

Infanta Projects and Princess Mysteries



DEBORAH FORBES 1999-2005

Background:

“My purpose is to tell of bodies which have been transformed into shapes of a different kind.”

Ovid (Publicus Ovidus Naso; 43 BC - 17 AD) The Metamorphosis.

My fascination with the Diego de Silva Velasquez paintings of the *Infanta Margarita* started when I was a child. My sister and I used to make drawings of princess dresses to use on paper dolls. I must have seen a reproduction of the *Infanta* in a book and looked no further into the origin of the image than the golden curls and elaborate dress. My sister and I wondered how she'd get around in a dress like that, were glad we didn't have wear one like it everyday, but were fascinated with the opulence. However hampering it would be to wear, it worked beautifully in two dimensional paper cut outs.



I didn't see *Las Meninas* until I was a few years older, recognized the princess dress immediately and wondered, again, how on earth she would play with her dog or her dwarfs. I hoped the dress was left to stand on it's own for the long sittings with Velasquez. Maybe the Infanta was allowed to run off with her dog while the dress just stood there, supported by its farthingale?

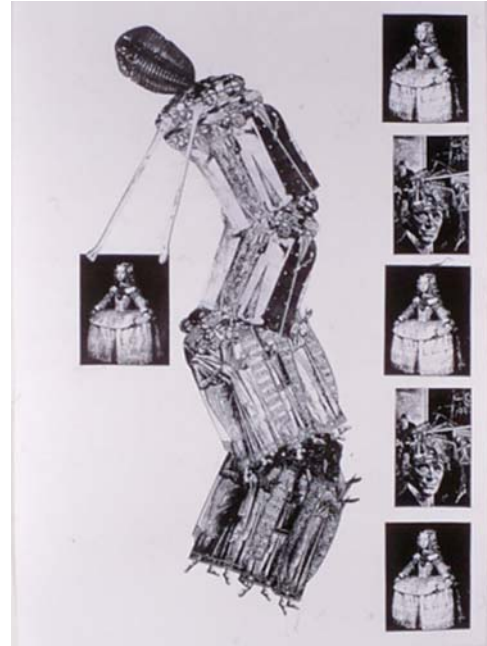
The *Infanta* has threaded her way through my life. I studied Velasquez in art history courses and became only superficially aware of the significance of *Las Meninas*. Over the course of many years the painting keeps revealing its mysteries to me. I continue to learn from it.

I have worked with children and art for the last twenty years. I periodically ask five year olds to draw a princess. Almost without exception, male and female alike, the drawing will be of a figure with long wavy hair and a long gown that juts out at an unlikely angle from the waist. Most of the five year olds will not have seen the Velasquez portraits, but somehow, the visual information from this period has persisted. The image has infiltrated an entire cultural memory bank of northwestern hemisphere people. Our contemporary 'little princesses' on the child beauty pageant circuit have abbreviated the gown to the knee length instead of the floor, but the extreme contour endures. It seems to be about excess - excess of material, excess of hip width but when one looks beneath the dress there's more to it. If I show five year olds a reproduction of the Velasquez *Infanta* and ask who is it, the instant answer is, "a princess."

In a previous body of work, *Degrees of Extinction*, I had been dealing with images and ideas that involved time, transformation and the first Law of Thermal Dynamics: Energy is neither created nor destroyed but simply transformed from one state to another. On one piece, I scraped two marks into a previously painted surface. These horizontally mirrored, slightly curved marks were so shockingly recognizable as the upper edge of the skirt of the *Infanta's* farthingaled dress, I had no choice about the direction the piece demanded to go. I then did several more pieces constructing the *Infanta* contour from collaged art historical and fossil images.



I had been reading about mathematician, Henri Poincare, friend and influence of Marcel Duchamp in his art/math/science links. Poincare is thought to have laid the foundation for modern chaos theory. Of particular interest to me is his notion of the 'unconscious sieve' that chooses from random ideas formed and reformed by colliding molecules within the mind. The mental choices that appear as sudden illuminations are often the simplest part that allows us to comprehend the whole. His idea of the 'whole' being evident in the right selection of a 'part' seems to be constantly connecting to the work I am doing on the transformation of matter and images.



I used collaged photocopies of trilobites, coelecanthes and figure groupings from Moravian church frescoes to create the developing *Infanta* work. The figures in the Moravian frescoes always make me think of the great collective unconscious with the figures with dinner plate haloes and fewer feet in a grouping than the number of heads would suggest. This web of new connections led directly into the *Infanta Project: Series I*.

