

Everywoman's spa opera

GALLERY GOING
GARY MICHAEL DAULT

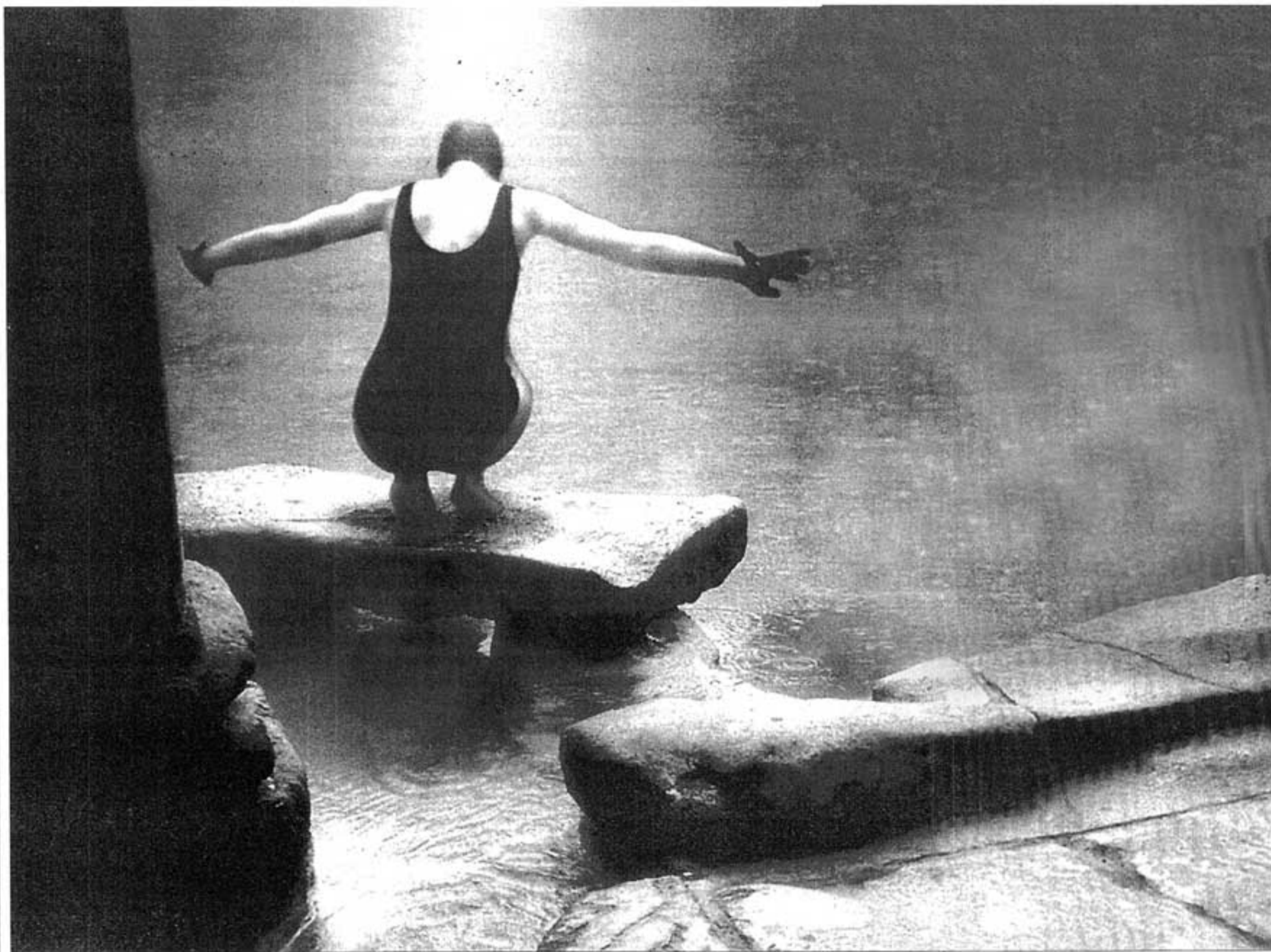
Flotation Devices, an ambitious photo-based installation by **Joan Kaufman**, an ex-Winnipegger now living and working in Toronto, is an archetypally rich and fecund study of the pivotal, vibrating edges in life where the body meets the psyche, where safety and familiarity sidle up to the vastness of the unknown, where each of us meets the otherness of things and must then decide how to take ourselves in hand.

This photographic morality play of Kaufman's, her epic foray into what she terms "constructed reality" — opening today at Toronto's **Red Head Gallery** — is set in the ancient Roman baths in Bath, England. Here, captured in vast, water-colour-soft, black-and-white giclée prints, where the wet stone arches of the baths have marinated in 2,000 years of mineralized steam, a solitary woman, dressed in a black bathing suit and cap, takes the waters.

And not just any waters, either, but waters that, as Red Head's director Daniel Baird so eloquently puts it in the exhibition's catalogue, "have the burnt, metallic reek of the underworld's hot rivers." This water, Baird continues, "is heavy, saturated, smouldering black ink, and the drifting wisps of steam rising off it are ghostly."

In one of Kaufman's photographs, one that works as a sort of overture to her entire spa opera (*Series 4, #1*), her protagonist perches, arms outstretched, on a time-softened stone bench, about to take the plunge, or not. Indeed, in most of the photographs this same woman — who, by the way, was photographed in the artist's studio and has been cunningly introduced digitally into the bath environment — hesitates like this, perpetually on the brink of immersion, of commitment to the deep, of transformation from one state to the other.

That's where the flotation devices of the exhibition's title come



An image from *Flotation Devices*, by Joan Kaufman: a photographic morality play set in the ancient Roman baths of Bath, England.

in. For in most of the photographs, Kaufman's Everywoman hangs from and is restrained by a harness, by which she is suspended over the dark waters, her withholding of herself amplified by the presence, on her body, of white floats.

The harness and the flotation devices will prevent her from entering the water — or, if she does enter it, they will keep her from drowning.

But they will also, at the same time, deny her a certain kind of totalizing experience. "Human beings need flotation devices," Baird writes, "because we want to rise and float and fly and cannot, because it is our nature to fall and sink." Baird points out, too, that despite the harness (for floating in air) and the floats (for floating in water), Kaufman's spa-woman is "not so much floating as not falling."

And so, in photo after photo, she is shown in mid-air, turning in falling shafts of transcendental light, or reaching down, in a gesture poignant with yearning, to the water from above, or bobbing like a puppet enclosed, stage-like, by a wet stone niche.

There are even a few highly abstracted photographs (such as *Series III, #10*) where the woman-bather is stretched through the tubular interior of a strange,

ribbed, boat-like structure, bathed in a sourceless radiance, as if her dialogue with water and the space above it had synthesized, in the end, into some consummation, even a kind of apotheosis.

\$800-\$2,500. Until June 19, 401 Richmond St. West, Suite 115, Toronto; 416-504-5654.