

## VISUAL ARTS • VIRGINIA HOWARD

# Photos turn human flesh into object of fascination

**Of Mudlarkers and Measurers:**

**Antoni Abad, Maria Fernanda Cardoso, Gwen MacGregor, Lyndal Osborne, Regina Silveira**

**When:** Until June 29. Tues. to Fri., 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; Thurs. to 8 p.m.; Sat. & Sun., 12-5 p.m.

**Where:** Ottawa Art Gallery, 2 Daly Ave.

**Duality of the Flesh: Chantal Gervais**

**Corporis Cognosco: Marc Behiels**

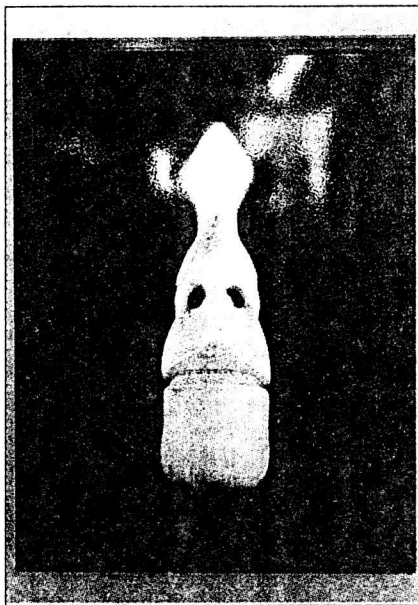
**When:** Until June 5. Tues-Sat, noon-6 p.m.

**Where:** Creative Outlet, 332 Cumberland St.

**W**hen you make the ancient open-handed gesture to someone, you're displaying much more than a peaceable nature. Your warm mitt identifies you as a member of the tool-making race, a manipulator par excellence.

In the low-tech works of the *Of Mudlarkers and Measurers* show, the image of ourselves as overlords of the food chain is deflated. We're brought back down to earth, almost literally, by Gwyn MacGregor's *Not Here Not Now*.

While living in England, MacGregor spent some time as a mudlark on the clay banks of the Thames. She painstakingly unearthed hundreds of clay pipes, straight pins and buttons, all personal effects that had been discarded by seafarers over the centuries. The buttons inspired her to build a wooden tray rack a little more than a

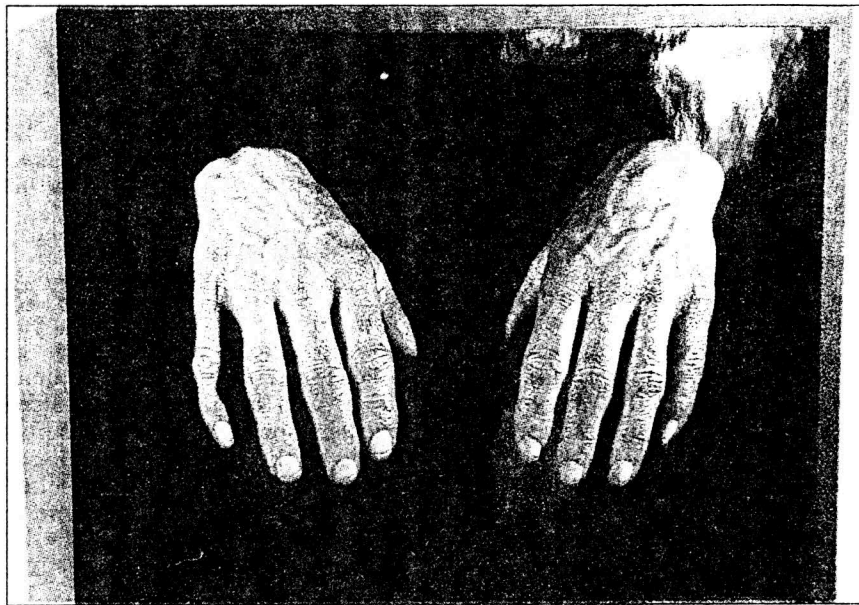


WAYNE HIEBERT, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

**Faces emerge from a pool of black in Chantal Gervais's photos.**

metre high.

MacGregor loaded the rack with plastic trays, specially moulded to contain clay replicas of the antique buttons. At specific times, which coincide with a tidal schedule posted by the rack's door, a gallery attendant dumps a trayful of clay buttons into a jar of water. Looking at the multi-coloured strata in the jar reminds the viewer that all bodies and artifacts are prone to dissolution. The things that we struggle to preserve may be washed away by the next era's tide.



WAYNE HIEBERT, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

**In this portrait, a pair of blue-veined hands, with fingers as red as rooster claws, appear to float in the darkness.**

If Antoni Abad came across you mucking around in the Thames, he'd haul your hand out of clay, cast it in aluminum and fix it to a gallery wall.

In his installation, *Minor Measures*, he's made a frieze using castings of his own right hand as it measures out a hand's breadth. In the days of horsepower, you'd walk your hand up from the horse's hoof to its shoulder, and reckon its height in so many hands. Abad demonstrates this sidestep in a video projection on the wall opposite his aluminum frieze. The third ele-

ment of Abad's installation is one page of text displayed in a light-box. It's an account of a day in the artist's life, from dawn to dusk, as he works on *Minor Measures*. This intimate chronicle, combined with the vision of the hand, gives you the strong impression that an individual's life path has crossed yours.

In the split second when Abad's hand disappears and the wall is dark, you may find yourself gazing into the fathomless black of Chantal Gervais's photographs. She's used this black to

great effect in her Chromogenic print series: *Duality of the Flesh*. By draping and vignetting parts of her models' faces and bodies, Gervais turns human flesh into a strange object of fascination. One of the first works to confront the viewer at the Creative Outlet shows the central third of a face, emerging from a glistening pool of black. Another image shows a man's pale torso with soft, translucent skin, revealing itself through a diamond-shaped tear.

The psychological impact of Gervais's images is complex. Because she hasn't deleted blemishes, chapped skin or whiskers, we're made painfully aware that she's quoting from the bodies of individuals. Like mysterious icons of sense memory, emerging from the subconscious well, they provoke intense feeling. We know ourselves to be as fiercely alive and as perishable as the flesh haloed in black.

The last word on human individuality goes to Marc Behiels.

Using a commercial technique to make printed circuit boards, he's covered his copper plaques with models of the double helix and scientific notations describing human DNA. Will this be our destiny, where an individual's genetic profile can be mapped like circuitry on to an electronic board?

Will our sense of an individual's worth diminish, when we view each other as garbled genetic information?

*Virginia Howard is a freelance writer.*