

Alchemical Transformation

Gary Singh

On multiple levels, in various degrees of scale or metaphor, the work of Sally Weber illuminates alchemical processes. Each singular artwork in a particular exhibit of hers might embody its own microcosm of emergent ideas, somehow inseparable from the macrocosm of the whole show.

Sally Weber comes to us from a long and storied career, in which land art, environmental installation, holography, digital projection, pulsed light, and solar art all played a role of some sort, but no matter which media becomes a conduit for her creative impulse, one perceives a transformative fusion unfolding, either on the creative, psychological or chemical level. The media seems like the fortifier, the galvanizing element. It's easy for one to get lit up by Weber's work.

inFLUX, (the cover image), can be understood as a light installation in which 28 laser pendulums hang above a sand pit, swaying, gyrating, illuminating the sand, while leaving traces of their erratic paths. The interactions of the pendulums as they pass, twist and occasionally collide, reflect the energy inherent in nature on all levels, all scales. Via a more detailed illumination in this issue's Art on Graphics department, Weber compares the interactions to Brownian motion, water molecules or particles of light.

This sense of scale, how molecular interactions function in relationship to the macro level, in a literal sense or an esoteric sense, emerges from much of Weber's pursuits. Even in her holographs, one can distill an alchemical metaphor that might not be a metaphor.

Weber first developed an interest in defracting light into imagery when studying years ago at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT. She took an evening course and then became a graduate student.

"I was interested in using sunlight to illuminate holographic installation," she recalls. "Gradually, my work developed through a number of series exploring holography for public art installations, specific techniques that could reveal subtle motion from within the body, and more recently the elements as a means of reconnecting the bonds between us and the components within us and the rest of nature."

Three recent film-on-glass holograms, *Echo*, *Azurite Echo* and *Emerald Echo* (see Figure 1) can be arranged on a wall in succession, as if to function as a triptych. Each image features a feather that seems to dip into a pool of water, with the feather and the light pool bisecting the image plane and appearing to stretch out in space towards the viewer, who also functions as a participant. In a hologram, color determines how the light is bent to achieve a particular angle, so the viewer perceives each of the three feathers at a slightly different angle. The observer/participant

looks down at the image from above, or up at the image from below, to achieve a different experience. From either perspective, the physicality of a feather affecting water comes through, even though the viewer can't put his or her hand on it.



Figure 1. Three of Sally Weber's recent film-on-glass holograms, *Echo*, *Azurite Echo* and *Emerald Echo* can be arranged on a wall in succession, as if to function as a triptych.

"The work references touch and its consequences in one form or another," Weber says. "[But] of course, a light field offers no tactility except for the eye and mind."

By contrast, *Entangled* (see Figure 2) is a hologram usually installed horizontally on glass, positioned on top of a pedestal, facing up, with a mirror below it. A custom green LED illuminator hangs from the ceiling and points down toward the image. The observer/participant sees both the image above the surface of the glass and a reversed image of light in the mirror below the glass.

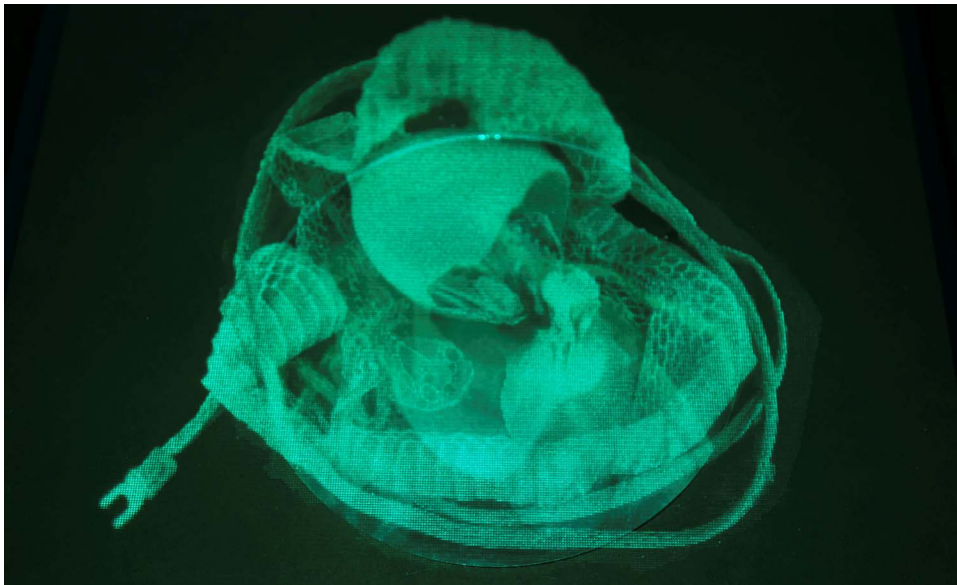


Figure 2. Weber's *Entangled* combines views of a hologram installed horizontally on a glass with a mirror and a green LED illuminator to present the viewer with both a image above the surface of the glass and a reversed image of light in the mirror below the glass.

