

Esther Teichmann  
*Silently Mirrored*

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# Love in Black and Blue

Esther Teichmann's *Silently Mirrored*  
by Carol Mavor

As lover, the mother, who is most readily hued as blue is taboo.

We find Mother as blued via the waterways of the maternalized sea (*la mer* is never far from *la mère*) or via the flowing cloak of the Virgin. We find Mother as tabooed lover through Mama's boys, like Marcel Proust who famously performed his illicit desire for the maternal with great eloquent literary style, so much so that some readers have chosen to miss it completely.

As lover, at least in Anglo-American culture, the black male body is often fetishized, as taboo. The photographer Robert Mapplethorpe performed this fetishization of black skin in shocking black and white photographs, so much so, that some viewers have chosen to see nothing else in his pictures.

Esther Teichmann's watery, slippery world of another order is also taboo. In *Silently Mirrored*, the viewer slips and slides between photographs of the exuberance of her husband's black skin (so dark that it hails deep sea blue) and photographs of the exuberance of her mother's white skin (so white that it hails sky blue). In Teichmann's black (body) and blue (washcloth) landscape of touching feelings, made of breath, water and skin, one is bruised (black and blue) by naked love.

To speak so nakedly of such love is taboo.

Teichmann's utopian island-world lies somewhere between black and blue seas, between here and now and the fantasy of where one might go, or perhaps, even, where one has been. At the heart of the work is

the experience of the primal loss of the mother, who necessarily turns away, as Teichmann's mother does in some of the photographs.

In one, she wears a pink robe, made entirely of satin, the same material that one might find on the silky edge of a baby's beloved blanket: that slippery, soft, soothing part of the child's treasured object. Children, in an effort to calm themselves down or to go to sleep (when their mothers are away or are psychologically unavailable), often obsessively rub the satin of their 'blankie'. The British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott famously revered such soft and comforting things (a soft doll, a teddy, a blanket or even a cherished piece of string) as 'transitional objects'. These *first things* enable the child to make the transition from being one with the mother to being out in the world without her, to being split from her.

In other pictures, Teichmann's mother is dramatically fragmented: we see only the soft dough of her soft torso, with all the earmarks of having given birth, and her well-nursed breasts, or simply the beechnut of her armpit, revealing a slight bit of a hair, a downy nest unfinished.

This turned-away mother, this fragmented mother, like all mothers, does not answer our cry. She goes to work. She leaves us behind. She eventually leaves us for good.

This splitting between the mother and child is, then, tragically repeated later, with the same-shared intensity, between the adult and his or her lover. Like the mother, the lover also turns away. The lover does not answer our cry. The lover goes to work. The lover leaves us behind. The lover may leave us for good. And, just as the mother may have another child, the lover may find another one to love. (Every older child knows all about this, as does every betrayed lover.) To wait for a lover to return home is, as the French essayist and philosopher Roland Barthes has suggested, not unlike a child waiting for the mother. For Barthes, a pair of lovers is no more or less erotic and nourishing than the mother and child pair – nor is it any less of a catastrophe. In *A Lover's Discourse*, Barthes moans of such lost love as a maternalized 'amorous catastrophe':<sup>1</sup>

'... I shut myself in my room and burst into sobs: I am carried away by a powerful tide, asphyxiated with pain; my whole body stiffens and convulses: I see in a sharp, cold flash, the destruction to which I am doomed.... This is clear as a catastrophe ... an abrupt sexual rejection ... seeing oneself abandoned by the Mother....'<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, the photograph (as a moment severed from time, yet an object loved for holding time) is also an amorous catastrophe. (As Barthes writes in his famed treatise on photography *Camera Lucida*: 'In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder, like Winnicott's psychotic patient, *over a catastrophe which has already occurred*.'<sup>3</sup>) In Barthes' hands, every Photograph is umbilically connected to its Referent, every Photograph is a child severed from the Referent as mother. Photography for Barthes, for Teichmann, is a medium of love and loss.

