



Available Providence

Work by Constance Lowe

February 27 – March 30, 2024

Opening reception: Tuesday, February 27, 5:00 – 6:30 p.m.

Artist's Gallery Talk: Tuesday, February 27, 5:30 p.m.

James K. Schmidt Gallery / Voney Art Center / Principia College / Elsah, Illinois
<http://content.principia.edu/sites/jameskschmidtgallery/>



(above) detail of *Les Voix Imaginaires* 1994/2023 overall dimensions variable birch plywood and aluminum screen
42" x 16" x 8" archival inkjet print, wood frame, glass 11-1/4" x 9-1/4" Printing by Hare and Hound Press

(front) *Drift Threshold #5 (Tapioca Tundra)* 2023 acrylic paint and ink, wool felt, and leather on drafting film 15.5"
x 18.25" Photo: Richard Sprengeler Photography

Introduction and Acknowledgements

By Paul Ryan

"Metaphor creates a kind of conceptual synesthesia, in which we understand one concept in the context of another."

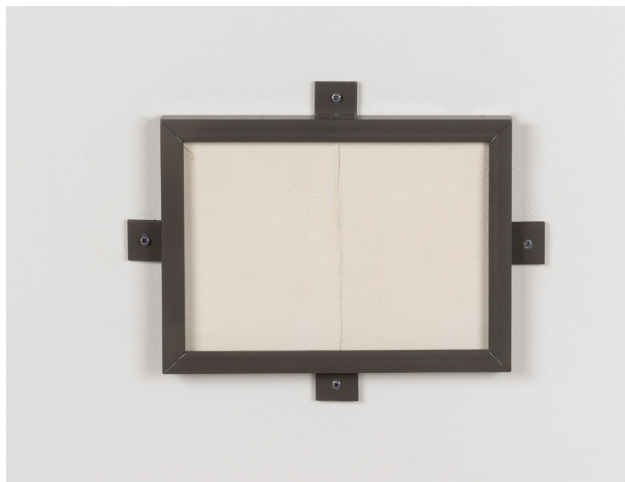
•James Geary, *I Is an Other: The Secret Life of Metaphor and How It Shapes the Way We See the World*

Explaining the origin of the title for this exhibition, *Available Providence*, artist Constance Lowe states that "...[t]he exhibition title was lifted from a roadside sign—discovered by chance on my daily route—advertising a property offered by Providence Commercial Real Estate. I was immediately taken by this conflation of the prosaic and profound..." The conceptual fusion or linking that Lowe refers to is related to the apparatus and action of metaphor. Loosely defined, a metaphor is simply something used to represent something else, oftentimes setting up a curious or even astonishing or enlightening juxtaposition that becomes a dialogue. The writer and journalism scholar James Geary's idea of "conceptual synesthesia" is a fitting description of how Lowe sees the world and how this awareness informs her studio practice. Related to this, Lowe's sensitivity as an artist includes a sense of how things, both animate and inanimate, are conceptually alive: she naturally practices a kind of conceptual animism. This is one reason why her coupling of two generations of her artwork in this exhibition—found objects and fabricated 3D works from the 1990s juxtaposed with exquisite, colorful paintings of the last two years—makes complete sense.