Infanta Project: Series I



DEBORAH FORBES 1999-2001

The Infanta Project

Series I

The connection to the Velasquez *Infanta* had now become a fascination with an image that has entered our collective unconscious and stuck. Whether Disneyfied, Halloweened or child beauty pageanted, the Infanta image is the proto-princess. I started to become interested in concurrently running the physical processes of time, transformation, decomposition, and alteration of matter with the historical and literary investigation of ideas. This approach served several functions:

- It allowed investigation of an iconic image of 'princess' that has endured and influenced for 350 years and continues into the disquieting world of child beauty pageants of the present.
- It allowed for investigation of the princess as an archetype in myth and fairytale.
- It allowed contemplation of adult/child relationship at different times in history as well as the present, as yet another process of time and transformation.
- It allowed physical evidence to speak.

From my previous work with images of fossils, natural and man-made materials from my collections, and while questioning any real notion of extinction, I started to think of the matter with which I worked as "evidence." I started to think of working with communities of matter that act as evidence of time and transformation. I started to work with the actual objects rather than images of objects.

I had been reading the work of theoretical biologist, Rupert Sheldrake, who has developed the idea of '*morphic resonance*.' He talks about a '*morphogenetic field*' that surrounds not only living organisms but molecules, crystals, atoms; the field carries cumulative memory which ranges across space and time concerning everything that has happened to the species/matter in the past. This excites me in terms of thinking about the transformation of matter from one form to another carrying the history of all matter.

One the very day I was to begin the work there was a confluence of events that involved a barely averted family tragedy and eight Bohemian waxwings, drunk on fermented Mountain Ash berries flying into my windows and dieing at my feet. I scanned the beautiful little bodies while they were still warm. Consider the *morphic resonance*.

Six Bohemian Waxwings; They Died at My Feet. Photo silkscreen with metallic ink on raw steel.



Process: The *Infanta Project: Series I* is a set of 12 Giclee prints on Arches. Three core images were produced by scanning collections of evidence/objects on a scanner the size of a single bed. These 3D collages were output in the same size as the original evidence/objects in editions of five prints of each of the core images. The size was determined by the height of a five-year-old child in relation to the dress. The three core images were output in editions of five so I could subject each image to a variety of processes of time, transformation, degradation and decomposition and still have the original pristine images as a point of reference.

The three core images comprise:

An image in the shape of the *Infanta Margarita's* dress worn by the five year old *Infanta* in several of Diego de Silva Velasquez paintings. The dress is depicted as a child's paper cutout doll's dress and is constructed of Bohemian Waxwing bodies, scanned on a ground of antique red velvet.

An image of a little skeleton constructed of bones, fossils, feathers, scrap metal scanned on a ground of antique blue velvet.

An image of the little skeleton fused onto the dress, scanned on a ground of antique blue velvet.



In *Series I* the focus is on both interior and exterior structures (the skeletal figure and the dress surface).

Writer and cultural theorist Walter Benjamin, who in the first half of the 20th century talked about mechanical reproduction of a work of art and its affect on the work's 'aura,' claims that "even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be." (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1936). Benjamin's comments interest me in this time in history more than a half century after he wrote this, because of the barely imagined reproduction capabilities of new technologies. I wonder about the work's 'aura' in a new technological context.

