TRACY HICKS
COLLECT, PRESERVE, CHANGE
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**SP/N GALLERY, THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT DALLAS**

AUGUST 10 - NOVEMBER 10, 2018

Presented by the School of Arts and Humanities at The University of Texas at Dallas
Support provided by the Edith O'Donnell Institute of Art History.
Collect, Preserve, Change embodies the constitutional tenets Tracy Hicks adhered to throughout his lifelong art/science research practice. This exhibition is less a comprehensive retrospective than a sequence of highlights from the considerable output of a lifetime of artistic production. With the exception of several additions, I have transplanted the Corsicana memorial exhibition put together three years ago by Tracy’s friends, family, collectors and colleagues following his death. It has been my intent to offer this collection of works to a wider audience in homage to one of Dallas’ own ‘favorite son’ artists and one who is regionally respected by fellow artists, curators, scientists and educators as a truly genuine creative. My hope is that those who witness this work will be inspired to learn more about Tracy’s research and representational processes, and thereby become more engaged in their own creative inquiry, and in examining our shared relationship to nature.

That said, I find it difficult to do justice to the immense complexity of an artist whose work encounters the natural world with such an obsessive directive of inquiry. Tracy was on a ceaseless pursuit to observe, record, and then define such relationships. His idea of definition was not an empirical path to proving, but rather a comparative assembling of parts representing the synchronistic design of shared possibilities. This seems to be the mandate of his exploratory research, often governed by the aesthetic constructive delivery of his own unique humanist narrative. Simply put, he respected the imperative of change. Every part of Tracy’s life was a research project he pursued using his creative intuition, his referential and philosophical renderings, and his ritualistic, alchemist methodologies. His muse was always with him. The endless descriptors one can assign to his work — empathetic, ironic, confrontational, exotic, ordered chaos, repetitive, reflective and so on — could most appropriately conspire under a collective rubric of three: adventurous wonderment, beauty and concern. He meticulously documented this rubric in nontraditional expressions of life, which he wove into a larger, more captivating tapestry of evolution — from origin to extinction.

In this exhibition and thus our catalogue, we seek to reflect on Tracy Hicks’ more prominent works as well as his contributions in sculpture, installation, photography, social practice, research science, collecting and as an experimental archivist on the early Internet. The video and slide components of the gallery show will hopefully fill in for the omission of works that we were unable to secure, or that only lived for their moment of installation. Our ultimate wish is to convey a sense of Tracy’s many iterations of engagement, ranging from assemblage works, to interactions with the social or natural world, to the organic flow of death animated. These are the defining traits that mark Tracy’s fixation and reflection on the artistic provenance of purpose.
EARLY WORKS
Tracy Hicks’ origins as an artist were evident in many of his early works, including those that would come to define and contribute to his art/science research endeavors. Leading into any discussion of his work, it’s important to note that his early traits signaled the transitions he would make throughout his career, and telegraphed his future fieldwork and collaborations with scientists.

As a maker and sculptor, Hicks developed his own adroit, intuitive architectural sense of the object and presentation. It could be compared to Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, where objects, food, words and rooms all have their own psychic, accumulative inheritance of disposed association. Many of Hicks’ early works also employed his own adaptations of Constantin Brâncuși’s columns to serve as pedestals for his mantle pieces, as we see in *Old Glory* (1991) and *Blue Ball Exercise* (1991). Hicks often delegated his poetic, constructivist aesthetics to object-oriented assemblage works reflective of West Coast artists like George Herms, Bruce Conner and Alison Saar. These columnar works, and his other assimilated errant devices he made at the beginning of his career in the mid-eighties, eventually found their way into numerous group shows.

Texas and New York artist Robert Rauschenberg was a major influence in Hicks’ work, however. Rauschenberg’s *Erased DeKooning Drawing* (1953) and the famous tire and goat *Monogram* (1955-59) of the Combines series essentially gave Hicks permission to break with sculpture and the more traditional segregated mediums, granting him the incentive to establish his own ‘combine’ monogram. The shelves and the Kerr Mason jars that would become such signature housings for his collecting ventures began trending with the commodity works and display shelving of Israeli-American artist Haim Steinbach. They first showed up in *Shell Life*, Hicks’ solo show at Dallas’ Conduit Gallery in 1991. The exhibition contained several key works he made that same year, such as *North South Pole With Still Life*, the first version of *American Gothic*, and *Paradise Lost*, a series of bottled pages of texts from John Milton’s epic poem.

Hicks recalled his affiliation with the objects he tendered into his work during this period as “an investigation of the correlation and juxtaposition between objects worn by use.” He also described the moment he formed his own distinction between image and object: “Standing in the shower trying to wash the 100 degree film of North Texas heat off my body a reoccurring thought took some form. Image is shaped by the illusion of layering like clothing on a body, while object has the often-uncomfortable directness of presence.” We see this best illustrated in *Paradise Lost*, which includes the *American Gothic* handle and spade of the hoe.
immersed in the salt of the land and imbued with the salt of man — the spade worn to a nub with use and time. Hicks is never direct in interpreting the seeming metaphor, but instead suggests that “the depth takes place beneath the surface in realms we will never fully comprehend.” This declaration about his art remained constant throughout his career — he routinely resisted attempts to define his work in a didactic sense. He saw meaning more as an underlying mystical force in his art, and one that each viewer should interpret as they please.

Hicks’ work during this period caught the eye of Annegreth Nill, incoming Associate Curator of Contemporary Art at the Dallas Museum of Art. Seeing these assembled motifs and the museum’s newly acquired Hicks sculpture Clear Cut (1985-86) prompted her to include him in the 1991 DMA group show The State I’m In, giving Hicks his first museum exposure. A solo exhibition at DiverseWorks in Houston, Patience and Time, soon followed. DiverseWorks was a venue recognized as the most progressive alternative arts exhibition space in the Southwest, and his 1992 show there helped establish his career path for the next few years. He introduced early versions of pieces that would become some of his signature installation works, including Freedman’s Field (1990-94), the first in a series of preserved flags, his surreal and poetic kitchen lab ensembles in Three Graces and Table of Contents, and his objects library Study For Study (1991-1997). Elements of these pieces continued to be articulated into performative installations and staging in other shows, including his 1992 solo exhibition Patience and Change at the Center for Contemporary Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and 1993’s Marking Time at the Hickory Street Annex in Dallas. The latter venue was an alternative exhibition space run by Dallas Artists Research and Exhibitions, which Hicks co-founded, and it was there he showed his Storeroom (1992-94) installation, along with his flag works and a more comprehensive version of Freedman’s Field, for the first time in North Texas. Nill responded to the show by offering Hicks a spotlight exhibition at the DMA featuring many of the same works, pairing him with an ascending international art star for 1994’s Encounters 5: Damien Hirst and Tracy Hicks. Nill featured Storeroom in her curator’s introduction to the show, writing, “The Storeroom is about rootedness, connections, the ‘brotherhood of man.’ It is also about loss and the consciousness of mortality. And yet the very idea of a storeroom is life affirming.”

That second DMA exhibition brought Hicks to the attention of a broader audience, including Houston-based artist Rick Lowe, who invited him to apply for an artist residency at Project Row Houses in 1996. The regenerated shotgun houses located in the Third Ward neighborhood were on their way to becoming one of the most recognized social sculptures in the world, and Hicks was one of the first white artists to participate in PRH, connecting with and collecting the story of this community marginalized by its rapidly developing, urban Houston surroundings. In his work plan for the residency, Hicks outlined ideas about preservation that he would continue to consider and develop throughout the balance of his career:

“Over the years my work has dealt most directly with questions around what we find precious enough to preserve and why. In the Project Row Houses installation I am working with people who are preserving a community, the Third Ward of Houston, a place of rich history suffering from urban decay. While at any one time people and places are the ingredients of a community, the past and present are the ingredients of the future – and, after all – that is what we preserve for... the future.”

