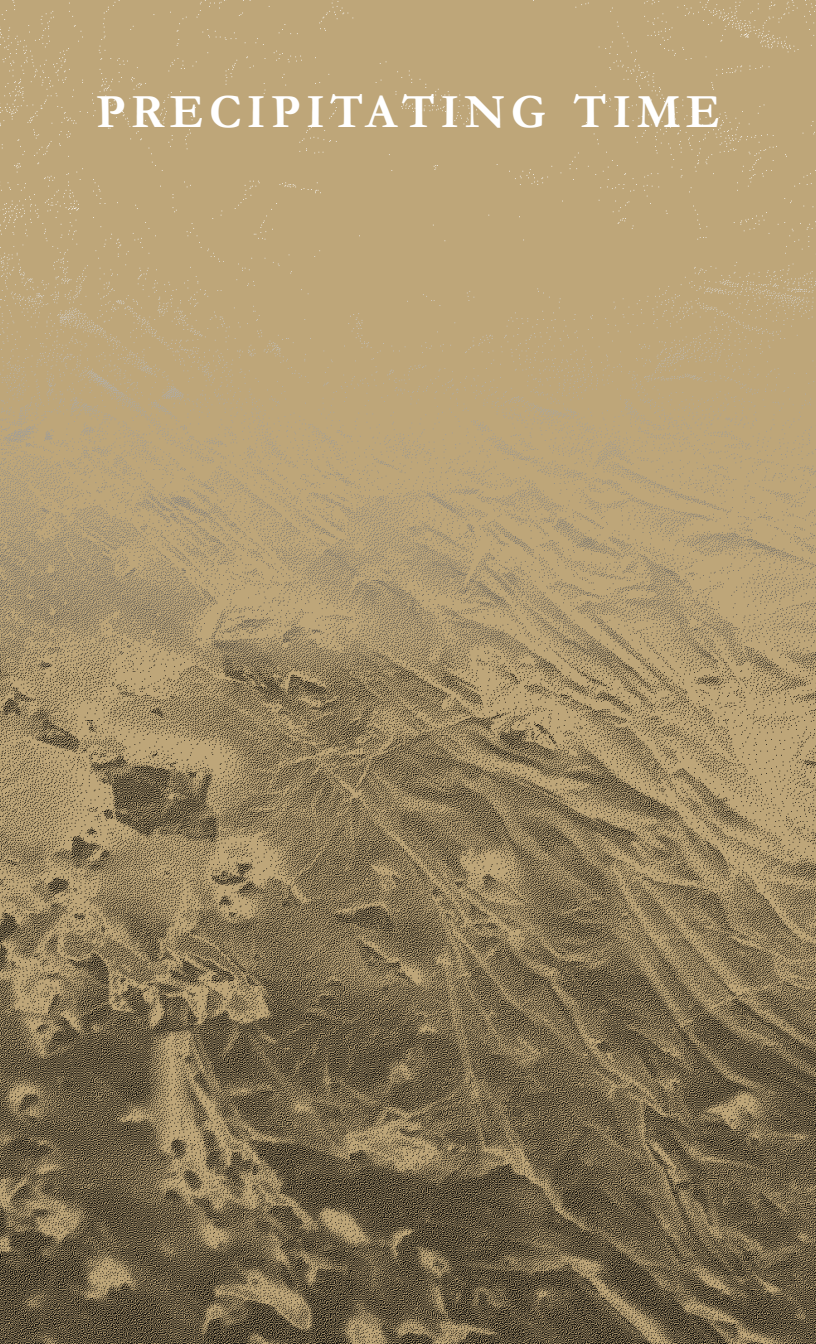


PRECIPITATING TIME



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Essay by Jennifer Baker

for the 2018 *Charlotte Street Foundation*
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H&R Block Artspace at the
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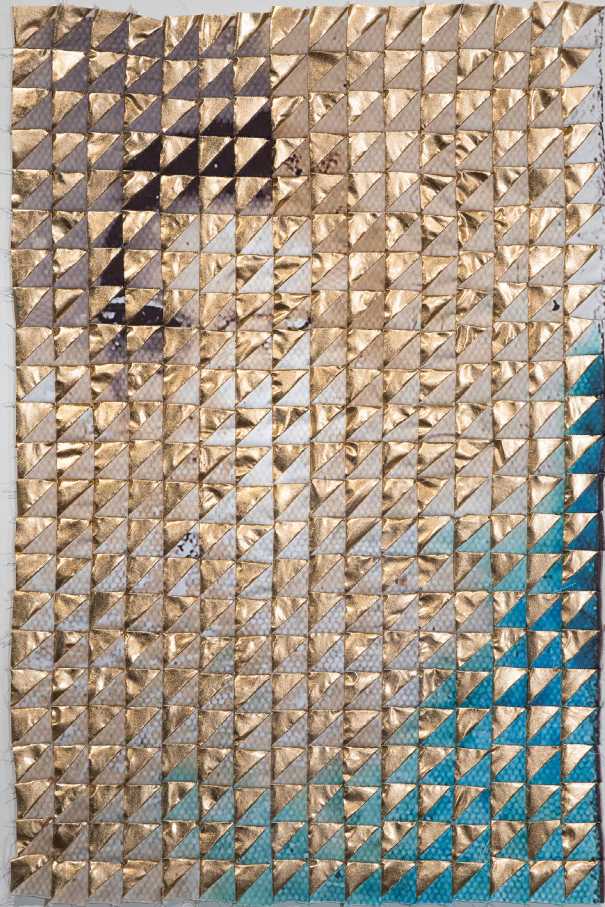
Design by Jacob Canyon
Photography by E. G. Schempf

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A Moving Image

There is a palpable quality of stillness in the thirty minutes before rainfall: a suspension of atmospheric breath presaging an impending tearful confession, the calm before the storm. Eventually, this stillness is interrupted by slow winds rolling across a landscape, bringing with them the scent we've come to recognize as something soon torrential. The fresh, crisp smell is the aroma of ozone, a word that derives from the ancient Greek meaning, "to smell."¹ The pale blue gas is carried by downdrafts from the stratosphere to the troposphere where it reaches our noses. Unlike our senses of vision, hearing, touch, or taste, smell is not relayed through our brain's thalamus—instead it travels through the olfactory bulb, which is directly connected to the amygdala and hippocampus. These are the areas of our brain that also process memory and emotion, and this biological pathway might explain why scent so easily triggers such intense and sometimes unexpected episodes of nostalgia.