Teichmann's images can be appealingly delicate, even powerfully weak, as in the shared breath (almost too quiet to hear, almost too quiet to see), rising and falling, as found in her *Drinking Air* (2007): it is as tender as the

delivery of a soufflé carried from oven to table. In French *soufflé* is breath, as made famous in Jean-Luc Godard's *À bout de souffle* (Breathless) (1960). The surprise of the subtle movement of the two bodies breathing in *Drinking Air* (here Teichmann's father and mother), suggests that all of the photographs in *Silently Mirrored* may also be breathing. I am reminded of Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), a film made entirely of stills taken with a Pentax 24 x 36 camera, save for the brief moment when the woman slowly blinks, comes alive. Looking and listening in *Silently Mirrored*, I become conscious of my own breath and feel at once resuscitated and asphyxiated. I feel the joy and fear of love, of life.

In *Drinking Air*, Father's head is seemingly being delicately birthed from between Mother's no-longer young legs. He is the elderly infant: too old to be born, just as St. Anne was too old to give birth to the Virgin. Teichmann's father has something a bit miraculous about him. But he does not leap in the womb (as John the Baptist did in St. Elizabeth's); he merely breathes a shallow breath. I think of Rachel Whiteread's *Shallow Breath* (1988), a cast of the space beneath the bed in which the artist was born that was made shortly after the death of her father.

Mother's soaking belly and breasts and Father's sleeping head and chest are nourishing each other, silently mirroring each other. Breaths of water. Drinks of breath. (In the womb, the foetus' chest subtly rises and falls as if breathing air, but its lungs are filled with fluid.) Here Teichmann's mother and father are a kind of 'nursing couple' (a funny term that Winnicott gave to the unweaned child and mother).<sup>4</sup> The two nurse each other's air in a kind of unconventional kiss or suckle. They lose themselves, if only for an instant. They are a grown-up version of Baldovineti's *Madonna and Child* (1465), Fig. 1.

According to Winnicott (and other psychoanalysts, including Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva), at the beginning of the infant's life he understands himself, or herself, to be one with the mother. The attentive mother understands this and gives into it, with pleasure. No compromises. No other desire than this. This fantastic sweet pleasure of being elsewhere, walled off, *enceinte* (that French word of Kristevan punning which means a protective wall around a town, but is also the *femme enceinte*, the pregnant woman<sup>5</sup>), keeps 'the nursing couple' afloat in the sweet odour of a symbiosis that lives to be aired. Baby omnipotence is the rule of the day (and night). The breast is 'under the baby's magic control'.<sup>6</sup> And not just the breast, for her face is also his mirror: his emotions, his needs, his very being is held steadfast in her face, her eyes, her very being. As Winnicott writes, 'The precursor of the mirror is the mother's face'<sup>7</sup> – the 'mother's role [is] ... giving back to the baby the baby's own self'.<sup>8</sup> It is this place of connectedness that Teichmann's work goes back to and forward to, just as Freud's young grandson threw a wooden spool on a string, back and forth, inventing his *fort/da* game in order to cope with his mother's absence. (The story is famously told in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.<sup>9</sup>) When the spool was close to him, he said a happy *da* for *there*, and when the spool was away, he said a sorrowful *fort* for *gone*. He imagined that he could control his mother's comings and goings, like a spool on a string.

Teichmann's photographs of her mother and her husband are a game of *fort/da*. Each image is the coming and going of a moment lost, held and returned; a mother lost, held and returned, a lover lost, held and returned. The camera, it turns out, is Teichmann's perfected transitional object.

