

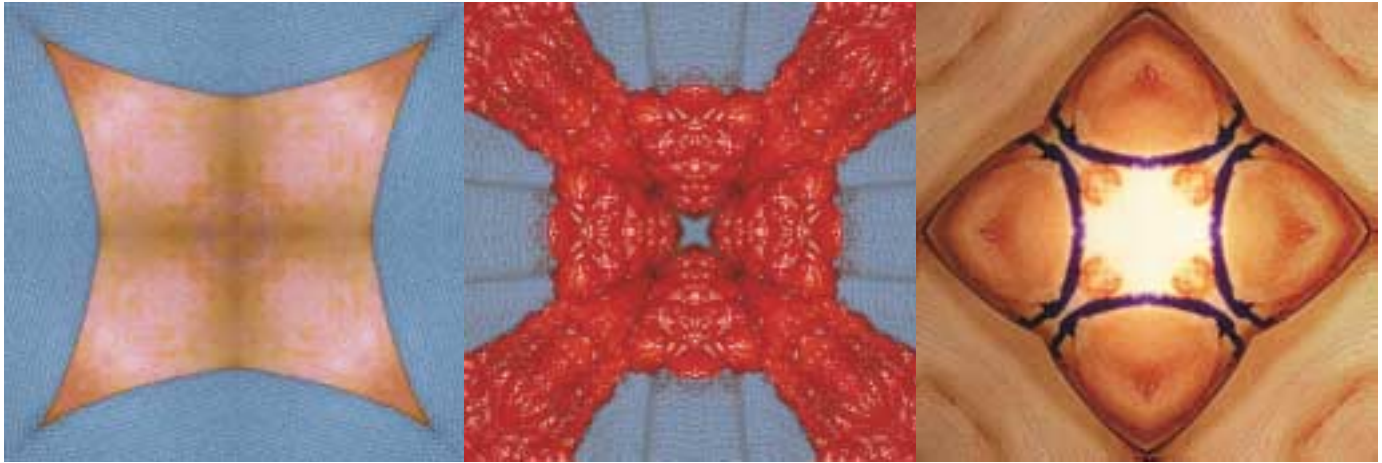
Underflesh:

Exploring Human Fragility and Resilience



A mixed media installation by Kathryn Nobbe





2003, photographic digital prints on paper, 30" x 30"

Art, Spirit, Community: New Work by Kathryn Nobbe

During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, images associated with the mortality of the flesh and the cycle of life and death formed the central subjects of art. On display in churches and chapels throughout Europe and Byzantium, images of violent martyrdoms of saints, miraculous healings and resurrections illustrated sacred events at the same time that they presented viewers with scenes that suggested their own experiences of suffering with serious illness and encounters with death and dying. The images of suffering which appeared in the great altarpieces of the past were accompanied by messages of hope and renewal and served as a medium for the relief of suffering and sometimes helped in the healing process.

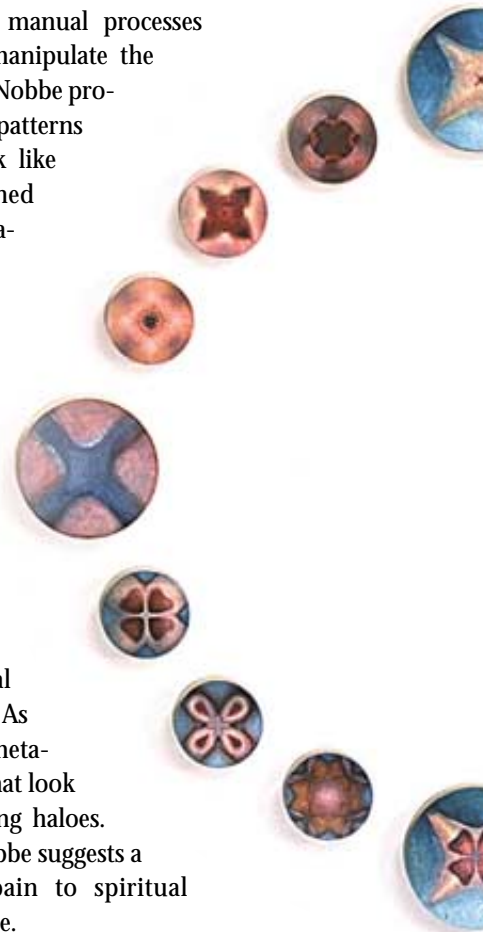
Although the specific subject of Kathryn Nobbe's work is secular — she works with images documenting her breast cancer surgeries — and her visual vocabulary is thoroughly modern, many of her aesthetic goals recall those of earlier times. In her digital photography, painting, mixed media and installation, Nobbe presents meditations on her own encounter with deadly disease as well as her appreciation of the mysteries of life's renewing forces and the interconnectedness of all things. Indeed, in this exhibition Nobbe weaves together a series of seemingly appositional concepts — science and spirituality, life and death, individual and community — which like the sacred art of the past presents the universal through the particular to forge a bond between the single individual and the larger community.

