Nether Mind

The Nether World

is a recurring idea in most cultures - the infernal region, often a place of contradiction - out of nature, and out of the natural body. It can be a blessing, if the unexpected, irrational, and uncontrollable are your forte, but a curse if you are a candidate for torment. Can such a "place" exist in the Western World in the twentieth century? In Aldous Huxley's seminal futuristic novel, Brave New World, the dulling effect of a recreational drug, Soma, provided the populace with a respite from the equally dulling impact of a technocratic control world. Our contemporary technological world has, instead, delivered Virtual Reality - a means to actualize what could only be imagined - and created the thrill industry of special effects and techno-mutation. One recent example is Arnold Schwarzenegger's film, Total Recall, based on the "mind vacation" and the question: *Are the events imagined or real?* This "reality" may, in fact, be one-dimensional, having no lasting presence or meaning. The underlying condition

of a film such as Total Recall, where "the *message* is the *medium* ", is the antithesis of a Nether World, whose mysteries are passed on through oral culture. Imagine a grandfather sitting a grandson on his knee to tell the "Story of Arnold". The response might be "Turn on the VCR (or CD-ROM, or whatever), and let's see".

Alice's Wonderland was a Nether World - a dimension beyond the illusory mirror.

The trick is getting past the mirror.

I landed in Istanbul and wanted to visit the Grand Bazaar. This desire was ingrained by Hollywood's exoticism - the lure of Arabian Nights (Yes, I know, it's the wrong place, but who's checking the map). It was not what I had imagined. Antiquity had turned into Honest Ed's bargain emporium. But as a visitor, with no comparative scale, I could not judge the prices, even of a cup of coffee. The real experience was in the Spice Market: heaps upon heaps of coloured stuffs and aromas. I could have asked what they were, but probably wouldn't have understood their uses. Nothing could be clearly identified, at least by a Westerner whose spices are bottled. For those who crave the predictable, this could truly be an infernal region.

A year later, I found myself in Tunis and plunged into the Souk - a labyrinth of winding alleys, streets, and tiny stores surrounding the central mosque. I wanted to "get lost "- not like Chet Baker, but to absorb it through the skin. My companion wanted to visit the Grotto of Fertility. We found it, but as a man, I was barred from entry. I stood outside the gate, and watched the comings and goings. I could hear cavernous echoes of conversation, feel the cold air drifting out into the heat of North Africa (how was this possible?), and smell *something*. Not a fragrance, not the musty odour of ruin, but something I could not describe. I asked what the Grotto had been like, but I knew the answer:

You had to be there.

Anastasia Tzeckas

Anankе
1993

Carl Skelton

Work in progress (detail)
acrylic, false eyes, uranium glass
1993
photo: Isaac Applebaum

