

Medium Emotions
Jess Willa Wheaton

Text by Natasha Marie Llorens

Jess Willa

Wheaton's work centers

on the suture. There is a history to her endeavor: from the moment images were produced with a claim to index the real and the intention to sell an idea of truth, beauty, justice, luxury, youth, love, desire, etc., there were artists protesting their seamlessness, their coherence, even their fundamental honesty. The breakdown of language in Dadaist collage, especially in Zurich and Paris before the Second World War, and its partial reassembly by John Heartfield and Hannah Hoch in Berlin in response to the rise of fascism, are two of its more radical episodes. Heartfield and Hoch felt an urgency to disrupt the truth claims made by photography in the hands of mass advertisers, state-run news organizations, and in propaganda campaigns by the Nazi party and its avatars, but they were not after a complete disintegration of language into non-sense. They sought instead to demonstrate the constitutive vulnerability of the image's rhetoric. They tore open the first glossy images and re-sutured them with delirious fury.

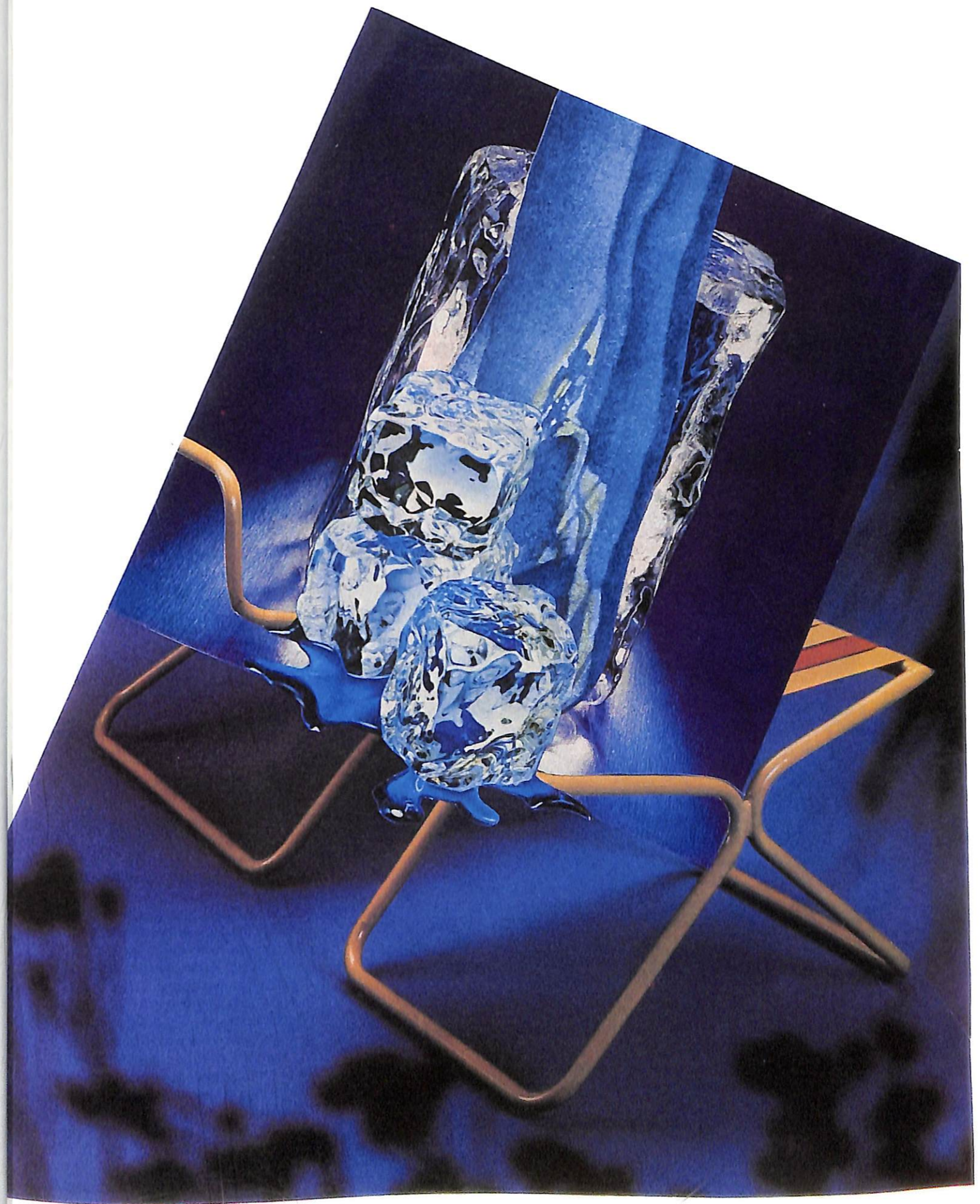
When Wheaton rends an image, she does so in order to will its dream into appearance. When she brings an image into contact with another, their touch suggests the structure of each one's fantasy. Unlike the Berlin Dada collages, her work is precisely balanced; it does not re-constitute an image's meaning for the viewer. This is the point Leo Steinberg made of Robert Rauschenberg's collages as well: Rauschenberg used the canvas as a horizontal, depthless surface on which to place fragments of the world in order to reorganize them. He produced new sense, but he also demonstrated that meaning relies on context, adjacency, the frame, and the order it structures. He made the recognition of an image's mutability central to the work of art. Wheaton returns to the problem of the natural world—that of water and landscape and the animal—but without relinquishing Rauschenberg's commitment to representing the operational processes by which culture is produced.

Though her attention to each fragment's texture, viscosity, and density is meticulous, what really interests Wheaton is the transition between them. Her medium is the space each image is forced to inhabit together with another in sense. The stable selling power of an image can be broken by association with another, this Heartfield and Hoch also knew, but Wheaton slices an image where it is most vulnerable to being undone, at the site where its own dreams are closest to the surface. She pierces images where their claim to the indexical register is thinnest, finding each place by touch.

Wheaton's
process, that of sifting through
paper archives compiled from disparate sources
that are often produced decades apart, is intimate. These handmade collages could
not have been made before the touch-screen appeared as a portal to Internet technology,
because they are of the body in response to an expanse of disembodied digital space that
forms the horizon of imagination for many. The work is inescapably the result of
her fingers sliding across paper, searching for its edges, uncovering the image below.
This process leaves a residue in the structure of each collage, or the sense that the watcher
is falling in and out of frames as they watch the places Wheaton has touched and cut and
sutured. Her collages are flat, but as they have no ground in time and space, they are also
endless, dizzying. Their formal equilibrium resolved, they are somehow also never still.

Like any open surface, Wheaton's collages are polyvalent. They are a meditation on climate
change, on whiteness, on collective delusion and collective grief, on polymorphous love.
To name these things directly in relation to specific works, however, threatens to return
them to some state of conceptual resolution. Resolution would void Wheaton's attention
to the suture, it would obstruct the work's attempt to demonstrate that even the most
coherent kinds of images, advertising images, can be made to betray themselves or can
be made to dream. Instead, I have dreamed with them, trying to maintain the concise
irreverence with which they were constructed.