Though created some 500 years before Winnicott's writing, the baby Christ with his mother Mary in Baldovineti's *Madonna and Child* illustrates the state of illusion of the infant's first days. On the seas of his mother's billowing lap, he floats high. A bobbing b(u)oy. Behind his soft head is the halo which marks his sinlessness and mirrors his mother's own nimbus. Mother and son: their haloes are circular mirrors, as are their faces, which reflect each other. Eye to eye, mirror to mirror, the two are bound together, immobilized by illusion (which is another name for love). It is as though Winnicott's words describe this image perfectly: 'There is no interchange between mother and infant [because there is no separateness there can be no exchanging, no following of one by another, only oneness] ... the infant takes from a breast that is part of the infant, and the mother gives milk to an infant that is part of herself'.<sup>10</sup>

Just as Teichmann's art can be as fragile as breath in *Drinking Air*, it can also be as appealingly strong as her husband's clench of muscular breast, as captured in the diptych (*Untitled* 2006) from her series *Stillend Gespiegelt*. The German word *stillend* means both breastfeeding, quieting and making still. Every photograph is a moment held still, not unlike a mother quieting her infant, holding her child still. The German word *gespiegelt* means mirrored, and suggests the physical stillness of both mother and child in the act of nursing, as the two concentrate on one another. Likewise, every photograph is a reflection, a mirror of what we see. (Early on photography was referred to as Daguerre's mirror.) *Stillend* and *gespiegelt*, then, are curious words given to us by Teichmann as a word-diptych. *Stillend Gespiegelt* manages to hold the essence of both nursing and photography.

Like Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, *Silently Mirrored* is a return to the womb, to the original home of mother and beyond. While searching for the perfect photograph of his recently deceased mother (the famed Winter Garden Photograph), Barthes begins with Boudinnet's pure blue Polaroid of a bed enclosed by curtains, and stops along the way at certain photographs, including Charles Clifford's *The Alhambra (Grenada)* (1854–56). This is Barthes' fantasy of a sublime image of Mother as home. This image of otherness, ('Arab decoration ... a Mediterranean tree'<sup>11</sup>), like Barthes' musings on Japan in *Empire of Signs*, or even Proust's mother-cake dipped in tea, which blossoms all of Combray, 'as in the game wherein the Japanese amuse themselves by filling a porcelain bowl with water and steeping in it little pieces of paper which ... the moment they become wet ... become flowers or houses or people',<sup>12</sup> hails the maternal as an image of escape, a place to travel to: backwards and towards. Barthes becomes a Baudelarian armchair traveler, moving spatially and temporally through the power of the photograph: 'a double movement which Baudelaire celebrated in *Invitation au voyage* and *La Vie antérieure*'.<sup>13</sup>

Both Baudelaire and Barthes conceive of a utopia that is driven by an unselfconscious nostalgia of womb memories that embrace a wild

Orientalism. When Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida*, 'I wanted to be a primitive, without culture',<sup>14</sup> or captions *The Alhambra (Grenada)* with 'I want to live there',<sup>15</sup> one hears Baudelaire's '*La Vie antérieure*'/'A Former Life', with the overt colonialist fantasy in hiding:

So there I lived, in a voluptuous calm  
Surrounded by the sea, by splendid blue,  
And by my slaves, sweet-scented, handsome, nude,

Who cooled my brow with waving of the palms,  
And had one care – to probe and make more deep  
What made me languish so, my secret grief.<sup>16</sup>

Longing to inhabit the maternity that Barthes sees, feels, when looking at *Alhambra*, the author confesses: 'a kind of second sight which seems to bear me forward to a utopian time, or to carry me back to somewhere in myself ... it is as if *I were certain* of having been there or of going there. Now Freud says of the maternal body that "there is no other place of which one can say with so much certainty that one has already been there".<sup>17</sup> As Winnicott plainly reminds us: 'Home is where we start from'.<sup>18</sup> And that first home is the body of the mother.

In *Untitled II* and *Untitled III*, both from *Exuberant Skin* (2007), Teichmann pictures her husband and her mother as embodying the same wild Orientalism that sweeps through the maternal longings of Baudelaire, Barthes and Proust. But Teichmann's is not a story of fantasy travel: both her husband's and her mother's bodies are places that she has inhabited. In *Untitled II*, we find her husband posed as if asleep, covering his head in a mirrored gesture of a Courbet odalisque: the light dances off his dark skin, just as Mapplethorpe would have liked it. Green leaves sprinkle the exotic overhead, emphasizing the cultural stereotype of the black body as recklessly natured: suggesting, perhaps, a tropical forest, a jungle, island otherness. Likewise, in *Untitled III*, we find her mother in the classic pose of an orientalist Ingres bather; her coiled hair suggests those Victorian photographs that fetishize women's tresses. Succulents surprisingly sprout behind Teichmann's mother as if she were posing for Henri Rousseau's *The Dream* (1910). (Because this photograph, and all of Teichmann's images of her mother, eroticize the older woman, it also shocks.) In Teichmann's hands, exuberant skin erotically pairs mother and lover.

