distance & trace

exhibition dates: march 17 – april 15, 2006
curated by: Marilyn Waligore
opening reception: friday, march 17, 6:30 to 9 p.m.

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT DALLAS
SCHOOL OF ARTS & HUMANITIES
VISUAL ARTS BUILDING, MAIN GALLERY

Artist’s Gallery Talk
march 17
Anni Holm
3:30 p.m.
Visual Arts Gallery

cover images:
Anni Holm (above) Anwa, India
Steven Silberg (upper right)
Bit Transformation, detail
Edwin Jager & John O. Smith (lower right) Threshold

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Distance & Trace, an exhibition curated by Associate Professor Marilyn Waligore, examines the distance between the original and copy produced as a result of processes of reproduction. Distance & Trace, on view in the Visual Arts Gallery of the University of Texas at Dallas from March 17 through April 15, 2006, features the work of eight artists: Texas artists Debora Hunter and Kevin Todora of Dallas, and Elizabeth Mellott-Carrón of Denton; Edwin Jager and John O. Smith of Wisconsin; Anni Holm, Chicago, Illinois; Steven H. Silberg, Baltimore, Maryland; and Stephanie Dinkins, New York. These artists have embraced processes of reproduction and have exploited their potential for creative possibilities, for investigating how our view of subject matter is altered or changed through digital and light-based processes—from artists' books to digital projections to unique photograms. These mediated images investigate concepts of the real, the copy, the dream, and the imagined.

For photography is an imprint or transfer off the real, it is a photochemically processed trace casually connected to that thing in the world to which it refers in a manner parallel to that of fingerprints or footprints or the rings of water that cold glasses leave on tables. The photograph is thus generically distinct from painting or sculpture or drawing. On the family tree of images it is closer to palm prints, death masks, the Shroud of Turin, or the tracks of gulls on the beach. For technically and semiotically speaking, drawings and paintings are icons, while photographs are indexes. Critic Rosalind Krauss has written extensively on the photographic index and the status of the photograph as trace, as shadow, as an imprint of the real. With the introduction of digital technology into the domain of photographic production we can consider how artists have explored the potential of digital processes, while also reflecting on the connections between the thing itself, the object in the world, the point of origin for a work, and the images these source materials engender. We may consider not only the trace itself, but also the status of the original referent. Photographs, often the only remaining echo of an original object or experienced event, are ideal tools to record the transitory or fleeting.

In Distance & Trace, lens-based or light-based technologies are adopted by these artists, but the tension between copy and original varies greatly among the works on view. Anni Holm, Kevin Todora, Steven H. Silberg, and Stephanie Dinkins employ digital media to perform this transformation. Anni Holm’s portraits of international students are generated using a matrix, a pattern derived from the fingerprints of her subjects. She fuses commentary on identity with that of homeland security, as a response to the U.S. government’s monitoring of individuals from abroad. Her large-scale portraits recall the gridded works of Chuck Close. However, her passport images, with their obsessive reference to the subject through the use of 4000 life-size fingerprints to comprise the final image, parallel the massive collection of information on foreign visitors to the United States and the merging of photographic and electronic means of data acquisition. Holm, a native of Denmark, invites international students, Anwa from India, Michael from Singapore, Reo from Japan, Jana from Germany, to pose for her camera. Merging two forms of identification, the fingerprint and the headshot, she questions
generate a new work that embraces storytelling through performance.

Mellott-Carreón constructs dioramas based partly on "her imagina-
tion of what war is like" and on her soldier husband’s experiences in
the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts. Elizabeth Mellott-
Carreón mines the distance between the experiences of her hus-
band, a U.S. soldier serving in the Iraq/Afghanistan War, and her inter-
pretations of those her. Her assembled dioramas include photo-
tomgs, shadows collected from objects placed in arrangements,
which reference varied narratives. She pulls source material from her
own dreams, stories told by her husband and his friends, and news
from the Middle East. The intimate shadow boxes present unassum-
ing, delicate arrangements of objects, such as a small dress. In The
Long Hike Back a plastic military toy soldier points his gun toward a
sky strewn with wilted blossoms. The child-like presentation appears
shrouded in mystery, providing insight into a secret code, and draw-
ing the viewer close. Tiny lights illuminate the dark corners of the
frames. Solarized photograms of solitary flower stalks punctuate the
altargnum black rectangles of the diorama display, transforming the
images into memorials. For Mellott-Carreón these staged events rep-
resent interpretations of the war, lost lives, “the emptiness and con-
sciousness of distance evoked by physical separation.” 21 The gravi-
ty of the work gradually overcomes us as we consider the larger con-
text of the work, references to military conflict far removed from our
daily lives, but close to home for those individuals serving in the mil-
itary and their families.

