouds, and scientific analy-

ses of weather patterns, in particular Luke Howard's *On The Classification of Clouds*, a late 19th century text. Bronson's cloud studies are additionally informed by recent scientific work, which attempts to chart massive changes of the earth's ecosystem through an analysis of the changing forms of clouds, studies that potentially reveal the impact of global warming and other factors.

For the body of work Bronson produced in New Zealand clouds do feature, but the most striking motif is that of the volcano. The active volcano is an amazing event – an apocalyptic expenditure of the earth's repressed energy. There are connotations of the fires of hell, the underworld

gushing forth and the planet changing its physical appearance in front of one's eyes. Historically one might think of Pompeii and the destruction wrought by Vesuvius, the burial and simultaneous preservation of an entire population understood as an angry God's revenge upon an unworthy human population. The motif of a volcano is one of high drama.

19th century American painters also utilized the image of the volcano to evoke the sheer awesomeness of nature. Frederic Edwin Church, in particular, produced magnificent images of natural drama culminating in his 1862 painting of the South American volcano Cotopaxi. In Church's painting the sun rises over a vast plateau in the centre of which Cotopaxi expels its contents vertically into the sky. The lava and sunrise combine, casting a molten red filter over the entire scene. In contrast to this extremity of heat, a lake produces a waterfall which gushes into the foreground of the picture, as if to offer some relief from the possibility of certain annihilation. The stage created by this picture offers the viewer a 'seat' outside of immediate danger while intensifying and completely exaggerating the

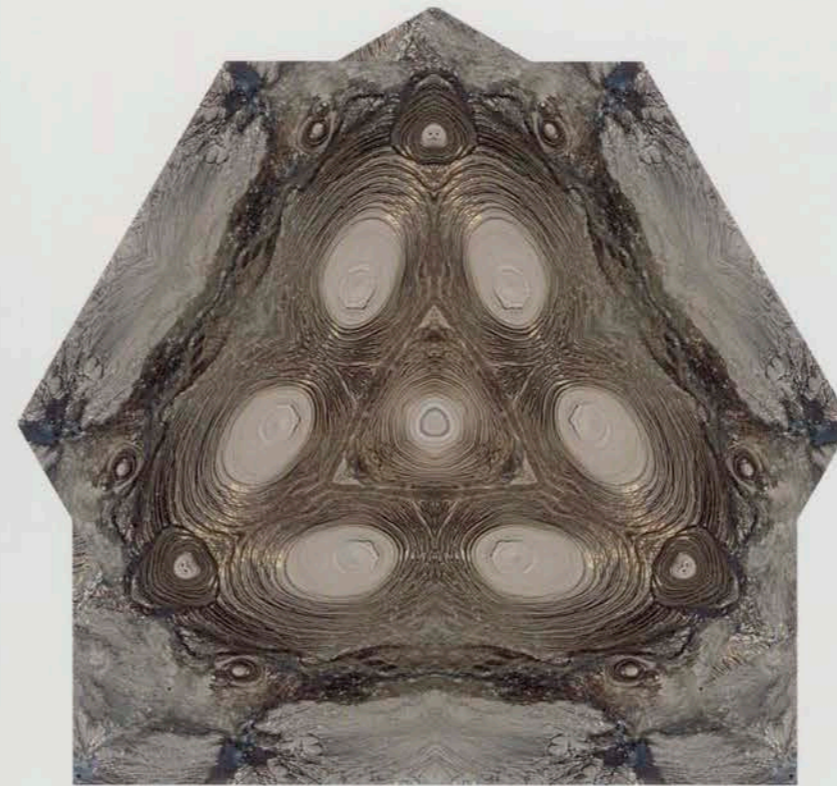
event, in order to make a parable of sublimity that fulfils every requirement of the genre. One can be repelled by this moralistic exploitation of geography, basking in its sheer Christian pre-tentiousness, but also be thrilled by the total excess it represents.



For many artists working in this genre, there was apparently a sense that the landscape itself was inadequate as a sitter. Not only did these artists feel obliged to depict the world's most stupendous locations – the Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls, Yosemite and so on – but they couldn't avoid a little amping-up of the scenery as well. Colour in these works can be, well, psychedelic. This, perhaps, might be compared to the way in which portrait painters under the pressure of patronage have idealized their subjects.

The works of the 19th century 'American sublime' can hardly be categorized as naturalistic; rather, they are fully-fledged examples of the hyper-reality that is frequently (and tediously) associated with contemporary, mediated society. Albert Bierstadt, for another example, made studies of the American landscape that are so completely epic that the landscapes appear to be lit by at least three suns. Massive intensities of light invade mountain ranges that are altogether twice the size that they appear to the scientific eye. The brute force of nature, tripled, converses with human frailty and weakness while Bierstadt's mastery of depiction summons the sadistic power of the colonizing and controlling empire. These are resolutely intellectual paintings produced by phantasmic imaginations; more Baudrillardian than Jean Baudrillard himself.

The direct link between these artists and Bronson is that landscape is separated from itself and transferred into a parallel universe. Without the moralistic intent of the 19th century painters, Bronson participates in the pleasure of exaggeration resulting in unrealistic renderings of the natural world. In her beautiful studies of the Volcanic Plateau, the horizon is sliced down the centre producing two skies, one directly above the other, as if a body of water was directly below the volcanoes producing a perfect reflection. Like Bierstadt's three suns, screen grabs from these DVD's include the same erupting volcano four or more times in one frame. The seam separating each separate landscape is camouflaged by the editing process and the picture takes on an estranged organic wholeness, hallucinatory and possibly terrifying in its implications, as if the earth was being torn apart. Filmed at dusk or dawn, the plateau is mutated through electronic means; it flies across the screen in an unworldly fashion.



Accompanying the quadrupling of motifs is an explicit attack on the forces of gravity. The world is literally turned upside down. There is not, however, an apocalyptic sense to these images; rather, Bronson's studies are characterized by cleanliness and a mathematical precision. The sweeping movements they project are concise and airy. The process of repetition is cool and calculated, as opposed to impulsive and pathological. In these respects they are emotional opposites of their aforementioned 19th century predecessors. Digitized as they are, they cannot, however, help but convey a sense of the archaic which the landscape automatically advertises. A volcano

is a volcano, after all and Bronson's pixellated depictions still convey the specific atmosphere of the plateau, simmering with its tectonic intensities of hot and cold.

During the mid-seventies I lived in the volcanic plateau region, in Turangi, New Zealand, where my father worked for an Italian engineering company. I became fascinated with the power of the landscape. A family friend who was a geologist would sometimes bring me crystals that had formed in the centre of mountains or core samples from 100 feet below the earth's crust. One could sense the age of such specimens; indeed, the whole region radiated with a sense of time almost beyond human comprehension. Cracked open, as it were, this landscape reveals the process through which all landscape is formed: it is a primordial exhibition of the earth's transience which might playfully be likened to one of Gilles Deleuze's conceptions of cinema as 'crystals of time'.