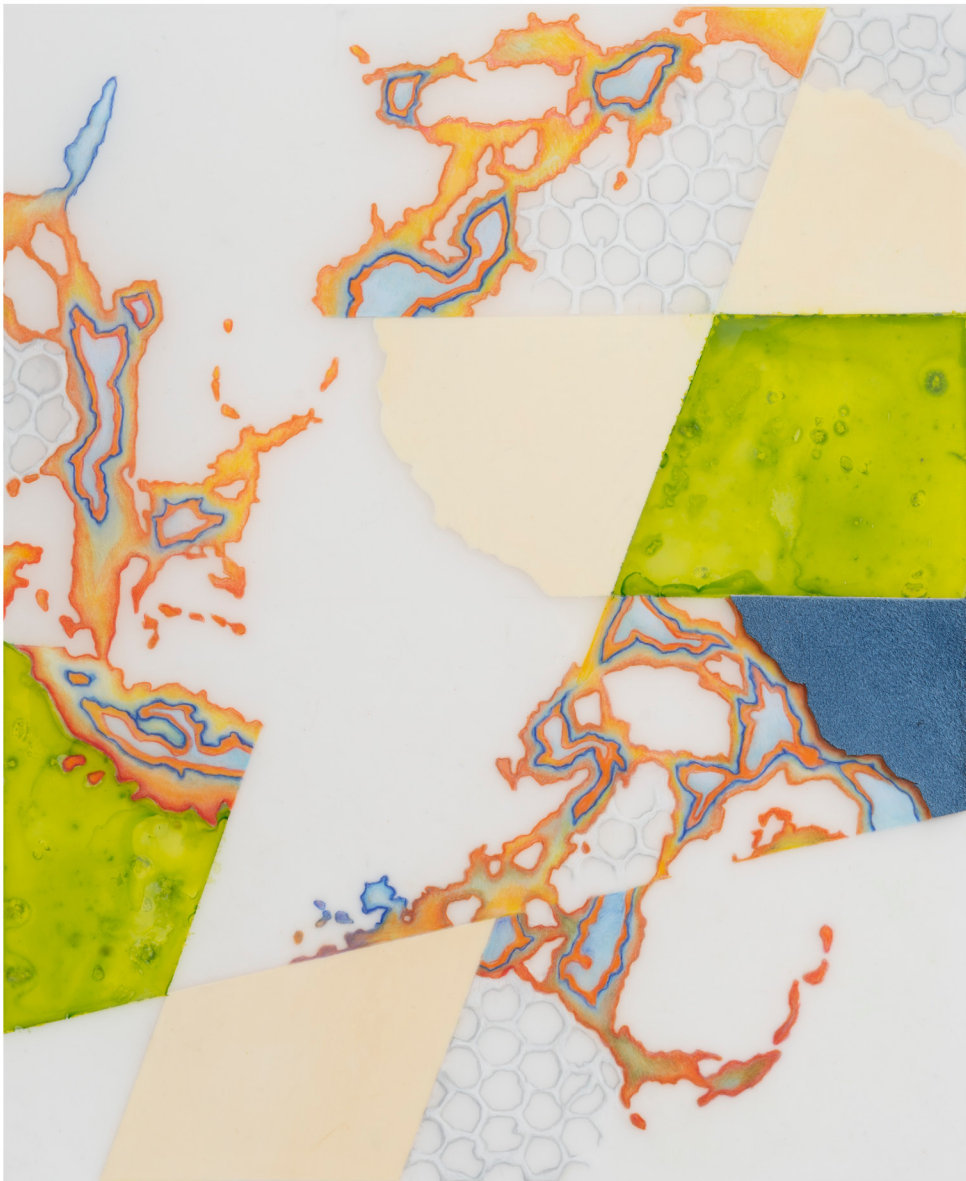
Lowe's studio practice is about the power, and in a way, the inevitability of metaphor in the human experience, and especially through our efforts to make meaning and expand thought. Through her love of design, the formal elements of late Modernist geometric abstraction, and a dedication to craftsmanship, Lowe creates objects that exist through metaphor as impetus and action (metaphor as a kind of verb) and finally as concrete metaphors (conceptual objects/art). Her works are conceptual and aesthetic blends of Duchampian gestures, utopian inclinations of Mondrian, the postmodern winks of Richard Artschwager, and the attentive, intuitive poetry of Janine Antoni. Lowe's studio practice can perhaps be summed up in two words that suggest a spirited, fluid paradox: precision and ambiguity, where ambiguity is crafted and reached through precision, and precision is achieved through the curious ideas and connotations of ambiguity. As she states so eloquently in her artist's statement: "Across my practice, I attempt to locate a space between the familiar and mysterious, intellectual and sensuous, or natural and artificial – in which visible evidence is refracted through a poetic lens to prompt a constellation of associative possibilities."

