



# CHIASM:

meg brown payson

McCoy Gallery, Rogers Center for the Arts  
Merrimack College, North Andover, Massachusetts  
December 4th, 2013 - February 8th, 2014

cover: *Horizon: Beech Wood 1-7*, acrylic on panel, 60" x 35" 2013

front inside cover: *Silk Wall: River Ice*, lithography and drawing on layered silk, 54" x 32.5" 2013 (detail)





# Exhibition Notes

by David Raymond, Director, McCoy Gallery

*Chiasm* includes six objects made specifically for installation in the McCoy Gallery that might be understood as a meditation on natural persistence. The show's title is meant to suggest a variety of cross forms and intersections referenced in anatomical science, genetics and optics. Recurring natural patterns observed by Meg Brown Payson in light and water are at the heart of a methodology of splitting, multiplying and restructuring forms. Her practice carries mimetic replays of what is seen that become the basis for complex, symmetrical visual systems. Her work crosses technical borders—painting and drawing gestures are sources for a variety of digitally driven woven and printed executions that fill the gallery with enveloping surfaces of rolling loops and knots.

Payson inherits the expansive manner of abstract field painting, scrolling out fluid forms that are both energized and serene. *Silk Wall: River Ice* is a delicate two-layered fabric flow that quietly reveals itself in its cool, shadowy details. With a sense of visual temperature that crosses the gallery, Payson opposes the fragile chill of *Silk Wall: River Ice* with the warmer, seven paneled *Horizon: Beech Wood*, an immense painting suggesting reflected sunlight. These two large works and the others in the exhibition employ repeti-

tive gestures and colors in ways that suggest chant and even seem to mimic one's own breathing, while holding to the pleasure of iconic steadiness. Although each work serves as a kind habitation for the artists' mark-making, either actual or digitally restated, Payson's imagery is not an expressionist exposure of self. Instead, a sense of nature in its own actions is what Payson delivers. In a curious way, the artist takes on the role of advancing or extending the very natural order that compels her.

In *Hemlock/Thaw (x4)*, Payson's darker palette enables a density that slows down the eye in the knotting of a space of forested thickness—a botanical barrier that dares entry and exploration. The intersection of oppositional signals in nature is an aspect of the revelatory character of this work. Payson's tripartite video *Summer Shallows* exhibits the related condition of contradiction in the reflected bounce and penetration of sun light through watery shallows. The flickering light, seen at different angles and distances, incorporates moments of seeing in motion that compelled Edgar Degas' paintings of horses and dancers. Like Degas, Payson enables our own sense of shifting location.

# Meg Brown Payson's Interior Universe

by Edgar Allen Beem

Meg Brown Payson's art is simultaneously about the creation of the universe and the creation of the paintings, drawings, prints, and textiles she makes in response to the mysteries of creation. The chromatic loops, strands, cells and protozoan forms that animate her work read like the primordial soup out of which all life emerges, whether from the microscopic broth of the Petri dish or the cosmic plasma of the Big Bang.

*Chiasm*, Payson's conceptually unified yet materially diverse 2013 exhibition at Merrimack College's McCoy Gallery, evidences both the sheer physical beauty of her art and its philosophical depth. While it is certainly possible to appreciate the pure aesthetic experience of her densely-layered work without considering its intellectual ambitions, knowing what Payson is about in these visual explorations heightens their impact.

Payson defines chiasm in most general terms as "a reciprocal exchange of information" and describes the subtext of the art in *Chiasm* as "landscape as an exchange between the encultured mind and the wild world." There are optical, biological and linguistic connotations to chiasm as well, as we shall see, but the big idea underlying *Chiasm* is that we perceive the world around us in terms of our own interests, needs and

desires, essentially creating reality and making meaning as functions of mind.

The exhibition includes liquid acrylic paintings on birch panels, multi-plate lithographs on sheer silk organza, digitally printed wall hangings, both woven tapestries and muslin printed with Payson's imagery, and videos discretely focused on some of the natural phenomena that inspire the two-dimensional art. Conceived by the artist as "a rich and textured world of ambiguous form and odd color," *Chiasm* is exhibition as environmental installation and philosophically inquiry into the nature of art and the nature of knowing.

