

WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN



THE BOOK OF
DOLORES

The Book of Dolores

by William T. Vollmann

Published by



To be released: **November 2013**

This PDF of *The Book of Dolores*
is only a preview and an uncorrected proof.
Lifting images from mechanical files is strictly prohibited.

To see the complete version, please contact Nina Ventura,
Publicist: nina@powerHouseBooks.com

The Book of Dolores



by William T. Vollmann

1: CONSTRUCTIONS

1.1	Denial, and Other Cosmetics.....	12
	Dolores and Her Friends	
1.2	Practicing and Recording, <i>or</i> , Confessions of a Lady's Tailor.....	26
	Becoming Dolores	
	In Between	
	First Female Gazes	
	Male Gazes	
	Breasts	
1.3	<i>How You Are</i>	46
	The "Black Lipstick" Passage	
	The "Calliope" Passage	
	The Birthing Cave Sequence	
	"Speak Now, My Heart"	

2: PORTRAITS

2.1	Laptop Photographs.....	76
2.2	Mexican Watercolor Drawings.....	91
	Oaxaca	
	Xalapa	
	Veracruz	
2.3	Woodblock Prints.....	113
2.4	Paper Negatives.....	122
2.5	Silver Gelatin Positives.....	135
2.6	Color Film Positives.....	143
2.7	Gum Bichromate Prints, <i>or</i> , It Will All Come Off in the Clearing Bath.....	152

3: END MATTER

3.1	My Gum Bichromate Procedure.....	188
3.2	Captions.....	191
3.3	Acknowledgements.....	195
3.4	Or Whichever Other Innocuous State of Being.....	197

1.1: Denial, and Other Cosmetics

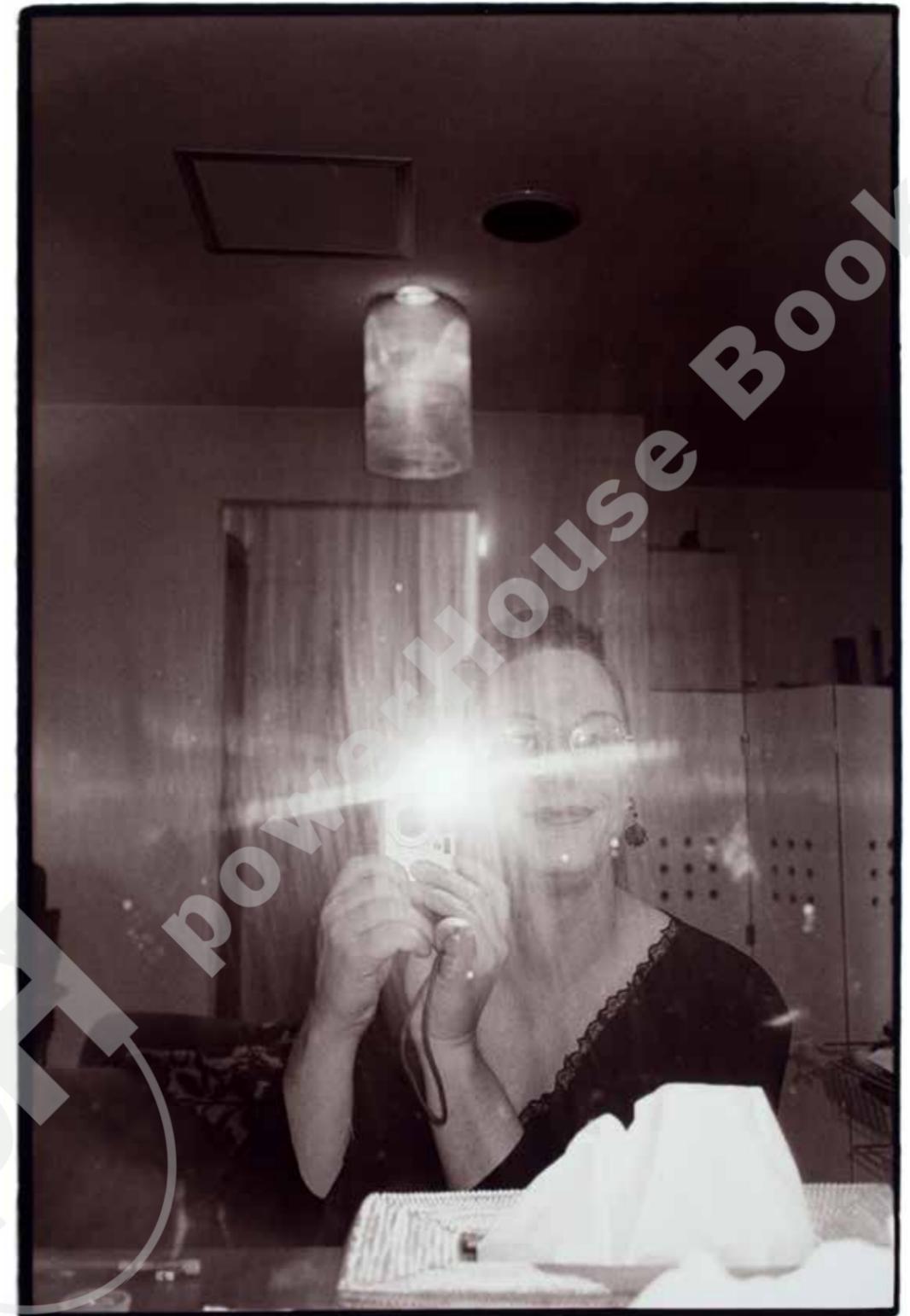
The young woman whom you see on the facing page, somewhat veiled by the flash of her 35 millimeter Contax camera, is feeling quite excited, curious and happy with herself, like a teenaged girl who has locked herself inside the bathroom in order to covertly and inexpertly, hence all the more earnestly apply her elder sister's makeup. The photograph was made in a tiny second-storey studio, less clandestine than merely discreet, where certain men in Tokyo make appointments to be professionally made up as women.*

This woman's name is Dolores, and she imagines that she has never looked so good — which is to say, so much herself. And this rather murky print (on account of its murkiness) does her hopes justice. Not only are her foundation and concealer fresh, but the collusion of flash and ambient dimness suppresses the ageing midtones of her skin. She exists only in episodes, and even her youth arrived rather late in life.

Beaumont Newhall once wrote: "The fundamental belief in the authenticity of photographs explains why photography of people no longer living and of vanished architecture are so melancholy. Neither words nor the most detailed painting can evoke a moment of vanished time as powerfully and as completely as a good photograph."** Let us forgive the man his overstatement; he loves what he knows. And because I likewise love photographs, and other images, I have made this book. How "authentic" is the photograph now exposed before you? The person it depicts was certainly present on that rainy day in that little room, not so many years ago. Since then I have lost one of Dolores's best earrings, and the new black dress of which she felt so proud has worn out, and my hands are more wrinkled. Meanwhile Dolores has made herself real to me even as I wonder when she will disassemble herself for the last time.

Among my photographic teachers I count Ansel Adams, whose books I read and reread. Quite often his final print appeals to me less than one of the trial versions reproduced beside it, just as I sometimes prefer a study to a finished oil painting. It used

* For a more complete account of this establishment, see my book *Kissing the Mask* (New York: Ecco, 2010).
** Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography*, 5th ed., 6th pr., rev. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, New York, distrib. Bullfinch Press / Little, Brown & Co, 1997; orig. ed. 1982), p. 94.



to unnerve me that people disagree as to the best form of a picture (or of almost anything). Now it makes me feel free. The main thing is to know what one likes. Next in importance (although it may come earlier) is learning what one can do. More inspiring than his coolly brilliant prints is Adams's insistence on previsualizing the image and its tonal scale before snapping the shutter. To the extent that I sought to obey his advice, my large format work benefited, and even my 35 millimeter negatives improved once I comprehended what a light meter can and cannot see. I have published another book of pictures, called *Imperial*, which shows, I hope, that I tried to think through my compositions and exposures. Adams might not have been impressed by the choices I made. Many an inferior worker is too easily pleased, and I frequently did please myself. I remember opening my tripod one hot day in a grapefruit orchard on the shores of the Salton Sea. Pale moons of fruit shone against the dark leaves. Thanks to previsualization, I knew that I wanted a green filter, and I chose to increase my exposure by two and a half stops. I felt excited when I opened the shutter, elated when I saw the developed negative, and calmly joyous when I produced my first platinum print from it. Whether or not it was the best grapefruit picture ever made, it was certainly my best, and I take pride in it. When I see it now, I remember that May morning, and the woman who was with me, and I reexperience them together. Perhaps a locket of her hair would serve me as well; as for the grapefruit picture, people sometimes tell me they like it, but of course for better and worse it is a different picture to them because there is no woman in it. Andrew Wyeth's occasional practice of portraying someone in, say, his meat cellar and then painting him out, leaving only the depicted setting to represent him, proves how effectively context can haunt a picture; and if the joke were on us, and Wyeth had never actually concealed a person beneath the final layers of paint, would it matter?



With landscapes, I took my time. But when I photographed people for *Imperial*, I plucked their vanishing moments more straightforwardly after Newhall's sense. Most of them I would never get to know; thus their portraits became all that you and I could have of them. I think that when they were posing for me in their asparagus fields and in the doorways of their sun-dazzled dusty streets, they sensed this. What they gave me cost them little to give because, like the sun, they kept giving it simply by existing. This left me no less covetous. The longer I live, and the more *past* their portraits become, the more I will cherish them.