Jillian Youngbird grew up in Hartville, a town deep in the Missouri Ozarks that averages 45 inches of rainfall per year. In a humble house with three generations of women and no men, Youngbird quickly learned how to make things out of necessity, cultivating a determined work ethic and a creative curiosity toward material possibilities. Honing the handiwork skills taught by



her grandmother and incorporating the natural and domestic landscapes that surrounded her in those formative years, Youngbird has infused her artwork with the aesthetics of the Ozarks using appropriated images, practical “make-do” sensibilities, and the idioms and dialect of the region.

Altered photographic images often appear in Youngbird’s work, recently as images of frontiersmen and the “wild west” into which the artist introduces humor using text or playful material interruptions. In the work created for this exhibition, she continues to engage the photographic image, focusing on a more theoretical investigation of the medium and its capacity to capture the fleeting nature of remembrance.

2

Back in the Wild Blue Yonder and *Blue Are the Hills that Are Far Away* are sculptural wall installations reminiscent of interior windows dressed in curtains. The latter features a photograph of the artist’s maternal grandmother re-photographed, processed as cyanotype prints,² and organized into two planes—one as a grid of nine rectangular segments in thin gilt frames that hang on the wall, and the other printed in the same grid format, but onto one continuous and transparent piece of cloth that hangs several inches from the wall, undulating freely with the currents in the air.