Hicks was part of a local and international group of artists during his residency that included such notables as Fred Wilson and Shahzia Sikander. His...
community engagement resulted in an installation he titled the *Third Ward Archive*, where he collected 3,000 Mason jars and filled them with photos and writing from people in the surrounding neighborhood, who collaborated with him by documenting their daily lives. The final installation filled an entire house with a library-like maze of faces, places and shared stories.

Hicks continued to explore new iterations of his work as his installations were displayed in different spaces and contexts. *Freedman’s Field* was reassembled at the African American Museum of Dallas in 1997 as part of an installation documenting the history of the city’s Freedman’s Town and Freedman’s Cemetery, once located north of downtown in what is now the Dallas Arts District. Hicks was also eager to change and deepen the conversation he was having about art and science in his work, and to advance his collecting and preservation mandate. He sought to examine the historical underpinnings of order and origins, and the questions accompanying their sustainability.

In 1998, Hicks was invited on a research trip to Guatemala, accompanying a group of herpetologists studying the plight of amphibians and reptiles. He observed their work and helped them collect specimens in an environment where indigenous people who had long lived in harmony with nature were experiencing a transition of the land. Ecological factors had led to the systematic extinction of many species in the name of progress, and this triggered a turning point in Hicks’ work — his focus shifted from preserving the natural world would continue to expand for Hicks, and his work would become more than just “a naming.” It would become “a making,” and a new way forward.

The ideas and collaborators that fueled Hicks’ early work continued to have a place in his art as it transitioned to new areas of focus and new ways of working. At Lowe’s invitation, he returned to do a second residency with Project Row Houses in 2002, and 10 years later, the two artists collaborated on a social sculpture at the Center for the Living Arts, Space 301, in Mobile, Alabama. The Memory Lab (2012) was a project that echoed Hicks’ work on the Third Ward Archive, in that it was a means to reintegrate Mobile’s historic shotgun houses into the city’s culture before they were lost. Hicks designed and built a scaffolding structure that replicated the actual scale of a shotgun house, but the installation also became a stage for community activity and performance, thus acting as a laboratory for change through collaboration. This is just one example of the communal spirit Hicks brought to his art throughout his career.

Hicks’ work and research also went on to be recognized by important national figures in science, including John (JD) Talasek, Director of Cultural Programs of the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, D.C. (CPNAS). He invited Hicks to be a panelist for CPNAS’ Visual Culture and Evolution Online Symposium in 2010, an extension of the agency’s mission to explore cultural intersections between the arts and sciences, as well as engineering, medicine, technology and visual culture. Talasek’s deep admiration for Hicks’ work is also preserved in a book plate the artist made based on notes from the symposium, featuring Talasek’s observations on Hicks’ process. “Tracy is able to make and present discoveries that are personal and fantastical in nature if he desires,” Talasek writes, “a luxury that he might not enjoy fully if he wore the hat of a scientist.” Though Hicks approached his work with an intellectual rigor on par with his collaborators in the natural sciences, as Talasek notes, he was also unique in that he made work which illuminated scientific method while also transcending it. He embodied the argument advanced by photographer, author and fellow art/science pioneer Rosamond Purcell, that visual meaning in object and...
artifact can lead to discoveries just as profound as those we can count and label. This idea underscores both the freedom Hicks had as an artist and the intense curiosity that infused his work with scientists during the most prolific era of his career.

Notes:
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
TRACY HICKS: COLLECT, PRESERVE, CHANGE

EARLY WORKS

Vanitas Chasing the Wind, 1996
Tempest Corner, 1994

El Pena Blanca Corn Field, 1999

The Memory Lab, 2012
EARLY WORKS

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Stars and Stripes Forever, 1993

Lone Star, 1994

Stars and Stripes Forever, 1993, installation view, SP/N Gallery, 2018

Lone Star, 1994, installation view, SP/N Gallery, 2018

Stars and Stripes Forever, 1993, installation view, SP/N Gallery, 2018

Lone Star, 1994, installation view, SP/N Gallery, 2018
FREEDMAN’S FIELD
Freedman’s Field literally comes from the ground of Dallas, Texas, a city notorious for bulldozing history.\(^1\) The artist Tracy Hicks found the individual pieces that make up Freedman’s Field while walking his dog in a vacant field near his studio on Routh Street, in the nascent Arts District. That field once supported a vibrant African-American community, one of the first settlements of freed people in Dallas. With the abolition of slavery, black towns sprung up throughout Texas and across the South. Several black towns developed in postbellum Dallas, including Freedman’s Town, established in 1869 on the outskirts of the city proper.\(^2\) Black Codes dictated the movements and activities of African Americans during Reconstruction, as white Texans sought to preserve the social order of slavery even after emancipation.\(^3\) Freedman’s Town became a haven for formerly enslaved women, men and children from across the Deep South. Within this unincorporated town, community members built houses, schools, businesses, the Freedman’s Cemetery, and a church, now known as St. Paul United Methodist Church. Together, these various buildings and institutions comprised home for over 500 black citizens by 1873.\(^4\) The homes built by these men and women and their descendants are recalled through Freedman’s Field, which contains dozens of domestic objects like bottles, flatware, tools and toys assembled together as a table setting for four.\(^5\)

Outside forces threatened these homes and this community from the very beginning. In 1872, just three years after its founding, the Houston & Texas Central Railway laid its tracks through the town, dividing the cemetery from many of the first homes erected by the freed people. Even so, black communities throughout Dallas continued to grow. By 1889, the city of Dallas merged Freedman’s Town and North Dallas — another enclave established by formerly enslaved people — and incorporated the entire area as the Ninth Ward, which would take on the moniker North Dallas. This brought together two historical black communities, and together they grew dramatically in population and economic value over the next several decades. Several major city projects meant to improve the lives of Dallasiites in the mid-twentieth century brought the downfall of North Dallas. None was as destructive as the Central Expressway, completed in 1949. Much like its predecessor, the Houston & Texas Central Railway, the Central Expressway bilurcated the North Dallas community and strangled its economic and social life. Population declined over the next two decades, and by the 1980s, most of the buildings and institutions that black Dallasiites called home had been demolished. Indeed, the rusted and broken artifacts that comprise Freedman’s Field point to the destruction experienced by the black North Dallas community. Repeating patterns that took place across the country, Dallas city planners thus destroyed the black neighborhood of North Dallas. Designated as “slum clearings,” this demolition provided the land and initiative for the development and gentrification of new areas, including the Arts District that would rise up near the aging warehouse Tracy Hicks called home in the late-twentieth century.\(^6\)

The thousands of objects Hicks found in the ground were directly connected to the formerly enslaved people and their descendants who made Freedman’s Town. Of course, by the time Hicks walked his dog across this field, picking up debris like pottery shreds and rusted stakes that would later adorn the Freedman’s Field table, this freedman’s town had been demolished.
and cleared. It is not as if this history has been lost, of course. It just depends on who you ask. The history of this and other freedman's towns has been maintained through oral histories of African-American families, as well as by scholars who see such towns as crucial to black Americans’ survival of Jim Crow. Yet for those unlikely to read a historical monograph, this history is lost. The material evidence of the towns would be a reminder of both racial discrimination and the struggle to dismantle it; yet, in the case of Dallas’ Freedman’s Town, skyscrapers and museums now sit on the land once inhabited by freed people. Without the material, the memory of the town seems to fade away. That is, at least for those Dallasites whose racial composition allows them the privilege of not remembering.

