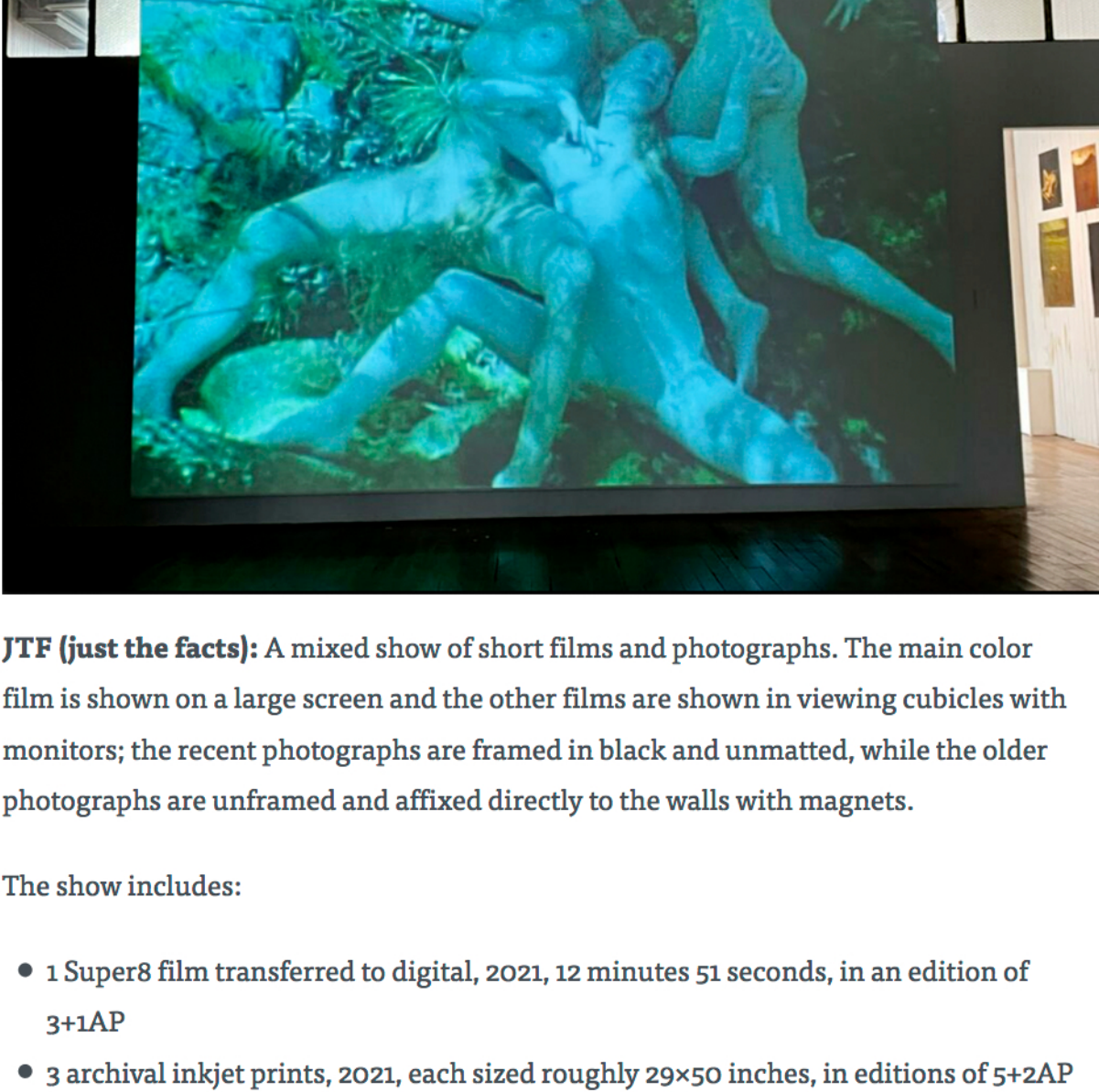


Aneta Bartos, *Monotropa