My previsualizations on those occasions were simple: Stop down the lens for maximum depth of field, set the shutter speed as high as feasible (generally around an eighth of a second), and refrain from stage directions, since I remember how a pho-

tographer once posed *me* against the churchwall of his choice, in his leather jacket; I never liked that picture.

Dolores was, at first, just such a stranger as these others. And I could not previsualize her even as superficially as I had them, because I could not see her except in a mirror, and she mostly refused to let me wear my glasses. Well, her moments were certainly vanishing ones, all right.

To be sure, the portraits in this book are by their nature posed. (Sometimes I posed her and sometimes she posed herself.) They are also discoveries. What I discovered I frequently wished were different. Well, didn't that make it all the more authentic?

When I look at the woman on page 13, I remember how thrilled with herself she was, in that ignorant, innocently narcissistic way of hers, and I feel tenderly toward her and her enthusiasms, as I would toward the self-exaltations of any small child. When it comes to myself, I rarely hold such tolerance. I live in an ageing, expendable male body. My intellect, such as it is, I consider to be one of my tools, not something I deserve credit for, or even something that is more a part of me than, say, the Contax camera riding at my belt. My body and mind deserve my care and, perhaps, my gratitude. But they exist to be used until they break, not to be cherished.

I do not exactly cherish Dolores, who is, after all, an aspect of myself. (When I looked closely at myself, I began to see what I was made of. I was more like me and less like Dolores than I had imagined, or perhaps it was the other way around.) Anyhow, I would help her if I could.

In the same spirit in which Nixon once assured the nation that "I am not a crook," I advise all my readers that I am not a narcissist. Why this work, then?

Transgendered people sometimes make extreme commitments to selves which could never exist but for effort, pain, anguish, humiliation and isolation. Dolores is no such individual, for I have never believed myself to be a female born into the wrong body. I am a heterosexual male with a hypertrophy of the empathetic organs. Not only am I physically and emotionally attracted to women, I also wonder what being a woman would be like.

Recently I wrote a novel in which I imagined myself as a transgender woman.* The more some acquaintances saw and heard of what I will call my research, the more

* When I first began the research for that book, I did not understand the difference between cross-dressers and transgender people. In brief, the latter often tend to have believed since childhood that they were born into a body of the wrong gender. Their resulting misery, or gender dysphoria, impels them into painful, expensive surgery in hopes of rendering who they are consistent with what they have. Cross-dressers, on the other hand, may or may not become transgendered. Frequently they enjoy the use of the genitalia they were born with, and step in and out of their acquired gender as easily as they do their lingerie.

degraded they considered me. This encouraged me to embellish what they called my degradation. So in the book I became a physically unattractive Mexican street prostitute. How could anyone believe that women, Mexicans, prostitutes, street people are by nature inferior? But multitudes do — among them, sad to say, members of those very categories; not to mention the rich and selfish, who have no justification not to know better, and the circumstantially ignorant, whom I excuse. In fine, I found that because there were some who looked down on me, I grew ashamed. When I put on my dress and prosthetic breasts, it felt frightening to go out into the night. This was, as a good friend would say, information. Precisely which other information I sought by becoming Dolores is not entirely transparent to me, but I might have learned it, or other things, in the course of this experiment. For a summation, I refer interested parties to the novel, which is called *How You Are*.

To repeat, what I felt while wearing feminine clothes, wigs and other things differs from how I looked, both “objectively,” to a camera, and, let’s also say “objectively,” to myself, with a watercolor brush in my hand and my spectacles off. The camera saw Dolores in one way. I saw her in another. Previsualization became a joke.



This vain, young, inexperienced woman thought that she looked better than she did. Who was I to tell her otherwise? I would not say that my watercolors flattered her, exactly, but many of her pores and wrinkles became invisible to this well-meaningly nearsighted old watercolorist, who might perhaps have believed in what the women’s magazines sometimes spell “glamour.”

In the 1980s my friend Ken Miller used to photograph prostitutes with his big camera while I made watercolor portraits of them. Ken once said: “Man, I envy you, because you can just make your background the blank white of the paper. Me, no matter how shallow I set my f/stop, there’s still going to be some texture or off-white from the wall.” Ken’s photographs were cruelly beautiful, every stretch mark and abscess in

place. As for me, I was benefitted not only by my paper’s blankness but also by my poor vision. As I said, many of the fine wrinkles around a sad old street-whore’s eyes I could not see. And I did not mind missing them. One of the greatest compliments I received in my distinguished career of harlot-painter was when a hotel girl whom I had paid to pose offered me the ten dollars back if she could keep her likeness. When I declined, she snatched it and ran laughing down the hall, with her money tucked safely in her underpants! As an old commercial photographer used to tell his clients, “Ma’am, when you look good, I look good.” I guess she looked good then.

So when it came time to make portraits of that sad old lady named Dolores, I recollected my talent for not seeing wrinkles. By then Dolores had had many humiliating experiences of taking off her glasses, primping and posing for the camera, exposing herself to truth’s light, and then, her glasses back on, inspecting the portrait, only to discover that she did not look as pretty as she had felt. If only the camera had envisioned her as she did! When I put on a dress and wig, sat down before a mirror, with a pad or notebook in my lap, a palette on the table and a brush in my hand, I could see only what Dolores could. After a few such sessions, I began to know my face a little, for the first time in my life. I noticed, for instance, that at the outer edge of each eye, a crease curved downward. I learned the shape of my mouth, which was neither thin nor full; the line between my lips consisted of two diagonal segments and three curves. I had no eyebrows (the result of an accident at the North Magnetic Pole). I became conversant with my ovoid head. Of course I could rub concealer over my eye-grooves, enlarge my lips with red gloss, draw on the eyebrows of my fancy, and give the sides of my face any shape I liked, thanks to wig-hair. But the eye-grooves and mouth, at least, I generally left alone. I wished Dolores to be recognizably me as well as herself. And so I drew my eyes with their downcurving side-creases, and I sketched the lips that I have. By then it scarcely mattered whether I wore a wig or any makeup, unless I chose to do so in order to regale myself with that “feminine feeling” so delicious to cross-dressers. Did I want to be a longhaired blonde like my youngest sister, or a greyhaired butch lesbian? I could paint those details in.

Ken was quite right; my paper gave me help. Even more helpful were my dreams, suppositions and imaginations.

One afternoon in Oaxaca, I was sketching an old clay figurine in the anthropology museum. The thing gaped its thick-lipped, beautiful mouth and widened its eyes. It wore a thick headdress and massive ring-earrings. I had wished to render it more carefully and completely, but the establishment was closing. Returning into the sunlight a little sorrowfully, I kept thinking about that lovely female image and longing to see it again. Suddenly I wondered how Dolores would appear if she attempted to impersonate it. Opening the sketchbook to the quick drawing which I had just completed, I sat before the mirror and began to model. The clay lady had opened her mouth. My lips did not

go in quite the same way, but I drew them the way they did go, plumping them out, however. Next I drew my nose, and my eyes with their downcurving creases, accompanied by their undershadows. I invented a collar from which a grinning, gaping pendant hung by a chain studded with Dolores's earrings. And when I stopped to study the effect, I felt that "Dolores the idol" was me, but also someone alien. I experienced a sense of freedom, pleasure and power.

At this time I had not worked out how my novel would end. The picture-play with that indigenous figurine convinced me that Dolores would somehow come into her own in Mexico. I accordingly awarded her the capacity to speak perfect Spanish and a half-reliable supply of hormones and methamphetamines, upon which everything took a suitably extreme direction.

No, as much as she might have hoped I would, I never flattered her. And yet in these drawings and writings I did get to be what I pretended. Hence the drawings and woodcuts are in my opinion fair representations, which is to say self-portraits by a nearsighted person.

So I played and played with poor Dolores, who had little to say about any of it — not that she objected, either. It is possible (although I cannot say for sure) that at times she liked to get a trifle high and kinky; unlike me, she could be an exhibitionist.



Statuette, and Dolores imitating it

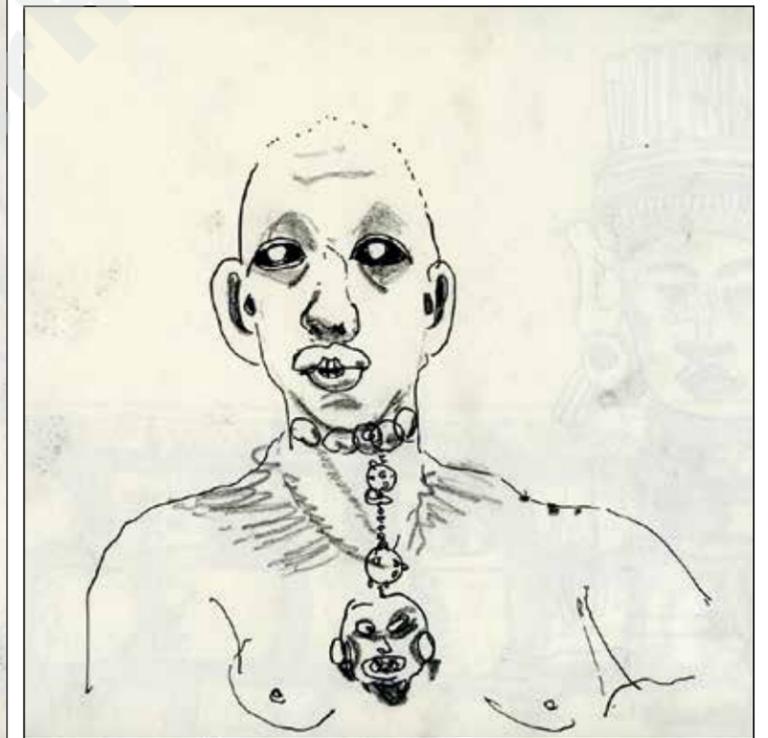
At those times I wondered whether she knew her own interest. If the word got out, what kind of person might she be taken for? All the same, I clicked the shutter.

