The surreal narrative: contemporary tintypes and video.

Mary Helen Yates
University of Louisville

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THE SURREAL NARRATIVE: CONTEMPORARY TINTYPES AND VIDEO

By

Mary Helen Yates
BA, Eckerd College, 1991

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of the University of Louisville
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Department of Fine Art
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2005
THE SURREAL NARRATIVE: CONTEMPORARY TINTYPES AND VIDEO

By

Mary Helen Yates
M.A., University of Louisville, 2005

A Thesis Approved on

March 21, 2005

by the following Thesis Committee:

Thesis Director
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother

Ms. Sarah Roberson Yates

Who instilled in me curiosity, creativity and ambition in both my pursuit of education and experience of life.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my major professors, Mitch Eckert and Mary Carothers for their guidance, encouragement and enthusiasm for my progress as an artist and scholar. I would also like to thank the other committee members, Dr. Tom Byers and Dr. Christopher Fulton for their support, comments and assistance. I would also like to express my thanks to my mother Sarah Yates, for her love and encouragement during my life and in particular the last two years. I would additionally like to thank to my father who gave his support and confidence in the pursuit of my goals. Also, many thanks my friends and models without whom my art making would not be possible.
ABSTRACT

THE SURREAL NARRATIVE: CONTEMPORARY TINTYPES AND VIDEO

Mary Helen Yates

May 14, 2005

This thesis is a combination of actual works of art in the tintype and video mediums and a written theoretical exploration of the theme of shadow in fairytales, myths and religious stories. The written portion begins with an overview of the central idea of transformation in both object and narrative in regards to the Jungian notion of the shadow. It also discusses the nature of the tintype process and its relation to storytelling in the context of the body of work.

The written thesis continues with a narrative interpretation of the works of art and their role in the metamorphosis of story through audience interpretation. The first section begins with the notions of the shadow and transformation. It describes the basic concept of the shadow self and applies that theory to the visual imagery in historical examples of stories. The next section is comprised of interpretations of individual works of art. This section encourages the viewer to further the interpretation through questioning the role the shadow plays in one’s life.

The final written section is the return to the more direct messages of the artwork and the concept of eternally changing interpretations of the world and that which we most
fear. Through the transformative qualities of storytelling we can embrace what we fear and grow as humans.

The last section of the thesis is images of the artwork for the viewer to interpret in relation to the written portion and the purely visual experience of the work itself. It is color digital reproductions of tintypes, a silver reversal photographic process, and digital video stills from a DVD installation.
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Prologue

Once upon a time a girl journeyed into the woods, where stories were woven out of thin air and existed only in a mutable place on the edge of consciousness. Once upon a time the fairytale was a dark place where we could touch our shadow selves and, perhaps, shudder as we came to know what lurks in the hearts of humankind. Once upon a time nothing made sense and we were forced to construct meaning so we could sleep at night. Out of the wind we pulled stories; our collective experiences passed from generation to generation to help define our existence and express the values necessary to live out our days in the company of others, without upsetting the balance. Those stories began to metamorphose, to become more astute expressions of the human condition, and they were variable in their retelling. Each teller might change the word pattern, the events recounted, to create something new, to give words new meanings and bring them into the realm of the physical where they assume a form, acquire weight, occupy space and become dimensional.

Metal has a physical and tactile presence in its very nature. The tintype in its production from cold metal to light sensitive expressive potential speaks to this notion of transformation from latent object to realized matter. You can hold it and feel its weight, temperature, and surface nature of the emulsion. The coating and the mode of display amplify its physicality, and thus the pieces become like a storybooks or icons. We may gaze at them, touch their presence and create our own narratives, either of individual images, or of several grouped. Our connections may be based in our understanding of
religion or myth, or may surface from our unconscious yearnings and fears, but the constant of interpretation is transformation: The object is created. We gaze upon the object, we make connections, we divine meaning based wholly on our own understanding of the world, so that we become the storytellers – the transformers of thought.

