

MARTHA OTERO GALLERY · Los Angeles, CA

Lia Halloran doesn't expect her viewers to return to eighth-grade science class. Nor does she believe the exact nature of creating her hypnotic, blue ink drawings should be known. In fact, it's unknown even to her. There's a tantalizing energy coursing through Halloran's solo show, *Sublimation / Transmutation*, with gallerist Martha Otero in Los Angeles: one where the viewer could beg for answers but, instead, enjoys their own yearning curiosity. This exhibition is riddled with questions of scientific discovery and how artists may humanize that methodical, icy pursuit.



Lia Halloran, *Figure Forms, Part 21, 2011*, ink on drafting film, 14" x 17"
COURTESY OF MARTHA OTERO GALLERY

Half-abstract, half-figurative bursts of imperial blue are hung throughout the space. Faintly visible hands, flowing hair, and body contours mesh into spiky patches of crystal. Surrounded by large rings of negative space, the figures float on a shimmering surface: a special grade of drafting film coated with Mylar. Within the figures themselves, fine fractures, blobs, and lines create a secondary alien landscape. The bodies are all female, with even their shoes, hairstyles, and some clothing clearly recognizable. The crystal mounds are within them, a part of them: their dynamic is completely symbiotic. Separately, a series of earthen objects are also rendered in ink, with titles such as *Gypsum*, *Barite* and *Erythrite*. Laid out in the grid with which schoolchildren are familiar, the periodic table of elements is transformed into a living gallery. The tiny drawings teem with the figures of little men and women buried in and emerging from rock. Fine details of fingertips, boot heels, and faces in profile are never compromised, but made in

response to the parent image: the earthen element.

In speaking at length about her practice, Halloran describes the process of creating her ink drawings as something resembling trial and error. Carefully adding and subtracting water to her deep indigo pigments, the customized ink floats over the sheets of drafting film and where it stops, nobody, especially Halloran, knows. The drying times are all variable and a sole smudge or run would invalidate an entire day or week of work. Ink of this kind is "self-animating," reacting more to the surface on which it sits versus the command of the artist's hand. This would be a complex task with simplistic forms or abstract blobs on their own. Halloran, however, flatly rejects the simple route. She incorporates the shifts and movements of live female models in the larger drawings, who disappear and reappear from the crystalline formations. If the ink travels across the surface in an unpredictable manner, she has no choice but to negotiate with the medium and adjust to its behavior. Each drawing exudes vitality in the thin, tangled paths of white space within floating fields of intense blue. Personifying the ink isn't just a literary ploy for Halloran; she contends that it genuinely possesses a distinct personality and performative nature. Performance is a significant term within the work: the models and the medium from which they issue actively experience a dormant, potential energy that bursts into kinetic movement. Like the natural earths that fuel human energies in the world at large, Halloran's "inked" elements reflect an exuberant, intimate relationship between persons and petrologies.

The physical exertions of printmaking and a wealth of quality in mark-making are notable strengths of this exhibition. Halloran is well informed of the deep contrasts and impressions that are possible with ink alone, a trait often relegated to the act of warping the paper before the mark is even delivered. The movements of the ink seemingly have no origin and no terminus within the figures of the rocks, but have clear demarcations within the human subjects. Impressing the surface to create texture is, more often than not, exclusive to the specific arts of woodblock, lithography, drypoint, and engravings. Yet Halloran incorporates the fundamental principles of high-contrast crafts with works apparently generated via sharpened tools or the grooves of a lithograph/printing press. There is no specific dating within the work, although any visible wardrobe on the human subjects suggests modernity. More indicative of the contemporary sphere of production is the active dialogue between organic and inorganic materials. Humans do not control nature nor are they slaves to it, just as seemingly defenseless objects wield invisible powers which have only begun to be understood, and are still seldom respected. In a breathable, spacious setup, gallerist Martha Otero displays her own curatorial prowess in granting Halloran room for her works to move and move together well.

The daughter of a scientist, Lia Halloran was born in Chicago in 1977 and has maintained intensive interest in both arts and sciences throughout her life. She earned her BFA from the University of California and her MFA in painting and printmaking from Yale. She became widely known for her *Dark Skate* photographic series, 2006-8, where she strapped a light to a wrist or her head, skateboarding through darkened city and rural parks throughout Los Angeles. Lengthened exposure times created haunting images of light trails slicing through nocturnal spaces. Her previous project, *The Only Way Out Is Through*, 2009-10, connects with the geologic mystery of *Sublimation / Transmutation*, where she recreated the extreme environments of the Cuevas De Los Cristales mine in Naica, Mexico. Halloran is a lecturer in the art department at Chapman University in Orange, California.

Halloran is gracious to her audience in retaining a childlike enthusiasm for discovery in art and science, her work never seeming too pretentious or overtly intellectual to the point of alienation. Artists have probing minds in the same fashion as practitioners of the physical and technical sciences, but explore their hypotheses through emotive channels versus unfiltered, sequential logic. A respect for classical geology is a certainty for Halloran, but venturing into the creative realm appears to hold greater sway. The names of rocks and gases will hardly be memorable to gallery-goers; it is Halloran's ebullient painted forms that retain their unique brand of intelligent spectacle. Could this be the making of a female da Vinci? Artist and scientist emerge with equal passion.