

intimate topographies

by Hélène Le Chatelier

Curated by Tan Siuli



Editorial

As a woman entrepreneur and gallerist, I am particularly dedicated to identifying female's talents and supporting their career's development. In a field still largely dominated by male artists, Intersections gallery takes pride in representing as many female artists as male artists.



As such, I am delighted that the opening of *Intimate Topographies* by H el ene Le Chatelier coincided with the International Women's Day 2021.

8 years ago, when H el ene invited me to visit her studio I had the intuition that there were abysses of meaning to explore, beyond the pristine aesthetics of her artworks.

One year later, in October 2014, Intersections had the great pleasure to successfully present *Naked Memory*, H el ene's first solo show in Singapore, in the gallery of the Alliance Francaise de Singapour.

The same success was repeated at each of H el ene's shows, which Intersections presented in Singapore and abroad. To mention only a few significant ones: H el ene's show in Bangkok in 2015, part of the 'Nuit des Galeries' was acclaimed by the local press and her show at Art Paris Art Fair in 2016 was sold out.

I see *Intimate Topographies* as a milestone in H el ene Le Chatelier's career and I am extremely proud to co-present this exhibition curated by Tan Siuli with the Alliance Francaise de Singapour.

Marie-Pierre Mol
Intersections

I see the body as an internal or external landscape, a continent to explore. We can immerse ourselves in it, explore it and try to define the contours of what is inside us. This is an endless and fascinating journey. When looking at my paintings, some see nudes, others see landscapes. I am very attached to this double reading.

(Helene Le Chatelier, Thaillynews Issue #19 - November 2015)



Cambrure 3
Chinese Ink on Watercolour on Saunders Waterford paper
67cm x 101 cm
2014

Intimate Topographies

The body and landscape, and the body-as-landscape, are enduring themes in the art of Helene Le Chatelier. A substantial corpus of her oeuvre comprises a series of nudes, rendered in fluid washes of Chinese ink which the artist allows to bleed and pool, in the process blurring boundaries and creating hazy silhouettes that enable double readings. The female form reveals itself only on closer looking; from certain perspectives, the image is suggestive of a landscape, with its topography of vegetation, crags and contours.

Alongside the exploration of the human form, landscape also figures prominently in Le Chatelier's art. Works such as *Internal Landscapes* and *Psyche*, as well as the series *Geology of Memory*, suggest that her landscapes are internal and imagined, and the depicted panorama or terrain is intimately bound up with emotion and an inner world or scape.



Geology of Memory,
Solo exhibition, Art Outreach, Singapore
2021

Intimate Topographies presents a new body of work that continues and extends the preoccupations and artistic approach established in these earlier works: the oblique representation of the female form, the body-in-landscape or the body-as-landscape, and the quality of softness – the blurring of distinct borders and boundaries between subject and landscape. The exhibition presents a group of distinct yet inter-related series of works; collectively, they explore the idea and image of the female body as 'terra incognita', an ambiguous terrain open for new, and personal readings.

The *Wanderlust* series comprises close-up photographs of skin, printed on metal plates. Here, the lens of the artist –and by extension, our gaze – is in such intimate proximity to flesh, that the body vanishes into abstractions. Yet, traces of figuration remain, and call upon our reservoir of remembered and familiar embodied experiences. Their palette of flesh tones and intimations of skin and crevice are a sensual evocation of 'origins' or a return to primordial emotions of comfort and intimacy. With other plates, particularly those with darker or red tones, we are plunged into an abyss of the unknown, or set adrift in a viscous sea of red membrane. Yet others, with their prismatic palette, suggest a shimmering aurora akin to the experience of rare natural phenomena such as the polar lights. The human body, and the experience of and encounter with it, is conflated with natural and cosmic phenomena, as well as viscerally linked to primordial physicality. In many of these images, a faint horizon line is perceptible, conflating once again the body with landscape. The images also offer up different vistas when viewed under changing light and from different perspectives because of the borrowed iridescence from their metal substrates; here the body may be a mirage, or a constantly shifting, restless terrain.

The *Disambiguation* series makes tangible the idea of the body as a topography to explore, and locates the female nude in a timeless landscape, evacuated of the often sexually-inflected gaze that conventionally frames this genre. Working with a live model, Le Chatelier captured a series of close-up and abstracted images of the female form submerged in or emerging from a bath of water mixed with milk.

Here, the planes of the human body take on the quality of dream-like, primordial landscapes, where the intimacy of skin meets the eternity of sky, or emerges from the mists. Bathed in soft light, the swelling curves and gentle planes are evocative of islands, sandbanks, or gentle mountains, freckled skin evoking the speckle of stone. In some of these photographs, the image is bathed in an additional layer of soft colour, evoking the dawning of a new day or a new beginning – a return to innocence and new possibilities. Located in this timeless cycle, the genre of the female nude – freighted with contested art histories – is here re-imagined in soft and dream-like images which resist the conventional male gaze while simultaneously questioning 'feminine' attributes, re-casting the individual female body as part of as well as a metaphor for Gaia.

A series of works with embroidery extends the imagery and ideas explored in *Disambiguation*. In these vignettes, the soft and dream-like images are punctuated – and punctured – by embroidered text. Words such as 'Unsaid', 'Untold' and 'Unknown' suggest the mystery of the female form and the timelessness of the landscape alike: territory that is perhaps beyond language. And yet, the delicate stitches yoke the female form to the inevitability of gendered cultural histories and tradition, in its connection with a conventionally 'feminine' activity bound up with notions of domesticity as well as female labour and pastimes. There is also a suggestion of small acts of violence implied in the act of this embroidery: puncturing, and piercing. The red-coloured thread makes this doubly clear, its colour suggestive of the drawing of blood, a punctum in the otherwise otherworldly body-landscape. On other images, the embroidered text is rendered in soft peach and flesh tones that almost blend in with the image of the body, suggesting certain attitudes and assumptions that have been indelibly ingrained and stamped on women's bodies and psyches through generations of social and cultural conditioning. At the same time, these stitches on the surface are also suggestive of sutures, a necessary passage of pain in a process of healing and recovery, or in this case, of reclamation.

The video work *Peau* is in many ways, an extension of Le Chatelier's body-landscapes. In the latter it is the eye that wanders over and explores the body-scape; in the video, it is a hand, or a pair of hands, that traverses the planes and curves of body and skin, with gestures that are at times caressing and comforting, and at others, threatening and potentially violent. Within this video one may locate the same territory of softness as well as violence articulated in Le Chatelier's embroidered landscape photos, an ambivalence that reflects the complex relationships we may have with our own bodies and hold towards others, an uneasy ambiguity that accompanies the exploration of terrain rendered unfamiliar.

The final body of work included in *Intimate Topographies* is a series of old maps of France, which have had portions blanked out with white paint, leaving only faint traces of rivers and tributaries on the grid. This series was born partly of Le Chatelier's experience of living abroad: as years passed, the artist found that her memories of her land of birth were fading, along with attendant notions of identity and belonging. When she first embarked on this project to express that relationship with her motherland, Le Chatelier started by erasing all the place-names and the legend on her old maps as a means of expressing her dis-orientation. Dissatisfied with the result, she switched to blanking out everything except the rivers, which she views as primordial presences in the landscape. In doing so, this 'Motherland' is voided of all the histories, memories and politics embedded in its territories and place-names. The act of erasure returns it to a 'virgin territory', where possibilities may be imagined anew, in an act that parallels the desire to vacate the female nude from the weight of its histories in the *Disambiguation* series. The nation, imagined as an originary female body (Motherland), similarly has its boundaries and borders blurred; poetically, only its rivers remain, as if to complete the task of 'washing away', their resemblance to fine veins visible under the surface of the skin making concrete the parallel with the human body with its arteries of life.