At times the two identical images line up to create a whole and readable picture,

but these moments are fleeting as the gallery’s airflow activates the nearly weightless cloth. The image displaces and realigns itself before our eyes in a mesmerizing choreography with the interior atmosphere. This rhythm of displacement in space amplifies that the image has already been remediated twice—first through the process of digitally photographing the original film photograph (one can see the artist’s hand holding the original photograph in this secondary image) and again during the photographic cyanotype processing. The distance this chain of image displacement and remediation creates, the constructed illusion of looking out a window into an imaginary space, and the brooding blue of the cyanotype print effects a striking visual interpretation of melancholic longing—a grief that can only come from an unnamed or unknown loss, one that cannot be fully comprehended or articulated.³

3

The brassy gold of Youngbird’s frames and metal hardware in these works shows up in other pieces as meticulous beadwork in *My Cup Runneth Over* and in the hand-pieced fabric work of *The Daughter Sure Favors the Mother*. In the latter work, Youngbird has digitally printed another photographic portrait of her grandmother onto fabric, cut it to pieces, and sewn a diptych of the image together with pieces from a golden table runner. The result creates the effect of a mirror image, though the abstraction of the grid-like deconstruction makes it

difficult to register the portrait. Through the tessellated disruption, what becomes more striking is the seeping turquoise stain that appears to emanate from the negative space between the two framed images. This painterly blue-green feature is taken directly from the original photograph, which has been damaged by an unknown agent, obscuring a portion of the original photograph and threatening to continue to break down the chemical elements that display an image of the artist's beloved kin, destroying its legibility completely.

By allowing gilt surfaces to punctuate the portrait and further wounding the wholeness of the original image, Youngbird has translated the photographic punctum⁴ as something tactile and glittering. Her material interpretation is born from a dear memory of a game her grandmother invented for her to play when she was a young girl: pretending to be a prospector searching for "gold," which was actually common rocks her grandmother had spray-painted and hidden in the yard. The "gold" in Youngbird's work (spray-painted plastic or cheap synthetic fabric) demonstrates a preciousness dependent on sentimentality rather than monetary pricelessness, kitch rather than glitz. The treatment of material is an abstract retelling of her personal narrative, creating a reverent mosaic that reflects the artist's longing for a remembered thing.

Both her great-grandfather and her mother appear alongside her grandmother in this body of work, revealing three generations of storytelling through a combination of photographic processes and material manipulation. Billowing folds of fabric, enigmatic shadows, jewel-toned erasures, auric interruptions, and windows to a blue-grey weather of remembrance fully animate photographic images of the artist's own history, creating a body of work that gazes back in time while situating itself in the present as a group of moving images.



The Surface of the World

The weight of footsteps on a damp forest floor agitates soil underfoot, and the wet, musty aroma that accompanies this disturbance immediately places one's sensibilities in the natural world. Geosmin, a metabolic byproduct of bacteria, is the substance emitting this smell, and despite the scent's association with growth, life, and generation, it can only be released once the bacteria have died.

Jarrett Mellenbruch positions his most recent project to address the northernmost landscape of California—the Redwood National Forest, where the average annual rainfall reaches 71 inches. In this wet climate, fog blows inland from the Pacific Ocean and makes a slow descent through the dense forest canopy to the ground below. Such humid conditions must be maintained through the careful weekly watering of a Coast Redwood sapling that sits on a large post and lintel table in a sunlit gallery alcove as part of Mellenbruch's installation *The Eternal Question*. Planted in a biochar-filled glass beaker, the sapling is flanked by two additional objects: a facsimile of a black-and-white photograph of the artist's mother as a young girl with her family and a patinaed bronze three-dimensional diagram. On each long side of the table are sizeable benches of the same reclaimed wood, making space for people to sit and read from a document that hangs on the wall nearby: *Deep Ecology Project: Redwood Preserve*, which was authored by the artist. *The Redwood Preserve* whitepaper outlines

a proposed land art and social enterprise project meant “to restore the ancient California redwood forest obliterated by logging in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This restoration would revive biodiversity through the re-creation of a massive wildland sanctuary and combat climate change by establishing a giant terrestrial carbon sink.”⁵ Within this wildly ambitious plan, Mellenbruch proposes to employ a decentralized cryptocurrency token system (the bronze diagram acts as tactile teaching tool to illustrate this model) by which people and organizations can buy back land from the logging industry and other private landowners to establish and maintain two million acres of Redwood preserve in northern California and the Pacific Northwest.