These artists practice methods that we use to duplicate, to archive,
to record, and to document the everyday as well as historical
events. Their insistence on process both affirms our reliance upon
methods of reproduction and duplication, and also acknowledges
despite herculean efforts, our inability to permanently and exactly fix
the image or archive information, both remnants of our lives.
Mellott-Carreón’s haunting dreams, Silberg’s witness to degradation,
Dinkin’s body drawings, Hunter’s replaced models, Jager and Smith’s
records of performance, Todora’s transformations of celebrity and
Holm’s multiplication of identifying marks represent varied
approaches to how we archive our existence.

“We live in a technocratic society. The transient nature of information
has been mapped upon the tangible aspects of our lives. We desire to
hold on to our posts and embrace the speed of the future, all the while
looking for the balance between stability and flux and for the beauty with-
in each.” 22

--Steven H. Silberg

4 Steven H. Silberg, artist’s statement, 2005
7-10 Stephanie Dinkens, artist’s statement, 2005.
11-12 Deborah Hunter artist’s statement, 2005.

Acknowledgments:
I am indebted to Debora Hunter, Frontiers of Flight Museum Series for her contributions to the DIALOGUE exhibition. I also want to thank Cheryl Younger and Ruth Schilling Harwood for their contributions to the DIALOGUE exhibition. And a special thanks is extended to all the participating artists who lent their work for this exhibition.

Debora Hunter, Frontiers of Flight Museum Series

--Marilyn Walgren, 2006

Similar to Todora’s experiment with the image distortion, Silberg
introduces noise into his DVD projection. Bit Transformation, to visu-
alize the degradation of data. Steven H. Silberg pushes at the margins of new technologies through study of the relationships
between temporality and image data. For Silberg, “By reassessing the
relationship between the disruptor and the organizer, degradation
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potentially fugitive digital archives. Silberg notes that he begins with
the statement, “To Be or Not To Be,” due to the connection of the
actual phrase to binary values. He employs the binary values of ASCII equivalents for each letter to calculate this initial statement, which becomes altered over time through the removal of individual “bits.”
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processes of print reproduction, applying an exaggerated overlay,
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whelm the subject. Reminiscent of Andy Warhol’s famous celebri-
ty paintings, Todora creates serial portraits that float in a sea of
halftone texture. His merging of painted stencil and photo-
graphic surface confuses the distinc-
tion between painted marks, printed dots, photographic grain,
and digital noise. Todora recycles images of Darby Crash, an inno-
ative punk rock musician, but unlike Warhol’s Elvis, Marilyn, or
Jackie, Darby appears to sink into the background of these varied
hued circles. Darby’s cult status in the punk rock music industry
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Kevin Todora, Darby series

--Marilyn Walgren, 2006
presented with each image.1 Within the frame of the video projection we view a grid of cells, filled with an array of commonplace light switches. The switches gradually spill from the surface, exposing their inards, the circuitry behind the wall. As each switch becomes transformed, the quote from Shakespeare's Hamlet becomes more and more unintelligible. Silberg embraces the processes that are integral to image and data creation and destruction as he notes, "While the introduction of noise into an existing structure or system creates something new, it does so at the cost of the original."4

Stephanie Dinkins also relies on digital technology to generate new imagery, using a flatbed scanner to collect images of human hair. Her Hair Drawings apply 21st century processes to the reinterpretation of the 19th century photogram—"photographic drawings"—as adopted by Henry Fox Talbot, one of the early innovators in the history of photography. Stephanie Dinkins challenges our assumptions about distinctions made between drawing and digital "direct image acquisition technique."5 Her Hair Drawings, "derived from random configurations of hair scanned directly into the computer," suggest commonplace subjects, such as insects, while they also represent the sinuous black lines of discarded body hair, encouraging readings on more than one level. She notes that her focus on visual interpretation, "marks an effort to reconnect with my experientially gained definition of what art is, how art is made, and the cultures, both familial and societal, that inform my work. Inspired by my grandmother, who would often ask if I could see, as she did, a flower, a face, a horse... lurking in the shape of an amorphous cloud," Dinkins explores aspects of human perception and the potential for engaging the viewer in a more complex manner—parallel to the cloud photographs of contemporary artist Vik Muniz, which challenge the Equivalents series of photographic icon Alfred Stieglitz. For Dinkins, "these 'drawings' are an attempt to simultaneously work within the realm of an art form long excised by the Western art canon while challenging that canon by removing the handwork from the process and by working with a material, discarded body hair, that rides the line between seduction and disgust."6 Unlike Muniz' fluffy cotton balls, forms that suggest both objects and partially cloudy skies, Dinkins work recalls the body. The reference to sexuality and physicality embed these images with a verifiable presence. The delicate, curvilinear "marks" produced by the hair suggest a kind of play and Dinkins invites our participation.

