



DESIRÉE  
HOLMAN

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SOPHONT

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HOLMAN

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SOPHONT

OCTOBER 17 – NOVEMBER 23, 2013

THE PHILIP J. STEELE GALLERY

CURATED BY CORTNEY LANE STELL



*Channeling Aura 2 (detail), 2012  
gouache on paper*

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# A REAL FANTASY

A NEW BODY OF WORK BY DESIRÉE HOLMAN

Text by Cortney Lane Stell

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Populated by masks, fantasy, fetish, and saccharine pop references, Desirée Holman's semi-surrealistic projects suggest a sense of make-believe and theatrics in the construction of everyday life. Pop references provide Holman's work an entry into the exploration of the human psyche. Just as philosophers use exaggerated situations from science fiction to explore the boundaries or implications of ideas, Holman places familiar icons on a stage where their actions speak to the human quest for a greater purpose.

Holman is a project-based artist investigating topics across multiple mediums, usually over a two to three year time period. Through the lens of fantasy her projects reveal an in-depth inquiry into the ways individuals identify themselves within larger cultural constructs. The projects are approached through a constellation of research practices resulting in a rich expansiveness of thought and methodologies. This process evokes query and plurality, rather than inert opinion or belief.

*Sophont* is a new chapter of work that engages New Age mysticism. The term 'sophont' was coined by science fiction author Poul Anderson to describe intelligent beings with reasoning capacity, both human

and non-human. The word 'sophont' also relates to the term 'sentient being,' a technical term in Buddhist discourse that denotes any being with the ability to feel, perceive, or experience subjectivity. Holman's use of 'sophont' to title this project and exhibition underlines her investigation of common science fiction icons often found in metaphysical ideologies.

Holman is influenced by the cultural changes spawned from hippie counter culture of the 1960s. These cultural transformations challenged traditional social boundaries, like sexual norms, and helped foster the growth of New Age mysticism throughout America. The artist's practice is informed by the prevalence of these cultural shifts experienced in daily life, for example, the colloquial practice of horoscope reading. This popular cultural turn in America promoted self-awareness, self-reflection, and connection to a higher consciousness - all topics touched on in *Sophont*. A common metaphysical trope and major theme in this project is granting acquaintance to realities or states not accessible by standard sense perception. As part of her research, the artist participated in classes like Transcendental Meditation and the Halprin Process of expressive dance, gaining first-hand experience in various New Age techniques.

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*At the Kitchen Table with Football*  
from *The Magic Window* project, 2007  
color pencil on paper  
24 x 36 inches

#### IDENTITY AND THE UNIVERSAL

The mask is a common theme in Holman's work, perhaps originating from her previous career spent dressed in costume as a children's performer. Beyond this personal connection, Holman uses the mask to conceal performers' identities in order to speak to humanity in a generalized sense, as a species. While masked, an individual transforms into an "other" or a "they" and becomes a larger sign or symbol. The actor is able to stand for anyone and everyone, thereby representing general human actions, desires, wants, or conditions. Further, the individuals in Holman's work are primarily non-professional volunteers working as bodies that perform both scripted and improvised actions. By performing, in addition to being masked, the actor is hidden, twice removed.

As with spiritual rituals commonly seen throughout Africa, the mask is often an instrument used to channel, and sometimes inhabit, the spirit of ancestors or a higher consciousness. The African mask, in a general sense, is a cultural device that enables performers to stand apart from their everyday role in society. Holman similarly uses the mask's transformative properties. By

presenting actors disguised as familiar characters, the artist is able to reveal generally understood cultural experiences and habits, like theories of evolution and technological innovation. Similar to rituals of the Kung in South Africa, Holman's use of dance and sound tap into concepts of ceremony, storytelling, enjoyment, and bodily communication, casting an optimistic tone over her work that promotes emotional, social, and physical wellbeing.

In the *Sophont* exhibition the viewer encounters gouache paintings depicting nude people wearing commercially-produced alien masks immersed in aura clouds. The use of mass-produced masks adds another complicated layer of interpretation to the project by directing attention to commodity. The alien masks have the ability to speak concisely to a generalized culturally accepted symbol of the "other." Through the familiar bulging eyes, enlarged bald, round skull, and elongated foreheads of the culturally established visual definition of beings from outer space, Holman relates the viewer to fetishized images of aliens. In this sense, the masks symbolize the commodification of the unknowable and the way in which mass production simplifies and makes digestible the identification of the "other".

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## TRYING IT ON

The helmet sculptures in the exhibition *Sophont* are part of a larger performance piece titled *The Indigo and the Ecstatic: A Motion to the Future*, which was first presented at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in the summer of 2013. In the performance, three distinct groups of actors wearing helmets and black and white pillowcase-like costumes conduct a series of movements intended to bridge the present potential of humanity towards a collective future tense. As part of the work Holman guided performers to improvise an ecstatic dance to portray opening portals of visionary thinking.

In *Sophont* the helmet sculptures are artifacts of the performance. In this way they also connect to contemporary display of African masks once used in rituals. Made of odds and ends like remote controls or kitchen utensils, the helmets have a sci-fi, homemade feel to them. The sculptures intentionally resemble aluminum foil hats or mind-reading helmets common in both fiction and film. The concept of wearing a tin foil hat for protection from threats has become a popular stereotype and way of mocking paranoia, persecutory delusions or belief in conspiracy theories. Another inspiration for the helmets comes from recent

technological developments, like Google Glass, which might dramatically change our interaction with the world. Holman does not state specifically if the sculptural helmets are intended to protect one's thoughts, connect one's mind to another, or communicate through technological innovations, but the helmets do reveal uncanny connections between fantasy and technology. They also speak to our relation to personal privacy and theories of human abilities yet to be discovered. Largely these sculptures act as cultural artifacts and icons of our relation to the ever-growing technological world around us.

Throughout her work Holman's performers are often also costumed in auras. She uses the aura as a metaphor for memory of an emotional body, connecting humans universally as well as conveying each individual's emotional composition. In *Sophont* Holman steps away from digital interpretations of the aura used in previous work like the *Troglodyte series*, in exchange for an aura camera capturing "real" auras. An aura camera applies biofeedback technology to the chakra system creating images representational of an individual's cosmic glow. Hand sensors in the camera translate biofeedback from the body's chakra energy points. According to the Hindu practice there are seven chakra colors,



SFMOMA Performance, 2013

each relating to different energy points on the body. Holman paints from the aura camera photographs, thus removing them from their status as original documents and adding the element of the artist's hand, creating an additional transference similar to the performers wearing masks.