8 Mellenbruch’s *Eternal Question* installation is one of three artworks placed throughout this exhibition. Near the entrance is *The Eternal Question II*—a seemingly banal wall clock. The clock reveals to the viewer an uncanny performance, however: its secondhand ticks counter-clockwise, negating itself as a tool for keeping accurate measure. The experience of initial surprise and delight is quickly subverted by questions about the construction of time as a concept and its reign over how we think and experience living.

At the farthest end of the gallery in a dimly lit space is *The Eternal Question III*, a digital video played on an outdated CRT monitor that sits on an out-of-fashion Formica pedestal. Onscreen is a moving image of the artist, shirtless, chopping

wood in the forest, but the video playback is distorted via the monitor settings so that it flickers and flashes in a vertical synch roll. The effect produces a quality of urgent and quickly moving time, antagonizing the fact that the original digital video has been edited to play in slow motion. Should one persevere the visual agitation of the playback effects and the illegibility of the image—fragmented, as it is, into multiple viewpoints—the sequence eventually repeats, the second time running in reverse so that the artist seems to be “unchopping” wood or alchemically mending the material back together.

These more poetic depictions of reversed time underscore the explicitly mirrored time that Mellenbruch outlines in his *Redwood Preserve* proposal: “One hundred seventy years ago, on January 24, 1848, James W. Marshall discovered gold in Sutter’s Mill California, launching a gold rush that lured over 300,000 people to Northern California and began the destruction of the once seemingly unending redwood forest. The Redwood Preserve proposes a goal to mirror that timeframe; one hundred seventy years in the future, a new generation should be able to walk among a maturing forest of the same vast scale that is already 150 years old.”⁶

Mellenbruch suggests that this reversal be activated, not by digging through rock for mineral ore, but through generating cryptocurrency—a process that is also called “mining.” Producing Bitcoin—the

most popular and well-known type of digital currency—requires a miner (who could be anyone with a computer) to verify units of currency through computational algorithms for a possible token reward. The miner’s reward is dependent on how quickly the mathematical calculation is completed, and as new units are verified and the value of tokens grows, the algorithms become increasingly more complicated, requiring exponentially more energy. A skeptical read of such a projected scheme might suggest that while the proposal presents a striking inverse relationship between the environmentally destructive California Gold Rush and the boon of a decentralized token currency system, nearly all mining operations—including digital ones—create a negative impact on the environment.

10

Critical feedback such as this spark the expansive conversations meant to take place within the space of this work. Such skeptical inquiries about the environmental impact of the project’s token economy reveal that Mellenbruch has planned to implement a more progressive blockchain system—one that requires “validators” rather than “miners” and relies on proof-of-stake (a random selection of wealth and/or age) rather than proof-of-work (algorithmic solutions). The gallery visitor walks away knowing more about the nuances of blockchain technology and the artist has received a type of peer review to consider as he refines his written proposal.

The conversations that Mellenbruch’s project facilitates highlight the role of the

artist in contemporary society—not as that of scientific researcher or economic strategist, but that of a multi-solver tasked with imagining radical possibilities. The artist has placed himself within the lineage of art history, referencing monumental land art by Robert Smithson, the social sculptures of Joseph Beuys, the ready-made minimalism of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and early video works by Nam June Paik and Joan Jonas, and demonstrates how the synergy of these varied practices has made way for contemporary artistic potentials. In a world of increasingly rarefied technical specialization, it becomes the domain of the artist to propose a project so charismatically audacious that it threatens to bring together bitcoin miners and climatologists, instigating arguments and conversations that build sustainable and solution-oriented partnerships.