Natasha Marie Llorens
Marseille, May 2018



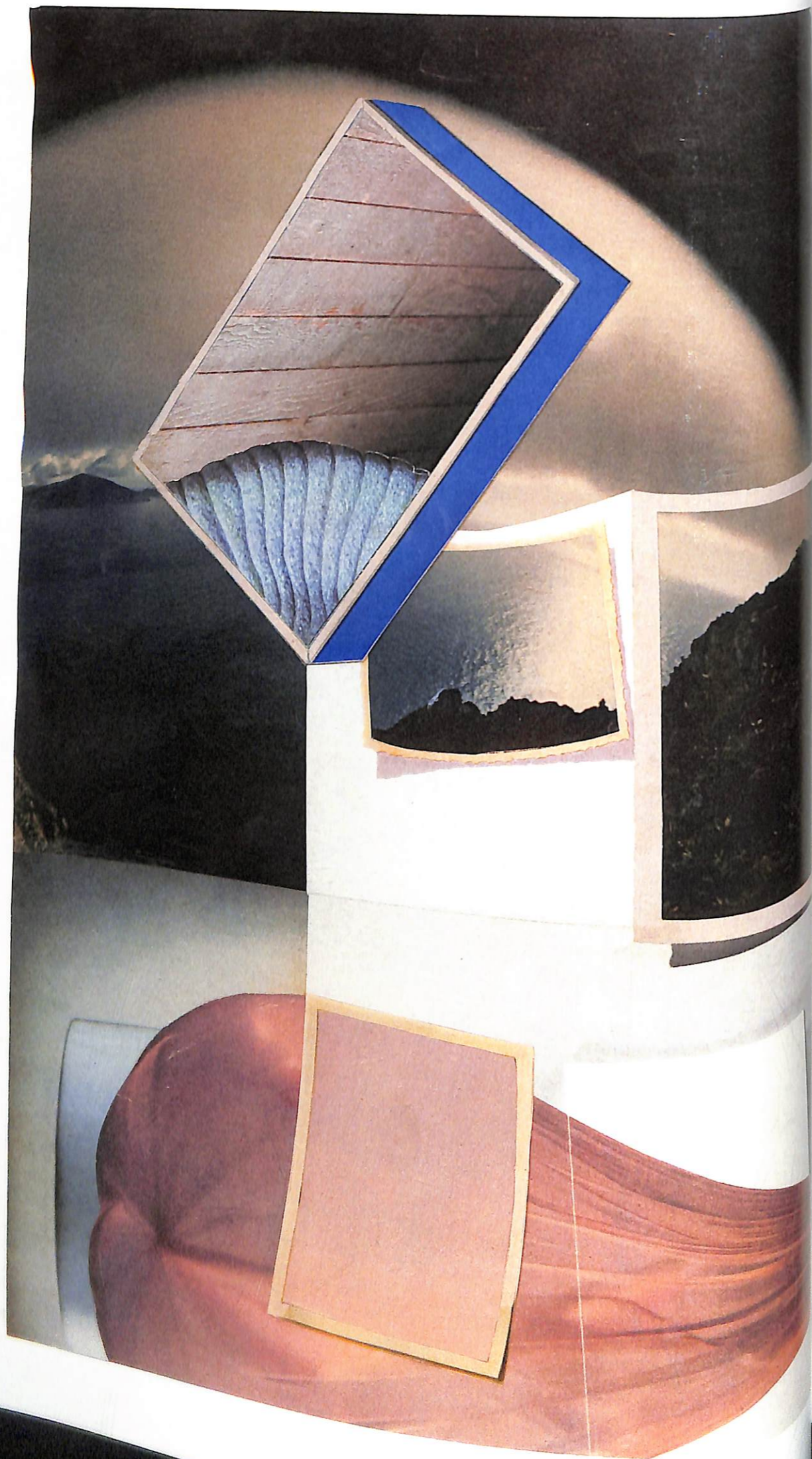


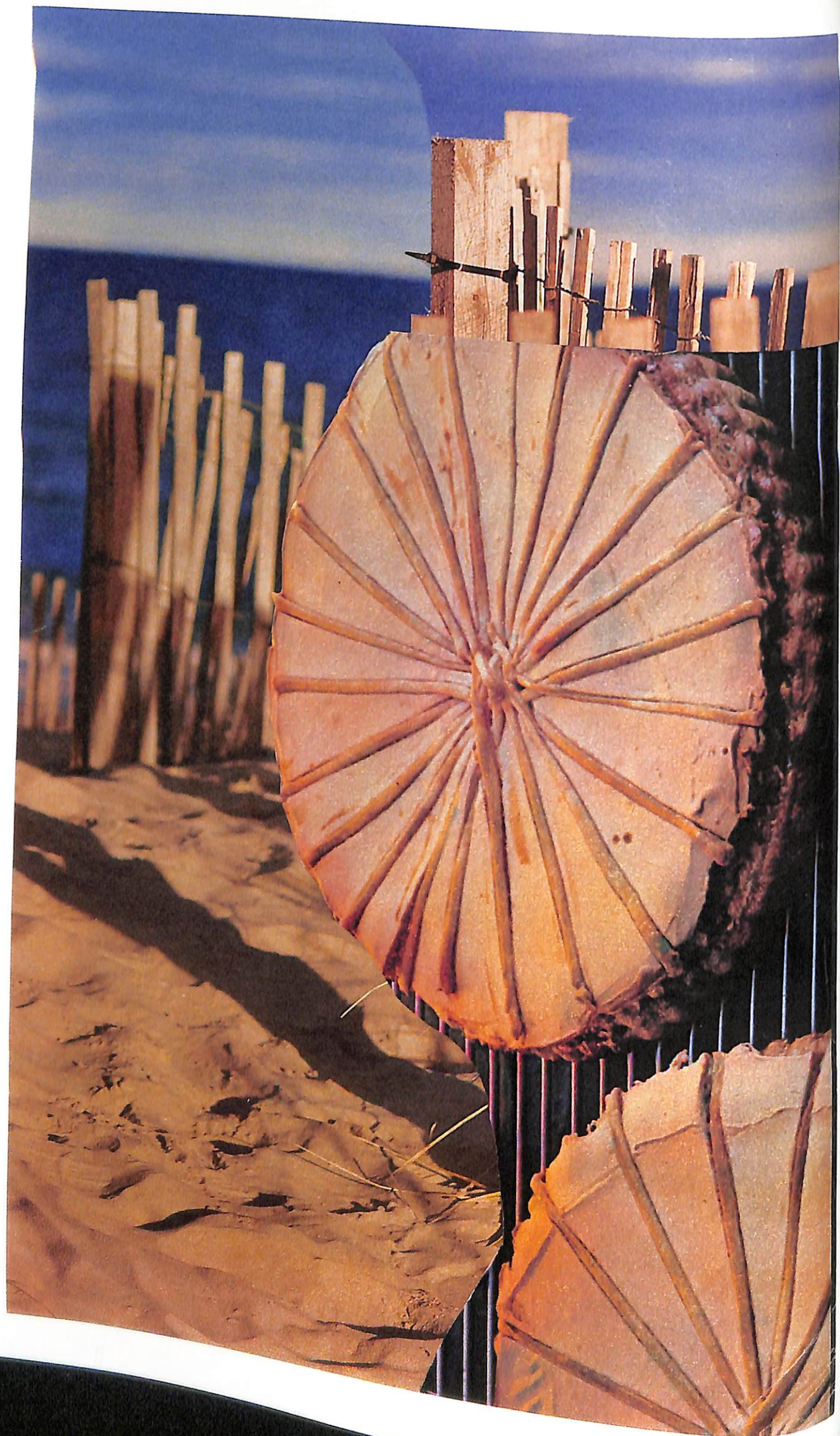


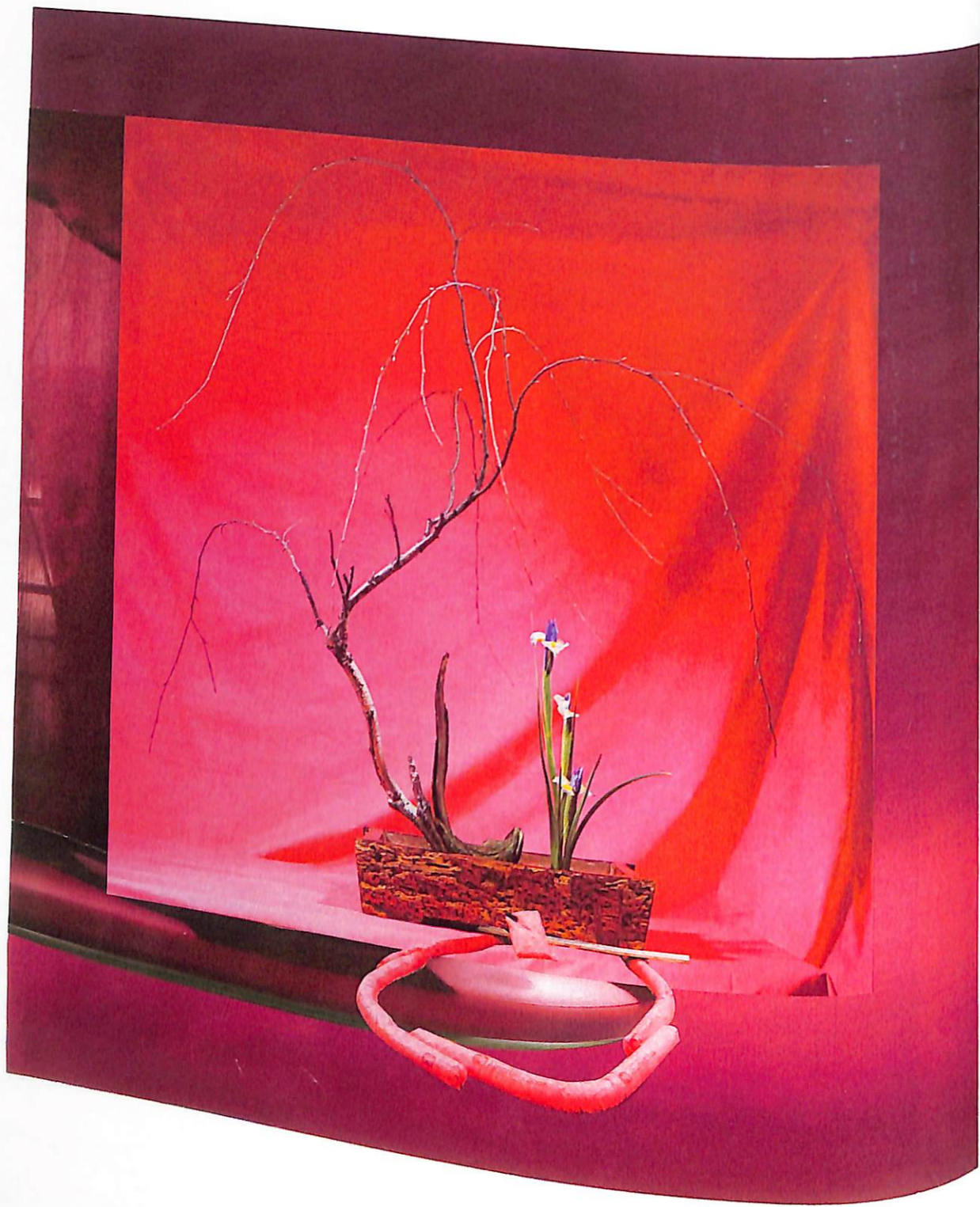
Paper weights are firmly placed on each important semiotic seam. Office plants stand at the ready to dampen the sound of frivolity. But there is no telling what shade of green will result from the inevitable collide of figure with ground, just as there is no guarantee that the painting surface will catch everything thrown at it. Even the stones are transparent here.



You told me that the place where pictures come from was so full that I would lose my mind if I found it, because it would exceed my capacity to think myself in relation to the density of possibles it contained. For twenty-seven years, I believed you. I wish that I had never learned the truth.