The performative aspect of Holman's work, the aura of the artist, and the often hand-made aesthetic of the costumes confront the viewer with the artist's presence. For example, the mind-reading helmets are fashioned with intentional evidence of the homemade construction. In viewing her work we are never apart from the artist acting simultaneously as author, creator, actor, enthusiast, and critic.



*The Magic Window*, 2007  
3 channel A/V installation  
video still

## A NEW THEATER OF THE ABSURD

The detachment fostered by masking performers guides the work to wrestle with large questions of our existence. Holman's work touches on important themes also found in Existentialist thought and The Theater of the Absurd but twists them in a new way. The Existentialist line of thinking offers the possibility that – when stripped of all religious, familial and scientific dogmas – our position in the world becomes essentially meaningless. The Theater of the Absurd engages these Existentialist ideas through a theatrical style that subverts convention and renders human action utterly meaningless or illogical. However, Holman's work does not conclude in this traditionally pessimistic vantage point. Her work engages with



SFMOMA Performance, 2013

socially developed ways to cope with absurdity, highlighting the logic uniting us in the search for the “ultimate” reason for being, or reason for our actions, placing hope where the Absurdists saw none.

### REAL FANTASY

For the artist, there is an important power found in imaginary play, as she herself experienced this enlightenment in childhood and with others through her work as a hired performer. Holman examines the spaces where fantasy can reveal truth. This inquiry stems from common fantastical subjects in science fiction novels, films, and the occult.

Holman’s aesthetic investigations into topics like aliens, mystics, and possibilities of higher consciousness, sit squarely in fantasy for some, and in reality for others. This particular grey area is precisely the place where her investigations take root. It is Freud who brought our attention to a connection between fantasy and desire and their ability to reveal concealed yearnings. Similar to Freud, Holman uses fantasy and play as a tool to expose truths. The precarious positioning of fantasy balanced between real and fabricated further connect the artist’s work to the human search for meaning, answers, and our relation to the world.



SFMOMA Performance, 2013

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By bringing the reality of fiction to the forefront of her work, Holman creates an ideological space for inquiry that is both playful and insightful. Fantasy can also be used to envision and describe desires, actions, values and goals. It is Karl Marx who said that we live through fantasy, not just in the sense of escapism, but in that we rely on fictions to move through the world. He claims that our perceptions are fictions, as they require our brain to edit, and that even our financial systems can be seen as fictitious structures.

#### KEY STRATEGIES TO DE-FAMILIARIZE THE FAMILIAR

Mining the space between knowledge acquired through the senses and knowledge gathered through intellect and intuition positions Holman's practice in unifying methods of query. The idea of imperceptible elements around us was once hard to believe but is now acknowledged by most as demonstrated in the common acceptance of light wavelengths that are invisible to the naked eye, or viruses and germs that exist and proliferate but remain unseen. In *Sophont* Holman questions and complicates ideas of sensory knowledge and intellectual knowledge with images of auras and aliens. Science, technological advancement, and spiritual studies lead our inquiry into the human experience beyond our sensory limits.

Due to our innate need to make sense of the world, significance and intention is often attributed to seemingly irrational and inexplicable events, so as to provide a graspable understanding. Specters, alien species or higher powers are identified as answers to unexplained natural forces. There is comfort in naming or identifying what we experience outside of the traditional senses. It can be frightening to feel something or to perceive an event and not be able to talk about it, ground it in reality, or relate it to others. Through labeling these perceived but unknown experiences and creating cultural ways of describing them we can either confront or hide behind understanding.



Holman's expansive research-based process acquires insight from a multitude of perspectives, gathering knowledge from a wide array of fields including academic, scientific, ideological, theological, entertainment, and firsthand experience. Using performance and play to free us from objective reality allows her work to consider unsettled questions of how we fit into this world, how we relate to others, and how we relate to what we cannot perceive. Holman uses these approaches to both question and empathize with the human need for connection.



*Soothsaying* (detail)  
from the *Troglodyte* project, 2005  
C-print  
30 x 24 inches

