

Al McWilliams / BETWEEN PROXIMITY AND DISTANCE

The images I use come from a variety of places: some are found, some are of my own making. Some are images of represented worlds—stills taken off films, of architectural structures—and others are photographs of people who are close to me. Each image has a particular appeal or meaning for me and at times that meaning or value is not entirely clear until I start working with it, until I put several images into a space where they can relate to each other. But I put them into that space because, from the beginning, I have a sense that there exists a prior relationship between them. And quite often when the images have been put into a play of relations what results both exceeds and falls short of anything that could be called my own intentions.

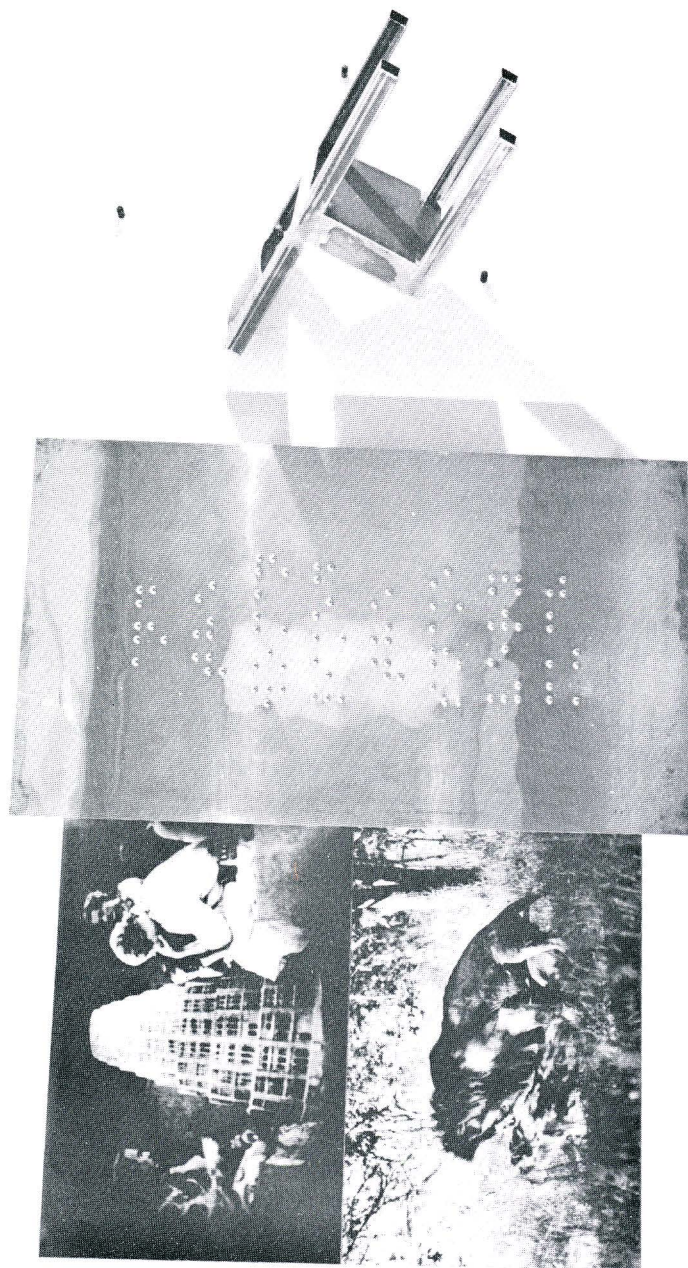
The images in my work are not essentially different from the other materials I use. I don't want to draw particular attention to the image as such but rather try to orchestrate *all* the materials in a way that no single element assumes priority over any of the others. A piece of lead, its surface, can carry as much information or weight as a photograph of my son's face. What interests me is the connective tissue between the materials, all of which have their own histories of use, of value and of meaning. I like to use materials that bring with them complex stories so that when they are put together they generate the possibility of layered readings.

I use braille because its materiality as a writing system is so obvious and palpable. One's involvement with braille is primarily physical. You have to use your body, your fingers, to read it. It is a sculptural or spatial writing system and I am interested in finding out what happens when that system of writing is enlarged as it is on my panels, where it is still visually recognizable as braille text, but where it also becomes an abstract sculptural component to be apprehended independent of its function as a meaning carrier.

When I have used images of the human body (my son's legs, or the portrait of Simonette Vespucci) I have done so in order to displace in some way our habitual ways of apprehending gendered images—in order to look at the ways I have been looking at the

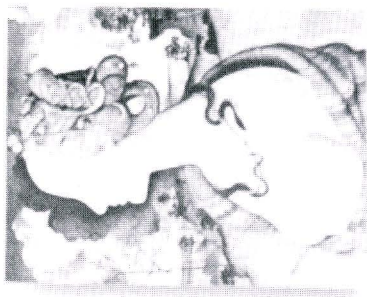
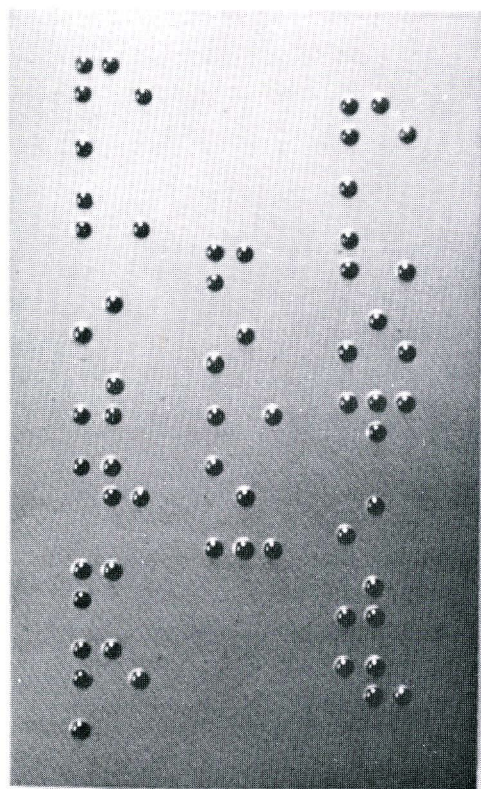