Nobbe's core imagery originates in a series of photographic slides that the artist persuaded her surgeon to take during the progress of her mastectomy surgeries. These photographs document the way that surgery translates and transforms her body into cut skin, bits of flesh and biopsy specimens. Nobbe reconfigures these visceral and disturbing documents into contemplative, even pleasing images. Using computer graphics in

combination with traditional manual processes like painting and collage to manipulate the original photographic sources, Nobbe produced gorgeous kaleidoscopic patterns of color and texture that look like snowflakes or medieval stained glass windows, and which paradoxically register the disturbing matter of their making while encouraging in the viewer a state of transcendence and well being. *Kaleidoscope I-XVIII*, a series of large photographic digital prints opens with fragmented glimpses of blue surgical blankets, bloody human tissue, plastic medical implements and sutures, which speak of the painful physical aspects of the artist's surgery. As the series unfolds the patterns metamorphose into bursts of light that look like sacred mandalas or glowing haloes. With this abstract narrative Nobbe suggests a progression from physical pain to spiritual awareness, from despair to grace.

Nobbe presents a sequence of abstractions in *Corpus I-VII* which relate as much to the artist's concern with the body as interest in paint, form, color and texture. In the initial images of the sequence one glimpses the silhouette of a breast, an incision, the vague outline of a bandage. As the series progresses the designs become increasingly non-representational as the

2002, oil paint and m
overall size



artist explores the formal arrangement of the compositions and the relationships between the droplets of paint. As Nobbe works she says that analogies form between individual droplets of paint, and the cells and molecules that make up the tissue of her body. These purely abstract works are then at once formal studies in color, shape, and space, and Nobbe's poetic vision into the substance of her own body.

Kaleidoscopic designs drawn from the slides of her surgeries appear as well in the round canvases that constitute the outer circle of the *Mandala* (Word Path), an interactive installation inspired by an online thesaurus developed by Plumb Design*. With this piece Nobbe invites viewers to investigate the plethora of subtle meanings connected to just about any word.

Mandala



detail

Viewers type a word into the computer terminal located in the gallery and watch related words cluster around it on the visual display at the center of the wall installation. Each word provided by the viewer serves as a kind of portal into the intricate web of linguistic significance, visually demonstrating the rich path of knowledge hidden within the words we often use unself-consciously in our daily communications. *Mandala* works collaboratively with the audience; the piece changes with the addition of each viewer's word selection, responding to

interests of the community of viewers in addition to expressing her individual concerns.

Connecting with others and incorporating aspects of real

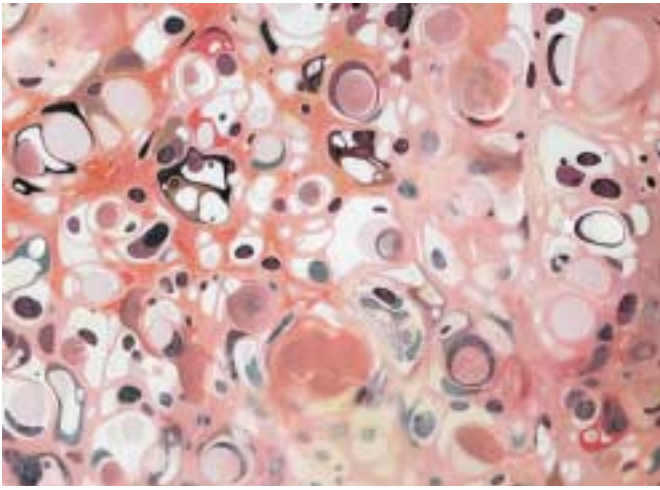
experience into her art motivate many aspects of Nobbe's approach, a fact that is born out in her Video Booth installation. In the years that she has been working with imagery related to her cancer diagnosis Nobbe has heard many stories of illness from her viewers who are frequently compelled after seeing her work to recount their own stories of struggles with illness or the loss of a loved one to disease. Recognizing that many of her viewers would like to share their stories, Nobbe acknowledges the possible therapeutic function and political significance of voicing these narratives. Accordingly, she designed a video booth for this exhibition, which records viewers' stories and projects the footage on a small video screen outside the booth. In this piece the memories and thoughts of her audience are woven into the exhibition.