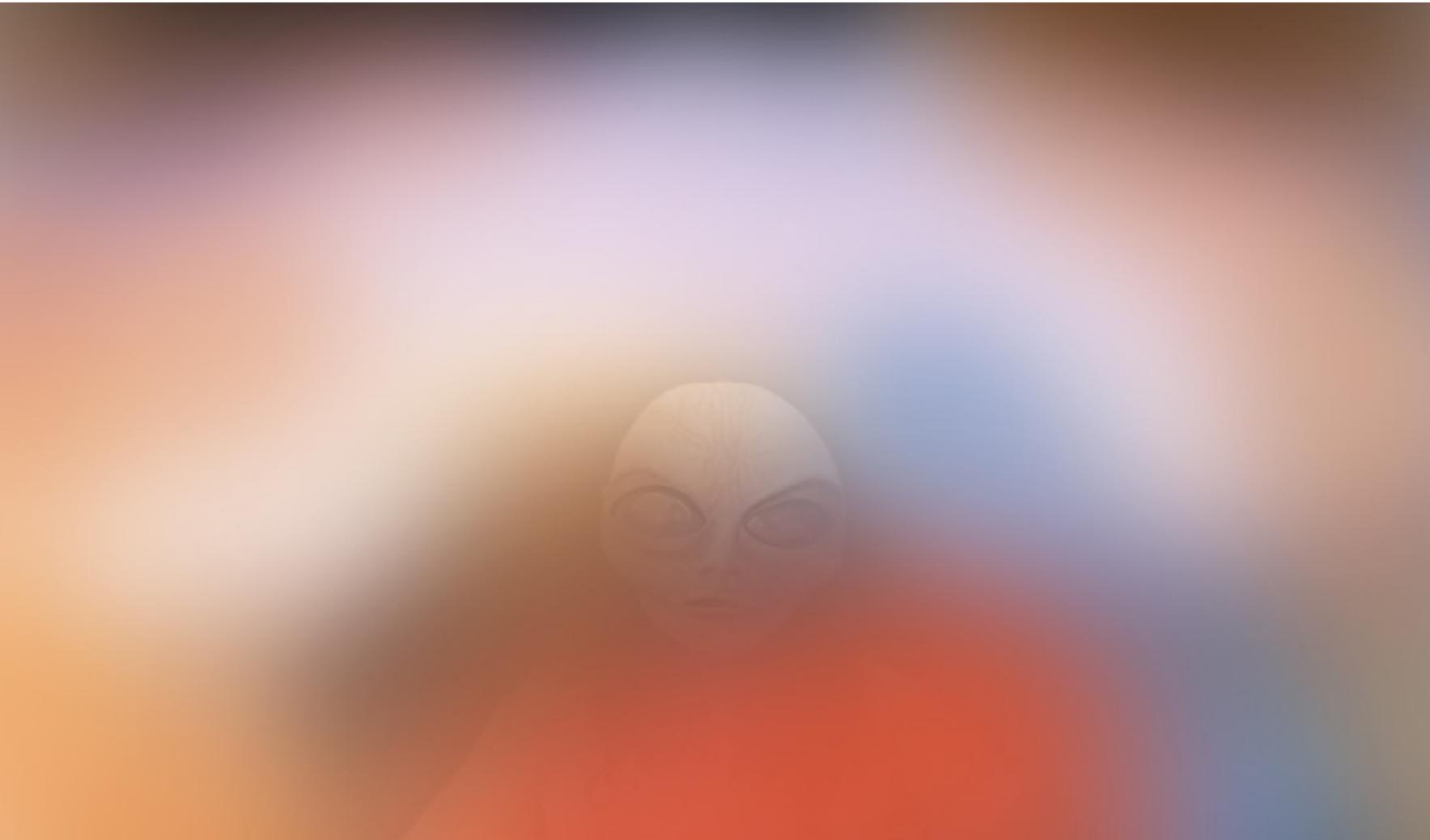




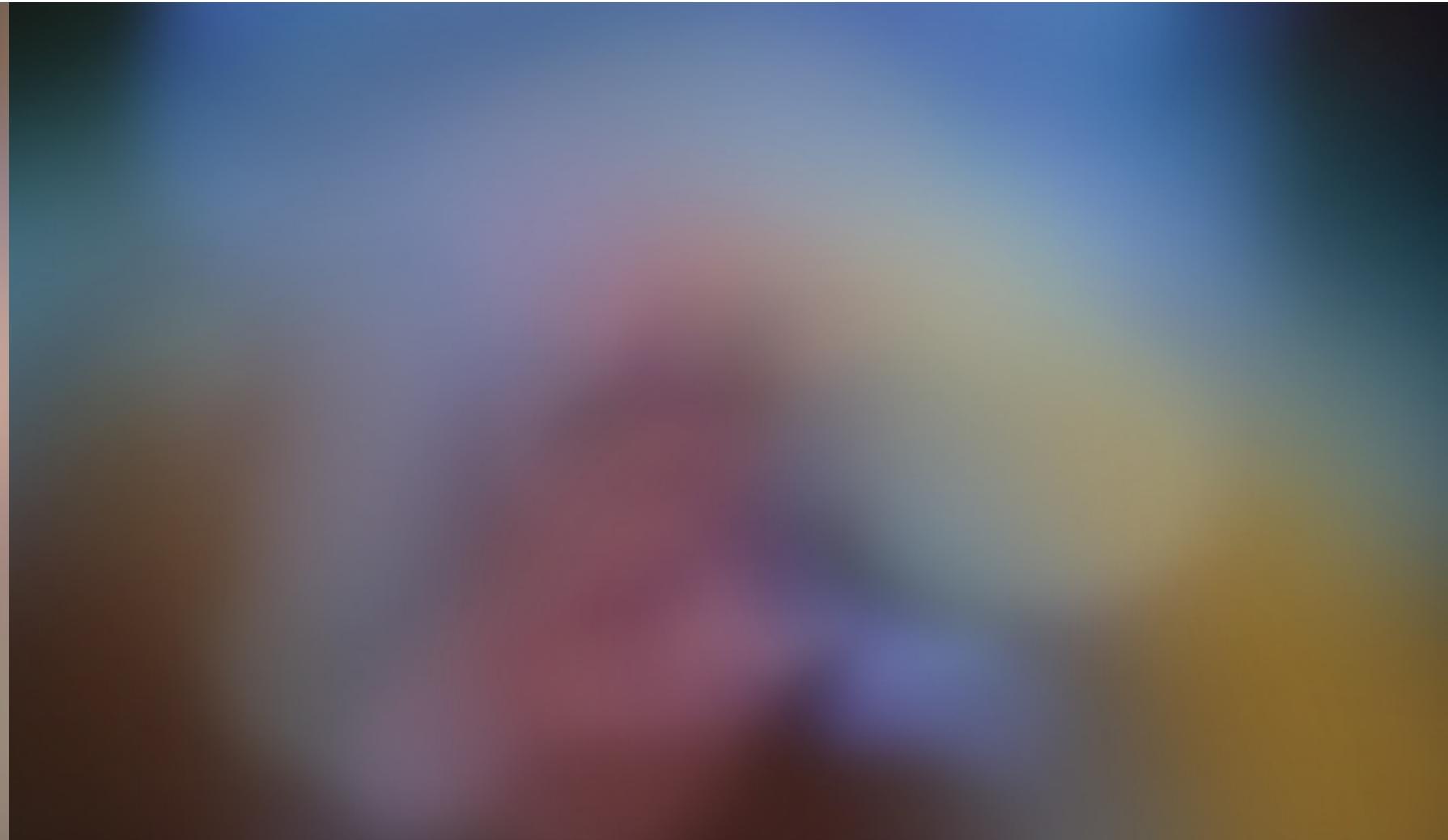
*Close Contact*  
from the *Sophont* project, 2013  
28 channel video installation