Terrain* @Postmasters

By Loring Knoblauch / In Galleries / February 9, 2023

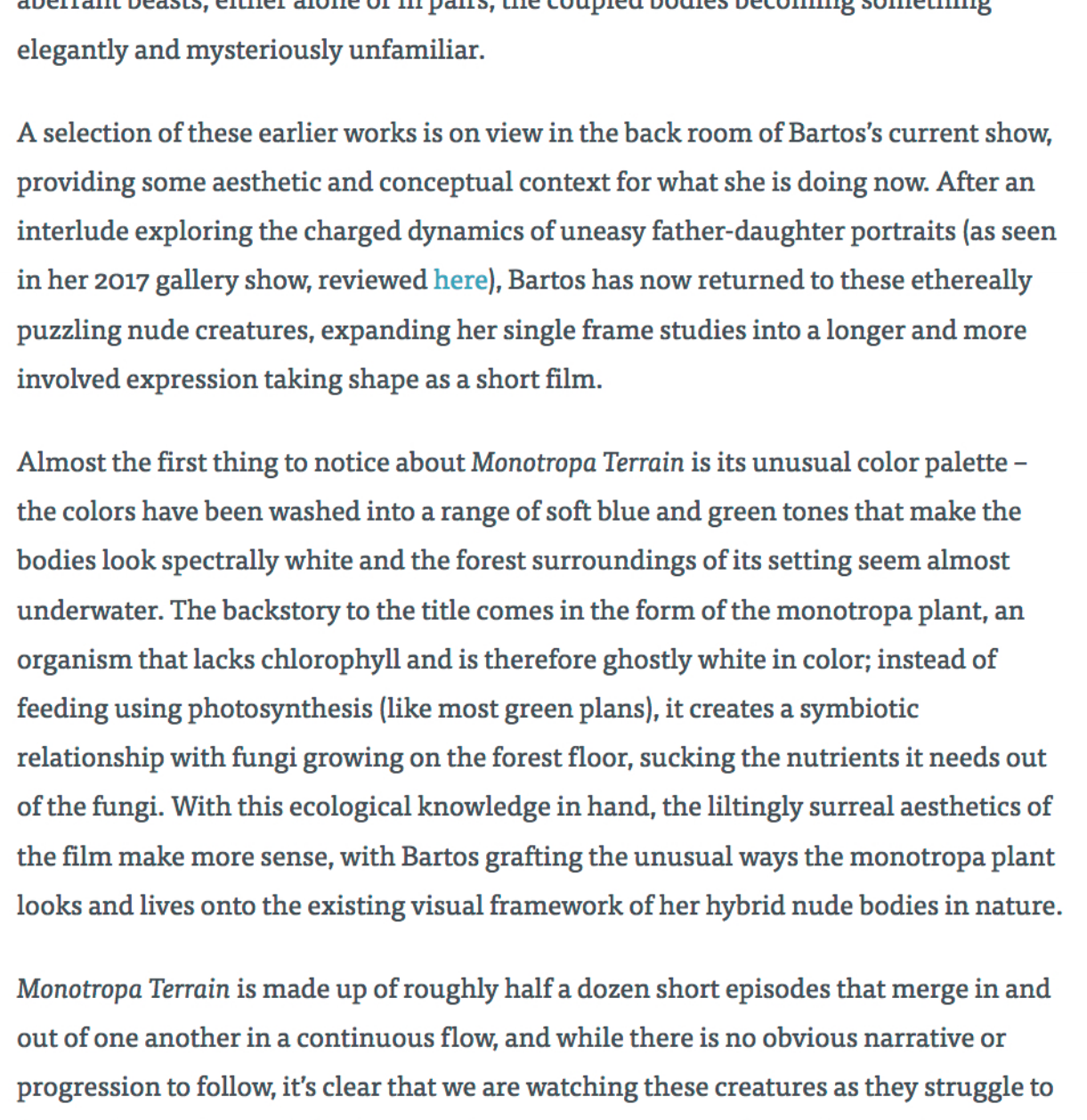
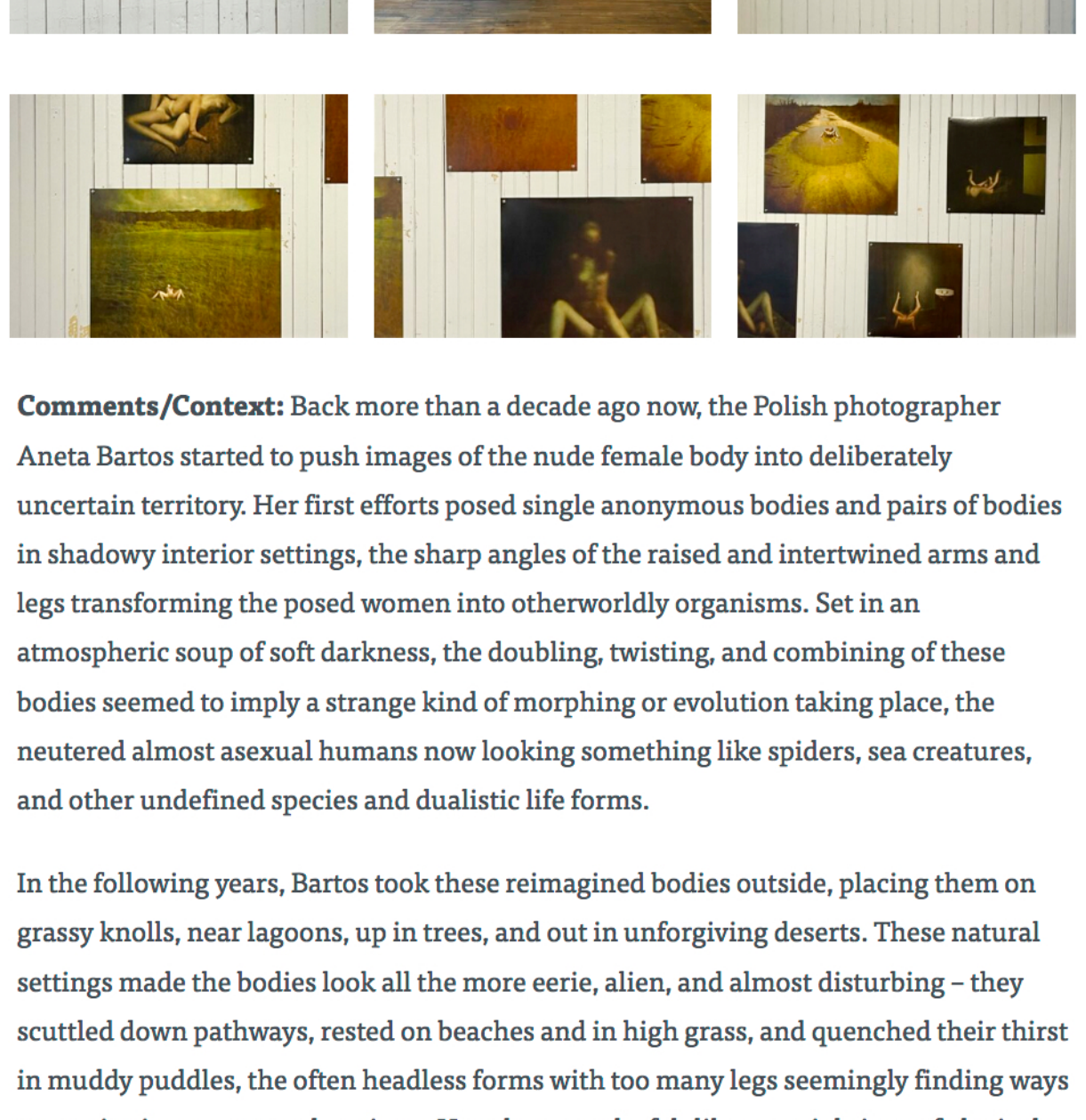