Generations of women artists have, in various ways, sought to reclaim the representation of the female figure on their own terms, so as to wrest it from the dominant male gaze of art history.

With her iconic painting *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1612 – 1613), Artemisia Gentileschi established her technical brilliance and asserted a representation of female characters equal to the tasks – and savagery – of men. More recently, artists such as Jenny Saville and Sarah Lucas have created striking images of defiant femininity that subvert the male gaze. Saville's self-portrait of 1992, *Propped*, shatters canons of 'female beauty' and is painted from a perspective of dominance rather than submission: the insouciant female nude coolly returns the gaze of the viewer. In Lucas's *Self Portrait With Eggs* (1996), she too meets the gaze of the viewer with a hard, discomfiting stare, presenting her own body clad in the tropes of rude 'laddish' jokes while simultaneously asserting her 'masculinity'.

Power – and its imbalance – lies at the heart of these representations and approaches. These depictions of the female form adopt, or appropriate, forms of (masculine) power – and turn them to their own ends. Le Chatelier's approach of 'softness' and delicacy takes a markedly different turn. Her oblique representations of the female figure and the dream-like quality of her images arising from the blurring of boundaries between subject and background, serve to erase hard binaries. As French philosopher Anne Dufourmantelle posits, 'softness' or 'gentleness' (*douceur*) is an approach or strategy that refuses power binaries, or the idea that one has power over another, in the first place. Le Chatelier's images likewise reach out from this same starting point of a common humanity. The soft, blurred contours of her representations suggest a dissolution of certainties and boundaries alike, an admission that we perhaps do not really know ourselves either. It is from this mist of unknowing-ness that perhaps new understanding may arise.

Like the islets that emerge when the tides are low, and are submerged again in high tide, our understanding may wax and wane; like the shimmering polar lights, the grasp of what it means to be human – woman – in all its embodied-ness, is elusive and something that many ceaselessly pursue.

This terra incognita calls for new maps of our own making.

