

LUISE FONG  
MORE HUMAN

GOVETT-BREWSTER ART GALLERY NEW PLYMOUTH  
6 SEPTEMBER — 23 OCTOBER 1995



**M**ORE HUMAN. More human than what? This is not a question I'd expect to be asking about Luise Fong's work — for it has always been about the human. In the near-abstractions that characterise her work, she has continually alluded to the body, its forms, surfaces and sensations. On some works the artist's faint fingerprints are evident; her paintings have been described as "an epidermal operation"<sup>1</sup>; and she herself (like others) has equated the dribbles, stains and smears which frequently characterise the surfaces of her work with the secretions of the human body.

A number of her paintings have been pierced with a cluster of small holes within the rough outline of an ellipse, in a revisioning and inversion of what, in the 1990s, we'd consider to be a clichéd feminist central core image. Such imagery was originally framed in deliberate resistance to the Freudian perception of the female genitalia as a "lack"; it asserted their concavity not as a void but as an active presence. Fong, however, emptied it out anew, questioning its solidity, its basis in physical observation. Her "central core" images are shot through with doubt, opened up to speculation or possibility. For, like many women artists today, Fong has been exploring ways of representing or speaking of the feminine body without picturing it, impelled by a desire to invoke the secret responses, the hidden thrills and convulsions of the sensate, more than the visual, body.

while I crawl into the unknown  
cover me  
I'm going hunting for mysteries  
cover me<sup>2</sup>

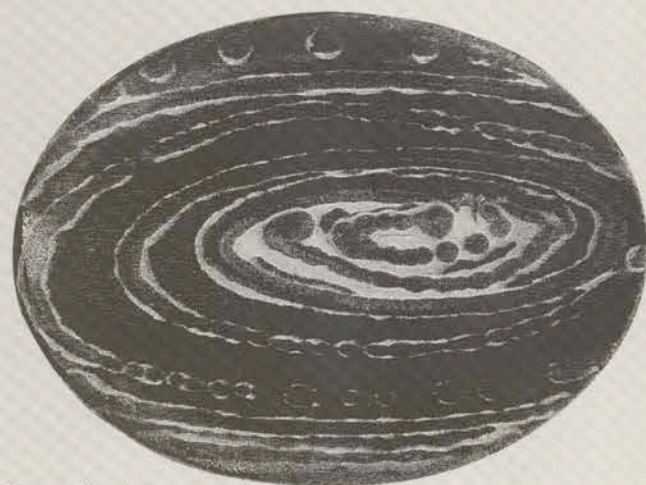
In this installation a familiar space is altered subtly but undeniably, occupied (in more senses than one) by four separate elements. This transformation is achieved by the most economical of means — the simple addition of two long white-painted shelves. Invisibly attached to the walls, they look more like integral architectural elements than practical contrivances. Across this renovated space, the four parts of *More human* "speak" to one another in a dialogue of repeated forms, contrasting materials and interconnected ideas.

On one of the shelves is a group of photographic images (*Render*). They're propped against the wall in an informal arrangement that resembles a collection, made over years perhaps, of photos, postcards, memorabilia, casually displayed on a mantelpiece. Any



Newcastle virus (mag. x 150,000)

resemblance to the domestic is undermined, however, by the images themselves. Ghostly white and mysterious shadows float on a black ground. There's a delicately fringed structure that looks like an undersea creature; forms that look like sliced tree trunks with their growth rings; others that look like amoebae, viruses and other bio-organisms viewed under the microscope. This resemblance is emphasised by the way they're framed. Rather than displaying them in proper picture or photo frames, Fong has chosen to present them sandwiched behind glass held with metal clips, and replaced in the polystyrene packing these cheap "frames" were bought in. The resemblance to laboratory slides and to x-rays is unmistakable.