As always, this exhibition would not be possible without the generosity of others. I want to thank Constance Lowe for her generous and graceful spirit in sharing her work with the Schmidt Gallery and the Principia College community. Much appreciation goes to writer, cultural critic and Professor of English at Principia College, Dinah Ryan, whose exhibition essay about Lowe's work makes insightful connections within and beyond the art world. The exhibition catalog and invitation were designed by Bruce Rea, who, as always, brought his discerning eye to the work. Thanks, too, to Michael McMullin for his expertise in printing technology and processes. And many thanks to Deb Wold, the James K. Schmidt Gallery registrar, for her precision and support in every task; to Graham Littell, 2023-2024 post-graduate teaching intern for the Department of Art and Art History, for his assistance in installing the exhibition; and, to Jon Hosmer, the College's Web Director, for his advice and work on the Gallery website. Finally, much appreciation goes to my colleagues in the Department of Art and Art History for their support of all of the Schmidt Gallery exhibitions as a key part of our educational programming.

Paul Ryan is the William Martin and Mina Merrill Prindle Professor of Fine Arts and Co-Director of the James K. Schmidt Gallery, Principia College.



detail of *Salt in the Cradle* 1995/2024
overall dimensions variable birch
plywood, aluminum screen 70" x 6" x
6" 6 steel frames 9" x 7" archival inkjet
prints, glove leather, wool felt, Kansas
rock salt, glass Printing by Hare and
Hound Press



*Drift Threshold #3
(Study) 2023 acrylic paint
and ink, colored pencil
on drafting film
10-7/8" x 8-7/8" Photo:
Richard Sprengeler
Photography*

Available Providence: A Dialogue

"The world is blue at its edges and in its depths. This blue is the light that got lost. Light at the blue end of the spectrum does not travel the whole distance from the sun to us. It disperses among the molecules of the air, it scatters in water."

- Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*

So much depends upon William Carlos Williams begins *The Red Wheelbarrow*. You can see the wet red wheelbarrow and the white chickens. You can imagine someone letting go of the handles of the wheelbarrow, setting it down in the farmyard, just so. You can even imagine those chickens wandering over. But you don't know why. You don't know why they have come together or *what depends upon* their conjunction.

Ever since Marcel Duchamp's readymades introduced contingency through the seemingly random confluence of material things and their associations, artists have been creating discrete objects—you might say *assembling things*—that tease the boundary between the certain and the mysterious. Duchamp's snow shovel leans against the wall *In Advance of a Broken Arm*. But it is not the snow, the shovel, the moment of slippage that results in breakage that are at work in his readymade. Rather, it is the thing that comes into conjunction with another thing that creates a *some thing* that appears to have a function that can't be fully identified, a poetry of consonance and dissonance. So much depends upon what you can imagine as possible, imminent, originating, or accumulating.

Similarly, the works in *Available Providence* have been brought into a specific configuration, arranged *just so* by the discerning eyes of the artist and the curator. But this effort to arrange, to make meaning by the syntactical arrangement of statements—the ordering of things like the ordering of gestures, images, words, experiences, and ideas—is contingent. The works in *Available Providence*, like the specific material substance of a life lived, can be rearranged. They constitute an enigma that can be configured into a variety of wholes.

(Dinah Ryan)

detail of *Salt in the Cradle* 1995/2024 overall dimensions
variable birch plywood, aluminum screen 70" x 6" x 6" 6
steel frames 9" x 7" archival inkjet prints, glove leather,
wool felt, Kansas rock salt, glass Printing by Hare and
Hound Press



Available Providence connects two generations of my work, pairing earlier fabricated and found objects with new, emerging iterations of paintings on drafting film. Over time, I have drawn upon a range of forms, materials, and media to consider our efforts to frame, order, contain, and control natural phenomena in response to existential and practical comforts and threats. These conceptual considerations are not an agenda or target, but rather arise from visual explorations that seek to align method and anecdotal experience with larger social and scientific concerns.

(Constance Lowe)



Allweather (Home Body) 1998/2024 overall dimensions variable microfiber coat, mother-of-pearl buttons, thread, salt residue 44" x 22" x 8" rock salt Photo: Jenelle Esparza

Suppose in each moment you are given a choice between something and something else. What is lost in the scattering of fragments that arrive half here, half there?

Carrier opens to shadows, light, and air. Look through the screen, look inside to see the gridded shadow falling through its interior. Look through the screen, look from one side of the object to whatever happens to appear on the other side. Consider that it is impossible to enter or exit this immaculate object except by vision and by imagination. What then does it carry? What impulses of containment, of safety or confinement, of home or displacement?