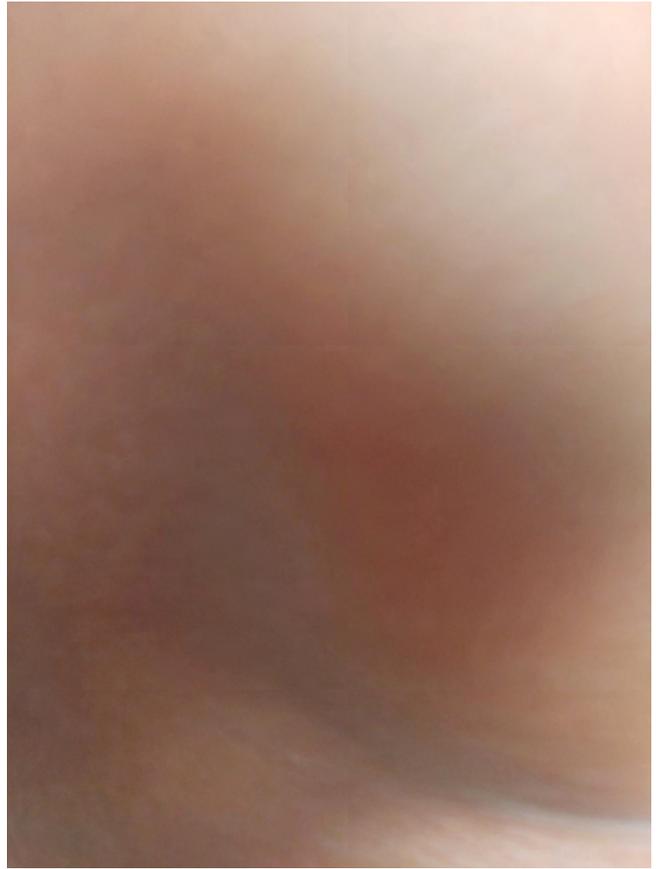
Tan Siuli, Curator



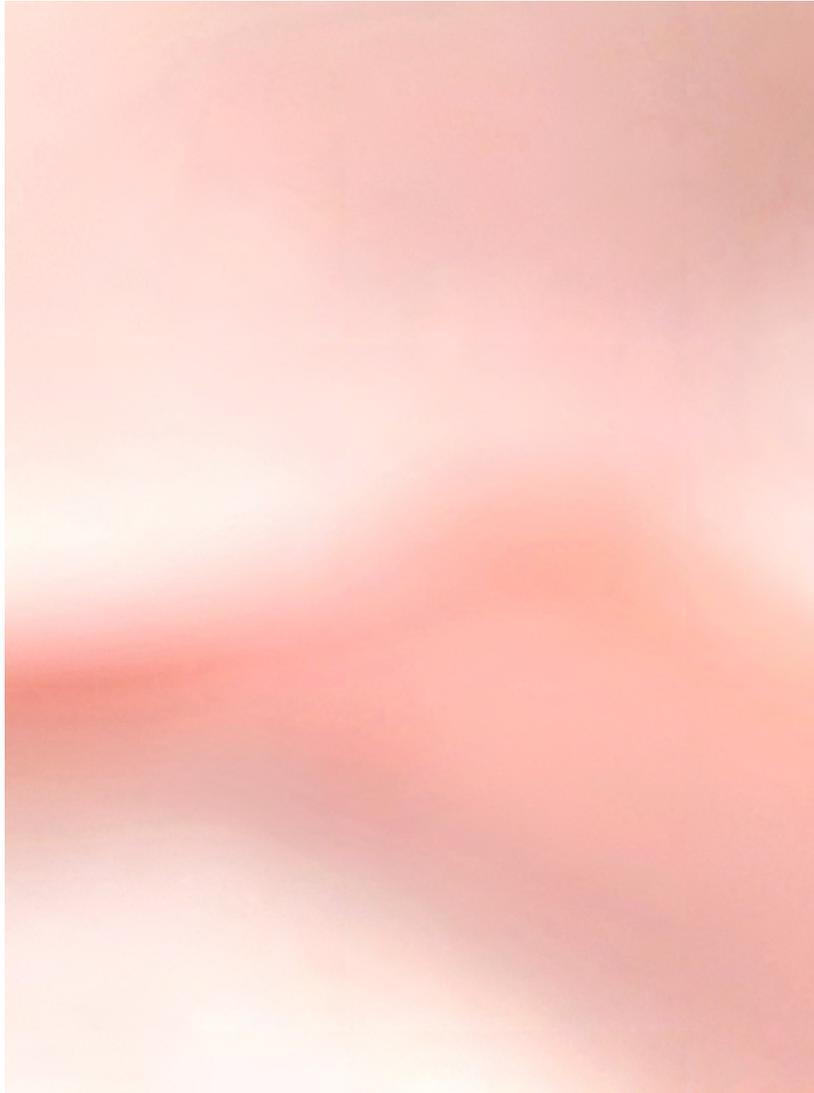
wanderlust



Terra Incognita (Wanderlust) 1
Photography on metal
20.5 cm x 27 cm
2018



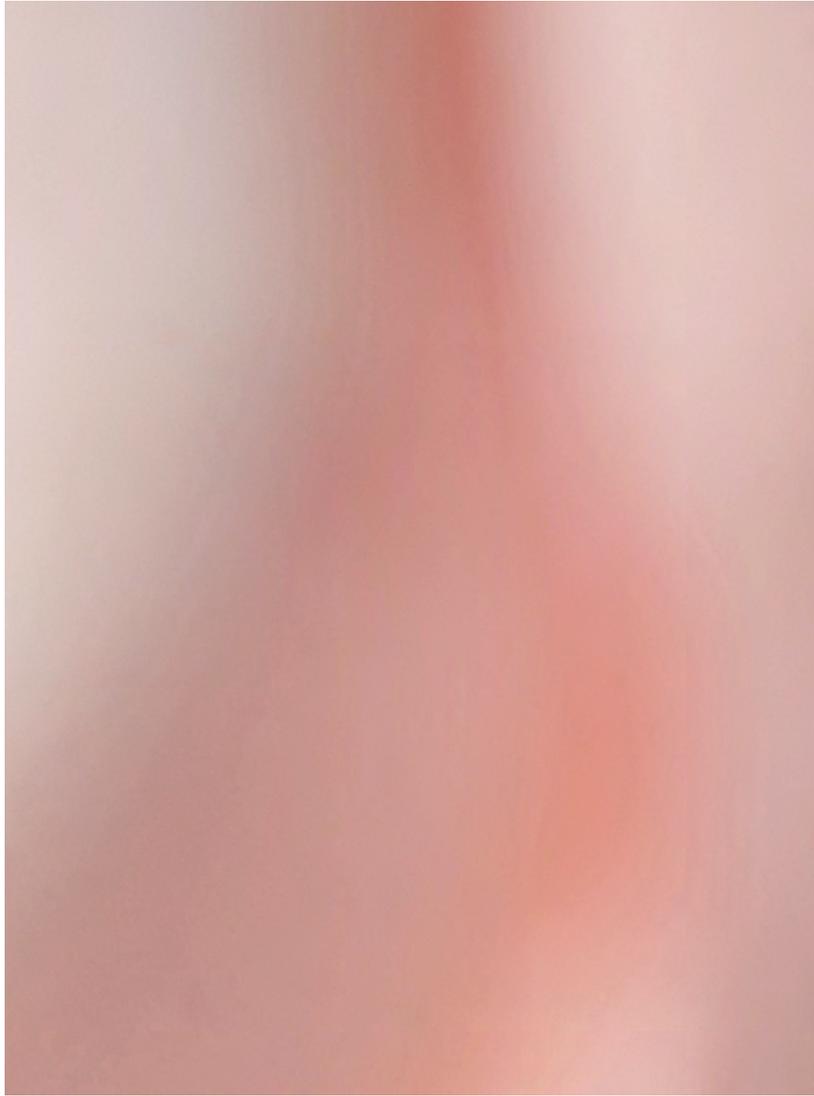
Terra Incognita (Wanderlust) 4
Photography on metal
20.5 cm x 27 cm
2018



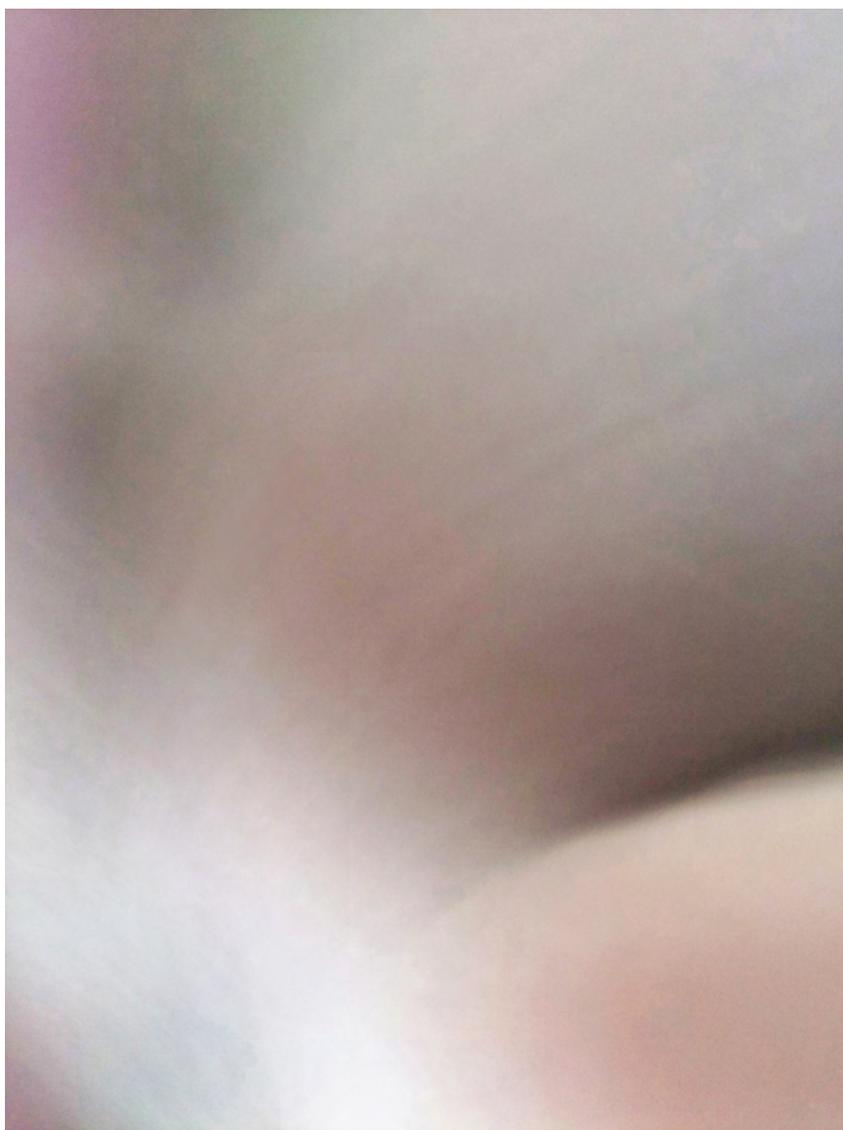
Terra Incognita (Wanderlust) 14
Photography on metal
20.5 cm x 27 cm
2018