Debora Hunter, Elizabeth Mellott-Carreón, John O. Smith, and Edwin Jager compare the real with the imagined or the replica. Debora Hunter documents the Frontiers of Flight museum, at Dallas Love Field Airport in Texas, where "for eighteen years the museum's collection of aviation artifacts and memorabilia was displayed in the former Luxu room on the second floor of the concourse in Love Field Terminal."7 Debora Hunter photographs model planes, which populate the previous Frontiers of Flight Museum, a place of "untidy and unclean Havens". Debora Hunter photographs images directly onto red indirectly references 9,1 11 and reminds us that our experience of air travel has forever changed. Cabinets of model planes hover in space or lie on surfaces that suggest clustered runways, while planes suspended overhead are blurring to suggest flight. Beyond the glass separating

the small museum from the airport itself, life-size planes await commands from the air traffic controller, introducing a kind of doubling through contrast of scale. Her photographs are copies of copies. Hunter embraces the "mom and pop" style museum that demonstrates an "enduring attempt to preserve, witness, understand and honor" 14 our collective past. The former museum of replicas documented by Hunter has now been replaced by an expansive, new, relocated 100,000 square foot structure on Lemmon Avenue in Dallas, the latter which finally allows for "the displaying of actual aircraft rather than only replicas and memorabilia." 15 Hunter has documented a site which no longer exists, and model objects that now have been replaced by their originals.

Elizabeth Mellott-Carreón, John O. Smith, and Edwin Jager explore the power of objects to promote associations and narratives, making connections between the real and the replica, or between lived experience and the dream. Edwin Jager's and John O. Smith's collaborative book project, Threshold, has its point of origin in a poem written by Edwin Jager, and its virtual counterpart in an elaborate websites. The voices of these two fictional characters lead the viewer through this visual narrative as they "interact in a world where the borders between the real and the imagined are tenuous."10 The book project is designed to document a performance, "placing the protagonists in various situations and exhibiting their contrasting approaches."11 Gridded pages present serial images, adopting geometry as a visual code. The characters engage in rituals to construct transitory sculptural objects—paper rings and floating cubes of light—evoking poetic language through visual association. Jager and Smith use repetition of action and gesture to signify a series of events, "the activities as presented in the non-verbal language of the photographic sequence."12 The resulting visual narrative fosters an innovative transformation of the poetic text. According to the artists, "The layout of the book is influenced by references to film, encouraging viewers to 'read' the images sequentially."13 As viewers we see glimpses of actions presented in chapters entitled Habit, Logic, Illumination, and Permanence. Smith and Jager use photography to translate the content of a poem to a visual format, but in doing so,
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These artists practice methods that we use to duplicate, to archive, to record, and to document the everyday as well as historical data-gathering mechanisms that have been introduced in the United States since 9/11, and “the use of this information as a tool to secure America.” These towering digital prints of 57” x 43” provide the sitters with a presence, rendering them significant, while denying the system of categorization that reduces the individual to digital data and archived profiles.

Kevin Todora, like Holm, also explores portraiture and processes of print reproduction, applying an exaggerated overlay, an enlarged dot pattern, to overwhelm the subject. Reminiscent of Andy Warhol’s famous celebrity paintings, Todora creates serial portraits that float in a sea of halftone textures. His merging of painted stencil and photographic surface confuses the distinction between painted marks, printed mesh, photographic grain, and digital noise. Todora recycles images of Darby Crash, an innovative punk rock musician, but unlike Warhol’s Elvis, Marilyn, or Jackie, Darby appears to sink into the background of these varied hues circles. Darby’s cult status in the punk rock music industry contrasts with the wide-spread appeal of Elvis—the latter still occasionally sighted by neurotic fans. Todora references lost celebrity or unrecognized creative activity lying outside of mainstream pop culture. Rather than amplifying Darby’s position, Todora allows the face to merge into the halftone dot screen of the printed page, like a fading photograph or a yellowing, crinkled newspaper. We no longer discern the reference to celebrity status, but we sense a connection to an indistinct memory, underscoring the photograph’s long-standing position as document.

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