

ELIZABETH OPALENIK

Bodies, stark and sensual, float in a liquid suspension of time and space. Flowers, fragile and severe, resonate with erotic equivalence. Water, mysterious and dark, conflates temporal cleansing and spiritual rebirth. A photographer, innovative and uninhibited, combines these narrative elements in a dazzling mosaic of mirrorings and intersections. Welcome to the visually expressive and emotionally charged reveries of Elizabeth Opalenik.

"I'm not interested in photography as reality, but as a journey of self-reflection to find the beauty within," she says. "Photographs are self-portraits to express our hopes, dreams, visions, childhood memories, life. They are stepping stones and tools to open doors to exploration."

The Oakland, California-based artist began her highly individual odyssey during a 1979 Maine Photographic Workshop. She intuitively grasped the medium's metaphoric potential and began exploring it with such non-traditional tools as infrared and hand painting. Her use of alternative processes is driven by a need for hands-on engagement with photographic materials as well as a strong preference for one-of-a-kind interpretations. "Mass-produced imagery has never appealed to me. I have a passion for creating something different each time out. I don't even make a black-and-white print the same."

In 1991, French photographer Jean-Pierre Sudre introduced her to Mordançage, a process in which part of the emulsion from the densest areas of a photographic print



is lifted off the surface and rinsed away. Opalenik added her own twist by letting the floating emulsion fold back on itself like a kind of transparent skin and allowing it to re-settle back onto the paper in new and unexpected configurations. She was quickly hooked on the one-off nature of the draping effect.

"I had always used fabric with my nudes, and having once dreamed of being a dancer, I liked the feeling of fabric swirling, so it was natural to dress my Mordançage images with the draping," she says. "But like life, it's unpredictable. There are lots of rejects because not every image translates, and with the draping there is even less control. I once worked 15 hours a day for three weeks on the *Changer la femme* series, and even then kept just six images from about 50 attempts. Some days it is magic and works just fine, but as photographic paper is manufactured with less silver, the process is becoming harder."

The payoff for all this time

and effort has been a series of stunning Mordançage images with haunting transformative power. In *Margo*, the process renders Opalenik's sensuously draped model into a ghostly abstraction, yet one that retains a sensual innocence coupled with seductive fascination. In *I'll Fly Away*, Opalenik bridges organic and inorganic forms by attaching Mordançage "wings" onto a leaf, thereby imbuing it with gravity-defying grace.

Opalenik has received a great deal of attention for her formal experimentation, especially with Mordançage, yet her work would not resonate so powerfully without the foundation of a dense, poetic vision. Foremost in this vision is an obsession with liberation—of the body, mind and spirit. The visual element utilized most often to express this theme is water, as the undraped figures in pictures such as *Light Circles* and *Tami in Spirit* eloquently testify to.

In an essay for her book, *Poetic Grace*, Opalenik wrote: "Water has always calmed me, soothing my soul, with each ebb and flow having the possibility for a new beginning. I seek the continual pleasure that just looking at water and its transformative qualities brings. It carries mystery, reflects back a life, can be a million jewels of dewdrops, brightens the duller subject, can be the most powerful force, and yet gently causes reverie while gazing upon its soft sensuality. Like the ripples of the stone that you throw in the water, I receive energy with each light wave. It reminds me to send that energy into the world for

peace and tranquility."

While much of her subject matter comprises recurring visual elements, she never worries about exhausting their creative possibilities, believing there are no new things in life, only new ways of seeing. As she progresses further on her voyage of discovery, she remains perpetually open to new possibilities and interpretations. This improvisational approach results in part during the initial image capture with her models, Opalenik remaining alert to the full spectrum of their movements, moods and gestures as she strives to access their inner mystery and beauty.