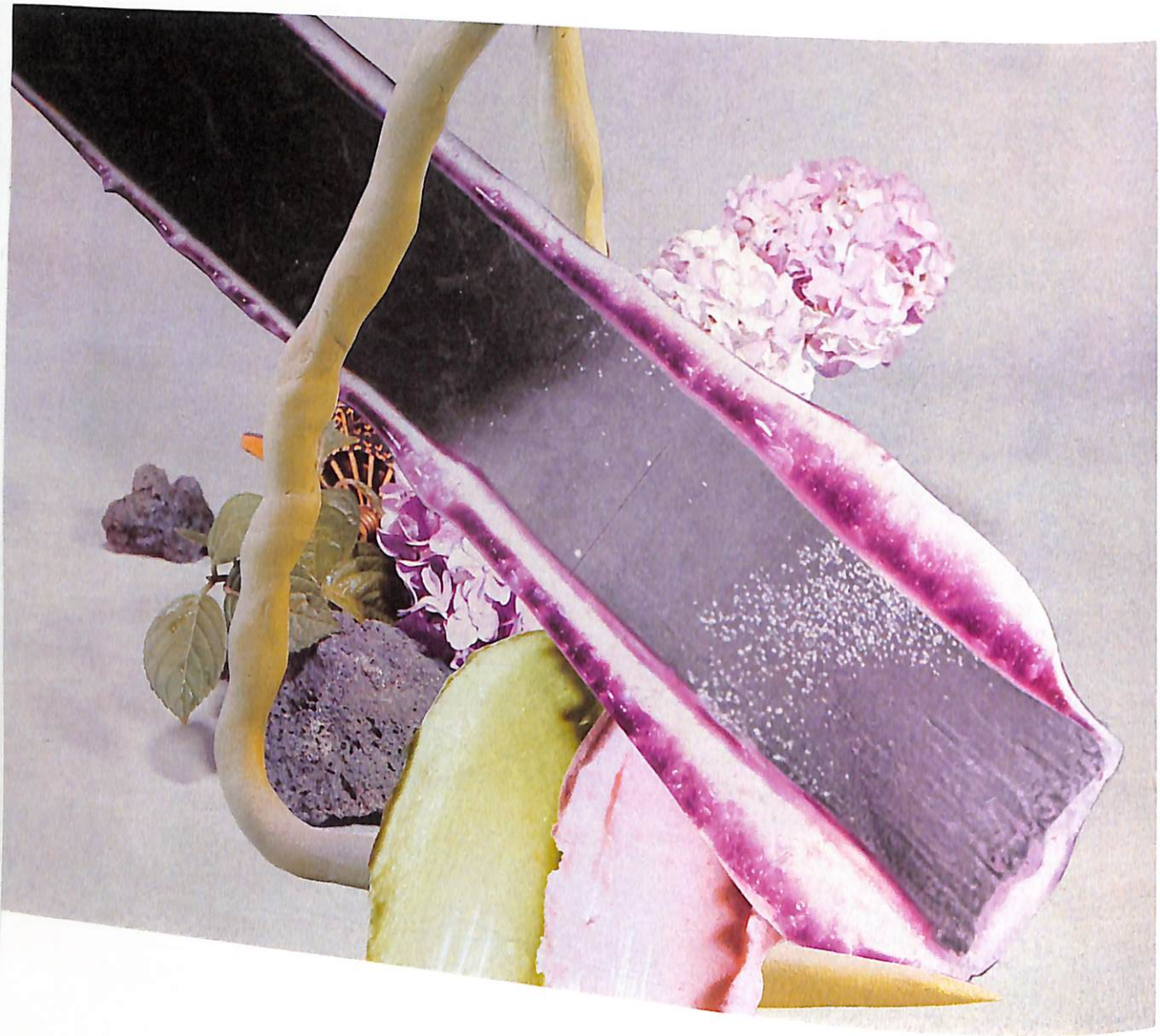




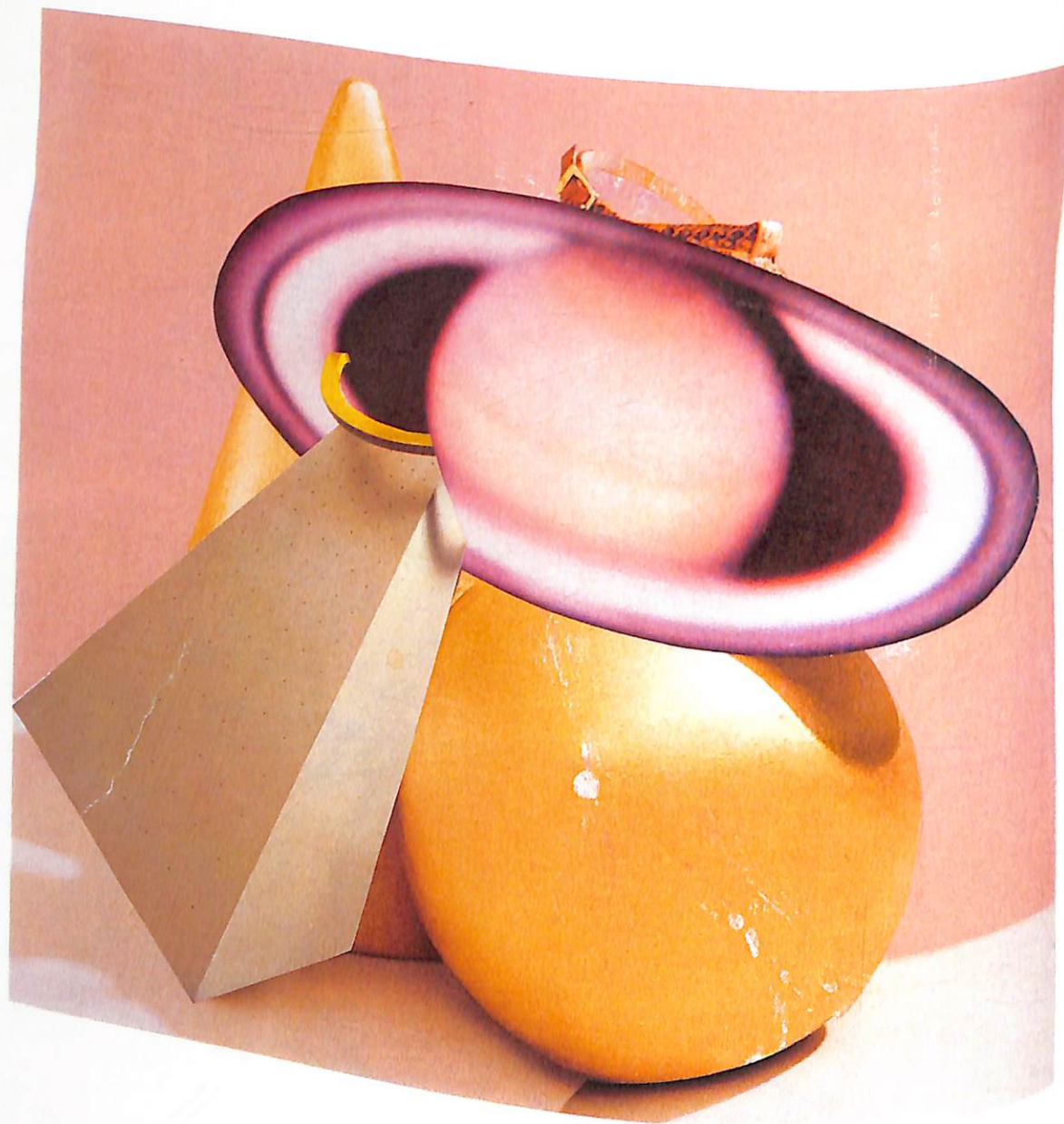


You put the sandbags at the threshold of that shady lane to try to keep it from bleeding out of its picture frame. But you forgot we can still see the cotton-candy colored Styrofoam scaffolding that is holding up the river bank, that is just beneath the surface of the stream. A fantasy of virgin land underpinned with toxic idealism, its beauty a lure for those who imagine themselves innocent, still.

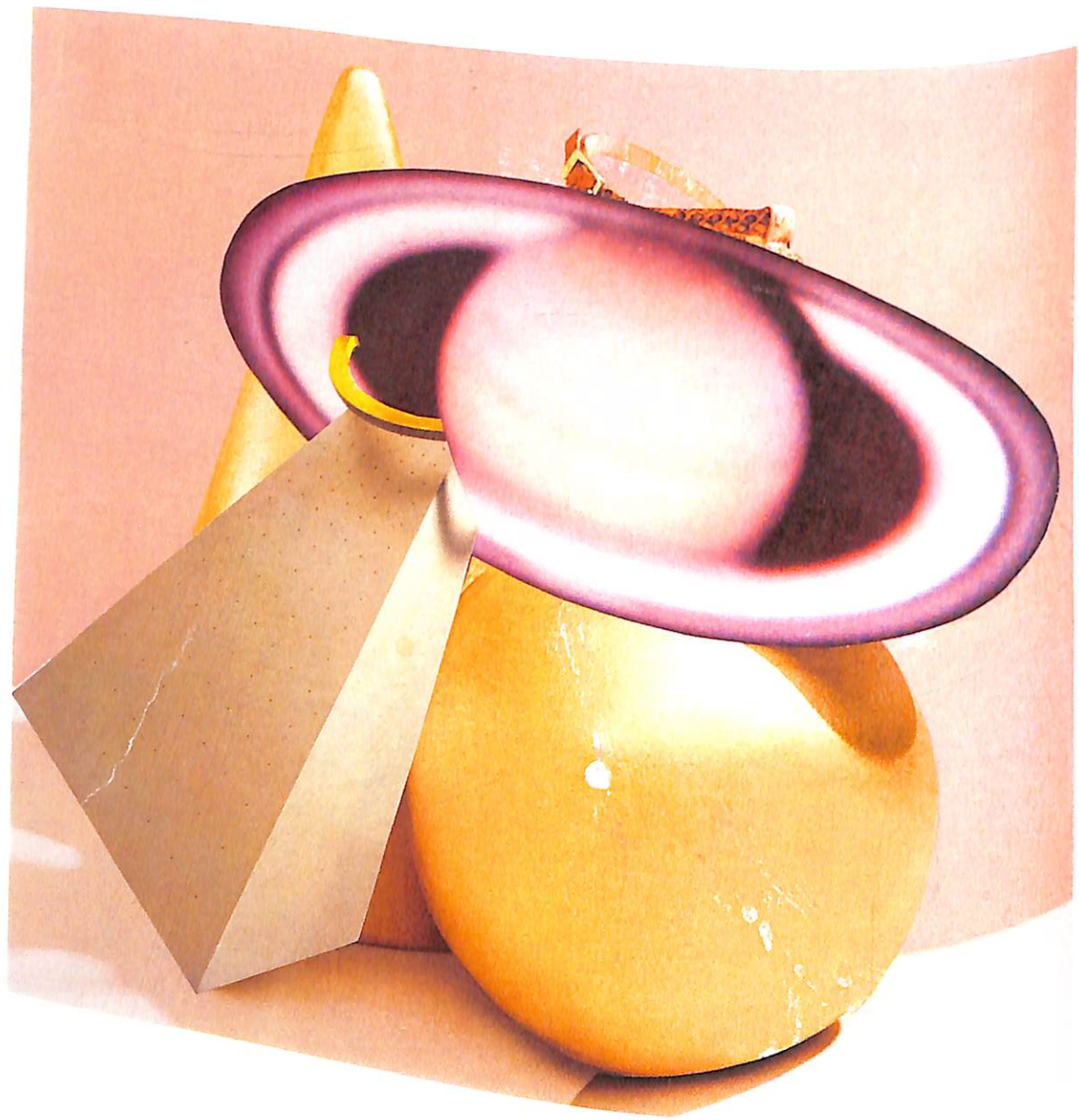








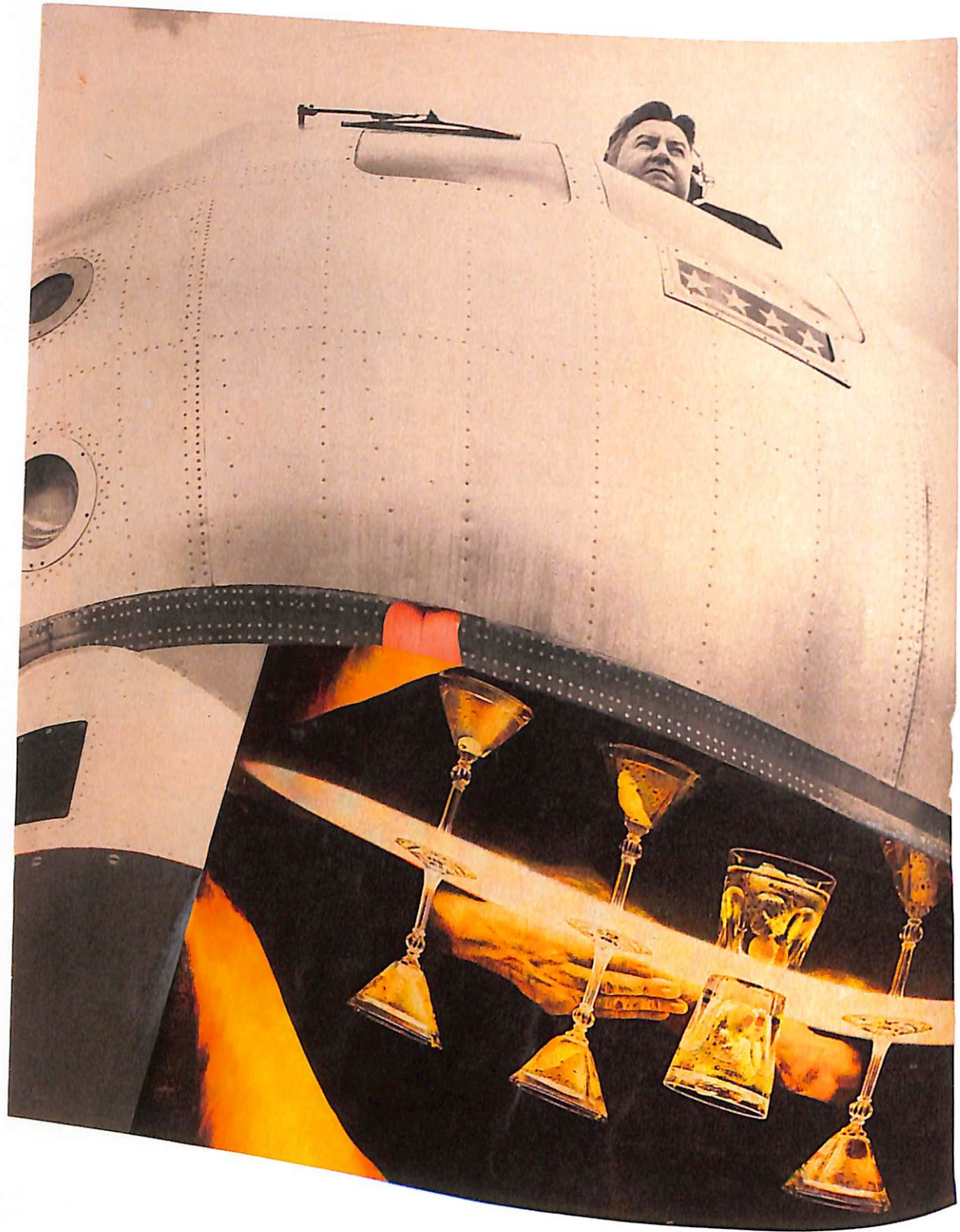
In EXECUTIVE ancora più vantaggi: 7 biglietti più 3 in regalo!