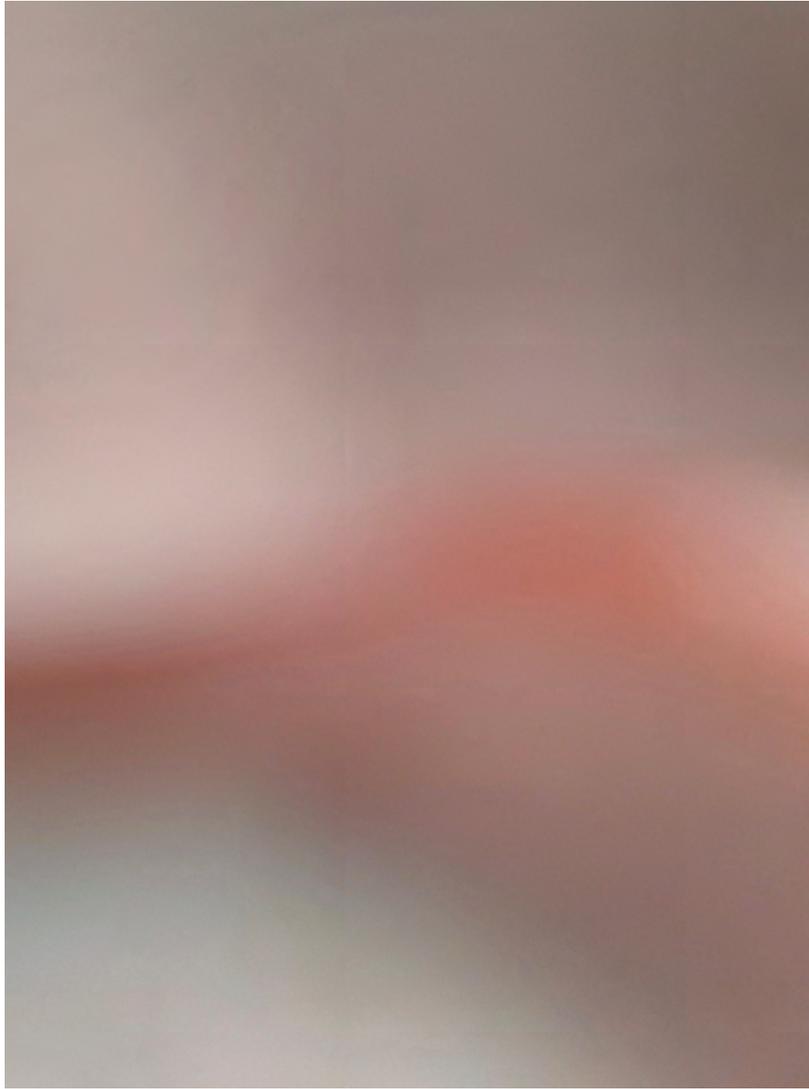
Terra Incognita (Wanderlust) 7
Photography on metal
20.5 cm x 27 cm
2018



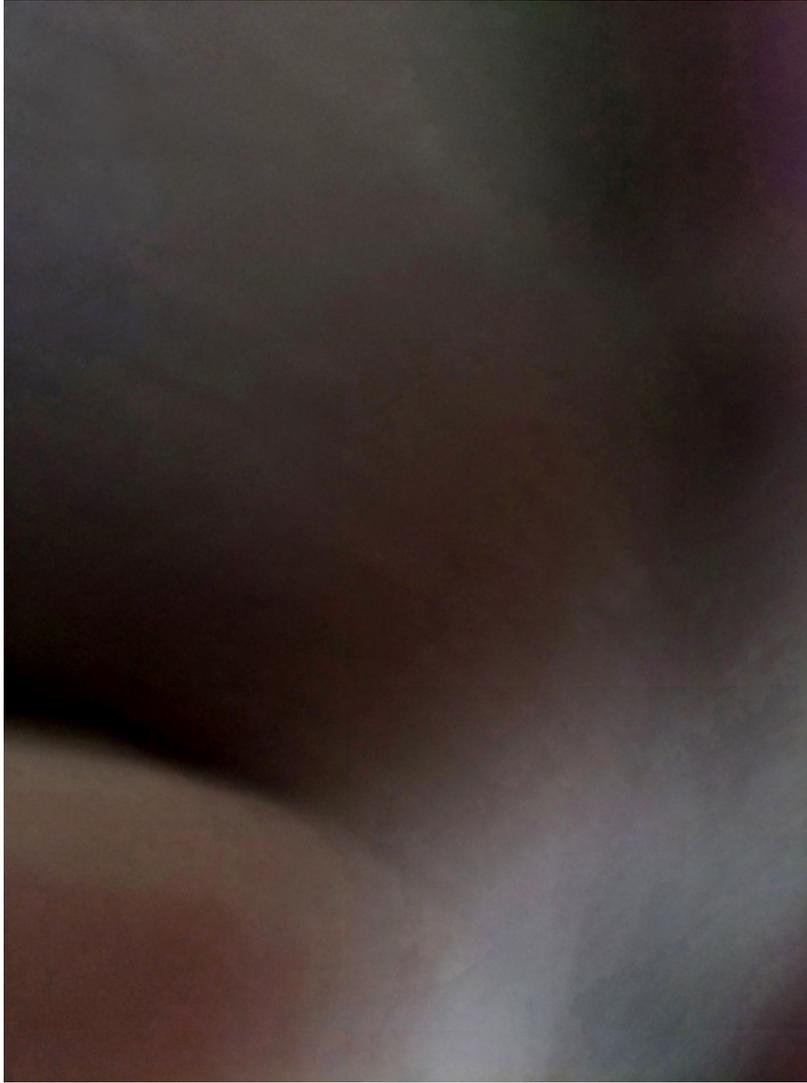
Terra Incognita (Wanderlust) 13
Photography on metal
20.5 cm x 27 cm
2018



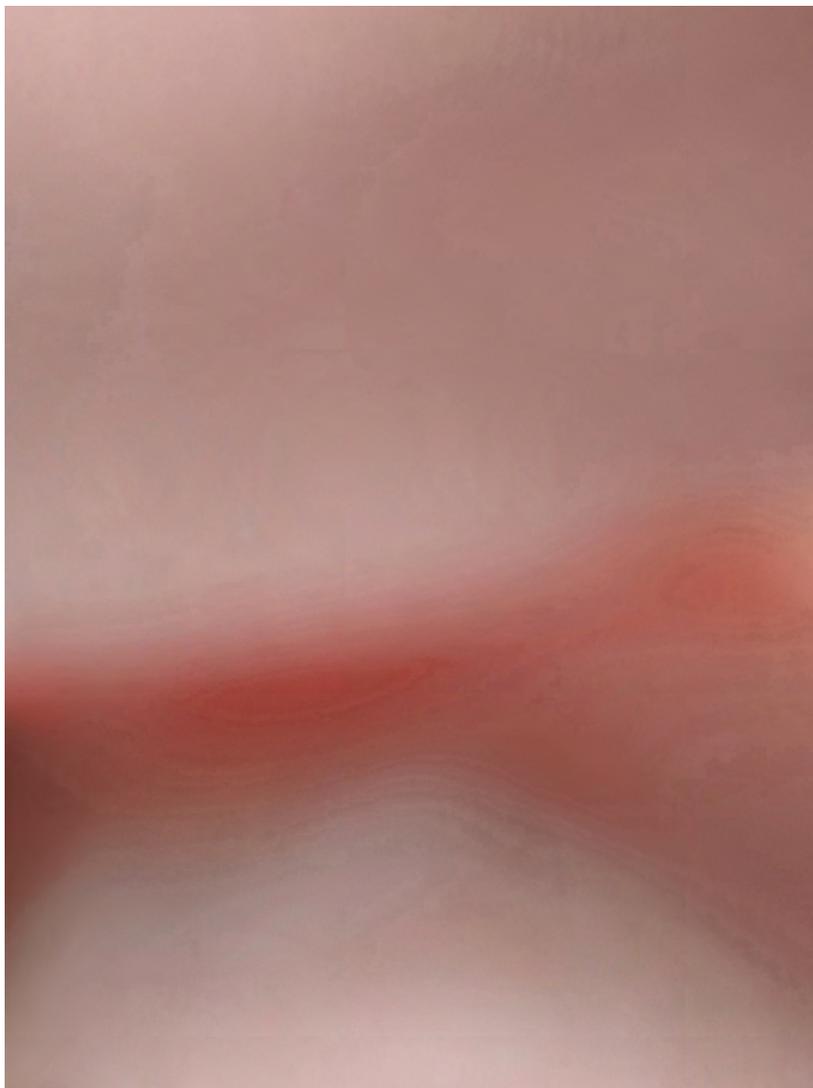
Terra Incognita (Wanderlust) 3
Photography on metal
20.5 cm x 27 cm
2018