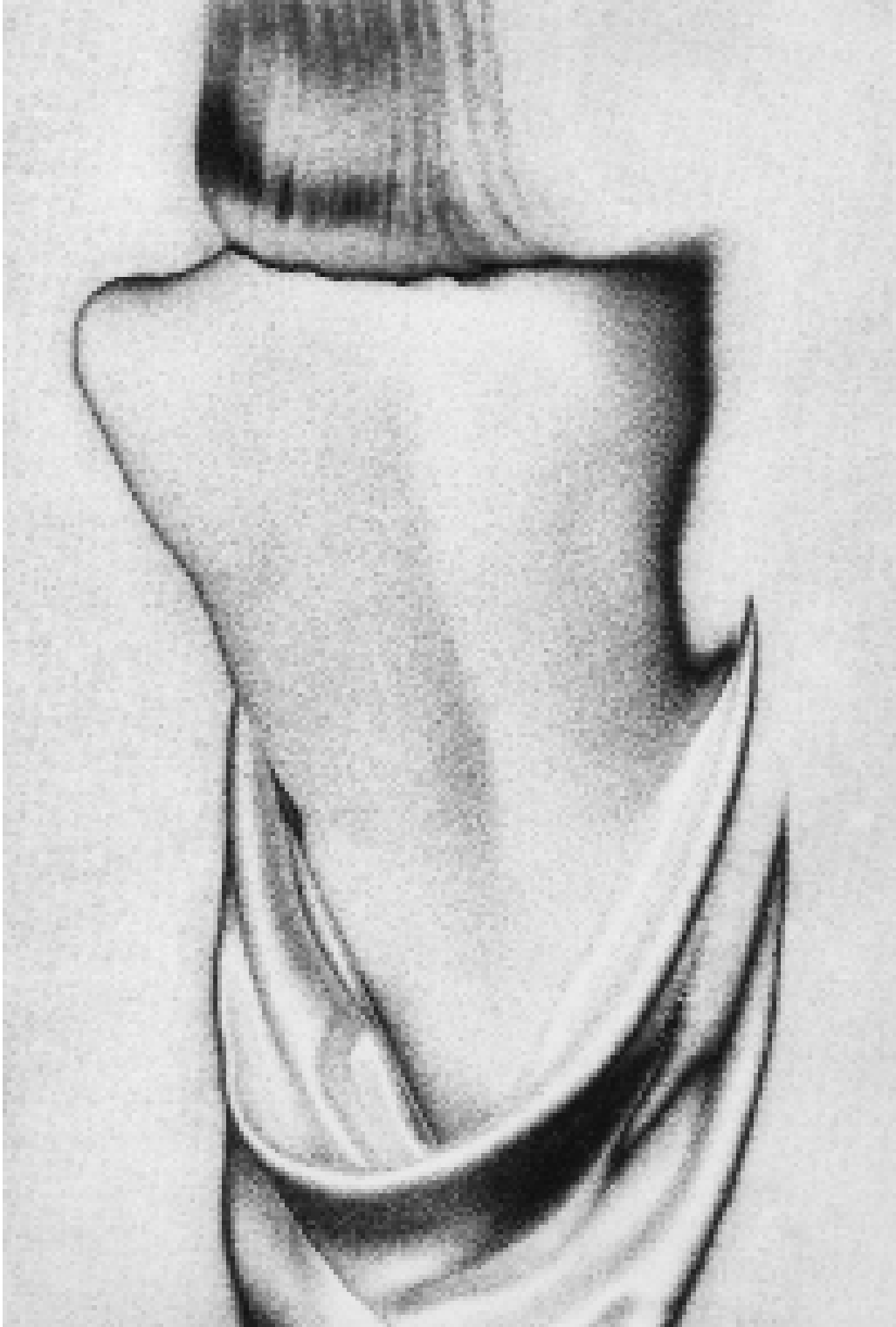
Opalenik doesn't believe in over-analyzing her photography, and is gratified that people in general relate to it from an emotional perspective. "I really have very little to say about my figure work," she admits. "I just make images for myself and hope that an audience finds them. I find that people bring their own personal history to the work, and as long as it moves them, whether positively or negatively, I'm happy."
—Dean Brierly

■ PRINT INFORMATION

Contact the artist for information on type of prints offered, print sizes, editions and prices.

