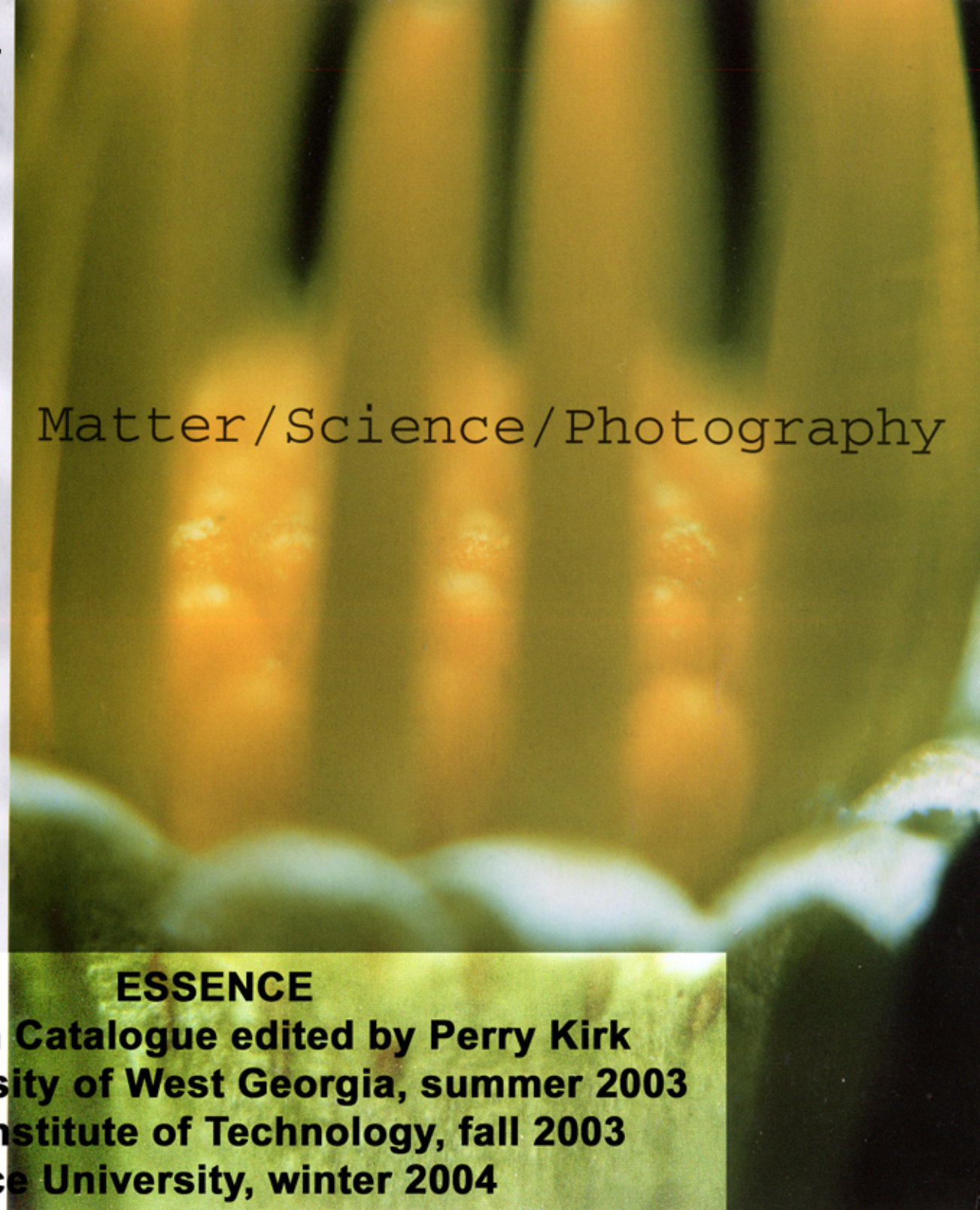
Kirk, Perry. *Essence: Matter/ Science/ Photography.* Carrollton, GA: University of West Georgia, 2003. pp. 1 - 2.