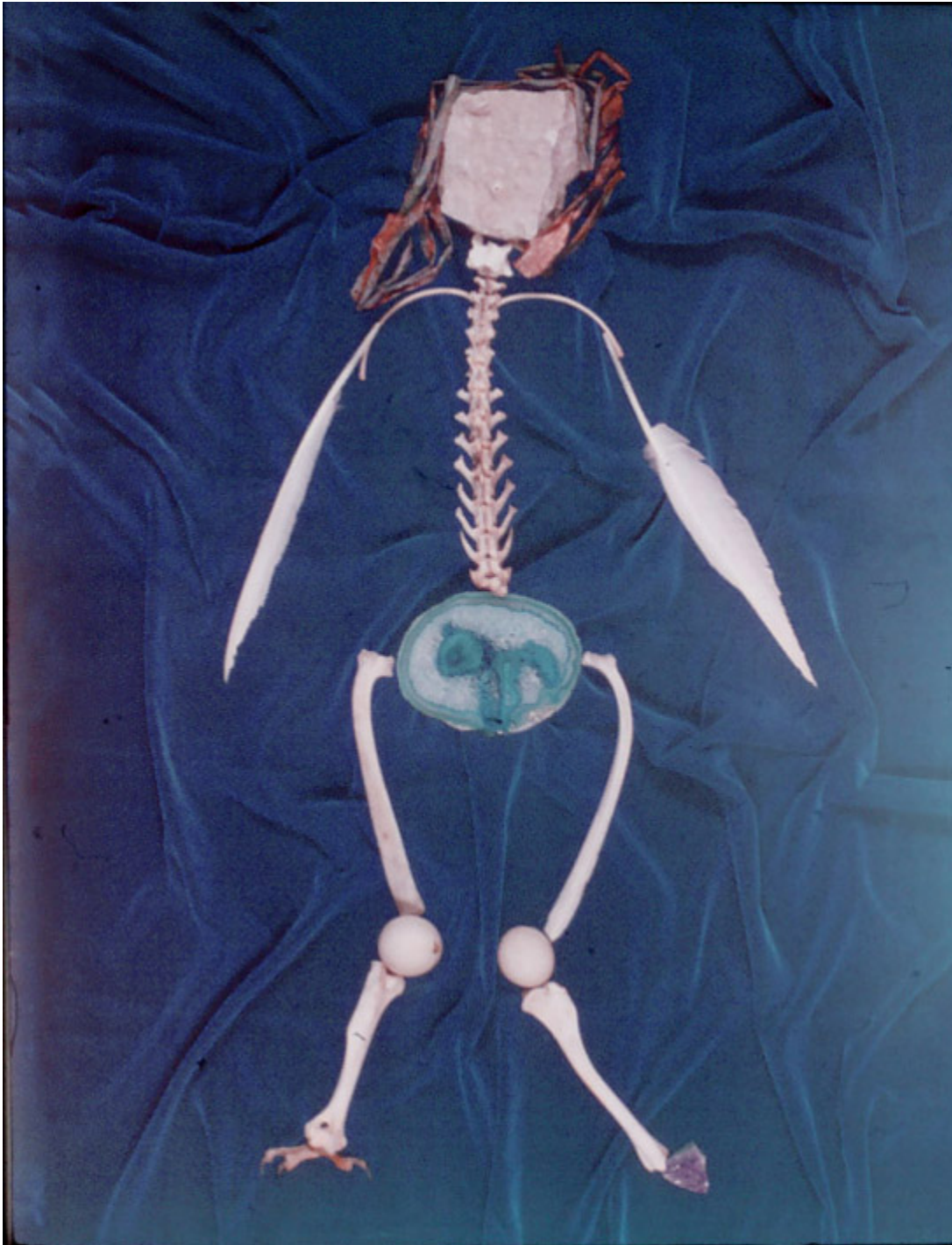
I am very interested in multiples and how multiple images are inescapably part of our contemporary cultural context. The ability to produce multiples also allowed me to transform identical images by weathering for one year, burying for one year, burning and acid distressing. One of each of the three core images was subjected to each of these processes.



Paper Cutout Dress 2000 Giclee print on Arches 46" x 34"

From 1653 - 59 Diego de Silva Velasquez painted portraits of the Infanta Margarita, daughter of Philip IV of Spain and Queen Mariana. The evidence of the little princess remains in the paintings and in our cultural memory bank.

On June 2, 2000, eight Bohemian Waxwings ate fermented Mountain Ash berries, and in a drunken frenzy flew into my upstairs windows and died at my feet. The evidence of their lives remains in scans of their little bodies.



Little Fossil Figure

2000

Giclee print on Arches

46" x 34"

Five hundred million years ago, molluscs developed in the ooze of our planet. The evidence remains in fossils.

Some scrap metal, various bones and fossils, some feathers, a slice of agate, a piece of amethyst, an eagle claw, bolts of antique velvet leave evidence of all matter from which they came in what they have become.



Little Fossil Figure w/ Paper Cutout Dress 2000 Giclee print on Arches 46" x 34"

Inquiry: A community of matter/evidence collides in a piece of visual work. How do the original constituents speak of their origins and their transformations as matter? How do the relationships amongst the evidence create new discussions of time and space? How does the means of production (scanned collages, digitally printed on paper) affect the evidence?



Paper Cutout Dress ; Weather 2000 - 01 Giclee print on Arches 46" x 34"



Little Fossil Figure; Weather

2000-01 Giclee print on Arches

46" x 34"