Indeed the sheer force of time is what dominates the DVD work of Bronson and her landscape subject alike. Bronson's illuminated slithers of time depict the absolute age of the planet

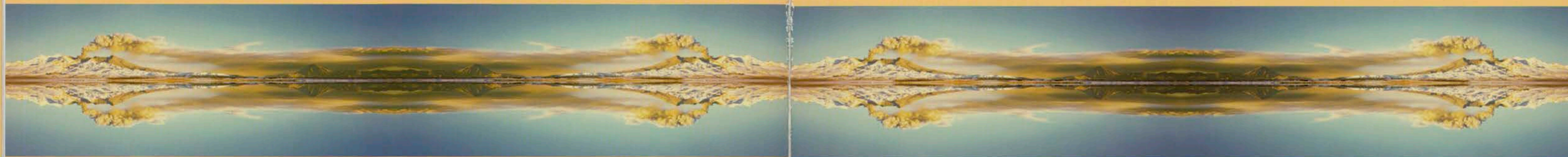
while the planet itself is engaged in a really, really long cinematic event starring itself. Perhaps it is no coincidence then that Bronson finds herself at this location. As landscape artists before her have made paradoxical facsimiles of the earth's topography, Bronson produces an immediately engaging version of a perpetually changing domain.

JESSICA BRONSON TALKS TO GREGORY BURKE

Rather than a documentation of work produced through a residency this publication can be thought of as a work itself. Is this a new direction for you?

Not really. Every venue that I've worked with has in some way prescribed the nature of my projects. What initially began as a consideration of practical issues – that is, dealing with issues of architecture, equipment availability, budget, viewing audience and curatorial expectations – gradually becomes a device for structuring every body of work. In this way, each project of mine has been produced as a site-specific project.

For my exhibition at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, we decided to show two new bodies of work produced and exhibited in Southern California, *Panamint Tilt* and *a small infinite*. The idea for the artist book occurred to me after realizing it was impractical to produce a large scale moving image installation, especially within the span of three months. While in residence, I became familiar with the Govett-Brewster's impressive history of producing publications for each exhibition. It seemed opportune to work with the Govett-Brewster to produce a book that



would address, both conceptually and aesthetically, some of the same issues that manifested themselves in *Panamint Tilt* and *a small infinite*. So practically speaking, this became another site-specific project that fully utilized the resources available to me, so that the circumstances actually determined the nature of the project.

There are aspects to the Govett-Brewster book project, however, that differ from past projects. For example, the book has been a collaborative effort from its inception and, so, it will ideally reflect more than just my interests. Another important aspect is the duration of the project. Because it has been more than a year in the making, I feel I've had time for my thinking about my experiences in New Zealand to catch up with my actually being in New Zealand. I don't know if this makes sense but I've noticed a conceptual delay in my practice so that my sense of being in a place often manifests itself in the project intended for the next place. So, for example, ideas which emanated from my being in New Zealand, actually formulate the project I just produced for the Berkeley Art Museum.

Your works are often conditioned by a consideration of the given exhibiting space and brief, yet you have also re-presented installations in other spaces and countries. How does the change in context affect the work?

Of course it is challenging when a body of work is then re-installed in a new space with a different architecture, different programming history, different viewing audience and so on. With *Panamint Tilt* and *a small infinite* it was a gamble as to whether or not New Zealanders would understand certain references to do with Hollywood and the desert landscape. For example, many viewers in Los Angeles recognized the L.A. River as the subject for *a small infinite*. This was extremely important at the time I was making the piece because of my interest in the complicated history of the L.A. River. I know history is kind of a funny subject for Los Angeles, which is often characterized as a-historical, a complex notion in and of itself. Anyway, the L.A. River was once a "real" river but now resembles a large concrete drainage ditch because of alterations done throughout the last century for purposes of flood control, irrigation and drinking water supply. Erasure is immanently implied in the river because it was literally erased. Furthermore, its history is intertwined with the erasure of the Owens Valley Lake, now an environmentally

hazardous dry lakebed, due to drainage of the lake for irrigation and drinking water. Its route crosses the San Andreas Fault, pointing to a potentially catastrophic erasure of Los Angeles. Finally, the concrete reconfiguration of the L.A. River implies a permanence, which not only denies the natural "arroyo" (or seasonally dry) quality of the river itself, but also seemingly seeks to erase the very real drought like conditions of Los Angeles. Of course, once I installed *a small infinite*, it began to reference other things for other people. At the Govett-Brewster, viewers made references to Persian tapestries, Robert Smithson's non-sites and mathematical abstraction, which all seemed relevant to me. As with all of my projects, it isn't essential for one to completely understand all of my original references in order to construct meaning.

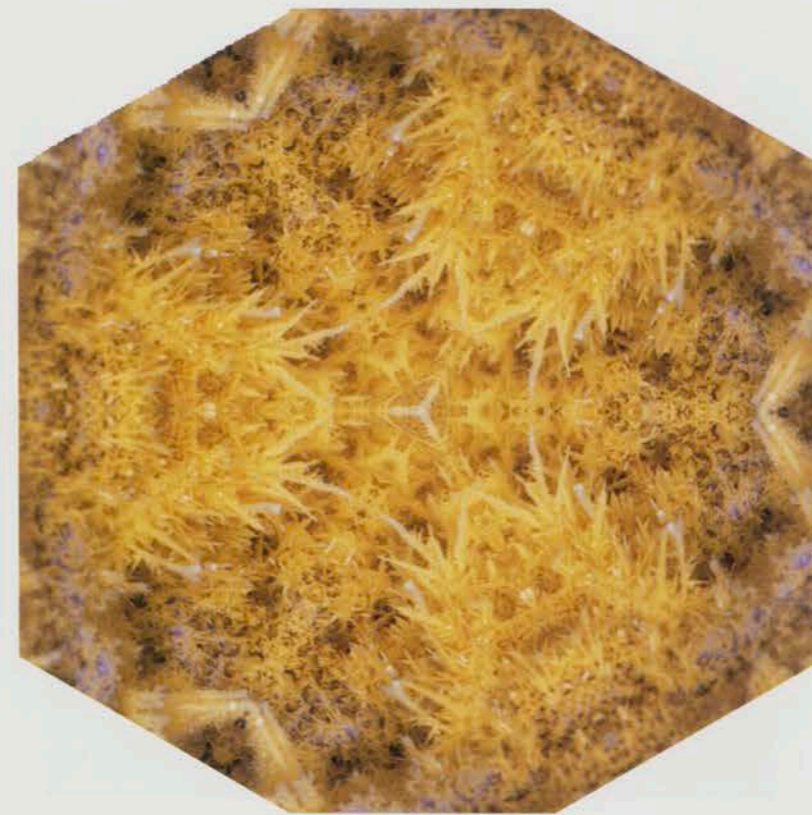
My father disappeared into a mirage and was never seen again. I would like to ask him one question, not why, or how, or did he mean to, but this: is complete and total exposure the ultimate freedom? This question occurs to me as I stare at my wrist, an exposed strip between thermal shirt and gloves, a necessary protection against the sun. Hidden under layers, higher up my arm are pacified melanomas, or my 'red suns' as my son refers to them. Well protected, I sense rather than feel the temperature diminish, the sun following closely on its heels. From where I sit, the horizon hovers flat, only a simple straightness without any depth.