In
EXECUTIVE
ancora
più vantaggi:
7 biglietti più
3 in regalo!



You say that the horizon was always vertical, that I am not in free fall, but I still can't feel the ground in this dusk light. You say that the gilt at my ankles is made of fine, flexible thread, though I have lost circulation and with it a feeling for the truthful color of my body. Without the feeling, what does it matter which parts of me you break.



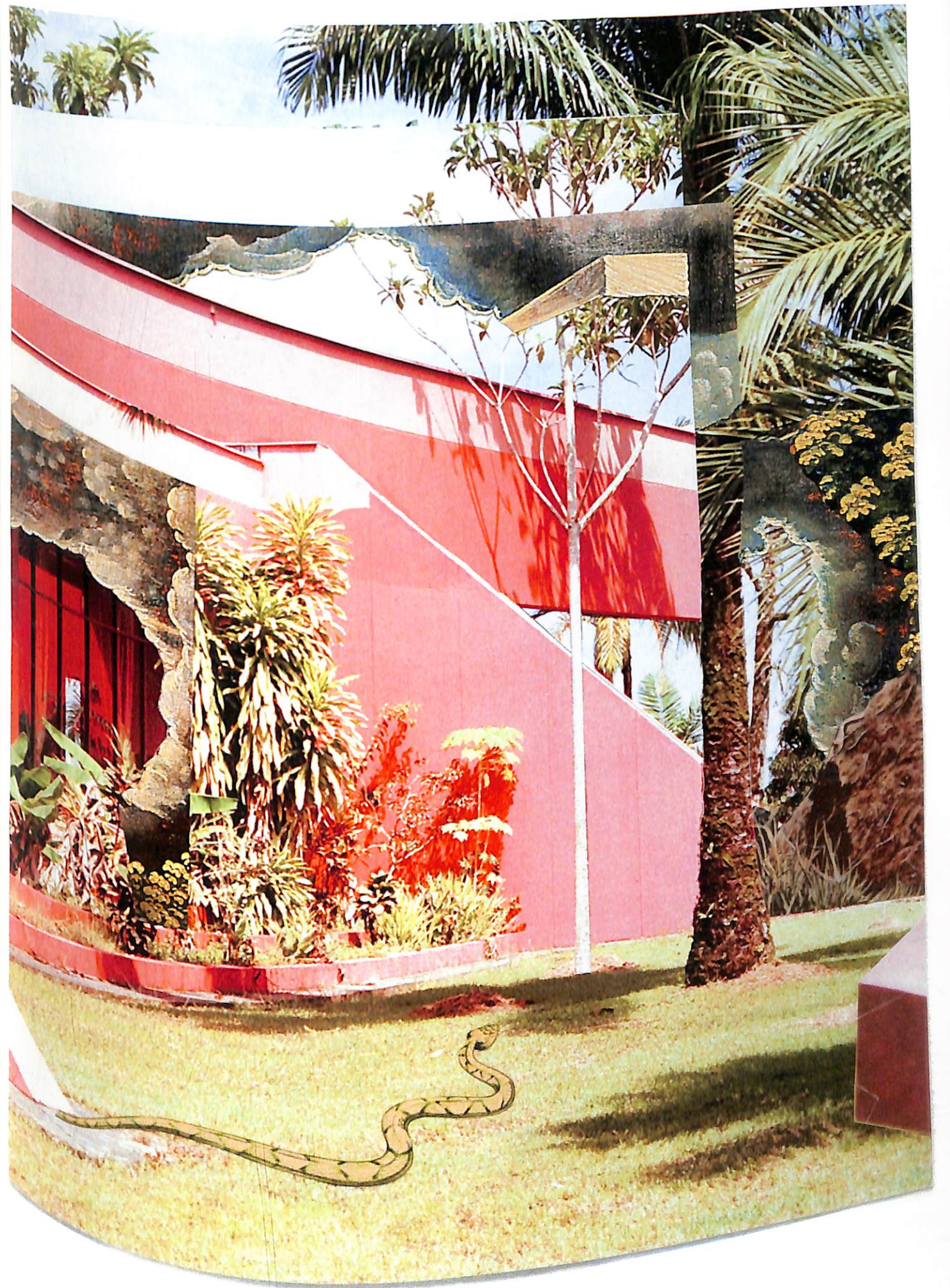


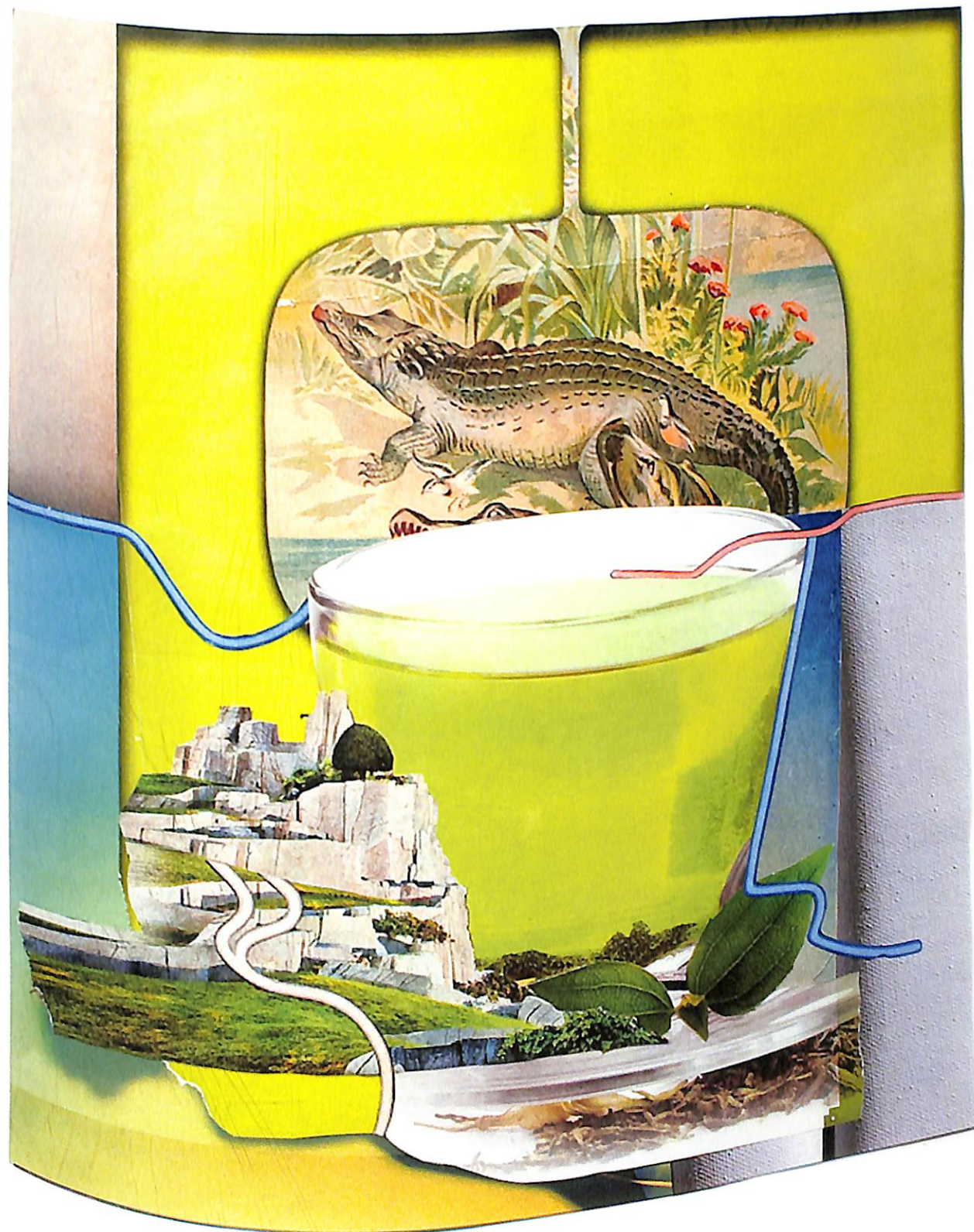
The dark is safer than language. All the gleaming surfaces of the world are blunted by something that will not explain itself. No pleasure you take from the glow of neon on the surface of the rain-soaked street will be held against you. The dark is not watching you play.