Just what a photographer owes his subject is an eternally unresolved question. I suppose that what Michael Walzer remarked on the subject of just and unjust wars pertains here: "Whatever the rules may be is less to the point than the fact that there are rules." In any event, throughout my career I have sought to show respect and gratitude for the people who pose for me, asking and thanking, paying those who need it, and refraining from making nonconsensual images except under very particular circumstances such as the following: a person is dead, unconscious, or otherwise a victim, and the picture is about his situation; a person is part of life in a public place, etcetera. For me such photographs are exceptions. Mostly, I ask. I would rather fail to get a good photo than fail to be a good neighbor to others.

In commencing this project, of course, I looked forward to exploiting myself with ruthless abandon, without regard for courtesy, dignity and all the rest of it. Since Dolores belonged entirely to me — was in fact my construct, who came and went only at my will — how could she stop me from posing her as I chose?



Indigenous idol



Dolores as idol



Party girl

All the same, in certain respects she turned out to be a difficult model. Like me, she could be stubborn and unrealistic. As I keep remarking, she expected to look beautiful, posed with what she fondly supposed to be a come-hither look (derived, I suspect, from half-remembered glances at fashion magazines and pornographic pictures), and offered my camera what was in fact the vacuous simper of a wall-eyed, jowly man of late middle age. When I put my spectacles back on and saw these pictures for the first time, I felt embarrassed on her behalf. Poor Dolores! But, after all, I owned her, so if she appeared ridiculous, grotesque or pathetic, there was nothing she could do about it, and it certainly didn't affect me.

(My friend Jeff, who develops my film, laughed at the pictures and said: "You know, Bill, you really are awfully ugly." He and I both eventually got used to it.)

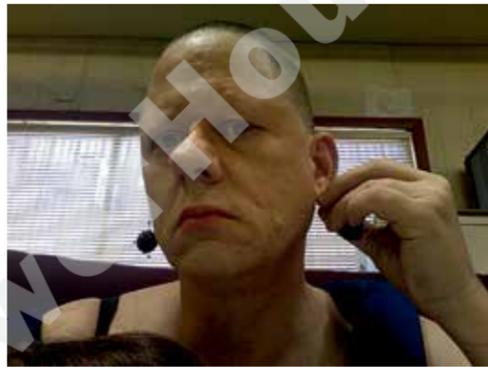
I would have liked to photograph her nude, out of curiosity or empathy. Unfortunately, Dolores nude would have been nobody other than myself. — Or am I mistaken? Precisely because she is blinder to her faults (or merely because she is newer), she appears more at ease with herself than I. Although people do sometimes inform me that the pictures of her tend to look "sad," and in my condescension I think of her as such, she may well be more gleeful than I, or at least freer. Had I asked her to pose without clothes, I am sure that she would have done it. (Perhaps I did ask; maybe the pictures didn't come out.)



Housewife

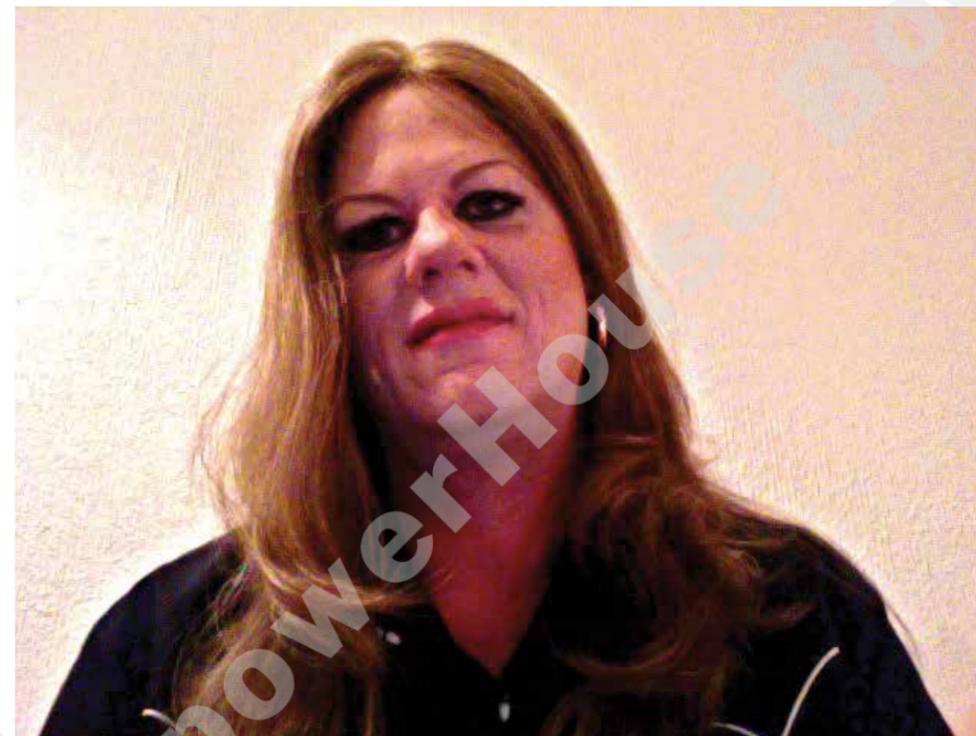
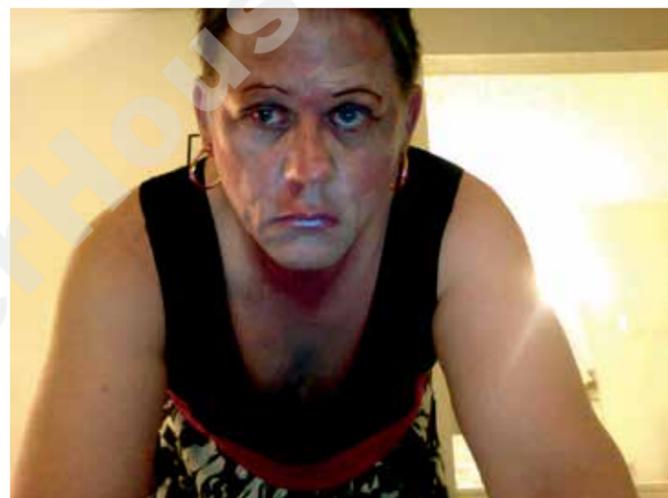
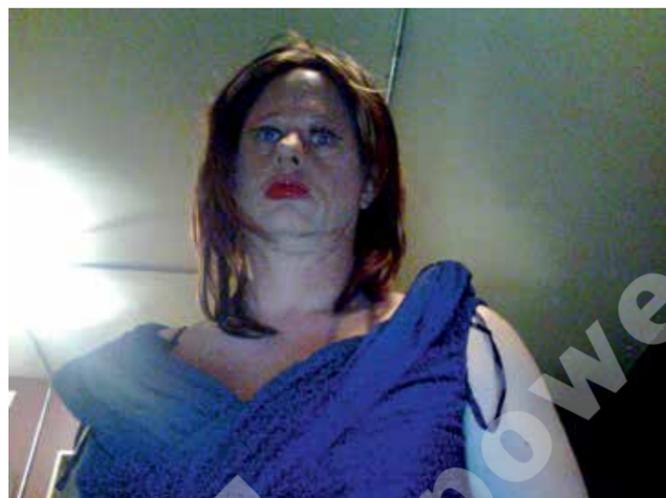