Like so many white Dallasites, Hicks did not know the history of Freedman’s Town until he physically stumbled upon it. His own discovery of this history, and subsequent chronicling of it through art, reflects the forgetting that happens when communities are disrupted and dismantled. But there is a more complicated story of narrating history at play in Freedman’s Field. After discovering that the thousands of artifacts he unearthed were from one of Dallas’ first freedman’s towns, he felt compelled to tell this community’s story. But as Hicks began to piece together Freedman’s Field, the history he composed alongside it was colored in form and narrative by his own limited understanding of a lost black Dallas. Hicks saw, among other objects, ceramics — a type of artifact that for him indicated a domestic scene — and so he told a story with these artifacts that reflected this point of view. We see a table set for four, as if a family were preparing to sit down for dinner. Yet as the African American Museum of Dallas so clearly demonstrates in its exhibit, Facing the Rising Sun: Freedman’s Cemetery, these ceramics were not part of a dining ritual but rather of a death ritual. Broken plates were a key component of the funerary rituals performed at Freedman’s Cemetery, and these ceramics were acquired for this specific purpose.

But what makes Freedman’s Field so intriguing is that even though Hicks did not immediately know the intended use of these unearthed objects, the table setting speaks to a truth that is very much consistent with the lives of those who the ceramics were meant to honor in death. By using quotidian domestic objects like irons and spoons, Hicks invokes the centrality of family and home to those who inhabited Freedman’s Town. Archaeologist James M. Davidson has shown that, in the case of black households on Juliette Street in Freedman’s Town, the majority (81 percent) contained two parents by 1900, making these “nuclear” homes. This is a telling statistic, as just two decades before, more than 30 percent had been single-parent, female-headed households. These families were only 15 years out from the chains of slavery — an institution that ripped black families apart during the antebellum era — as well as the massive disruptions in life caused by the Civil War. But in one generation, families formed and built new households, even as oppressive legal and social norms arose after emancipation. As historian Heather A. Williams has so poignantly shown, formerly enslaved black Americans went to great lengths to find their family members, an indication of how important family bonds were during slavery. Reconstruction, Jim Crow and beyond. While many black families did move between houses in the freedman’s communities, it was uncommon for black Dallasites to migrate away from the city completely, an indication that this was indeed home. And home was of paramount importance for black Dallasites. Reverend A.S. Jackson, speaking at the Afro-American Fair on Juliette Street between 1900 and 1910, declared “a home for every man” one of his community’s greatest needs.

As is apparent through evidence left in the soil by Freedman’s Town residents, black Dallasites seemed intent upon building and maintaining both family and home. Survey work performed by the University of Texas Archaeological Field School in June 2002 revealed remains of the domestic world created by the Cole family in Freedman’s Town. Thomas Cole, his wife Nora, and their four daughters lived in a small house adjacent to Saint Paul United Methodist Church on Juliette Street between 1900 and 1910. They left behind a wide array of domestic goods, including household ceramics, food refuse, bottles, toys, buttons, tools and various other household items. Look again at Freedman’s Field, and you will see that Hicks’ assemblage closely parallels this family’s material history. While Hicks was not immediately aware of the function of the specific items he unearthed in the field next to his home, he correctly chronicled another aspect of life in old black Dallas. Hicks’ work provides an equally meaningful historical truth about the importance of family and home for the denizens of Freedman’s Town. It is an evocative reminder of the people who called this area of Dallas home, a home they in time lost to a city that seems to devour its history.

Freedman’s Field reveals the complexity of remembering and narrating history. But it also demonstrates how art can push us past the history we know from documents, photographs and material remains toward another kind of truth, one that helps us better understand the people who previously inhabited the space we now call home. In doing so, we can connect across time to those whose history deserves to be preserved and told. Freedman’s Field tells an important historical truth: black Dallasites living in Freedman’s Town highly valued family and home in the century after emancipation. Just like the history of ceramics placed in gravesites in Freedman’s Cemetery, the history of family and home...
demonstrated by *Freedman's Field* is a part of Dallas' past that merits a more prominent place in our city's historical landscape. As Dallas continues to grapple with how to represent its past in the public sphere, Tracy Hicks' work provides an example of how we can speak to multiple historical truths using art.

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2 The exact parameters of the town at its founding are unclear, but Dallas' Freedman's Town roughly included what is now the northern section of downtown Dallas and the Arts District. North Dallas, Frog Town and Deep Ellum were the other major black enclaves during the postbellum era. Alan Govenar and Kay Brakefield, *Deep Ellum: The Other Side of Dallas* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2013).
3 The Eleventh Texas Legislature passed the state's Black Codes in 1866. Excerpts of the Codes can be found at http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtid=3&psid=3681.
4 The population figure comes from a newspaper article that asserted “over five hundred negroes living in what is called Freedmantown, adjoining East Dallas.” *Daily Herald* [Dallas], April 27, 1873, 4.
7 Information from census data in James M. Davidson, “Living Symbols of their Lifelong Struggles”: In Search of the Home and Household in the Heart of Freedman’s Town, Dallas, Texas,” in *Household Chores and Household Choices: theorizing the Domestic Sphere in Historical Archaeology*, eds. Kent S. Barille and James C. Brandon (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 89.

Following pages: *Freedman's Field*, overhead view, 1990-94
Artist Tracy Hicks has shown enormous sensitivity to the history of the area that surrounds his studio and living quarters. I am relatively new to Texas, but I have been intrigued by the State Thomas area and its surrounding neighborhoods. I have been drawn to their former history as communities of African Americans whose first settlers were freed slaves. These communities have now metamorphosed into enclaves of the young and upperwardly mobile perched in their cubicles of no muss and no fuss. Barreling in on the Central Expressway for my first job interview at the Dallas Museum of Art, I was alerted by the couple who was my transport and welcoming committee to the busy construction scene below at the juncture where Lemmon Avenue becomes Haskell. As befitting a crossroads, the graves of black freedmen were found hidden beneath layers of dirt and the detritus of time, politics and the ebb and flow of city development. Graves were found ringed with shells, some from Africa, in the manner of slaves taken from the kingdom of the Kongo and the Kongo-related people who seeded other areas of the South and the Caribbean and South America. What came in the Great and Terrible Passage was not just song and dance, but philosophy and form and color, images of cosmos, and the remembrance of the laws of states.

I am African-American. Mr. Hicks is not, but when I first saw his work Freedman’s Field at the Dallas Museum of Art, with its patina of rust, evidence of the process of change, decay, torsion and fusion, I was moved. This was a story of my heritage, central to the American saga, cold and warm, redemptive and bitter. It is full of the heroism of living without despair the daily routine, and fulfilling against terrible odds one’s responsibilities. This is the true making of the mythic man and woman, noble in their ordinarienss and the courage to confront the absurdities of the pain and pleasure of life.

It is so fitting that Mr. Hicks, so concerned about metamorphosis in all his work, chose to make a composition of four place settings. We do not feed on these things for our sustenance, and that sustenance is the heritage of memory. That Mr. Hicks gets it so right is a testimony to the universality of the value of community as a great human truth. We all take our places at the table, examine with our eyes broken white porcelain, old and luminous green glass. We take in the hallowedness of seconds, minutes and hours on their inextricable run through the activities of life. Human fingers long gone touched this milky glass. That broken plate held a savory meal that was a testimony of love and generosity. Over there, private industry and quiet hours rest in the rusty patination of a small thimble. Suddenly, there is my great-grandmother before me, alive again as these things are alive with the memory of the energy of their function. And it is then that I feel it. I feel the tug and pull. There is the cinnamon smell of her housedress. I feel the tug and pull of her wonderful, island, immigrant hands wrapping strips of old cloth around tendrils of my hair. When she is finished she takes up a piece of cloth and a small thimble, puts it on my five-year-old finger, and teaches me how to make memories with thread.