The tintypes in this body of work fall into three categories, interpretation of actual stories, circus surrealist narratives, and color interpretations. The first category is composed of digital photographic collages that are layered with imagery suggestive of the Jungian notion of the Shadow. “In Jungian psychology, we generally define the shadow as the personification of certain aspects of the unconscious personality, which could be added to the ego complex but which, for various reasons, are not. We might therefore say that the shadow is the dark, unlived, and repressed side of the ego complex.”¹ That is a simplified notion of the concept. “The shadow is simply a ‘mythological’ name for all that is within me about which I cannot directly know. Only when we start to dig into this shadow sphere of the personality and to investigate the different aspects, does there, after a time, appear in the dreams a personification of the unconscious.”²

As we come to understand the shadow concept we see in storytelling that malevolence, suffering and the hope for divine reward exist to hold a mirror to one’s understanding of that which exists internally, but cannot be seen. In a Russian Fairytale, Frost, to attain marital bliss a father abandons his daughters to a creature of the night; the Biblical Eve gets tricked by a snake and causes humankind to be damned for eternity; in ancient Egypt, the notion existed that if one’s heart did balance against the Goddess Maat’s feather of truth, one would be thrown to a hideous monster and devoured. “The figures and events of fairy tales also personify and illustrate inner conflicts, but they
suggest ever so subtly how these conflicts may be solved, and what the next steps in the
development toward a higher humanity might be.”

These stories and the ones we create all give us the tools to glimpse our shadow and learn to know ourselves better. “Myths and fairy tales speak to us in the language of symbols representing unconscious content. Their appeal is simultaneously to our conscious and unconscious mind, to all three of its aspects – id, ego, and superego – and to our need for ego ideals as well. This makes it very effective; and in the tales’ content, inner psychological phenomena are given body in symbolic form.”

We are given these stories and weave them into our own experience of human existence. Our foundations for the stories we tell in the creation of our lives are drawn from these collective remembrances of the old ways. Whatever one’s culture, the fairy tales, religious stories and constructions of shared histories create the ripe seeds necessary for us to see the world as a transformable place. The shadow is lurking all around us and within us; learning to nurture it and to not shy from our expressions of the things we fear and hope we are not like allows us to transcend the chaos and reinvent the telling of our lives. “One attraction to this literature is its expression of that which is normally prevented from coming to awareness”. Like snake handlers whose stories tell them that receiving multiple snake bites is the road to glory, we are drawn to the darkness with the hope of transmuting the poison so as to come out transformed on the other side.

The Visual Journey Begins

At the beginning of time and storytelling there was The Origin of Symbol (fig. 1) interpretation of eye in hand iconography. This type of symbol appeared first in Egypt during the Old Kingdom and was associated with the goddess Isis. Known as the blood
of Isis, the eye in hand can be connected with the womb and menstruation, or the great mystery of birth. This symbol is particularly interesting because it appears in many different cultures with a similar meaning. In Middle Eastern belief it is the protective hand of God, which has the power to ward off the evil eye. This symbol is also present in early North American Indian tribes and some Asian cultures. In this tintype, the eye-in-hand is the beginning of our story. It represents the trans-cultural reminder that we must open our literal and mystic eyes to observe what we are presented with in order to understand ourselves and grow. It is an invitation to be open to our interpretation of our ever-evolving stories under the protection of a higher presence.

If the first is our protective figure, then the next image must be a reminder of horror that exists in the world – the notion of evil. Without the knowledge of bad there can be no understanding of good. *The Seventh Circle* (fig. 2) is the Circle of Hell to which the suicides are condemned in Dante’s *Inferno*. Suicide is the ultimate selfish act of refusal to hear the calling of potential in the midst of the tumultuous rain of chaos and disorder. This figure is juxtaposed with images from a Boschian painting of chaos in hell. Layered over the center of the portrait figure, Lucifer shoves his pointed trident into undulating hordes of the damned. This is the retelling of the *Inferno* in the context of our story; it is one notion of the shadow self or that which is “not like us” that we become. It represents the Shadow in action as it lures us from life to death, obscuring hope with the vanity of self-delusion. This piece offers a mirror held up to the viewer that enables him to peer into the dark, to see where one can truly go if he does not guard against it.
Through our acquaintance with the darkness, we begin to try and understand the shadow, to glimpse ourselves through the retelling of stories with which we are familiar, but concerning which we have refused to acknowledge how the darkness may transform the individual. We may then view *Lugubrious Demise*, (fig. 3) a work that speaks to the common fairytale theme of infanticide. Many cultures practiced the abandonment of children who were unwanted or "imperfect," in some way. The practice was a mechanism, a tool to maintain the wealth of a family and to assure strong bloodlines by weeding out the weak in order to save resources that they might consume. In our story the shadow expressed in this dreadful act is symbolic of the casting off of unwanted, un-nurtured parts of ourselves. Here are the issues, the ideas, the dreams we refuse to examine, the deformed children of our intellect. This piece reminds that when we cast aside those aspects of ourselves that we cannot accept, there is inevitable pain. The child is dead, but the woman above is not indifferent. She mourns. It is through deep pain that the first seeds of transformation can take root.

