



Published on the occasion of the exhibition
Amy Honchell: Personal Geographies
JANUARY 16 — FEBRUARY 8, 2009

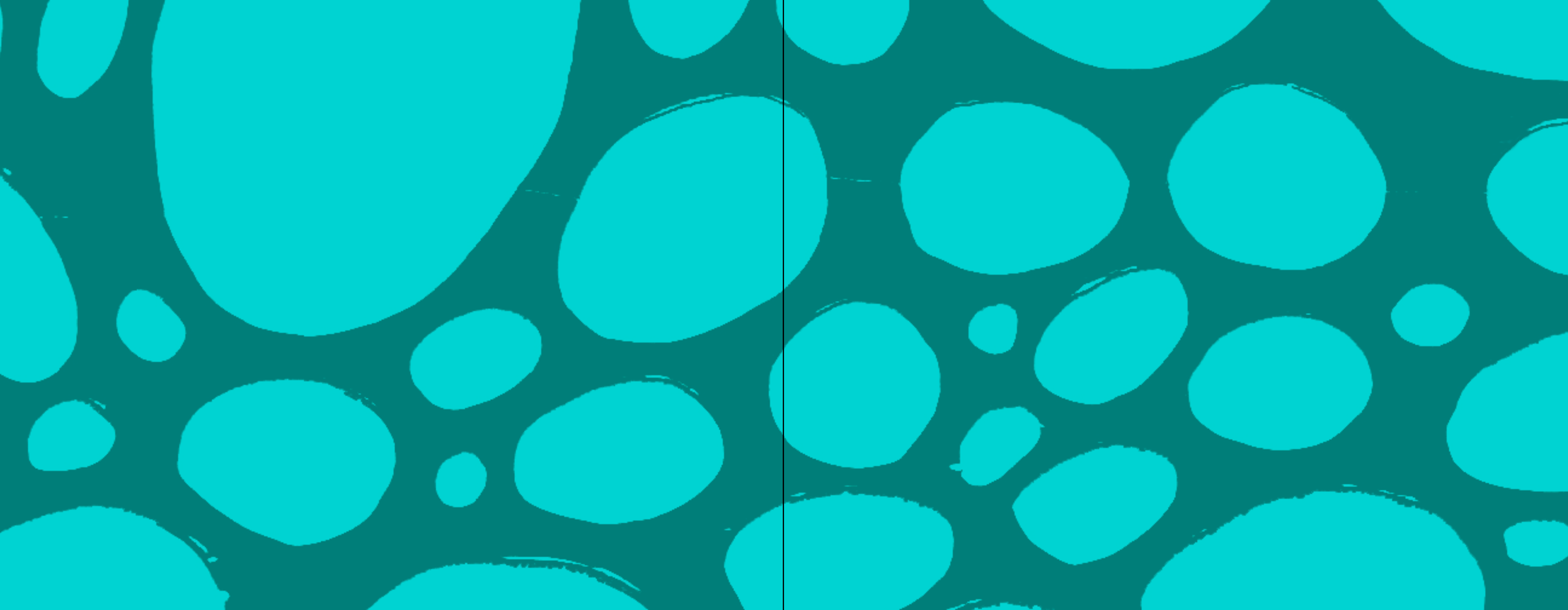
Organized by the
Clara M Eagle Gallery, Murray State University
Murray, Kentucky

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Cover image: *Purl*, 2008-09, DETAIL

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Amy Honchell





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Preface

Becky Alley

DIRECTOR of UNIVERSITY GALLERIES
MURRAY STATE UNIVERSITY

I knew of Amy Honchell's work before I ever met her: I found her work thoughtful, beautiful, and delightfully surprising. So, I invited Honchell to install a solo exhibition in one of the galleries on the Murray State University campus in early 2009.

Amy Honchell: Personal Geographies proved to be a compelling exhibition for the audience at Murray State University. The gallery was flanked on two sides by enormous works that stretched like skin across the wall and into the space. Made of highly reflective metallic blue and gold fabric, the pieces filled the space with warmth and electricity. Smaller drawings on paper and a wall drawing made of colored wire offered quieter moments of subtlety and sensitivity. In the center of the space a soft undulating fabric piece fell in pools and swells reminiscent of water or topographical maps.

Gallery visitors immediately encountered sensory stimulation, vibrant colors, and the tactile qualities of Honchell's installation discovering layers of meaning in the work. The concept of landscape, as it related both to land and body offered moments of connection between the physical world and the less tangible realms of human psyche.

Through her innovative approach to material and playful use of color and form, Honchell's art is consistently witty and smart. I hope all who view this catalog make their own discoveries within its pages and find points of resonance and personal meaning.

Facing title page: *All Borders are Dangerous*, 2007, DETAIL

Facing Page: *Purl*, 2008-09, DETAIL



Artist's Statement

Amy Honchell

*"The mind and the terrain shape each other:
every landscape is a landscape of desire to some degree,
if not always for its inhabitants."*

—REBECCA SOLNIT

Creating art, like creating a map, is an act of translation — conveying the conceptual through the material, and articulating ideas/information both visually and verbally. I believe that looking at and being aware of the world around us is a key part of being an artist.

