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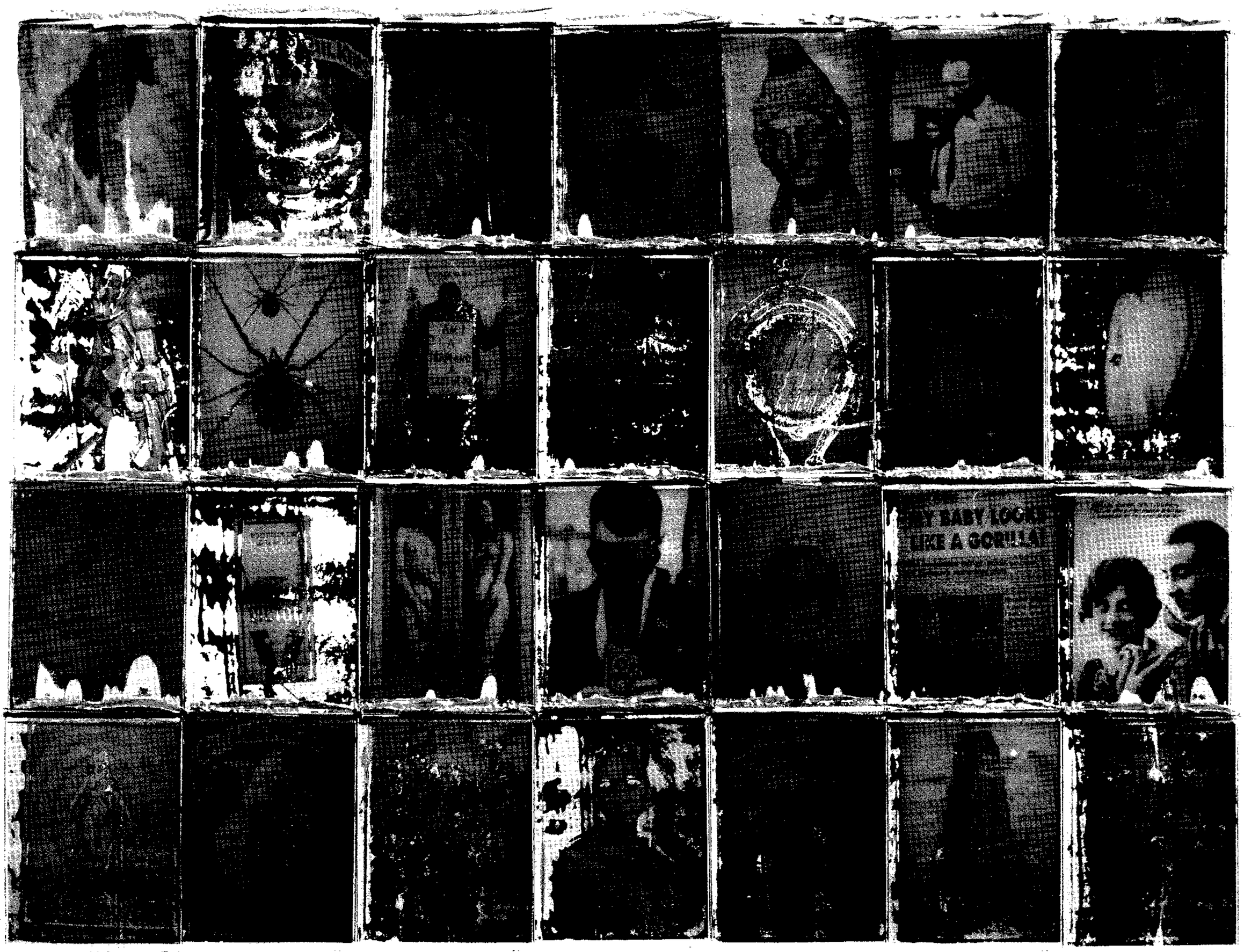

Rick Hock—Large Green *Codex (Monkey Business)* 1987. Polacolor transfers. 40 inches × 56 inches.