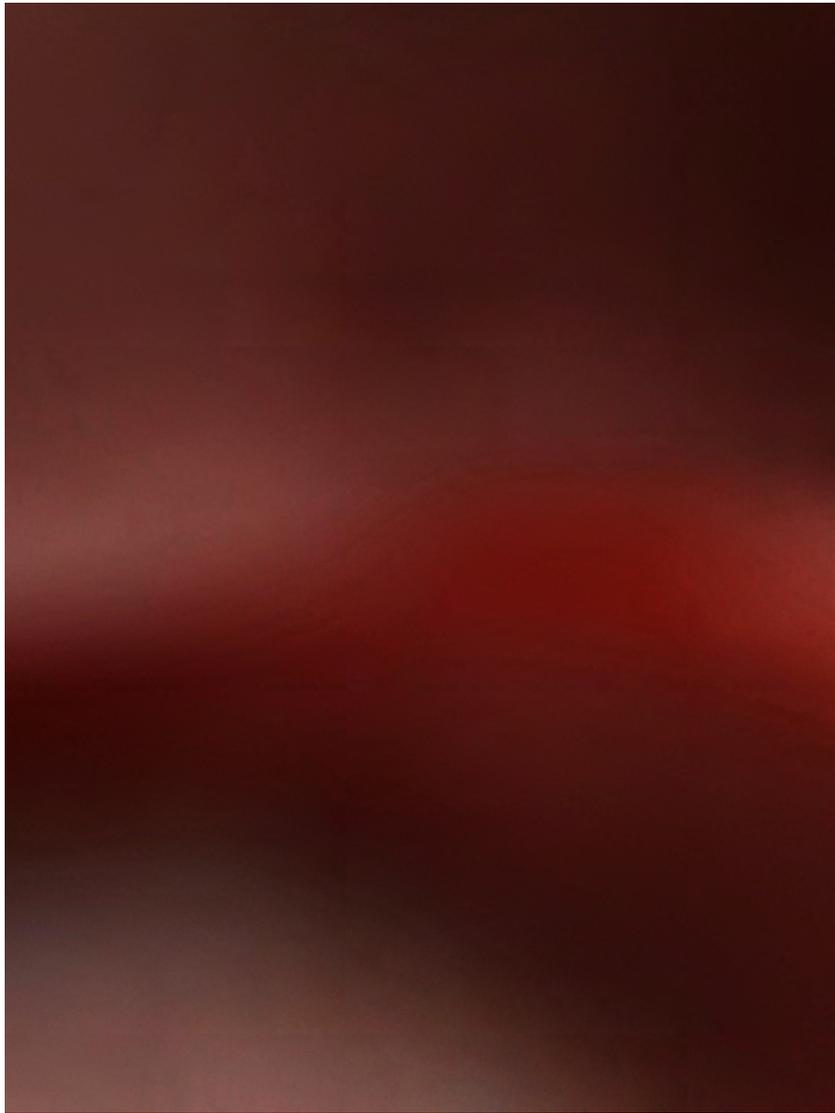
Terra Incognita (Wanderlust) 15
Photography on metal
20.5 cm x 27 cm
2018



Terra Incognita (Wanderlust) 2
Photography on metal
20.5 cm x 27 cm
2018



Terra Incognita (Wanderlust) 16
Photography on metal
20.5 cm x 27 cm
2018



Terra Incognita (Wanderlust) 11
Photography on metal
20.5 cm x 27 cm
2018

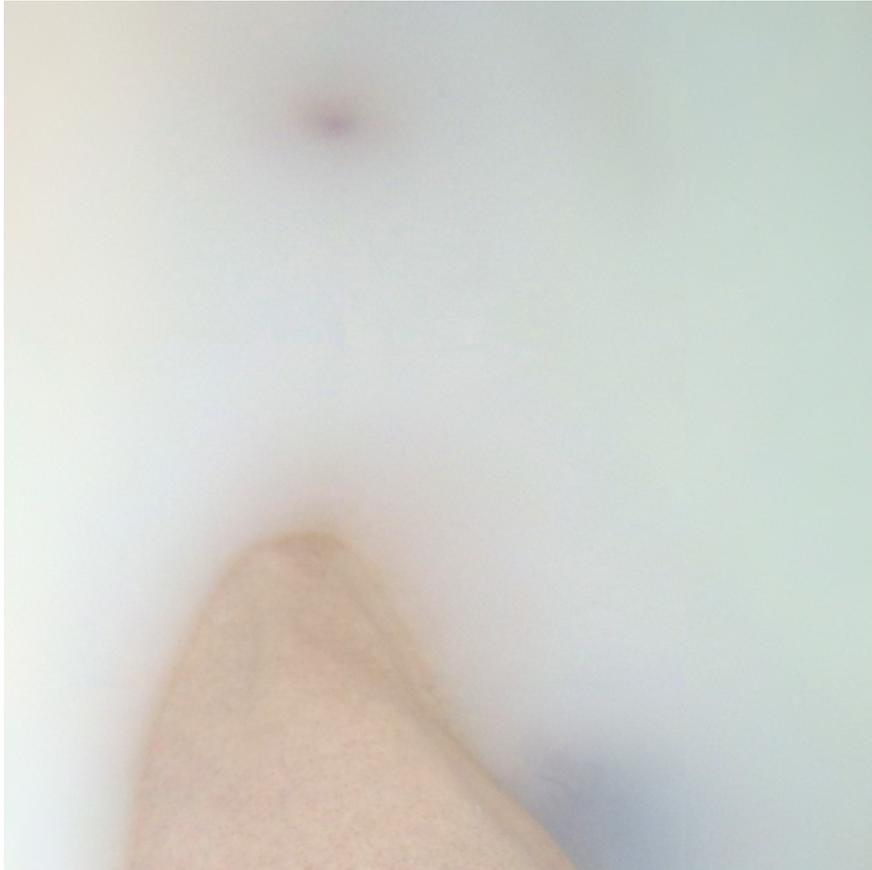
disambiguation



Terra Incognita (Disambiguation) 9
Giclee Print Photography on Arches Velin Museum Rag
91 cm x 71 cm
2017



Terra Incognita (Disambiguation) 6
Giclee Print Photography on Arches Velin Museum Rag
71.7 cm x 71 cm
2017



Terra Incognita (Disambiguation) 7
Giclee Print Photography on Arches Velin Museum Rag
71.7 cm x 71 cm
2017



