

**:: GRANT WAHLQUIST GALLERY**



**TAD BECK**

# TAD BECK SCRYING



9/11–11/16/2024

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:: GRANT WAHLQUIST GALLERY

# SCRYING

"Scrying," Tad Beck's fourth solo presentation with the gallery, is a body of interrelated works in photography, video installation, and sculpture that explore the complex relationship between photography, memory, and the occult. "Scrying" models Beck's structuralist relationship to the camera—his commitment to stretching or extending the camera's capacities and attributes to test what a photograph is or can do—activated here through an investigation of his own childhood toys, loves, and fears. Joining the artist's formal and conceptual concerns with some of the most unabashedly personal subject matter of his *oeuvre* to date, the exhibition is among the artist's most sophisticated, yet also most accessible, and a triumph of retinal pleasure and psychological depth.

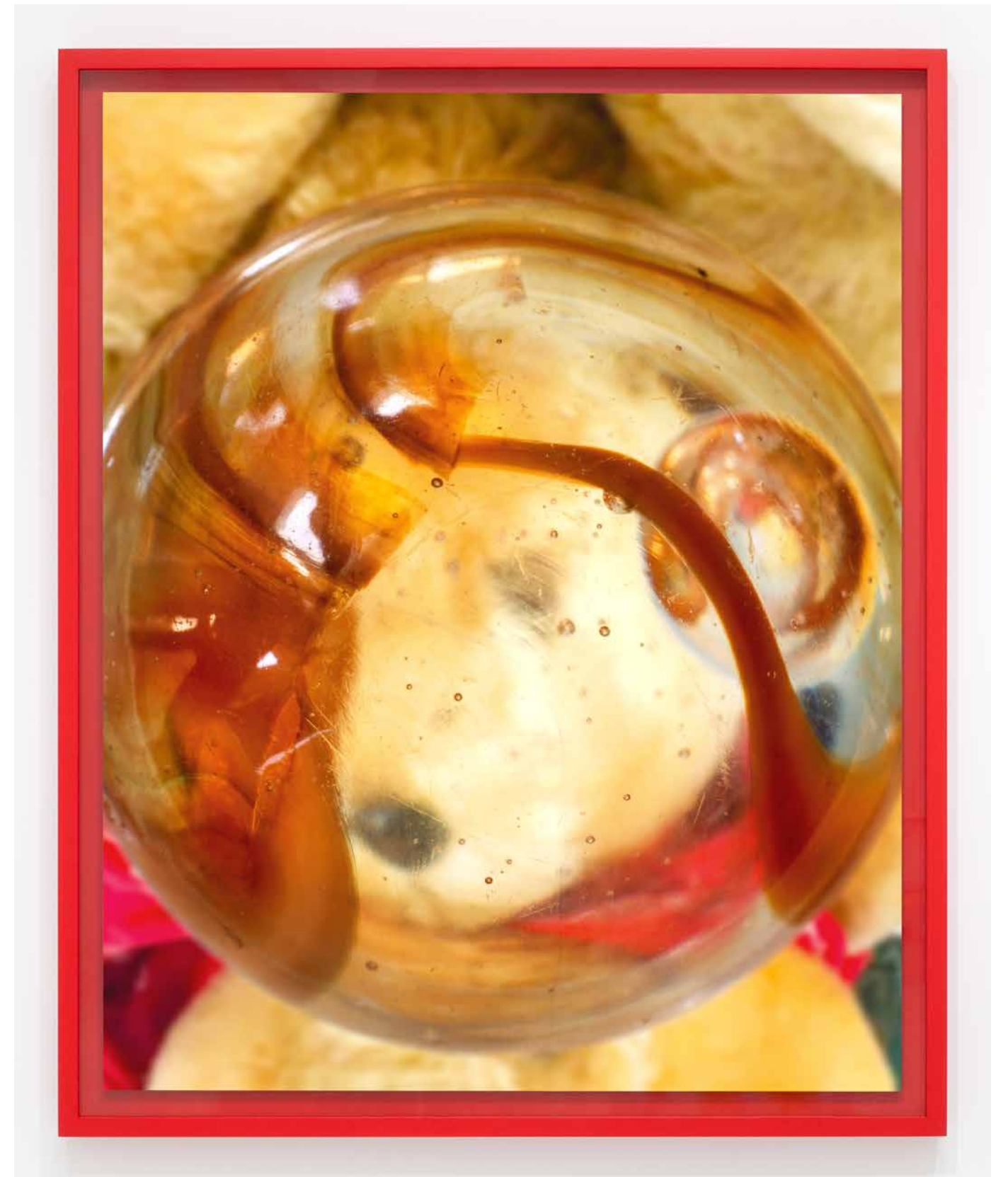
Taking its name from the divinatory practice of gazing into a medium from which revelation may arise—a crystal ball, a mirror—"Scrying" began with a series of photographs drawing on Beck's childhood delight in gazing through glass marbles, which he recently came to consider a primal experience of the satisfaction of experiencing objects and scenes through a lens. Making use of his longstanding practice of (re-)photographing images through refractive surfaces and substances, Beck photographed images of his beloved childhood toys through those very same marbles, generating inverted and distorted portraits of these cherished effects. Paying homage to the work of his teacher Mike Kelley, Beck marries Kelley's use of stuffed animals as symbols for cultural practices and psychological phenomena with his own photographic methods. Perennially stimulated by questions of