body. When you look at something you are always implicated in the something that you look at. You cannot separate the self that scrutinizes from the self that hides. In my view, you are both inside and outside of the thing you observe. In the case of the photo of Mathew's legs with the drawings of the chairs, I am simultaneously very far removed (when I suggest the materiality and structural shape of his legs vis-à-vis the materiality of the concrete in front of which they are posed and vis à vis the two chairs) and very close (when I suggest their vulnerability, the tenderness of the backside of my son's knees). This play between flesh and furniture, between proximity and distance is present in most of my pieces and can translate, I think, to a level where the viewer is equally involved in such a movement. The pieces can draw the viewer into a close or intimate relationship, and what will be seen there will be quite different from what can be seen at some remove. I don't mean this in the obvious sense of seeing detail up close and seeing comprehensively from a distance. What I am trying to get at is the sense of understanding intimacy from a distance or distance from a point of view of intimacy.

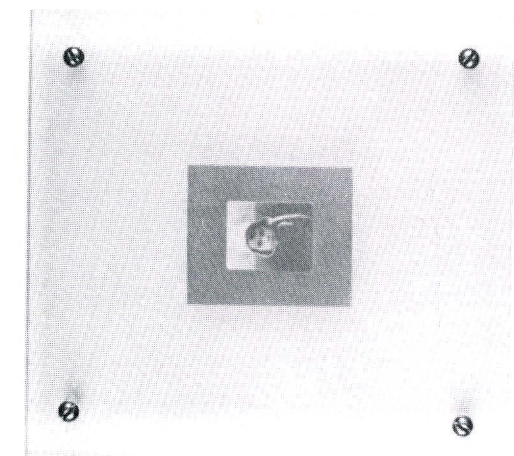


No Title, 1987. Photographs, copper, steel, glass, 7' x 14'.
Braille: "and the woman liked the snake very much".

Photo: Peter McCallum



"*And the Man...*", 1987. Steel, jade, photograph, 16" x 44". Braille: "and the man liked the woman very much".



No. 1988. Photograph, glass, silver leaf on lead, 14½" x 35".

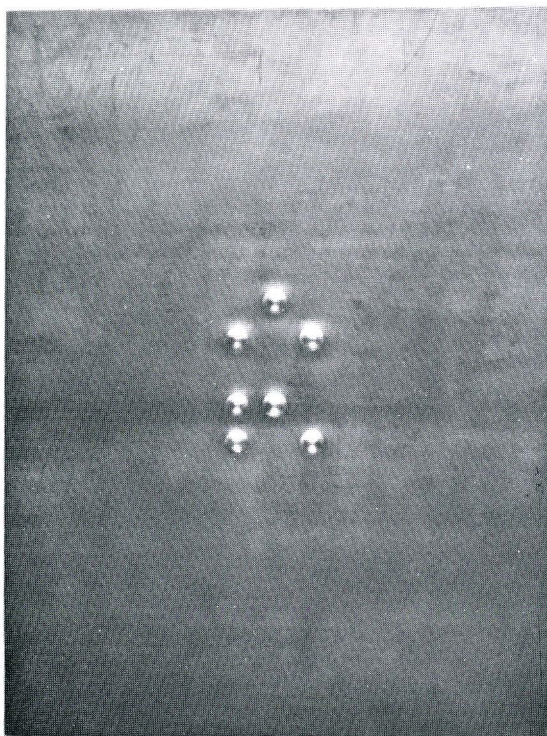
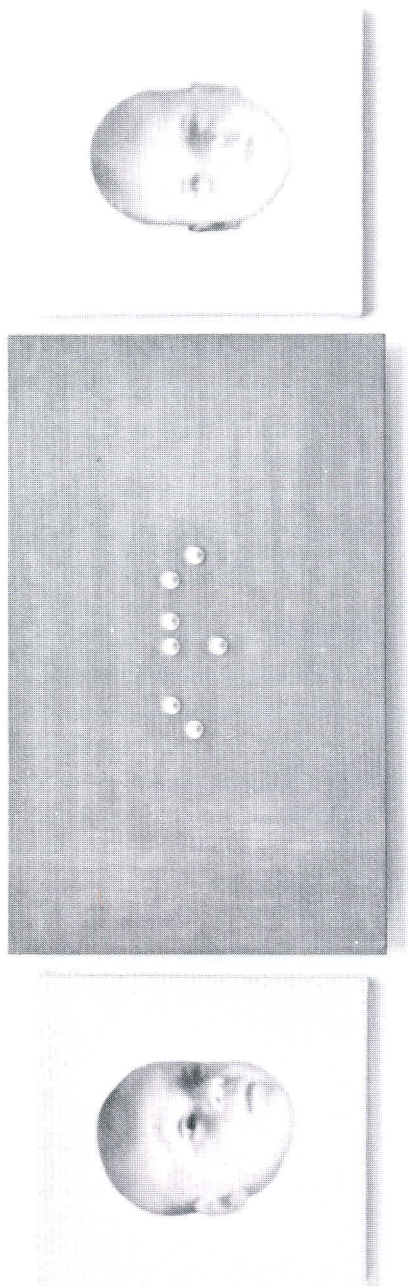


Photo: William Cupit



I/Me, 1989. Beeswax over photographs, silver leaf on lead, 16" x 54".

Photo: William Cupit