*Close Contact* (detail), 2013  
28 channel video installation

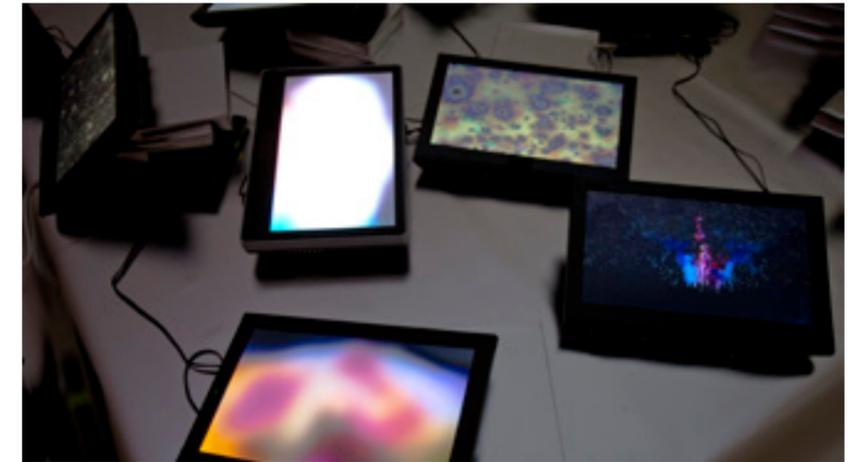


*Close Contact 1, 2013*  
video still



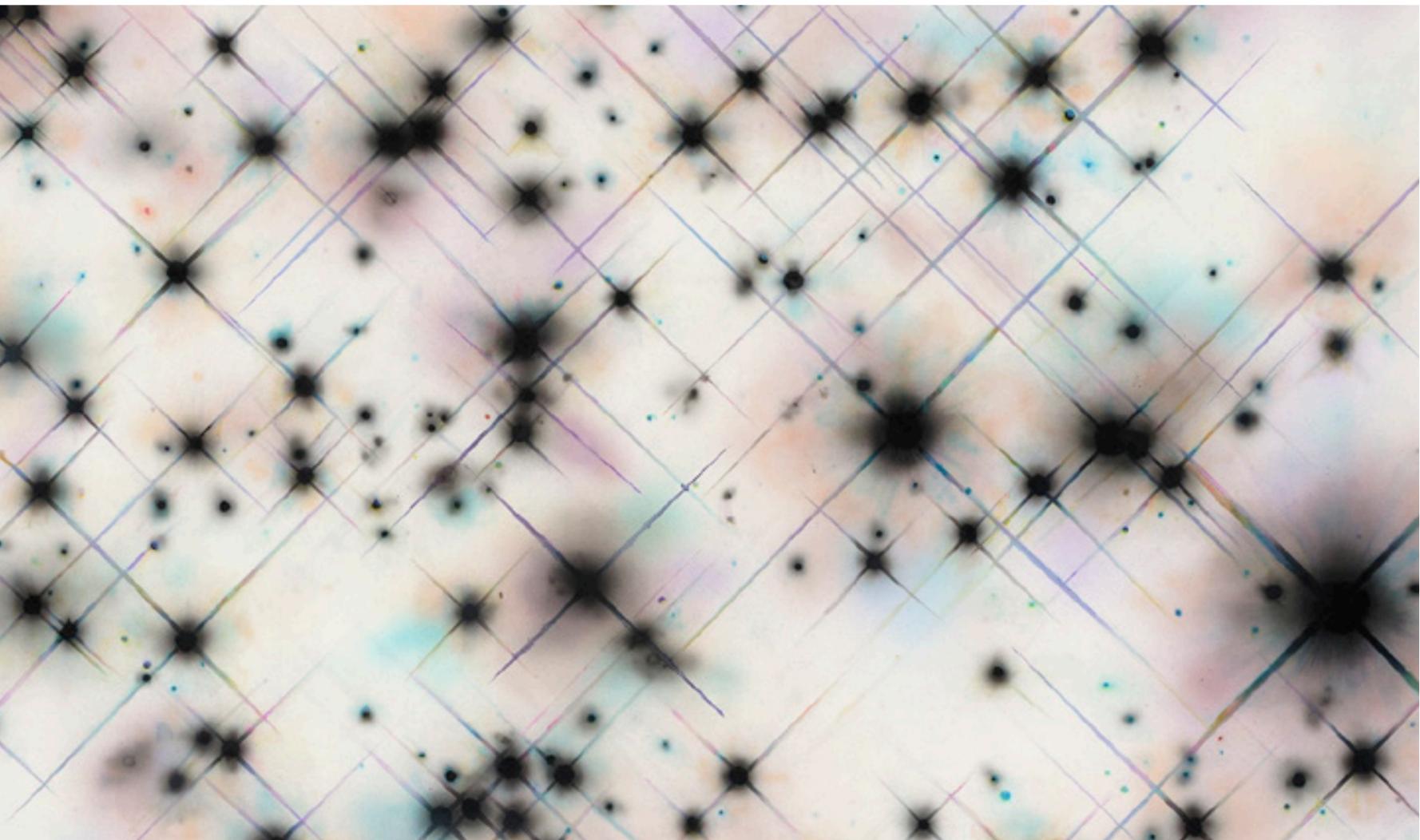
*Close Contact 7, 2013*  
video still



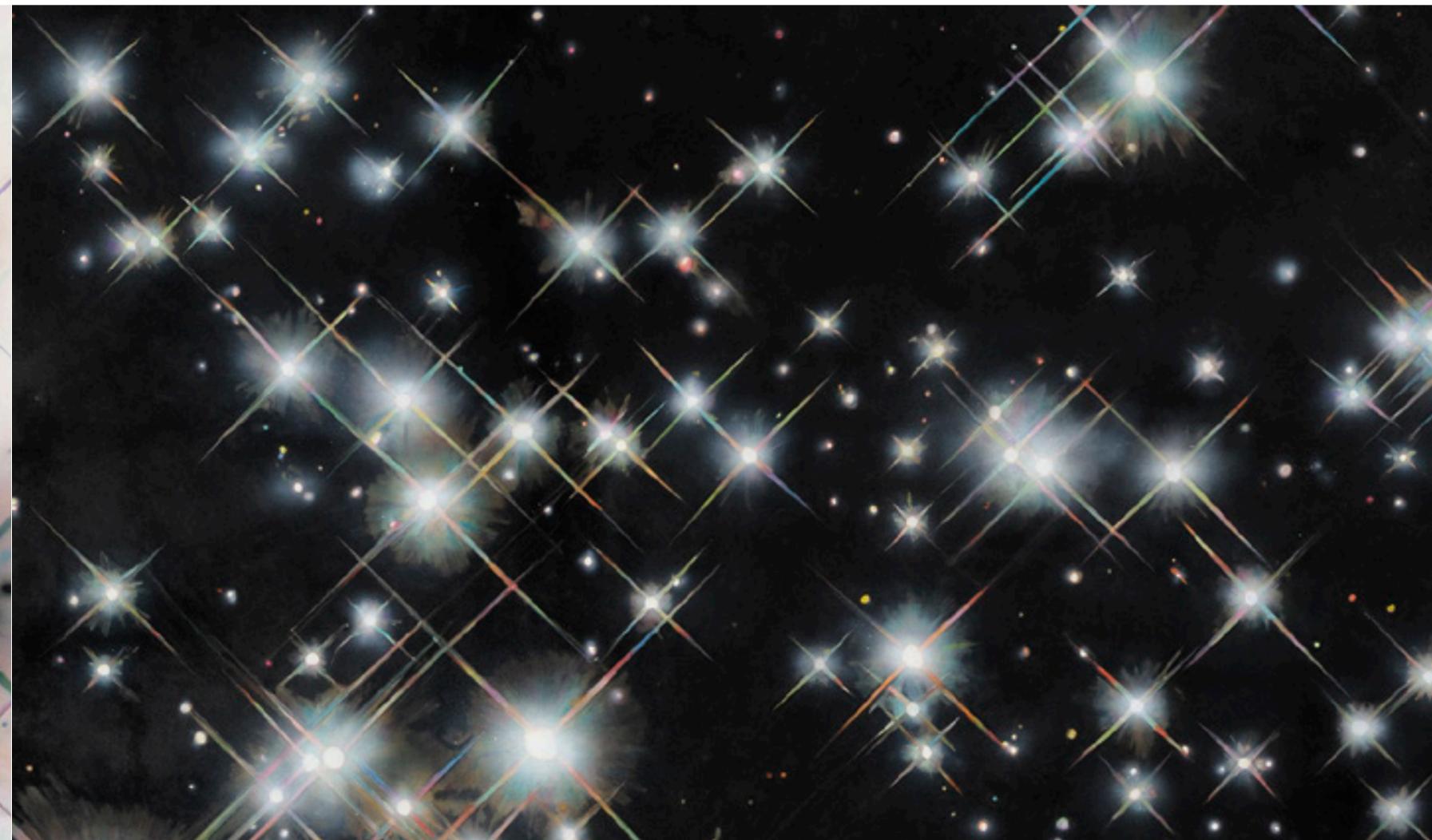


*Close Contact* (detail), 2013  
28 channel video installation

*Close Contact, Milky Way* (detail), 2013  
video still



*Close Contact*, 03h 17m 46.16324s,  $-62^{\circ} 34' 31.1563''$ , 2013  
video still



*Close Contact*, 03h 18m 12.81853s,  $-62^{\circ} 30' 22.9048''$ , 2013  