artistic influence and legacy, Beck places these images in brightly colored, painted frames in a fashion clearly inspired by Sarah Charlesworth's 1983-1988 series "Objects of Desire." As the writer David O'Neill wrote of Charlesworth's work, this body of photographs by Beck are "deceptive and honest, universal and personal, alienating and beckoning."

These photographs are displayed alongside a two-channel video installation presented on vintage projection screens surrounded by vintage chairs. Sharing its title with the exhibition as a whole, *Scrying* features two of Beck's childhood hand puppets, one sporting a wizard's hat in front of an array of seemingly occult objects, the other in front of a bookshelf displaying texts and catalogues on the work of Beck's artistic forebears (Kelley, Charlesworth, Zoe Leonard, Roni Horn, and more). These two characters engage in what at first appears to be a discourse on the nature of divination, as the lines spoken by the puppet in the wizard's hat are in fact appropriated from online scrying tutorials. However, students of the history of photography will quickly observe that the lines spoken by the yellow puppet in front of the bookcase are modifications of quotes from seminal 20th Century texts on the history and meaning of photography, from Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* to Susan Sontag's *On Photography* to Jack Kerouac's introduction to Robert Frank's *The Americans*. Accompanied by a commissioned score by Kevin Kenkel whose tones echo in the gallery, *Scrying* both informs and expands on the viewer's experience of the exhibition as a whole.

Finally, as if to oppose Barthes's assertion that there is "nothing Proustian in a photograph," "Scrying" contains a wall-mounted sculpture by Beck that pays homage to Marcel Proust's ruminations on memory and childhood, his famous remembrance of consuming a madeleine as a child in *In Search of Lost Time* in particular. In that passage, the protagonist's consumption of a madeleine conjures a series of memories from childhood at his Aunt Léonie's house that becomes a reflection on "the vast structure of recollection." In the process of developing this exhibition Beck discovered a photograph of the interior of The House of Aunt Léonie-Musée Marcel Proust in Illiers-Combray with a striking formation of plates mounted to the wall. Imagining that Proust might have sat in front of this array of plates as a child while consuming madeleines, Beck collected an identical number of vintage souvenir plates from places he has lived over the course of his life; these plates were painted with a chrome finish that obscures if not completely eliminates their underlying imagery, turning them into an array of scrying mirrors in the exact same formation as the plates in Léonie's house in Illiers-Combray. Simultaneously a self-portrait, a work of quasi-minimalist sculpture, and an inversion of the lenses present in the related photographs, this work embodies Proust's speculation that "[t]he past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) which we do not suspect. And as for that object, it depends on chance whether we come upon it or not before we ourselves must die."