— “Memories and Metamorphosis: Intimations of Black Dallas and Times Come and Gone Again by the Artist Tracy Hicks” (circa 1995), reprinted with permission of the author
EVOLUTION
I'm not certain when I first met Tracy Hicks, but my clearest memory of him was from a proposal he submitted for a Dozier travel grant. As I recall, the most memorable aspect of his proposal was a drawing of himself and his dog in a pickup truck with Dallas in the background. Tracy had a zest for life both forward and backward. I remember the first time I visited his studio, which I thought of more as a laboratory. It mixed photographs, handmade sculptural objects, found archeological objects and other experiments with decaying fruits, plants and maybe even some insects and other biological matter.

I was fascinated with how his mind worked. In the first year and a half of Project Row Houses — a neighborhood-based public art project that facilitates opportunities for artists to work in the context of a historical African-American community in Houston — we decided to invite only African-American artists. We wanted to curtail any suspicion that the project was colonizing a historically black neighborhood with white culture. After making a statement with the first rounds being all African-American artists, we felt it was time we could venture out and diversify the artists we worked with. During this period, having trust that the artists would be respectful of our community and its context was the top criteria for inviting artists to work with us.

While Project Row Houses grew organically in collaboration with folks from inside and outside the community, being a new community member I felt it was particularly important to be mindful of how we presented our work. Some years earlier I had seen Tracy's installation of objects from the old Freedman's Town in Dallas. It was one of the most beautiful and thoughtful installations I'd ever seen. The kind of care and deference he paid to the simple objects he recovered from the site brought forth the spirit of those whose history had resulted in the objects being left behind. It almost felt like they left each and every object there specifically for Tracy to use them, to lay bare their history on the long table that held them in his Freedman's Field installation. His piece was deeply connected to the people it represented in the most honest and humble way. Seeing that installation informed my decision to invite Tracy as one of the first non-African-Americans to participate in the Project Row Houses Artist Projects Program.

At the time, the program invited up to eight artists in each cycle to generate a project that pushed the boundaries of their work, in one house each. Instead of prescribing that the work had to be connected to or reflective of the surrounding neighborhood, we felt that the context of the neighborhood and the weight of the historic houses would draw the artists' focus onto the neighborhood. I remember Tracy's first site visit. He arrived in his van. I imagined him leaving Dallas with a view of it in his rearview mirror just as I had seen in his Dozier grant proposal. We spent time driving and walking around the neighborhood. We talked about the goals of the community and how Project Row Houses was trying to contribute. He visited with other artists he met at the project, as well as with neighborhood children who were hanging around. This was just one of many trips Tracy made as he formulated his ideas for his project. During his second visit, he did more walking around on his own. I was more than surprised when he came back from one of his walks with a sharp new haircut and shave. Apparently he had stopped at one of the local barbershops. I couldn't believe he had
walked into an all-black barbershop in the Third Ward for a haircut and shave. But Tracy thought nothing of it other than he figured he could get a good cut and shave and also get to know about the neighborhood.

Tracy had talked about creating an archive of the neighborhood. He mentioned the possibilities of an installation with objects he might find around the neighborhood and photographs that he would take. Since community engagement was high on the list of things Project Row Houses was seeking to do, Tracy instead made a bold leap as an artist. He thought it might be interesting to allow the community to supply the content of his installation. He would just create the framework for it. This was partly informed by the popularization of different technologies. Computers were becoming more accessible for individual use. The advent of the disposable camera made photography more accessible for personal use. As a test, he gave a few children who were hanging around Project Row Houses disposable cameras and asked them to take pictures of the neighborhood, their family, friends and whatever they liked. The children brought cameras back the next day and he took them back to Dallas to develop them. Before he came back to Houston, he sent his proposal detailing an installation where the house would be built out as an archive, with shelves all around the perimeter to hold Mason jars filled with photographs taken by people from the neighborhood. His proposal encapsulated perfectly the balance between an aesthetically pleasing display and intensive community engagement.

Tracy spent more than a week building work tables and shelves that lined the entire house. Mason jars were placed in the middle shelves, while those too high up or too close to the bottom for viewing symbolically suggested that the archive was alive with potential to grow. The work tables were the receiving center where he dispensed and collected cameras from neighbors. When he received the photographs back from the lab, he would invite the photographers to help sort out which images they wanted to display in the Mason jars. This process resulted in deep conversations that led to inviting people to write comments about the photographs. The Third Ward Archive project engaged 75 neighborhood photographers and hundreds more who contributed their comments in the jars. The neighborhood photographers brought family and friends to see their work in the exhibition. Many other neighbors came to visit with the admiration of seeing their neighborhood on view, through the eyes of folks who lived their entire lives there.

In classic Tracy humanizing way, he confessed to me that the project changed something in him. He spoke about what the photographs might have been like had he taken them. He understood that as an outsider, it would not have been possible for him to capture the intimacy and spirit of family life in the Third Ward neighborhood the way that our neighbors did. Most of the photos paid no recognition to popular images of drugs, trash and hard living in low-income black neighborhoods, the kind that most people from the outside would likely look for from the start because their only vantage point is stereotypical media representation. The neighborhood photographers showed the humanity of loving people, at home with family, having barbecues, playing with pets and so on. Tracy was a humanist. He sought to find the best in humanity in his work. His Third Ward Archive project did just that by capturing the best of humanity right here in our Third Ward neighborhood.

People and place are the ingredients of a community. The past and present are the ingredients of the future. In putting up preserves, ingredients are combined and then preserved for the benefit of hungry people of the future. So the ingredients of this installation are photographs of and by the people of the Third Ward.

In a way unique to photography, evidence of lives lived will be preserved in over 3000 quart canning jars, each containing one photograph. Collectively all 3,000 jars will span the entire row house space, creating a near-maze of the faces and places of the Third Ward.

The new color (2002 residency) and the old black and white photos (1996 residency) will merge in the jars to present an image of the past and present, a visual archive of the Third Ward which will stay with Project Row Houses.

Excerpt, Tracy Hicks’ Artist Statement, Project Row Houses Round 16, 2002
You might call Tracy a mad scientist if you were to visit his studio, with its slack-jawed creatures in amber jars, obsolete laboratory gadgets and gurgling tanks of live candy-colored frogs. He called himself an alchemist. It makes sense when you consider his work. He transformed base matter into a holy presence through mysterious repetitions and combinations. I remember his hands testing, rearranging, assembling and disassembling. He summed up his motions in a recurrent theme: “Repetition is a basic element of collection.” His writings are peppered with this alchemic recipe.

I’m composing this note under a shriveled old apple. A couple of decades ago, when the apple was fresh, Tracy bit out a chunk. Then he crafted a wire cage to hold its remains and hung it in an installation. Each day he bit into a new apple, made a cage, and hung the remains. After a week, Tracy had assembled seven apples in incremental stages of decay, a calendar of decline. When Tracy gave one of those consecrated apples to me, I hung it over my dining room table, where I write. After all these years, the dried, dead apple disintegrates more slowly, almost imperceptibly.

To my left, on bookshelves, I see other deteriorating gifts from my dear, deceased friend. In his love for nature, Tracy designed sculptures that also die. His wire-bound, salt-preserved book sheds grains of rust. Tracy’s Sharpied name has now vanished from a Mason jar of canned fall foliage. The leaves faded to brown, and the ink dissipated. There’s a bronze apple pierced through by a six-inch nail, implying a displaced apple by omission. Even his glow-in-the-dark silicon molds lose light as they fade each evening. Tracy’s themes of absence, impermanence and the wistful contrivances of preservation now include the presence and absence of Tracy himself.