Inspiration for Nobbe's Two Hundred Prayer Cards comes from her knowledge of the historical and present-day uses of devotional cards. Originally handmade and often elaborately decorated with religious imagery, lace and decorative borders, devotional cards have been used for centuries in children's religious education, exchanged as gifts and used to remember special events. Drawn to the social and memorial aspects of their use, Nobbe initiated a community project to produce her own secular version of these cards for use in her artwork. Each card features an abstract digital design drawn from the flowers the artist received while in the hospital and during her convalescence following surgery. After designing the pattern for the border of the cards, Nobbe invited women and girls from her circle of friends, family, neighbors, and even her hospital and clinic to participate in producing the decorative borders in a traditional paper pricking process called ornare. Nobbe wrote directions, provided materials, hosted training sessions, and together with her collaborators, has produced the 200 cards which make up this installation. Like the original holy cards, which are sometimes used to commemorate funerals, baptisms and weddings, participants dedicated their card to someone or something. Many dedicated their cards to friends and family members who have died or have been diagnosed with an illness, while others considered the process a form of prayer or meditation. Some simply used it as a way of sending positive energy to another person. Weaving together the thoughts and sentiments of all those who dedicated the cards, this installation is the visual manifestation of a powerful communal prayer.

is an art historian and independent curator. She teaches art history and critical studies at the
Patricia Briggs *Minneapolis College of Art and Design.*

ed media on canvas,
54" x 54"

Corpus VI



2002, oil paint and mixed media 11" x 8"

Over the years Ms. Nobbe has received awards and commissions from Forecast Public Artworks, the Jerome Foundation, the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, and Robert Rauschenberg's foundation, Change Inc.. Most recently, she was awarded the Minnesota State Arts Board Artist Fellowship (2002), a McKnight Artist Fellowship (2001-2002) and a fellowship from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation (2000). Her work is represented by Dolly Fiterman Fine Arts in Minneapolis, and her paintings and drawings are in numerous public and private collections in the United States and abroad.

Ms. Nobbe makes her home in St. Paul, Minnesota with her husband Fritz Bergmann, a composer, and her sons Hardt and Colin.

Artist's Bio Kathryn Nobbe is a painter and mixed media artist based in St. Paul, Minnesota where she earned her MFA in Studio Arts from the University of Minnesota. She was awarded a scholarship to the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture where she studied with Connie Fox, Leon Golub, William King, Jacob Lawrence, Judy Rifka and Terry Winters.

Ms. Nobbe has created a number of public artworks including a large-scale outdoor mural for the Pillsbury House in Minneapolis, which involved a unique dialogue and collaboration with the local community. Other projects include a set design for the new music opera *Mirabell's Book of Numbers*, by composer Marjorie Hess and writer James Merrill and a "painting performance" in collaboration with composer Homer Lambrecht and the Anicia Quartet. She also produced a series of paintings for Eugene Garber's award-winning novel, *The Historian*, published by Milkweed Editions.

Corpus III



detail 2002, oil paint and mixed media 11" x 8"

Thanks To *This exhibition is launched with support from **Dolly J. Fiterman**, Owner/President of Dolly Fiterman Fine Arts, Minneapolis. As lead sponsor, Dolly's compassion for the subject matter and generous spirit are a perfect beginning for this traveling exhibition.*

Special Thanks

Due to space limitations, please see supplement for a complete list of generous in-kind donations by numerous individuals and businesses.

*The premiere installation of **Underflesh: Exploring Human Resilience and Fragility** by Kathryn Nobbe has been brought to fruition through the collaboration of the Catherine G. Murphy Gallery and the Centers of Excellence for Women and Health at the College of St. Catherine.*

On Cover: *Two Hundred Prayer Cards*, detail 2003, mixed media on paper