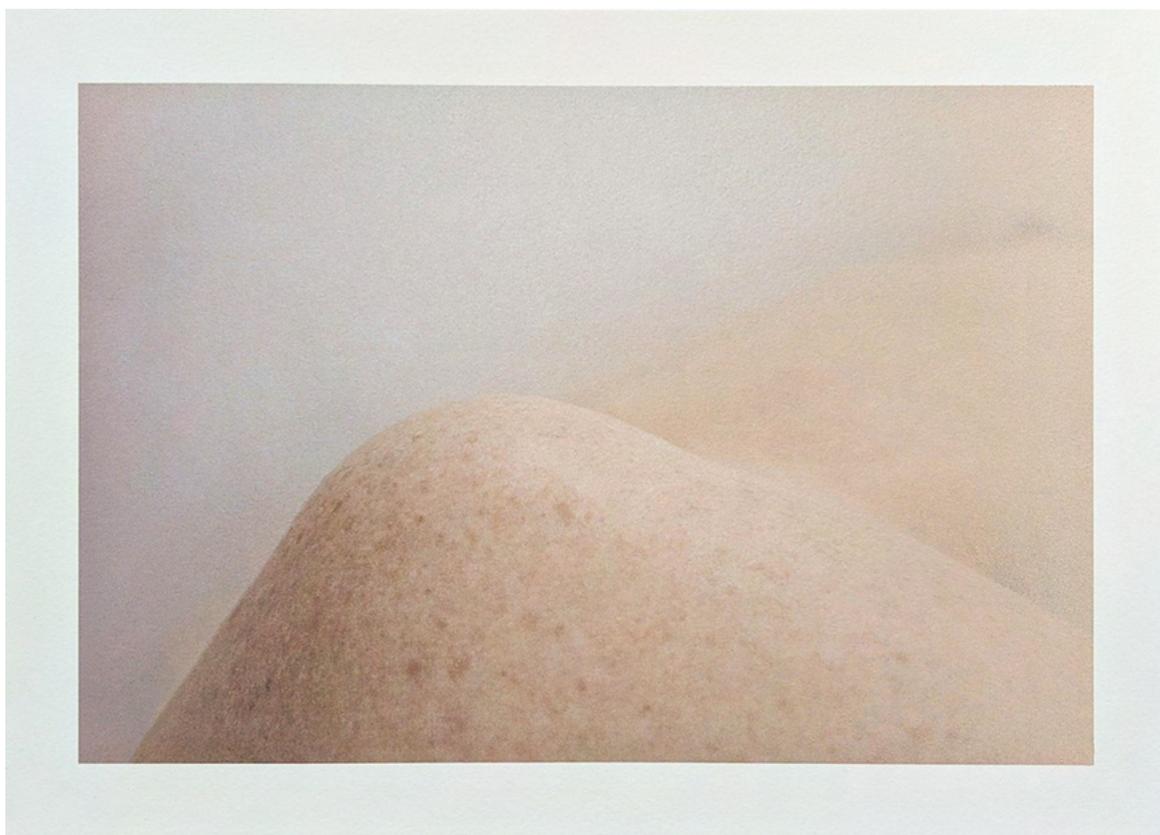
Terra Incognita (Disambiguation) 8
Giclee Print Photography on Arches Velin Museum Rag
91 cm x 71 cm
2017



Terra Incognita (Disambiguation) 14
Giclee Print Photography on Arches Velin Museum Rag
31 cm x 22 cm
2017



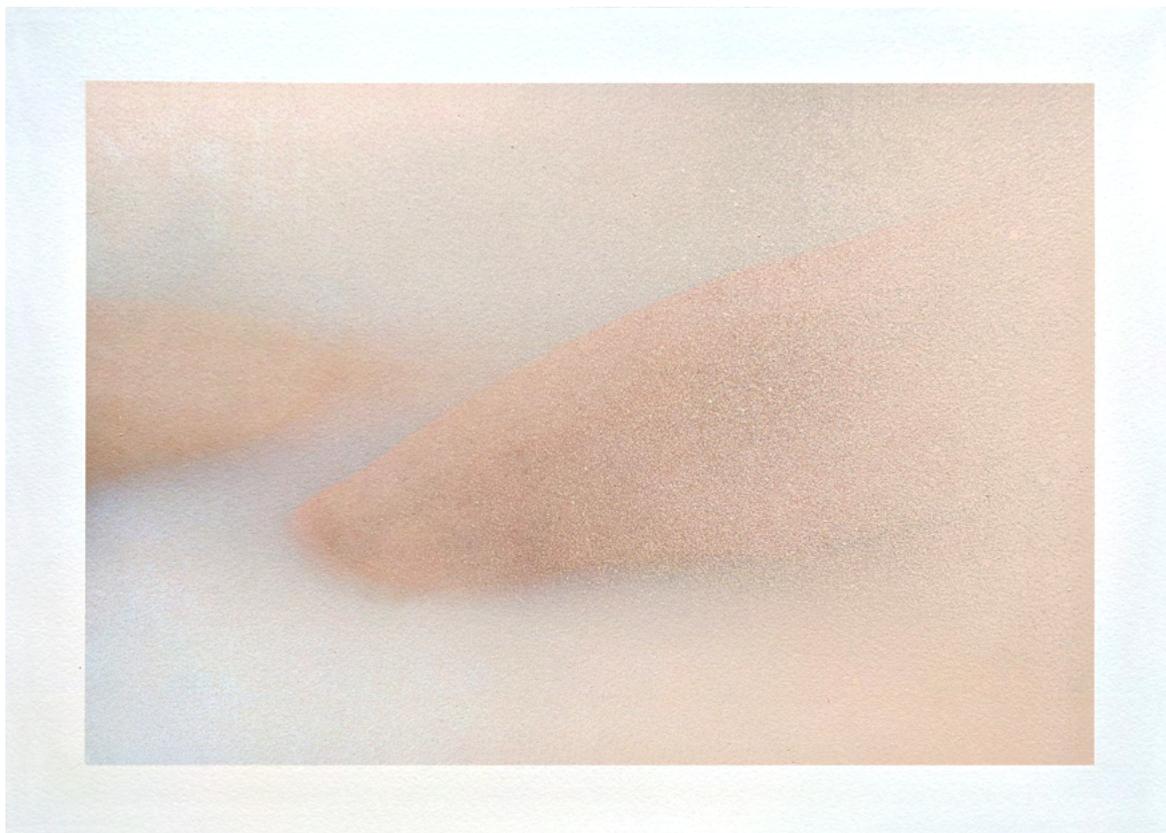
Variation 3 & 4
Acrylic on Giclee print photography
on Arches Velin Museum Rag
22 cm x 22 cm
2021



Variation 1
Acrylic on Giclee print photography
on Arches Velin Museum Rag
31 cm x 22 cm
2021



Variation 5, 6 & 7
Acrylic on Giclee print photography
on Arches Velin Museum Rag
22 cm x 22 cm
2021



Variation 2
Acrylic on Giclee print photography on Arches Velin Museum Rag
31 cm x 22 cm
2021



Untold 1
Acrylic and embroidery on Giclee print photography
on Arches Velin Museum Rag
31 cm x 22 cm
2021



Unknown 2
Acrylic and embroidery on Giclee print photography
on Arches Velin Museum Rag
22 cm x 22 cm
2021