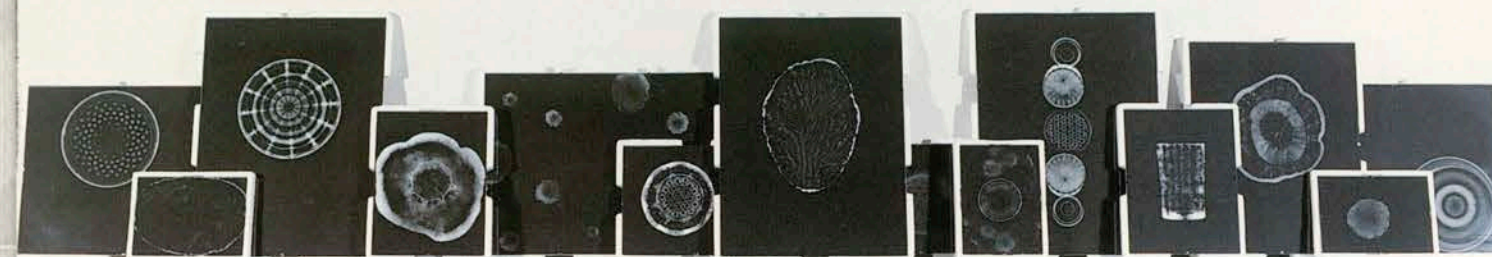
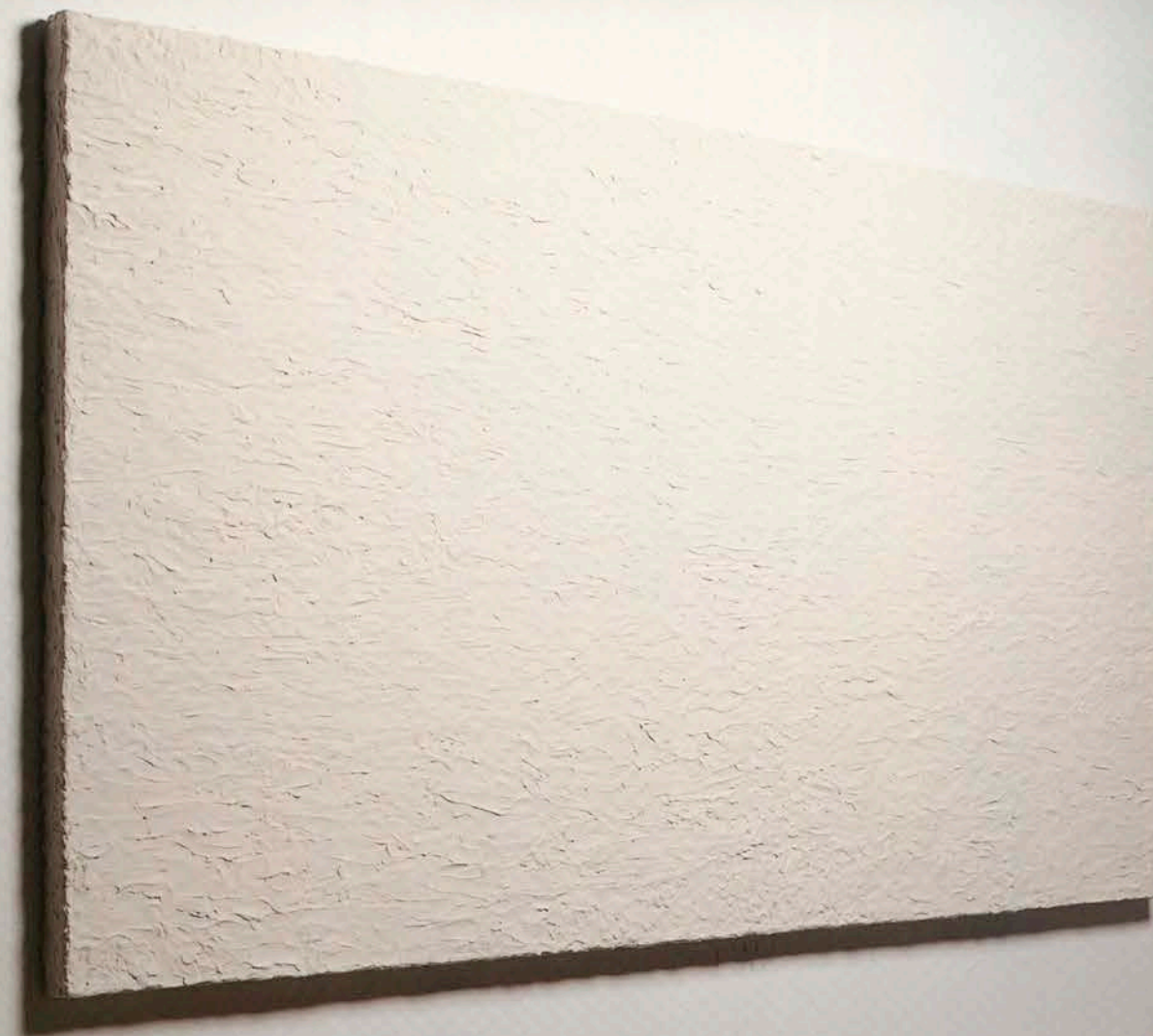