Originally, some of the sculptures included military-issue blankets. Though the blankets have disappeared from the work, they linger in memory. Is the term "military blanket" an oxymoron, signifying something equipped to be cozy, or is it a precise description of the potential for organized violence that covers the earth?
(Dinah Ryan)



Carrier 1993 birch plywood, aluminum screen and handles, steel frame
60" x 24" x 48" Photo: Richard Sprengeler Photography



Drift Threshold #7 (Tapioca Tundra Sketchbook), 2023, acrylic paint and ink, wool felt, leather, and colored pencil on drafting film 15-1/2" x 18-1/4" Photo: Richard Sprengeler Photography

In the 1990s, with fortunate grant support, I had the opportunity to enlist fabricators to construct three-dimensional forms related to the ambiguously familiar images in my paintings and drawings of that time. The sculptures and altered coat and chair in this exhibition belong to that body of work; some have been re-imagined for this current presentation. While the three-dimensional works are scaled to the human body and lived environment, the *Drift Threshold* paintings — structured on landscapes seen from the air — take a more distanced view. In the context of *Available Providence*, they might be interpreted as maps for the territory occupied by the objects.

(Constance Lowe)

Suppose you are seated on a pristine, skirted vanity chair, buckled in, so to speak, for the journey through the day or the preparations for the night or for the unknowable future. Around your waist, holding you steady, is a seatbelt that contains in its buckle a tiny image of a buoyant mass of cumulous clouds sheltered in a vast blue sky. Above you is a window, more clouds and a blue sky, deep blue to "its edges and...its depths." There may be bluebirds singing at the window, their feathered tails twitching behind them. On the wall there may be a blue painting. What is it that you see while you are sitting in the center of your morning, your evening, your life? *The future is stupid* goes one of Jenny Holzer's *Truisms*. Indeed. So much depends on the assembly of meaning through conjoining thought and sensation.

Q & A is one of several reimagined works in *Available Providence*. What happens in the span of thirty years, between 1993 and 2023? Is it a nanosecond or an eternity? "You can never get to the blue you see," says the artist, quoting Solnit. In fact, this blue is as scattered as your experience, a reflection of the earth's bodies of water as much as it is a wave of light from the sun. You move within it but can't fully know it.

Above you, *Pearl* hovers, pocked and puffy, mounded like a meringue or a swirl of cotton candy, made partly of foam, shimmering with a greasy pink like iridescent clouds slicked with sunset reds. It is turned upside down as if it were a hornet's nest or an arrow. You look up at this looming cumulation. Do you feel trepidation or wonder?

(Dinah Ryan)



(above) *Pearl*, 1998, foam, fiberglass, polyester resin and acrylic interference paint, metal hanging hardware, 52"h x 21" diam. Photo: Ansen Seale/Seale Studios