**Tad Beck** received a B.F.A. in Photography from the School of Visual Arts, New York and an M.F.A. in Fine Art from Art Center College of Design, Pasadena. He lives in Vinalhaven, Maine. Beck's solo exhibitions include: the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; The Fisher Center at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York; Samuel Freeman Gallery, Los Angeles; Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (two-person exhibition with Jennifer Locke); Samuel Freeman Gallery, Los Angeles; Marisa Del Re Gallery, New York; Nathalie Karg Gallery, New York; and the Center for Maine Contemporary Art. His work has been featured in group exhibitions at numerous museums and galleries including: the Institute for Contemporary Art, Portland, Maine; the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut; the Center for Maine Contemporary Art; FotoFest, Houston; Spritmuseum, Stockholm; the Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Massachusetts; the Portland Museum of Art, Maine; and the Worcester Art Museum, Massachusetts. His work is in the collections of the Addison Gallery of American Art; the Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, Maine; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; the Princeton Museum of Art; the Portland Museum of Art; the Wadsworth Atheneum; and the Worcester Art Museum.



**Teddy**

2024

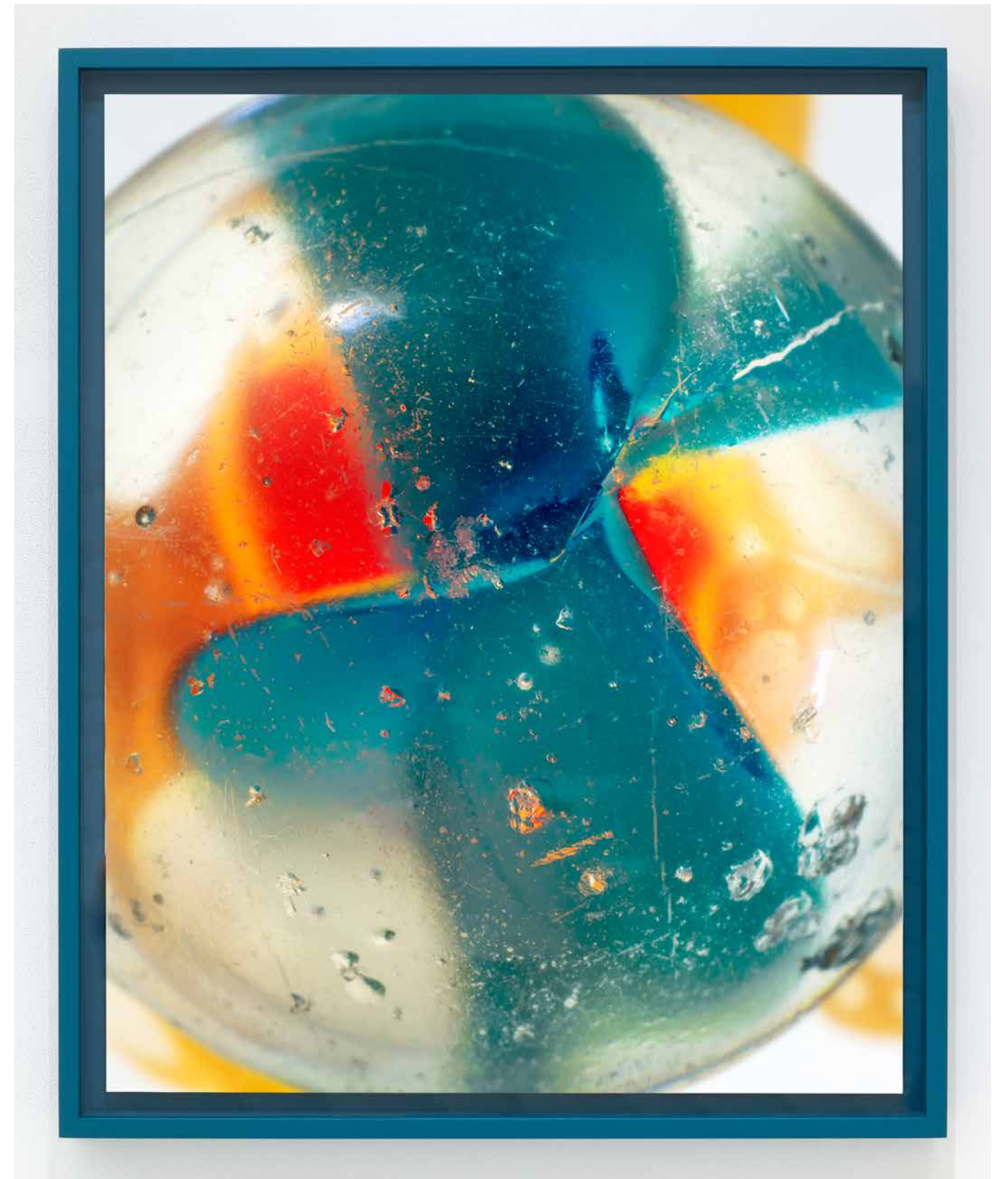
Archival inkjet print mounted to Dibond in custom painted frame

