

Stained: an intimate look at Joan Kaufman's Watermark Series

by Bridget Indelicato

Joan Kaufman loves to shoot. She captures uncountable images with her camera in her studio and on location, and then begins to commit to a precious few in the darkroom. In her *Watermark Series*, a single, female figure, face always turned away, is submerged in water, wearing a soft white gown, her skin stained. Presented as an adjunct to the larger photo-based installation *Sure Sign*, Kaufman's mini series gives us an up-close, cropped view of a wet world of impending danger, seduction and especially of hope.

Watermark, as in *Sure Sign*, is Kaufman's personal response to larger worldly issues that are hard to escape. The Toronto-based artist shares in her project description that contemporary political, social and environmental

harsh realities warn us of our fragility, and the staining of skin in this work becomes a metaphor for dangerous times ahead. Water, which frames each figure, signifies the unknown and power to heal. As a whole, these works present us with a "cautionary tale" and inspire us to become more aware of our uncertain world.

Presented like the conclusion of an untold fable, *Watermark* shows us the aftermath of what seems to be a flood. This project is a continuation of her earlier works which are set in the ancient Roman baths of Bath, England, where the water rises but a lone, swimming-capped figure is somewhat safely perched above it. Now, the water is more aggressive, filling the edges of each

photo credit: Joan Kaufman



Joan Kaufman, *Watermark Series #1*, 2004, photo-based digital output on Museo fine art paper, size W 64 cm x H 53 cm

print, penetrating the figure; her arms and back are soaked and marked with dark stains reminiscent of a skirt hem dragged through a dirty puddle. Kaufman achieved this staining by literal means: she hand painted organza with India ink, wet the fabric, molded it over her model's limbs and back, and then digitally enhanced the marks to her desired effect.

While black-and-white photographs digitally printed onto heavy watercolour paper are the material we are presented with in the final product, sculpture and fabric play a vital role in the making of Kaufman's work. An accomplished sculptor, she creates all costumes her model wears and props she encounters. She enjoys the process of physically working with these tactile materials as much as she loves creating her photographs. The white, institutional gowns worn in *Watermark* are intentionally nondescript, simple and ambiguous as to their context. Are we witnessing a hospital patient? An inmate? Further speculation comes when in one image the figure wears a white head wrap, now pushing the viewer to consider a historical reference. Again, context and time are hard to pin down, as intended.

The murky, tragedy-marked world presented in this work also holds beauty and seduction. Although the figures at times appear lifeless, their limbs are gestural, the fabric soft and touchable. Her work is strongly influenced by contemporary dance and theatre: the graceful gestures and staging of her characters in intricately crafted sets. She overlaps sharp and blurry images, resulting in warm, ephemeral dreamscapes. Kaufman loves to make beautiful work – at times a dangerous adjective to use in the art world as it connotes frivolity and decoration. But in Kaufman's work, beauty is used as a powerful tool to draw viewers in and hold them, more so than would images that are hard to look at. She chose to print *Watermark* on a smaller scale than most of her other work and to present it frameless to allow greater intimacy with the viewer. Her images get under your skin, creating a push-pull effect where seduction and repulsion are simultaneously at play.

And then there is hope. To escape darkness and interject humanness into the world's events, hope must be signified. Kaufman skillfully, and subtly, introduces light into her work. Without the drama of spiritual intervention, a warm glow appears as though through a break in the clouds or sun filtered through a crack. Light gently reflects in the water and moves over the folds of fabric and the pale, stained skin. Rather than a bleak ending to a mysterious tragedy, we are offered the opening to a new chapter ahead.



photo credit: Joan Kaufman

Joan Kaufman, *Watermark Series #2*, 2004, photo-based digital output on Museo fine art paper, size W 53 cm x H 63 cm

Joan Kaufman is a Toronto-based artist who has exhibited both nationally and internationally. Her artistic practice includes sculptural installation work and large-format photo-based installations, which explore the blurred boundaries between reality and illusion. She will be exhibiting *Sure Sign* and *Watermark* in spring 2006 at The Red Head Gallery in Toronto, ON. For further information, visit www.joan Kaufman.com.

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