In the next image, *Sweet Fruit of Mortification*, (fig. 4) we see the moment that Snow White is transformed by death. She still holds the bitten apple in her hand. In the original tale, three times the evil queen tricks Snow White, but three different times the girl transmutes poison and revives. She is Eve in temptation – she cannot resist the promise of something beyond what she knows. It is her innocence and search for knowledge that is the saintly aspect of this story...she wants to believe in the kindness of strangers, she wants to taste the fruit of life. So by her example should we then take the risk, the hope for transformation through transmutation?
Transformation is rooted in _In the Company of Wolves_ 1 & 2. (figs. 5-6) These images directly tell the Perrault version of _The Little Red Riding Hood_. The tale of the Wolf and Red Riding Hood is fraught with cautionary advice about the dangers a young girl faces on her transformative journey into womanhood. The Big Bad Wolf may be the man who follows you home one dark night. He might be lurking in the bushes outside the window, waiting to catch the unsuspecting virgin off guard. In the original story, the warning is clear: “Beware young ladies. Look out for your safety, because you’ll grow up much too quickly in the company of wolves.” In these images the wolf appears first in a mask, then as a distorted male figure. The females in these images are bound with the actual text of the story and the moral overlaid on their skins. The vision here describes the constraints that are put on females to uphold themselves and behave on their journey into womanhood. If they are unwitting victims, they have not misbehaved except maybe in their minds. However, it is when the female breaks free of her mental bondage and surrenders to the wolf that she becomes “bad” or “unclean.” Why must the female restrain herself or her thoughts? The notion of the repressed innocent led astray by the wolf is a convenient way to control girls’ beliefs about sexuality and their impending womanhood. They cannot transform themselves in bondage, but they might if they confront the shadow lurking in their martyrdom.

The anti-martyr, the clever and powerful figure of Shahrazad, (fig. 7) is the original transformer of thought through the art of story telling. In _A Thousand and One Arabian Nights_ she not only saves her own skin, but also makes the king understand his wrongs and become a better man in order to realize his potential. She is a symbolic reminder that throughout trials of horror and deception, maintaining a quick mind and
A clever approach to any situation will allow us to seize the reins and guide our story to a better place. Through this image we are also asked to narrate the world experience in order to benefit those around us. This piece speaks directly to the notion of the necessity of storytelling and its importance as a transformative art. It is the crux of the story and provides clues to how we might advance any given situation to make the transformation from the shadow denied to the shadow evolved.

_Salome_ (fig. 8) is, then, the transition from the stories that exist in the literary library of the culture, to the stories of our own creation. She is a performer and pawn. She has been granted whatever she desires in exchange for performing a dance. At the prompting of her mother, who seeks revenge, Salome requests the head of St. John the Baptist. She is shown here bearing the severed head, which is the traditional way of presenting Salome. What is hinted at, as well, is that fact that she is a performer. Where else might we glimpse her shadow? This image reminds us that performers take on many roles, and once a yarn starts spinning, the skillful performer can keep the audience guessing about who will be cast in the lead.

**A Transformation Occurs – the Story is Re-told**

The tale of our performance begins here with the invitation to _A Momentary Suspension of Disbelief_ (fig. 9). In this moment, this fleeting snippet of time, true potential exists. This is the instant before we know what happens next, that pregnant pause where anything is possible – be it terrible or wonderful. It is also the place where we truly become part of the story because there is no separation of the action in the play from our own experience of the world. This sliver of time exists in connections in the
unconscious, when we do not recognize the difference between ourselves and the tale that is unweaving before us.