11

In fact, Mellenbruch’s proposal harnesses something much more valuable than any digital currency in that it mines the economic unit of attention. Whether or not the artist’s proposal is viable in its current form is almost irrelevant in comparison to the attention it calls to this issue, the space it creates for conversation, and the challenge it poses to imagine solutions that are larger than lifetimes. The project connects people to the natural world, to each other, to history, and to the future, reminding us that questions about how to be present with our values serve us best when they remain eternal.



Stone and Blood of Gods

During droughts, plants exude an oil that is absorbed by the clay in rock and soils. This oil is thought to slow the germination of seeds, improving their potential to successfully grow when rainfall is more abundant.⁷ Once it does rain, water releases the oil into the air along with geosmin, and the combined scent of these compounds creates *petrichor*, or put simply, the scent of rain.⁸

The absence of liquid water and gravitational effects in space makes rainfall as we understand it on Earth impossible. However, in the ice-giant worlds of Uranus and Neptune, highly pressurized molecules of methane crystallize to form tiny diamonds that rain down through the permeable gaseous surface and into the interior of these strange planets.⁹ While diamonds on earth are relatively rare, extraterrestrial diamonds are quite common. These microscopic nanodiamonds are often found in meteorites, and samples prove that they retain a readable record of their formation,¹⁰ tracing a long and violent history of being ejected from a star into interstellar medium, travelling through the formation of a solar system, and being incorporated into a planetary body that was eventually broken into pieces—meteorites that flew billions of miles through space and time to crash onto the surface of this world.

Set within Marie Bannerot McInerney's site-responsive installation [*Ap*] *Parent Bodies* is one such meteorite fragment—a 4.5-billion-year-old specimen that landed approximately 500 years ago in present-day Argentina and was procured by the artist via the internet through a mineral dealer in Minnesota. The palm-sized reflective metallic fragment is placed on a dark plinth alongside a much larger golden eggish form that could as easily be an alien seed pod as a precious mineral geode as some kind of vacated incubator for an unknown animal form. The plinth, also made from material that appears unnamable to the viewer, could as easily be volcanic rock as it could be industrial flooring as it could be a whale's hide, and it sits on a brilliant white grid of tiles, lit from above by a fixture designed to outline the measurements of the plinth directly below it.¹¹ Between these two parallel geometries—which take up two stories of architectural gallery space—are five giant swaths of sheer fabric, dyed in gradient from grey to white, and slung from the walls into a sagging belly that hangs above the plinth, leaving just enough room for a human body to stand. A cool light is diffused through these gradient tones until it reaches the ground and permeates the space in a dim, petrichor-hued stillness.¹²

The artist's inventive and masterful command of materials as well as her decade-long career in theater, where she hand-dyed costumes and props to create imagined worlds, is on display in this

installation which functions as a kind of stage set. In fact, it is a stage within a stage, and our own bodies are invited to participate as actors, as long as we are comfortable—or willing to engage in the discomfort of—having no script. On stage already are two character actors and/or strange props: the meteorite fragment and Eggish. Footsteps are audible on the gleaming white floor tiles as we circumambulate the mysterious plinth, and it becomes clear once we have moved through the installation that Eggish is a vessel, punctured or maybe detonated or possibly destroyed from within. We are drawn toward the uncanny hole and sense its aurally resonant and smelly void, a darkness that interrogates recognizable depths and boundaries.

Theorist Timothy Morton poses that the reason we humans, as a species, have not been able to successfully address the demise of the planet is that we have attempted to prevent the end of the world; we should instead accept the fact that the world is always already-ending and address these issues from such a temporal understanding.¹³ As climate change thaws the Siberian permafrost, for example, there is exciting potential to investigate links to our distant pasts in the preserved human and animal bodies that were frozen in time thousands of years ago. But this thawing also predicts terrifying futures: folding and warping landscapes that release carbon into the atmosphere and create a feedback loop of arctic warming in which toxic mercury

and long-dormant microbes might also begin to escape from the frozen ground, accumulating in the food chain and proliferating ten-thousand-year-old viruses capable of eradicating entire populations that are without immunity. In her research, McInerney links these phenomena of the Anthropocene to the final scene of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, when Juliet wakes from her drug-induced slumber to find Romeo dead from suicidal poisoning, ingested in tragically mis-informed mourning.