Through the years of our friendship, I watched Tracy’s meditations on death lead to an ever-increasing affection for life. He felt a fierce empathy for threatened species and squandered nature. He accompanied field biologists on research and collection trips that left him humbled and searching. He funneled his inquiries into installations that actually incorporated the dead bodies of endangered and extinct species. These were demonstrations of environmental advocacy. He made it clear that the repetition of death, so elemental, collects us all in a basic mutual-interest predicament.

Ultimately, Tracy’s work trains us in the rawest, surest way of belonging. If, as Wallace Stevens wrote, “death is the mother of beauty,” then Tracy gives us a portrait of our mother, our phenomenological siblings and our collective conscience.
Sofía,

In an odd sort of a way, I owe you some heart-felt thanks. So thank you, Sofía. Cleaning up and patinaing this little bronze apple for you started me thinking. I literally shoved these apples away and have kept them virtually hidden these past five or six years.

It is a long story and one you may have heard in part before, so I'll just hit the highlights. In 1985 I had a massive heart attack that left my heart with a scar about the size of a man's palm. Luckily it was on two ventricles otherwise I probably would not have survived. Six years later, while I was casting some of these partially dried vaginal shaped apples for a show on the seductiveness of knowledge, I had another heart attack that resulted in open-heart surgery. Suddenly I had over $42,000 in medical bills with no insurance. The apples provided a means for me to repay that debt. It took years to make and sell 365 bronze apples. It would have been much faster to make a mold and make them all the same, but the sameness would have taken away from the uniqueness of the experience.

Eventually the hospital wrote-off the last few thousand dollars, before I finished making the series. That embarrassed me. Over the years lots of people had bought the apples knowing they were helping me.

After the original heart attack in '85 I had taken what was in effect a vow of poverty. Before then I had struggled as a commercial photographer. The career was doing well, but the ad world was a miserable environment. So my vow was as much one of changing direction to try, through Art, to make a better world as it was accepting the poverty. To me the two went hand in hand and I have been stuck with that mental image ever since.

Most of the people who bought these apples chose the big round ones. I was never sure if it was sexual character of these more dried ones or just Texan’s tendency towards big hair and cars, but I was left with around twenty or so of these beautiful little ones that people didn’t like. They were the ones I loved the most. Although the shape is certainly sensual and sexual, it also draws a more direct correlation to the scar on my heart. And in a less direct way a long lasting scar on my financial stability.

Sorry I’ve rattled on so much about my stuff. It’s just that I know what you are going through is not easy. It’s damned hard. At times it will look like you have it whipped. And at other times you’ll feel like it’s more than you can possibly bear. There will be times years from now when you look back at it (like I’m doing now) and learn something new from it. Whatever it takes to get through this ordeal.

Like the symbolic character of these apples this is your unique experience. It offers you the opportunity to see everything a little deeper and a lot richer.

Victoria and I wish you the very best!

Tracy
THE CHORUS AND
THE TWO CULTURES
Tracy Hicks was fascinated by collections, or perhaps it is more accurate to say that he was fascinated by collection storage arrays — by the neatly ordered and labeled rows of objects that museums sequester in their storerooms. Not surprisingly, he was an inveterate collector and rearranger of things himself.

My collaboration with Tracy began in the spring of 1999, after his installation of dozens of goldfish preserved in jars of alcohol was shut down over fire safety concerns. Because I worked with fluid-preserved collections, Tracy thought I might know of a safer preservative he could use. I was impressed that his chief concern was for authenticity — he wanted his installation to be as similar to a museum collection as he could make it.

Much of Tracy’s art interpreted what he termed museum vaults, such as *Correlation and Collection*, or *Freedman’s Field* and *Third Ward Archive*. In 1998, he joined an expedition to Guatemala with a team of scientists from the University of Texas at Arlington. He did not take a camera with him, he later wrote, in order to concentrate on learning how to collect and preserve amphibians and reptiles. He returned from Guatemala captivated by the processes of preparing scientific specimens and concerned about imperiled populations of amphibians.

Tracy wanted to probe deeper into the mysteries of natural history collections, so I invited him to visit the museum where I worked at the University of Kansas. Both our shared interests and differences in training became immediately evident. When I took Tracy into the herpetological collection, he paused in the doorway and asked me what I saw. I saw science. He saw beauty. We were both right.

I introduced Tracy to Marjorie Swann, an English professor who had written a book on the history of collecting and taught a class on collecting. Marjorie immediately saw connections between Tracy’s work and ours that I did not, and suggested that we apply to the (now defunct) Museum Loan Network for funding. The agency’s mission was to help get objects on display that were normally hidden away in museum storage. We were awarded two grants for a project that included a loan of Asian frog specimens from the Field Museum in Chicago to compliment the New World specimens at KU. The project melded three distinct viewpoints on collections. I saw scientific specimens as tools to be used to understand evolution and biodiversity. To Marjorie, collections were cultural constructs that shed light on the conflicted relationships between humans and nature. Tracy found the inherent beauty of life and death in the preserved animals. The overarching concept we wanted to explore was how animals, selected from the wild and turned into scientific specimens, became culturally significant objects that were used to understand the world. Tracy took the name of the project from C.P. Snow’s 1959 book, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, which addressed the communication gulf between scientists and artists.

Over the course of the project Tracy made several trips to Kansas to prepare molds of frogs. The process was fairly straightforward, but had to be carefully timed. He used a rapid alginate cold-casting method to make fragile molds of the specimens without damaging them, but the molds only held together for about ten minutes. During that time, Tracy had to carefully fill...
Two museum studies students organized a diverse panel to discuss art and science. An art museum curator spoke about art metaphorizing nature while science explained it. A professor of particle physics explained his reductionist approach when he tried to find patterns in the installation as he did in his research. The art museum director addressed the commonalities in people’s attraction to museum objects because they glorify our ability to collect and hold things we love, pointing out that both art and science begin with close observation and rigorous attention to detail. A post-doctoral herpetology student from Germany listed scientists who were artists and artists who were scientists — including Leonardo Da Vinci, Albrecht Dürer, Ernst Haeckel and Alfred Einstein — and wondered why there were so few like them today. A professor of theory and composition discussed the relationship between math and music, and how a musical composition could describe an epileptic seizure. The natural history museum director mused that science and art shared the act of creation and an empirical way of knowing the world. Tracy told a story about apprenticing to a goldsmith while wanting to be a herpetologist, becoming a commercial photographer, and then an artist. To him, science was fact-building while art was emotion, and he lamented the polarization of art and science. When my turn came, I pointed out that the bulk of C.P. Snow’s book ignored, and that Snow had almost called the book The Rich and the Poor rather than The Two Cultures. I concluded that, based on observing visitors to the installation over several weeks, most scientists who came to the exhibit enjoyed playing with the ultraviolet flashlight and went away thinking that glow-in-the-dark frogs were cool, without further thought about what Tracy was saying with his art. On the other hand, none of the people from the humanities had asked about amphibian declines or why we have scientific collections. Nearly 50 years later, it appeared that neither side was really trying to cross the two-cultures divide.

The glowing silicon frogs reappeared in Tracy’s art several more times, but he never repeated exactly what he had already done. In 2009, he was invited to participate in a show called Reflections on Darwin at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, on the occasion of Darwin’s birthday 200 years before. In the gallery, Tracy constructed a two-story scaffolding that held a collection of found objects, mounted on heavy glass panels. It was a mesmerizing display that included a reassembled snake skeleton, fossils, a bat and a frog, mouse bones, butterfly wings, doll parts, plants, dozens of insects, laboratory glassware, animal skulls and bones, and bottles of strangely colored oils. All of the animals and insects were creatures that he found already dead — although Tracy liked to hunt, he only killed animals that he used for food.