I discovered this desert lakebed sometime ago. An area less than four kilometers, it is long enough for multiple refracted angles, and has the advantage of rock formations on either side of the level plane to mask the equipment. It's perfect for a mirage, perfect. Replicating mirages is not an easy task, but this place is ideal.

The sun sears the runway of black tarp rolled over the even earth. Mirages require enough sun, a heated surface, variant wind temperatures to succeed. Today, the elements arranged themselves flawlessly. I take off my gloves. My chapped hands, still peeling from damage done long ago, wiggle freely without protection. Elbows propped up on covered knees, I rest my heavy boots on the fuel box and wait.

Mirages haven't occurred here naturally for forty years. I simply help the sun by providing heat and the optimal conditions. It isn't a bad life. There are other places off-world, monasteries where I would be welcome. These events can be orchestrated on any flat landscape. By staying here, I cannot deny that the sun is killing me, and everyone who remains. Still, I have no reason to leave.

And who would want this staged circus on a contaminated world? My son, I wonder. No. For him there is no memory of the last naturally occurring mirage. The sun's strength withered long ago. As the last remaining witness, I provide an essential connection to the pilgrims traveling from so far to experience a recreation of that last immeasurable event.



I don't know when the mirage took on spiritual significance. At some point the audience transformed into followers, the followers begat pilgrims, the pilgrims made it religion. I bless them at full sun. They receive their share of spectacle disguised as spiritual practice. On the right day, our mirages are indistinguishable from those of the past, a reflected sky blue mantle above the desert, rippling over the black tarp like heated oil. It takes hours of heat to produce the effect of a lake or inverted desert. Pilgrims have seen lost loved ones, extinct animals, shapes or even boats reflected in the mirage. I suppose that the mirage reflects what they want and need in themselves. Heavily protected from the heat and sun, they meditate in small bands dotting almost a kilometer. I meet them afterward, blessing each covered head with a gloved hand. Over the years, I've come to realize that the

experience of God is directly related to the overall health of a planet. Once a planet like ours enters its death cycle, God flees. Those who still come, receive synthetic miracles created in God's wake.

The temperature plunges lower, much faster than when I was a boy. I must turn off the heat modules, clean the turbines, hose air onto the fans to remove the silt. I enjoy the daily rituals of generating air currents angled above the mirage tarp, adding air blown heat, devising the correct refraction index, always at the mercy of the sun and what little heat it gives. Today there are more pilgrims. This is concrete, this is a gift. I suppose the word is out, people want to see me one last time. They want a link to that past mirage, to that last moment of bliss.

Downward spiraling meditation interrupted, I open my ruined eyes as the sun spikes, a brightness indicative of its slow eventual death. I stand slowly and focus on the horizon.

Spreading open my jacket, I pull my arms from the sleeves. Frigid air immediately cools my unprotected chest. I wait in vain, half-hoping to see a real mirage.

Did he plan to leave, the day he disappeared? My father taught me that a mirage is quantifiable; n_1 , n_2 , n_3 , n_4 a refraction index as light rays pass through heated air and bend. Still, without the visual distortion created in the human eye, a mirage cannot exist. The eye and the elements are partnered. My father used to say that a mirage exists within memory already refracted. And so I imagine today's orchestrated mirage exists only in the memory of the pilgrims, who will cast-off this planet, fulfilling their spiritual hunger elsewhere. Their memories forming a finite mental space growing ever smaller as each one dies.



The horizon shifts, something moves, interfering with the desert line. I strain for a better look. A sense of panic causes small hairs to ripple across my forearm and I close my eyes, refocus them. Sure enough, there is a figure. Who is this? It must be one of the pilgrims again, investigating the apparatus with his own eyes. Fool, another half hour and he'll freeze to death. The figure stops midway and remains motionless. The light escapes between his dark legs, a cut out figure, hard edged and opaque. Does he think

I can't see him? I wonder what he is waiting for?

Cast shadows steal across the desert surface, but the sun still reaches me, searing my leggings, my boots—all that is confined. Even from so far away, the figure seems familiar. I watch his image, wavering from the faintly heated surface. Unease rises in me like the heat shimmer surrounding him. I did not see him die, and suddenly I remember it as if I was there all along.

Impulsively, I strip off my UV suit, hat, goggles, everything to feel what he must have felt in the arctic: to experience the elements completely. The wind meets my warm skin, vented down from the sun's position. I am warmer than I've been in the last 40 years and free of restraint, euphoric. Instinct drives my bare feet into the desert, to the man I'd waited so long to see again, to my father.

Is the fact that one doesn't need to know all your primary references also true for the book, given that it will circulate internationally and that it is anchored by images derived from the New Zealand landscape?

Absolutely. It's even stranger for me to wonder if these volcanic landscapes are more familiar to readers because of *The Lord of the Rings* phenomenon. And, if so, will the images read as more, or less real, since New Zealand's landscape is now contextualised as fantastic. Pretty interesting.



"I wanted to simultaneously reference fragmented space and infinite space." jessica bronson

How does the book relate to your interest in the interruption of the visual flow? I am thinking for example of the traditional linearity of the book as opposed to the circularity of your past video work.

Well, the book is a space that has all of the characteristics I just outlined; architecture, equipment or resources, budget, audience, expectations. I simply asked myself what is the nature of a book? How does the viewer, or in this case, reader, experience the space of a book? Questions of time, space, movement, subjectivity and narration are integral to every work I produce and, therefore, applicable in this case as well.

I'm glad you brought up concepts of linearity and circularity, because they pertain to all of my work. While it is true that my moving imagery is looped, meaning that it plays continuously with no apparent beginning, middle and ending, a viewer's initial experience with the piece automatically constructs a beginning. This "constructed" beginning is reinforced and simultaneously reconsidered by everything that follows, just like the first page of a book provokes the reader to establish a hypothesis, which is then proven or not by each page that follows.

It's important to remember that we, as individuals, live in real time and experience events sequentially, and even as non-linear space. It is also important to acknowledge that books aren't necessarily read linearly, certainly not by me. In developing the idea for a book we had a lot of ideas about pushing alternate ways to read or experience the book. This is when the idea of considering the book as a palindrome arose.



JESSICA BRONSON TALKS TO GREGORY BURKE

The notion of a constructed beginning recalls panoramic painting, which attempts to render a 360-degree view in linear form. To what extent are you playing off that genre or the genre of romantic landscape painting? I am thinking of attributes such as the colour palette, a clinical but exaggerated reality, expansive vistas, open skies and the desire for cartographic precision.

To be honest, I hadn't thought specifically of panoramic painting. I did, however, think of romantic landscape painting. One thing that immediately struck me about the stock images I selected for the publication was how "unreal" they seemed, particularly the three shots of Mount Ruapehu taken from the same camera angle at different time of the day. In terms of color, the images couldn't be more fantastic. In fact, they already seemed color enhanced as if to make the catastrophic landscape even more spectacular. I liked how the billowing smoke enhanced the panoramic aspect, so that the eye naturally followed the smoke. What was strange, though, was the existence of a second volcano which disrupts the flow of the smoke. Does the second volcano double the



catastrophic implications, or, conversely, negate them? Interestingly, a notion of mirror image, or reflected image, is inherent in the image itself. I suppose, too, that a kind of infinite panorama is implied by endlessly mirroring the image, although I was thinking more in terms of suggesting an endless flow and rhythmic disruption.