44.5 x 33 inches

Ed. 3 + 1 AP







***Rabbit***

2024

Archival inkjet print mounted to Dibond in custom painted frame

44.5 x 33 inches

Ed. 3 + 1 AP







***Panda***

2024

Archival inkjet print mounted to Dibond in custom painted frame

44.5 x 33 inches

Ed. 3 + 1 AP





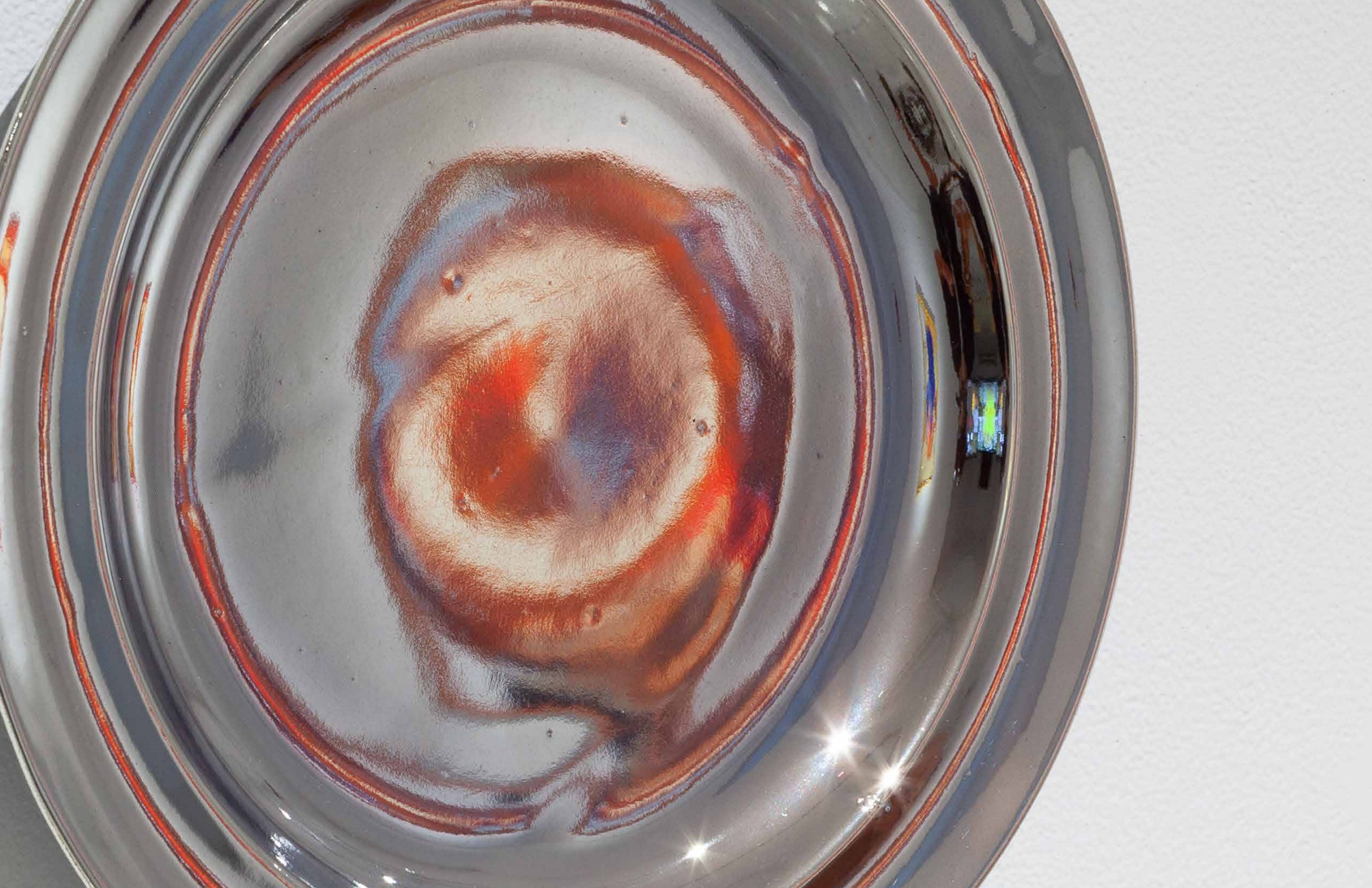


***Scrying (A Proustian Photograph)***

2024

Fifteen ceramic souvenir plates, Pchrome coating, stainless steel hardware

44.5 x 79.5 inches





Maine

The Pine Tree State

STATE CAPITOL





***Pink Elephant***

2024

Archival inkjet print mounted to Dibond in custom painted frame

44.5 x 33 inches

Ed. 3 + 1 AP





# VISION AND VISIONS IN TAD BECK'S SCRYING BY NANCY KATHRYN BURNS

The word scry almost immediately summons thoughts of the paranormal and soothsaying, but in essence, to scry is to seek. It is also a form of exploration that requires a tool imbued with mystical powers. Tad Beck's newest body of work "Scrying" investigates the analogous aims of the crystal ball and the camera—and, by extension, the fortune teller and the photographer. His colossal marbles, wall-engaged divination mirrors, and puppetry coalesce into a statement about the nature of image-making conveyed through his lifelong relationship with lenses. In turn, "Scrying" may best be understood as a self-constructed mid-career "introspective" instead of the more commonly mounted "retrospective."

I began following Beck's career over a decade ago, acquiring two of his works for the Worcester Art Museum's collection. Bleeding through Beck's series "Palimpsest" is the specter of the canon. At the time, I was interested in how time functioned in his work. In *Palimpsest 2*, 2009, for example, he seamlessly merges contemporary photographs of male nudes with those taken by nineteenth-century painter Thomas Eakins and his students, then presents them within ornamental repoussé frames. I interpreted them as Beck's seductive critique of the academic male nude by superimposing his overtly gay male gaze upon that of Eakins's covert