Geologist



becoming dolores

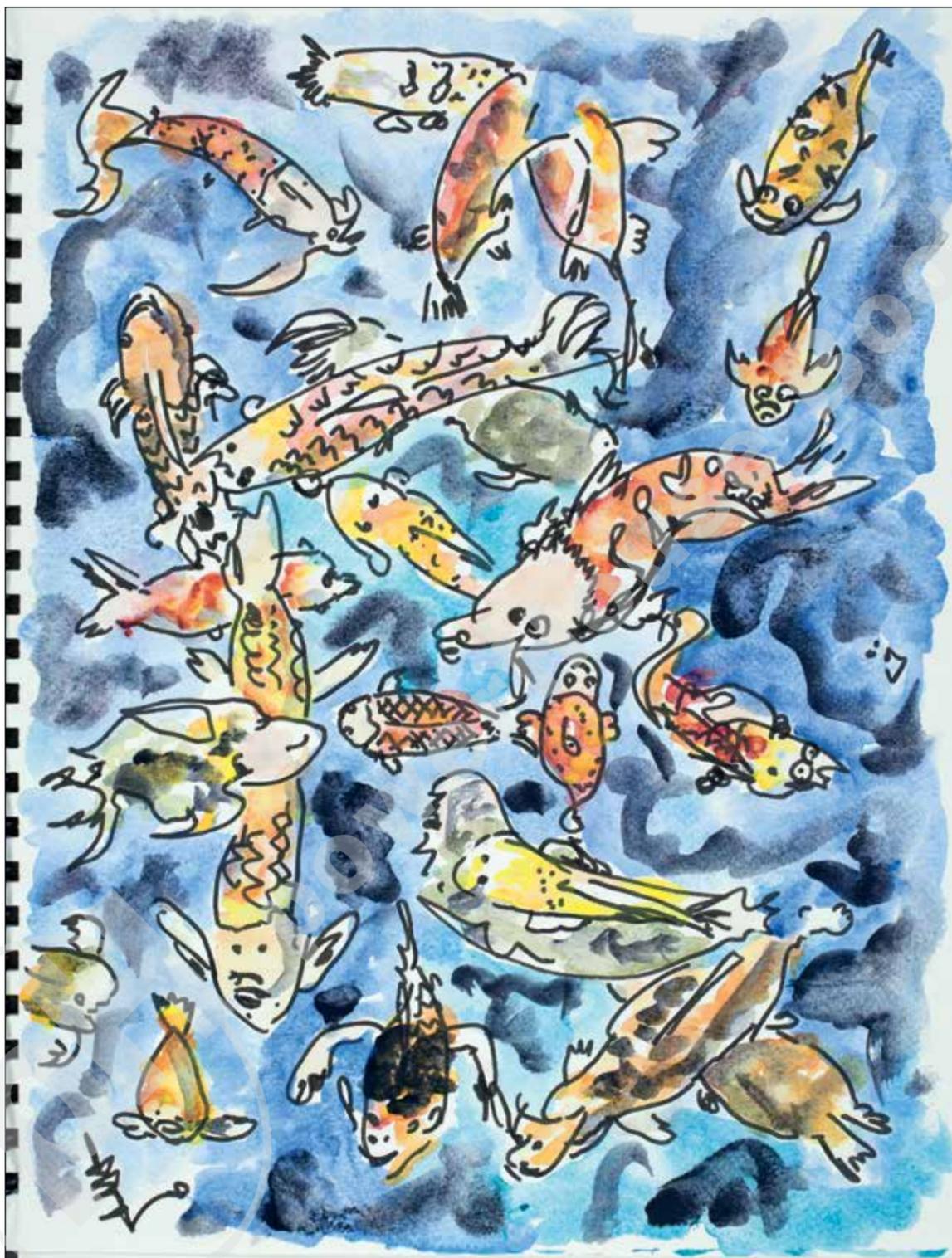




*Top left: Necklaces (see p. 182); top right: Bedtime;
bottom left: Prostitute; bottom right: Desert motel*

Melissa's work (see p. 125)

2.2: Mexican Watercolor Drawings



Carp

In Mexico I drew myself not merely as I wanted to be, but also as I seemed to see myself. The fact that these meetings with myself sometimes surprised me may be evidence of a lack of self-knowledge, of the unconscious content of psychological projection, or, as I prefer to believe, that anything is worth studying. On occasion I felt lonely when Dolores modeled for me; sometimes I feared that I was wasting a portion of my life, and that rather than dwelling on myself, which I could have done anywhere, I should have gone out into the Mexico of other people, as in the past I would certainly have done. But I had now come to believe in the existence of a Mexican Dolores, and it was only here that I could find her.



When I encountered myself instead, this entity likewise began to take on a faintly Mexican appearance. But no matter whom I saw, my half-blindness continued to be convenient.

For example, the sketch called "Dolores's *novio*" [p. 96] is a likeness of the man whom I perceived in the mirror. The details which without my spectacles I could not see consisted of rough-pored, age-spotted skin, unskillful bouts of shaving, my new double chin, etcetera. Hence the man in the portrait looked younger and smoother-skinned. In the next picture, "Debutante" [same page], I added long hair, eyebrows, earrings and mascara as I pleased. Dolores might not have been beautiful even then, but at least she was the way she saw herself.

I never saw the astigmatism of my left eye, evidently because it is the one I use for the closeup vision entailed in drawing. Hence in these sketches, as is far from the case in the photographs, Dolores's eyes appear to track.

The Oaxaca portraits were all done in a sketchbook. As they accrued, it became a thrill to page through them and observe how protean Dolores could be, and yet how

much she remained very much herself. Since the little book was always with me, whether I sat down for an ice cream at the *zócalo* or wandered up a desert hill, I could pencil in whatever I pleased on any leaf, before or after the fact. Thus the two “earring and pyramid” drawings were each begun on an ancient archaeological site; later on I whisked a bit of paint onto them, and in place of a moon I finally hung one of Dolores’s first earrings in the sky. In “Public offering” [p. 100] the man in the hat was sketched first; and after Dolores posed for me, I added in the tilework pattern at the very last. It was as a result of these Mexican drawings that I began more vividly to imagine the Dolores of *How You Are* becoming, or trying to become, a Mexicana.

By the time of my visits to Xalapa and Veracruz, that aspiration was a settled matter — in the novel, anyhow. The respective sketchbooks were larger and less portable than the one I had taken to Oaxaca. Accordingly, I often worked in the hotel room or on the balcony. These portraits took on a semiformal character; but I continued to feel free to imagine myself in anywhere I liked — for instance, in a candy store with carp swimming through the air.

“First Jadeite Dolores,” so called not only because there was more than one such composition but also because the main watercolor pigment was jadeite — and jade rock occurs in the province of Veracruz — was begun from two sketches of figures in the Anthropology Museum in Xalapa. Returning to the hotel I then, as usual, sketched myself posing in imitation of one of the statues. (It is easy to tell Dolores from her exemplars by her narrower nose and fuller eyelids; she is in the center of the trio.)

In “Dolores as an indigenous giantess,” I narrowed my eyes, widened my eyes and tilted back my head in an attempt to resemble the woman in the foreground, whom I had sketched in the park.

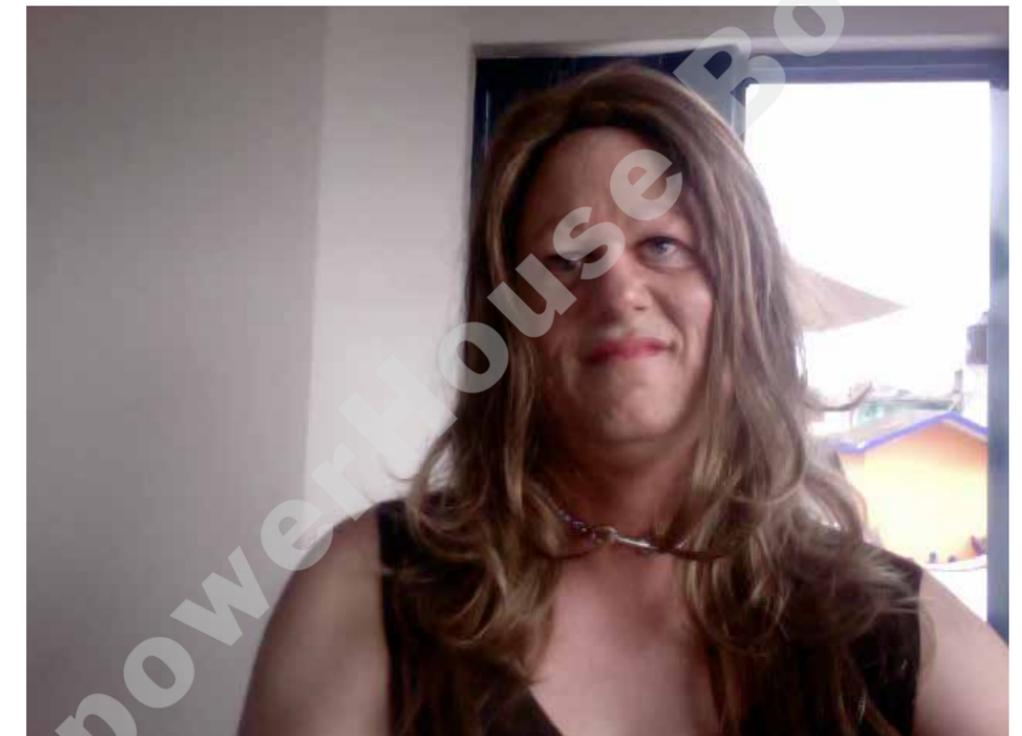
“Dolores as a young Mexicana” modeled herself after the hotel chambermaid, who posed for me after work. In this latter case, once Dolores was alone I parted her imaginary hair in the chambermaid’s style, added imaginary squiggles of earrings, and left her essential facial features alone as always. She looked fresher than usual since I somehow neglected to draw the wrinkles in. Here she is wearing the one dress she had with her in Xalapa, a black one with a red stripe across the breast; it struts itself again in the gum print “Desert light.”

By the time of the final sketching trip, to Veracruz, I felt more willing to alter the con-



tours of my body (excepting my face) as if my flesh were another fantasy garment. The girl on the left in “Blue devil” was an outdoor waitress. After she had posed, I returned to the hotel room, stripped, and modeled, giving myself breasts and hips similar to hers, painting in hair and earrings of my own invention, and coloring Dolores blue. The differential between my height and the waitress’s is shown accurately.

In “Banana crown” I was feeling my age. One can see in Dolores’s eyes that she has begun wondering when it will all come to an end.



Dolores in Xalapa



Top: Princess of the Red Cactus; bottom: With her familiars



Dolores as a decapitated head

Since Dolores likes women near about as much as I do, we might as well call her a lesbian. So in these woodblock prints we see her both alone and with her lesbian lover Isabel. What they do together I can't imagine.