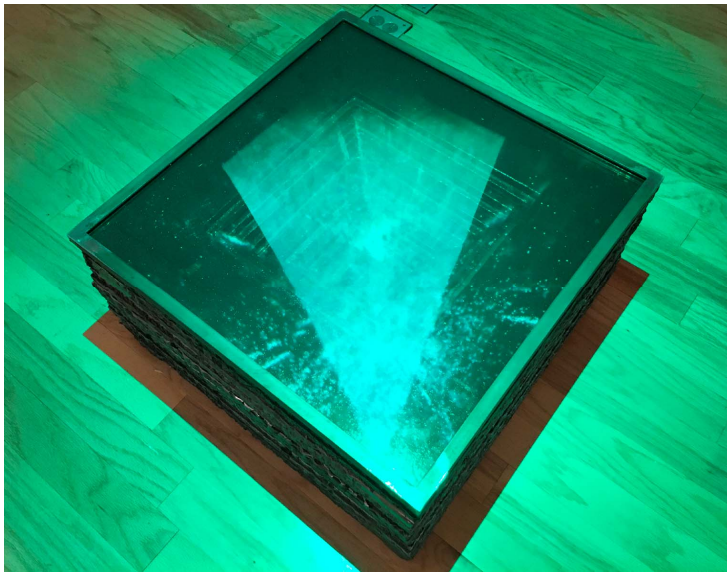


Figure 3. Sally Weber's work seeks to illuminate alchemical processes. As an example, her floor sculpture *Core* directly alludes to the central alchemical role of iron.

Skewing even more toward Weber's research into alchemy and the ancient quest to discover the origins of fundamental elements, *Passions*, a four-part installation,

features three wall panels and a cast iron floor sculpture capped with a steel-framed digital holographic image. The wall panels, *Emergence*, *Allure*, and *Immersed*, use primary colors and materials referencing essential elements like hydrogen, oxygen, carbon, gold and their properties. The floor sculpture, *Core* (see Figure 3), contains an inverted ziggurat, capped by a holographic image of an inverted pyramid extending up towards the observer/participant and piercing down through the floor, surrounded by a map of the stars. *Core* directly alludes to the central alchemical role of iron.

The *Echo* series, as well as *Passions* and *Entangled*, seem to reiterate the alchemical phrase, "as above, so below." The viewer can determine the degree to which everything is literal or metaphorical.

All of which conjures up intriguing history. Medieval alchemists claimed to search for ways of converting base metals into gold, and their laboratory-based terminology contributed to the development of modern chemistry, although for centuries people have argued over the degree to which the alchemical process was mental, physical, spiritual, or psychological. Were the alchemists literally trying to convert lead into gold, or was it an allegory for personal growth?

When it comes to Weber's aesthetic, she sees the alchemical process, transferring base components into something much more emergent and interesting—whether it's light particles, color, sand, carbon, iron, pixels or data packets—as intrinsically creative. The transmutation of artistic elements necessitates a merging of inner with outer on a personal level as well as a tangible level. In terms of computer graphics in fine art or design, maybe pixels can even be perceived as digital quanta, points of information in constant flux versus photons as quanta of light. She also explains that in a previous incarnation, she was a jeweler and a metalsmith, during which she eventually discovered that metallurgists and early chemists thought base metals matured into the "royal metals" of gold and silver in the ground because miners often found different metals and minerals together, inferring their relationship as a maturation process from one state to another.

"I think I was curious about alchemy because it's been entrancing to so many from psychology and the work of Jung and Maria-Louise van Franz through mysticism and the arts and sciences," Weber says. "What isn't involved in the transformation of something into something else? This is the search. To create something new from the unexpected. Refining something into its better."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gary Singh lives and writes in San Jose, California.