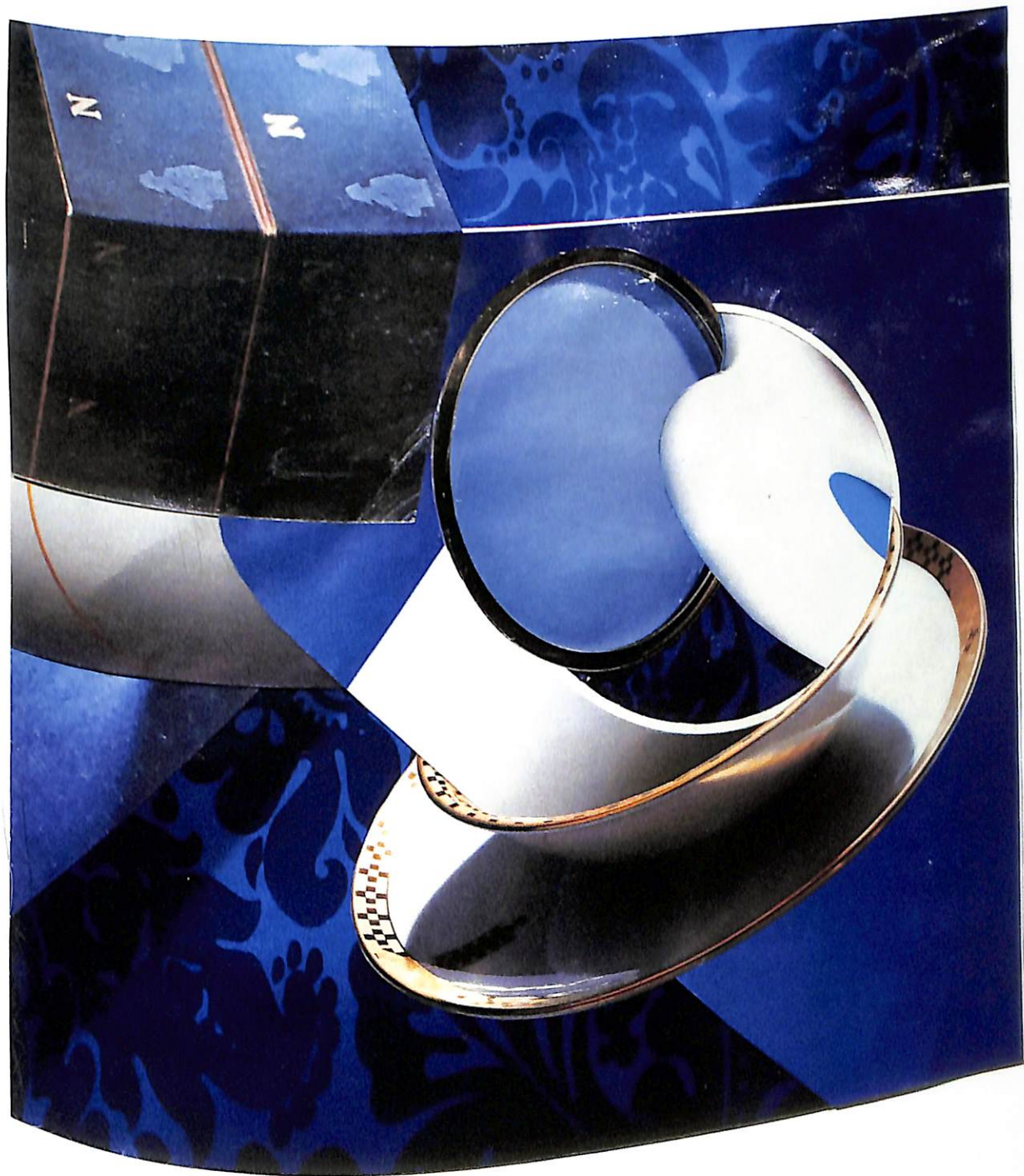
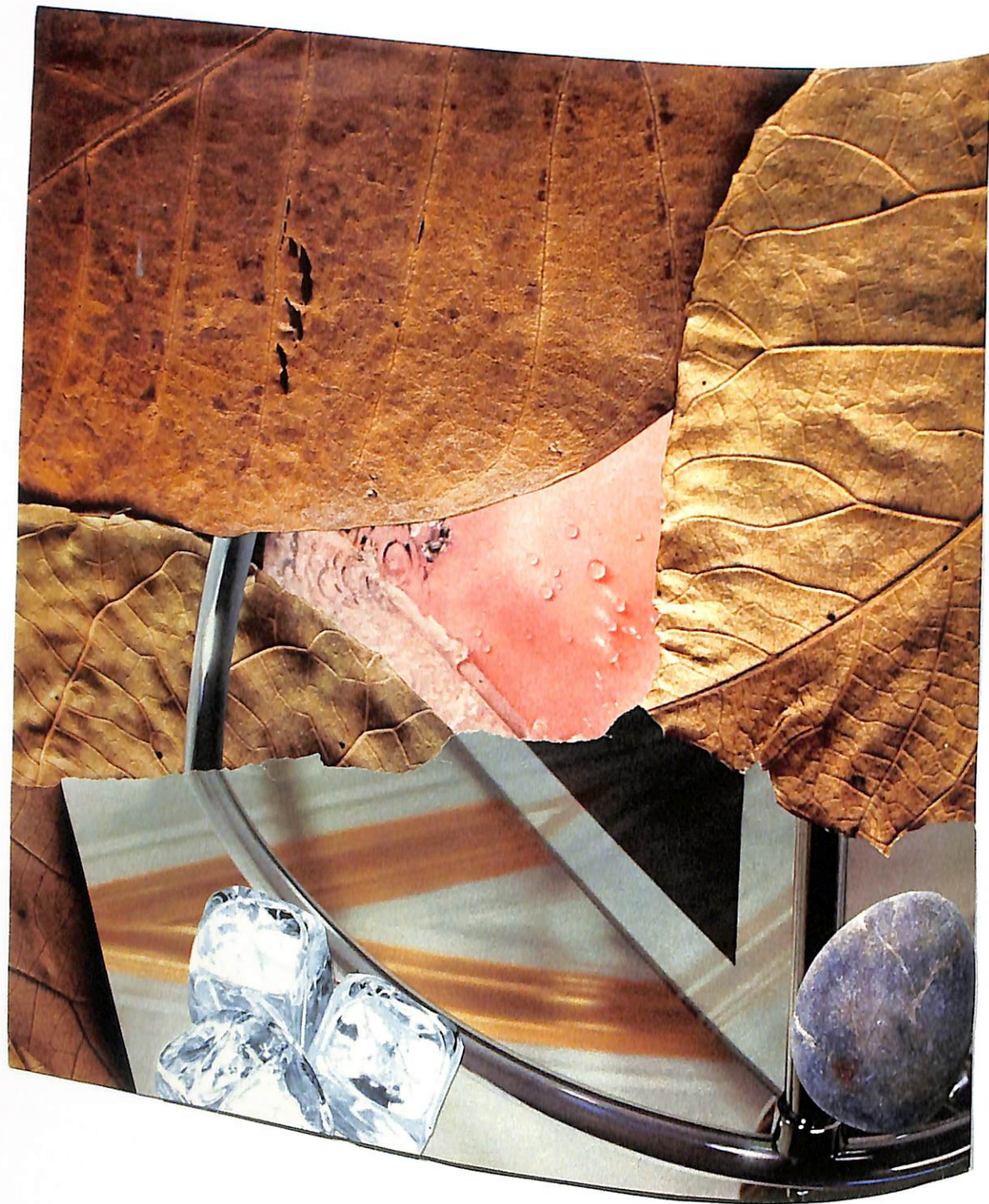


There is a moment in grief when it is not a question of keeping tears from leaking because there is no longer an external surface to the body. Skin, eyelashes, lips, throat, fingertips. Whatever distinction could have been made is shredded by the force of body expressing loss, melted by its passage through tissue made for subtler emotions.

You built it for your public secrets, so that everyone could be witness without the responsibility an utterance would entail, with pilfered eye-beams from the endless construction out on the shore. When I came to find you, I sliced my hand open trying to push the foliage out of the way; I didn't realize it was made of glass, stuck into the landscape like the shards embedded in the concrete to keep the birds and the homeless people away.





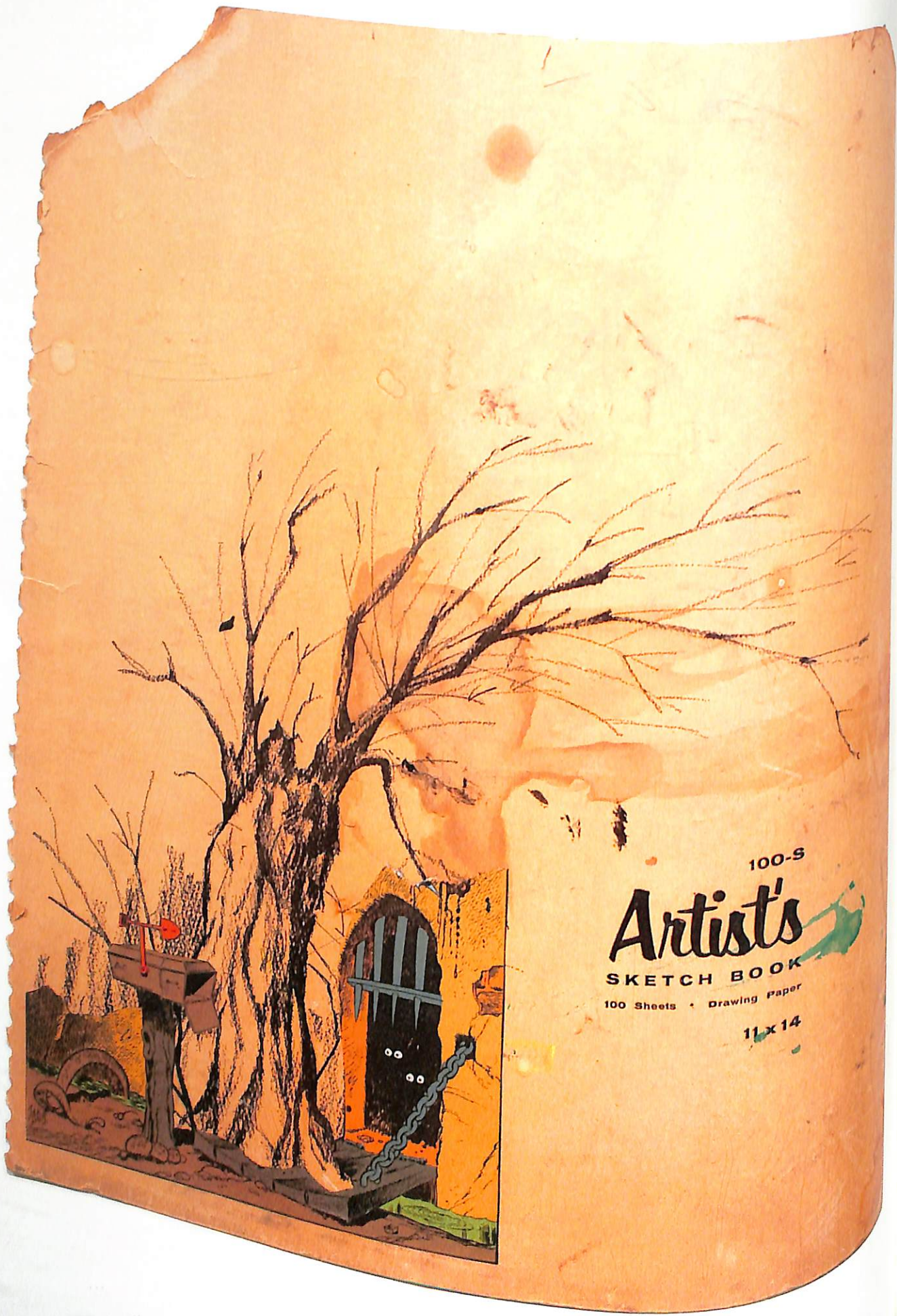






If I build you a grave in the jungle but I forget to tell you where it is, will you have to wait to die until we find it? If I never wash the sheets after you leave and I stay in bed for years, will the smell of you breathing in your sleep persist? Because what is the difference between grief and solitary worship, after all?