When I travel to other countries, I frequently buy the local wood, hire models and start drawing straight onto my blocks. If I have time, I carve them on the spot. Thai *ulo* wood is crispy-soft and comes in tall, narrow, thin lengths — nearly too thin in my opinion, since it can break. Japanese cherry, the traditional choice for *ukiyo-e* printing, is hard and nearly grainless. American pine and redwood can offer knots and grain for

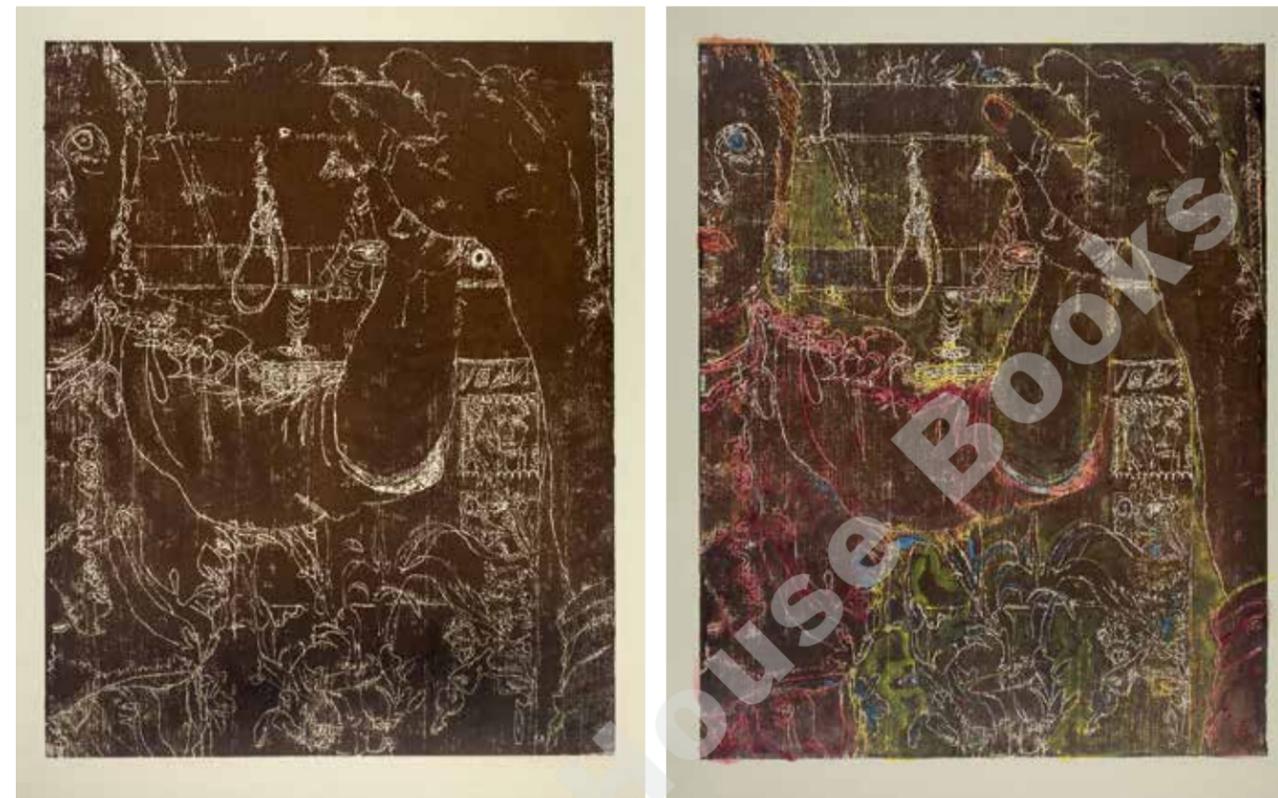


special occasions. I like Norwegian pine better. American oak is a bit like cherry, while poplar and birch are easy to work and somewhat featureless. Malaysian *datang* is so extremely soft that it can be incised with a fingernail. Therefore it comes thick and heavy — a joy to carve, but unnerving to print, since too vigorous a rubbing can ruin an image. Its strangely globular grain enhances certain images.



I carry cheap gouges in my suitcase. In the studio, however, I make increasing use of an air-compressor-powered engraver which cuts nearly as easily as a felt-tipped pen draws on smooth paper. Most of the figure-lines in the Dolores blocks were cut with this tool, although I widened some grooves with a gouge or two, and much of the crosshatching was accomplished with a steel comb.

I have always preferred the bold effects of relief printing over the greater detail of intaglio, which requires a press. My favorite printing tool is a spoon. For larger blocks such as these Dolores prints, I first employ a round Japanese barren, establishing the block's edges through the paper, and then passing rapidly over its entire surface in a series of circular motions, before the ink can dry. After that I pick up my spoon