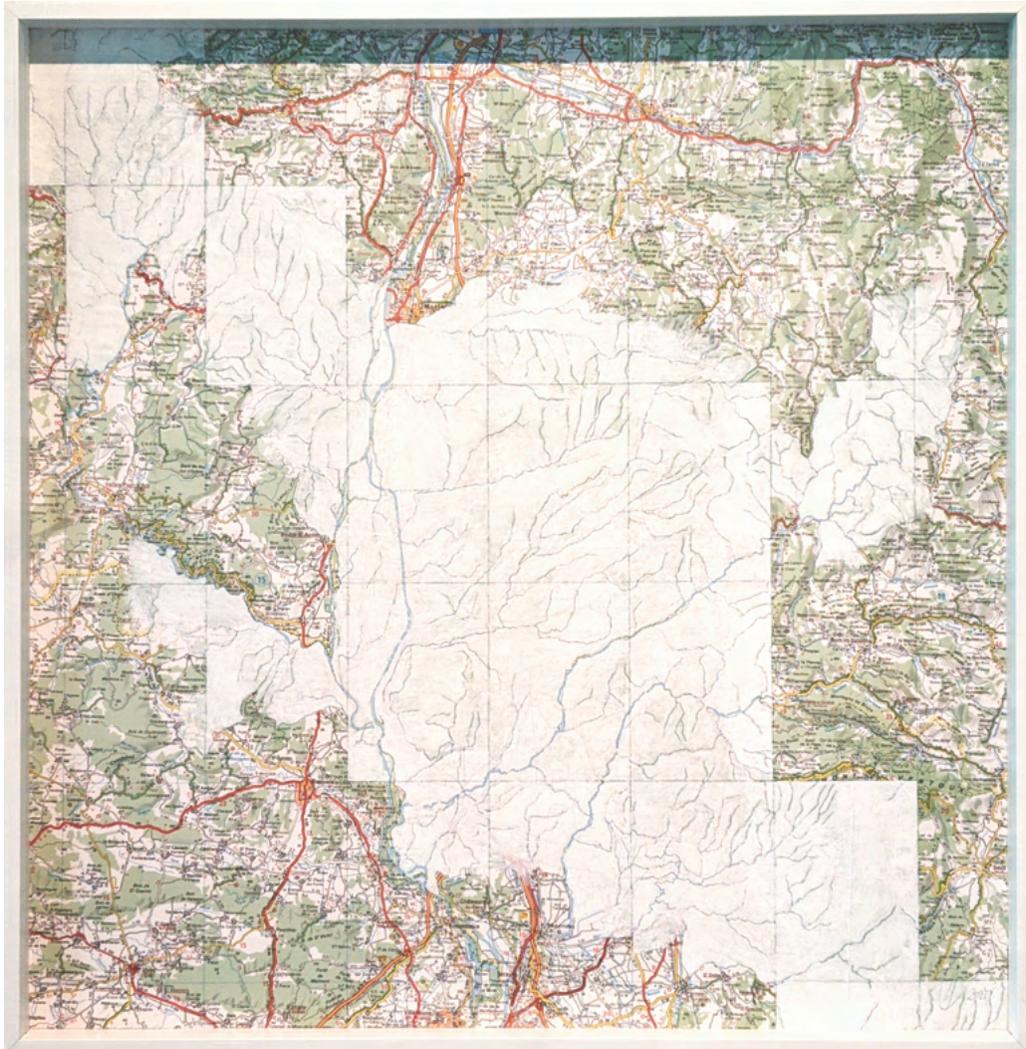
Unsaid 2
Acrylic and embroidery on Giclee print photography
on Arches Velin Museum Rag
31 cm x 22 cm
2021

peau
skin



Peau
One-channel video, 1 min 32 secs
2017

untitled
maps



Untitled 13
Acrylic on Road map
46.8 cm x 46.5 cm
2021



Untitled 10
Acrylic on Road map
50.5 cm x 50 cm
2021



Untitled 7 and 6, Untitled 11 and 12
Acrylic and Gouache on Road map
10.5 cm x 10.5 cm and 10.5 cm x 10.5 cm
21 cm x 22.5 cm and 21 cm x 22.5 cm
2021



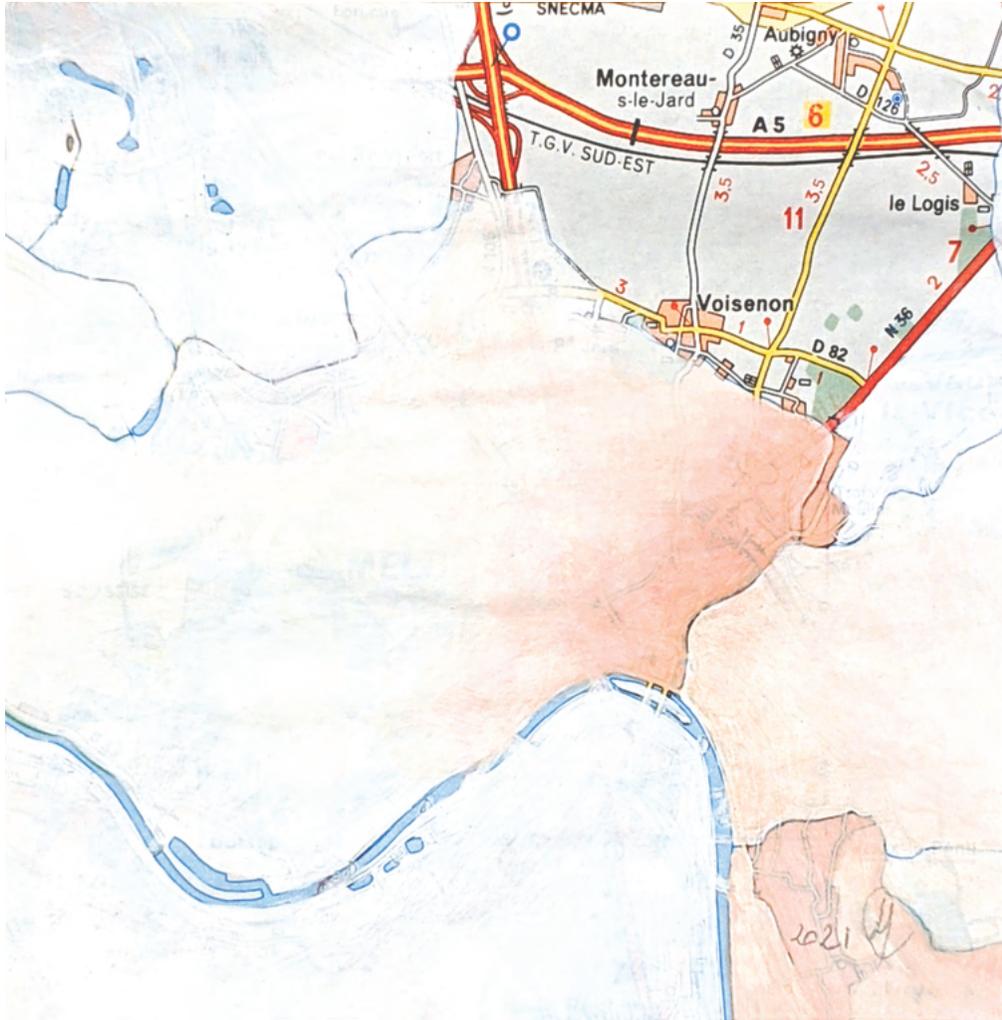
Untitled 3, 4, 5, 8 & 9
Acrylic on Road map
10.5 cm x 10.5 cm
2021