Are we then controlled by some kind of *Puppet Master*?(fig. 10) One cannot help but think of Bela Lugosi’s insistent direction, “Pull the Strings! Pull the Strings” as the puppet master in Ed Wood’s *Glen or Glenda*? Who is in control? Who is the teller of the tale? Is it some arbitrary construction of a “god,” such as Lugosi’s character in the Wood film? In this image we see a small happy doll facing the camera, controlled by a larger figure, whose expression appears more puppet-like than the smaller figure. If we look more closely we see that she too is guided by some disappearing strings, some force beyond her control. This image illustrates a simple truth about our stories as humans. There are many things beyond our control; what do we choose to believe about our situation? Would we prefer to think the unconscious doll wields the power of destiny, or would we rather think the smaller figure can shape the world through her own delirious gaze? The truth is that we want both, the simple position of power un tarnished by awareness, and the lively interaction of participating fully in the weaving of our tales.

The *Painted Man* (fig. 11) has had his own tale etched and inked on to his skin. He is the first of our character studies and is the largest because he has chosen to express his creation of the world in such a visible manner. He is the first character introduced as an individual in the play we are writing. He is not the lead, but the one who fearlessly tells his tale to all those who gaze upon his skin’s deep pictorial history. But who is he really? Is he the “other” or the expression of the shadow - that which is not like us? Victoria Pitts argues “To the extent that bodies are spaces where identities are both continually enacted as well as socially patrolled, spectacular bodies can be socially
disruptive.” In discussing the performative quality of body modification, she quotes Colleen Ballerino Cohen who says that “bodily acts and images that bring into play parody, multiplicity and slipperiness, resist a resolution into the fixity of a dichotomous system.” Considering that, our character becomes as mutable as the story itself. He acts as the catalyst for discovering that there is more here than meets the eye.

Our eyes focus now on the cast of characters presented in a group. These Character Studies for the Circus of the Surreal (figs. 12-24) are waiting for our unconscious to take over and make associations, and to forge meaning. The story is writing itself. Who are they? What are their connections? How might they interact with each other? with the viewer? This group is waiting to be cast, waiting for us to decide where they fit in the narrative. Above all else, they symbolize the great potential of the story to be told in whatever manner, through whatever means, and with whatever details the teller or viewer wishes to tell the tale. Though some of these characters have already begun playing their parts (notice Salome), others have yet to be written into the plot. The yarn is still spinning. Who can say what will happen next?

Unconscious connections and extraordinary events take place in the surreal narratives of Lenora Carrington. (figs. 25-26) The video interpretations of these stories veil their original form and replace them with personal connections to the words of Carrington. The viewer then reinterprets these unconscious connections through another veil, both metaphoric and literal. This is about the art of transmutation. With each video loop, the story is digested and processed, the story is digested and processed, and the story is digested and processed and so on. The important concept to grasp is the change in translation. Like a child’s game of telephone, where one child whispers a story in
another’s ear and that child passes it on to the next, meaning layers upon meaning, images circle around until both the teller and the tale are completely transformed by the process of story. This example of the cyclical nature of the narrative underscores the prime measure of our ability to transmogrify our experiences, our religious family and cultural histories, and write a new chapter in the book of human experience and understanding.

The Painted Series – A beginning at the end, and the end at the beginning

Through the cyclical nature of narrative, the series is transformed as things are added at our own discretion. The colors we use to define and embellish our tale are latent, like the photographic image when it is exposed but not processed. In order to bring them to life we must take the necessary steps to fulfill our potential as storytellers. Through the expressive use of brush strokes, the images in the painted series are a combination of character studies and stories that have had details filled in that shape their empty spaces, and add new details to the narrative. Potential still exists for the viewer to add content, but we must deal with the information presented to redefine our narratives once again.

Throughout the journey we have been guided. Some unseen force has exerted subtle clues about the conclusions we might draw. Now we are shown that the Archangel Uriel is Mocking us, our protector has lead us astray into the realm of the shadow once again. (fig. 27) What unseen hand pulls these strings and suggests that the Western creatress, Eve, is masquerading as Snow White? (fig. 28) Or that her sister Rose Red is cunning and sly as she gazes back at us from her floral veil? (fig. 29) The magician
throws up her hands in wonder at the current of electric events that unfold before her.