■ CONTACT INFORMATION

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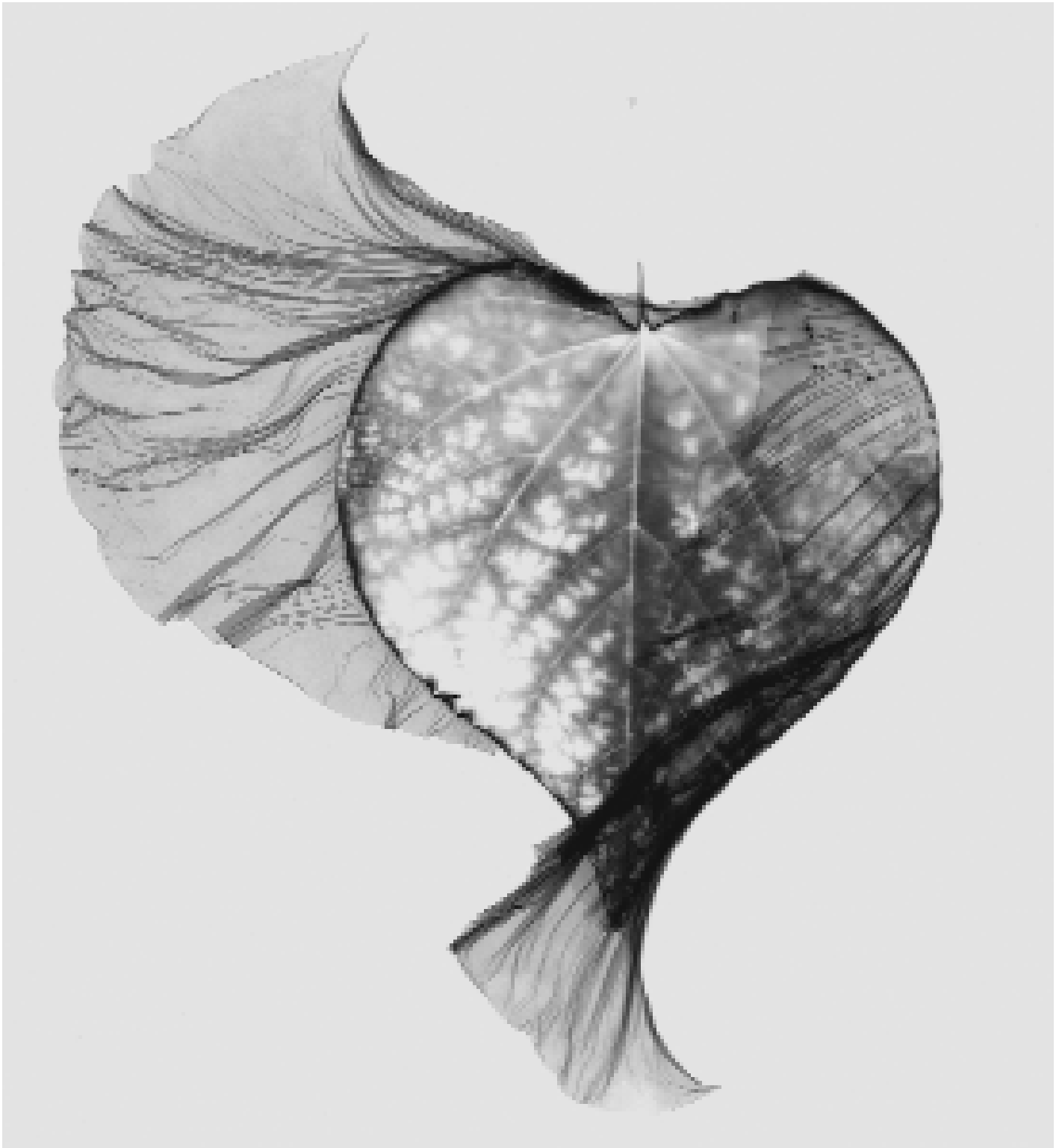
MARGOT, ROCKPORT, MAINE—1993