16 Upon understanding the events that have taken place, the grief-stricken Juliet stabs herself with her lover's dagger so that she might join him in death. McInerney sees the possibility of this theatrical tragedy of dormant potentials and deadly misunderstandings to play out on a global scale with unimaginable environmental impact. Her work provides a spacetime where we might psychologically prepare ourselves to encounter what we learn when this ended earth wakes.

To accompany her large-scale installation, McInerney has created three relatively small drawings titled [*Ap*]Parent Bodies: *Stratum 1.1, 1.2, 1.3*. On perfectly square and leather- or rubber-like substrates of meticulously painted and sanded canvas, the artist has incised the smooth black surface with a scribe to demarcate aerial views, rendered in very fine line, of various elements in her installation: the grid structure of the floor, the dark and textured plinth, and the square perimeter of the light fixture. These

drawings maintain McInerney's organic and materially complex signature with a modest but distinct dusting of metal leaf, calling to mind both a deep night sky with a galaxy full of distant and potentially dead stars, and the black and gold enigma of Eggish. We remember that a void is an abject container for what we claim to know, wherein projections only return questions. What tragedy has taken place here? Is what we see a hole or whole? Shall we measure "end" as *when* or *where*?

Notes

1. Ozone (O₃) is the form of oxygen produced when an electrical charge (for example, from lightning) splits airborne nitrogen and oxygen molecules into separate atoms. As an oxidizing gas it is pale blue in color with a pungent odor highly detectable by the human nose, and as a liquid it is a darker blue and highly combustible.

2. Cyanotype is a photographic printing process that uses UV light to develop a deep blue solar print onto a substrate such as paper or cloth that has been treated with a photosensitive solution.

3. Sigmund Freud outlines psychoanalytic melancholia in opposition to mourning, wherein mourning is a normal response to loss processed in the conscious mind, and melancholia is an unconscious and pathological condition. Freud, Sigmund (1917) "Mourning and Melancholia." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson. Vol. XIV:1914-1916, 243-258.

18 4. In Roland Barthes's treatise on the effects of photography and eulogy to his recently deceased mother, he outlines two elements present in photographic images: the *studium*, which is the indexical, informational, cultural content of the photograph, and the *punctum*, which he defines as sensitive points or wounds. According to Barthes, the *punctum* "will disturb the *studium*...for *punctum* is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole. A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)." Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981, 26-7.

5. Mellenbruch, Jarrett. *Deep Ecology Project: Redwood Preserve* <http://bit.ly/mellenbruch> (2018).

6. Mellenbruch, 2018.

7. Bear, Isabel Joy; Thomas, Richard G. "Petrichor and plant growth." *Nature*. 207.5005 (1965): 1415-1416.

8. Petrichor is a name coined by Australian researchers, taken from the Greek *petra* (stone) and *ichor* (blood of gods). Bear, Isabel Joy; Thomas, Richard G. (March 1964). "Nature of argillaceous

odour." *Nature*. 201(4923): 993-995.

9. Ross, Marvin. "The ice layer in Uranus and Neptune—diamonds in the sky?" *Nature*. 292.5822(1981): 435-436.

10. Davis, A.M. "Stardust in Meteorites." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. 108.48(2011): 19142-19146.

11. The material of the plinth is a textile invented by McInerney through extensive testing, which the artist began in her studio in 2014. A complex mixture of concrete, pigment, elastics, and other treatments are applied to a machine-knit substrate, producing what is essentially a flexible concrete fabric. Upon learning of this material, Jacob Canyon (the designer of this catalogue), coined the term "Bannerite," and I have since adopted the name as an apt description of this mineral-like substance.

12. I am suggesting that the artist's treatment of "atmosphere" (listed as a medium in the artwork's object label) creates a pale green capable of evoking a synesthetic response, a color that smells of rain.

13. Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

Images:

i

Jillian Youngbird, *The Daughter Sure Favors the Mother* (detail)
2018

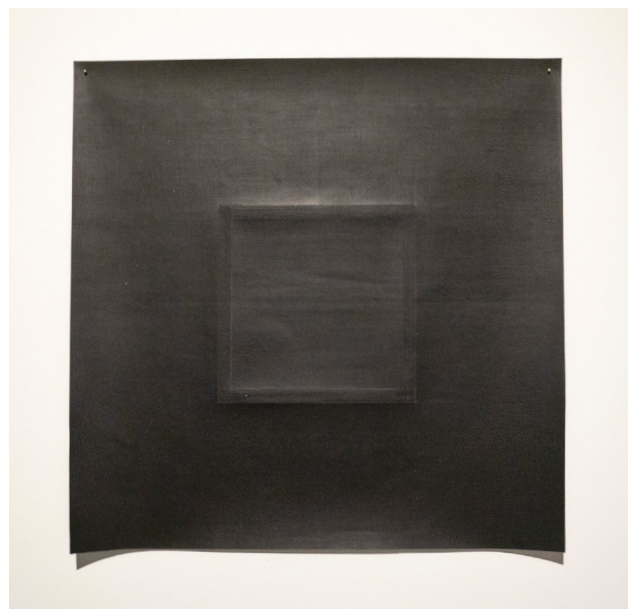
ii

Jarrett Mellenbruch, *The Eternal Question* (detail)
2018

iii

Marie Bannerot McInerney, *[Ap]Parent Bodies*
2018





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above:

Marie Bannerot McInerney, *[Ap]Parent Bodies: Stratum 1.3*
2018

canvas, paint, metal leaf, and scribe

left and previous spread:

Marie Bannerot McInerney, *[Ap]Parent Bodies*, 2018

light, silk, atmosphere, plaster, flax paper, metal leaf,
beeswax, concrete, cotton, plastic, and meteorite fragment





above and previous spread:

Jarrett Mellenbruch, *The Eternal Question*, 2018
white paper, wall-mounted document holder,
reclaimed pine, bronze, redwood sapling, biochar,
Pyrex beaker, and photograph