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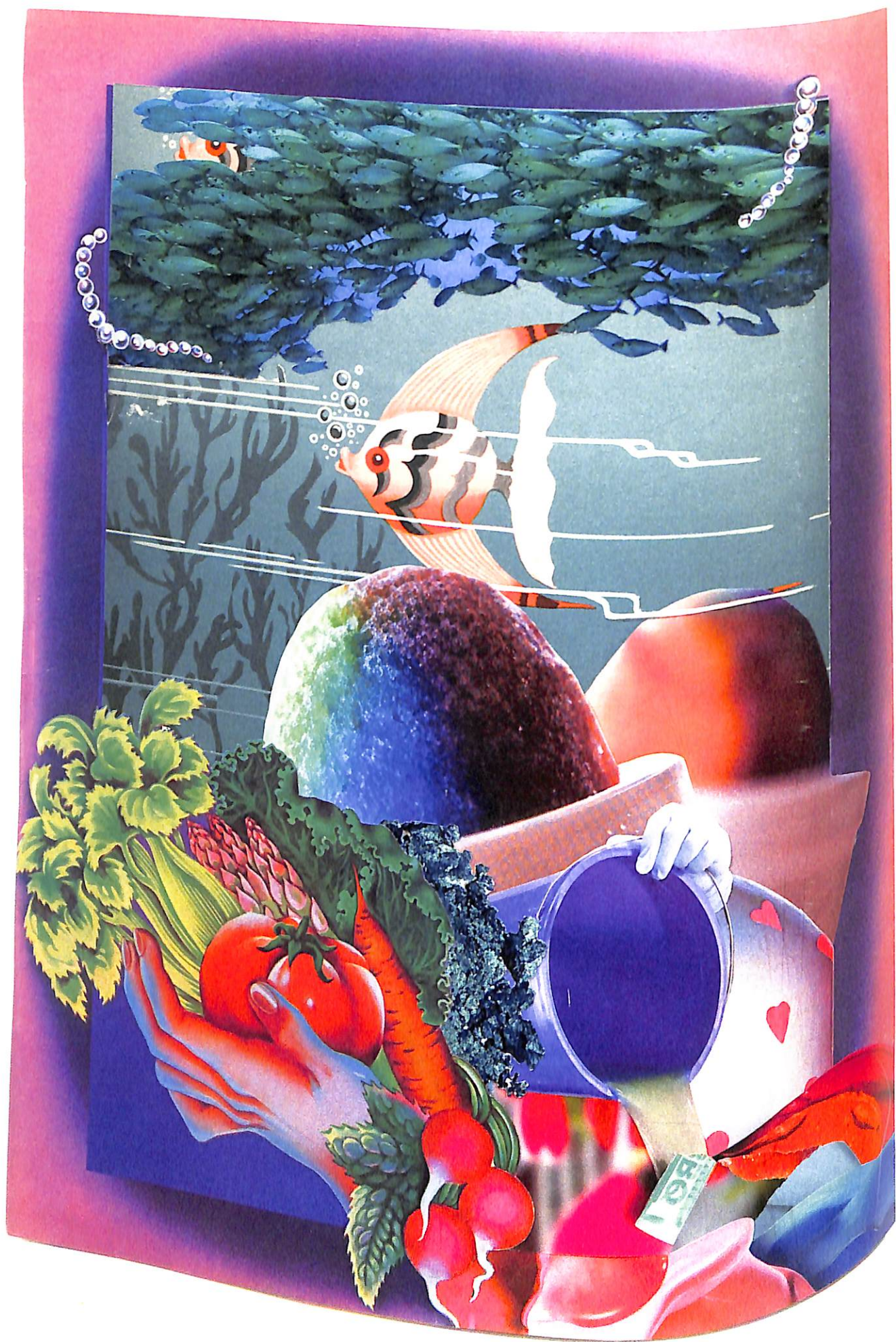


Polka dots in the kind of heat that shimmers in the air. Polka dots on the kind of fabric that disappears as soon as you get it wet. Then you just have a body plotted with rows and rows of dots, shimmering from the effort of disappearing so much whiteness in the desert at noon.









A gloved hand that should have been white, but it escaped from Alice in Wonderland irradiated. A nude hand that should have been brown, but it got stained with the blood in the ground. A fish that watches impassively from its castle in the sea, fashioned from all your abandoned rubber sex toys, repurposed to break the swell of the water current.

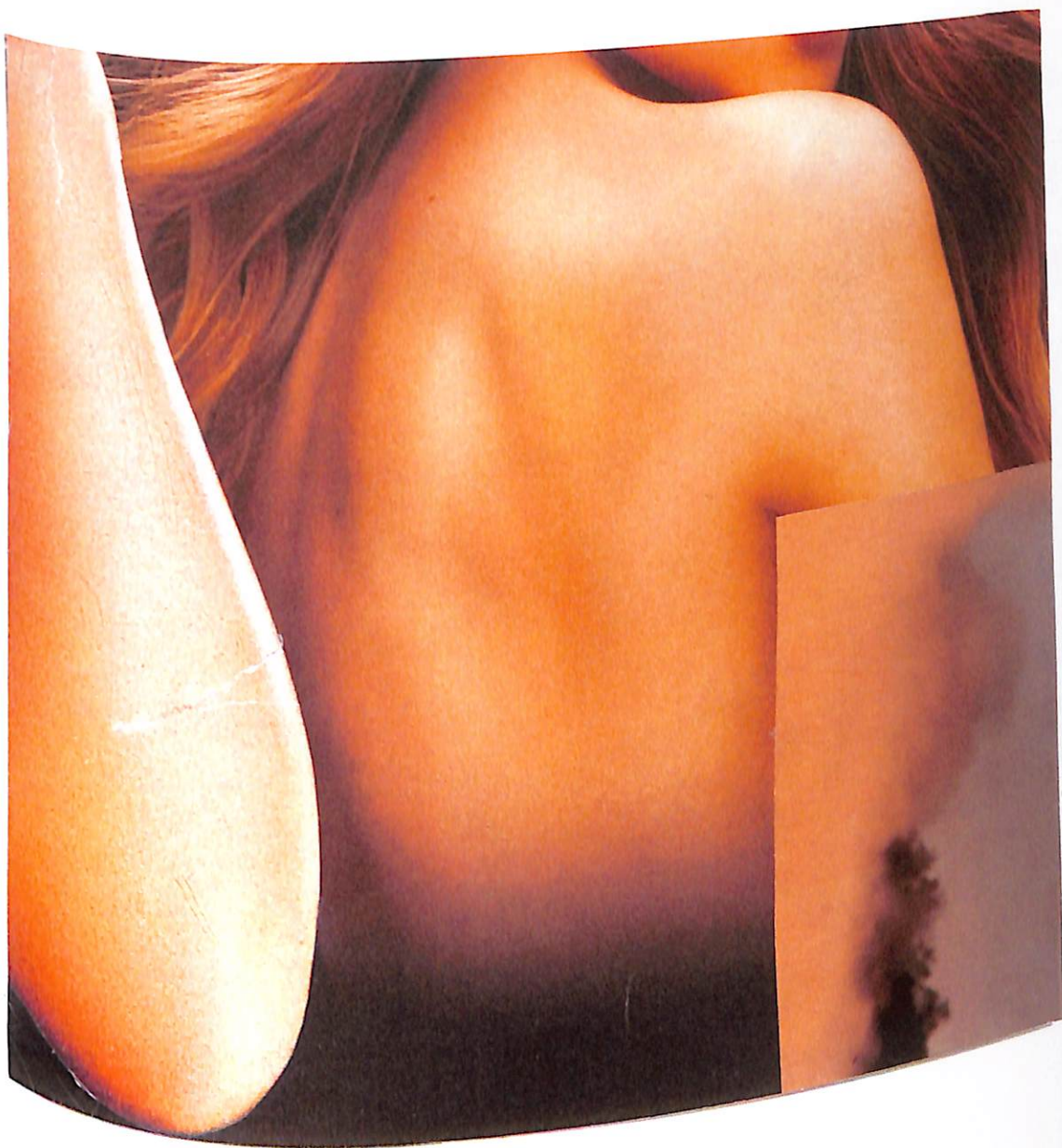


Baby, that's muddy water, she says. Not, he replies. It's so clear it looks like mercury spilling out over the flowers I got you to make amends. Molten water. Safety glasses off, balanced on the surface of it all and forgotten. Golden light blowing out the shapes in the corner of her eye.

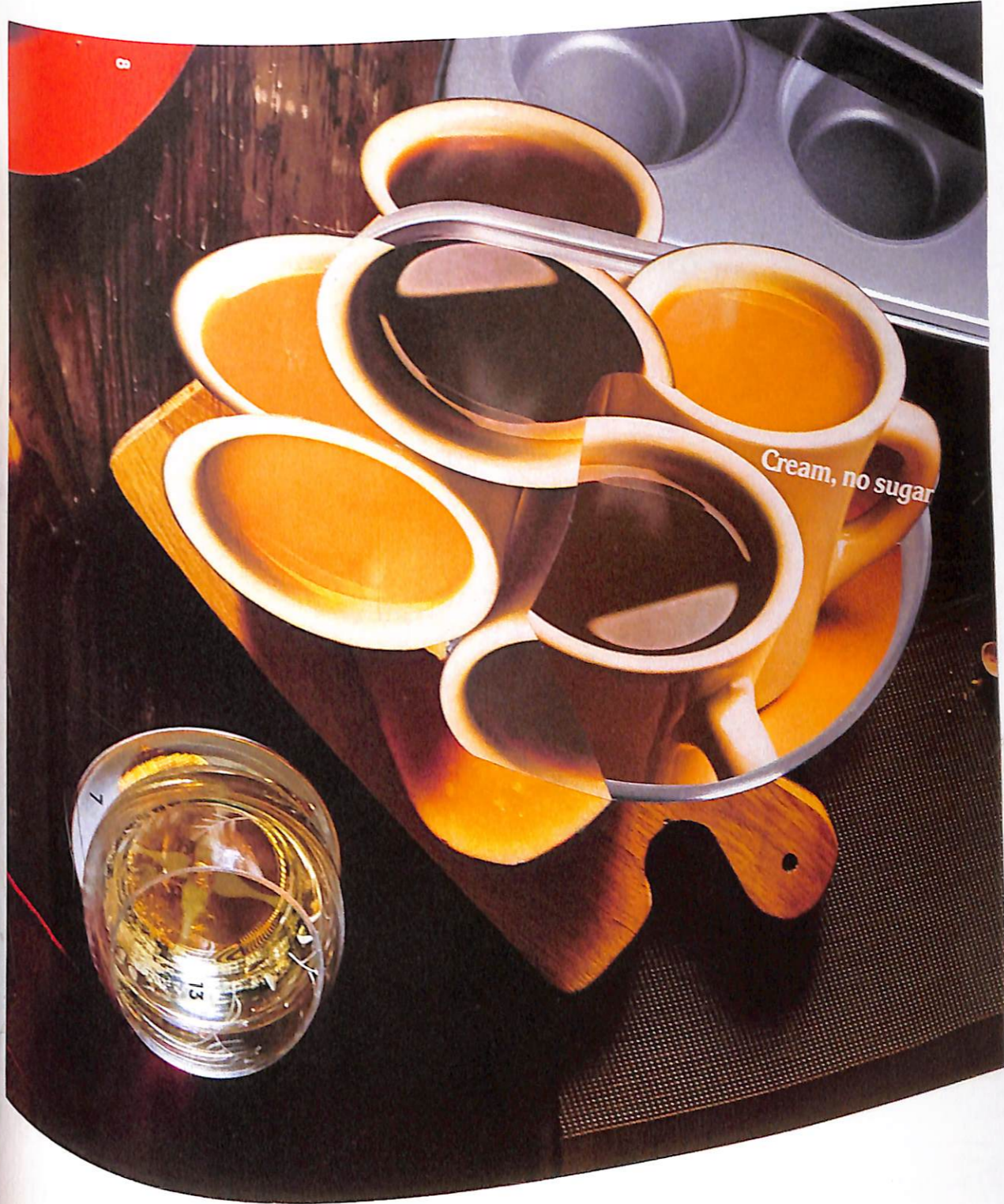
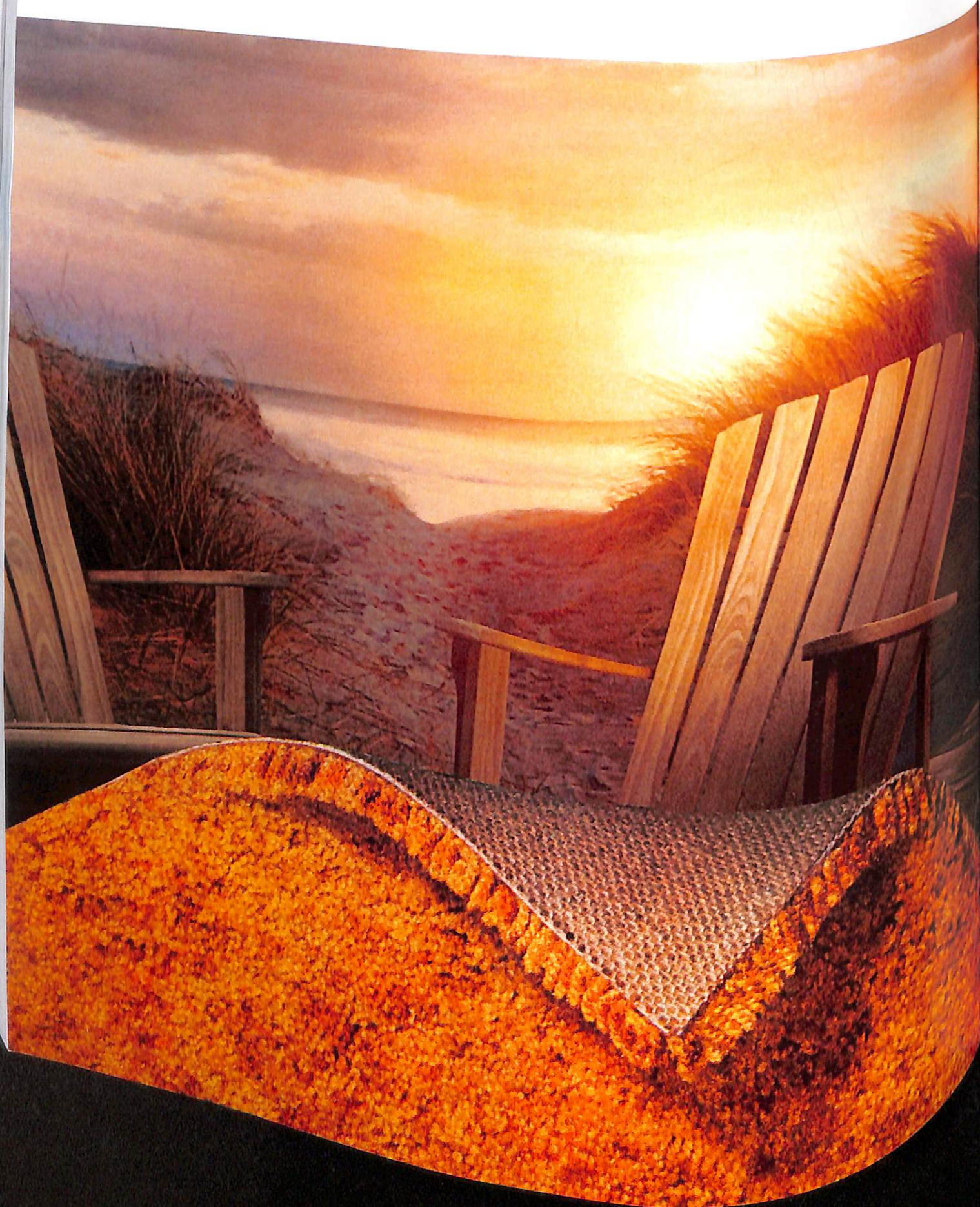