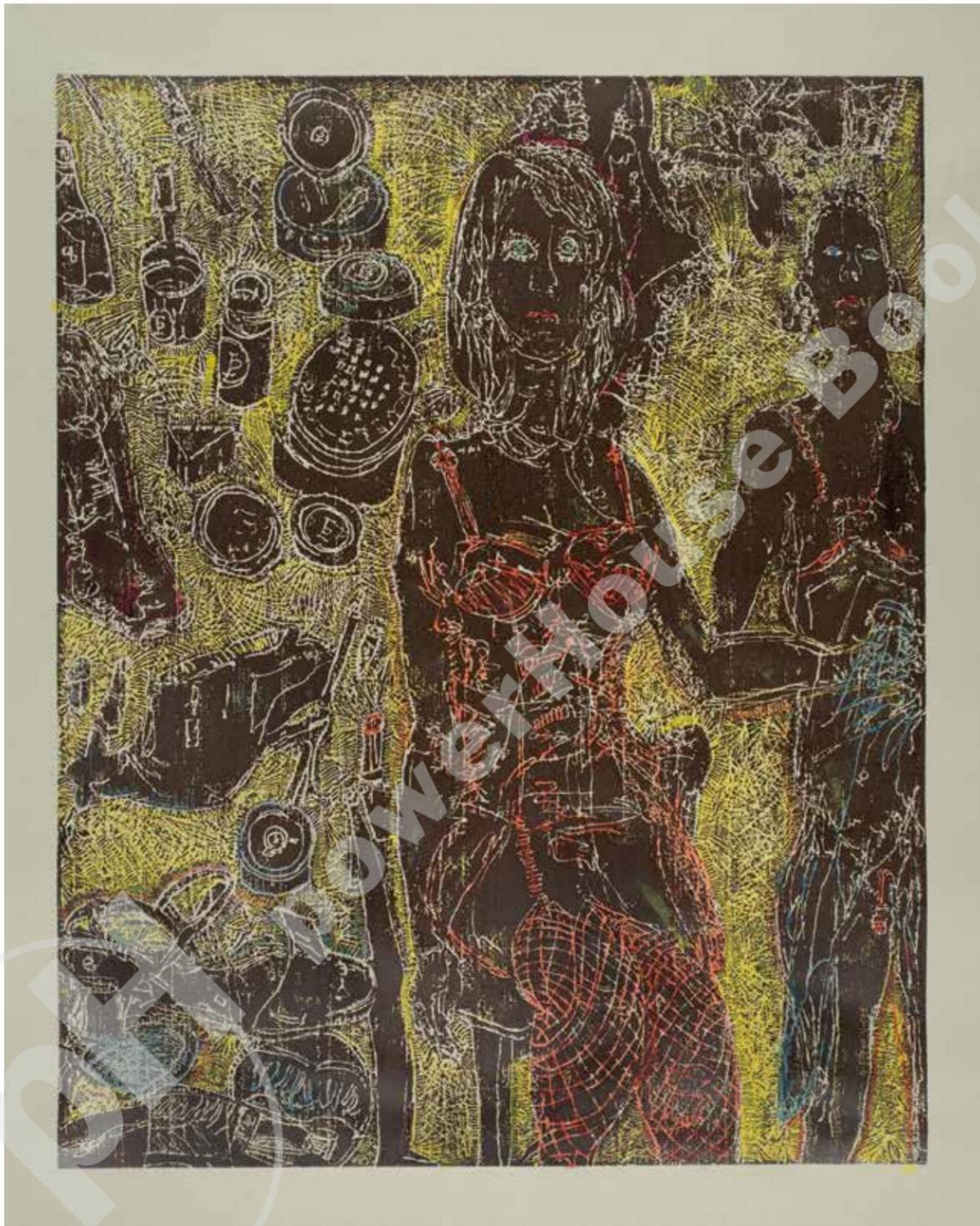


"Happy landings," first and second states of block

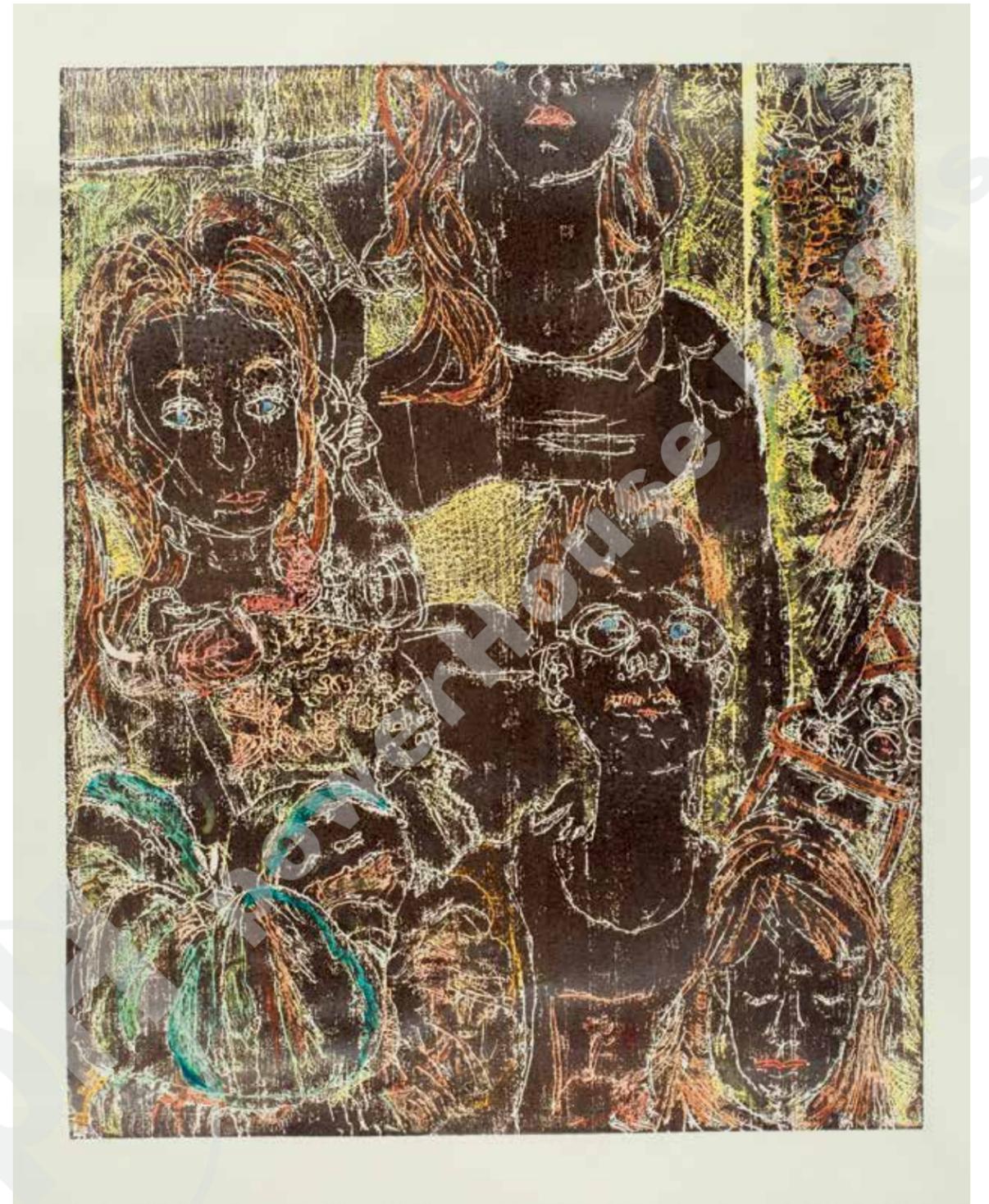


and cover the area again, this time in slow, careful rows of to-and-fro motions. Whenever I like, I can hold down part of the paper with one hand, while with the other I can lift up a corner or edge to study how the print is coming along. Should I wish to add emphasis to a face or some other element, I'll swirl the spoon more forcefully over that one spot, darkening it. Or I can print a background extra lightly. In effect, I can dodge and burn with more ease and leisure than in the darkroom.

Once upon a time there was a gruff old man named Leonard, whose cigarette smoker's voice would answer the phone: "Action Machine." In those days he was investing in gold and silver. I asked him to build me a hinged table to ensure registration for my relief printing. My idea was that the woodblock would rest on the bed, the paper would attach to the underside of the



Isabel protecting Dolores from the material world



The artist with Dolores, wig head, Indian corn, feminine accessories and girl-child

2.4: Paper Negatives



Detail from untitled 8 x 10" portrait

I have heard that there is a speculative field of human endeavor called digital photography, which allows somebody to capture an image and see it instantly. It is hard for me to understand the use of that, when I can wander into any smidgeon of total darkness I like, load a sheet of Bergger cold tone developing-out paper in the holder (an indefinite loan from my friend Roger Vail, who has renounced analogue processes), stride grandly into the light, insert the holder in my 11 x 14" camera (a gift from my equally famous photographic colleague, Mr. William Linne, who last I heard, so in fashion are his skills, was applying to be a bouncer at an adult bookstore), verify that the ancient lens, which lacks click settings or even gauge-marks, remains stopped down to f/16 for a reasonable compromise between depth of field and speed,* pull out the dark slide, remove the lens cap, start my kitchen timer, direct obedient Dolores to run and instantaneously compose herself upon that chair over there on which I previously focused, encourage her to remain still for the two to four minutes of the exposure, whisk her out of the picture once the timer sounds, close the lens, re-insert

* Empirical tests indicate that this aperture contracts to at least f/200.

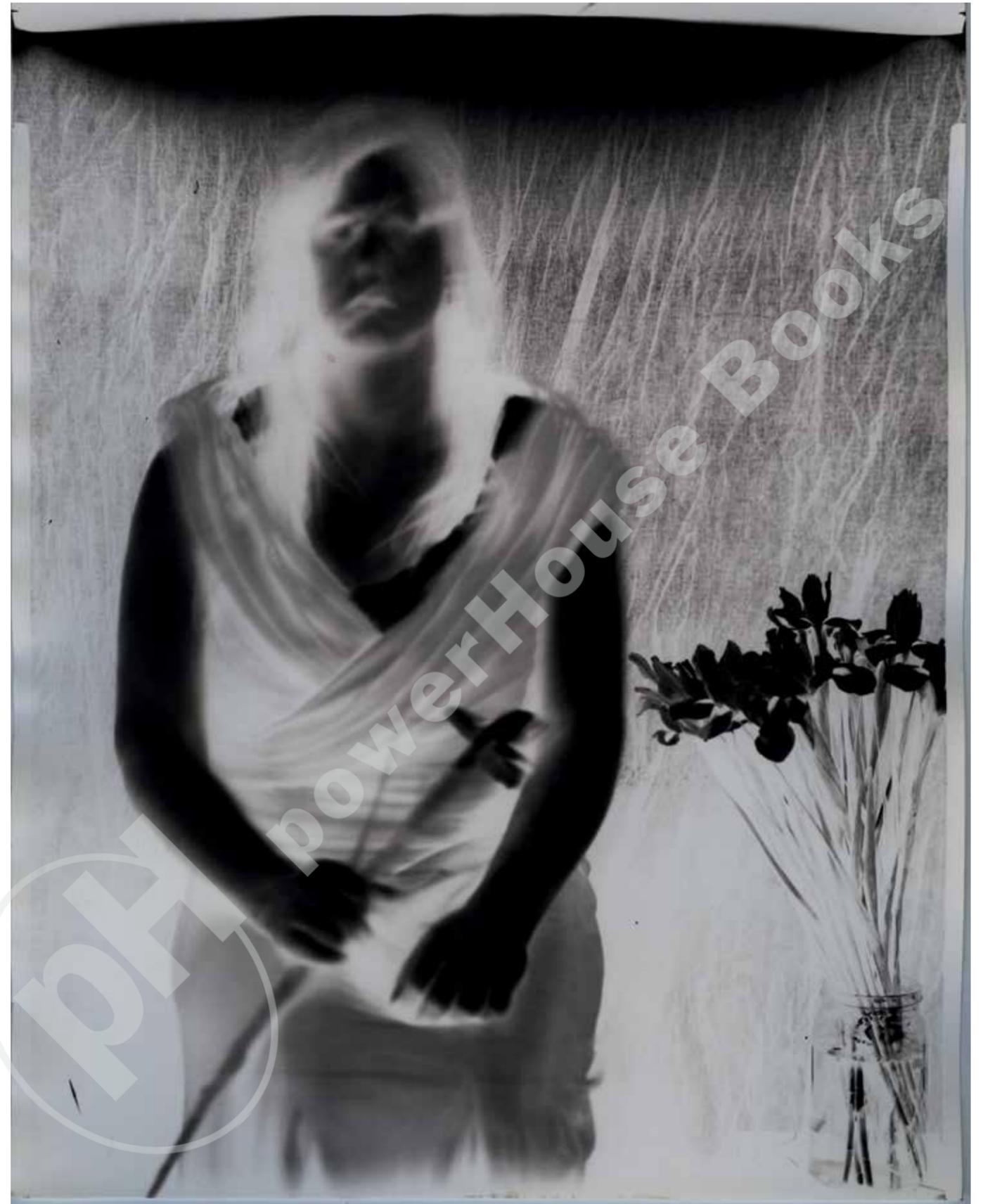
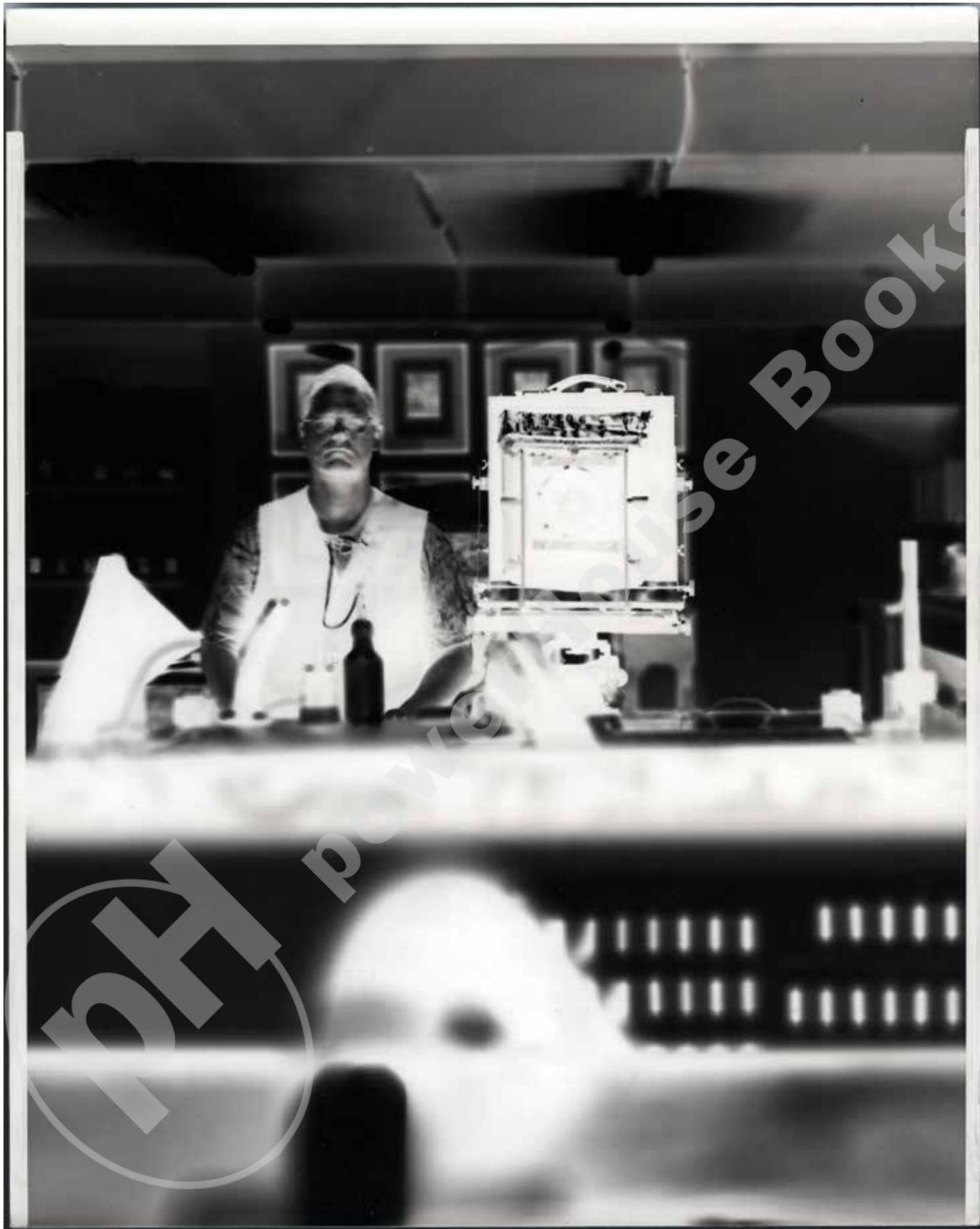
the dark slide, withdraw the holder, carry it into the darkroom, shut the door, pull out the paper, convey it into my ruby-lit inner paradise, which invariably exalts my spirits and expands around me in an infinity of unborn pictures and deliciously poisonous fumes, place the paper glossy side down in the developer bath (HC110, dilution B), rock the tray four times, grasp it with tongs sufficiently tenderly to avoid crimping and just tight enough to preserve it in my clutches, turn it over, release it and continue agitating gently and nicely, developing by inspection, my hopes as pleasantly blank as the sheet itself, upon which I now begin to distinguish a half-mistakeable thickening