The publication definitely brought forth issues of constructing a whole from fragments. But, in many ways, this is analogous to putting together a moving image scene from multiple shots, so it was not an entirely new experience. I thought quite a bit about revealing continuity as well as an intentional discontinuity in the montage of the images. I guess I wanted to simultaneously reference fragmented space and infinite space.

In one sense your works seem to offer alternative descriptions of natural or synthetic spaces, yet there is also a sense of deferral away from the objective, such as landscape, toward the speculative.

Landscape is truly sublime in that it is, in many ways, a ubiquitous and therefore unquestioned subject for a work of art. The first works I produced that alluded to landscape were actually dealing with weather. I have to admit I saw them as dealing primarily with catastrophic weather and science fiction.

So you are mixing up the real and imagined by referencing visual languages of science and science fiction?

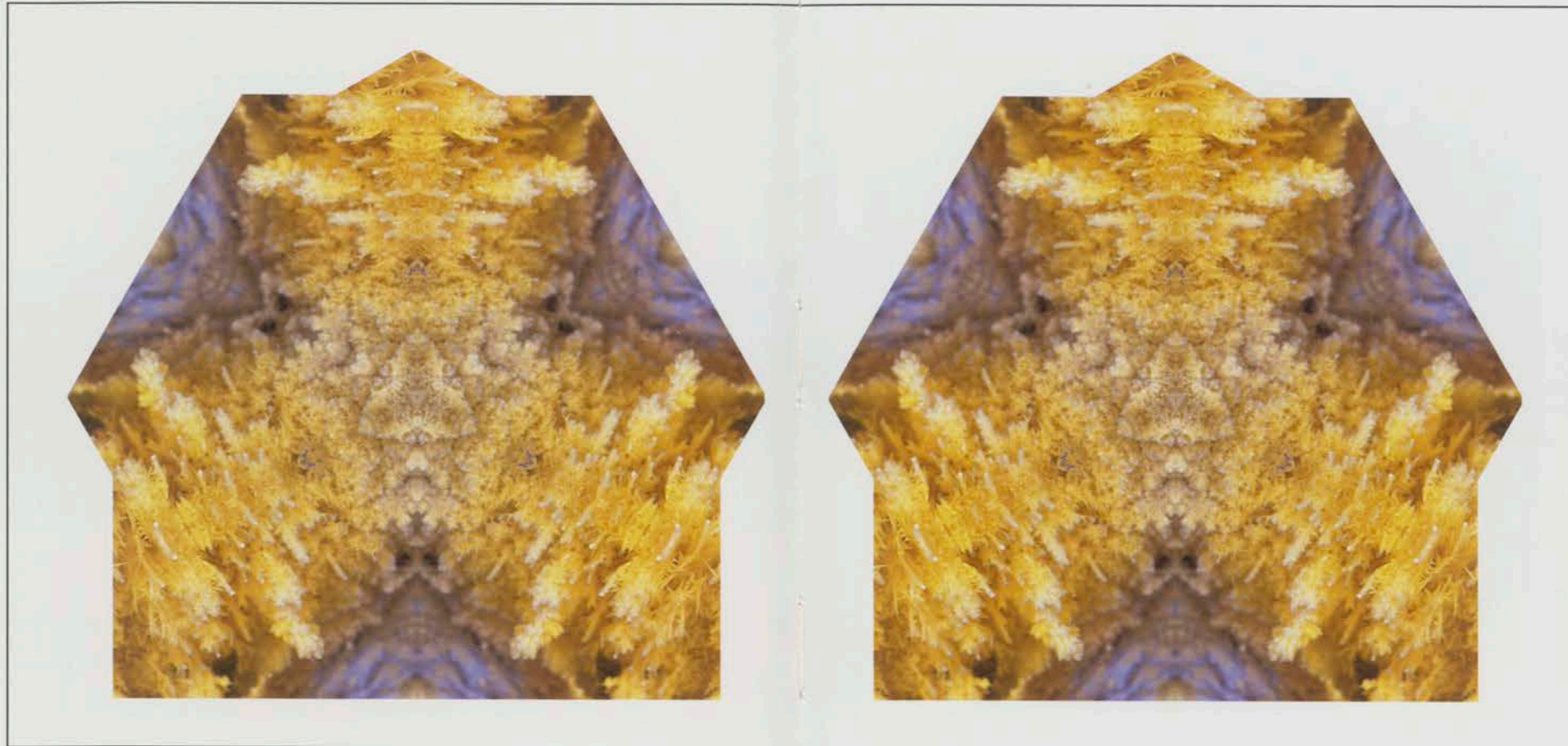
Is there a language of science free from science fiction? I'm just speculating here, but the interesting issue to consider is the intention of the Institute of Geographic and Nuclear Sciences photographer, since the images so strongly play into notions of the romantic. Our culture can't escape notions of framing. All images are mediated.

"One thing that immediately struck me about the stock images I selected for the publication was how "unreal" they seemed..."jessica bronson

My father once genuflected before a Fata Morgana, one of the last recorded superior mirages. I was six at the time, and he hoisted me onto a dog sled to ride into the shimmering illusion of ice particles suspended in the air. He called it a castle. But it was really an inversion of the frozen arctic sea reflected back on itself, like a fold separating two identical pages of a book. The effect created an illusion of tall turrets and medieval ice walls. He told me that a Fata Morgana was the hardest and luckiest to find because the arctic conditions to produce it were rare. He feared this would be the last one ever recorded.

The closer we came to it, the faster it transformed and dissolved. My father's breath froze on the simulated mink tendrils of his parka. When we reached the center, he sprung from the sled and genuflected right there, next to the panting dogs. He was a scientist and practiced Abstractism, a form of spiritual abstraction of all things organic. As he prayed, I surveyed the curious landscape, as choppy as any ocean, only with ice formations, not waves. We were hidden inside it, anyone watching would see a mirage castle, and not us. It was an illusion, a place where one could hide and unhide.

We traversed from one edge of the mirage to the other for several days. On the way back to the Post, I sat backwards on the sled, so I could know the exact moment the illusion disappeared. On this day, he dropped me off at the Survey Post so he could continue his experiments with air and heat waves. He was a scientist and studied optic phenomena to be simulated on off world sites.



Hours later, I awakened from my nap to an insistent high pitched ping. I followed the sound toward the kitchen, padding along insulated blue flooring that reminded me of the polar water far beneath us. Automatically I opened the green plastic cabinets and heated a packaged meal of noodles, seaweed broth and cubed seal meat. The pinging continued and I followed the sound to the lab entrance.

I wasn't allowed in the lab's inner chamber without my father, but I reached up for my parka on the heated hangers and jumped into the entranceway without touching the edge of the lower rim. Following my father's instructions, I took care to secure all my gear before slamming the indicator for the compartment hatch. I braced myself for the temperature to adjust from the warm kitchen to the frigidness of the lab. Within seconds, the hatch to the lab opened; I called out to my father.