Cluster (detail)

**B**UT these are not images of living organisms. They are, in fact, photograms made by passing light on to photographic paper through various translucent domestic vessels — a textured drinking glass, a perforated rice steamer, a range of plastic and glass bowls and platters. (Fong's use of domestic objects to create these images is neither expedient nor coincidental; and it's significant that, elsewhere, she has titled similar works *UFO* — *unidentified feminine object*). Like x-rays which reveal the familiar body as a collection of strange, floating masses, these photograms transform everyday domestic objects into eerie non-human bodies. But the scientific revelations they propose are of a pseudo-science or, if you will, an entirely *different science* — *more human*.

On the wall opposite is a painting, *Cluster*, a rectangular panel girdled by a clutch of ovoid satellite forms. The egg-shape that occupies the middle of the central panel is hard edged, clearly defined, its aureole of shafts and tendrils sharp black against a veiled whitish-grey background of blurred radiating lines, all nodules and swellings. In the "parts" that touch and overlap this panel's edges the focus slips, forms become amorphous, their genesis in water and stained fluids unmistakable. Here are Fong's characteristic spots, splotches and stains, forming starbursts, spirals and fronds; her "central core" images; her references to bodily fluids. There's a sense of teeming life, though, as with the photograms, it's not clear if these are cellular or astral bodies, or if their spawning is in inner or outer space.

*The black well of sky and stars went out and out and out for ever; her body and her complexity seemed to disappear. She was one of the stars, a bright dot in blackness, without home, without a companion, in eternal cold and silence.*<sup>3</sup>



top  
Touch

bottom  
Render



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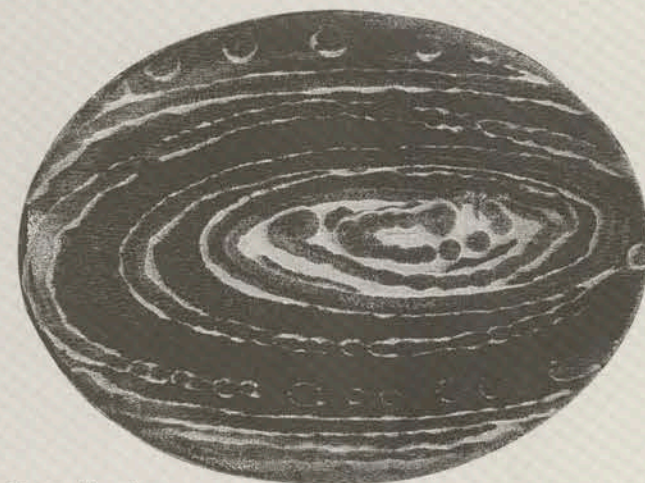
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The structure of the work is strikingly similar to a Venn diagram drawn by the artist before she started making the works for *More human*. Microcosmic and macrocosmic structures, satellites and amoebae, fossils and the production of plastics are linked through "laboratory research", "biology", "technology" and — central for the artist — "shape" and "form".

**T**HESE connections are further explored in *Nostalgia*, which parallels the reconfiguration of the domestic we see in *Render*. On this second shelf is a collection of plastic kitchen containers, lined up, stacked on top of one another. In some of them are eggs — ordinary hens' eggs, the solidity of their pale creamy ovals contrasting with the dead white and bluish white translucency of the containers. An immediate response is that this is a new breed of designer kitchen style, a spare and elegant vision of how we might arrange our lives, if we could. But let the imagination float a little, and we might recall jellyfish or toadspawn or sea squirts:

I swam out to Chinaman's Hat. We walked partway in low tide, then put on face masks. Once you open your eyes in the water, you become a flying creature.... A white globule quivered, swelled, flipped over or inside out, stretched and turned like a human being getting out of bed, opened and opened .... It's a spaceman, I thought. A tiny spaceman in a spacesuit.<sup>4</sup>

The containers can also be seen in terms of the hermetically sealed environments we sometimes find in scientific contexts — for keeping germs out or deadly substances in; or of space suits with their carefully monitored one-person environments. On the one hand, they suggest a particular kind of sterility which seems to contradict the fertile connotations of these egg-laden vessels; on the other we might also think of *in vitro* and other laboratory-assisted fertilisation techniques.