video still



*Close Contact, Eliphas Levi, 2013*  
video still

*Close Contact, Emmanuel Swendenborg, 2013*  
video still





*Time Traveler* sculptures  
and *Untitled* color changing L.E.D. installation  
from the *Sophont* project, 2013  
East Gallery installation view



*Time Traveler* sculptures  
and *Untitled* color changing L.E.D. installation  
from the *Sophont* project, 2013  
East Gallery installation view

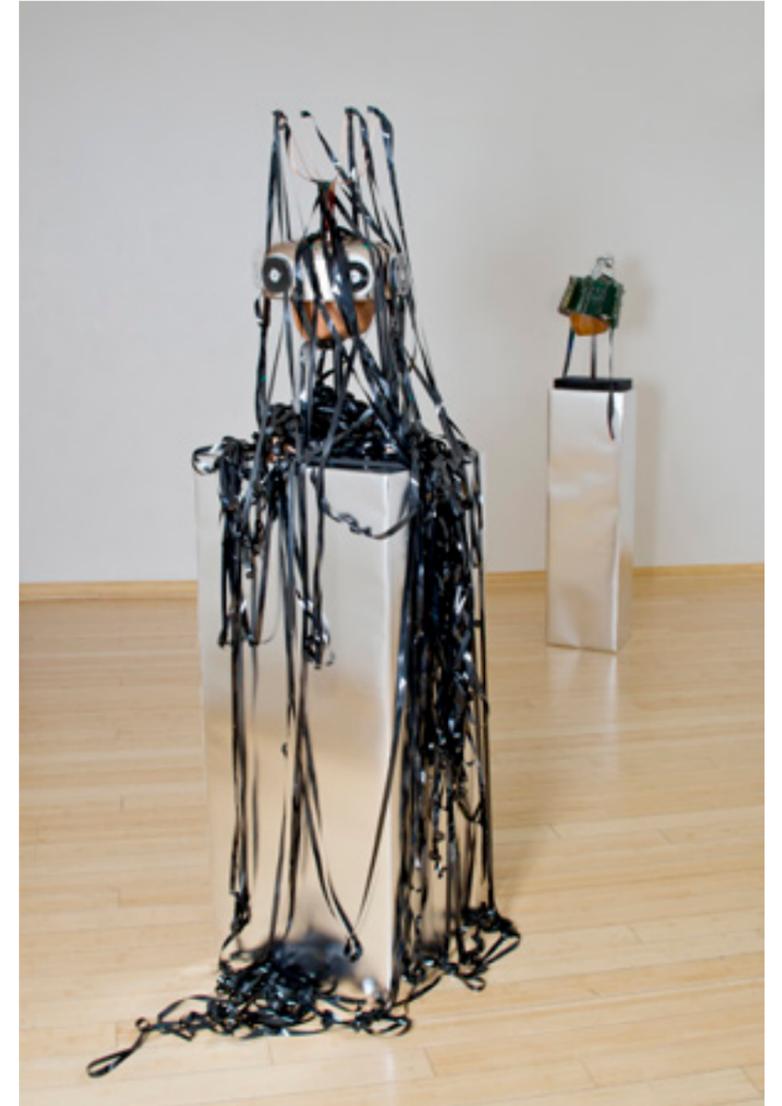
7  
*Psionics 10*, 2013  
mixed media  
16 x 16 x 24 inches



