



# Carter Hodgkin:

## From Microorganism to Macro Art

Poppy Evans



Carter Hodgkin

**A**rtist Carter Hodgkin draws ideas for producing her serigraphic panels from a unique and somewhat macabre source: electron micrographs of the inner body. Indeed, viewing the work of this New York City-based artist evokes the feeling of a journey within and the sensation of floating in a sea of vaguely familiar organic images. In spite of the ethereal feeling and decidedly organic look of her work, it still comes as a surprise to discover that you are, in fact, gazing upon detailed magnifications of the human body. The result of state-of-the-art medical technology, these blown-up renditions of microscopic cells serve as the inspiration for Hodgkin's work.

The artist's larger-than-life monoprints of microorganisms are designed to draw the viewer into the beautiful and intriguing world that exists within the body. She renders these images large scale by photographically screen printing them onto rice-paper panels. The ethereal quality of her work is further enhanced when her pieces are suspended in a gallery and fluttering with the subtle movement of the air—delicate and beautiful, yet somehow, strangely unsettling.

Formerly an abstract painter of more traditional genre, Hodgkin started working with photographs of the inner body about eight years ago. "I had been looking at CAT scans and MRIs. My husband gets a lot of trade magazines like *Scientific American* and I found myself looking at a lot of images in there," she explains.

Drawn to the strange beauty of this imagery and seeking to somehow incorporate it into her work, Hodgkin made a trip to an upper Manhattan hospital, well known for its research facility, in search



**Votive Ganglia**, a 12 x 96-in. screen-printed and acrylic wood panel

research pathology unit that she discovered electron micrographs—photographs of cells, bacteria, and other microorganisms that are shot from within the microscope and used to detect cell abnormalities. "I asked the doctors, 'Can I look through what you have?'" recalls Hodgkin. Among the electron micrographs she found were shots of human lung tissue intermingled with asbestos and blood cells with the unmistakable sickle shape associated with sickle-cell anemia.

Hodgkin immediately recognized the inherent beauty and visual potential in these images as vehicles for artistic expression. "Electron micrographs portray things that are not apparent to the naked eye in exquisite detail," she relates. "They were not as abstract as CAT scans. They were portrayals of real objects in your body, rather than a CAT scan where images are abstracted by the machine."

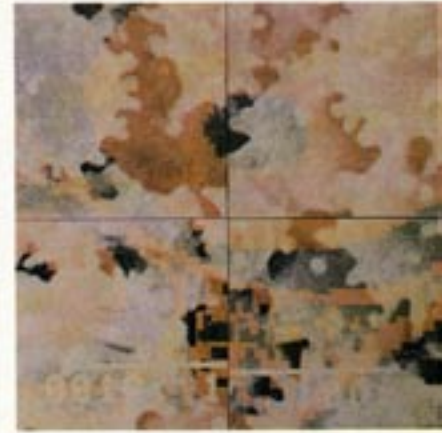
When Hodgkin asked to borrow some of these images, the doctors readily obliged. "Actually, they were very flattered," she says, adding that they saw the artistic potential in the electron micrographs as well. Hodgkin continues to make annual visits to the research pathology unit to replenish her work with fresh images.

Because painting was the medium she was most familiar with from her studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, Hodgkin was first prompted to paint these intriguing images. However, after completing a few canvases, she realized that, in addition to being painstaking, the painting process was not yielding the kind of technological precision she wanted. Hodgkin also remembers some viewer confusion about what the painted images were. "People didn't instantaneously understand what I was portraying. They had to work at it," she admits.