I draw inspiration from the histories and structures of textiles, geography, biology, and architecture. Invisible patterns—topography, weather patterns, bodily systems—are the basis for my site-specific installations and drawings. My work focuses on conflating the spaces we inhabit (landscape, architecture, bodies, and minds).

Formally and conceptually, my installations are complemented by architectural sites. In my work, drawing becomes a dimensional, tactile action. Topology, sewing, and elements of mapping underscore the parallels between the structures and functions of the human body, architecture, and the landscape. I invite viewers to cross unseen boundaries and discover new territories while exploring the sense of touch in a visual way.





permeations:

Personal Geographies

AN ESSAY BY Jeremy Biles

[permute]

A strange, even discomfiting, pleasure is one likely response to Amy Honchell's *Personal Geographies*, an exhibition of work as alluring as it is disconcerting, at once clever and profound, playful and incisive. Heterogeneous in techniques and materials, but coherent in sensibility and arrangement, Honchell's work is wide-ranging in its sources and acute in its execution.

One is tempted to characterize it in the favored parlance of the day—as exemplifying the collapse of boundaries separating disciplines, methods, and cultural registers. “Collapse” has been a primary metaphor for expressing the relations between “high” and “low” in postmodern art and culture. Boundaries that had long separated the popular from the refined, and the masses

and from the elite, have, we are told, collapsed, crumbled. And gone, too, are the strict divisions between the disciplines. To be postmodern is to be postdisciplinary.

But Amy Honchell's work suggests something slightly different. At once supporting and subverting boundaries between disciplines, methods, ideas, and cultural distinctions like “high” and “low,” her art does not so much produce the po-mo “collapse” that is now de rigueur as it reveals and re-constructs borders, reveling in their shifts, flows, and permeability. This is not collapse but crossing, not eradicating borders but permeating them.

In fact, permeability is a key concept in Honchell's practice, where photography, drawing, sculpture, and the manifold processes of fiber art variously juxtapose, intermingle, and inflect each other. Honchell—who, not incidentally, teaches a

Previous spread: *Things Have to Be Imagined to Be Changed IV*, 2008, DETAIL

Facing page: *Purl*, 2008-09, DETAIL

course called “Permeable Membranes” in the Fiber and Material Studies program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago—neither constrains herself narrowly to any single discipline, nor routinely enacts the contemporary postdisciplinary emphasis on hybridity.

Rather, Honchell’s work playfully but purposefully shifts and reconfigures boundaries between disciplines, methods, and histories (her art has emerged in relation to the discourse of feminist art but is in no way confined by it), while punching holes in the membranes separating high from low, inside from outside, self from other. Making prominent use of materials mass-produced or of modest origin—donated fabrics, rumpled from disuse; compellingly gaudy dollar-store flotsam; wall-sized swathes of cloth with alluring sheens—Honchell permeates the gallery with enigmatic forms, while presenting a variety of techniques and methods that, especially when juxtaposed, reveal their mutual interpenetration: drawing is sculpting is sewing is cutting....

At the same time, what “personal geographies” implies, as both the title of a show and a body of work, is a crossing-over of the personal and the public, inner experience and outer expression, depths and surfaces. Each of these mixes with, influences, or saturates the other: a further mode of permeation.

Inverting the famous definition of God referred to in St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, one might say that “Personal Geographies” comprises (without containing) a group of

techniques and artifacts whose centers are nowhere and whose circumferences can be anywhere. The conceptual, technical, and cultural boundaries in Honchell’s work are many but porous: her containers leak: and in leaking, they communicate, with the gestures and matters of one discipline, idea, or cultural register connecting with, building upon, and permeating those of another....

[partition]

— HAPTIC

For Honchell, there is no permeation without partition. Her drawings, for example, both conjure and disrupt partitions in a single gesture, rendering undulant lines whose ripples and creases make for a thousand frangible delineations. What is being delineated, however, is as uncertain and suggestive as the wavering, stratifying lines themselves. Like dream imagery, Honchell’s drawings are overdetermined, an amalgam of sources and sites, not reducible to any single one.

But if the traces of the artist’s hand in these drawings make anything certain, it is the presence and prevalence of touch itself. For Honchell, palpability is inseparable from the act of creation; drawing is a form of touch, an engagement with materials and a way of imaginatively palpating the body’s inner geography.

With their brightly corporeal palates—visceral pinks and reds, bilious greens and browns, a range of fluidic hues—and



Things Have to Be Imagined to Be Changed VII, 2008, DETAIL

their intestinal curls, recursive kinks, and the suggestion of burgeoning carbuncles, the drawings have all the sparkle and flow of a body’s internal architecture, rendered in cross-sections or in strange bundles. This is drawing as an extension of touch.