No one could hear me over the blaring ping of a recording device and amplified wind monitors turned on high. The lab was an ice cave with iridescent pale blue walls, floor to ceiling. All studies on the mirage castle, the monitoring of wind, air, heat were recorded here by the scientists. While the air was relatively warm, a chill came from the arctic wind, invisible but present in every monitor. I called out again, but everyone was intensely occupied. One scientist stared intently into the screens depicting exterior ice scenes, gigantic beads of sweat rolled off his forehead and dripped down to his flushed ears where it disappeared into his neck insulation. The other scientist started yelling

something about liabilities, about religious ones and the pleasure of it. At the time, I didn't understand that those words liability, pleasure and religion in combination, were connected to my father.

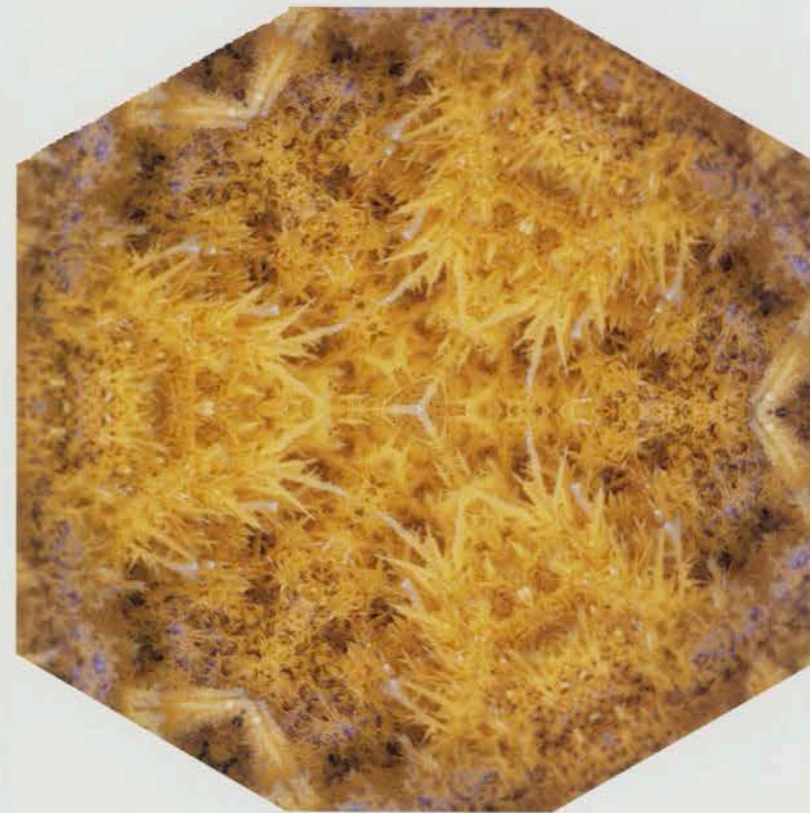
The sweaty scientist shook his head and zoomed in on the east quadrant, dark except for the white glare of the sodium lamps. Ice waves were forming, oblivious to the mysterious invasion. Tiny, wind tornadoes drilled into the waves, lifted and touched down elsewhere. He switched to the west camera, the south, the north, back to the south and then east again, each camera panning quickly. The panning was mesmerizing, lightning fast, and I reached up to the monitor to catch one of those elusive tornadoes.

Startled, the scientist gazed down at me, his right eye twitching from the sweat bearing down on his lid, then he gestured violently with his hand. Two arms grabbed me from behind and suddenly I was airborne flying beneath aqua ice waves above my head. As they passed, I blew into them with my warm breath, drilling like those tornadoes. I landed back in the inner chamber. Pssshhhht, the hatch sucked the lab away. I stumbled into the warm kitchen as the ping was replaced by a piercing alarm.

I knew then that my father had chosen to stay inside the mirage. I noticed my cold dinner of cubed seal meat, still on the counter. I was there when the company's ice rover had dumped the seal next to the Survey Post. It was a fresh catch, someone said, before walking away, leaving the seal motionless on the ice. My father stood next to me as I tried to understand why they left the seal lying there like a discarded rag.

"Why don't they bury him?"

"You can't," my father replied, "you can't bury a body in the arctic."



JESSICA BRONSON TALKS TO GREGORY BURKE

You have used mirroring as a device before as in *Panamint Tilt*, but does your decision to explore the palindrome relate to your New Zealand experience? I remember you saying that you found things here the same as in California but different, like the fact the cars drive on the left.

My interest in mirroring began as a child with my Grandmother's family name, "Harrah," which is a palindrome. I was mesmerized by the backwards-forwards orientation. Later, in undergraduate school, I learned of enantiomeric viruses, which are viruses that invade a body based upon the fact that they resemble the "self" but are in fact mirror images. I liked the metaphoric implications of an identical but dialectically positioned self and the confusion as to which was the true self and which was the copy. At the same time that I was studying enantiomers in molecular biology, I was absolutely struggling through advanced descriptive geometry classes. Without fail, I inadvertently inverted structures, particularly in translating them from 3-D to 2-D space or vice versa. It's as if I suffer from some kind of spatial dyslexia.



My visit to New Zealand was fascinating because everything was familiar but slightly shifted. This ranged from driving on the left, to walking through a Redwood forest outside of New Plymouth, to eating foods with familiar ingredients but different combinations. I suppose it was strange to live an experience only imagined up to this point. I was reminded of a science fiction story I read years ago about a person who wakes up to find the universe has been flipped backwards, so that everything was recognizable but completely shifted. This shifting of perspective makes everyday things seem new again.

So, in terms of my New Zealand experience, it seemed appropriate to use mirror imaging for the publication. Furthermore, I liked all of the historical references to artists such as Smithson.

You are interested in the concept of mirage. One often thinks of mirage in relation to atmospheric effects and in a short-circuiting between the sensory and the cognitive. Is this an effect you seek not only to explore but also to evoke or mimic in your work?

It's strange because effects of mirage both reference phenomenology and become phenomenological. One of the clearest memories I have from childhood is my fixation upon glistening puddles of water appearing and disappearing while travelling over stretches of hot black asphalt. My mother explained that what I was truly seeing was a mirage or illusion. This experience still resonates strongly for me because I can't quite connect the scientific explanation for the phenomenon with the phenomenon itself. I don't know if this makes sense. It had something to do with defining the real. Does the real reside in the object or the image of the object? Anyway, I suppose it was the beginning of a life long obsession with these types of phenomena.

It was interesting because I recall understanding the phenomenon and being completely bewildered by it at the same time.

"We have no need of other worlds. We need mirrors." This metaphysical pessimism is from Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* 1970¹, a classic of science fiction literature and also known by Andrei Tarkovsky's 1972 film of the same name. In Lem's tale the planet Solaris presents science with a conundrum. Covered with a vast living ocean, its seascape is imbued with a kind of consciousness. The efforts of centuries of science have, however, failed to explain this "autistic ocean", and humans by extension, have failed to make first contact with an alien consciousness.