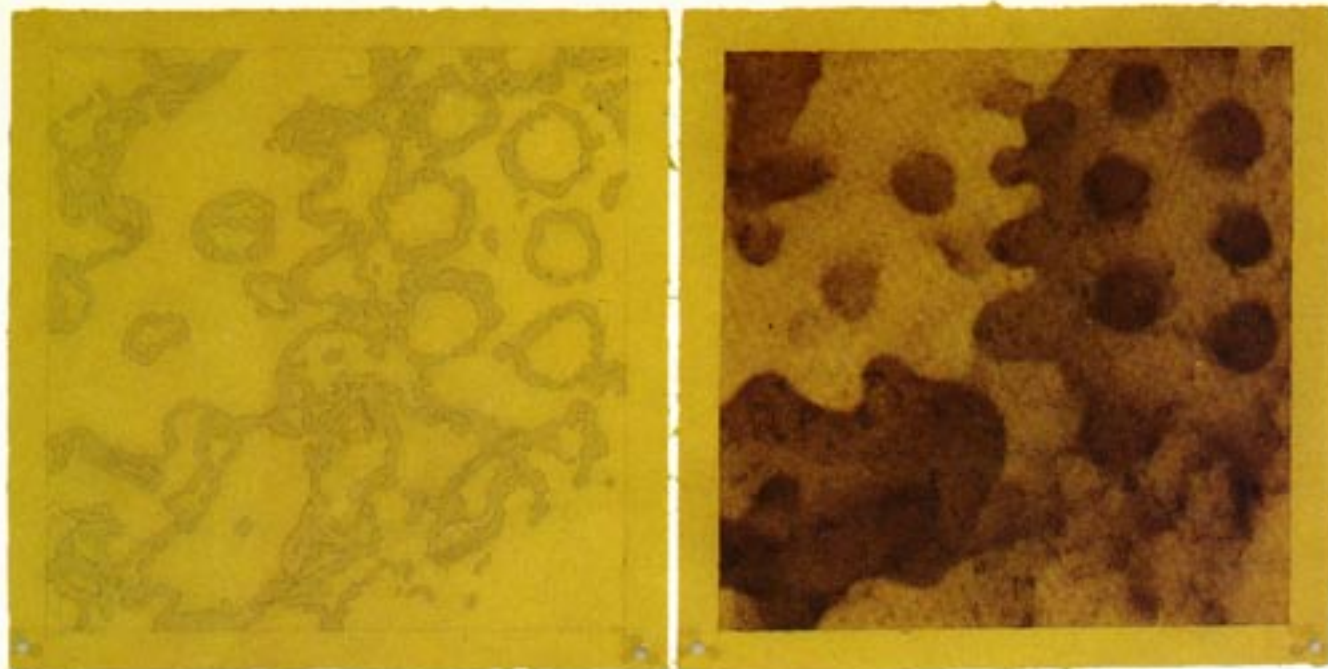
As part of meeting her BFA degree requirements, Hodgkin had taken some courses in printmaking, although it had been some 12-15 years since she'd tried the medium. However, she decided it was time to refamiliarize herself with the screen-printing process as a means of rendering her electron-micrographic images. She now views screen printing as the best means for achieving the high-

tions of cellular structures. "I wanted to portray a technological subject that was instantly recognizable as such," she explains. "I felt screen printing was the best way of portraying that—there was no question in anybody's mind that this was an image that had been derived from a high-tech process."

Once Hodgkin has selected an electron micrograph to work with, her first step is to make an 8 x 10-in. negative from it to ultimately be used for producing the



**Viral Bifurcation**, a 74 x 74-in. wood-paneled piece featuring screen printing and acrylic



**Notes for a Topology of the Physical Plane, an 8 x 16-in. screen print with gouache on Japan paper**

screens. "I keep these negatives and proportion them as I need them," she says, referring to the singular images she uses within each piece of film. (Hodgkin then returns the electron micrographs to the hospital after she has made her negatives from them.) After she marks off an area on each negative, she has it blown up onto a larger piece of film and ultimately prints this image by exposing it onto the screen in her homemade phototable.

Hodgkin further experiments with these images by scanning the original electron micrographs into her computer where they are manipulated within an image-processing program. With her software, Hodgkin is able to produce prints of a number of digitized images that still bear some resemblance to their organic counterparts. She ultimately hand paints the computer-generated images so she can contrast them with their originals by juxtaposing them within a single panel or series of panels.

The exact detail she desired also prompted Hodgkin to initially choose wood as a substrate. Although wood is normally thought to have a somewhat rough and not necessarily detail-revealing surface, the artist used birch plywood, which has a very smooth surface, and then she would sand it down. "It actually

has a much smoother surface than canvas," she adds. Hodgkin also chose wood for its sense of timelessness. "Wood has a history of being used for painting since the Renaissance. It also has an association with primitive art. I was trying to merge these associations."

While Hodgkin initially sought to isolate the blown-up electron micrograph and its digitized counterpart by screen printing each over a different-colored painted undercoat, further experimentation with double registering her images yielded even more exciting visual effects. "At first, my sense of color was to go for something technological—brilliant, acid, discordant colors. But lately, I've been working a lot with black, brown, and white. White has a lot of powerful connotations," Hodgkin says, adding that in many cultures, white is symbolic of death.