Elsewhere, I have written about how Barthes' story of childish wonder is fed by a deep desire to find his mother (his beloved Henriette) in boxes of old photographs, as if he were a child lost in a crowd looking for Mother.<sup>19</sup> And how, as a result of her death, Barthes' hunger is nourished by the texture of that which might hold her: the Photograph. It is along these Maman lines that this standing woman in the 1926 Van der Zee photograph, whom Barthes hails in *Camera Lucida* as the '*ô négresse nouricière*', finds herself bumping up against the famed 1898 Winter Garden Photograph,<sup>20</sup> the image of Barthes' mother Henriette at age five, a picture we hear so much about, but never see. Both the Winter Garden Photograph and the Van der Zee 'Family Portrait' are the most significant keepers and feeders of punctum in the book. Punctum is a bruise. As

Barthes writes: 'A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me ...).'<sup>21</sup>

Both mother and blackness nourish *Camera Lucida*.

Both mother and blackness nourish *Silently Mirrored*. (But in Teichmann's hands it is without the racism that has been attributed to Barthes' text.)

Both Teichmann and Barthes know Mother as Lover and Lover as Mother. Both, one a young German heterosexual artist, the other a mature French gay intellectual, fear *her* departure and *his* departure. Teichmann's photographs of her husband (a young black man) and her parents (an older white man and white woman), nourish and hold the viewer still through breath, water, and an overall punch of black and blue.

The installation has an encompassing feeling of the womb, which I always imagine to be black and blue. I feel that I remember being inside the body of my mother, inside this first home, a 'dark continent' (Freud) in which no more could be seen than saturated blue-blacks, violet blue-blacks, and crimson blue-blacks, even when my not-yet born eyes of my not-yet born baby self were opened wide. My foetal ears heard the shallow breath of my mother. I remember. I remember the darkness, the amniotic semiotics of the velvetized, waterized sounds. I feel certain, well at least a dreamy certainty, that I even remember hearing a gentle crackling of my mother's bones while still inside.

Inside *Silently Mirrored* (which is not really silent, but is extremely quiet) I hear the soft breathing of shallow breath that unites the older man's rising and sinking belly to the female nude torso that replays Courbet's *Origin of the World* (1866). The film's torso is a real body whose pubis is not sexually fetishized, but rather is one that has that marks of actually having given life (sagging belly skin, breasts that have nursed). I see (in my mind's haptic eye) the touch of the woman's blue terry wash cloth as seen in *Untitled* (2005), from *Stillend Gespiegelt*.

In our heterosexually-rooted culture, the husband as lover is rarely taboo, but Teichmann's husband happens to be black. And the male black body, though entirely fetishized as photographic object in the white culture in which I live (whether it be in the world of sports, fashion, ethnography, pornography, advertising or art, categories that are hopelessly overlapped), is still taboo, as has been skillfully argued by Kobena Mercer.<sup>22</sup> But Teichmann's large, still, though sometimes moving pictures, if barely so, are not so much about the taboo of taking the mother as lover or taking the black man as lover (when you are a white woman), they are more than that: they are a theorized diptych of wounding nourishment. For the maternal body and the black body have long been wounded by the gifts they give: whether they give freely or in slavery or somewhere in between, where the categories become blurred. As Hélène Cixous has claimed, 'Really there is no free gift'.<sup>23</sup>

For Teichmann, the gift of life, the gift of love, both are wrapped in black and blue (umbilical) ribbons. Love is not free for the taking, but for Teichmann that is precisely the point. A point that leaves a bruise.