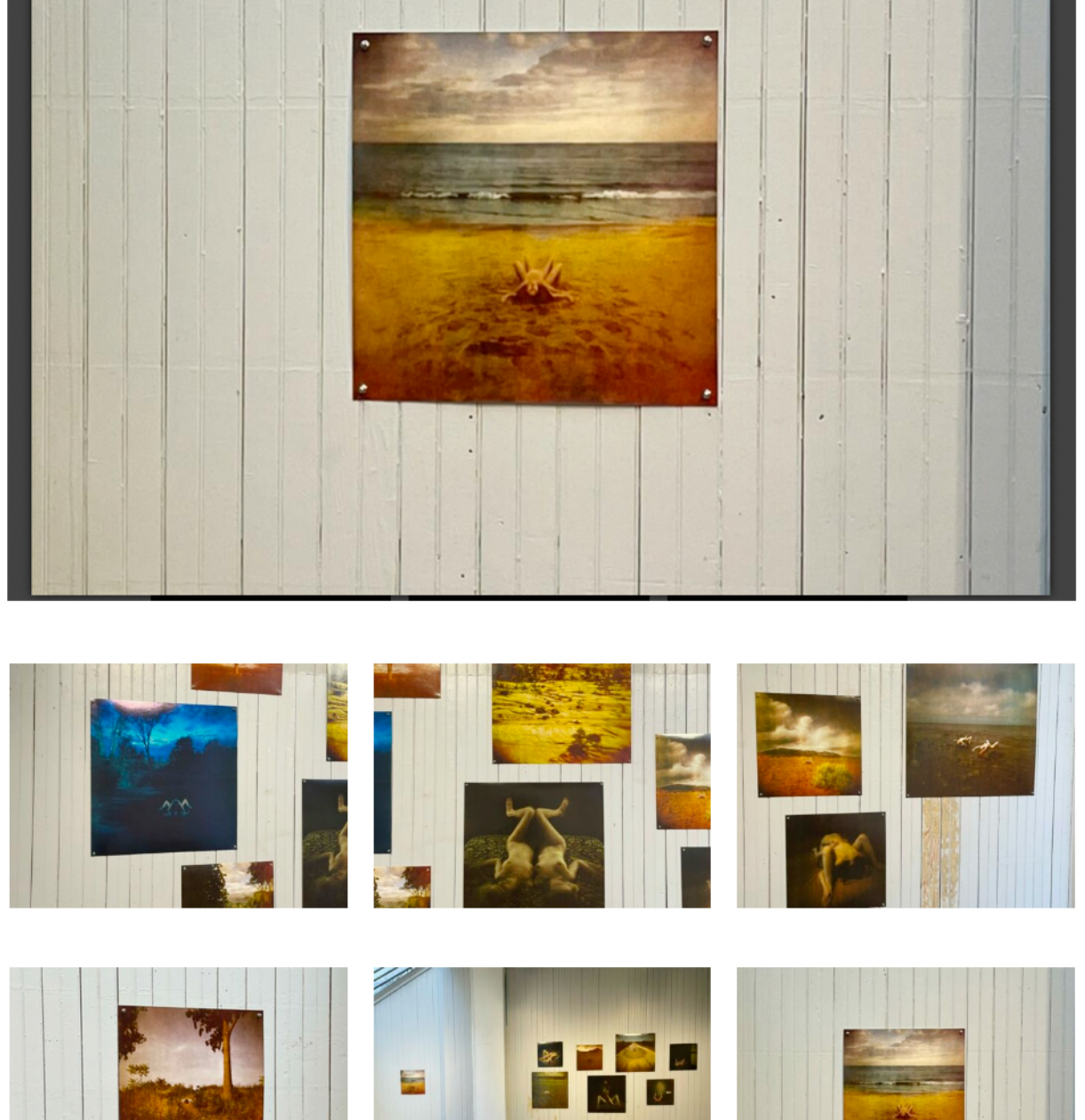
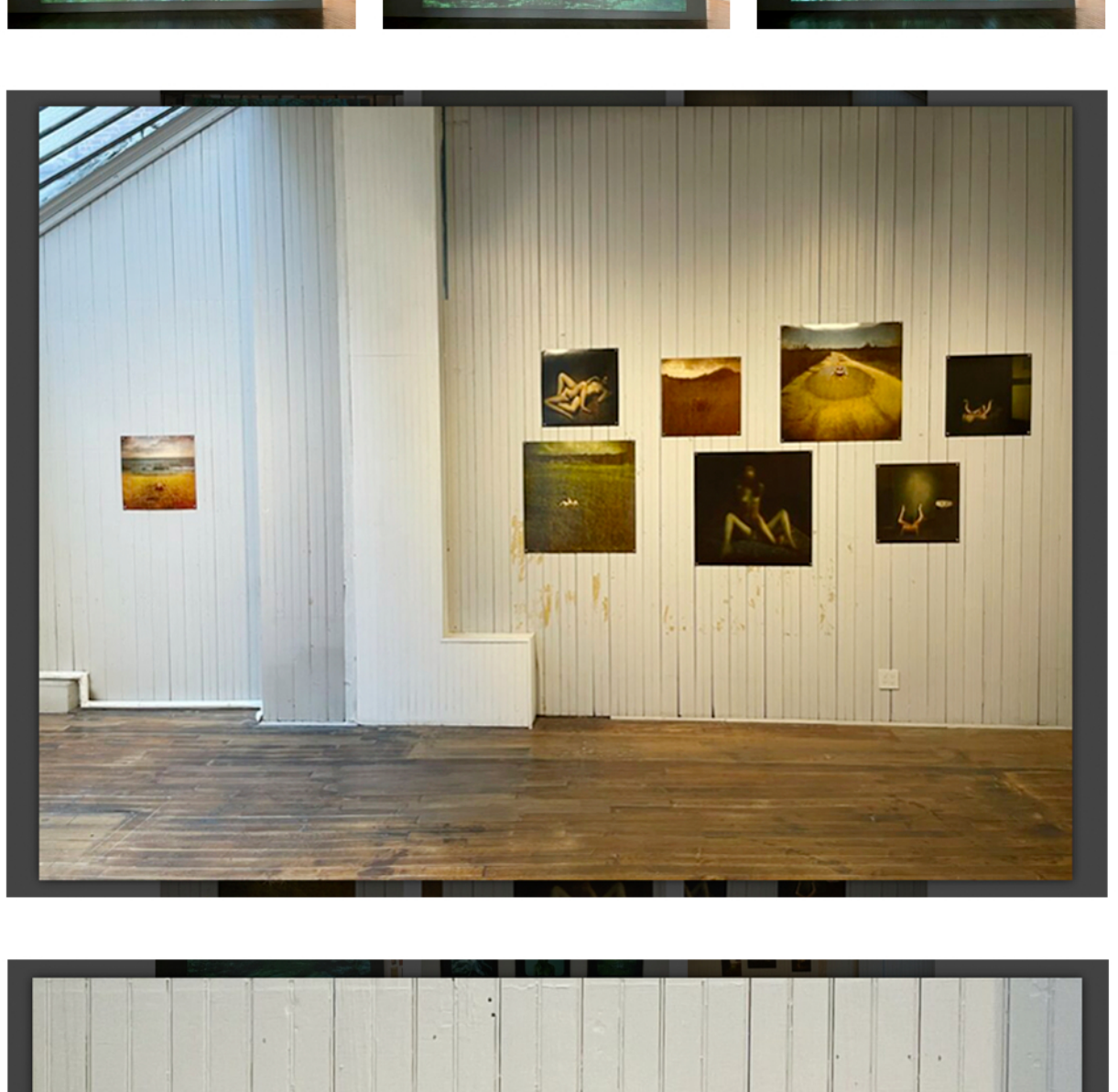