The personal experience that Meg Brown Payson brings to bear on this endeavor began with a childhood in Maine, the youngest of four children in a prominent local family, one in which the cultural life was revered and rewarded. That is not always true of a Maine upbringing, but what usually is true is the deep impression that the cold, bleak, beautiful landscape makes on its native sons and daughters.

Payson took that internalized landscape with her to her undergraduate studies at Boston University's College of Fine Art (BFA 1977) at a time when Philip Guston, one of the most influential painters of his generation, was teaching in the





graduate program there. Payson's early work employed the landscape and figurative tradition to evoke a sense of place, of belonging to a place where all is family and familiar.

Payson began teaching off and on at Maine College of Art (then Portland School of Art) in 1978 and from faculty painters Ed Douglas and Johnnie Winona Ross picked up an education in color theory and practice that had been largely overlooked at BU.

By the time Payson completed her own graduate work at Vermont College (MFA 1993), her paintings had begun exploring the numinous landscape, intuitive places imbued with a sense of the sacred and mysterious. From her simple, direct experience of place in childhood, she had developed an interest in how other cultures understand and express landscape as maps and journeys. She studied Aboriginal Dream-time and songlines, standing stones and Celtic knots, Japanese screens. She made paintings like kimonos that envelope and enclose the body and paintings framed as doorways to perception.

Payson's breakthrough year came in 1999 when she was forced to give up oil painting for health reasons and thus



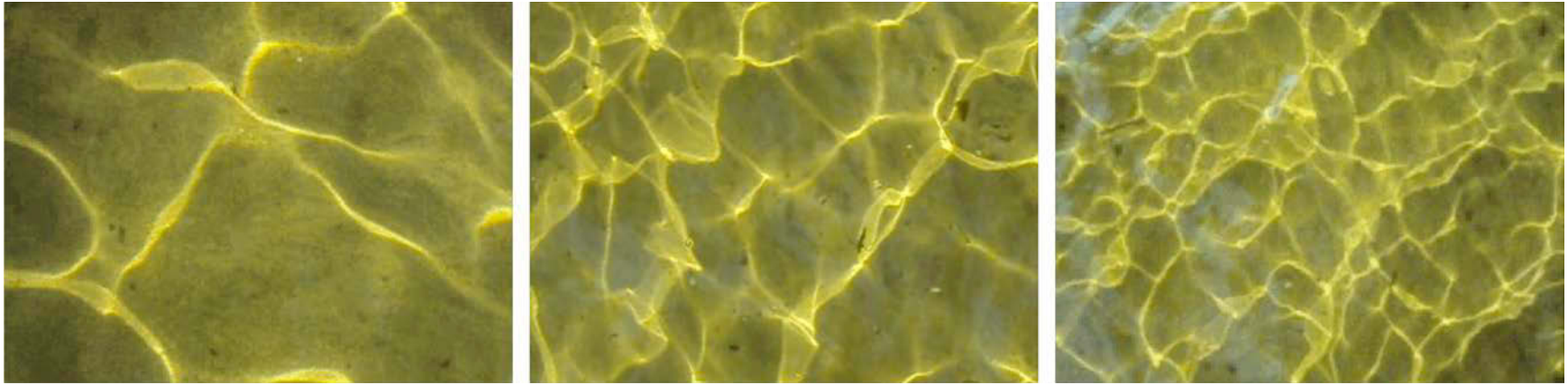


image: *Summer Shallows*, digital video, triptych dimensions variable, 2013



discovered the viscous possibilities of acrylics, and when she took a family trip that forever changed the way she thought about landscape. On a two-week voyage through the Grand Canyon by dory, Payson found herself in “a completely unfamiliar landscape with no references to bring to it.” With her vision contained within the steep walls of the canyon, she found herself “in” the landscape, flowing on a ribbon of water beneath a ribbon of sky.

Since 1999, then, Payson’s quest has been to explore and express the excitement of seeing the new, of being open to the unseen. Her exploration of ancestral landscapes and cultural landscapes gave way to a sustained examination of the phenomenological landscape, a place apart from a perceiver, the thought as separate from the thinker. Payson’s art in the 21st Century has been a search for ways to share that moment when individual perception encounters a new phenomenon. And that’s where chiasm comes in.

