

## DESIRE FOR MAGIC: PATRICK NAGATANI 1978–2008

UNM ART MUSEUM  
I UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO, ALBUQUERQUE

### “My work is a never-ending

search for magic,” Patrick Nagatani says. This retrospective proves that the artist has found the magic he seeks—again and again, in ever-changing forms—throughout thirty years of his remarkable career. Nagatani’s wizardry is apparent in his creation of new worlds that are fantastic but almost plausible, one step removed from the “real” one. Big Macs and cigarette packs hang suspended in a Manhattan subway car, sent airborne by the detonation of the Bomb—yet the visible filaments these cultural artifacts hang from signal that some puppeteer is pulling the strings. We viewers are jolted into an out-of-body perspective until our own truths are suspended.

On opening night of this retrospective, the newly renovated museum pulled in nearly one thousand visitors—evidence of Nagatani’s considerable following. Also launching was the beautifully produced two-hundred-sixty-page book *Desire for Magic*, edited by curator Michele Penhall, with essays by Penhall and six other writers. With one hundred and one images from seven bodies of work, this exhibition lets Nagataniphiles examine the actual prints of images we had until now seen only in books: the true pigments, the scale and surface, the exacting detail, the elements of fact and fiction.

The show begins with the *Nagatani/Tracey Polaroid Collaborations*, in which Nagatani and painter Andrée Tracey explore society’s fear of nuclear annihilation, capturing the precise moment of apocalypse. *Nuclear Enchantment* investigates New Mexico’s marriage to the nuclear industry. The *Ryoichi/Nagatani Excavations* spin the yarn of Nagatani and the Japanese explorer Ryoichi, who unearth luxury cars in sacred sites. *Chromotherapy* updates the ancient technique of treating illness with colored light. The show’s most recent works are the *Tape-estries*, which are paintings, often of Buddhist bodhisattvas, made with perfectly cut and layered brushstrokes of masking tape.

The exhibition also highlights two lesser-known bodies of work. In the *Japanese American Concentration Camps* series, Nagatani searches for the concrete details of his parents’ and grandparents’ experiences of incarceration in these camps. The *Novellas* are multimedia collaged vignettes addressing subjects like sex, relationships, and body image. Although the *Novellas* are intriguing and cryptic, I would have liked more wall space dedicated to the pure brilliance of the *Collaborations*, of which only four appear, versus the twenty-odd *Novellas*.

A retrospective allows viewers to trace themes throughout an artist’s entire *oeuvre*. Here, the

most obvious theme is documentary versus fiction. The *Collaborations*’ mini-apocalypses are fiction, but their truth still cuts to the bone today. *Nuclear Enchantment* is a hybrid of documentary (shot at hotspots like the Trinity Site) and manipulation through suspended props, assemblage, and radioactive colors. The *Excavations* attempt to prove a fictional story through the fabrication of supporting details. *Chromotherapy* is a mockumentary about the health industry, while the *Camps* are straight documentary—a departure, but one that fits its somber subject matter.