Essence: Matter/Science/Photography



ESSENCE

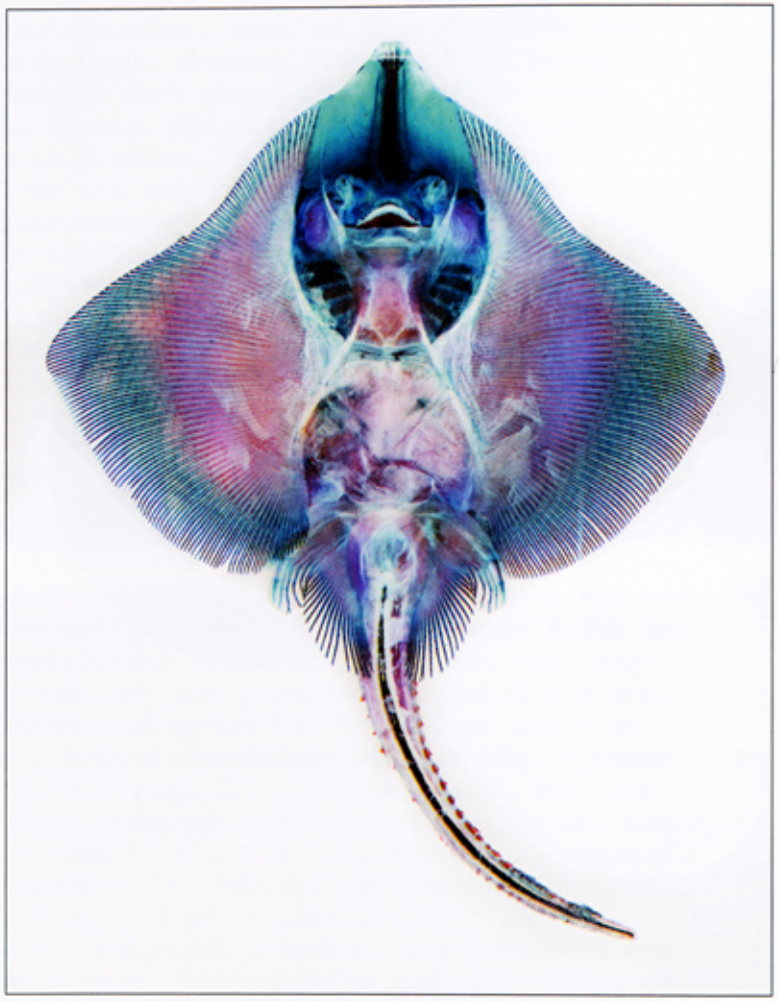
Exhibition Catalogue edited by Perry Kirk

State University of West Georgia, summer 2003

Georgia Institute of Technology, fall 2003

Pace University, winter 2004

Brandon Ballengee



Cleared and Stained Raja Species Skate
DFA 18 Cleared and Stained Multi-limbed Pacific Tree frog from Aptos, California
34" x 46" each
Iris Prints
2002

Introduction
Aside from the main premise for the exhibition, the artists share many other commonalities that are secondary but nonetheless important. The artwork in this catalogue was sequenced to emphasize some of those common points of interest.

Origins
As stated in the introduction, photography from its inception has had an inextricable link to science. Marshall and Sayre make direct reference to early photography because of that link to investigation. Sayre makes photograms which are the most basic, and arguably the earliest, form of photography. Marshall makes platinum/palladium prints from glass plate negatives. Beyond the conceptual reference however, the inconsistency of the process, the narrow depth of field in Marshall's images, and the subject matter of the images, all function as a hazy lens looking back in time to the origins of technology and science.

Faith Versus Empiricism
The beginnings of science-driven technology also signaled the beginning of the questioning of faith. Faith versus empiricism. Marshall, Nakada, and Gray address these contradictions in photography. The whole notion of *Essence* that inspired this exhibition implies that photography is capable, either through technique or concept, of depicting aspects of the physical world that are not fully explicable. Yet we are accustomed to regarding photographic images (and they are used in science for the very reason that they are regarded) as factual documents. Until the advent of digital imaging technology, photography had become so highly regarded, we had developed a kind of faith in the factual image.

Play and Discovery
Science is in part about curiosity and discovery. It is the same unbridled curiosity that is native to children. Formica and Sayre both specifically address the relationship between childhood play and scientific discovery. Many of Sayre's works include humor which, in part, disarms the seriousness of the fine art experience. But what it also allows is an unabashed enjoyment of the phenomenology presented in the work. Again, this is a trait that is native to children and has to be relearned by adults. Formica literally uses a child's toy as the optical device for her images. And while Sayre's images are more conceptual in their intentions, both artists are aware of the beauty in observation.

Data or Art
One of the primary motivations for this exhibition was to seek out artists that use image gathering methods that originated in the sciences, but are being applied to art production. Gray uses microscopic imagery of gland, blood, thyroid, pancreas, lung, and endocrine tissues because they directly refer to issues of genetics and our prejudices about types. O'Reilly uses electron micrography because of its ability to isolate elements down to the cellular level. This also provides her with a digital image, that can be manipulated in appearance and meaning. Ballengee uses a method known as clearing and staining in which a preserved specimen is treated in chemicals that literally digest it to a semi-transparent state. Then the specimen is submersed in biological dyes that adhere to specific tissues, such as cartilage or bone. In Ballengee's case, this method allows him to study the full anatomy of the organism and to try to understand at what point of development abnormal growth occurred.