Victorian thirst traps taken under the guise of study. In hindsight, my prior interpretation of "Palimpsest" was too narrow.

In 2019, I acquired another of Beck's photographs from "Blanks," a series of abstract photographs documenting light entering the studio. Beck's prior work consistently referred to the body either directly or implicitly. "Blanks," on the other hand, considered the relationship between interior and exterior spaces and the often-tenuous connection between analog and digital photography. With this group of lush white squares, I could see that Beck had stretched visually and conceptually. However, my assessment of his work again remained too narrow, seeing his project as dialectical, seeking the interpenetration of opposites.

With 2024's "Scrying" Beck presents the most diaristic and conceptually complex of his major bodies of work. He explores the nature of photography using objects he gravitated towards as a child. Upon entering the gallery, visitors are confronted with an assemblage of chrome-lacquered plates, *Scrying (A Proustian Photograph)*. Mirror-like but too apparently patinaed to perfectly reflect, the plates are a quiet but critical hinge linking Beck's photographs and the two-channel video *Scrying* (in a medium for which he is better known).



***Palimpsest 2***

2009

Facemounted lightjet print

Worcester Art Museum

Chapin Riley Fund at the Greater Worcester Community Foundation

Ed. 1 of 3 + 1 AP

2015.38.1

Manufactured originally as keepsakes, each plate represents a place Beck has lived. Their clinquant finish turns the plates into scrying mirrors, linking two key themes: the souvenir and the looking glass. Commonly, souvenirs are trinkets acquired to remember a day at the amusement park, a visit to the Eiffel Tower, or a romantic getaway. They are tokens of memory, designated as such at the time of purchase. A looking glass is synonymous with a mirror, but really, it's any object that can reflect an image, including the eye and a lens.