of something along the borders where the dark slide gripped it; and I might as well be in some New England forest of my boyhood, looking out through the trees at some creek-horizon or faraway wolf-hill, wondering which cloud will fly toward me — it's a grey ghost; it's blackskinned, white-lipped, whitehaired Dolores! — then when the negative appears slightly too dark (which is how photos should look beneath a mostly banked safe-light), I lift it out by the front right corner, drain it, deposit in the stop bath, not releasing the grip of my tongs until the far edge supports itself upon the bottom of that tray, which I now swish happily for twenty-odd seconds, fix the image in two successive baths for thirty seconds each, turn on the light, discovering the negative's true tones and details (shadow-light curving along the underside of her dark arm, pearlescent and often blurry greynesses in the whitish hollows of her eyes), and then decide whether I wish to do all this again. I generally do.

I have been known to compromise by employing one of my 8 x 10" wooden field cameras, but that I'll confess in my merest darkroom whisper.

My successful silver gelatin prints, both negative and positive, are later selenium toned to extend the tonal range. That only adds two and a half hours, mostly from washing. — Does this seem too long to you? My friend Tom Robinson sometimes washed his silver gelatin prints for a couple of days, remarking to me: "Those optical brighteners in the paper only last thirty to fifty years, so I try to get them out as soon as I can and find out what I'm working with." The cheerful determination of his words — Tom was going neck to neck against time itself — continue to gratify my aspirations of independence. I will grub my way toward death in my own fashion, thank you, in or out of a dress, striving to please myself as honestly as I can. Now that paper, film and chemicals are getting rarer, I have even less excuse to cut corners.





2.5: Silver Gelatin Positives



Shooting film is almost as instant as making paper negatives, but not quite, since I hire my friend Jeff to develop the rolls for me. He runs the last black and white lab hereabouts. Recently his wife told me: "Jeff's been fixing machines all week. The tank developer's broken, and so is the horizontal 8 x 10" enlarger. All these companies are long out of business. When I see him struggling in there, I want to cry." Hearing this, I was all the more pleased with Jeff's business acumen in wangling such a lucrative client as I. Sometimes I give him two or three rolls in one go. He drives in to my side of town to pick them up, and then we take a long lunch and chat about someday making daguerrotypes. The most interesting part of that activity will be learning how long we can hold our breaths while bringing mercury to a boil.

When I get my film back from Jeff, I inspect the negatives on a loupe. If I see half a dozen that interest me, I go into the darkroom and print them. I tone them on the same day. Silver gelatin is not yet arcane enough for me to detail the process here. However, the diptych of Dolores beside her jar of weeds deserves an anecdote. Its pair of negatives were 8 x 10" Kodak Tri-X sheets, which as I write have just gone out of production. I shot them in my ancient Kodak 2D field camera and Jeff developed them. Then I printed each one by laying it over a sheet of 8 x 10" Bergger warm tone paper on my enlarger easel, flashing the room light on, counting four seconds aloud, switching off the light, and developing the image in Dektol. That was some of the easiest printing I ever did.

More often I invoke my elderly Leitz Focomat enlarger, which I bought from my friend Tom up in Portland. Recently it shorted out, so I picked out a nearby electrician from the Yellow Pages and got a very Christian ex-engineer from the Ukraine; he expressed displeasure at the test portraits of Dolores thumbtacked to the walls of the darkroom, but forgave me once a genetic woman dropped by. Taking the enlarger apart (he had never seen one before), we discovered that it had been insulated with tiny hand-lacquered rings of brown paper. So it seemed that the wires had lasted since the 1950s. Now, thanks to this electrician and his painstaking crimpings and wrappings of vintage cable, it is in pretty good shape. Since the incandescent light bulbs it employs are disappearing, I bought a handful of those.

My friend Kent Lacin runs a commercial photography business here in town. It's

mostly digital videos now. He gave me his sturdy rectangular LED timers when he shut down his darkroom. Both of them are getting spastic now. Kent pities me for doing what he used to do, and also, naturally, for being a host organism to that humiliating parasite called Dolores. Twenty-odd years ago he told me that he was considering making a series of photographs of himself, and I wondered why he couldn't escape from his head. Now here I am.

In the dark I grin and dance to the music of up and coming or at least almost new musicians from that recent decade when I was in college and had never heard of prostatitis; while the Focomat projects a spider-monster shadow on the ceiling and a sheet of 11 x 14" Bergger warmtone paper, whose like is unavailable now, lies pallid within the metal frame-bars of the easel, receiving upon its dully shining glossy surface that negative image of Dolores for, let's say, a minute and thirty seconds, for forty-five seconds of which I will dodge her face with my ovoid-headed wand, hoping that Kent's timer won't short out again. The lens must be stopped all the way open now that the paper, after seven years of curation on the refrigerator along with leftover meals, has gotten weak, and with it the various developers (official shelf lives of unopened concentrate: two years). Don't we all store up treasures for moths and rust? So far, more light for a longer period of time, followed by longer development in a more concentrated solution, still rescues my prints, but the end approaches, not least because my eyes cannot so easily judge the progression of development nowadays as I stand under the safelight, peering down into the dark, dark liquid, whose fumes begin to make me nauseous. Thus one of my exaltations. Robert Demachy, 1904: "For initiated, or perhaps for the insane (this is a question of words), there is a most exquisite pleasure in the contemplation of fine shades of deep and translucent black independently of form."* I hope he finds nice black vistas in his tomb.