— TOPOGRAPHIES

The surrealists surveyed landscapes and saw in them the human body. Honchell goes a step further, also finding geographies in the body. Revealing the insides of the body amounts to making it public, and making the inner body public is to treat it as an impossible landscape, an unfathomable geography. *Invisible Depressions*, for example, reads like a relief map for some protean land made up of shifting surfaces and

uncertain, fluent terrain, while *Badlands* conjures the ridges and plateaus of the eponymous park in a manner that mingles points of view, with perpendicular surfaces rising against plateaus seen from above. The landscape of *Bluffs*, meanwhile, hearkens back to the body, with its stacked shapes resembling marbled slabs of meat.

In Honchell’s drawings, landscape becomes corporeal just as the body becomes geographical, their respective spills, crevices, and protuberances permeating each other. But Honchell’s drawings do more than simply analogize inner body and outer landscape. They bring each into the other’s domain, conjuring a topography that opens the body to the public even as it makes landscape personal.



Things Have to Be Imagined to Be Changed IV, 2008, DETAIL

— INSIDE-OUT

Inner thus becomes outer, each touching the other, and neither contained by its proper partitions. This strategic confusion of inside and out gives rise to an erotics: the body's viscera as sensual, playful expanses; a crossing of the personal and private; a libidinal terrain where the corporeal crevices and canals are explored, laid bare, and where the earth's surfaces are mimicked in the dips, wrinkles, and eddies of a disclosed anatomy—the personal made geographical.

If Honchell's drawings thus give rise to a pleasurable giddiness, perhaps this is because "all borders are dangerous" (to quote the title of one drawing). The risk here has to do with revealing, and feeling, what is private—the body's intimate geographies: hands sculpting a body by drawing it, by delineating the body's surfaces, even those surfaces that lie in the depths: emotional viscera traced on a soft map.

[permute]

— DRAWING IN AN EXPANDED FIELD*

Maps can represent surfaces—of the earth, the body, a system—but Honchell recognizes that drawing a map is also the act of creating another surface, sometimes a double surface. She takes drawing off the paper and makes it hover over and against a wall, a surface upon a surface.

Engaging the specific properties wire—its linearity and

pliability—Honchell treats drawing as a mode of sculpture and sewing in her work *The Myth of Solid Ground*. Mapping the zone between drawing, sculpture, and the processes of fiber art, she thus produces drawing in an expanded field. No longer simply a line traced on paper, her lines are molded in metal, with shaped wire plugged into the gallery wall like electrical conduits.

These gestures resemble hand processes found in fiber art: stitching, embellishing, sewing. Honchell thus draws by sculpting lines, and sculpts lines by sewing, with wire winding over and plunging into the wall's surface. Strata accumulate and shapes take form, giving rise to an imagined landscape at once abstract and elemental, and doubled by its own filigreed shadows.

— SKIN EFFECTS

It is not only the physical but also the historical and metaphorical properties of wire that interest Honchell. In drawing, sculpting, and stitching with wire, the artist creates landscapes that re-present the origins of the wire itself: the earth, the mountains from which the wire was drawn.

Drawn wire thereby becomes drawing wire. While Honchell plays along the borders between sculpting and drawing through references to the origins of wire—emerging from the earth's depths to be strung over its surface—she also refers back to the surface of the human body, its skin.

Wire, too, has skin. As an electrical conductor, wire displays

"skin effects," the tendency for electrical currents to course toward the surface of the conductor. At once recapitulating and playfully twisting and enlarging this physical quality for its metaphorical potential, Honchell endows wire with another skin effect: her landscape becomes personal, skin-like, resembling a giant fingerprint on the wall—public landscape permuting into the very emblem of identity.

— MYTHS OF SOLID GROUND

And yet, for all these connections and conductions, all these evocations of landscape and identity, Honchell's wires do not hold anything together; nothing remains stable. The landscape depicted in her sculpted drawing is destined to shift and come apart, as the piece is dismantled, never to be reconfigured in just the same way. Despite their pretensions to stability, security, and connection, these wires are part of a meditation on instability, ephemerality, and uncertain destinations, all the more poignant for having found form in something as apparently enduring as mountains.

In this way, *The Myth of Solid Ground* is about insecurity, an elegant, even elegiac, statement of the fact that the most seemingly solid ground is shifting, fleeting, bound to permute and even dissolve—as evident in the half-there, half-not nature of the wire drawing, which seems to dematerialize in its very materialization. But in Honchell's hands, the fugacious ground on which we stand is not (only) a cause for anxiety, but for celebration; its passages give rise to new acts of creation.

[puncture]

— OUTSIDE-IN

Passages figure prominently in other works by Honchell. Whereas her ink drawings bring what is inside out, her large cloth and thread series *Things Have to Be Imagined to Be Changed* have moved from the outside in. Originally stretched canopy-like among trees as décor for the Lollapalooza music festival, these shimmering cloths have infiltrated the gallery. In their original setting—the simultaneously natural and artificial environs of Chicago’s Grant Park—they blended with the sky, lake, and trees, while also remaining conspicuously artificial. As Honchell commented, “I wanted them to exist in a place between natural habitat and gaudy intrusion, like the festival itself.”