In terms of perception, chiasm is the point where the optic nerves cross, blending the images received by two eyes into one vision. And in molecular biology, chiasm is the point of contact between paired chromosomes during cell division. It

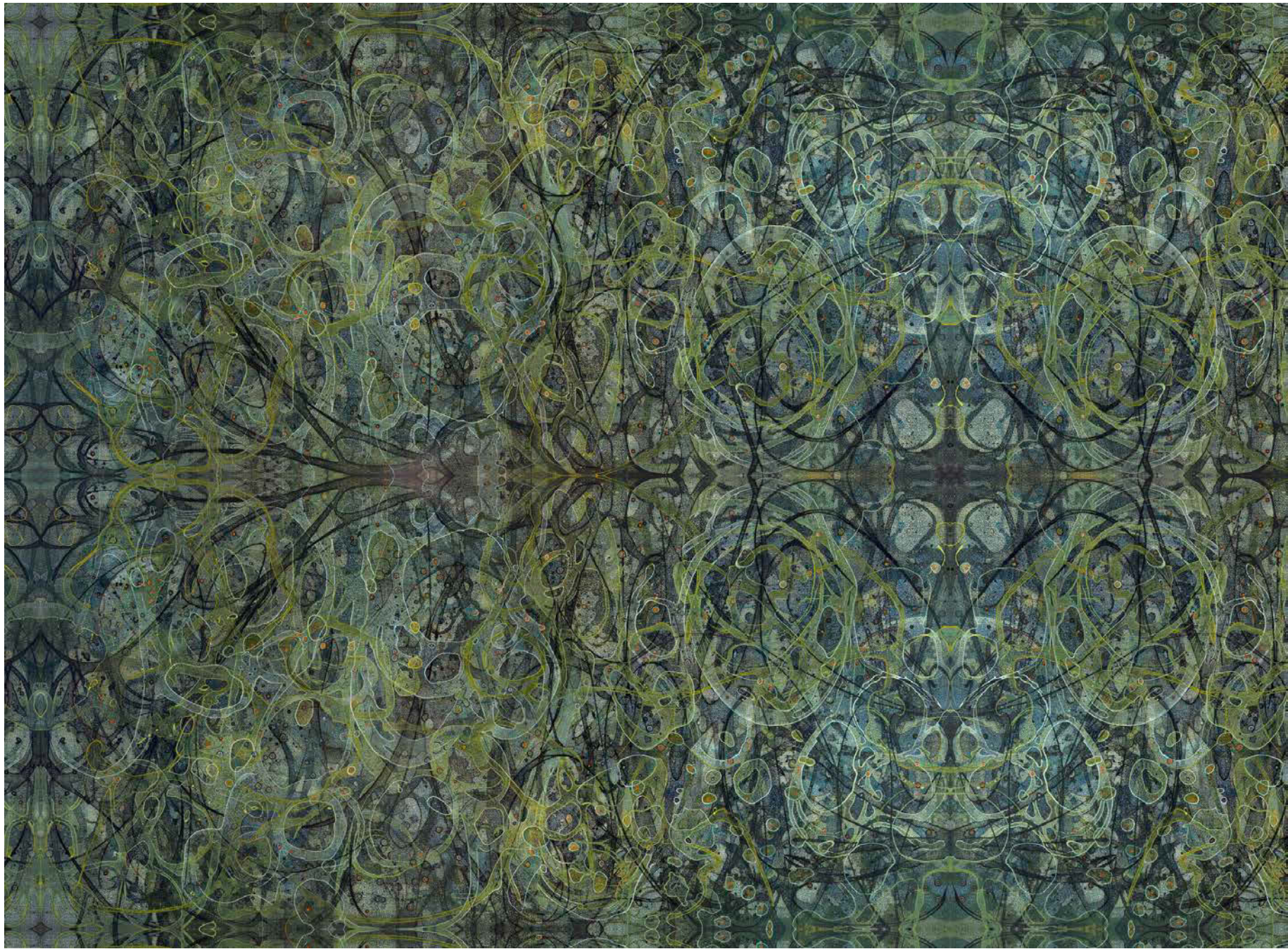
is a cytological form of crossing over, of exchanging information, and, as with the replication of strands of DNA, it is central to the process of duplication through which organisms grow and develop.