Tracy’s commitment to saving amphibians recurred in much of his art and other activities. He had a special fondness for poison dart frogs from Central and South America, many of which are now extinct in the wild (Tracy purchased his frogs from breeders in the U.S.). He raised several species in his studio, so the air was often abuzz with fruit flies (which he fed to the frogs) and filled with the high-pitched chirps of the male frogs. Most poison dart frogs are small, brightly colored, diurnal amphibians that lay eggs on land and guard them. When the eggs hatch, one of the parents carries the tadpoles to water on its back, where they undergo metamorphosis into frogs. The frogs get their name from the fact that a few species are used as poison sources for blowgun darts. One summer, when he taught a class for young people at the Dallas Museum of Art, Tracy brought frog eggs to the classroom for the students to draw as the larvae hatched and transformed into frogs. Tracy thought adolescence correlated well with metamorphosis. In a student sketchbook, next to a drawing of a tadpole developing hind legs, one of the participants wrote, “Change hurts.”
Tracy enjoyed talking to scientists, although sometimes the communication was difficult. Once, Tracy decided to attend a meeting of the Society for the Study of Amphibians and Reptiles with me. He registered as a commercial exhibitor and set up a small display of his jars of silicon frog casts among the vendors selling books and field gear. Most of the herpetologists in attendance seemed puzzled by why he was there. Scientists tend to be detail-oriented and research-obsessed, which can make it difficult for them to understand metaphorical representations of disappearing amphibians.

In 2010, Tracy received a Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship (SARF), a prestigious award that gave him inside access to the largest natural history collection in the world and the people who collect the specimens and take care of them. This presented a new opportunity for Tracy to interact with scientists, and this time he found a group that was far more open to his artistic ideas. At the Smithsonian, he began producing intriguing mixed images of field notes and jar labels superimposed with photographs of frogs in jars and human skin, and skin became his metaphorical link between humans and amphibians. He closely photographed finely textured frog skin, used raking light to reveal the coiled intestines through transparent tadpole skin, and made images of young and old human skin, and of scars.

During the fellowship, Tracy produced two books of photographs and text that he sent to people involved with his work. I received three versions of one book as he kept rearranging the contents. He wrote that his goal was “to visually connect human skin to frog skin, evoking an echo of that visceral thrill-squirm we feel when we hold a frog in our naked hands.” Tracy often linked photographs of frogs, jar labels, field notes and human skin into slowly changing animations, constantly experimenting with music to accompany them. To Tracy, the field notes and jar labels were “codification [that] forms a second skin of collection.” I sent Tracy illustrations of amphibian skin from research papers and first-hand accounts of finding new species of frogs in the wild. As he read the stories of discovery, he wrote that “collections wrap bare objects with cultural identity.”

In 2003, when we were at the Field Museum as part of the grant-funded project, Tracy became transfixed by a specimen of the giant Japanese salamander (Andrias japonicus) afloat in a large stainless steel tank of alcohol. Although it did not exactly fit the parameters of our project, we borrowed the salamander anyway. One afternoon in the lab, I watched Tracy ease the huge specimen into an enormous alginate mold — the biggest he had ever made — and pour in the plaster for the cast. The plaster salamander traveled with him back to Dallas, then to Atlanta, and finally to North Carolina before he found time to finish it. Japanese salamanders can grow to five feet in length, and are related to the hellbenders of the Eastern United States. Both species dwell in the cold flowing water of mountain streams, and like all amphibians, live through their porous skin. Like too many amphibians, they are also gravely threatened with extinction. Tracy spent hours working on the plaster cast, transforming its dull white surface until it looked very much alive, and he often told people that Andrias was the only god he believed in. It was certainly emblematic of the way he embraced nature: with a childlike curiosity coupled with a fascination with science, and a desire to make art that would help people better understand the world we live in.

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Tracy Hicks’ North Shore studio, Dallas, TX

Reflections on Darwin recreation, SP/N Gallery, 2018

1 Tracy Hicks, SARF Book 2 (artist book, November 2010).
2 Tracy Hicks, SARF Book 1 (artist book, July 2010).
3 Ibid.
Tracy Hicks' North Shore studio, Dallas, TX

Installation view (top) and installation in progress (bottom), \textit{fragile/natural}, 2008
The Chorus and the Two Cultures: Tracy Hicks

ROBIN MYRICK

Tracy Hicks’ art is often characterized by an accumulation of presence and absence, and buoyed by our fascination with the persona of the collector. There also is a temporal thread in the installations and images he created during the second half of his career that allows the viewer to read the collective in his work. “Like repetition,” he once wrote, “the relationship of one to the mass is essential to collection.” In the Chorus — a group of scientists, artists and others he assembled to consult and participate in his artmaking during this period — Hicks found collaborators that could match his passion for the natural world, and help him achieve the anesthetic beauty of science he admired.

Hicks began planting seeds for what would become the Chorus in 1998. His initial goal was to bridge the communication gap between the disciplines of science and art, and create a venue for feedback and critique. The name came from Greek choruses, but was also meant as a nod to the way frogs get together and sing at night. He began by quietly making invitations to some frog enthusiasts in the amphibian discussion groups he frequented online. He wanted a variety of perspectives represented, and pitched the group to his thinking and artmaking. The book is a collection of notes, essays, photographs, quotations, instructions, email excerpts, painting and poetry that contains only a modest contribution by Hicks. It is primarily composed of material by the Chorus, with an assist by the Yoruba Tribe, Miriam Webster and painter and philosopher Robert Henri.

Many members came to or through the group due to working with Hicks on a project or an exhibition, and some sent him frogs or contributed items to his collections. In time, he also began to collaborate with Chorus members, incorporating excerpts of their writing, photography, or creative work into his own. Book 03.2 (2003) demonstrates how quickly the conversations going on in the group became essential to his thinking and artmaking. The book is a collection of notes, essays, photographs, quotations, instructions, email excerpts, painting and poetry that contains only a modest contribution by Hicks. It is primarily composed of material by the Chorus, with an assist by the Yoruba Tribe, Miriam Webster and painter and philosopher Robert Henri.

Many scientists in the group admired Hicks’ devotion to preservation, and his skill at working with and positioning specimens. They also didn’t hesitate to call him out if they felt his pieces were not technically correct in their execution, and this form of critique both aggravated and energized him. It was the type of conversation Hicks sought to have, and his responses often sparked discussion about the terms of artistic and scientific correctness that informed his work back at the studio.

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One regret expressed by some in the group since Hicks’ passing is that there were few female voices in the Chorus, reflecting about a quarter of the group’s constituency over the years. Most of the women in the Chorus have been colleagues in art and science fields, and their contributions have been no less relevant to Hicks’ work, but only a handful have been part of the ongoing conversation. Occasional outbreaks of machismo originating with Hicks or other vocal members did create tension within the group that reflected issues or frustrations women in the Chorus likely experienced in their larger art and science communities, and some simply tuned out until the conversation matured. The idea that the Chorus could be a forum for members’ creative pursuits proved similarly fraught, largely due to the premise that underpinned the whole enterprise — the fundamental interpretive and communication conflicts between scientists and artists. The critique from Chorus peers could be strident, or focused on technical aspects of the work without consideration for the aesthetics. Hicks could be kind or eviscerating with his comments, and at times not so shy about the fact that he preferred to use the Chorus as his own sounding board. Some members chafed a bit at that part of the bargain, others never did. Those who were truly bothered by it simply left or lurked in response, and at least one member threw a Molotov cocktail on his way out the door. Friction with Hicks was a routine part of the Chorus however, as he loved the hunt of the argument and was an avid practitioner.