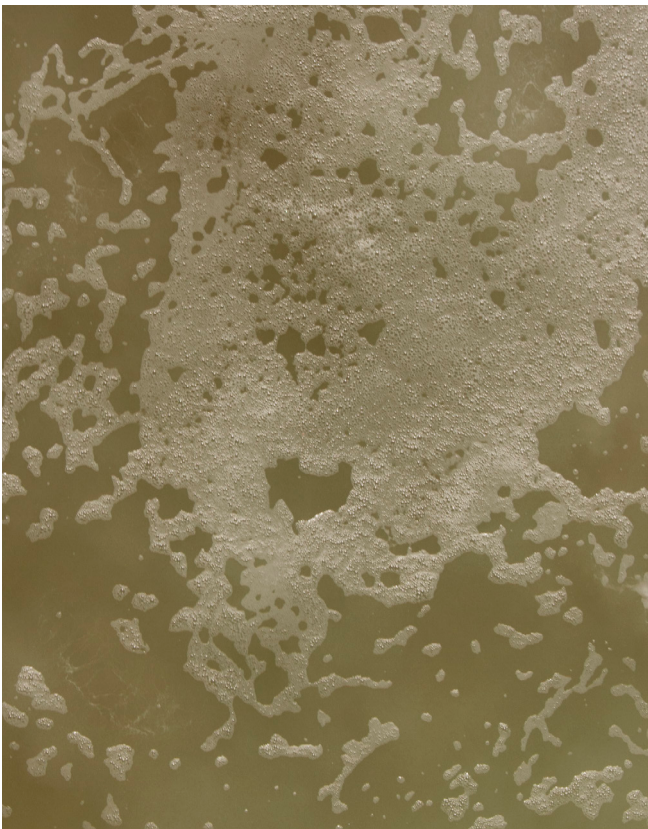
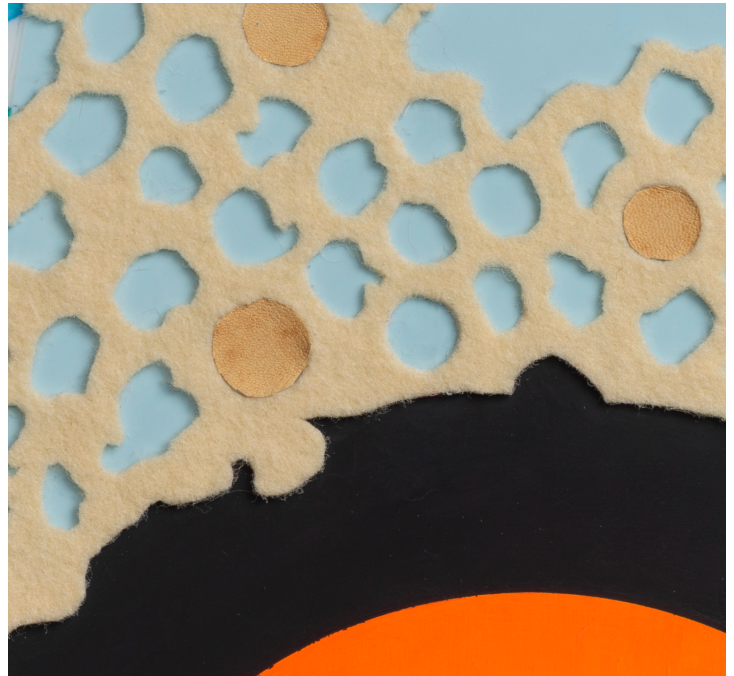
(top right) *Q&A* 1993/2023 upholstered chair, cotton belt with metal hardware, photographic buckle 28"h x 16" diam. Photo: Richard Sprengeler Photography



(bottom right) detail of *Q&A*

My process is rooted in the tactics (puzzling, figuring, cataloging, orchestrating...) and formalities of visual design, through which elements from my inventory of interests are layered and carved into each other. Specific images at play here are distilled from fleeting, transitory events — such as air travel, seawater, and clouds — as well as the nests of ground bees, and the graphic authority of traffic signage, with additions of wool felt and leather. I have favored drafting film as substrate and surface through several series of works because the translucent plastic material is an active, contradictory surface that is workable on both sides. It both reveals and veils, accepting and resisting various mediums that might pool on the surface or coat it like skin.

(Constance Lowe)