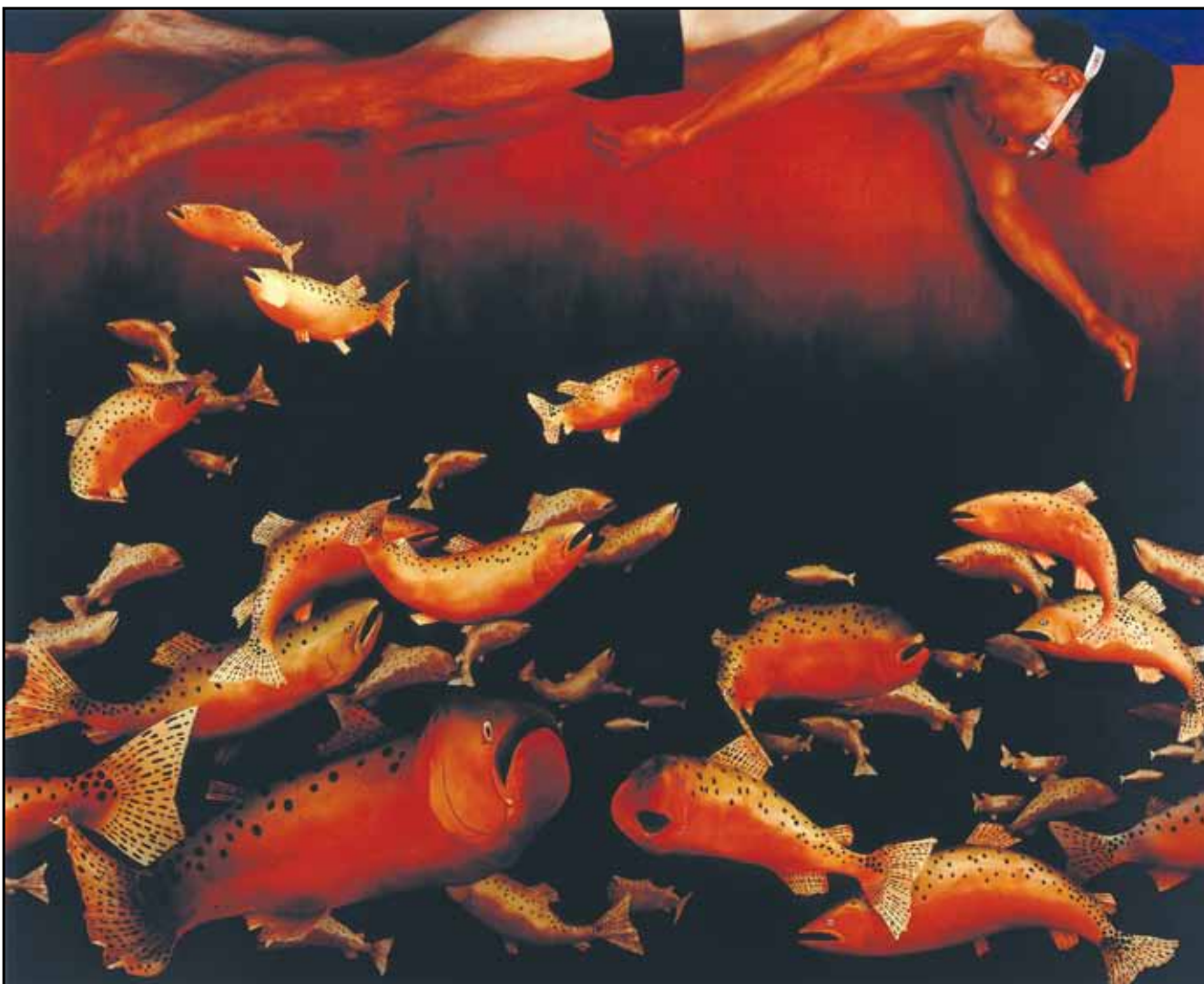
There’s also a thread of memoir about Nagatani’s Japanese-American identity. In his early works, he makes fun of Japanese tourists zealously taking Polaroid snapshots—but the scattering Polaroids depict mushroom clouds, referencing the tragic legacy of Hiroshima (Nagatani was born just thirteen days after the bombing). He searches for echoes of his family history in the concentration camps and explores his ancestral language through his alter ego, Ryoichi. The artist himself appears in a startling, courageous *Chromotherapy* portrait of his changed body following his bout with cancer. And Nagatani, who was raised Catholic, says that through the materials, process, and subject matter of the *Tape-estries*, he has come to embrace Zen Buddhism. Another theme is the role of the photographer and the photograph. Though he snaps the shutter, Nagatani often appears inside the photo, sometimes twice, watching himself be photographed. He surveys the scene of an H-Bomb accident, the shadow of his camera on his back, staring at a photograph within another photograph. Both the photographer and viewer are witnesses to a real-life government conspiracy.

For Nagatani, each photograph is not just the clicking of the shutter, but the climax of a narrative arc. His work has the sculptural quality of installation, employing cutouts, painted props, and meticulously constructed miniatures as elements in elaborate dioramas. The *Tape-estries* are singular, dimensional handmade objects. Color plays an important role: In the early works, brilliant color symbolizes radioactive toxicity and evokes foreboding, whereas in *Chromotherapy*, diffused color serves as a literal agent of healing, referencing photography’s ability to heal.

Only one element doesn’t seem to fit. *Nuclear Enchantment* began as a collaboration with the writer Joel Weishaus, and this show exhibits Weishaus’s prose poems. However, it’s apparent why this is only the second time the poems have made the curatorial cut. Unlike the photographs, they’re not fully realized works of art, and their idiom—a collision of obscure multisyllabic words requiring pages of explanatory paratext in the book—actually distracts from the photographs. Nagatani’s prints say far more in a spare and immediately accessible visual language.

But that’s a minor complaint about an important show that photography lovers shouldn’t miss. Nagatani is an artist who reinvents himself with each new body of work, bringing fresh innovation to each new quest for magic.

—KRISTIN BARENSEN



Patrick Nagatani, *El Nadador/Nacimiento*, Ilfocolor Deluxe print, 28" x 36", 1993