Lyla Rye

Dirt Pocket Darlings
1993

Reinhard Reitzenstein

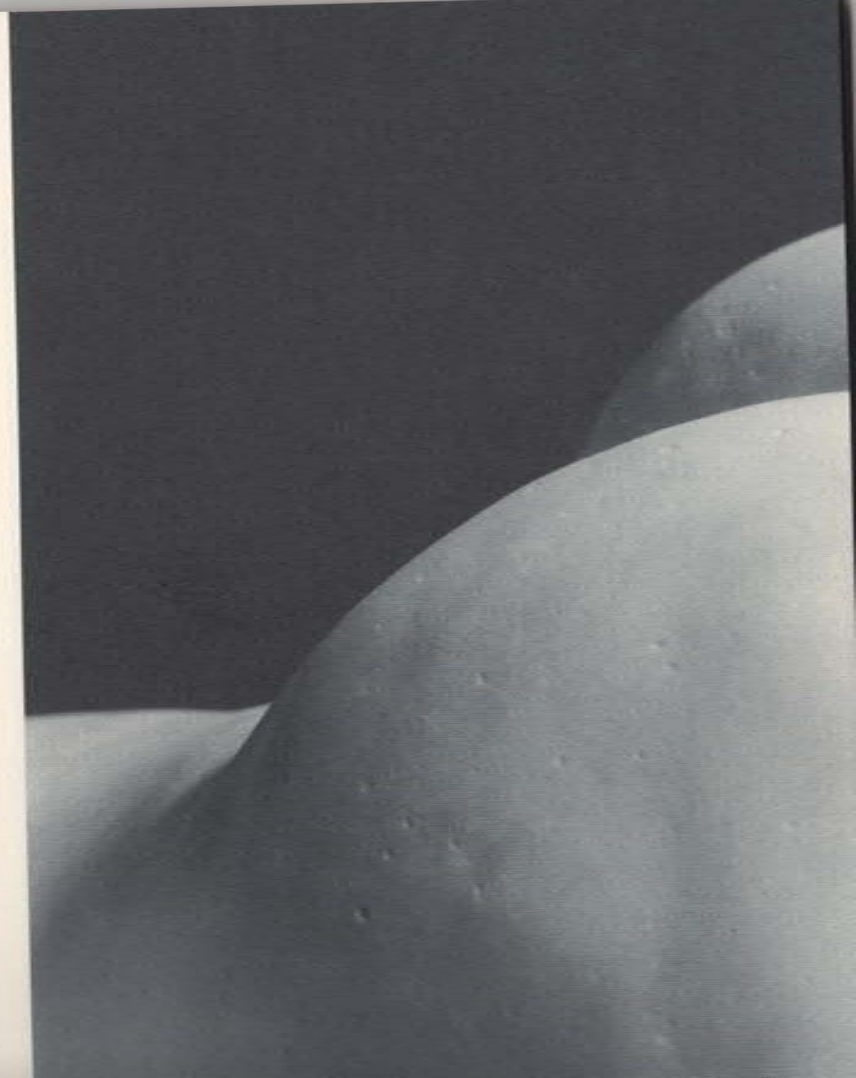
World Tree
Confederation Art Centre, P.E.I.
1993

Mary Catherine Newcomb

Work in progress
1993

Catherine McCarty

Work in progress
1993



Greg Hefford

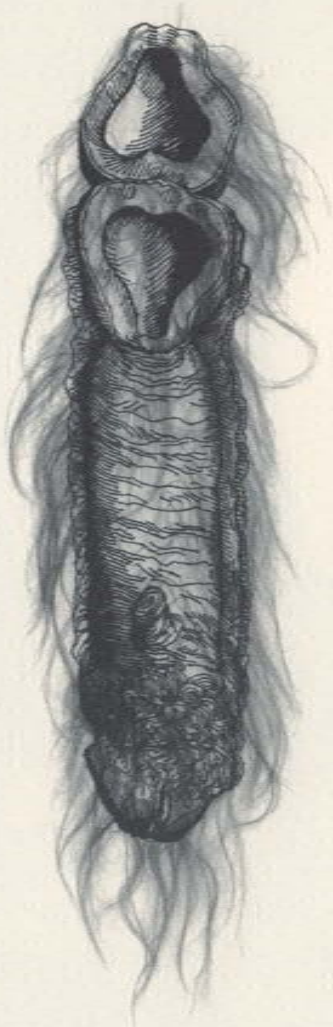
Address

All the male parts are also found in women,
there is not any difference except for one point...
that is, that the female parts are internal
and those of the male are external...

-Galen, De usu part., 2nd century A.D.