(fig. 30) Perhaps only the Belle, who confronts us with her knowing stare from under a rain of tears, is the one who truly knows “the answer.” (fig. 31) She is the one whose gaze meets the camera dead on – she is the one who is aware of her position and can confront the transformative nature of the artist’s vision.

Mixing and melding history with our own interpretations of our existence and experience, only human beings are equipped to comprehend that it is through our acquaintance with our shadow selves, and through the art of fabricating the stories we weave, that we create the world around us. Even though our stories contain details and motifs from the generations of stories that were told before ours, we know that future generations will incorporate the texture and heft of our tales and knit them into the universal consciousness. Our stories will become their stories, and our reality will merge with theirs to form their perceptions of reality. “The store of fairy tales, that blue chamber where stories lie waiting to be rediscovered, holds out the promise of...creative enchantments, not only for its own characters caught in its own plotlines; it offers magical metamorphoses to the one who opens the door, who passes on what was found there, and to those who hear what the storyteller brings. The faculty of wonder, like curiosity, can make things happen; it is time for wishful thinking to have its due.”

With eyes wide open and wonder in our hearts, we begin to weave the tale of our journey into the woods. On this particular trip, will we find wolves?

Epilogue

Storytelling is the place where we explore our purest virtues and our blackest vices, our loftiest dreams and our darkest fears. We learn how to behave as good little
children through the tales we tell or hear at night before we drift off to sleep. We weave those words into our dream state – they flow from our dreams into the tapestry of mythologies that connect us to the dreamers of a thousand generations before us.

As any child knows, saying a thing thrice makes it so. So through transformation, we end where we began –

Once upon a time...

Once upon a time...

Once upon a time...
END NOTES


2. ibid. Von Franz 3,4


4. ibid. Bettelheim, p. 36

5. ibid. Bettelheim, p. 36


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Von Franz, Marie-Louise, *Shadow and Evil in Fairy Tales*, Boston, MA, Shambhala, 1995

CURRICULUM VITAE

Mary Yates
1400 South Third Street #1A
Louisville, KY 40208

Education

BA - Honors
Eckerd College, St. Petersburg, FL, 1991
MA – GPA 3.97
University of Louisville, Louisville, KY, 2005

Grants and Awards

2005
Allen R. Hite Travel Grant

2004
Artist Bill Fischer Working Artist Grant, Community Foundation of Louisville
Allen R. Hite Scholarship, Teaching Assistantship
Mary Craik Graduate Scholarship

2003
Mary Craik Graduate Scholarship
Allen R. Hite Scholarship

2000
“Suitcase Project” Kentucky Art and Craft Foundation Purchase Award
Kentucky Foundation for Women Grant, Special Initiative
“Women, Art and Social Change”

Activities

2004
Production Assistant, Delphi Center, University of Louisville (Hubble’s Heritage)
Louisville, KY
Photographer, Roman Epigraphy Project, Speed Museum, Louisville, KY
Public Relations Coordinator, Guerrilla Girls Event, University of Louisville / Speed Museum
Gallery Assistant, Allen R. Hite Galleries, University of Louisville
Creative Co-director, Pyro Gallery, Louisville, KY

2002
Juror Ballard High School Art Contest
Juror Scholastic Art Competition, Louisville, KY
KFW focus group on women artists and fostering a community in which they are nurtured
Louisville Film and Video Festival Committee

2001
Louisville Film and Video Festival Committee
1997  Visiting Artist, Mary Anderson Center for the Arts “Salmagundi Sunday”, Mount St. Francis, IN
       Juror for Lee Hamilton’s Art Competition, New Albany, IN

1995  Photographer for Mary Anderson Center For the Arts “Working Without a Net”, symposium with Kurt Vonnegut, Karen Grassle, Paolo Soleri and Pat Renick, Mount St. Francis, IN

1991  Photographic documentation of a captive primate enrichment project, Chimpanzoo, Lowry Park Zoo, Tampa, FL
       “Give Hope” Cover Chimpanzoo Newsletter