2  
*Psionics 03*, 2013  
mixed media  
16 x 16 x 32 inches



3  
*Psionics 04*, 2013  
mixed media  
16 x 16 x 75 inches



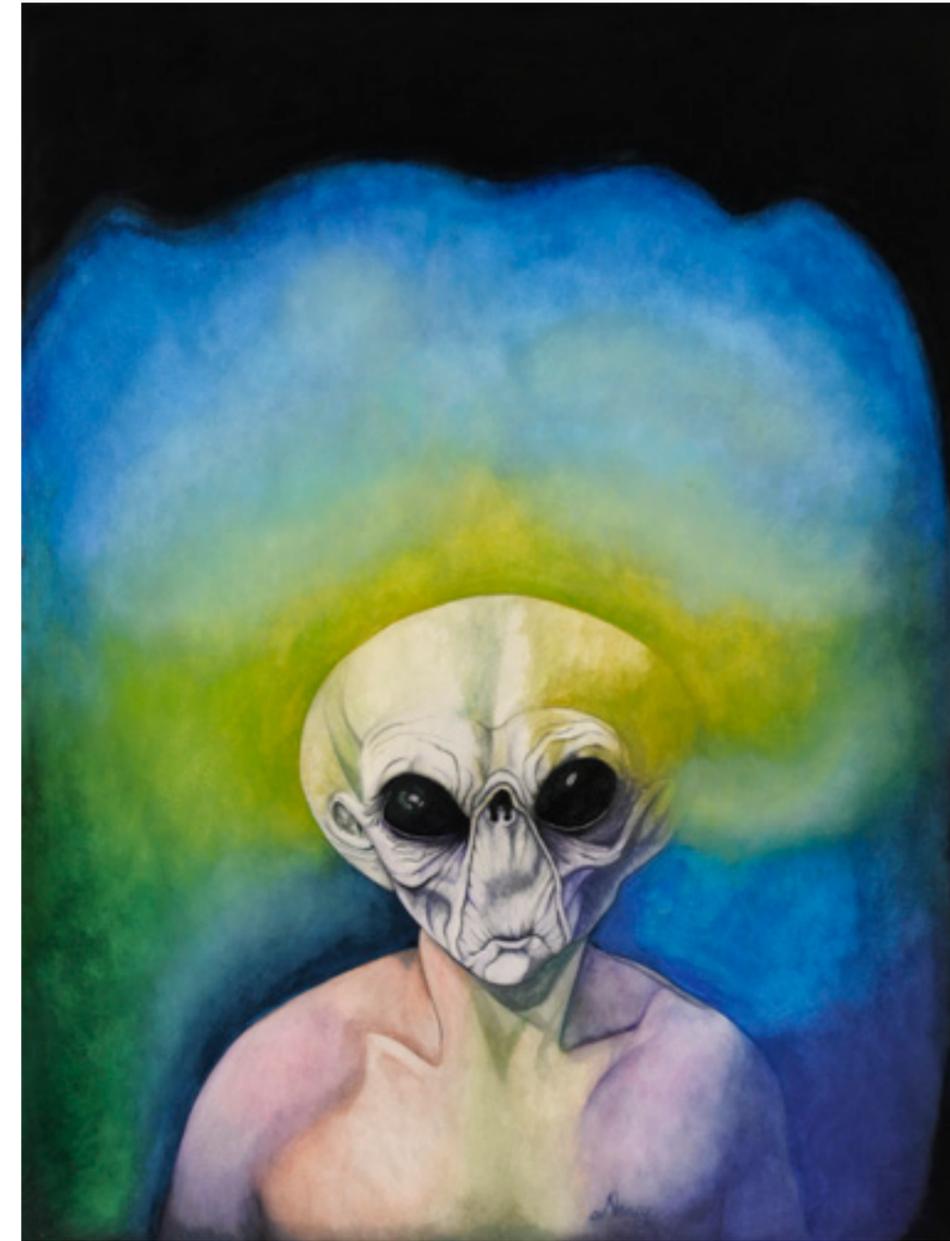
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2