Outdoors, these punctured, diaphanous pieces had framed their location, reflecting, filtering and masking the light while undulating with the breezy currents for which the Windy City is known. They at once created and enclosed a space. But in their passage to the interior of the gallery, they do something dramatically different. These giant punctured swathes simultaneously partition and puncture the discrete but mutually dependent disciplines of fashion and design, all the while vertiginously upsetting the audience’s sense of scale. Moreover, skinning the walls of the mezzanine levels of the galleries and spilling over the floors, the sheer cloths catch and reflect the

artificial light of the indoor space, casting a glow that can be seen from the upper and lower galleries; they become color fields.

— PORES

Of course, the holes that punctuate the skin of the cloth are also transformed by their passage indoors. In the gallery setting, the holes no longer frame sky and leaves, but disrupt the metallic surface of the cloth, here and there encircling the sinewy shadows behind them. If this evokes both sub- and epidermal tissue, then the cloth can be said to serve as a second skin for the gallery walls; the holes are its pores.

Pores are what make the skin a permeable membrane; they both let perspiration escape and allow for absorption. Every body is thus at once enclosed and dis-closed by pores. Similarly, the pores in Honchell’s pieces make the cloth permeable—a filter that reflects light and lets it through, a screen made up of both gleams and gaps, a series of passages that invite permeation in various registers: between landscape and body, between indoors and out, between high/refined (the art gallery) and low/tawdry (the flashy glitz of the cloth).

But as the cloth droops from wall to floor, it also slackens, its porous surface now reading like wrinkled flesh and rippled landscape. In that same movement, the cloth permutes from a geometrical, surface-work akin to painting into a sculptural piece, emphatically dimensional, textured, topographic. But the border between these two aspects remains porous, each folding

into the other, somewhere around the corner where the wall meets the floor.

— FLESHHOLD

Pores punctuate the threshold between inside and out, self and other: the skin, the flesh that both invites and rebuffs touch, solicits and protects against penetration. Similarly, skinning the walls of the gallery is a gesture to be understood in both senses of the ambivalent verb “to skin”: to cover with skin and to remove the skin.

To cover with skin: Honchell stretches a shiny skin over the walls of the gallery as a way of becoming more intimate with the space, of learning the particularities of the site in which she installs the piece. In giving flesh to the space, she encloses it, and herself within it.

To remove the skin: Skinning is also a way of penetrating the space, of denuding it, intimately, even as the artist covers it. Honchell calls attention to the walls, the angles of the interior architecture, laying them bare by covering them up.

Thus fleshhold: to skin at the dangerous boundary between enclosure and exposure.



The Myth of Solid Ground, 2009, DETAIL



Things Have to Be Imagined to Be Changed IV, 2008, DETAIL

[*purl*]

— FLOW

Partitions, passages, and punctures all appear again in Honchell's *Purl*, a beguiling series of rambling cloth modules whose spirals spin into each other, intersect, break open, flow. The title of the piece is multivalent; to purl is "to move in ripples or with a murmuring sound, to run or rise in circles or eddies, to swirl." It is also the name of a stitch used in knitting. Taking this stitch as her starting point, Honchell devised an innovative construction method of her own.

The uppermost fabrics in this piece are elasticized knits. Honchell uses a stitched line to connect the cloths, conjuring flows between landscape, topography, and the body that also link to her drawings, in both ink and wire. The modular components comprise layers of cloth accruing under a stitched (or drawn?) surface. The top fabrics, whose palate was determined on the basis of research in fashion color trending for fall 2007/winter 2008, is new. But the layers beneath this translucent surface reflect a history that goes beyond that of the artist alone.

In Honchell's own words: "One can discover a forty-year history of American plaids, disco-era prints, and quaint country calicos just beneath the smooth surface. Purple, a color often described as regal, ornate, imperial, and elaborate, features prominently in the top layer, adding a sense of import to the eccentric archive of cloth underneath. The color shift that

occurs on the surface of *Purl* hints at many things, from purple mountains (majesty?) to the fading of a bruise just beneath the surface of your skin."

— WITHOUT CENTER

In some ways, *Purl*, is the centerpiece of this a-centric show, a sprawling cluster of cellular cloth spirals with no clear point of origin or end. *Purl*, itself has no center, and its circumferences always shifting as the project grows. Its formal and material properties embody the highly personal, but resolutely non-individual, history from which it emerges—a history that the artist speaks of as an accident, and a gift.

— GIFT

"This piece happened by accident," Honchell remarks of *Purl*.. She received a large donation of cloth—entire boxes of mixed fabrics—from a woman who had been an avid sewer. Honchell never met the donor, but this gift, this accident, was life-giving, comparable, according to the artist, to an organ donation.