Press and Media

2005  Interview, Louisville Scene, Music Section.

2002  Television appearance, WAVE 3 Morning Louisville Film and Video Festival spokesperson with filmmaker Robbie Henson promoting the films “The Badge” and “Summerstock”
       Television appearance, FOX in the Morning, Artswatch spokesperson “Creepy Doll Invitational”
       Television appearance, WAVE 3 Morning Show, as Featured Artist at the Nitty Gritty Staff Pick, LEO Weekly, for Nitty Gritty Show
       Television Appearance, WHAS 6 o'clock news interview with Barry Bernson, Artswatch spokesperson

2001  Television appearance, WAVE 3 Morning Show, KACF Cyanotype Workshop WFPK radio interview with Kim Sorise on Sine::apsis Experiments Plug and Play Show, Artswatch spokesperson
     Television appearance, WAVE 3 Morning Show, Citiworks/Artswatch spokesperson

Selected Group Exhibitions

2005  “The Surreal Narrative: Contemporary Tintypes and Video” MA Thesis Exhibition, Belknap Gallery- University of Louisville, Louisville, KY

2004  “First Annual Nudes Show – Male” Pyro Gallery, Louisville, KY

2004  “3 State Political Invitational”, Glassworks, Louisville, KY

2004  “Pyro Artists”, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Louisville, KY

2004  “Alumni Invitational”, The Arts Center, St. Peters burg, FL
2004 “Rock Art”, Cinderblock, Louisville, KY
2004 “Photo Show”, Mellwood Arts Center, Louisville, KY
2004 “Faculty Show”, Artopia Visual Art Studios, Louisville, KY
2003 “Small Works”, Pyro Gallery, Louisville, KY
2003 November Featured Artist, The Nitty Gritty, Louisville, KY
2003 “New Members”, Pyro Gallery, Louisville, KY
2003 “Rock Art” group exhibition, The Cinderblock, Louisville, KY
2003 December group exhibition, Cerlan Gallery, Lexington, KY
2003 Juror's Choice Award, Faculty / Student Exhibit, Artopia, Louisville, KY
2003 “Food Glorious Food”, Louisville Visual Art Association, Louisville, KY
2002 “Holiday Show”, Cerlan Gallery, Lexington, KY
2002 “No Longer Civily Dead” guest artist for Michelle Kellon Amos’s performance art show, St. John’s Renaissance Center, Louisville, KY
2002 “Creepy Doll Invitational”, Artswatch, Louisville, KY
2002 “Homage to 9-11”, Cerlan Gallery, Lexington, KY
2002 September Featured Artist, The Nitty Gritty, Louisville, KY
2002 Towers Invitational, Louisville Visual Art Association and Chapel Gallery Louisville, KY
2002 Ohio Valley Annual, juried competition, Carnegie Center for the Arts, New Albany, IN
2002 Mary Anderson Center Alumni & Friends Bi-annual, Actors Theatre, Louisville, KY
2001 Instructor Cyanotype workshop at the Kentucky Art and Craft Foundation, Louisville,
2001 Instructor and Student show, Artopia, Louisville, KY
2001 Group Show, Pegasus Gallery, Standiford Field Airport, Louisville, KY
2000 “Preview/Review” Swanson Cralle Gallery, Louisville, KY
2000 “Photography Invitational” Artswatch, Louisville, KY
2000 Alternative Process Photography Exhibit, Artopia, Louisville, KY
2000 “Open House Show” Artopia, Louisville, KY
2000 “Mary Anderson Center for the Arts’ Alumni and Friends Art Show” at Actors Theatre of Louisville, Louisville, KY
2000 “Instructor Show”, Artopia, Louisville, KY
2000 J.B. Speed Museum “Afternoon Tea” Art Auction, Louisville, KY
1997 Alumni Invitational, Elliot Gallery, St. Petersburg, FL
1997 “Tuxes and Tails”, Humane Society Art Auction, Louisville, KY
1996 Visiting Artist, Mary Anderson Center for the Arts “Salmagundi Sunday”, Mount St. Francis, IN
1996 “Tuxes and Tails”, Humane Society Art Auction, Louisville, KY
1992 Alumni Invitational, Elliot Gallery, St. Petersburg, FL
1991 "Absolute Equilibrium", Thesis Elliot Gallery, St. Petersburg, FL
fig. 5

fig. 6
fig. 7