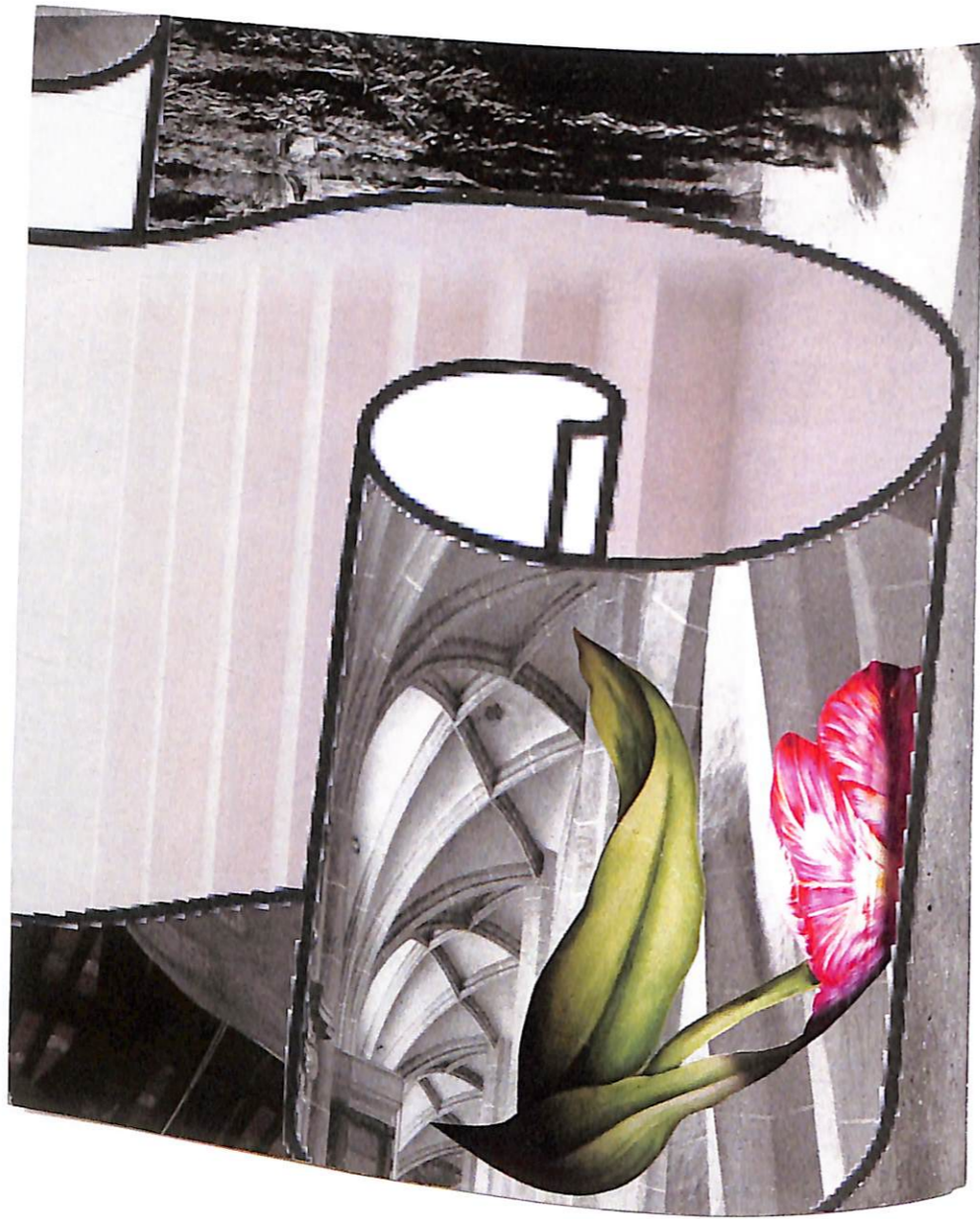






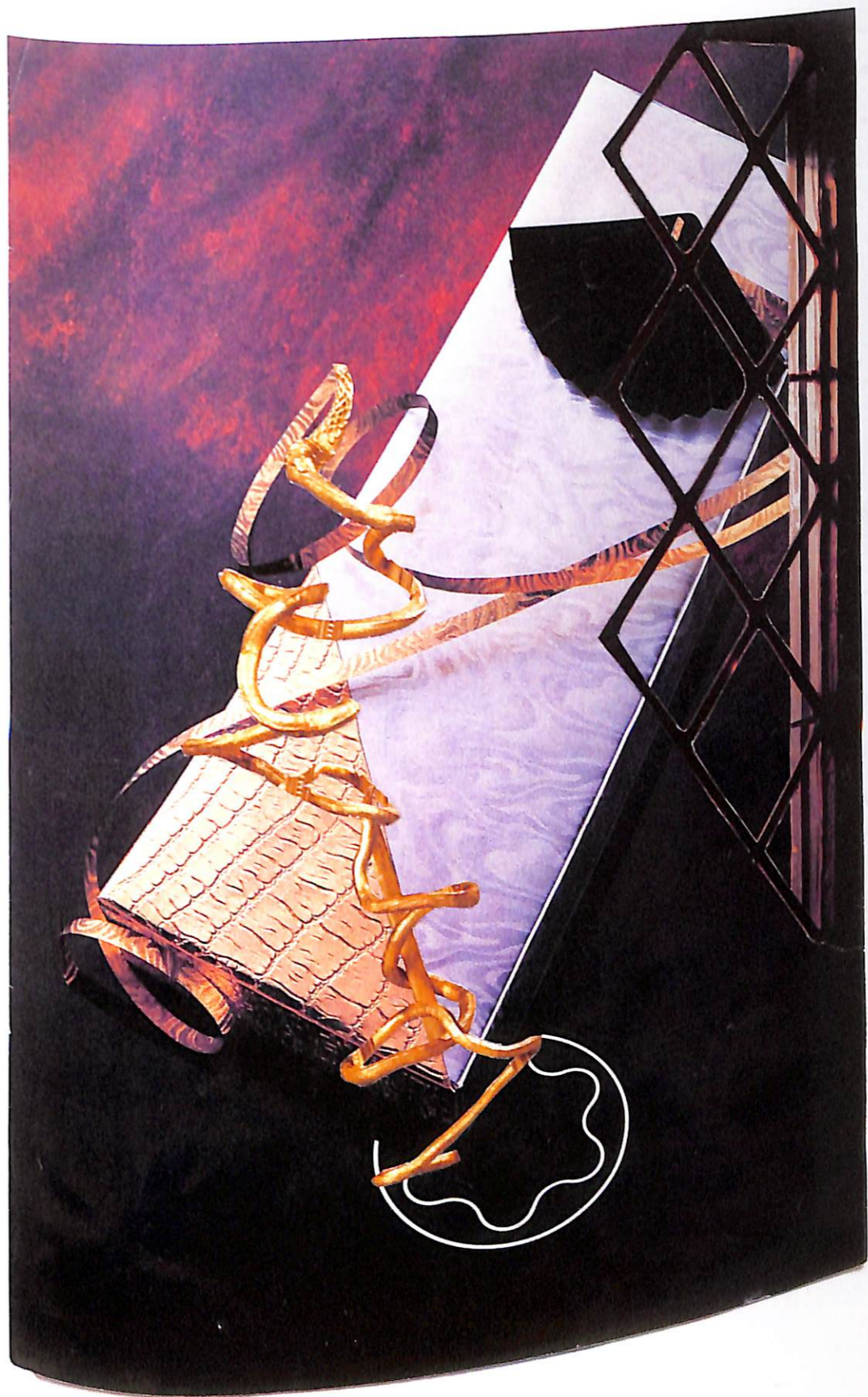
Her skin is a play of disappearances. Every surface a promise and a thick coat of petroleum-based sunshine and extra-fine dust. Your handprint already registered as an indentation in the space where her shoulder blade should have been. With all the softness of apocalypse masquerading as desire.