The *Codex* Series by Rick Hock: Haunting Images/Unlimited Meanings

William E. Parker

During his undergraduate study in the Department of Art at the University of Connecticut (Storrs), Rick McKee Hock majored in printmaking. On taking an elective course in photography, Hock says he "discovered light and silver to be media as exciting for pictorial exploration as copper, stone, and ink, so I enrolled in all of the studio photography and history of photography courses that were available." A master of drawing, lithography and etching, Hock's visual

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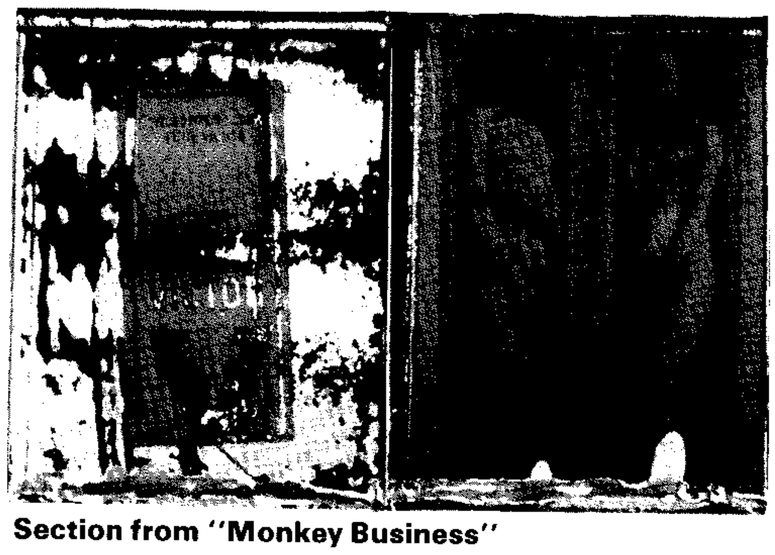

Section from "Monkey Business"

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attentions as a cameraworker, as well as his capacities for experimental usages of photographic media, have always been influenced by his printmaking skills. Such skills are evident in the exquisite textural qualities and subtle tonal effects of his early 8 ×10-inch black and white contact prints defining landscape and urban locales, as well as his recent multi-unit transfer pictures that have been generated through the use of Polaroid photographic materials.

Having completed his B.F.A. degree in 1977, Hock relocated to Rochester, New York, in order to pursue graduate studies in photography at the Visual Studies Workshop. Both Nathan Lyons and Michael Lesy further charged his photographic and historical interests. Completing his M.F.A. degree in 1979, Hock was employed by the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, where today he is Director of the Exhibitions Department. Also, for several years, he has been an adjunct faculty member in the Department of Art at the University of Rochester, teaching courses in black and white photography and architectural photography, as well as basic color, experimental, and non-silver processes.

Increasingly recognized during the 1980's as an important contributor to the field of photographic art, Hock has been the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Photographer's Fellowship and an invited artist-in-residence at Light Work in Syracuse, New York. Two of his most recent works have been acquired by the Museum of Modern Art and the Princeton Art Museum. His work is also represented in the International Polaroid Collection.

In one of Hock's favorite contemporary novels, Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1983), the detective monk, Brother William of Baskerville, tells his disciple and scribe of the tale, the novice Adso of Melk, "...to recognize the evidence through which the world speaks to us like a great book." Considering Rick Hock's recent photographic art, it is as if, at some time in his life, he had also received a similar advisement. All of Hock's recent multi-unit pictures, defined as extensions of a series first begun in late 1986, bear the major title, *Codex*, inferring his belief that these works "are visual texts, not only to be seen, but also read; to me they are pages for an encyclopaediac book of images that is ever evolving."