The dogged attitude of science espoused by Lem in *Solaris*, has an analogy in a contemporary robotic, space exploration camera with its singular, myopic view; an analogy that Jessica Bronson exploits in her use of 'tilt' camera techniques. The connection with *Solaris* operates as an extended metaphor in recent works that also use mirrors: *Panamint Tilt* 2000, *circumfluentsuperfield* 1998, *doubled sunset* 2000 and *a small infinite* 2000. Indeed, the dual horizons of *doubled sunset* and the twin equators of *circumfluentsuperfield* could even reference the two suns that orbit the planet Solaris.

In these works Bronson surveys big sky, Californian terrain, loaded sites like the desolate Mojave Desert's Death Valley as well as crescent shaped horizon lines and endless patchworks of the Los Angeles aqueduct. Such works reinforce Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe's notion that a geographical image of limitlessness has given way to a technological one². The landscape of the sublime has been replaced by a video version, staged in real time, but manipulated and mediated. Bronson has distorted the view through the camera, reflecting, rotating and flipping segmented images back onto themselves. Her installations recede into endless simulacra, a *mise-en-abyme* of a completely mediated vision.

The vast desert scene that we encounter in *Panamint Tilt* evokes the entropic spaces of Robert Smithson's *Mirror displacements* 1969 in the Yucatan, Mexico and Michael Heizer's *Double negative* 1969-1970 in Nevada, USA. Their desert interventions were symptomatic of a post-modern sublime, and we know both primarily through documentary photographs.

Unlike Smithson's prosaic, unromantic snapshots, Bronson's images are poetic, idealised and continuously and seamlessly multiplied using the artificial potential of digital media.



a small infinite 2000 (detail)
four DVDs, four Pioneer 7400 DVD players, four 25" monitors, four acrylic trolleys, Technivision external controller and cables
dimensions variable
courtesy of the artist and Goldman Tevis, Los Angeles



Panamint Tilt 2000
CAV laser disc, laser disc player, LCD projectors and cables
dimensions variable, edition 1 of 3
courtesy of the artist and Goldman Tevis, Los Angeles

Her bubble shaped desert scenes inspire memories of cinematic experiences. The crater-like surface and arid atmosphere offer visual cues to generic locations for b-grade science fiction movies. Like those science fiction flicks, Bronson's landscape of abstraction and artifice is like a moment of time travel when a perceptual shift is described using psychedelic effects: from the rational and empirical to the unexplained and the unconscious.

Like Ernie Gehr's film *Eureka* 1974, Bronson's videos are devoid of narrative, they posit a world wholly mediated by cinema, nature filtered through filmic representation. Bronson's work *a small infinite* recalls Gehr's early structuralist film. *Eureka* was a step printed re-presentation of a 1905 panorama, filmed from a camera mounted in the front car of a San Francisco trolley. By comparison, *a small infinite* was filmed from a camera mounted on the nose of a stunt helicopter. It tracks a kaleidoscope of images segmented into north, west, south and east quadrants. The video trace, Bronson's original recording, is rendered opaque, robbed of indexical transparency. Her dense and layered imagery is without the landscape reference points that would be generated by an accurate mapping of the site.

Bronson's works can be technology intensive, embracing DVD and digital imaging technology. Like science fiction's fascination with science and technology, Bronson's video art implies an almost science fiction vision of art. Whereas science

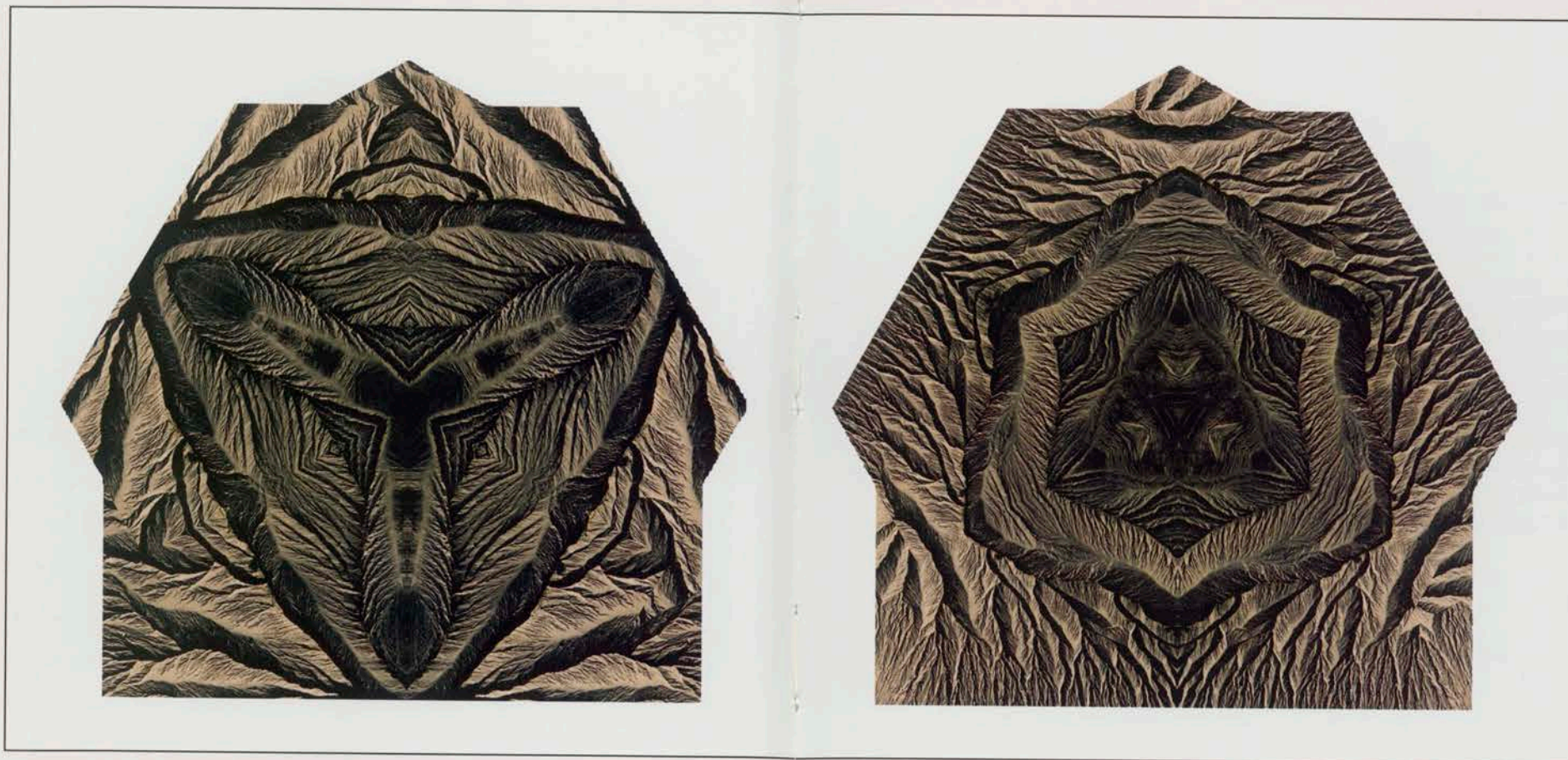
fiction depends on the credibility of science for its realism however, Bronson relies on the "veracity" of technology to create her simulated effects. In the wake of structuralist film legacies and digital engineering, Bronson's evidential video material becomes abstraction.