"Surgically sealed: Margery Kennett, senior scientist at Fairfield Hospital's 'hot lab', pursues the emergent virus that killed horse trainer Vic Rail last year." Newspaper clipping from *The Age*, Melbourne.

Fong provides something that's both a clue to and a complication of these readings. Inside one of the plastic containers is a strange transparent object, not immediately identifiable. It is, in fact, a pump that could be used for "blowing" eggs, for sucking out their contents, rendering them merely ornamental, useless either as food or for reproduction. As if contradicting her own evidence, however, the eggs in *Nostalgia* haven't been blown. As time passes, they leak unpleasantly and become discoloured, mottled, with soft blackish

mould appearing. Gradually, they will come to resemble the black blotchy circles and ovals of *Cluster*. Emptied and useless, they would remain stable; full as they are of potential life, they decay and become fetid.

.... there is no qualitative difference between the most elementary consumable object, food, and the most technically sophisticated prosthetics, for they all relate to the body as a permeable, manipulable surface, ingesting, incorporating and expelling an expanding range of objects.<sup>5</sup>

**W**E tend to think of the fertile body as healthy, in good working order. But is it a healthy body to which Fong alludes? It seems she's at least as interested in those pathological conditions which are perhaps integral to the working processes of every body. Normal bodily fluids — or morbid secretions? Procreation — or diseased growth? The desirable woman — or the monstrous feminine? Like life and death, all these co-exist as part of the human condition, although it is, perhaps, in the female body that they achieve their greatest extremity and in which they are most conspicuously investigated, manipulated and acted upon. *Touch* is the simplest of the installation's four parts, a large rectangular panel that's been covered in off-white plasticene, softened in a microwave and moulded into place by the artist's fingers. At first sight, it looks like an abstract painting, almost featureless, a dense opaque pale surface. A closer look reveals a multitude of tiny troughs and ridges, the press and imprint of the artist's hand. But there's a strangely inexpressive neutrality about this "artist's touch" that belies the emotional and psychological revelation that's so often implied in such gestural facture.

Inevitably, Fong's choice of plasticene evokes memories of play and childhood creativity. The crude multi-coloured substance we knew when we were young is refined, simplified and employed on a grand scale. It becomes evidence of the corporeal; it's a chronicle, a memoir, an inscrutable self-portrait; a record of labour and process, a task performed — but to what end? Is this the artist at work or the artist at play? Fong herself has intimated that, in its exploration of elementary modelling material and process, the work represents a "return to basics", as does the low-tech photographic technique of the photograms.<sup>6</sup> This regression stands as an antidote to the high-tech, super-science investigations and procedures that Fong alludes to in *More human*, recuperating the body from technological interventions and returning it to its inherent viscosity.

Priscilla Pitts

- Allan Smith "The flawed surface" *Luise Fong*; *Glenys Brookbanks Claybrook Gallery*, Auckland. np.
- Bjork, from the lyrics of *cover me* from *Post Polydor*, 1995.
- Maxine Hong Kingston *The woman warrior; memoir of a girlhood among ghosts* Picador, London, 1981. p 20.
- Maxine Hong Kingston *China men* Picador, London, 1981. pp 90-91.
- Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller "Hygiene, cuisine and the product world of early twentieth-century America" *Zone 6: Incorporations* 1992. pp 497-515 [507].
- Luise Fong, fax to the author, October 1995.

## LUISE FONG

- 1964 Born Sandakan, Malaysia. Arrived New Zealand
- 1983 Textile Design Course, Wellington Polytechnic
- 1989 Graduated BFA, Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland.
- 1991-92 Member Artspace Trust Board, Auckland
- 1993 Junior lecturer, Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland  
Iida Eise Painting Award, Auckland Society of Arts  
Merit Award Winner, Visa Gold Art Award
- 1994 Artist in residence, Victorian College of Arts  
Premier Award Winner Visa Gold Art Award
- 1995 Artist in residence, two months, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery/  
Taranaki Polytechnic, New Plymouth