REACH TO THE LIGHT, OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA—1993



LIGHT CIRCLES, ST. HELENA, CALIFORNIA—2003



I'LL FLY AWAY, OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA—1998



TAMI IN SPIRIT, OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA—2003



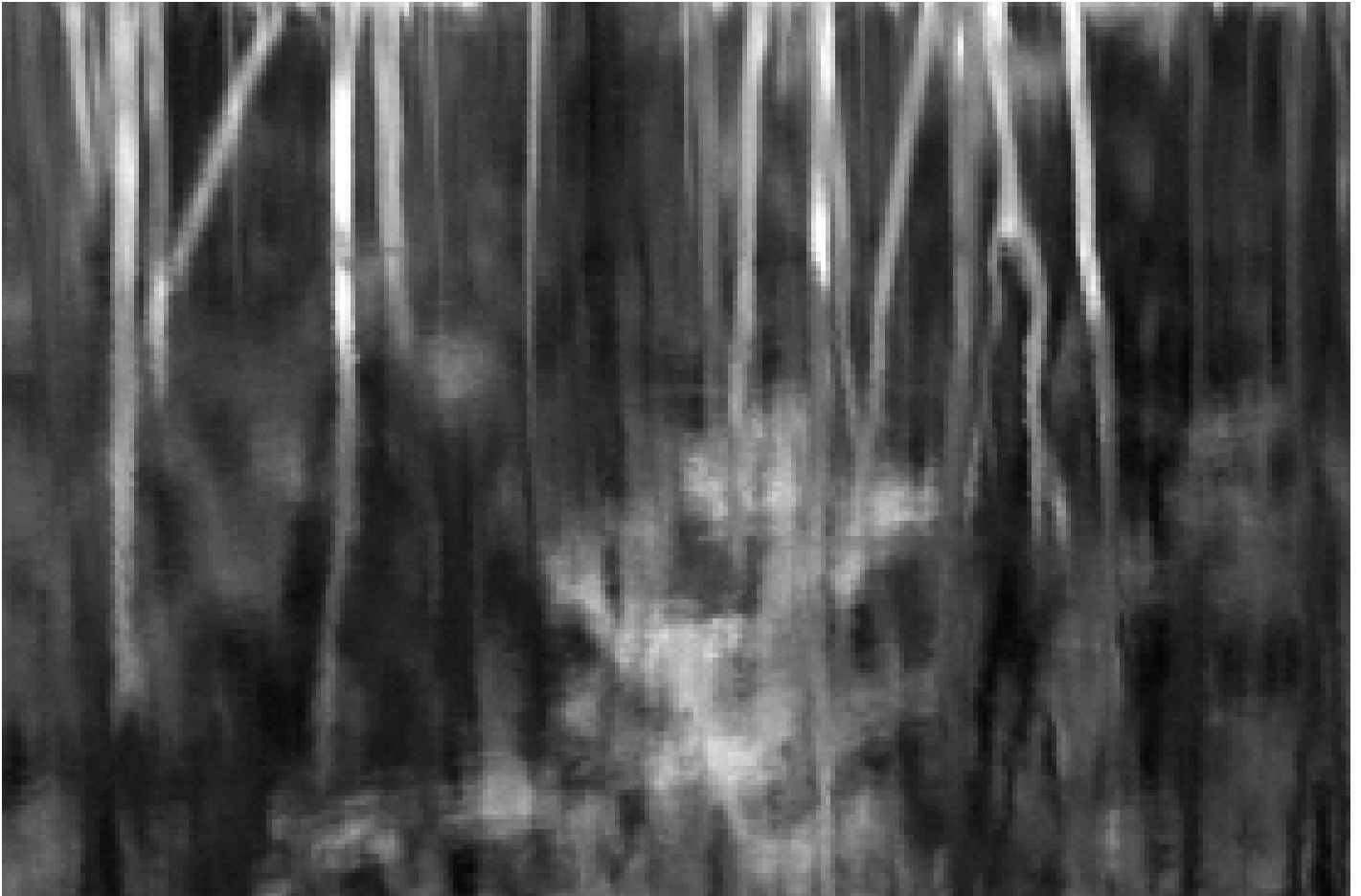
AMONG THE LILIES #4, LINCOLNVILLE, MAINE—1980



TOUCH THE EARTH, GEORGETOWN, MAINE—2004



ANGEL'S DREAM, OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA—1998



LIFE REFLECTING, GEORGETOWN, MAINE—2004