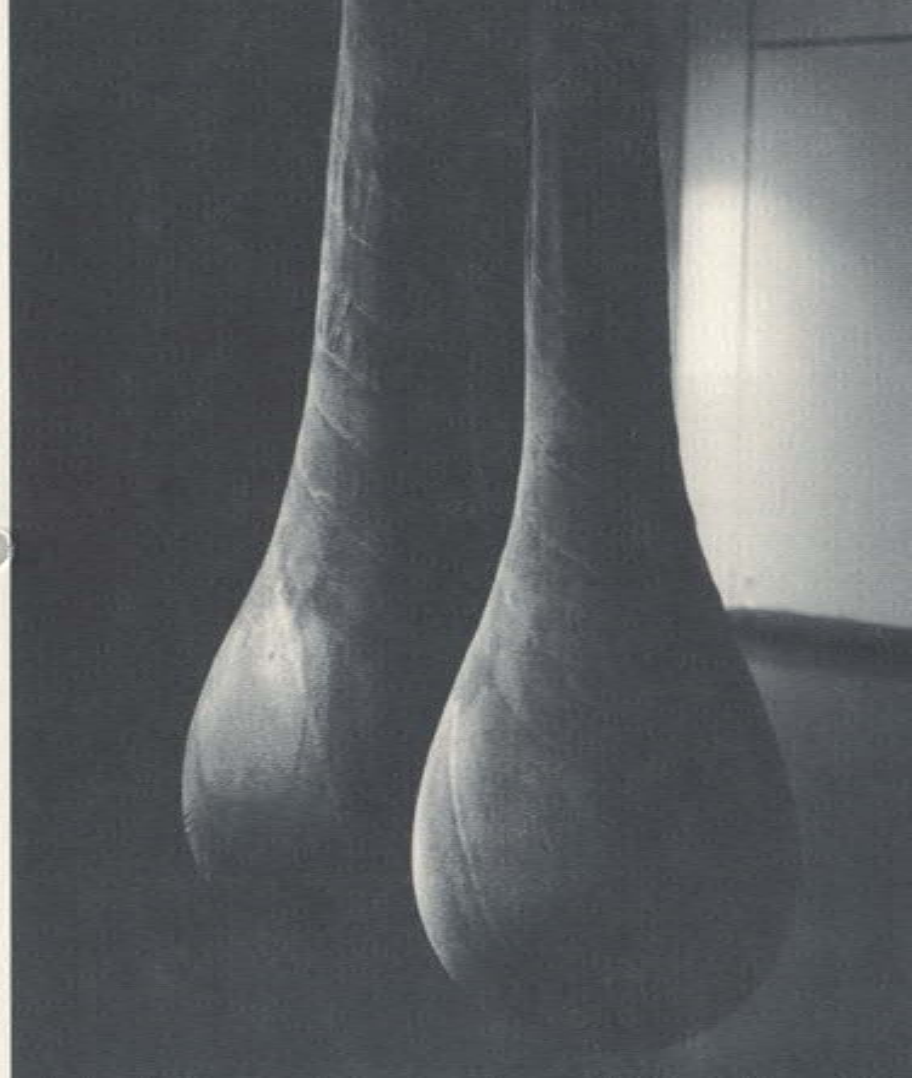
Catherine Heard

Untitled (after Vesalius, 1543)
1993
photo: Simon Glass



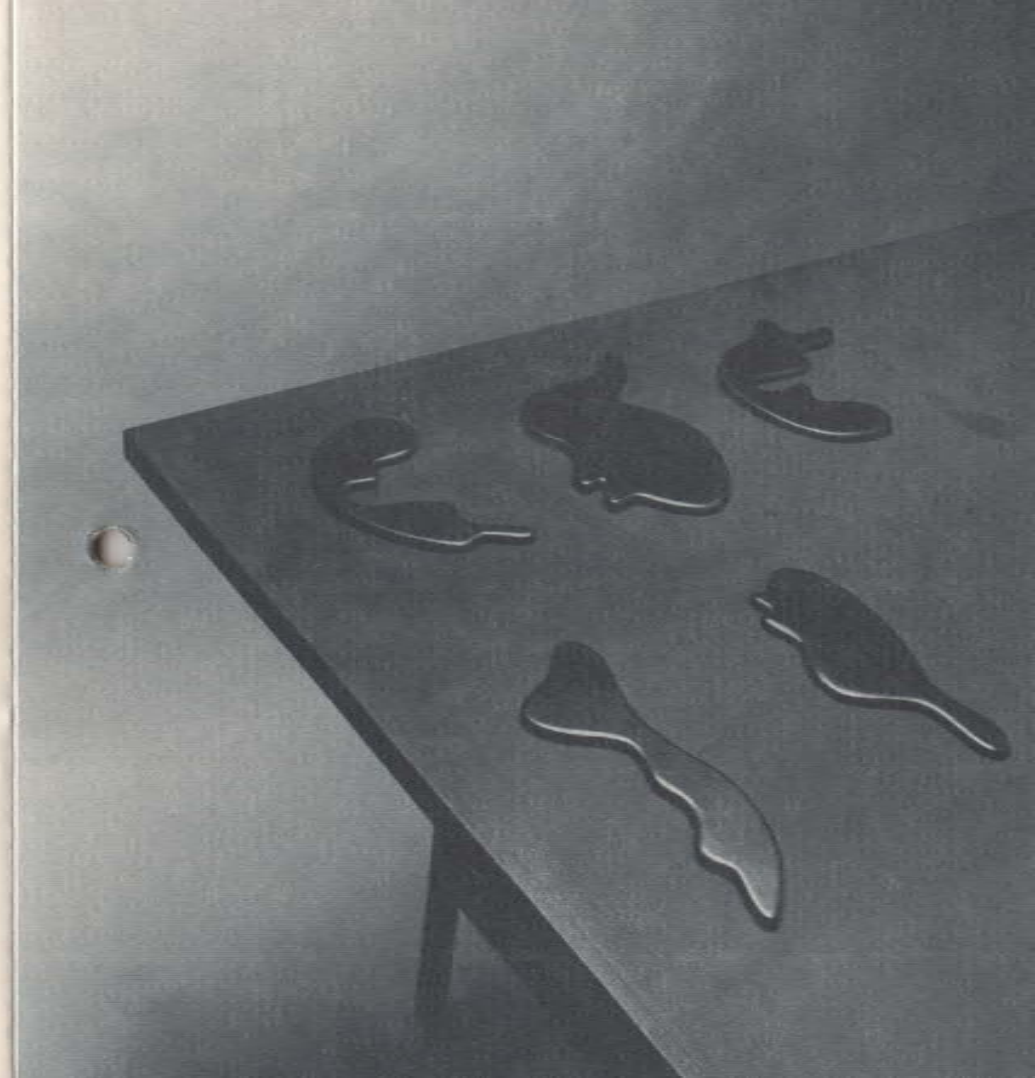
John Dickson

Strange Fruit (detail)
canvas, rubber, latex, water, steel
1993



Tom Dean

Untitled
carved ebony
1987
photo: John Williamson



Sunday July 18

Carl Skelton ushered me into his basement to show me his latest work, and a work in progress: Oracle, blinking "Yes, No", from two light bulbs whose cords snaked up to the ceiling; a "uranium glass" piece - its black stem embedded with glass eyes, unblinking, trailing up. There was an odour I could not identify. I peered into the dark corners, to see what else was there.

Monday July 19

The gallery was closed, but Olga let me in to see Reinhard Reitzenstein's show. I knew nobody else would come through the door. There would be no distractions - the idle conversation of the Saturday gallery-goer. I stood, examining two split trees, tied and hung from the rusting steel beams (I had forgotten how rusty they were), and smelled the beeswax covering the trees. Examining the direction of the wax drips, I tried to determine whether the piece had been made somewhere else and brought in, or done on site. I saw the small spun metal bowls, mounted on the wall above eye level. I knew that Reinhard had filled them with essential oils. I could smell the fragrances, somehow more pungent because I could not see the contents.

I remember having dinner with the geologist, tracking the surface of the nether world. Geology seems like such a practical, "down to earth" profession. Inert matter, categories of minerals, set procedures, strata maps, etc. But how do you know what's really down there, what you're looking for, and where to look? Standing on the infinite vista or on top of a mountain range, it may seem impossible. Perhaps it was the wine, or the company, but he finally broke down and told me the secret:

Kiss the rock, then you will know.

Wednesday August 11

One of those heavy, humid summer days. I stared out of the bus window. The trip to the Koffler Gallery was longer than I remembered. I was certain that it was "just past the hill", but where was the hill? I knew I was in North York, but it had the feel of the exotic: Kosher shops (was I back in Israel?), high rises baking in the sun, and steamy gardens.

John Massier showed me the latest High Junk exhibition. I stayed for an hour, drank his coffee, talked, and watched the comings and goings. We returned downtown together. I tried to describe my earlier "mind vacation" to him (the trip up). The heat and hazy sunlight were making me sleepy (or hungry), and I began to Recall the show. Lyla Rye's "peelings" of the pock-marked linen covered gallery walls. The odour of latex and talcum powder. I had stood there for some time, not wanting to touch, but finally began blowing. The sheets undulated in the "breeze", the kind that comes up from the desert, or so I imagined. Greg Hefford's ersatz TV monitors hanging from the lighting track, with curious and unfathomable images blinking and rotating. John Dickson's ball/sack shapes terminating in a glove, the giganticism of Disney on some erotic binge of black rubber and water sports (they were filled with water). There was an unexpected acoustic quality to the gallery space. I had called into the grotto and found a ritual hanging of unidentifiable carcasses.