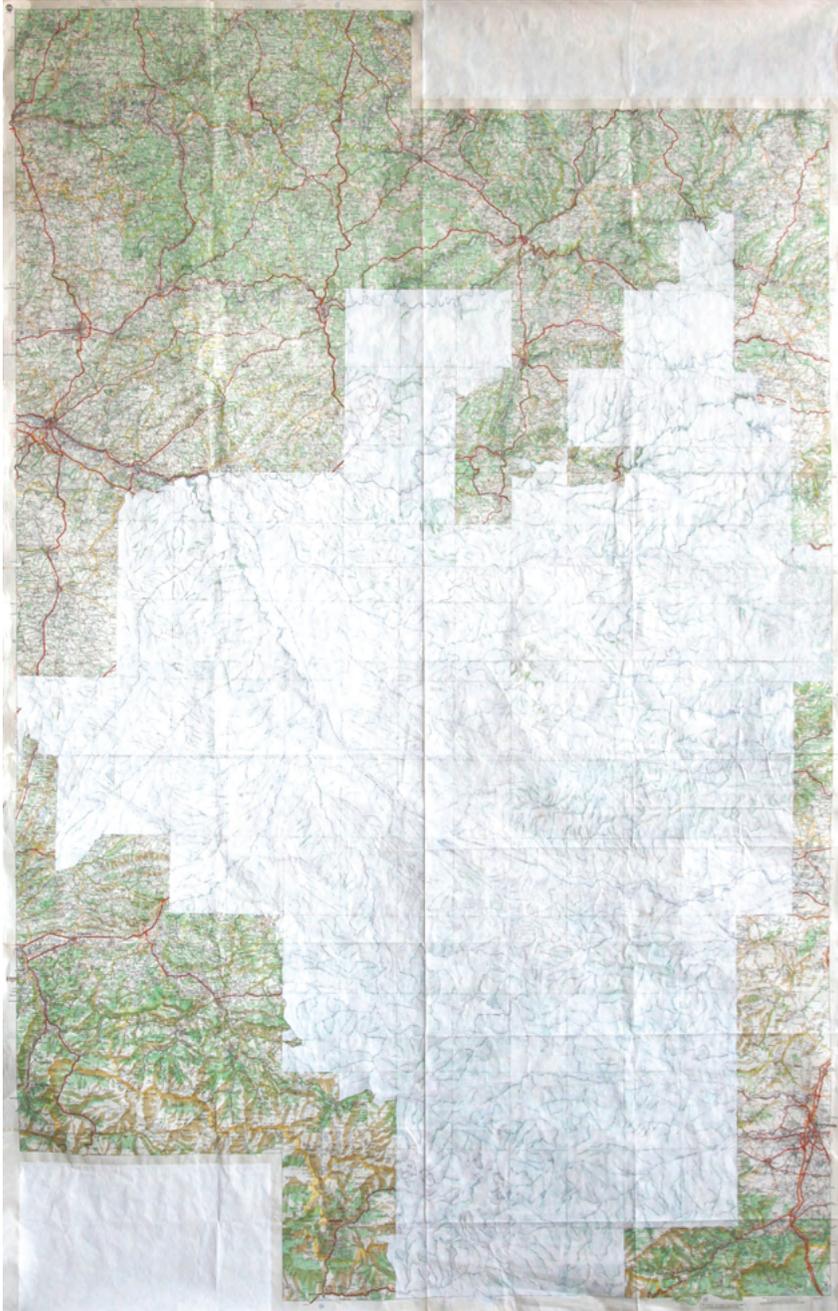
Untitled 8
Acrylic on Road map
10.5 cm x 10.5 cm
2021



Untitled 9
Acrylic on Road map
10.5 cm x 10.5 cm
2021



Untitled 3
Acrylic on Road map
10.5 cm x 10.5 cm
2021



Untitled
Acrylic on Road Map
99 cm x 155 cm
2021



Untitled
Acrylic and Gouache on Road map
50 cm x 143 cm
2021

Tan Siuli has over a decade of curatorial experience with a focus on contemporary art from Southeast Asia. Her exhibition projects include two editions of the Singapore Biennale (2013 and 2016), inter-institutional traveling exhibitions, as well as mentoring and commissioning platforms such as the President's Young Talents exhibition series. She has also lectured on Museum-based learning and Southeast Asian art history at institutes of higher learning such as the National Institute of Education as well as LASALLE College of the Arts. Her recent speaking engagements include presentations on Southeast Asian contemporary art at Frieze Academy London and Bloomberg's Brilliant Ideas series.



Hélène Le Chatelier studied Art in Paris at l'Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Appliqués et des Métiers d'Art, Olivier de Serres, where she graduated in Fine Art Fresco painting with honours. Since her first exhibition in Paris right after her graduation, Hélène embraced various modes of expression (painting, sculpture, photography, video, installation, writing).

Best known for her ink bodyscapes and her works with paper engaging writing and abstract landscapes, Hélène studies the influence of memory and social context on our intimate space.

In this age of migration and globalization overwhelmed by a constant flow of data, where human relationships are caught between our irreconcilable needs for both security and freedom, Le Chatelier's work exposes the volatility, the fragility and the liquid aspect of human bonds even with oneself. She questions the paradox between the incongruity of language and the need to label and define the untold, the unsaid, the not represented here or the not represented yet. She talks about transition, movement, transformation, highlighting the representation of our indeterminate and transitional state as a constant of our human condition.

Her work entered the MaGMA collection, the NPE collection, the Thaillywood / Taittinger Foundation collection as well as numerous private collections across Europe and Asia.

Her public art installation has been selected for SEA Focus 2019, a STPI project at Gillman Barracks, Singapore.

Hélène has been invited to be an artist-in-residence at NPE Print Residency, Singapore (April to June 2017) and at Thaillywood Contemporary Art Residency, Thailand (September 2015 to March 2016).

Her solo exhibitions include *Unspoken Truths* (2019), Ronewa Art Projects, Thailand, *Beyond the Surface* (2017), Intersections, Singapore; *Naked Memories, Intimacy* (2015), White Space, Bangkok, Thailand; *Naked memories* (2014), Intersections, Singapore.

Her recent group exhibitions include *Here, Somewhere, totally else...* (2018-19) in collaboration with FUJIFILM, Singapore; *Fiction of Precision* (2017), curated by Euginia Tan, Art Galleries Association of Singapore; *Flash of Memory, Memory Lapse* (2017), La Lanta Fine Art, Bangkok, Thailand; *Archives of the Discarded* (2016), 5th Singapore International Photography Festival; *The Broken Shreds of us* (2016), STPI, Singapore; *Into internal Landscapes, Dreamscapes, Form Space Atelier*, Seattle and White Box, New York, USA (...)

She recently started La Disparition, an Art and Science project conducted in collaboration with the Mechano-Biology Institute of Singapore / CNRS to question the concept of disappearance.

Hélène has spent a great deal of time in France and in Ireland. She currently lives and works in Singapore. Her work has been showcased in Singapore, Bangkok, Paris, Seattle and New-York and Tokyo.



Alliance Française de Singapour was founded in 1949. It is a non-profit educational and cultural organization, affiliated to the Alliance Française network which is the world's largest network of any cultural association with more than 800 locations in 135 countries.

In the buzzing evolving Singaporean cultural landscape, Alliance Française contributes to the regional influence of the cultural scene of the city-State by programming around 100 events/year in three key venues: theatre, gallery and media library.

Alliance Française' cultural and educational programming is extremely rich but coherent in achieving its goal: to create a desire of

France (and French) to an everlasting greater community of people whose strength is built from cross-cultural understanding which is at the

Alliance Française prides itself to partner with the best organisations such as Francophone Embassies, Singapore International Photography Festival, Singapore Film Society and many more.

Founded in Singapore in 2012, at the crossroads between East and West, **Intersections'** mission is to bridge diverse cultures through the arts. The gallery represents both established and emerging artists, mostly based in Southeast Asia. Over the year, the gallery established a solid reputation in presenting unique and rare contemporary art, both at the gallery and on international fairs.



Using art as a universal language, Intersections presents artworks which tell a story and connects artists involved in different art forms and different disciplines. The gallery started with a pop-up concept aiming to encourage people to discover art in unusual and unexpected places. The pop-up events strived to connect the artists' intentions, the artworks' meanings and the chosen venues' characteristics. In 2015 Intersections found a port of call at 34 Kandahar Street, in a vibrant neighborhood in Singapore. Since 2020, due to the pandemic, the gallery operates mainly online or through pop-up events.

Table of contents :

Editorial	2
Intimate topographies by Tan Siuli	5
Terra Incognita / Wanderlust	11
Terra Incognita / Disambiguation	21
Peau / Skin	34
Untitled / Maps	36
Curator and artist's bio	46
Organizers	48

intimate topographies

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