Even if a few of the blood blisters left from his personal pinch are still healing, many in the Chorus speak of the group as a family with Hicks at its center, and accept all the shared history and mess that the term can imply. Members still discuss the minutia of growing peppers or blueberries, and pithy Dutch proverbs about the fact the trees we grow may outlive us. The friendly jabs and crossed wires remain as they debate the boundaries of disciplines, aesthetics and preservation. And arguments about the fundamental nature of artistry — and the gaps that science may never close with it — will go on, as will the evergreen debate of art versus trade (or in Chorus terms, whether the artist gets to stay back at camp and create while everyone else is out hunting the mastodon). 13

The Chorus is, and has always been, the amorphous shape of a plastic grocery bag tied up and turned over, contents tumbling and spilling together, achieving narrative and continuity as a collective stream of thought. It remains a living document of the things that Tracy Hicks accepted about himself as an entity and an artist, primarily that he was the embodiment of many of the answers he sought there. A specimen born to die, measured by its bag of skin, defined by a thousand details to be chased down, a vessel to hold arguments about its nature and biology, a time-specific being cloaked in destiny and aspiration. The essence of a moment, articulated in bones and skull.

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1  Tracy Hicks, SARF Book 2 (artist book, November 2010).
2  Danté Fenolio, email conversation between members of the Chorus, August 9-10, 2018.
3  Brent Brock, Lars Österdahl, Jeff Plant and Ron Skyldstad, email conversation between members of the Chorus, August 9-10, 2018.
4  Email from Tor Linbo to members of the Chorus, August 9, 2018.
5  Ibid.
6  Ibid.
7  Danté Fenolio, Tor Linbo and Ron Skyldstad, email conversation between members of the Chorus, August 9-10, 2018.
8  Email from Ron Skyldstad to members of the Chorus, August 9, 2018.
9  Ibid.
11  Email from Brent Brock to members of the Chorus, August 10, 2018.
12  Email from Tim Paine to members of the Chorus, August 15, 2018.
13  Email from Tim Paine to members of the Chorus, August 15, 2018.
STOPPING TIME
In Tracy Hicks’ work as an artist, photography was a precursor and an afterthought, a vehicle for observation and a probe for personal, visceral reflection. He used photography to test conceptual juxtapositions and identify ecological relationships. Photographs provided a mode of evocative preservation essential to his thinking about the ephemera of experience and the human relationship to the natural world.

His artist website is an archive of such images. The opening page is a tapestry of photographs, each leading to a set of studies, photographs in series and slideshows. Their arrangement is like the interior of Hicks’ former Dallas studio, a kaleidoscope of art and natural objects with light passing through materials by careful positioning, but no single image easy to comprehend in isolation without the others. It is a photographic catalogue of catalogues. Swimming into this stream of images, one could tread water for hours before again finding footing.

It may appear that photography served Hicks mainly as a tool for recording his physical artwork, as it does for many artists. He did document his work thoroughly, and also supported himself to an extent by documenting the works of other artists. However, photography served his purposes far beyond recordkeeping — it was inextricable from his creative process.

Hicks took photographs during nearly every project, and at multiple phases, just as a scientist makes field notes. He collected and filed these images for future consideration, using them in short slideshows that he called “animations,” interlaced photos of similar objects in the scene. He also shot images of himself and placed them within his installations at times, and he occasionally photographed models, friends, or family when seeking human subjects that suited his needs.

Science and art coexist in the photographic process, and Hicks used the medium to explore his belief that creative and scientific traditions both come from the same human impulse, one torn asunder (in the Western mind) by modern classifications. Photography allowed him to unite an empirical mode of physical observation that requires technical precision with the visual language of aesthetics. It was this alchemical dichotomy of photography that most attracted him.

When Hicks used a camera in his work, he almost always attempted to propagate a third meaning from colliding the two cultures of science and art, or the symbols of each, within a frame. He often used collage or montage to relate images to one another, hinting at the metaphysical through physical juxtapositions. The result is imagery that sometimes contains as much discord or oddity as aesthetic unity, though like all of his work, his photographs gain more cohesion when considered within a broader collection.

Examples of this include his photographs of a resin replica of a round-bottomed distillation vessel, holding the cast of a frog and placed in various landscapes. Hicks favored these distillation vessels in particular for their historical use in both chemistry and alchemy. He made the landscape photos on road trips while hauling his installations around the country. In one image, the vessel seems to suggest a disconnection between science and faith in the face of death (when paired with the grave of Rosa Avila). In another instance, the vessel points toward a rock formation in an absurd, and perhaps accidentally phallic, marker of a man’s brevity amid geological time. Out of context, these are nearly inscrutable exercises in light, composition and incongruity. However, Hicks situated them in a number of animations, and in an artist book entitled Drawn to Darwin. In the book, they are combined with photographs of similar vessels arranged in windows, and with photographs of frogs and images of bare human arms and torsos. In his publications and studies they accumulate meaning.

Although the use of photography permeated his practice, Hicks rarely thought of his photographs as finished art objects in themselves, or exhibited his photography in isolation. One exception to this was an early series of technically crisp black and white prints first exhibited in 1986, Traveling Trophy, which laid some of the groundwork for his later use of the medium. In the series of 12 photographs, Hicks takes a rectangular plaster cast of a trophy fish on a road trip through Southwestern scenery. The cast is situated within postcard-worthy landscapes, both natural and human-made, amid formal compositions that highlight juxtapositions of scale and symbolism. Preserved and pictured in these contexts, the fish is transformed into a specimen, a fossil or relief sculpture. As science, art, and nature converge in this one object, we are asked to consider the relationships they have with each other, and how that renews with each location.

In one frame, the cast is laid poised between the edge of a vast, Western canyon and Hicks’ resting hound dog in the foreground. There is an absurdity and dark humor in the arrangement. The living pet beside the preserved fish amid the desolate and ancient geography prompts reflection on the human connection to other species, and the limitation of one human’s lifespan (or the lifespan of one domesticated dog) in geological time.
In another frame, the fish is situated on the side of a country road, fixed to the pole beneath a familiar diamond-shaped road sign reading “Church.” Its positioning transforms the sign into a crude crucifix that echoes telephone poles opposite in the frame, so that all three elements emerge as symbols of the major human systems of meaning, this time science, religion and art. All this within a natural landscape heavily altered by humans.

When the trophy fish visits downtown Dallas, Texas and sits upon a concrete bus stop bench bearing the DART transit authority logo, we are reminded of the distant millennia when this land was at the bottom of the sea. Considered in geological time, the existence of a fish is relatively more permanent than the massive architecture of 1930’s buildings, still less than 100 years old.

None of the images make much sense alone. Together, these quasi-documentary exercises in scale and incongruence point outside of the human experience of time, to “Deep Time,” the history of the earth as identified by scientific observation of geological and natural phenomena. We are prompted to ask, not without humor, what combination of accidents in cosmology, evolution and human activity brought these moments into being. Looking forward from this series to the rest of Hicks’ work, these images mark a seminal period in his imagination.

Fast-forward through his photographs from this point — to the bodies of dead specimens, and photographs of humans at various stages of age or disfigurement — and Hicks’ concern with the sensual and finite nature of the human experience remains. His photography becomes visual note-taking rather than an end in itself. The use of light grows more luminous and central to his imagery as he explores the material and aesthetic qualities of transparent glass specimen jars, and the semi-translucent skin of frog specimens, underscoring the fragility of life.