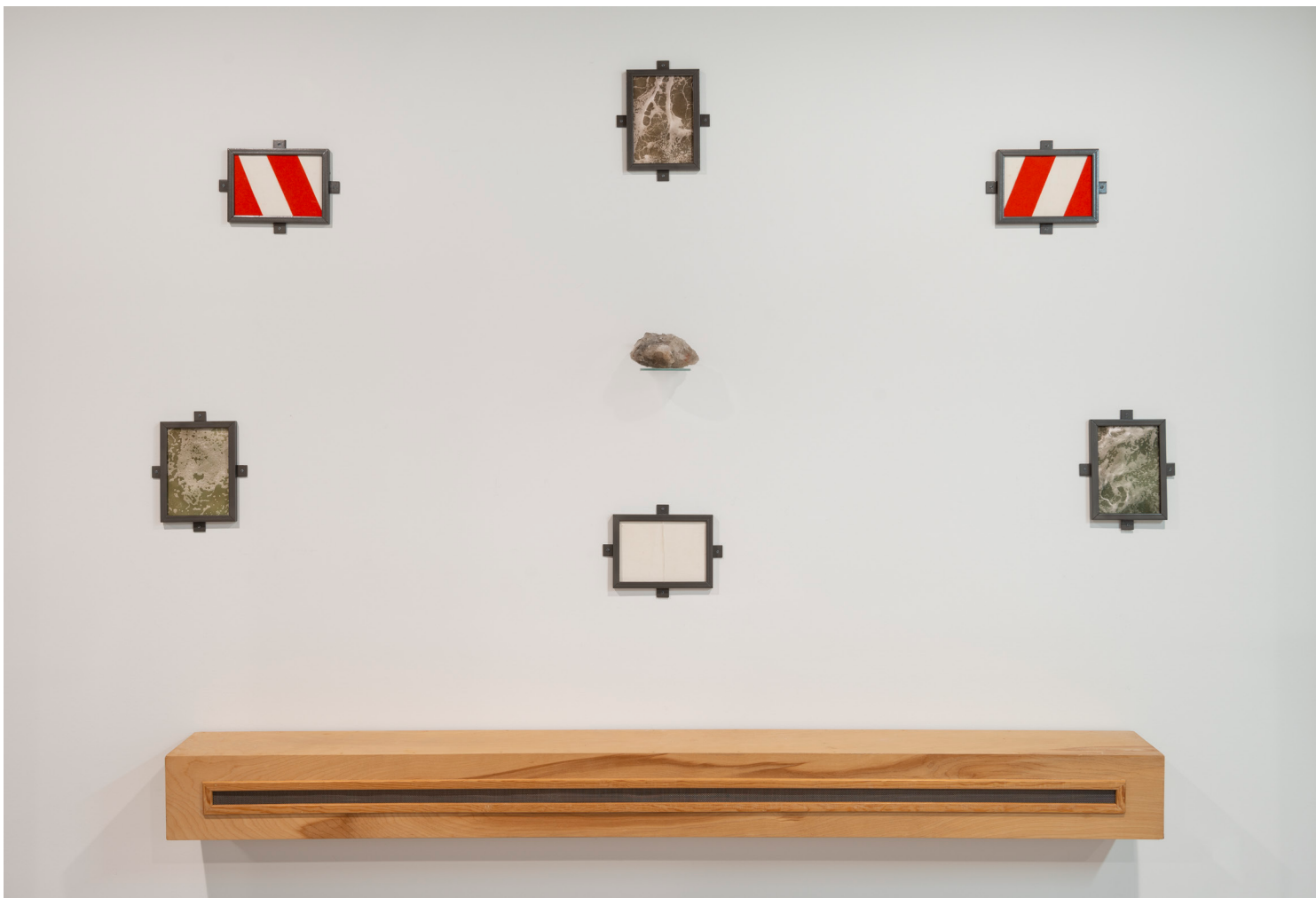


(left) detail of *Salt in the Cradle* 1995/2024 overall dimensions variable birch plywood, aluminum screen 70" x 6" x 6" 6 steel frames 9" x 7" archival inkjet prints, glove leather, wool felt, Kansas rock salt, glass Printing by Hare and Hound Press

(right) detail of *Drift Threshold #5 (Tapioca Tundra)*, 2023, acrylic paint and ink, wool felt, and leather on drafting film 15.5" x 18.25" Photo: Richard Sprengeler Photography

Suppose you hold in your hand a chunk of rock salt from the mine at Hutchinson, Kansas, a salt mine 650 feet below the prairie. Or suppose you see from the air or feel on the sandy beach around your feet the fluctuating, ever changing edges of salty sea foam. Suppose that following the old superstition, you throw into the cradle a handful of salt to keep the baby safe. Suppose as the ancient Greeks suggested, you should not trust another until you have eaten a peck of salt with them. Suppose you believe that spilling salt is bad luck and that you must either throw it over your left shoulder to counteract the curse or shed as many tears as grains of salt were spilled. Is salt the flavor of that which is loved, a savory means of protection, or is it the tangy bitterness from the bowels of the earth that represents the tracks of evil? Or is it simply material, a crystalline mineral composed of sodium chloride, and nothing more?