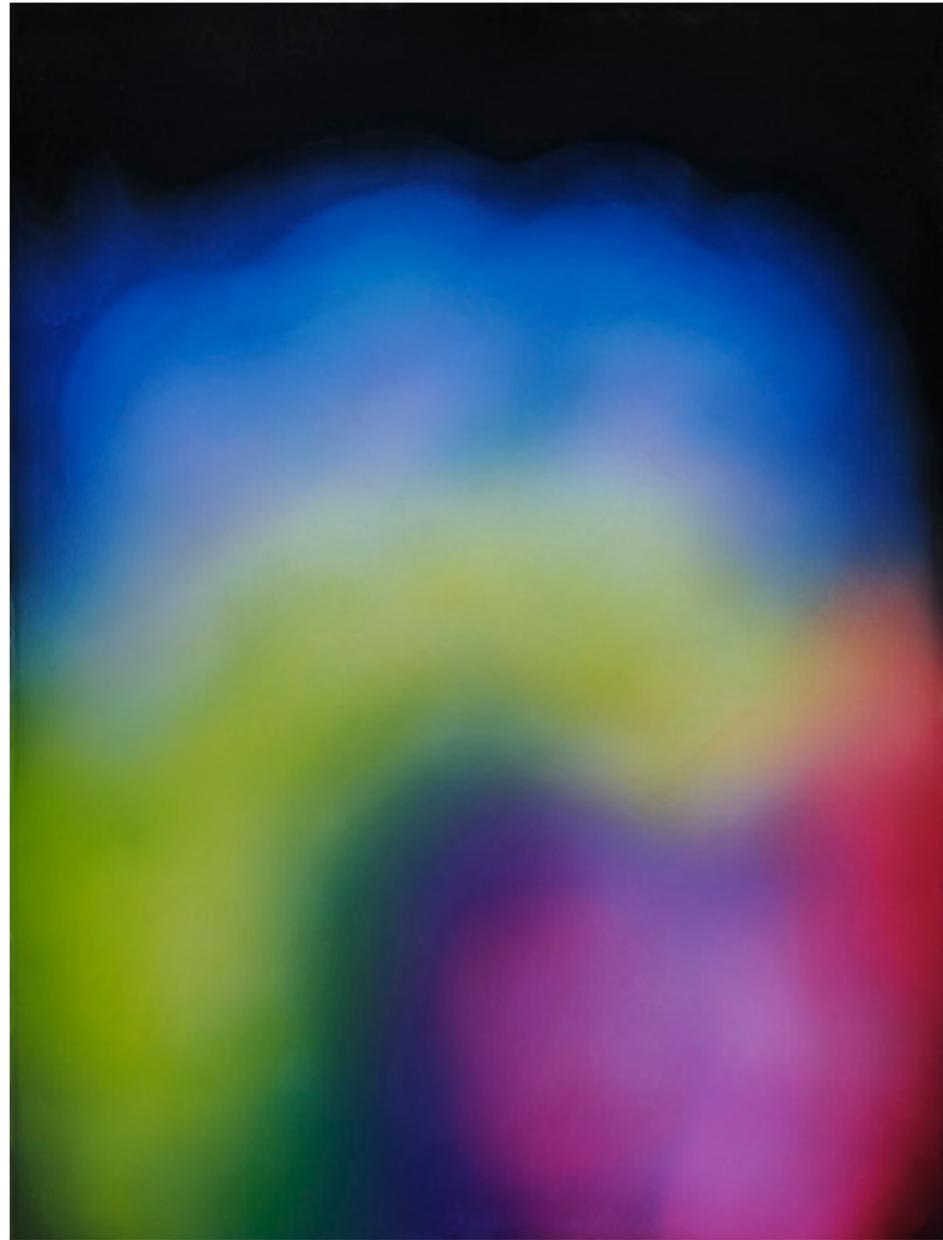
3



*Channeling Aura 4*, 2012  
gouache on paper  
30 x 22 inches



*Channeling Aura 2*, 2012  
gouache on paper  
30 x 22 inches



*Aura, Franz Mesmer, 2013*  
gouache on paper  
30 x 22 inches

# HOLMAN BIOGRAPHY

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Photo by Aimee Friberg

Desirée Holman is an artist based in Oakland, California. Her multi-sensory work positions theatrical tools, like costumes or props, in settings that illuminate ideas of identity, knowledge, and the complexities of the human psyche. Holman utilizes references to popular culture as well as subcultures in order to explore concepts around personal

life experiences and how we interpret visual culture. In this space, the artist's work reveals a complex dialogue about truth and the experience of the "real" world.

Holman holds a Masters degree from the University of California at Berkeley. Earning critical acclaim for her work, Holman was awarded a San Francisco Modern Museum of Art SECA award in 2008 and in 2007 the Artadia: The Fund for Art and Dialogue award. Solo exhibitions of her work include the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, and the Berkeley Art Museum's MATRIX program. International exhibitions of Holman's work include the Sao Paulo Museum of Modern Art, Hessel Museum, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, Milan's BnD, and Toronto's YYZ. Reviews of Holman's work appeared in numerous publications including Artforum, Los Angeles Times, NY Arts, Artillery, San Francisco Chronicle and Artweek. She is represented by Jessica Silverman Gallery in San Francisco, California.

# SELECTED EXHIBITIONS+AWARDS

## SOLO

- 2013 *The Indigo & the Ecstatic: A Motion to the Future*, SFMOMA, CA. Curator: Frank Smigiel.
- Destined to Disappear*, The Armory Show/Armory Focus: USA with Jessica Silverman Gallery, NY, NY. Curator: Eric Shiner.
- 2011 *Heterotopias*, MATRIX # 238, Berkeley Art Museum, Berkeley, CA. Curator: Elizabeth Thomas. (brochure)
- 2009 *Desirée Holman*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA. Curator: Ali Subotnick. (brochure)
- Reborn*, Silverman Gallery, San Francisco, CA.
- Living History*, Marc Selwyn Fine Art, Los Angeles, CA. Curators: Dean Valentine & Marc Selwyn. (two-person exhibition)
- Make Believe*, Thatcher Gallery at University of San Francisco, CA.
- 2008 *The Magic Window*, Machine Projects, Los Angeles, CA.
- Desirée Holman Videos*, Night Vision at the Climate Theater, San Francisco, CA.
- 2007 *TV Honey: Desirée Holman with Lynda Benglis and Joan Jonas*, Silverman Gallery, San Francisco, CA. Curator: Lawrence Rinder.
- 2006 *Desirée Holman: Bucolic Existence for my Unreal Life and Other Work*, Lisa Boyle Gallery, Chicago, IL.

- 2006 *Effigy*, YYZ Artists' Outlet, Toronto, Canada. (publication)
- 2005 *Troglodyte*, Queens Nails Annex, San Francisco, CA.
- Breath Holes*, San Francisco Arts Commission Gallery, CA. Curator: Mary Ceruti. (catalogue)
- 2003 *Luv Birds*, MiArt with BnD Studios, Milan, Italy.

## GROUP

- 2013 *Approximately Infinite Universe*, MCA San Diego, CA. Curator: Jill Dawsey.
- 2012 *I'm so Goth\_I'm dead*, Queen's Nails, San Francisco, CA.
- Big Reality*, 319 Scholes Gallery, Brooklyn, NY. Curator: Brian Droitcour.
- 2011 *Intimacies*, Gallery 400, University of Illinois at Chicago.
- 50 Years of Bay Area Art: The SECA Awards*, San Francisco MoMA, CA. (book)
- Super 8*, Christopher Grimes Gallery, Los Angeles, CA. Traveled to Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco; Kunstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin; Museum of Modern Art, Rio de Janeiro.
- 2010 *Soft & Hard*, Young Projects, Los Angeles, CA.