Hicks saw creative value in his own emotional and physical impulses as well. As a consequence, he displayed a decidedly sexualized male viewpoint toward women in some of his photography, one that contrasts sharply with his more nuanced and empathic approach to other subjects. In a piece he installed in 2000 at the gallery Artscan in Houston, Texas, he used 140 photographs to visually dissect the body of an anonymous young woman, each section installed in a quart-sized jar. The piece was called study: preserving a body, and it suggests a mass dismemberment of an idealized version of a woman’s body, and of its temporal status as an object of male desire. In writing about the piece, he compares the sections of the female body to his laboratory specimens: “The correlation between preserving these images of life in jars correlates directly with... the collection of endangered amphibians I nurture in my studio. The sensuality of a beautiful body will change as all things do... everything changes we preserve.”

Hicks acknowledged that at times he had difficulty considering women’s bodies in a non-sexualized context. In an exhibition he curated in 2002 — Female Body, Work by Four Women at Gallery 414 in Fort Worth, Texas — most participants were addressing their experience of the female form, often in ways that challenged the male gaze toward the female body. Some of Hicks’ writing about the exhibition effectively undermined some of his artists’ stated aims. He professed the active state of his inner child when it came to nudity, and noted that for him, the curation project was in part about “exploring something of that first innocent sexual awakening.” In part of his statement, he also separated himself from the artists in terms of perspective. “As a male I am going to interpret different than these women,” he writes. “My imagination will be alive and my instincts enlivened. I’ll tingle with some basic juice produced somewhere.
I met Tracy Hicks shortly after I moved to Dallas in 2009 when I visited his studio with our mutual friend, painter Kimberly Alexander. He was tenderly raising tiny poison dart frogs that no longer existed in the wild. Their skin contained chemicals powerful enough to stop a human’s heart, but they were so sensitive to changes in the environment that small shifts in the ecosystem had triggered their mass extinction. The biology of these small creatures embodied his concerns.

When I first saw his animations, I had no anchor for them and they unsettled my narrative-driven sensibility. They were not easy to parse without deeper knowledge of his work. One subtle piece that Hicks produced while at the Smithsonian, titled _SARF animated study_, 21 Nov 2010, unlocked many of his other photographic studies for me. The origin of the audio isn’t noted but the sounds are familiar: dense, high-pitch chirps overlay a low hypnotic “whoop, whoop, whoop” that is surely a frog but sounds much more like the amplification of water dripping into a primordial cave, where land-dwelling life invisibly and urgently evolves. In counterpoint to the throbbing, mystical sounds of fecund life are photographs of graceful but thoroughly dead amphibian specimens, their translucent skins revealing winding innards echoing the folds of skin on the artist’s knuckles. The piece concludes with a photograph of a delicately webbed white frog hand, floating in preservation fluid, that fades superimposed onto Hicks’ hand in a white glove. It is surprisingly touching considering the forensic nature of the visual elements involved. Through comparative anatomy and form, Hicks communicates his empathy with these small animals sacrificed for science, fostering empathy in the viewer for the amphibians, the artist, and our joint predicament in the face of unstoppable climate change. 8

During 2010 and early 2011, Hicks would alternate between photographing the skin of amphibians under microscopes in greater detail, using flexible-shaft lighting at the Smithsonian, and taking unclothed shots of friends and family in his home studio. He began interweaving the two sets of skin images — frogs and humans — in his animations and artist books. In this later period of his life, as his focus on mortality grew more acute and more personal, so did his photography. His sensitivity to the fragility of life was compounded by his own poor health. He worked and interacted with the urgency of a man living on borrowed time.9 At the beginning of 2011, the poison dart frogs that he bred in his home studio were lost en masse when he was away and the pipes froze in the house. Hicks was devastated. After returning to his SARF fellowship in the early spring of that year, he was diagnosed with the H1N1 virus and symptoms of pneumonia. He was placed in a medically induced coma to save his life and he awoke in a severely weakened state, having lost a lot of muscle and some motor skills. Much of the photographic-based work that came after this experience seemed to be in direct

Deep in my reptilian brain. Imagination is one of the most thrilling aspects of art. Nude images evoke some primal level deep within my layered brain and covered with reason. 9

This tension between intellectual reason and this “primal level” in Hicks’ art practice resolved somewhat as he sought to build bridges connecting the internal layers he describes. As his work evolved, skin became the overarching metaphor that united his interests, particularly from the time he began working with natural history collections at the Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship (SARF). In the first artist book he published during his SARF residency, he writes, “The net I am throwing broadly encompasses skin as the outer layer of all we preserve and can conceptually ‘see’ spanning invention and on to the scars created and endured and all correlated to the ecology of our shared environment.” 6 Hicks ultimately saw skin as “our most visceral connection to the human world.” 7 and by 2010, he was photographing his own body and surgery scars as well as those of his friends. He wanted to compare the intimacy of human skin to amphibian skin in his studies.

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Still images from _SARF animated study_, 21, November 2010

Still images from _Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship SKIN 2 ~ #32211 animation, undated_
together in animation, the detail of his body blurred by slow shutter speeds so that he appears as much spirit as man. His voice narrates the performance, musing about the physicality of skin:

“It’s a fairly modest thought process: looking at skin. My skin, the skin of my home, the skin of this space, the skin of the world. You know I’m no man’s Atlas, I mean I’m certainly not anything extraordinary, in fact very much the opposite. I’m just another human being. Just pretty plain.” 11

In a piece from February 2014, he performs nude in his studio, holding a glass tabletop over his head and on his shoulders in imitation of the Greek titan Atlas who passed life to Adam in Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel, as he photographed the webbed hands of two toads floating in preservation fluid, nearly touching. The correlation was an epiphany. He wrote, “I am looking for a human embryo to receive life from the fingertips of a toad.” 11

During his long recovery, he and his wife Victoria left their new home in Atlanta to build an ecologically designed residence in the mountains of North Carolina. Many of the animations Hicks produced in his studio there were more revealing than his earlier work, both physically and emotionally, as he placed his own nude body more frequently in front of the camera. With a degree of playfulness and self-deprecation, he aligns himself symbolically with deities in this work, and celebrates own life and efforts.

In a piece from February 2014, he performs nude in his studio, holding a glass tabletop over his head and on his shoulders in imitation of the Greek titan Atlas who led a revolt against Zeus. Still photographs are strung together in animation, the detail of his body blurred by

Hicks did envision a grand plan for his work, to urge awareness and incite action against mass extinction of species on a vast scale. He believed the poetic invocations of art could help achieve this. Late one night at the Smithsonian he had a vision of God dialogue with these traumatic brushes with death.

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Some images I see as lonely and others as mythical as the frog prince or so alien to the beauty of humanity as to seem lonely. Seeing these frogs as mythical or lonely, we see ourselves in them. I see in these images a long slow evolution from swimming in the womb to metamorphosing into the light and eventually generations on into this airy terrestrial canopy of urban sprawl.

—Tracy Hicks
TRACY HICKS 1947–2014
BORN IN SAN ANTONIO, TX.
ATTENDED STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE UNIVERSITY
SMITHSONIAN FELLOW

SELECTED SOLO AND TWO-PERSON EXHIBITIONS

2015 Tracy Hicks Retrospective (memorial exhibition), 100 West Corsicana and Nancy Rebal Studios, Corsicana, TX
2012 The Memory Lab, Centre for the Living Arts, Space 301, Mobile, AL (collaboration with Rick Lowe)
2011 Museum Expo—2011 Artist Integrating the Future of Museums, annual meeting, Center for the Future of Museums, American Alliance for Museums, Houston, TX
2008–09 fragile/natural, Noyce Science Center, Grinnell College, Grinnell, IA

SMITHSONIAN FELLOW

ATTENDED STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE UNIVERSITY
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New Forms Regional Initiative Grant (NFRII), funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, the Rockefeller Foundation and the Andy Warhol Foundation, 1992
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Artist in Residence, Southern Methodist University, Dallas TX, 1992–1999

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