A painting by Meg Brown Payson is not, of course, an illustration of cellular dynamics, not a scientific rendering of the life within a drop of water, but an artistic event in which Payson’s own process reveals itself. Her biomorphic, organic abstractions may conjure associations with the cellular and/or the galactic, but they are their own little worlds. More than that, Payson’s paintings are the information she seeks about how we receive and perceive the new and never-before-seen.

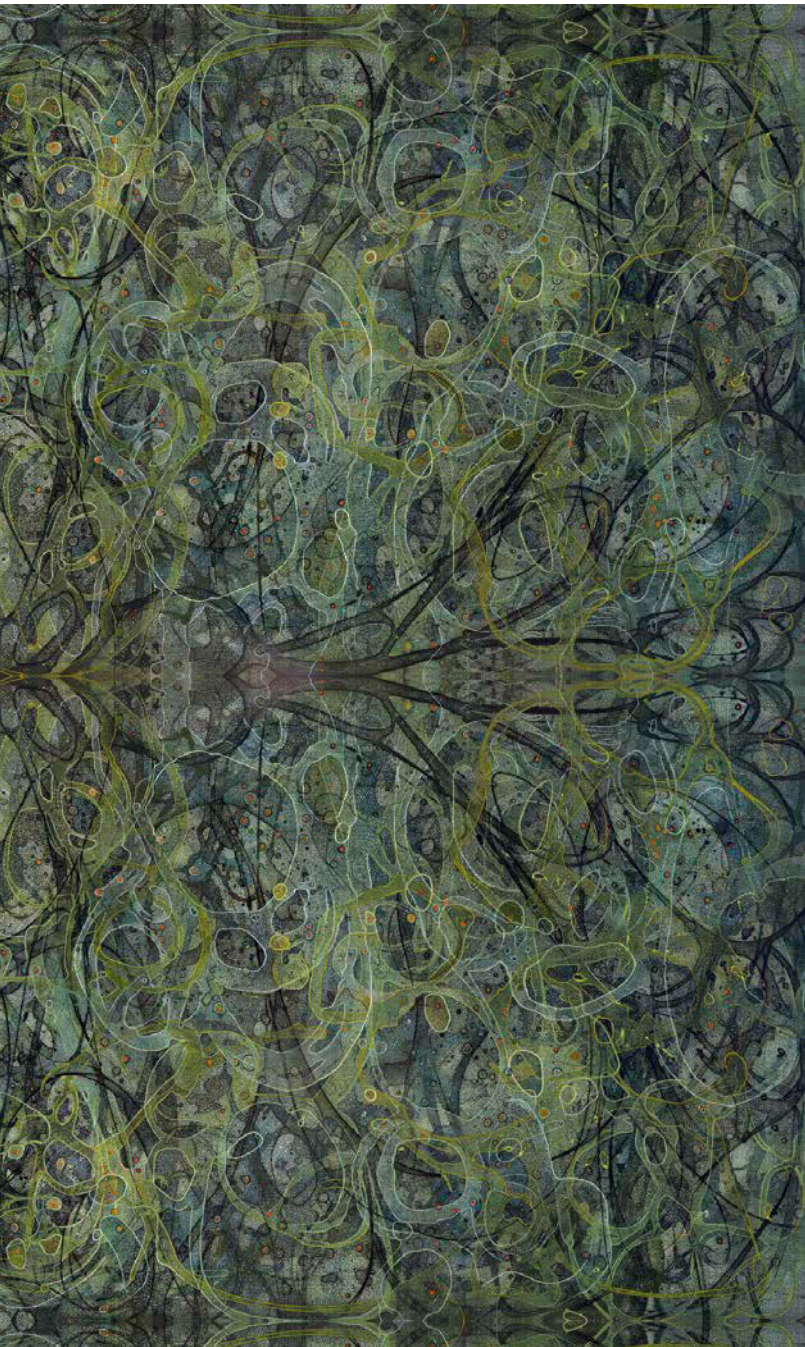
Payson’s project is essentially that of all creation, both human and divine. It is the hard work of creating order out of randomness. As she works through the flow of material information on the surface of painting, she is manipulating color, form and shape to the end of creating a comprehensive whole. No wonder many of her paintings often resemble the synaptic connections made as impulses fire through the human brain.