*Tigger* is one of six photographs featuring a jumbo-sized marble simultaneously obscuring, magnifying, and inverting one of Beck's childhood toys. In each, the marble functions as a fetishized hand-held collectible, a lens, and, in the larger context of the exhibition, a crystal ball. However, unlike most divination devices, Beck's marbles aren't used to look into the future; instead, they serve as an aperture into his past. Although he played with the marbles—manifested by occasional nicks and scratches—he preferred to peer through them. They are after-the-fact souvenirs of Beck's first scopes.

Relying on autobiography as the point of departure for any project comes with a sea of trepidation and/or temptation. On the surface it seems the most

accessible source material. Yet, there's a reason many seek the support of a therapist: most of us need assistance entering ourselves. Artists can easily become unmoored introspective explorers, creating work that begins as self-directed and ends as an inchoate cacophony of ideas and iconography. In contrast, sometimes visual references are so on-the-nose that the resulting objects are a form of inside baseball requiring intimate knowledge of the maker to appreciate fully. Beck successfully bridges the subjective gap between himself and the viewer by positioning the photographs around a modest, universally relatable toy.

Tying together all of the exhibition's major themes is *Scrying*, a dialogue between two simple and well-worn puppets manipulated and narrated by Beck. The black puppet in a wizard's hat on the left, #1, appropriates lines from YouTube videos schooling viewers on the basics of crystal ball divination. The yellow puppet, #2, presented slightly below #1 and to its right, appears to be a devotee, affirming and parroting back the words of his teacher. Instead, #2 reframes his spiritual teacher's lesson and responds with quotes from several famous texts wrestling with photography's status as simultaneously objective and subjective, like Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* and Susan Sontag's *On Photography*. Remarkably, as seen in the exchange below, the



**Vinalhaven-10.09.18**

from "Blanks"

2018

Archival inkjet print

Worcester Art Museum

Chapin Riley Fund at the Greater Worcester Community Foundation

Unique

2019.102

puppets' conversation appears fluid, rather than two characters talking at (not to) each other:

#1: So let's talk about the crystal ball when you work with it. The first thing you want to do is to clear your mind. You cannot come in from work or have had an argument or you're stressed, or you're exhausted or anything like that and get good results from working with your crystal ball. You're going to want to clear your mind. Take a few deep breaths, relax, exhale. Do it five or ten times. Kind of clear your mind. Then, concentrate on what you want the crystal ball to show you. When you're looking at the crystal ball, the best way I can explain it is this: you're not looking at the crystal ball. You're more looking in the middle of the crystal ball.

#2: I'm trying to move beyond looking at the subject of my gaze, which is my crystal ball. I'm starting to see details that are unexpected: image worlds, which dwell in the smallest things—meaningful yet covert enough to find a hiding place in waking dreams!

Here, #2 recites from a translation of Walter Benjamin's 1931 "Little History of Photography,"

which identifies photography's ability to open new "image-worlds" that benefit from an interpretive model better associated with the psychoanalytic approach to dreams as opposed to an empirical methodology. In this case, #2 has taken wizard #1's directive on acquiring prophetic vision with a crystal ball and married it to the subject-object relationship between the photographer and a camera's monocular (scrying) eye.

The entire exhibition is syncretic and simultaneous, not directed at a religious deity, but rather at the transcendent nature of photography. Existing concurrently as present and past, subject and object, document and dream, physical and spectral, the photograph is divine evidence, and the photographer is its oracle. Throughout "Scrying," Beck is *both* puppets, scrying with the camera and using his earliest memories of photographs to teach the viewer how to enter the optical unconscious.

**Nancy Kathryn Burns** is the Stoddard Curator of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs at the Worcester Art Museum.