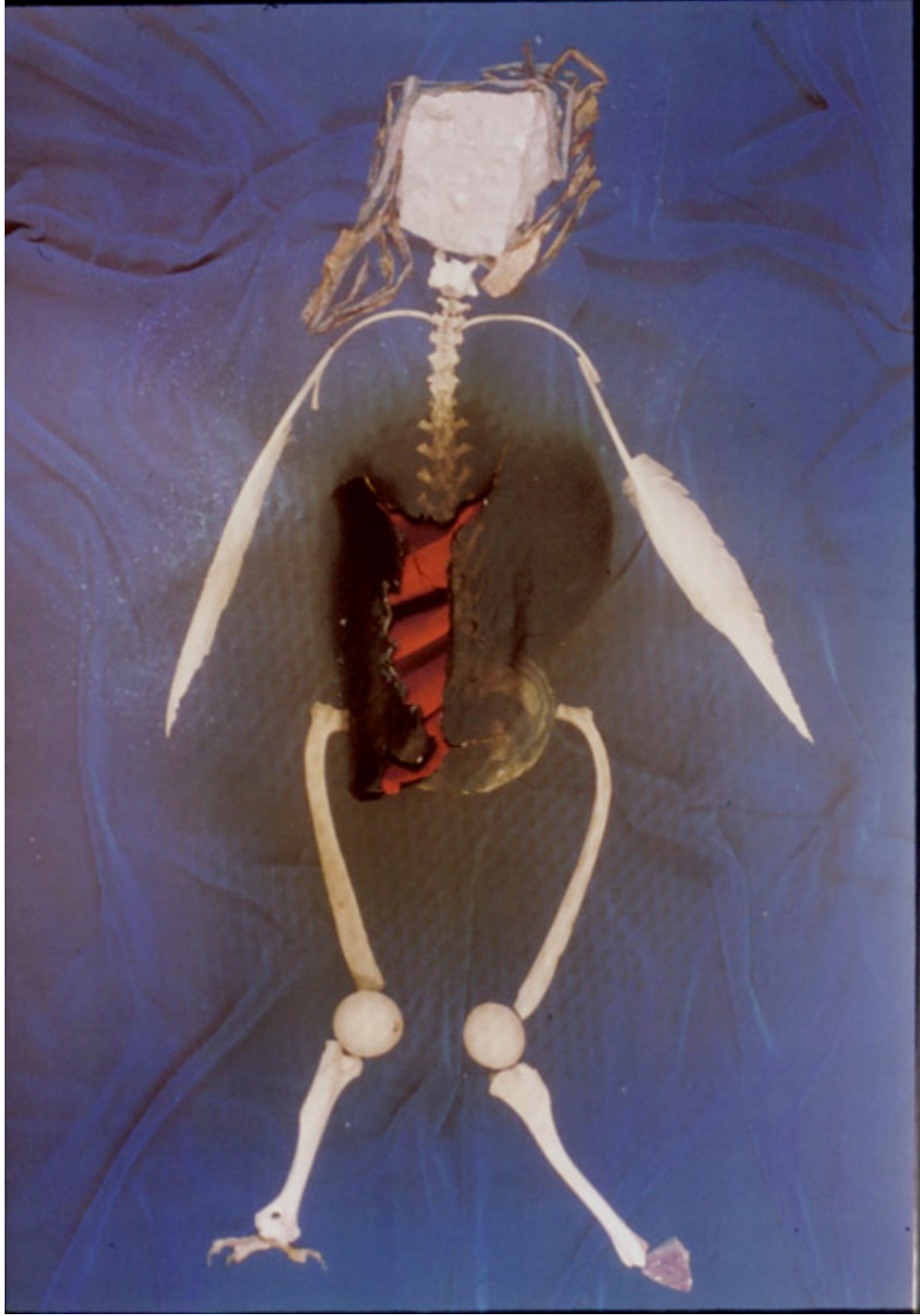
Little Fossil Figure w/ Paper Cutout Dress ;Weather 2000-01 Giclee print on Arches 46" x 34"



Paper Cutout Dress ; Burn 2000 - 01

Giclee print on Arches

46" x 34"



Little Fossil Figure; Burn 2000-01 Giclee print on Arches 46" x 34"



Little Fossil Figure w/ Paper Cutout Dres; Burn 2000 01 Giclee print on Arches 46" x 34"

Inquiry: How is the new evidence affected by subjecting it to processes of weathering, burning, burying and acid distressing? I work within a community of matter that discusses time and transformation; subjects so large that any statement about them is almost meaningless. I look for evidence in the particular as a clue to the general mystery.



Interment shot.

<i>Little Fossil Figure; Bury</i>	2001-02	Giclee print on Arches	46" x 34"
<i>Paper Cutout Dress; Bury</i>	2001 - 02	Giclee print on Arches	46" x 34"
<i>Little Fossil Figure w/ Paper Cutout Dress; Bury</i>	2001-02	Giclee print on Arches	46" x 34"



<i>Little Fossil Figure; Bury</i>	2001-02	Giclee print on Arches	46" x 34"
<i>Paper Cutout Dress; Bury</i>	2001 - 02	Giclee print on Arches	46" x 34"
<i>Little Fossil Figure w/ Paper Cutout Dress; Bury</i>	2001-02	Giclee print on Arches	46" x 34"

Evidence:

Nothing is lost.

Earth, air, water, fire and acid leave their marks.