The signature work of the *Chiasm* exhibition is a 35-foot,





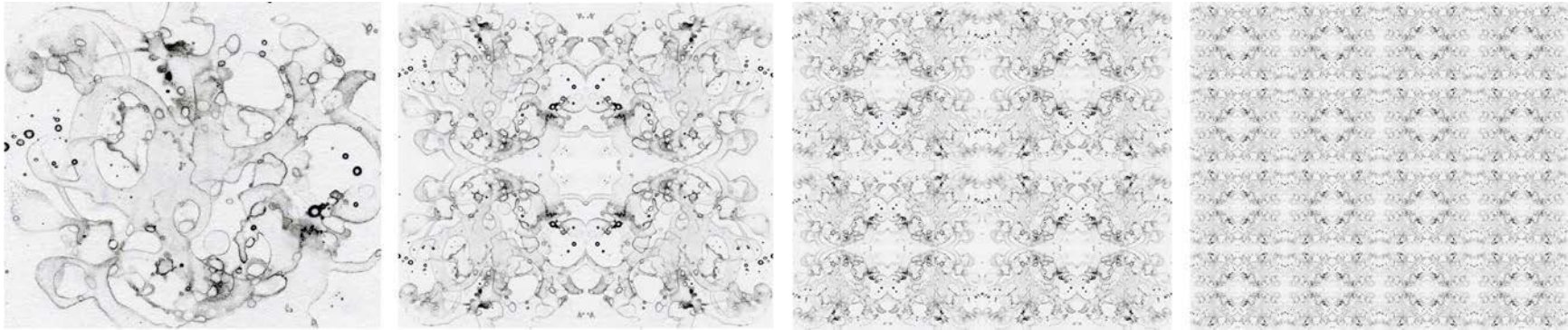




seven-panel painting from Payson's *Horizon* series. Seen leaning against the walls of her studio in rural Freeport, Maine, the seven panels have the power of a sunny sky cut into squares and brought indoors. They almost have their own light about them. Arranged sequentially on the gallery wall, they are a lateral horizon, larger cousins to the smaller painted bands Payson has created previously. The loops, drops, strokes, spots and drips of yellow, green and orange liquid acrylic on gessoed birch have been blotted and bled into what Payson describes as "a unique tangle of singular facts." They read almost like a Jackson Pollack action painting but with much more restraint and none of the anger.

For the wall hangings, tapestries and rugs, Payson has her paintings photographed and the images scanned so she can manipulate them on the computer. The digital images can play with scale such that her imagery becomes a quotable visual language, a shorthand notation transferrable to texture surfaces.

The simple act of replicating a digital image, doubling it along a vertical axis, creates a bilateral symmetry that resonates with body imagery. Loops become pelvic bones, arcs



*La Napoule: 44 (Progression), digital file of graphite monotype, polyptych dimensions variable, 2009/2013*

become collar bones, vertebrae begin to form a spine. In some digitized works, Payson has doubled down again and again such that the apparent wildness of her loose painted imagery becomes a well-ordered pattern. Accidents begin to look intentional. Random chance becomes a more predictable certainty with each regeneration.

The novelty of painted imagery scanned into a computer and printed on a rug which, when set upon a plinth, can be sat upon and touched adds a tactile dimension that few art shows have. And whether output on fine paper or ultra suede, the mediated imagery has the additional quality of actually being “new” to the artist herself. Payson has final approval over the computer-generated colors and registration, but she cannot ultimately control them. In that sense, her art is as much a surprise to her as it is to the first-time viewer.

While the painted *Horizon* panels glow with a solar heat, Payson’s multi-media *Silk Wall* prints are ethereal and cool,

light, airy and translucent scrims printed with blue-gray inks, playing the Moon to the *Horizon*’s Sun in the Payson universe. The *Silk Wall* prints begin as drawings on a plexiglass plate that are printed as monotypes. The printed image is scanned into a computer and printed out on a polyester lithography plate. These flexible plates can then be used to transfer the ghosts of the original drawn image onto filmy silk. Payson also goes in after the fact and draws on the printed image. Hanging one silk screen in front of another creates a shadowy depth of field that enlivens the two-dimensional imagery.