Biographies:

German/American artist Esther Teichmann was born in Germany in 1980 and moved to Britain in 1998. She received a Masters of Fine Art from the Royal College of Art in 2005, and continues to live and work in London. Teichmann's work has been internationally shown and published. She was listed among Art Review's top 25 new artists in 2005 and her work has been featured in Camera Austria, Capricious, Creative Review, Dazed&Confused, Hotshoe, i-D, V&A Magazine and Wallpaper amongst others. Teichmann is currently an MPhil/PhD by practice student in the fine art department at the Royal College of Art.

Carol Mavor is the author of three books: *Reading Boyishly: Roland Barthes, J. M. Barrie, Jacques Henri Lartigue, Marcel Proust, and D.W. Winnicott*; *Becoming: The Photographs of Clementina, Viscountess Hawarden and Pleasures Taken: Performances of Sexuality and Loss in Victorian Photographs*, all published by Duke University Press. Her work has been widely acknowledged and reviewed including by the New Yorker, the Times Literary Supplement and The Village Voice. Currently, she is finishing a novel entitled *Full*, and a slim film book entitled *Black and Blue*.

Notes:

1. Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), p.48. In French as *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil), p.60.  
2. Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, p.48. In French: *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, p.59.  
3. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), p.96. In French: *La Chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), p.150.

4. D. W. Winnicott, 'Further Thoughts on Babies as Persons' in *The Child, the Family, and the Outside World* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964), p.88.

5. Julia Kristeva, 'Motherhood According to Bellini' in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, edited by Léon Roudiez, translated by Alice Jardine, Thomas Gora and Léon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p.240. Originally published in French as 'Maternité selon Giovanni Bellini' in *Polylogue* (Paris: Seuil, 1977).

6. Winnicott, 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena' in *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock, 1970; reprint, London: Routledge, 1991), p.11.

7. Winnicott, 'Mirror-role of Mother and Family in Child Development' in *Playing and Reality*, p.111.

8. Winnicott, 'Mirror-role of Mother and Family in Child Development' in *Playing and Reality*, p.118.

9. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, translated and edited by James Strachey (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1961), p.13-15.

10. Winnicott, 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena' in *Playing and Reality*, p.12.

11. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.38. In French: *La Chambre claire*, p.66.

12. Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, Vol. I of *In Search of Lost Time*, translated by C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, revised by D. J. Enright (New York: Random House, 1992), p.64.

13. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 40. In French: *La Chambre claire*, p.68.

14. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 7. In French: *La Chambre claire*, p.20.

15. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 39. In French: *La Chambre claire*, p.67.

16. Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil* in French and English, translated by James McGowan with an introduction by Jonathan Culler (New York: Oxford

University Press, 1998), p.30-31.

17. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 40. In French: *La Chambre claire*, p.68.

18. Winnicott, *Home is Where We Start From* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986).

19. Carol Mavor, 'Roland Barthes's Umbilical Referent', in Richard Meyer, editor, *Representing the Passions: Histories, Bodies, Visions* (Santa Monica, California: Getty Research Institute, 2003). Also, *Reading Boyishly: J. M. Barrie, Roland Barthes, Jacques Henri Lartigue, Marcel Proust and D. W. Winnicott* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006).

20. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 43. In French: *La Chambre claire*, p.74. Richard Howard has translated 'ô négresse nourricière' as 'the "solacing Mammy"', with the careful addition of quotation marks around his all-out bang of 'solacing Mammy', suggesting his own bafflement of how to name the darkness of race as inflected by 'ô négresse nourricière'.

21. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 27. In French: *La Chambre claire*, p.49.

22. See for example his book *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994).

23. Hélène Cixous, 'Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays', in Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, translated by Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p.87. Originally published in French as 'Sorties' in Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *La Jeune née* (Paris: Union d'Éditions Générales, 1975).