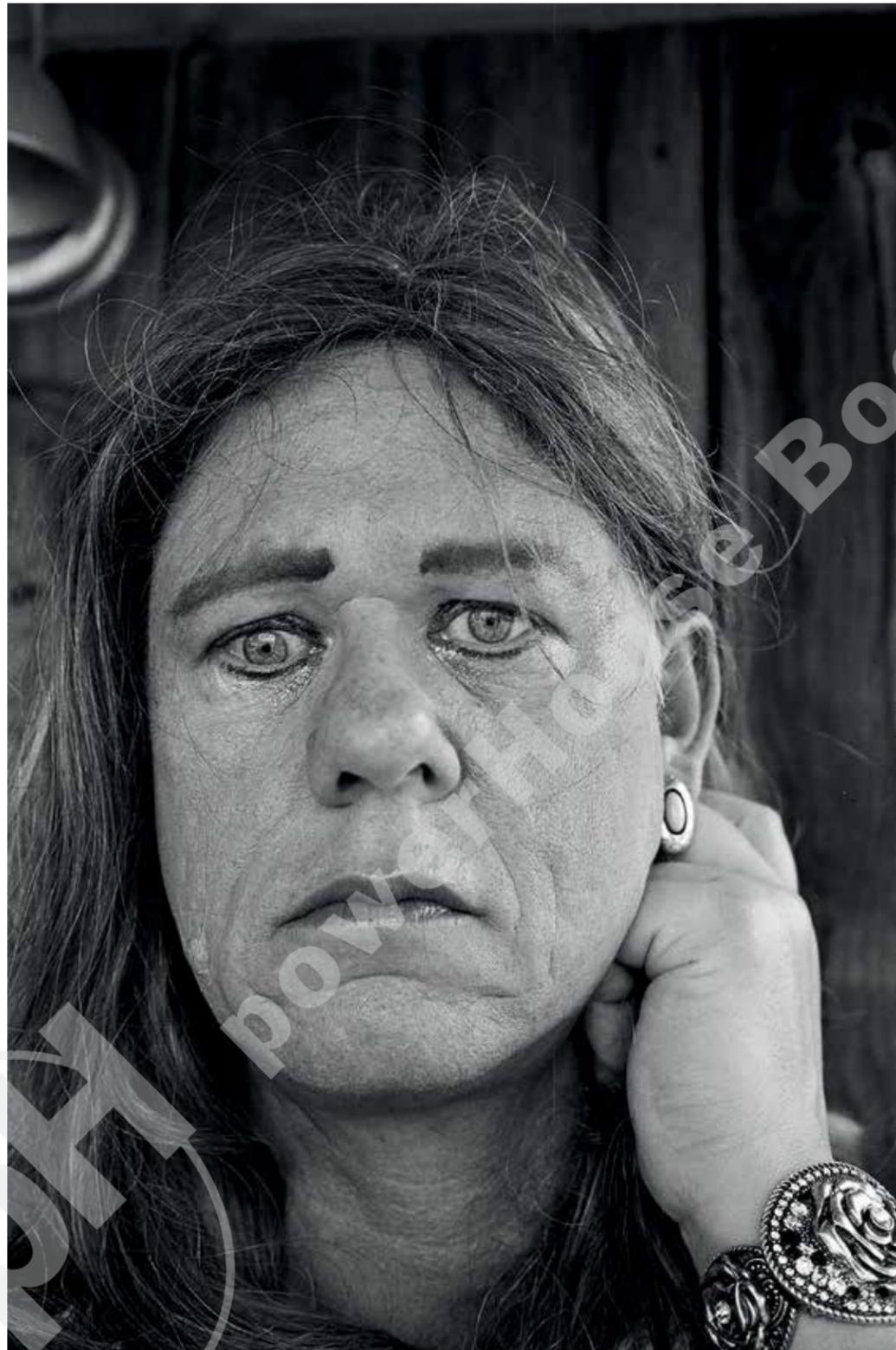
I begin each enlarging day with joy and hope. Staring down at the image on the easel is a lovely meditation. After eight or nine hours of standing on concrete, my back hurts. An hour's wash, and then six minutes of shuffling a batch of prints through concentrated selenium toner heated up in my tea kettle, and then another batch or two, followed by a another hour's wash, and I eat chili cold out of the can before squeegeeing my photographs with a windshield wiper blade. Even nowadays I can turn out a pretty decent set of matched prints, but as the paper and chemicals I love continue to age, silver gelatin becomes for me slightly more akin to such alternative processes as platinum and gum: more finicky, less consistent. I do not like this, of course. But Dolores never liked getting old, either. She and I had better accept our losses.

Jeff, by the way, is mildly disgusted by some of the Dolores images, particularly when harsh light accentuates the condition of her skin. To me she sometimes appears not unlike an Indian brave, longhaired yet masculine.

* Bill Jay, *Robert Demachy 1859-1936: Photographs and Essays* (New York: St. Martin's Press /Academy Editions, London, 1974) p. 27 ("On the gum-print").



Hoping to pass



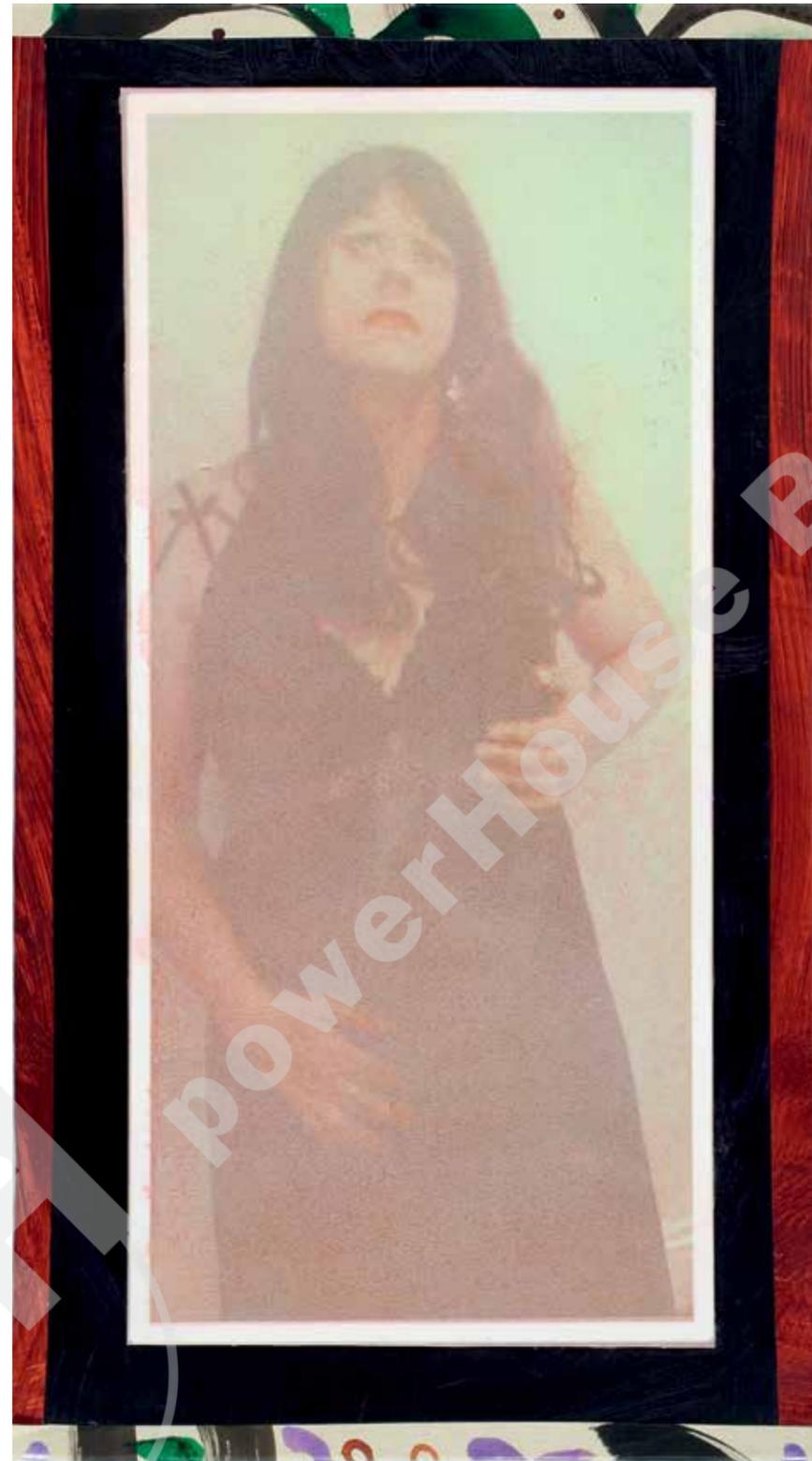
In Montana

2.6: Color Film Positives



Detail from outtake snapshot

Of all the the portrait methods in this book, color film is most unforgiving , as the above enlargement of Dolores's mouth area proves. Laptop photos obscure some pores and wrinkles behind pixellation, the high contrast of tonal reversal of paper negatives creates a convenient obscurity, and silver gelatin positives can always be under-exposed or -developed a trifle. I hardly ever shoot color film, but not for that reason. Why go to trouble and hazard for the sake of impermanence? When black-and-white labs began to wink out of business, I sometimes used to send magazine editors quickie color prints of my black and white rolls. The price was low and the time really no more than an hour. The tones would be either bluish or sepia; sometimes the one-hour people would even let me choose. These snapshots, taped to my wall in bright sunlight, have already lost contrast after a mere decade. I say screw all that. But since this book will doubtless be printed in fugitive inks, I shot a few rolls of Fujicolor, just for you.



Evening dress



Evening dress (variant)

The Book of Dolores

by William T. Vollmann

Published by



To be released: **November 2013**

This PDF of *The Book of Dolores*
is only a preview and an uncorrected proof.
Lifting images from mechanical files is strictly prohibited.

To see the complete version, please contact Nina Ventura,
Publicist: nina@powerHouseBooks.com