"I was really struggling in my studio before I received this gift. It revitalized my practice and made me feel intimately connected to someone I will never meet. I am grateful to and curious about the woman whose cloth and garments literally built up this piece. *Purl*, is an intimate mingling of two women's sewing practices, one supporting the other."

the pleasure—and invites the risk—of being incised and stitched up, pulled apart and pieced together, with boundaries crossed, permeated, ruptured, and, finally, reconstituted anew. This, I confess, is my own experience of Honchell's art—but it is an experience that should be no less pervasive for being personal.

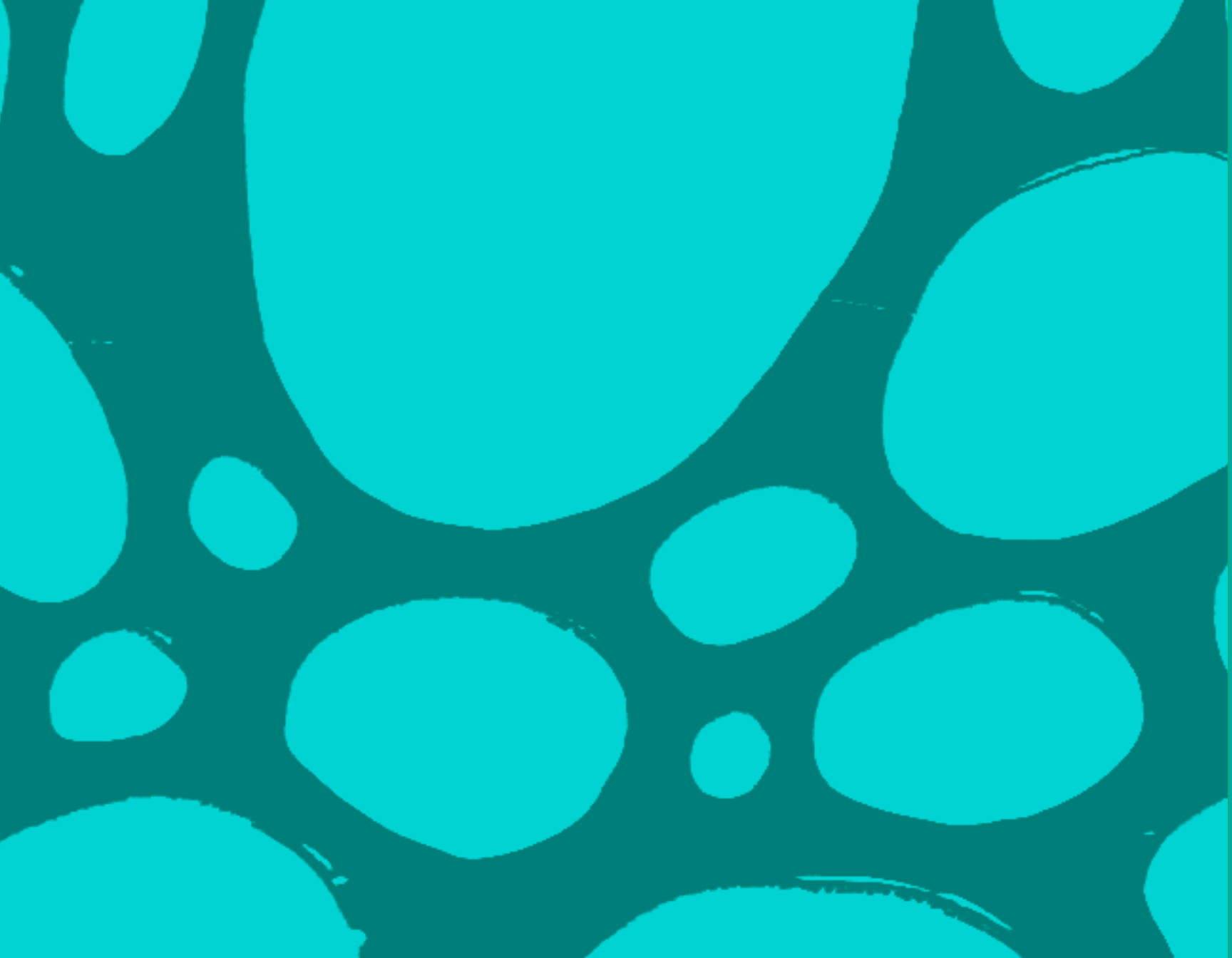
* Rosalind Krauss writes of "sculpture in an expanded field" in her classic essay of that title.

The "found history" of which *Purl*, is composed is a gift, as personal as it is intimate, but not specific to any particular individual person or artist. It is part of an artist's confession (the disclosure of emotional viscera)—but somehow an anonymous confession, one that leads us into uncanny, alien landscapes where our own imaginations are liberated to mingle with the histories of others.