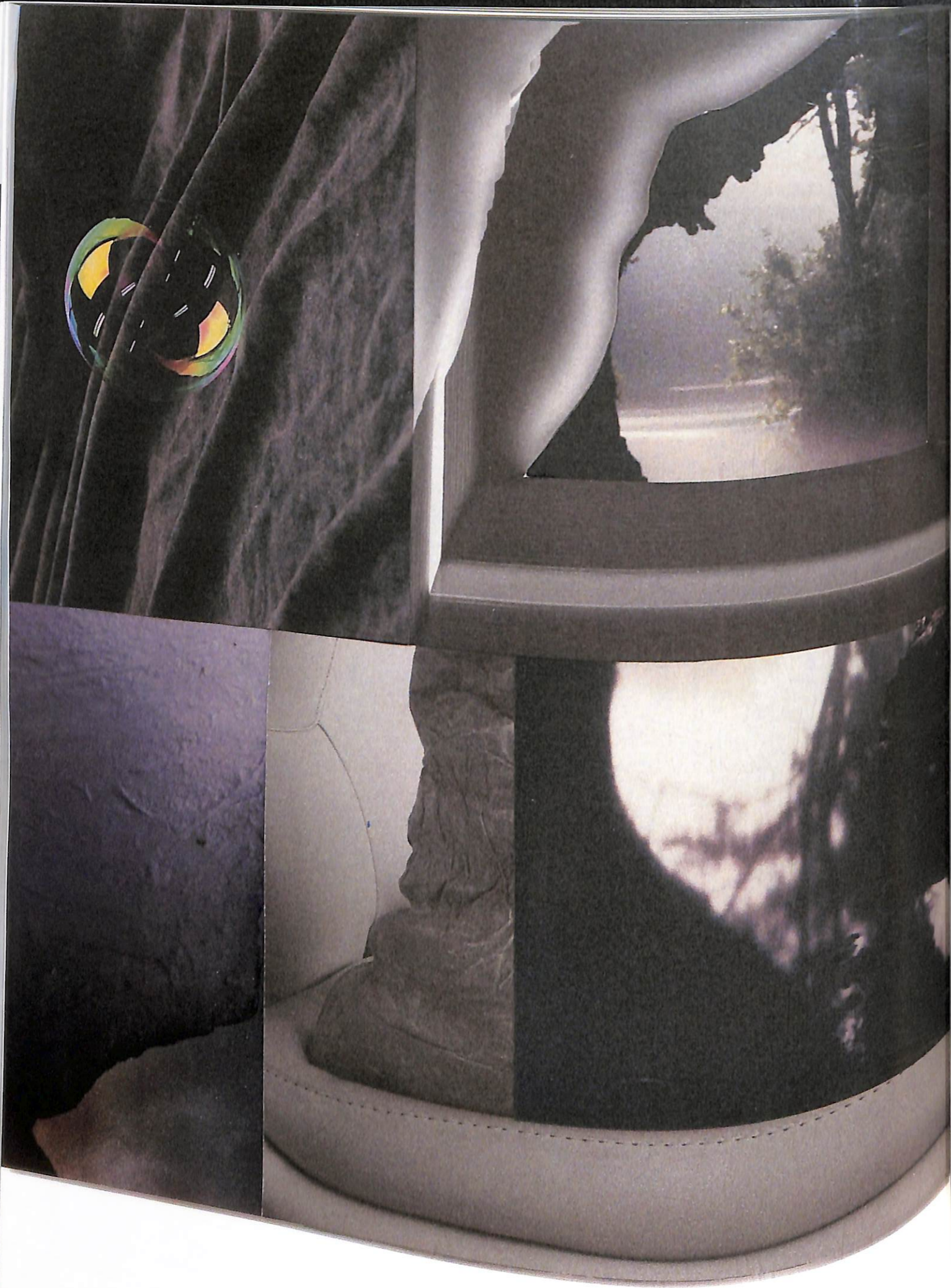




An aspirational house, all the violent delusions of western expansion and manifest destiny implicit in its faux-stone paneling. As though it were possible to un-see the lack of water, or un-sense the danger of touching train tracks left out in the sun all century long. As though leaving a window cracked could distract from the threat of fire.

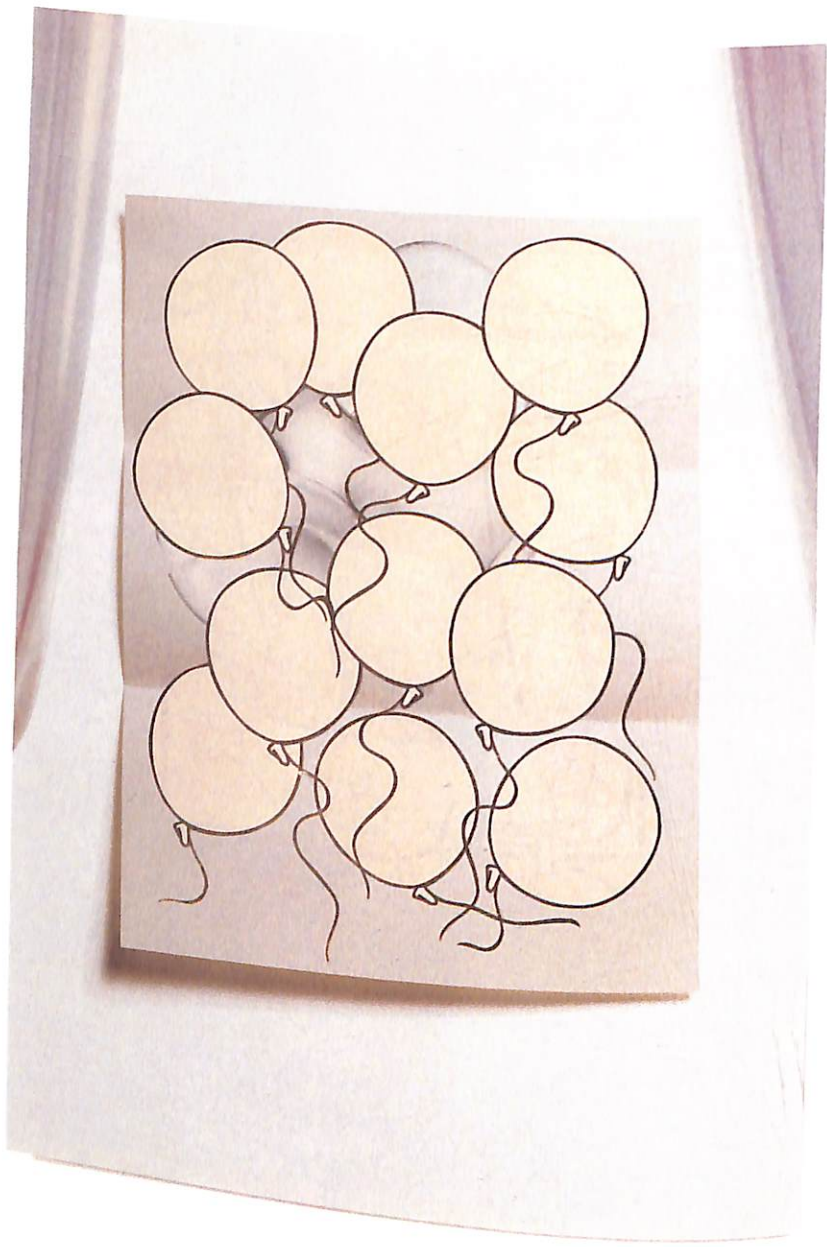








In the desert, you can watch the wind pick up a layer of the world and toss it the air. Pushed into furious piles, furrowed along invisible fault-lines, the surface of the world is so much more vulnerable than you can see from that shallow footpath. Its surface is a mirror for every tremor of subterranean tension.









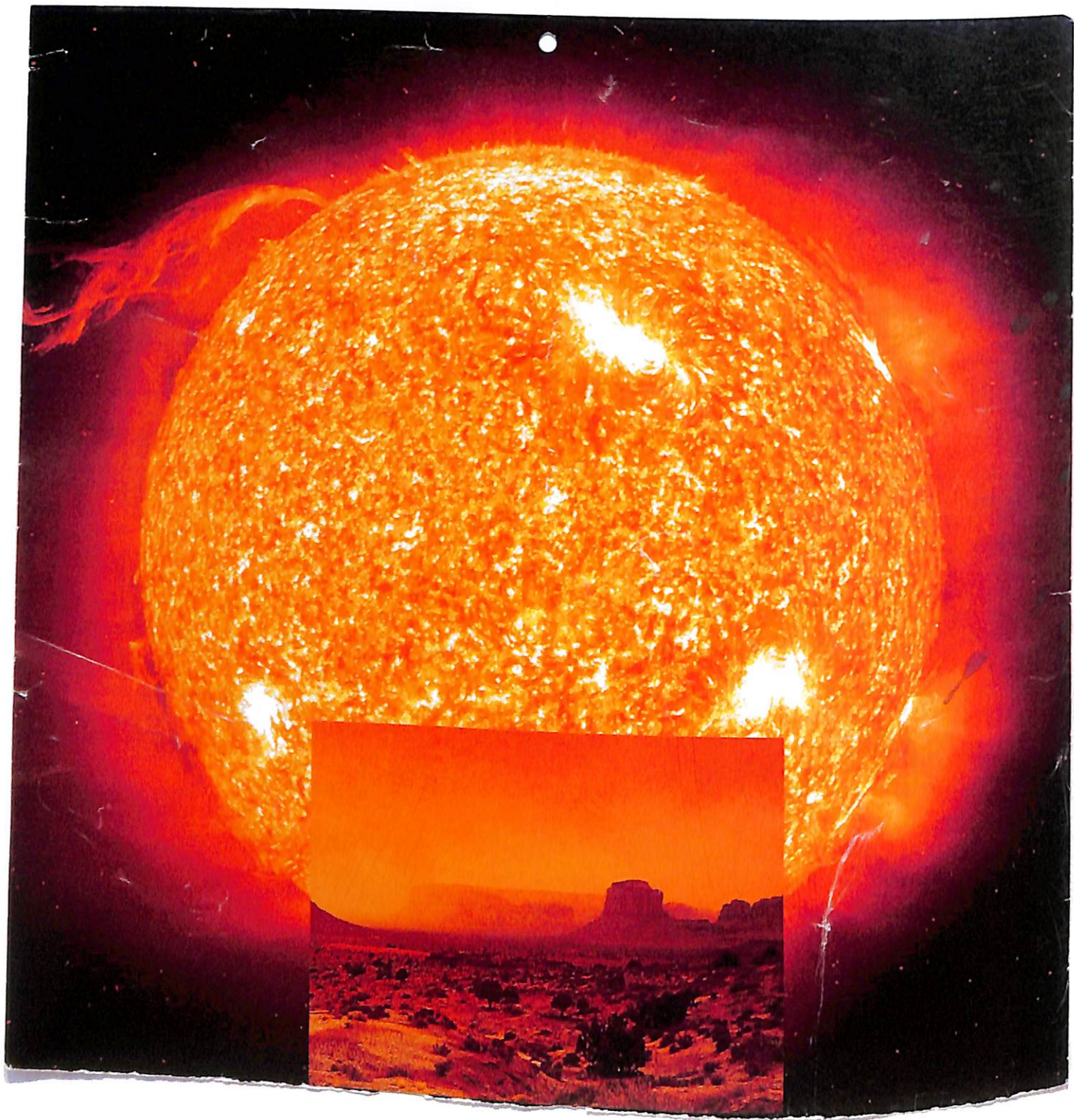


I dream of lettuce so full of water it explodes when I touch it. I dream of water so heavy from above that its weight on my shoulders pushes me beneath the surface, and I let myself sink until I can use the moss-covered rock at the bottom of the pool to surge back up for air, through water so cold that I feel it on the skin between my toes.

The road ended and so I filled it in with China Ink. The 1950s ended, but if we move to Italy we can buy an older model new for a song. Those are weeds and we both know they draw blood when grasped too tightly so I'll tie them up in a speech bubble and we'll deal it with in therapy in the 1980s.







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*Jess Willa Wheaton
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