Typically, in the preparation of his *Codex* works, Hock photographically appropriates already existent pictures or texts from every conceivable source and *re-presents* them in a grid format, each work generally consisting of 28 or 36 coalesced motifs. Through the use of the grid format, Hock deliberately denies any hierarchical ordering of the motifs; along the coordinates of the grid all units of a final *Codex* picture are given coequal attention. The grid structure also ensures there is no mandatory sequence for "reading" the collected images; horizontal, vertical, diagonal, "hopscotch" readings, and other modes of perceptual search are all possibilities for their visual or conceptual engagement. Through Hock's use of photographic transfer processes, his completed pictures reconstitute a wide range of ephemeral as well as archivally valued human picturings and writings which, when gathered together, implicate historical, everyday, personal, social, political, and psychological references. Hock's groups of redefined images remind one of what Roland Barthes, in "The Death of the Author" (1968), stated any text to be: "...a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture."

The pictorial/textual units for Hock's *Codex* pictures are initially derived from what he calls his "detective diggings in museums, libraries, archives, bookstores, and at newsstands." First photographing those documents that interest him with a 35mm camera, typically making color slides, he adds them to a vast image bank from which he can make withdrawals in the preparation of final images. Hock states that in making selections for transfer, he has "no fixed or rigid procedural rules...I prefer to let intuition prevail." For transferring image-units of modest scale, he first prepares a print from a slide, using a Vivitar slide printer and Polaroid Type 669 professional standard color pack film. When enlarged units are required, he uses Polaroid 8 ×10-inch 809 color print material which requires use of the 81-12 Film Processor. In either case, preparing final images and their transfer must take place one image at a time. Exposed material is processed, peeled apart, and the remaining "chemistry face" of the print material is then laid on the surface of a sheet of Arches, 240 lb., hot-press watercolor paper, burnished, and then the back of the print is pulled away and discarded. Once an entire series of transfers have been made—each unit of the group usually having been individually transferred from left to right in horizontal registers defined from top to bottom of a determined area of the picture-plane—and have dried thoroughly, the final work is sealed with a spray-type fixative. Hock acknowledges that there are many variables that can affect the appearance of images during every step of the generative process, variables such as the type and quality of the original slide, age of printing materials, intensity of exposure, light source color, temperature and humidity. In the final transfer process, the results can vary in accord with the length of print material "development;" the time permitted before the positive sheet is peeled away and for the transfer of the "chemistry face;" the surface of the receiving watercolor paper; and the degrees of pressure and stroke-patterns that occur in the burnishing process. Hock says that such variables are exciting for him and that "unlike those who desire a clean or straight transfer, I embrace the characteristics which might be considered by others to be faults or defects. I find these

Section from "The Amazing Hypnotist Randy"

can be eventually controlled, and that even initially unintended effects, happy accidents, can be repeated after figuring out how they occurred. This keeps the process alive and my interest in the work peaked. The Polaroid material is a blessing in that it allows me to work in a physical and tactile way with a spontaneity and immediacy uncharacteristic of traditional darkroom procedures."

Each work in the *Codex* series is identified by a subtitle such as "The Amazing Hypnotist Randy," "Frankenstein," "The Limits of Art," "Lips," "Femme Fatale," "Terror," "Fury on Earth," "Otto Rank" and "Dada." These subtitles identify thematic concerns that originally prompted Hock's selection of pictorial or textual units for coalescence, and while they may be pertinent to his own consciousness, they never declare thematic premises that conclusively inform or specifically direct anyone else's interpretation of the work. On the matter of his subtitles, Hock states that "they won't lead to any final enlightenment insofar as meaning is concerned." Like the often intentionally bizarre juxtapositionings of motifs in his final pictures, the subtitles are but another prompt for expanding rather than limiting interpretive possibilities. On encountering a work and then reading a label bearing its title, an observer might think the key to meaning is at hand, but that won't work because, as Hock says, "despite the fact that certain pictorial units in the work will definitely seem to bear witness to the subtitle and vice versa, along comes a unit in the assembly of images that seems not to link at all, and that is where the reader, not me, has to become responsible for meaning." To further focus Hock's views about interpretation and meaning, one might consider the *Codex* picture subtitled "Monkey Business." In a recent review of this work, Kelly Wise wrote that it "pokes fun at Darwin and civilized ways."