In this way, "purl" names not only a piece of art made up of modest materials, but also a method of artistic labor, as well as a sensibility, even an ethos. It describes an attitude of thought and work oriented outward, eccentrically, in ever widening circles. A gift in origin and end, its very form enacts what a gift does: it stitches together while also opening up; it connects but allows for growth, movement, passage. It permeates the membranes between high and low, inside and out, body and landscape, self and other. It spirals and grows and circulates like a gift is supposed to.

— PLEASURE

And the gift of this permeability is, finally, what accounts for the poignant, difficult pleasure of Honchell's art, and of *Personal Geographies*. From fabric beckoning to be touched—haptic temptations—to wire as palpable but as fleeting as a dream; from macrocosmic landscapes to the microcosmic labyrinths of the human body; from installation and sculpture to drawing and sewing; from high to low and back again: this is art that incites

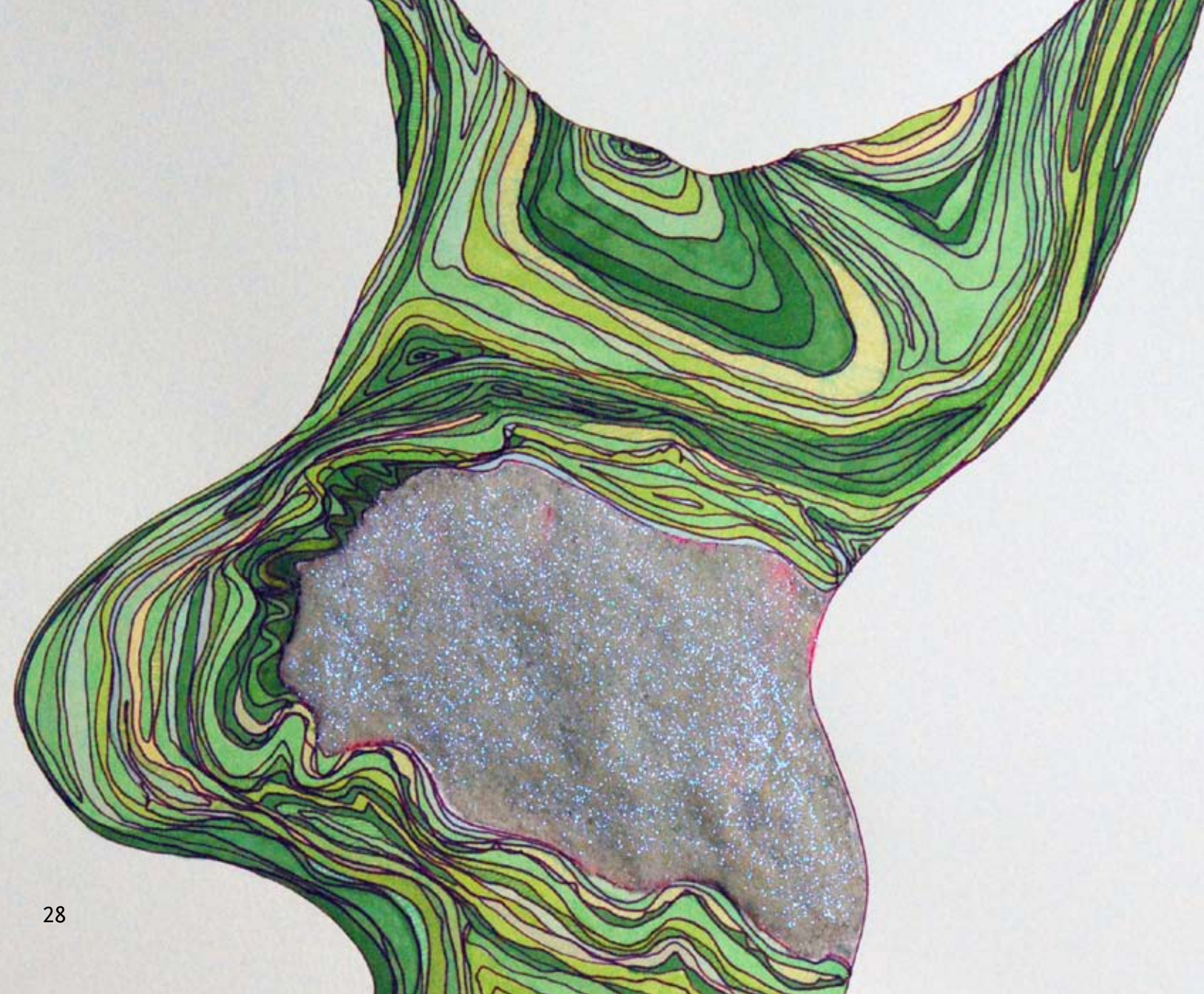


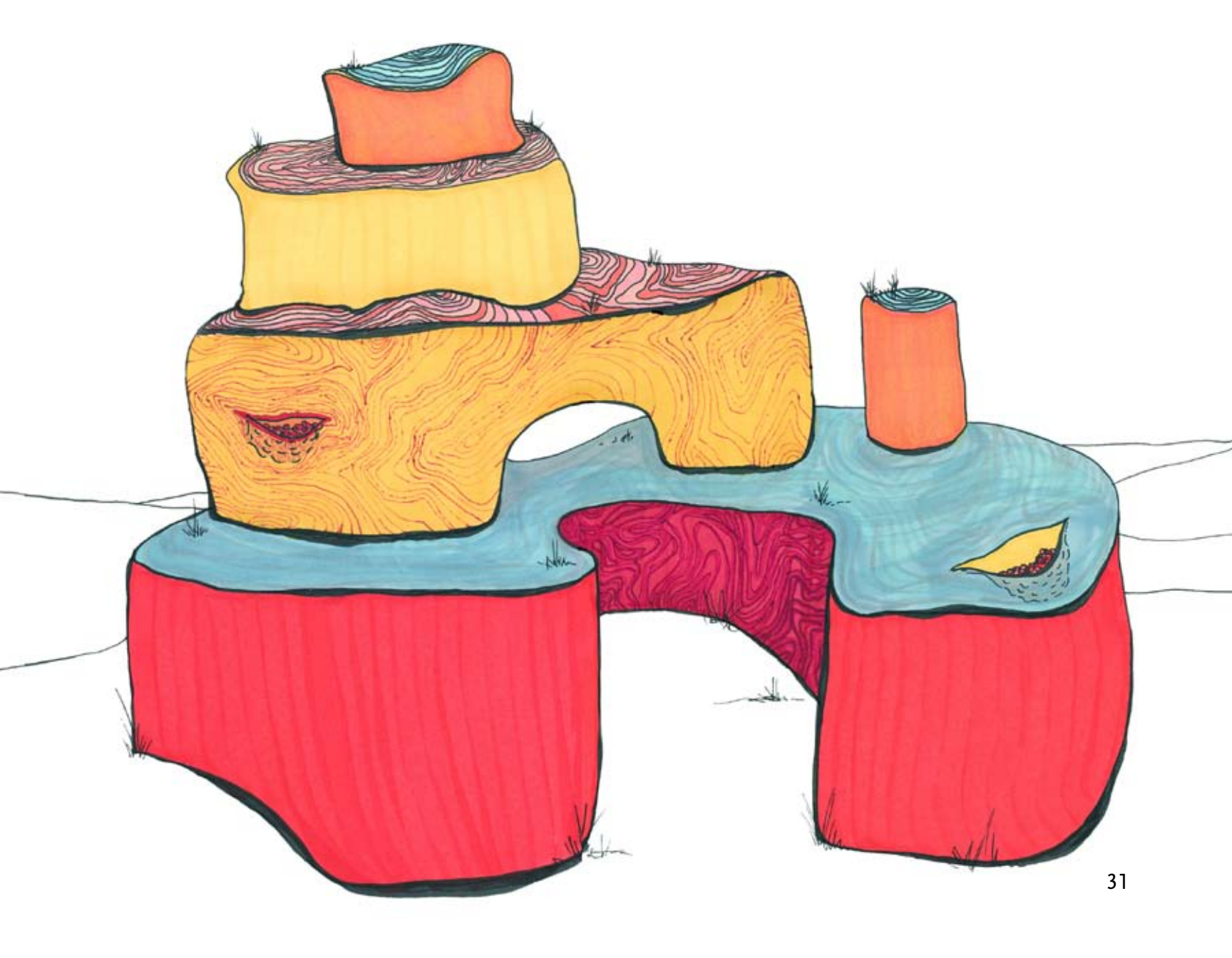
Plates

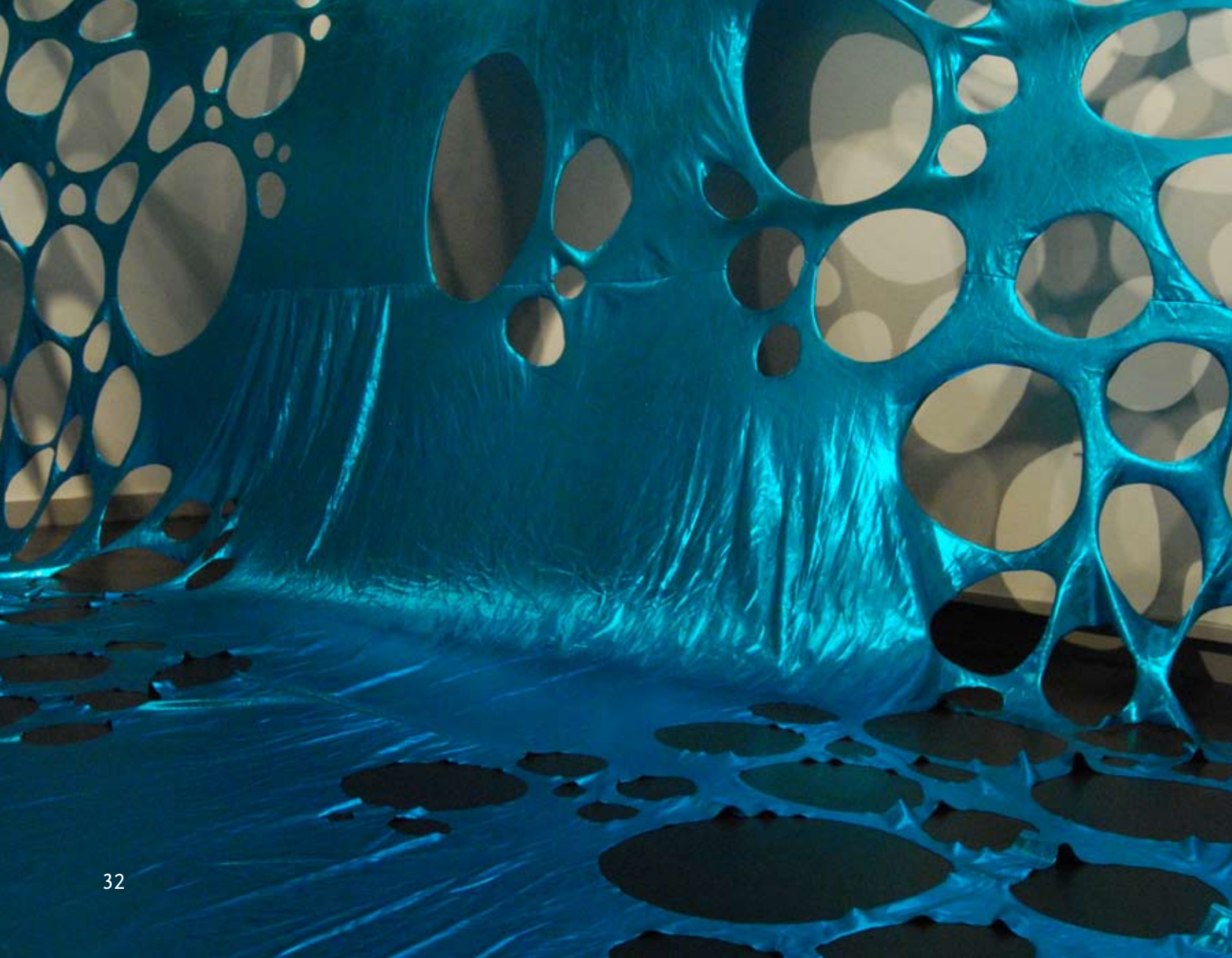












List of Works

All Borders Are Dangerous, 2007

