



Lifeworks

# Lacrimae

The series of lithographs entitled *Watermarks: a comparative study of artificial tears* (1998) by Barbara McGill Balfour makes reference to the conventions of a scientific trial by examining and comparing the action of three brands of artificial tears when they come in contact not with skin, but with stone. The process of lithography depends on the antipathy of oil and water, and on the receptivity of stone to both. As Balfour writes, "Artificial tears, like the natural tear film they replace, are

composed of both oil and water, and thereby leave discernible traces on lithographic stone, capable of reproduction. In addition to relieving the discomfort of 'dry eye syndrome,' the synthetic tears occupy an ambiguous position. What is their relationship to 'natural tears,' those transitory traces taken to be proof of genuine emotion?"

The difficulty of reproducing Balfour's almost invisible subject

on the printed page testifies to the paradoxical power of tears: despite their transparency they are extremely *noticeable*. We give enormous significance to tears, believing that they represent a kind of leakage of the true self. Our possession of qualities such as weakness or stoicism, vulnerability or maturity,

coldness or empathy may be judged by others on the evidence of how readily, and on what occasions, tears spring to the eye. Thus a photograph of the premier of Alberta in tears at the funeral of a teenager killed in a shooting was recently front-page material. We value tears, but not to excess. Chronic tearfulness is taken as a sign of psychological imbalance (aside from crocodile tears syndrome, lacrimation stimulated by eating, a sequela of facial palsy). And dry eye syndrome is treated because of its physical, not psychosocial, effects.

*Watermarks* was first shown as part of Balfour's exhibition *SoftSpots* at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery in Lethbridge in October 1988. *SoftSpots*, which included the works *m melancholia & melanomata*, highlighted in the last issue,<sup>1</sup> and *Taches de rousseur* (freckles), uses a range of printmaking techniques to explore clinical and emotional "readings" of marks on the surface of the body. Balfour currently teaches in the Department of Studio Arts at Concordia University in Montreal.

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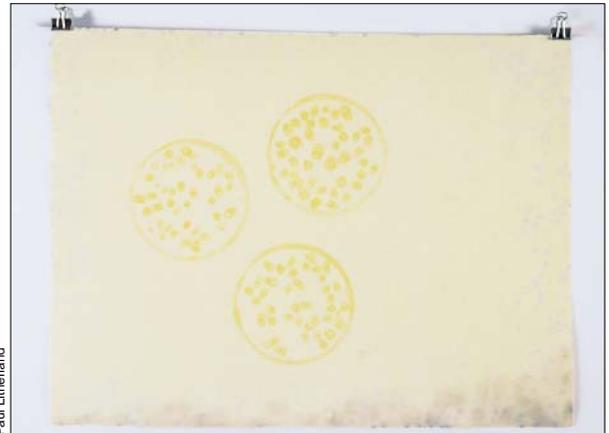
## Reference

1. Todkill AM. M-words. *CMAJ* 1999;160(10):1484-5.



mm Hutch-Hutchinson

Barbara McGill Balfour, *Watermarks*, 1998, print installation.



Paul Linehand

Barbara McGill Balfour, *Watermarks*, 1998 (detail). Lithograph on handmade paper, 16" x 21".

## Behind the small screen

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before you decompress his chest he might very well die. And it would be the physician's fault, see? Chest drainage first, okay?"

We rehearse the act. The plot turns on one of the nurse characters finding the trauma victim to be her husband. Horrified, she backs away from the scene. My eyes roll involuntarily, as if struck by billiard balls.

The resuscitation scene proceeds. I decide that I should be the one to intubate the patient. Why not? I do the real thing all the time. I give the assembled actors a few instructions on how to carry out their respective tasks. I begin to feel that this is a mock trauma code and that I'm the team leader. I get entirely carried away by the moment.

"Okay, break," the director barks. "Everybody back in five."

"I need to speak to you for a minute," says the assistant director. "Say, thanks for all the technical advice. Looks like we're not going to need you for this scene, though. But hey, you can do a walk-by later, huh?"

The next act involves a patient with a toilet stuck on his foot. The flickering glow has faded; I decide to bring my feet back down to earth. I've had enough TV for one day.

Out in the parking lot one of the crew is moving equipment. "Hey Doc, forget about this TV stuff. It's not for you, I can tell. Go back to medicine, that's what you do."

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