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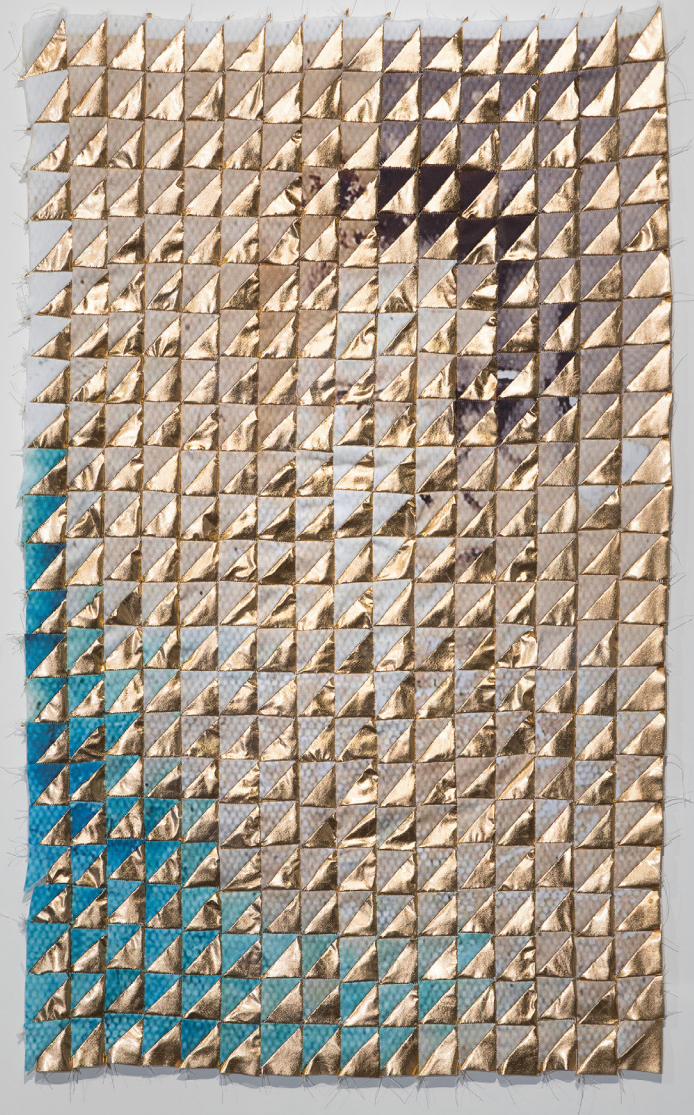
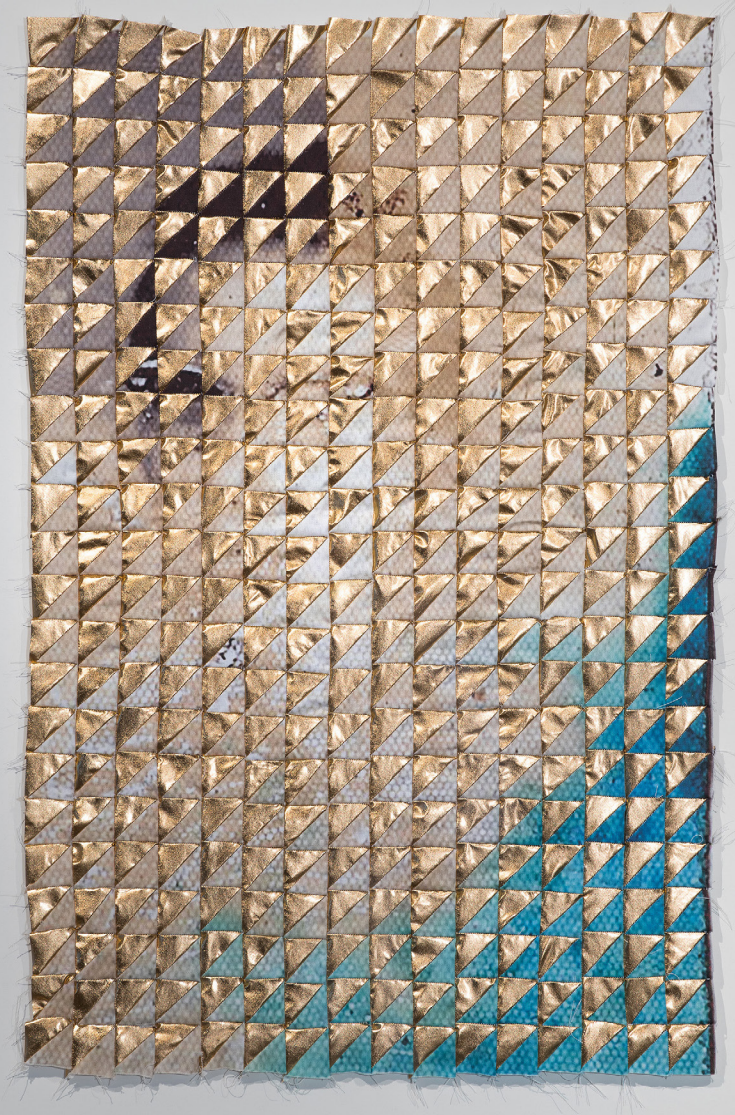
below:

Jarrett Mellenbruch, *The Eternal Question III*, 2018
digital video, CRT video monitor, Formica pedestal



Jarrett Mellenbruch, *The Eternal Question II*, 2018
altered clock

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above:
Jillian Youngbird, *Back in the Wild Blue Yonder*, 2018
cyanotype on fabric, frame, brass fixture

left:
Jillian Youngbird,
Blue Are the Hills that Are Far Away, 2018
cyanotype on fabric, 9 frames, and brass fixture

My Cup Runneth Over, 2018
plaster, gold beading, frame, and digital photograph on fabric

previous spread:
Jillian Youngbird, *The Daughter Sure Favors the Mother*, 2018
digital photograph on fabric, quilted with gold table runner