Fig. 1. Alessio Baldovinetti, *Madonna and Child*, 1465 copyright 1999. Photo Musée Jacquemart-André/ Inst. de France/ Scala, Florence

# List of Plates

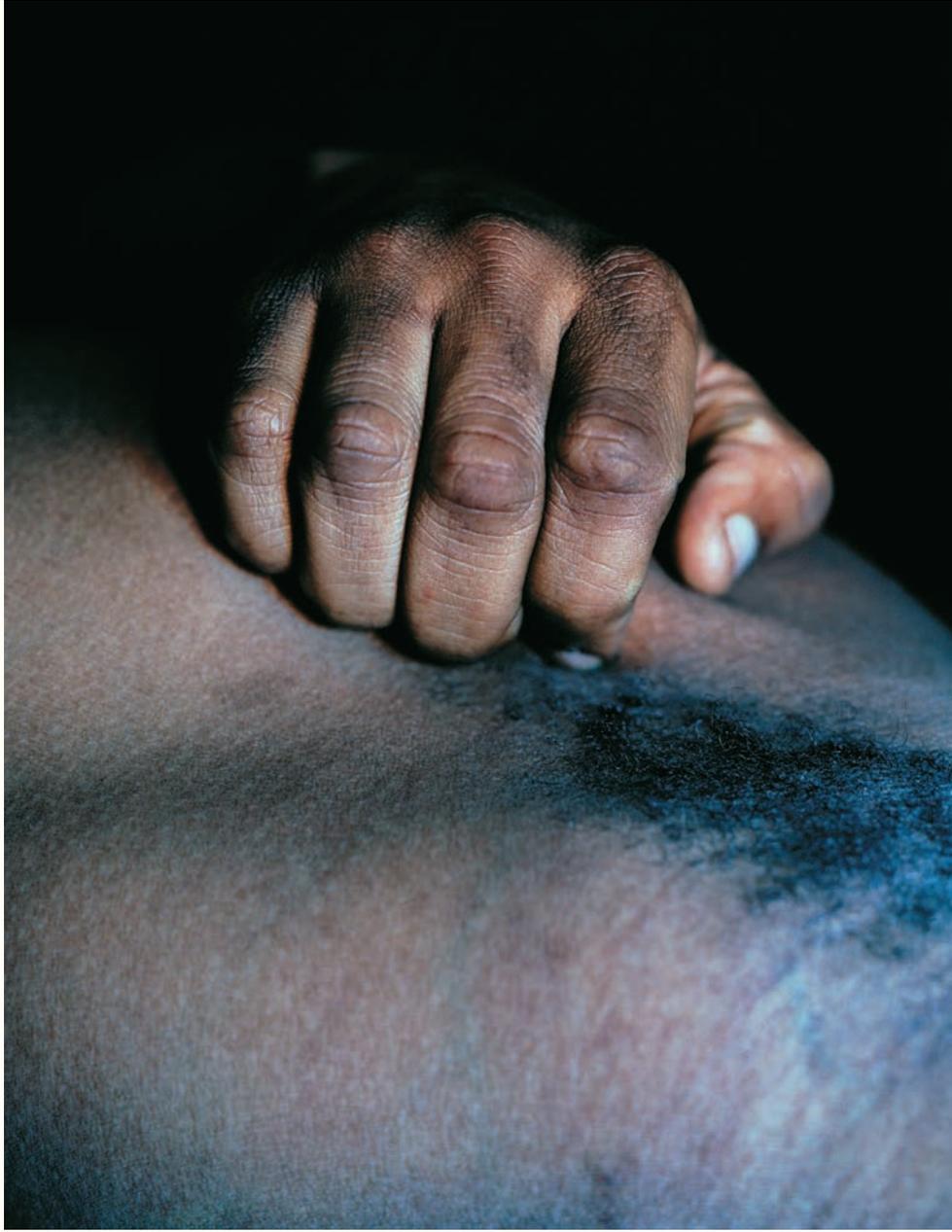
1.  
Untitled from  
*Stillend Gespiegelt* 2004  
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2.  
Untitled from  
*Stillend Gespiegelt* 2005  
20 x 24 inches
3.  
Untitled from  
*Stillend Gespiegelt* 2007  
40 x 30 inches
4.  
Untitled from  
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5.  
Diptych from  
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*Exuberant Skin* 2007  
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projection, 3 min loop























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