Salt in the Cradle creates a grid of framed images of sea foam and of felt and vintage kid glove leather surrounding a chunk of rock salt from the mine at Hutchinson, the artist's father's hometown, and the place where she visited the salt mine as a child. The grid is rectangular like the contours of a cradle. Its configuration is entirely fabricated,



(above) *Salt in the Cradle* 1995/2024 overall dimensions variable birch plywood, aluminum screen 70" x 6" x 6" 6 steel frames 9" x 7" archival inkjet prints, glove leather, wool felt, Kansas rock salt, glass Printing by Hare and Hound Press

(below) detail of *Salt in the Cradle*

a boundary that consists of matting or condensing disparate things into a tidy arrangement. In this tidiness, you forget the ambiguities of salt and the uncertainties of felt and leather, which are simultaneously capable of being smoothly shaped and reminiscent of the ways in which animals have been used to make the fabric, a thing you don't like to think about.

The red coat in *Allweather (Home Body)* has been commercially purchased and altered, its plastic



buttons replaced with shell and salt sewn into the hem. The hem has been picked open, salt appearing to fall in a shape on the floor, somewhere between a random pile and a mystical sigil that holds evil at bay and alleviates homesickness.

Close your eyes for a moment and try to imagine where your coat came from. Imagine the salt of your body permeating the fabric. Who made this bodily covering, from its threads to its buttons? What are the pockets and seams in which you hide things, like refugees or the lost, hiding what little can be preserved from the prying eyes and snatching fingers of those in power?

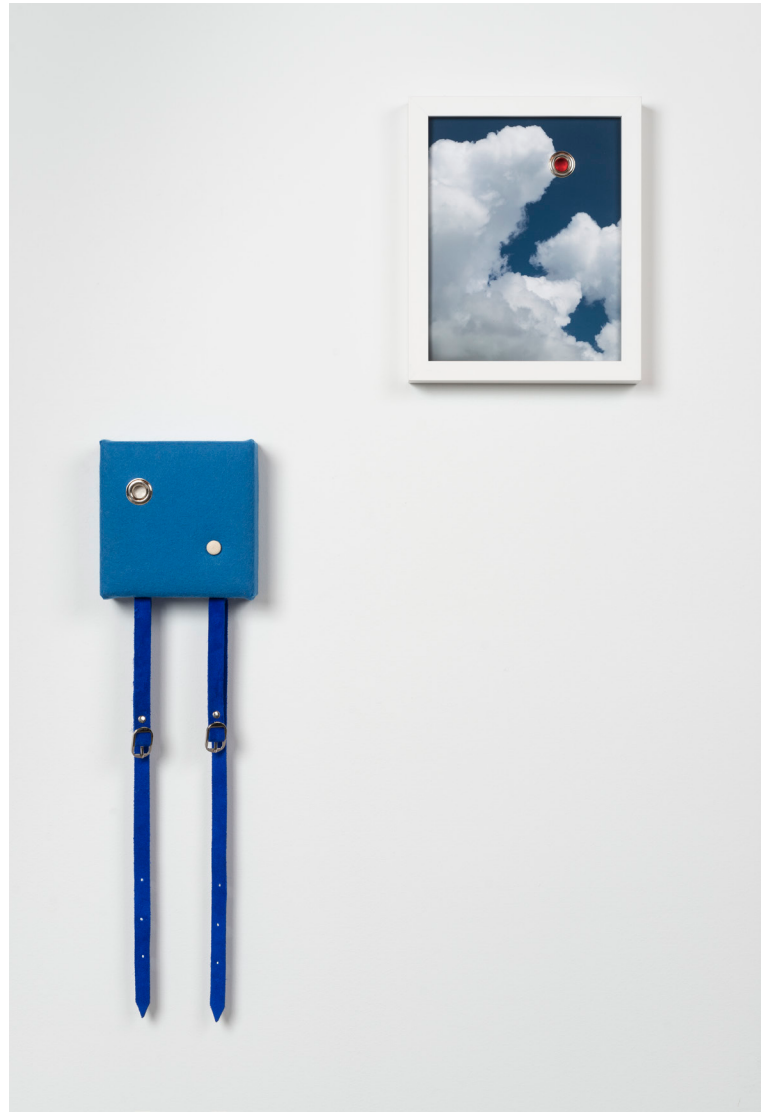
(Dinah Ryan)

The exhibition title was lifted from a roadside sign — discovered by chance on my daily route —advertising a property offered by Providence Commercial Real Estate. I was immediately taken by this conflation of the prosaic and profound, linking a world of business negotiations and office supplies to notions of fate, fortune, and supernatural influence. In my view as an artist, providence might arrive in this encounter of unlike things or through the reception and discovery of currents just below the surface of conscious thought and reason. Across my practice, I attempt to locate a space between the familiar and mysterious, intellectual and sensuous, or natural and artificial — in which visible evidence is refracted through a poetic lens to prompt a constellation of associative possibilities.