### Selected solo exhibitions

- 1989 *Past presence* Fish Shop Gallery, Auckland
- 1990 *Recent works* Brooker Gallery, Wellington
- 1991 *Recent works* Claybrook Gallery, Auckland  
*Artbeat* The Bathhouse, Rotorua  
*Half-light paintings* Brooker Gallery, Wellington
- 1992 *Speak* window installation, Auckland City Art Gallery  
*Smoke* Claybrook Gallery, Auckland
- 1993 *Meniscus* Jonathan Jensen Gallery, Christchurch  
*Pathology* Brooker Gallery, Wellington  
*Chen* Claybrook Gallery, Auckland
- 1994 *Recent paintings* Claybrook Gallery, Auckland
- 1995 *Small orbits* Jonathan Smart Gallery, Christchurch  
*Satellite* Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington  
*UFO* Claybrook Gallery, Auckland  
*More human* Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth and Fisher Gallery, Auckland

### Selected group exhibitions

- 1985 *Decoration as camouflage* Installation with Diana Lee Gobbit, Last and First Cafe, Auckland
- 1988 *20,000 leagues* Fish Shop Gallery, Auckland  
*Artistic callusions* Pembroke, Auckland  
*Fascination* Brooker Gallery, Auckland
- 1990 *Pandora's box* Installation with Deborah Smith, George Fraser Gallery, Auckland
- 1991 "exuberant, floating, dancing, mocking, childish and blissful art..." Nietzsche "The gay science" George Fraser Gallery, Auckland  
*Catholic taste* George Fraser Gallery, Auckland  
*Speaking through the crack in the mirror* Artspace, Auckland
- 1992 *Light sensitive* Artspace, Auckland  
*After dark* Wellington City Art Gallery and Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth  
*Shadow of style* Wellington City Art Gallery and Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth  
*Surface tension: ten artists in the 90s* Auckland City Art Gallery  
*The carnivalesque body* George Fraser Gallery, Auckland
- 1993 *Small works* ASA Gallery, Auckland  
*Dinner service show* Fisher Gallery, Auckland
- 1994 *Station to station: the way of the cross* Auckland City Art Gallery  
*Ten years on* Fisher Gallery, Auckland
- 1995 *Cultural safety: contemporary art from New Zealand* Frankfurter Kunstverein and City Gallery, Wellington, Te Whare Toi  
*A very peculiar practice*, City Gallery, Wellington, Te Whare Toi  
*The nervous system* Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth and City Gallery, Wellington

## Published works

- 1989 'Moments of bloom' page work *Antic* 6
- 1992 'Well read' page work *Midwest* 1 1992
- 1993 'Over one hundred string quartets' page work *1993 New Zealand yearbook*

## Selected bibliography

- Christina Barton "At the surface" *Surface tension: ten artists in the 90s* Auckland City Art Gallery, Auckland, 1992.
- Gregory Burke in *Cultural safety: contemporary art from New Zealand* Frankfurter Kunstverein/City Gallery, Wellington, Te Whare Toi, Frankfurt and Wellington 1995.
- William McAloon "Ways of the cross" *Station to station* Auckland City Art Gallery, Auckland, 1994.
- Stuart A McKenzie "Turn out the light" *Midwest* 2, 1992.
- Toni Nealie "Beyond The Surface" *New Zealand home and building* April/May 1995.
- Priscilla Pitts and Allan Smith, eds. *The nervous system* City Gallery, Wellington, Te Whare Toi and Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, Wellington and New Plymouth, 1995.
- Allan Smith "A very peculiar practice: a user's guide" *A very peculiar practice: aspects of recent New Zealand painting*, City Gallery, Wellington, Te Whare Toi 1995.
- "Toxic and tenebrous: urban beauty in the art of Luise Fong" *Midwest* 6, 1994.
- Wendy Vaigro "Cosmographies: a pathologist's diary" *Art and Asia Pacific*, Vol 2 No 2, 1995.
- Gloria Zelenka "Meditations of corporealities" *Alter image: feminism & representation in New Zealand art 1973-1993* City Gallery, Wellington, Auckland City Art Gallery, Wellington and Auckland 1993.
- Stephen Zepke "Black is black is black is black" *Shadow of style: eight new artists* Wellington City Art Gallery and Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, Wellington and New Plymouth, 1992.

## EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

*Nostalgia* 1995  
470 mm x 2500 mm x 300 mm  
plastic objects with eggs, painted wooden shelf

*Touch* 1995  
2200 mm x 1205mm  
plasticene on board

*Cluster* 1995  
2800 mm x 1702 mm  
acrylic on board and canvas

*Render* 1995  
520 mm x 2500 mm x 300 mm  
photograms, glass, polystyrene, mirror clips, painted wooden shelf

The exhibition *More human* resulted from the Taranaki Artist-in-Residence programme, a partnership between Govett-Brewster Art Gallery and Taranaki Polytechnic, New Plymouth, New Zealand.

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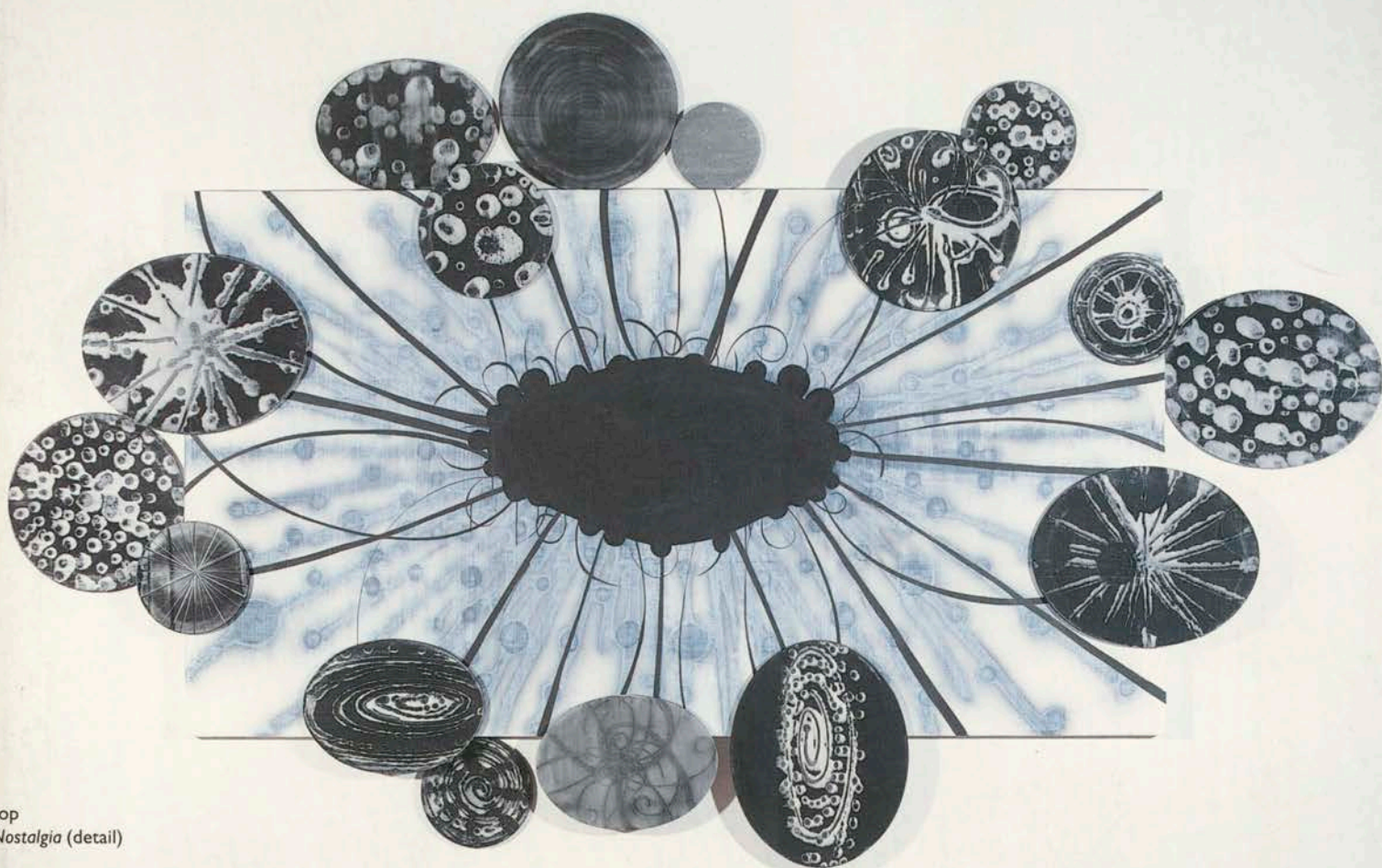
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Exhibition photography: Bryan James

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top  
Nostalgia (detail)

bottom  
Cluster

cover  
Render (detail)