JTF (just the facts): A mixed show of short films and photographs. The main color film is shown on a large screen and the other films are shown in viewing cubicles with monitors; the recent photographs are framed in black and unmatted, while the older photographs are unframed and affixed directly to the walls with magnets.

The show includes:

- 1 Super8 film transferred to digital, 2021, 12 minutes 51 seconds, in an edition of 3+1AP
- 3 archival inkjet prints, 2021, each sized roughly 29×50 inches, in editions of 5+2AP
- 5 digital films (black-and-white, sound), 2021, 7 minutes 31 seconds, 5 minutes 44 seconds, 6 minutes 7 seconds, 5 minutes 46 seconds, 5 minutes 35 seconds, in editions of 3+1AP
- 7 archival inkjet prints, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, each sized 30×30 inches, in editions of 5+2AP
- 12 archival inkjet prints, 2011, 2013, 2014, 2015, each sized 20×20 inches, in editions of 5+2AP

(Installation shots and film stills below.)



Comments/Context: Back more than a decade ago now, the Polish photographer Aneta Bartos started to push images of the nude female body into deliberately uncertain territory. Her first efforts posed single anonymous bodies and pairs of bodies in shadowy interior settings, the sharp angles of the raised and intertwined arms and legs transforming the posed women into otherworldly organisms. Set in an atmospheric soup of soft darkness, the doubling, twisting, and combining of these bodies seemed to imply a strange kind of morphing or evolution taking place, the neutered almost asexual humans now looking something like spiders, sea creatures, and other undefined species and dualistic life forms.