ink, glass, glitter on bristol

14 x 11 inches

Glacial, 2008

ink on bristol

20 x 24 inches

Invisible Depressions, 2008

ink on bristol

20 x 24 inches

Something Stronger Than Reason, 2007

ink on bristol

11 x 14 inches

Collection of Timothy Joyce

The Risks of Scaling Mountains, 2008

ink on bristol

11 x 17 inches

Bluffs, 2007

ink on bristol

11 x 14 inches



Purl, 2008-09, INSTALLATION VIEW



Something Stronger Than Reason, 2007

Badlands, 2008

ink on bristol

20 x 24 inches

Courtesy of the Artist

The Things We Want Are Transformative, 2008

ink on bristol

20 x 24 inches

Collection of Joan Livingstone

Purl, 2008-09

cloth, thread

dimensions variable

Things Have to be Imagined to be Changed IV, 2008

cloth, thread

216 x 300 inches

Things Have to be Imagined to be Changed VII, 2008

cloth, thread

192 x 180 inches

The Myth of Solid Ground, 2009

wire

228 x 96 x 6 inches

Acknowledgments

Many individuals are involved with the staging of an exhibition and the creation of a publication such as this.

My thanks go first to Becky Alley, Director of University Galleries at Murray State University for the invitation to exhibit my work. The faculty and students of the Art and Art History Departments at the University were generous and welcoming.

Thoughtful and creative design is the key to translating the experience of an exhibition into a catalog. Steve Juras of the Swiderski Institute took great care in crafting the graphic vision for this publication.

Special thanks to Jeremy Biles for the time invested in numerous thoughtful and articulate conversations about my work, and for the contribution of a most insightful and critical essay.

I would like to thank my colleagues from the Department of Fiber and Material Studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago for their continued support of my professional practice, in particular Anne Wilson, Joan Livingstone, and Fraser Taylor.

Thanks to Lindsay Packer for her keen editing eye and intelligent feedback on everything I do.

In particular, am indebted to three talented artists who were my studio assistants from 2007-2009 while the works for this exhibition and publication were being prepared. Danna Rooth, Efrén Adkins, and Jackie Niekamp worked tirelessly and were instrumental to the development, production, and success of *Personal Geographies*.

Finally, this catalog is dedicated to my husband, Tim Joyce, whose enthusiasm, humor, and support make everything possible.

AMY HONCHELL