The experience of watching *Panamint Tilt*, with its mirrored screens positioned in the space at right angles, provokes a sense of immersion in a "real" panoramic experience. Her mimetic

video representation of nature attempts to induce some of the vertiginous properties found in an experience of the sublime in nature. The synthesised soundtrack crafted for *Panamint Tilt* by Bronson and Michael Pierzynski enhances the experience of immersion and the suggestion of an alienated sublime. An electronic lullaby, the soundtrack shunts up and down a scale of synthetic tones, building and releasing suspense in an approximation of a science fiction movie score.

Science fiction optimistically promises to explore, hypothesize or speculate on the potential of technology. The halcyon images of *doubled sunset* recall the already dated aesthetics of 1970s science fiction films. Bronson's seductive images adopt the Utopian lure of technology promised by science fiction, but in doing so they, like the outmoded movies, are conditioned to a built in obsolescence.

At once familiar and alien, Bronson's desert/lunar landscapes reflect an interest in the perceptual uncertainty of a mirage - the distortion of vision due to atmospheric effects. Smithson obliquely champions the idea of mirage when he suggests, "Only appearances are fertile; they are gateways to the primordial. Every artist owes his existence to such mirages."³ Two works by Bronson draw out this connection with atmospheric interference patterns found in nature. The first, its title a direct reference to *Solaris*, *Does the ocean think?* 1998 is a white monitor video work that focuses on satellite pictures of an anticyclone. The second, *First and Last Strike* 1998, explores doubled lightning patterns and instantly recalls documentary photographs of Walter de Maria's *The lightning field* 1977 in New Mexico, however, Bronson's landscapes and technological interference patterns are synthetic; created using mirrors, distortions, montage and digital editing. Bronson draws on a legacy of structuralist film, low-tech video and Hollywood effects to synthesise atmospheric conditions.



The images are a sleight of hand, the hoax of science fiction movies. Like the conscious ocean in *Solaris* that resists explanation and holds science up to ridicule, Bronson's real time images are enhanced with visual turbulence, trickery and an impenetrable layering effect. In the context of science fiction films, Bronson's works are an aberrant abstraction. The camera becomes a reflection, not of nature, but of itself.

¹ Lem, Stanislaw *Solaris* reprint 1970 New York: Harcourt Brace & Co. (translated from the French by Joanna Kilmartin and Steve Cox) p72. The text continues, "We don't know what to do with other worlds. A single world, our own, suffices us; but we can't accept it for what it is. We are searching for an ideal image of our own world: we go in quest of a planet, of a civilization superior to our own but developed on the basis of a prototype of our primeval past."

² Paraphrased from Gilbert-Rolfe, Jeremy *Beauty and the contemporary sublime* New York: Allworth Press 1999, p54

³ Smithson, Robert "Incidents of mirror travel in the Yucatan (1969)" in *Robert Smithson: the collected writings* 1996 edited by Jack Flam, Los Angeles: University of California Press, p132

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BORN 1963 NORTH DAKOTA, USA

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2001 CRG Gallery, New York
Lemon Sky, Los Angeles
Matrix University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley
New Langton Arts, San Francisco
- 2000 *Jessica Bronson: Recent work* Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand
Goldman Tevis, Los Angeles
Panamint tilt Charles Luckman Fine Art Complex, California State University, Los Angeles
Superfluent circumfield Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City
- 1998 *World picture* Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles
Circumfluent superfield CRG Gallery, New York
- 1997 Institute of Visual Arts, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee
Its seethe, the quietest of whispers Bliss, Pasadena
- 1996 *Red line* Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin
- 1994 *Changing slowly, going uphill* MFA Gallery, Art Center College of Design, Pasadena

GROUP EXHIBITIONS AND SCREENINGS

- 2000 *DRIVE: power>progress>desire* Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand
Made in California 1900 – 2000 Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles
Edge festival Christenrose Gallery, New York
Speed of vision Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut
LA ex Villa Stuck, Munich
(extra) super [meta] Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco
Shifting ground: transformed views of the American landscape Henry Art Gallery, Seattle
Let's entertain: life's guilty pleasures Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota; toured to Portland Art Museum, Portland; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Museo Rufino Tamayo, Mexico City; Miami Art Museum, Florida
Commotion in the ocean boat of Rosa and Carlos de la Cruz, Miami
Calendar 2000 Bard College, Annandale on the Hudson, New York
- 1999 *Hotel utopia* various locations, Vienna
The LA edge festival Geffen Contemporary Museum of Art and Park Plaza Hotel, Los Angeles
Art/journalism Rosamund Felsen, Santa Monica
Not there Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco
The living theatre Salzburger Kunstverein, Salzburg
Sonopticon '99 (with Jan Tumlir) Action Space, Los Angeles
Landscape: outside the frame MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts
Sound foundations: the audio bases of video art Bard College, Annandale on the Hudson, New York
ATTENTIONSPAM @ Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica
- 1998 *Group show* Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York
Light x eight: the hanukkah project The Jewish Museum, New York
Zone franche; global tekno La Grande Halle de la Villette, Paris
The future that almost wasn't San Antonio, Texas; toured to Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, Los Angeles
Dromology: ecstasies of speed New Langdon Arts, San Francisco
Seamless stitching De Appel, Amsterdam
Wings of desire Walter/McBean Gallery, San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco
SPAN: Jessica Bronson, Mariko Mori, Diana Thater Artspace, Auckland; toured to Govett-Brewster

Art Gallery, New Plymouth; The Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Dunedin; Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne

- Places that are elsewhere* David Zwirner Gallery, New York
- 1997 *A home show: sitting up erect or reclining* Nostitzstrasse 14, Berlin
Sansoucci Handlung and Kunstverein Hamburg
CA 90001-90085 W139, Amsterdam
Invited Joseph Helman Gallery, New York
Objectif lune Centre d'art Neuchatel, Neuchatel
Sunshine & noir: art in LA 1960 - 1997 Louisiana Museum, Copenhagen, toured to the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg; Castello di Rivoli, Museo d'Arte Contemporanea; Armand Hammer Museum of Art at UCLA, Los Angeles
Cascade lounge The Art Exchange, New York
Projection still LASCA Gallery, Los Angeles
Biennial Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, California
Bastards of modernity Angles Gallery, Santa Monica
On-line-media Ghent, Belgium
- 1996 *STUDIO 246* Marc Foxx Gallery, Santa Monica
Los Angeles visits @ P-House in Tokyo P-House, Tokyo
Junge Szene '96 Wiener Secession, Vienna
New York film and video festival Walter Reade Theatre, Lincoln Center, New York
Mending the line Schindler Apartments, MAK Center, Los Angeles
Wunderbar Kunstverein, Hamburg
Antelope road trip Spanish Box, Santa Barbara
Sampler II David Zwirner Gallery, New York; toured to Rotterdam Film Festival, Rotterdam
- 1995 *Room 2, level 4: lotus eaters and the fourth dimension* Lotus Motel, Inglewood, California
The ravages of winter may well call for increased structure overhead or under one roof Three Day Weekend, Los Angeles
Smells like vinyl Roger Merians Gallery, New York
The big night The Bradbury Building, Los Angeles
Recent work Alyce B. Williamson Gallery, Art Center College of Design, Pasadena
- 1994 *Tank . . . between green and violet* Los Angeles Times Media Center, Art Center College of Design, Pasadena
Video lace annuelle Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, Los Angeles
FLOW Cerritos College Fine Arts Gallery, Cerritos, California
- 1993 *Against nature* MFA Gallery, Art Center College of Design, Pasadena
She disappeared first University Film & Video Association Conference, Montana State University, Bozeman, Montana; toured to Los Angeles Times Media Center, Art Center College of Design, Pasadena
Underexposed Barnsdall Art Park, Los Angeles
RE:SOLUTION: video annual Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies, Los Angeles
New work Alyce B. Williamson Gallery, Art Center College of Design, Pasadena
Los Angeles art fair Art Center College of Design's Space, Los Angeles
- 1992 *Two year anniversary extravaganza* The Living Room Series, The Real Post Other, Hollywood
Video show MFA Gallery, Art Center College of Design, Pasadena
- 1991 *The living room Spring show* Randy Hostetler's Living Room, Los Angeles