***Scrying***

2024

Two-channel video installation with sound

4k digital video projector, projector mount, two vintage projection screens, four Heywood Wakefield chairs

Score: Kevin Kenkel

Overall dimensions variable

Trt: 10:35

[Video documentation](#)

Ed. 1 + 1AP



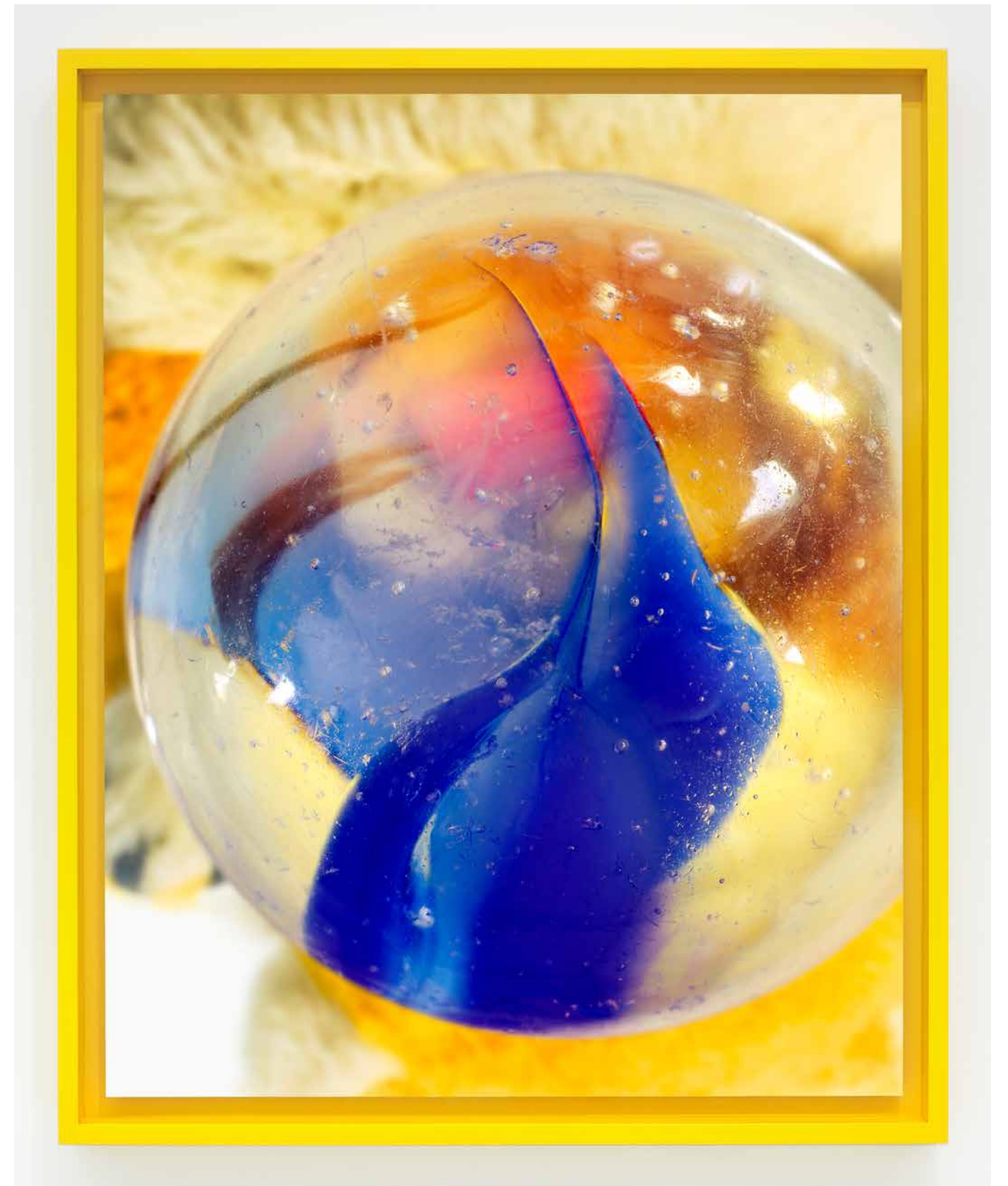












***Tigger***

2024

Archival inkjet print mounted to Dibond in custom painted frame

44.5 x 33 inches

Ed. 3 + 1 AP







***Hound***

2024

Archival inkjet print mounted to Dibond in custom painted frame

44.5 x 33 inches

Ed. 3 + 1 AP





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