Friday August 27

I received a redirected package from an Alberta film-maker, dated May 25, with a covering letter, dated June 7. It was about Max Streicher - an invitation to visit his studio in Toronto, between June 7 and 11- to comment on his work for a film being made on the relationship between artwork and text: "How the ways of looking, ways of documenting, and ways of discussing inform the 'critical' process". I was reading it, for the first time, today.

The same day, I went back to see Carl and to look at the catalogue images - not so much to find a connective thread, but to survey the rest of the terrain. I had an overwhelming sense of looking at unidentified remains (which should come as no surprise in the Nether World), and was struck by the manner in which these pictures appeared as clues to a mystery, or narrative, but resisted resolution or a conclusion.

Mary Catherine Newcomb's photograph appeared to describe a sculpture in progress in the studio, or some pre-historic sea creature being carved, or carved up.

Catherine McCarty had submitted a "detail" of a sculpture - buttocks perhaps (cropping plays strange tricks with recognition).

Max Streicher's photograph was equally ambiguous - showing an alabaster-like form with something connected to it, obscured by darkness.

Another image quirk was evident in Lyla Rye's photograph of a plumbing fixture. I was told it would be the starting point for a site work. I was taken by the Duchampian pun (what else) of the fixture's name, "Dirt Pocket Darlings". Carl thought it would be a good name for a band. I agreed, but wished I had thought of it myself.

Greg Hefford sent a photo of the deserted Gardiner Expressway, viewed from below, looking East (I think). Carl was not sure what relationship it would have to Greg's piece in the show. I couldn't imagine either, but it didn't matter because I am fascinated by the Expressway too - a lumbering beast, afflicted with a malignant rust virus.

Catherine Heard's image looked like a drawing, but this was another deception. It was in fact a photo, of an embroidery on translucent fabric. The image, a sixteenth-century medical illustration of a vagina, had been woven through the cloth with (real) hair, strands of which showed through the back.

Anastasia Tzeckas had submitted the only "graphic" image - a transfer montage of a plump, but demure, Venus balancing on a brain (or was it a walnut), and a skeleton looking away, with a Victorian gesture of modesty. How could such body language be possible without flesh?

Tom Dean - a photograph of carved ebony "puddles" from 1987. My mind's eye Recalled his recent work featured on the cover of the Spring issue of C. I keep coming across that magazine in my office. Cast plaster-looking-like-old-metal babies crawling on the floor. Had they come to life, from the magazine, crying for my attention?

I read in the Globe and Mail's travel section, recently, about a correspondent's journey through a tunnel which had been constructed in the time of King David, to bring fresh water from the Judean hills into the old city of Jerusalem. The article recounted a sense of isolation, a cold chill in the waters, and a panic of claustrophobia - the nether regions, cut off from all daylight - but also a sense of wonder at this feat of engineering. I know that travel articles are meant to entice the would-be tourist to visit and partake of a similar or identical experience. But would tourists really line up, no matter how compelling the writing, to risk life and limb? Can artworks, or for that matter art writing, trigger something similar - a journey to a nether world, through the nether mind?

Had I, inadvertently, already passed through the mirror to this place?

Nether Mind's third exhibition will take place in the basement of the 53 Fraser Avenue building, located in the industrial nether section of West Toronto. The building (so I am told) was originally constructed as a women's prison. More recently, the basement has been a sweat shop, making felt liners for boots and, apparently, parts for truck side mirrors. Mr. Sandman was located upstairs at one time - a business that made sand-cast novelty items. The door to the space is also used by Sully's Gym - still operating.

Traces of the building's past can be found here and there. Works of art can also be found here and there, for a viewer to sift through, assess, and identify, to see what stories come to mind.

You're on your own.

Ihor Holubizky