Wise was quite justified in linking some of the image-units of the piece to a spoof on issues and ideas associated with Darwinism and evolution, for not only the subtitle, but many of the pictures in the work relate to such a theme: for example, one of ape skulls, a portrait of John Scopes, an illustration entitled "Monkeyana" of a gorilla wearing a sandwich-board sign on which is lettered, *"Am I a man and a brother?"* Yet, there are counter-themes about human origins in the work, for example the van Eyckian "Adam and Eve" unit or the picture of the African vessel representing the womb of the world. And then there are other themes that depart from those concerning origins. What would someone else make of the illustrated "Garbage Pail Kid" mutant named "Defaced" in the bottom register of the grid when its affinity to the "Veronica's Veil" image at the top is discovered? Why has Robert Fludd's "Anima Figure" been included at lower left? What is the purpose for including a picture of Duchamp's "Nude Descending the Staircase;" why the Popeye cartoon with text that reads, "They has upset the balance of mankind"? And why the childhood portrait of Donna Rice dressed as an angel, while in another portrait, Rice appears as a buxom adult with scratched-out eyes, this portrait flanked by a Schongauer "Torment of St. Anthony" image and the "Defaced" kid? Are these images about origins and evolution? Do these and other motifs foster social, political, or psychological perspectives of meaning that diverge from the evolution theme? Hock wouldn't want to answer these questions, for that would spoil what he calls "the game of meaning in which I and the viewer are both involved. I am always amazed at how many readings of the work are possible beyond any I might have intended or felt; even at home, my life-partner Mary and our children, 11-year old Caitlin and 5-year old Ian, constantly astound me by their different ways of seeing and decoding the works... they are always the first to prove I'm on the right track as far as meaning is concerned." One might suspect that Hock's inclusion of the "Tower of Babel" and the "RolleiFlex Viewing Hood" pictorial units in "Monkey Business" come closest to his point of view concerning meaning by suggesting that what one might see, read, or talk about is not going to be, in any final sense, what Hock wanted one to get. As he says, "Everyone's language of interpretation is different, and the fact that I use photographically generated presentations ensures that everyone will suspect that any of my chosen pictorial or textual units, whether familiar or not and no matter how transformed, originally were existent in and taken from the world. Certainly, the messages of the units are not my inventions."

Hock has said that "anyone wishing to understand my approach to picture-making would be best served by a careful reading of Laszlo Gefin's study entitled *Ideogram: History of a Poetic Method*, published by University of Texas (Austin) Press in 1982." Indeed, Hock has clearly evolved his recent work by adapting to his own pictorial ends the poetic method that Ezra Pound called "*ideogrammic structuring*," whereby paratactic positioning (side-by-side placement without narrative connectives) or collecting together images of a diverse order, ensure unexpected symbolic convergences, as well as metaphorical and allegorical possibilities, that both reveal and transcend personal artistic intentions. Any encounter with the work is certainly conditioned by an observer's capacities for recognizing that all forms and ideas are limited only by what his or her consciousness discovers or permits them to be or mean. Hock insists that he doesn't want any meanings of the images he has brought together to be presumed to have been

sealed off or made final by his own operations as a picture-maker. Rather, he believes that the preexistent semiotic motifs transmuted formally and contextually in the *Codex* works should be dynamically open to varieties of audience interpretation. The compatible/incompatible and conjunctive/disjunctive units collected together should serve inexhaustible polysemic potentials, continuously signaling all already attributed and any newly discovered meanings.

As a testament parallel to his own intentions in picture-making, Hock would agree with Umberto Eco's views on narration and interpretation in *Postscript to The Name of the Rose* (1984): "A narrator should not supply interpretations of his work; otherwise he would not have written a novel, which is a machine for generating interpretations...capturing readers' dreams does not necessarily mean encouraging escape; it can also mean haunting them."

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