In the following years, Bartos took these reimagined bodies outside, placing them on grassy knolls, near lagoons, up in trees, and out in unforgiving deserts. These natural settings made the bodies look all the more eerie, alien, and almost disturbing – they scuttled down pathways, rested on beaches and in high grass, and quenched their thirst in muddy puddles, the often headless forms with too many legs seemingly finding ways to survive in unprotected territory. Her photographs felt like rare sightings of elusively aberrant beasts, either alone or in pairs, the coupled bodies becoming something elegantly and mysteriously unfamiliar.

A selection of these earlier works is on view in the back room of Bartos's current show, providing some aesthetic and conceptual context for what she is doing now. After an interlude exploring the charged dynamics of uneasy father-daughter portraits (as seen in her 2017 gallery show, reviewed [here](#)), Bartos has now returned to these ethereally puzzling nude creatures, expanding her single frame studies into a longer and more involved expression taking shape as a short film.

Almost the first thing to notice about *Monotropa Terrain* is its unusual color palette – the colors have been washed into a range of soft blue and green tones that make the bodies look spectrally white and the forest surroundings of its setting seem almost underwater. The backstory to the title comes in the form of the monotropa plant, an organism that lacks chlorophyll and is therefore ghostly white in color; instead of feeding using photosynthesis (like most green plants), it creates a symbiotic relationship with fungi growing on the forest floor, sucking the nutrients it needs out of the fungi. With this ecological knowledge in hand, the liltingly surreal aesthetics of the film make more sense, with Bartos grafting the unusual ways the monotropa plant looks and lives onto the existing visual framework of her hybrid nude bodies in nature.

Monotropa Terrain is made up of roughly half a dozen short episodes that merge in and out of one another in a continuous flow, and while there is no obvious narrative or progression to follow, it's clear that we are watching these creatures as they struggle to live in the woods. Single bodies crouch in streams and in paths, gathering, foraging, or simply connecting to the environment. One group of reaching bodies writhes at the mossy base of a tree, like milky larvae or newborns; another back-to-back pair shudders in the mud; and a third pair emerges from an algae choked (or amniotic) pool, each scene alluding to some kind of birthing, merging, or creative force at work. Still other scenes offer a rougher more feral reality, with a pair of bodies bluntly wrestling (seemingly searching for dominance, capitulation, or coupling, or perhaps they are oppositional forces within one creature) and a fleetingly glimpsed body moving quickly through the rustling darkness, not wanting to be seen or confronted.

Many of the scenes shift in and out of expressive blurriness, the bodies becoming grainy and indistinct like a drifting impression or disappearing memory. In some cases, this effect is almost painterly; in others, it further diffuses any voyeuristic tension we may have had in watching these female bodies, making them more abstract and almost intermediate, their in-betweenness becoming dappled and tactile. Bartos has then gone further in a few instances to make printed stills from the film, each containing three adjacent frames in quick succession, highlighting the broader theme of elusive transformation taking place.

Bartos has paired the main film with a series of five interview-style videos, where many of the same models from the film now tell personal stories of paranormal, supernatural, or other strange experiences. Each sits dressed in black, on a metal folding chair against a blank wall, and looks directly into the camera to divulge a secret, from one woman who sees an alternate world in a mirror to another who feels a bug inside her. Many of the stories include expressive movement, the models jumping, dancing, posing, and touching themselves in an effort to explain what has happened. As a companion to the themes in the featured film, these videos allude to other kinds of hybrid bodies and traumatic experiences, many more internal than the physical merging taking place in the film.



What stands out about these works, both the older photographs and the new film, is how Bartos has combined the bold re-imagining of female bodies and the expressive creation of atmospheric settings to take us someplace wholly unexpected. In the strongest works, the bodies become something “other”, perhaps in a way that only a female photographer would attempt, allowing Bartos to then freight them with a variety of alternate meanings and psychological resonances. In doing so, she's tapped into a vein of strange magnetism and friction with these works, which is likely why they feel so richly entrancing and disquieting.

Collector's POV: The photographs in this show are priced as follows. The recent film strip images are \$6000 each, while the older photographs are priced based on size and place in the edition, with the 20×20 works at \$3500 to \$4500 and the 30×30 works at \$5000 to \$5500. The main film is priced at \$7500, while the shorter black-and-white films are \$3000 each. Bartos's work has little secondary market history at this point, so gallery retail likely remains the best option for those collectors interested in following up.