CURATED EXHIBITIONS

- 2000 *All things, everything true* CRG Gallery, New York
- 1998 *Caption* Three Day Weekend, Los Angeles
- 1996 *100 years of the moving image through art* Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, Los Angeles

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2000 *Let's entertain: life's guilty pleasures* Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (catalogue)

2000 *Commotion in the ocean* (catalogue)

2000 *Jessica Bronson: Panamint Tilt* Luckman Fine Arts Complex (catalogue)

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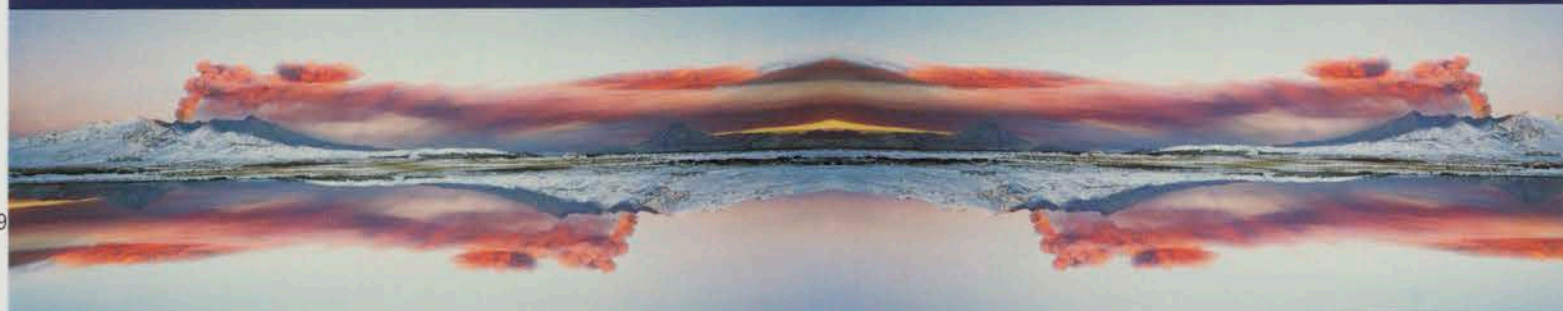
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1996 Calame, Ingrid. "Review" *Flash Art* March/April, pp120-121

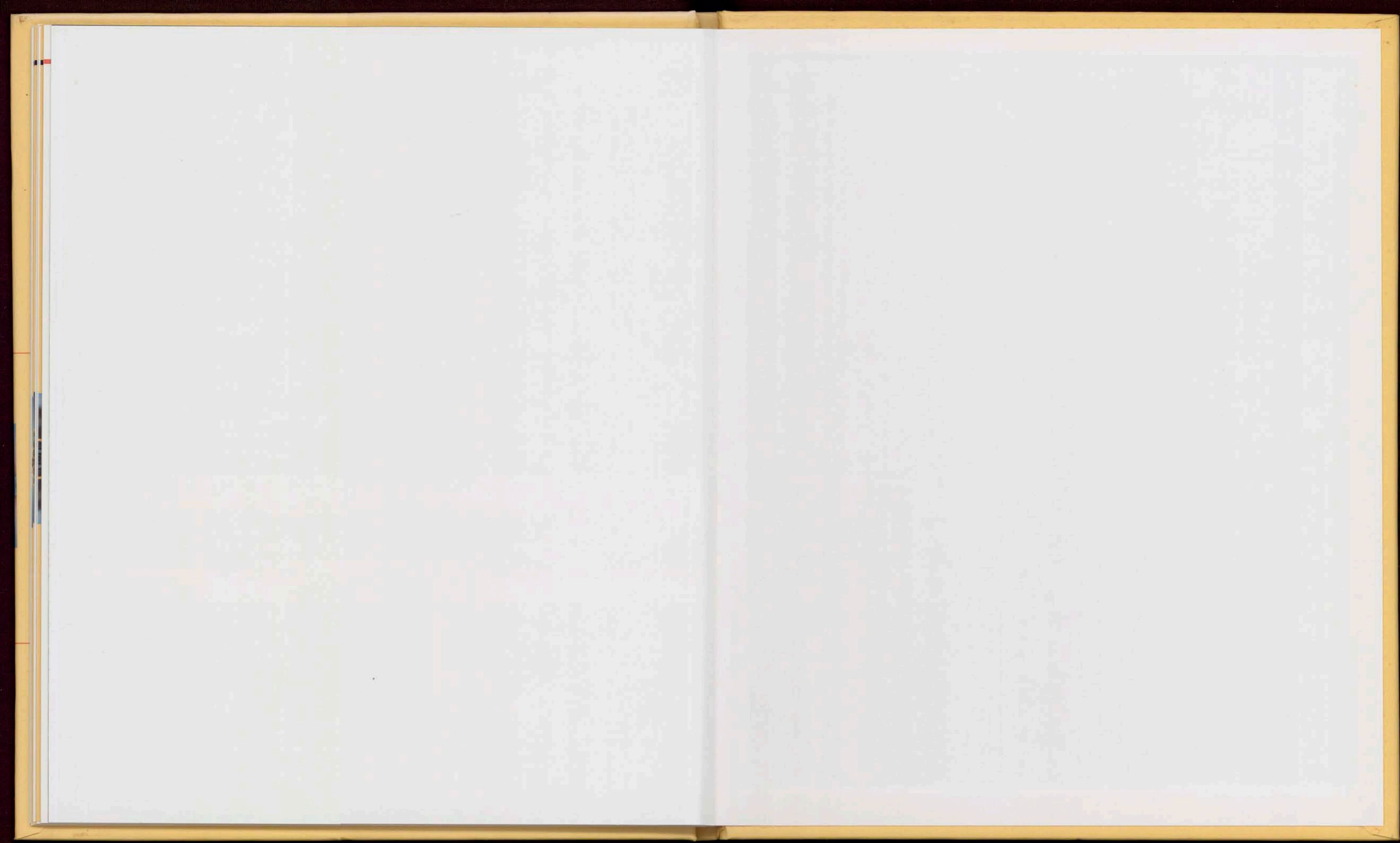
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