Payson’s videos are like visual notes from the natural world that informs and inspires her art. The barely perceptible movement of leaves rustling in a breeze and the dancing of gold and silver light across the surface of water are projected in the gallery like moving paintings.

*Chiasm* engages the sense of sight in at least a half dozen direct ways, the senses of touch and hearing in more subtle











ways. As an aesthetic experience it is indeed “a reciprocal exchange of information” in that each viewer takes from it what Meg Brown Payson has presented and brings to it a lifetime of personal impressions and associations. That is true of all fine art exhibitions, but the difference with Payson’s *Chiasm* is that the nexus of exchange – all that is seen, felt and heard – is not only intentional, it is the subject of her art itself .

(Edgar Allen Beem has been writing about art in Maine since 1978. He is the author of *Maine Art Now* (1990) and co-author of the forthcoming *Maine Art New*. He is a regular contributor to *Down East*, *Yankee*, *Art New England*, *Design New England* and *Photo District News*.)

image: *Shimmersea: 5 (x2)*, woven tapestry, 104.5" x 35" 2009/2013

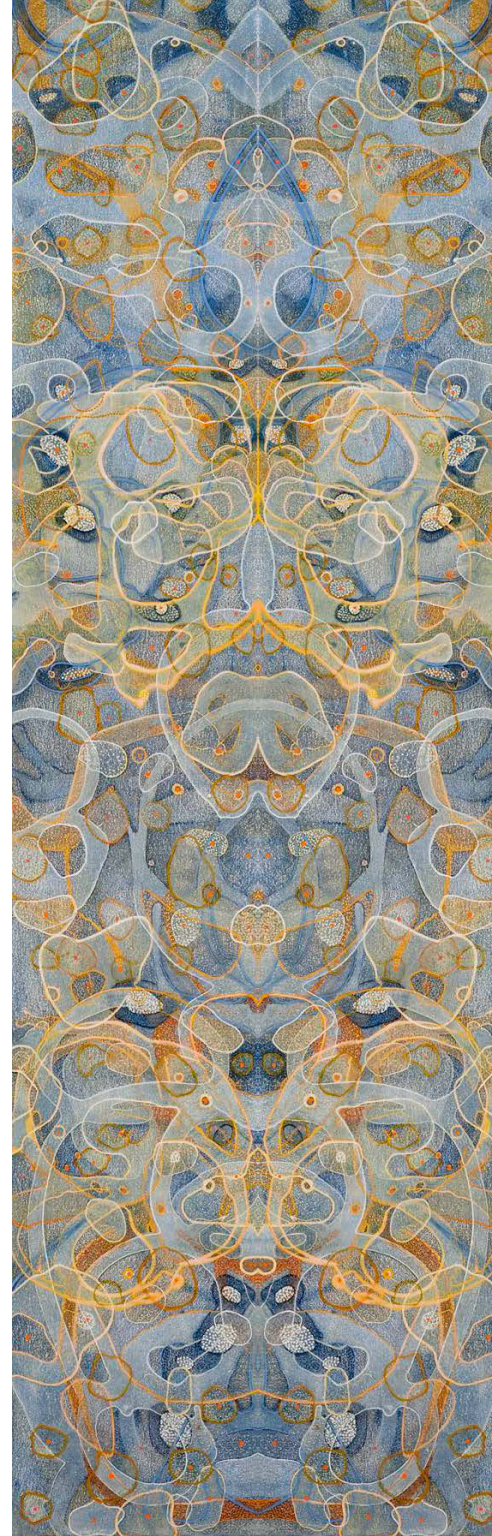




image: *Tidelines*, digital photograph, triptych, dimensions variable, 2012

Selected work from the *Chiasm* project was exhibited from December 4th, 2013 to February 8th, 2014 at McCoy Gallery, Rogers Center for the Arts at Merrimack College in North Andover, Massachusetts.

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image: *Twitchell Shore*, digital photograph, 2013





image: *Emergence: 11 (x8)*, digitally printed carpet, 84" x 110.5" 2013