(Constance Lowe)



Les Voix Imaginaires 1994/2023
overall dimensions variable birch
plywood and aluminum screen 42"
x 16" x 8" archival inkjet print, wood
frame, glass 11-1/4" x 9-1/4" Printing
by Hare and Hound Press



(left) *Drift Threshold #4 (Turnaround)* 2023 acrylic paint and ink on drafting film 11-3/8" x 8-7/8" Photo: Richard Sprengeler Photography

(right) *Bluebird Between Here and Not There* 1994/2023 overall dimensions variable wool felt over wood panel, leather, metal hardware 24" x 6" x 1-3/4" archival inkjet print, leather, metal grommet 11-1/4" x 9-1/4" Printing by Hare and Hound Press

Suppose from *Les Voix Imaginaires*, a cloud photograph and nonfunctional screened box that recalls a speaker, come imaginary voices, the sounds that come through a ventilator, or HVAC's ambivalent hum. Such ambient sound, colliding in unexpected junctures, is music, said John Cage. Listen to the surrounding hum of your life, this music that is your life, these blues that are always arriving in tattered pieces with torn edges. Think of the clouds always moving through the blue, shifting in the currents of the air.

The *Drift Threshold* series brings together on translucent film the drift of eddying seas, the contours of landscapes seen from the air, the edges of sharply defined shapes, the pocked openness of punctured felt. Imagine these drawings as peculiar maps of the confluences that must constantly be traced, drawn, and redrawn within the available providence of the things that come to hand. *So much depends upon.*

(Dinah Ryan)



(above) detail of *Salt in the Cradle*
1995/2024 overall dimensions
variable birch plywood, aluminum
screen 70" x 6" x 6" 6 steel
frames 9" x 7" archival inkjet
prints, glove leather, wool felt,
Kansas rock salt, glass Printing by
Hare and Hound Press

(left) *Untitled* 1992 oil paint on
wool blanket, birch plywood,
aluminum screen, and cones 75"
x 62" x 9", collection San Antonio
Museum of Art
Photo: Ansen Seale/Seale Studios



(above) *Appetite for System 1992* studio installation view
Photo: Ansen Seale/ Seale Studios



(left) detail of *Drift Threshold #5 (Tapioca Tundra)*, 2023, acrylic paint and ink, wool felt, and leather on drafting film, 15.5" x 18.25" Photo: Richard Sprengeler Photography

Artist's Bio

In late 2019, Constance Lowe returned to her hometown of St. Louis, following a long career as a teaching artist, including twenty-five years as Professor of Art at the University of Texas at San Antonio. She was selected for the International Artist in Residence program at ArtPace, San Antonio, and was a visiting artist-teacher at the Kunstakademiet in Trondheim, Norway. In addition to her exhibitions, presentations, and curatorial activities, she is especially pleased to be included in the collections of eight healthcare and educational institutions as well as the San Antonio Museum of Art and Ruby City/Linda Pace Foundation, San Antonio. She is represented by and frequently exhibits with Ruiz-Healy Art, San Antonio/New York.

www.constancelowe.com



Photo: Richard Sprengeler Photography

Dedication by Constance Lowe:

The exhibition is dedicated to the memory of my brilliant friend, Frances Colpitt, and the passion she devoted to her scholarship, writing, curatorial work, and students.

Dinah Ryan is a writer, cultural critic, and Professor of English at Principia College.

All artwork images copyright Constance Lowe.

Unless indicated otherwise, all images of artwork are courtesy of the artist.

This exhibition was initiated and curated by the James K. Schmidt Gallery.

James K. Schmidt Gallery / Voney Art Center / Principia College / Elsah, Illinois

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