- 2010 *American Gothic*, Nelson Gallery & Fine Art Collection, Davis, CA. (catalogue)
- The Jellification*, Parsons Hall Project Space, Holyoke, MA.
- In Wolves Clothing: Re-imagining the Doll*, SHOWstudio, London, UK.
- Other things to do*, The Pawnbroker, Reading, UK.
- Ordinary Miracles*, Slaughterhouse Space, Healdsburg, CA.
- Seven Easy Steps*, Horton Gallery (Sunday L.E.S.), New York City, NY.
- Five Centimeters Short*, Rupert Goldsworthy Gallery, Berlin, Germany.
- 2009 *Capricious: Looking Forward, Feeling Backwards*, PPOW, New York City, NY.
- Intelligent Design: Interspecies Art*, University of California, Riverside Sweeney Art Gallery. Curators: Tyler Stallings and Rachel Mayeri.
- Coté Court*, Pantin, France. Curator: Shana Moulton.
- 2008 SECA Art Award*, San Francisco MoMA, CA. Curators: Apsara DiQuinzio & Alison Gass. (catalogue)
- The Stan Brakhage Symposium*, University of Colorado at Boulder. Curator: Steve Seid.

## GROUP (CONTINUED)

- 2008 *Twice Upon a Time*, Galerie Andreas Huber, Vienna, Austria.
- Cover*, Museum of Modern Art, São Paulo, Brazil. Curator: Fernando Oliva. (catalogue)
- I-Legítimo*, Museum of Image & Sound and Paço das Artes, São Paulo, Brazil. (catalogue)
- Running Time: 24:00:00*, Paul Gleason Theater, Los Angeles, CA.
- Mineral Park*, The Park Gallery, Falkirk, Scotland.
- This One Goes Up to 11*, <http://whyandwherefore.com>
- Specter*, CRG Gallery, NY, NY. Curator: Summer Guthery.
- Second Thoughts*, Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY.
- 2007 *Coming Up*, Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland, OR.
- A Century of CCA: Artists of Invention*, Oakland Museum of Art, Oakland, CA. (book)
- Body Double*, Luckman Fine Arts Complex, Los Angeles, CA. Curators: Julie Joyce & Marco Rios. (catalogue)
- Two Things at the Same Time*, Peak Gallery, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.
- 2006 *Glitch*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA.
- Circles of Confusion*, 49th San Francisco International Film Festival, AMC Kabuki 8.
- 2006 *All Systems Go!*, Scope New York, Curator: Marisa Olsen/Rhizome, New York, NY.
- 2005 Video installation at Omni Art Project/Art Basel Miami Beach, Curator: Nina Arias, Miami, FL.
- The Peekskill Project*, Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art, Peekskill, NY.
- Spark Video: New Local and International Video Art*, Syracuse University, NY.
- Cross Cuts*, Southern Exposure, San Francisco, CA.
- 2004 *The Love Show*, The Drake, Toronto, Ontario, Canada. (dvd catalogue)
- Continuities*, UC Davis' Nelson Museum, Davis, CA. Curator: Renny Pritikin.
- 2003 *Captivita*, BnD Studios, Milan, Italy.
- The Pretendlings*, New Langton Arts, San Francisco, CA. Curator: James Bewley.
- MiArt*, BnD Studios, Milan, Italy.
- 2002 *Bay Area Now 3*, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA. (catalogue)
- Knew Knowledge*, Berkeley Art Museum, Berkeley, CA. Curator: Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson. (catalogue)
- Home Movies*, SF Camerawork, San Francisco, CA.
- 2001 *HiArt*, Worth Ryder Gallery, Berkeley, CA.
- Skowhegan Alumni Exhibition*, Knoedler Gallery, New York, NY.
- 2000 *HARC*, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, CA.

- 2000 *The San Francisco International Art Exposition*, Refusalon Gallery, San Francisco, CA.
- Hi Touch/Hi Tech: Making Art in the 21st Century*, Refusalon, San Francisco, CA and Kala Art Institute, Berkeley, CA. Curator: Larry Rinder.

## AWARDS+RESIDENCIES

- 2014 *New American Paintings*, No. 109, Pacific Coast Issue, Juror: Janet Bishop.
- 2010 Investing in Artists Grant from the Center for Cultural Innovation.
- 2009 Headlands Center for the Arts Artist-in-Residency, Sausalito, CA.
- 2008 SECA Art Award, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. (catalogue)
- 2007 Artadia: The Fund for Art and Dialogue Award. (catalogue)
- 2005 San Francisco Arts Commission Construct Award.
- 2001 Kala Art Institute Fellowship.
- 2001 Kala Art Institute Artist-in-Residency, Berkeley, CA.
- 2000 HARC Foundation Creative Arts Award.
- 1999 Skowhegan Artist-in-Residency, Skowhegan, ME.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## SOUNDSCAPE

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Angel Deeradorian created the unique soundscape in 2013 specifically for the *Sophont* project. Deradorian is a multi-instrumentalist, singer, and songwriter hailing from Northern California. As a child, she focused on classical piano, which became the catalyst for her exploration in other genres of music. At age 15 she left high school to pursue a musical career. After traveling around the country in several bands, her heart led her to Brooklyn, NY, where she joined Dirty Projectors. During her tenure with the band they released the critically acclaimed records *Rise Above* and *Bitte Orca*, and worked with several talented and respected artists such as Bjork & David Byrne. In 2012, Deradorian left the band to pursue her own project. She is currently living in Los Angeles and working on an album inspired by singing and the space in which sound can reside.

## SCULPTURES

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The sculptural helmets were originally created as props used in *The Indigo and the Ecstatic: A Motion to the Future*, a commission by the Live Art program at SFMOMA. A talented team played a critical part in the creation of the sculptures. Kinetic electronic components are by Lee Sonko. Malia Rose collected pieces and parts and advised on the construction. Wood and metal sculpture stands are crafted by Steve Shada.

## SFMOMA PERFORMANCE

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Desirée Holman's *The Indigo and the Ecstatic: A Motion to the Future* was commissioned by the Live Art program at SFMOMA and performed on June 02, 2013.

Photographic documentation by Charles Villyard.

## EXHIBITION + CATALOGUE

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The catalogue is published by the Rocky Mountain College of Art + Design on the occasion of the exhibition *Desirée Holman: Sophont* curated by Cortney Lane Stell at the Philip J. Steele Gallery on view from October 17 – November 23, 2013.

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**Exhibition Coordination and Catalogue Editor:**  
Gretchen Marie Schaefer

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Sara Ford Photography

**Catalogue Design:**  
Joshua Claassen

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GALLERY