The bright colors in her earlier art are now viewed by Hodgkin as a distraction, and she has recently moved into more monochromatic work. Her switch to more neutral tones represents an attempt to focus more of the viewer's attention on the dramatic interplay of the imagery in her work. "I like working with color a lot, but people react to colors in personal ways," she observes. "Instead of getting caught up in the color, I want people to get

caught up in the feeling of the work."

Engaging the viewer has also motivated the artist to incorporate softer substrates that beckon the viewer to touch and impart more of a flowing feeling to her work. Recently, Hodgkin has switched to printing on silk and rice paper because of its tactileness. "I respond to the physicality of paper—it's very transparent and fragile and ties in with the imagery I'm using. The detail of these images really comes across well on paper and silk," she points out. To add subtle color, Hodgkin first "dyes" the paper by lightly washing it with watercolor pigments before she prints.

Her finished panels range in size from 12 x 72 to 108 x 119 in. "The size is a major consideration. I want to convey a feeling of looking within. They're just large enough to make you feel as though you're being enveloped," Hodgkin says, adding that she is careful not to scale them to the point where they overwhelm the viewer.

Recently, Hodgkin chose to alternate rice-paper panels of the original screen-printed electron micrographs with their computer-extrapolated counterparts. "My work has also become more site-specific and installation oriented," she points out. Hodgkin suspends her rice-paper panels from grommets placed at the top to aid



Lifting the screen from the pulped image

### Making Photoimaged Paper

**A**s a result of receiving a paper-making fellowship from Manhattan-based Dieu Donne Papermill, Hodgkin recently departed from her traditional serigraphic panels to experiment with merging her screen-printed images into handmade paper. The fellowship was made possible through a grant from the

New York State Council on the Arts. Hodgkin was one of four artists selected by Dieu Donne to collaborate with the mill as a means of exploring a way of merging her work with the papermaking process.

Working with Paul Wong, director of Dieu Donne, Hodgkin was able to interject a digitized version of one of her electron-micrograph images into the papermaking process with a unique method. "We did something that we believe no one else has ever done," she says. "We used the screen as a mold for the paper."

Hodgkin exposed a high-contrast negative of an image onto one of her screens and then took it to Dieu Donne, where it was pulled over one of their papermaking molds. The mold was dipped into a vat of pulp, and as the water drained through the screen-like mold, the pulp drained off the positive areas of Hodgkin's image and sank into the negative areas, revealing a positive image within the paper.

The process yielded an impression very similar to a watermark. But for Hodgkin, the realism of the image was also a surprise. "I processed the photo image until it became very abstract. But when it reappeared on the paper, it looked almost photographic again—it didn't look all that abstract anymore." In all, Hodgkin and Wong produced seven different paper images, making two or three editions of each. "But each one is unique," she points out. "The pulp never settled in exactly the same way."

The artist has included her photoimaged papers in the latest showing of her work. However, she says that she would have to obtain additional funding through a grant or fellowship before pursuing further work in this area. But the dream of producing an entire series—several editions of a number of different images—still remains. "It would be nice to have



Cleaning extraneous pulp around pulp image

in the work's mystique. She explains, "When people walk by, they float with the movement of the air. I want these images to be very evocative—you aren't quite sure of what it is, but it's intriguing." Light and delicate, her panels are somewhat reminiscent of Oriental landscapes painted on silk. The Far Eastern feeling of Hodgkin's work is no accident. She readily admits to a fondness for Oriental art and seeks to duplicate this fragility in her monoprints.

The metaphysical implications of her work haven't escaped Hodgkin either. She explains that for centuries, the geography of the human body has been a preoccupation of many Oriental and Mideastern cultures. Citing the Chinese and their acupuncture charts, Hodgkin says, "In India, they have books that map out the body in almost metaphysical respects. I try to portray that mapping process in my work."

Although Hodgkin's work has prompted a few viewers to react with some revulsion, for the most part her monoprints have received more acceptance in recent years. "I've got a gallery behind me. I'm showing now and people are interested." The artist also points out that generally, those accustomed to viewing art are not put off by her work.

But if some people continue to find her work unsettling, that's all right with Hodgkin. She feels that she's achieved a precisely balanced interplay of beauty and revulsion—one designed to create a strong reaction in those who view her art. "You'll get people who will say, 'Oh, this is really beautiful. What is it?'" she relates. "Then you'll tell them it's part of the body—it's a virus or a cell—and they'll say, 'Yuk!'. But to me that's okay. I find it interesting that people are repulsed by these images, which are very beautiful. It's the kind of irony I enjoy in my work." ■

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