

Intimacy's Awkward Beauty

Sarah Anne Johnson

Introduction by Meeka Walsh

Utopia has been the central issue in Sarah Anne Johnson's work from the outset—the through line connecting series as distinct from one another as “Tree Planting,” 2005, “The Galapagos Project,” 2007, “House on Fire,” 2009 and “Arctic Wonderland,” 2011. Its celebration as a collective experience in “Tree Planting,” its pursuit in the restoration and maintenance of the Galapagos Islands, the struggle to find it and hold it psychically in “House on Fire” and the evidence of its ready environmental destruction in “Arctic Wonderland.” It's here too in this newest work on intimacy, which reminds us of our inability to be inside someone else's skin no matter how urgent the desire, how close or willing the pairing. Empathy and shared feelings can't breach the fissure that keeps us separate beings, alone, inside our head, inside the soft skin carapace that holds us intact.

For this new work, all from 2013, the artist's research or questioning is directed to sexual intimacy—what is it, how is it experienced and displayed? Can its evidence be read or measured in a photograph? Can its essence or expression, its aura be fixed?

Johnson let it be known, through friends, that she was looking for couples, and individuals who were interested in being the subjects of her photographic gaze as she investigated manifestations of intimacy. Any awkwardness had to be dispelled when it was there, or alternately, if couples were at ease and saw their being photographed as a spark to their relationship. In some of the shoots Johnson's role was directorial and intense and she found herself setting the actors in place, establishing confidence, connecting with them and then working to get the photographs she was looking for. On occasion she found herself cast by her subjects in the role of therapist and counsellor.

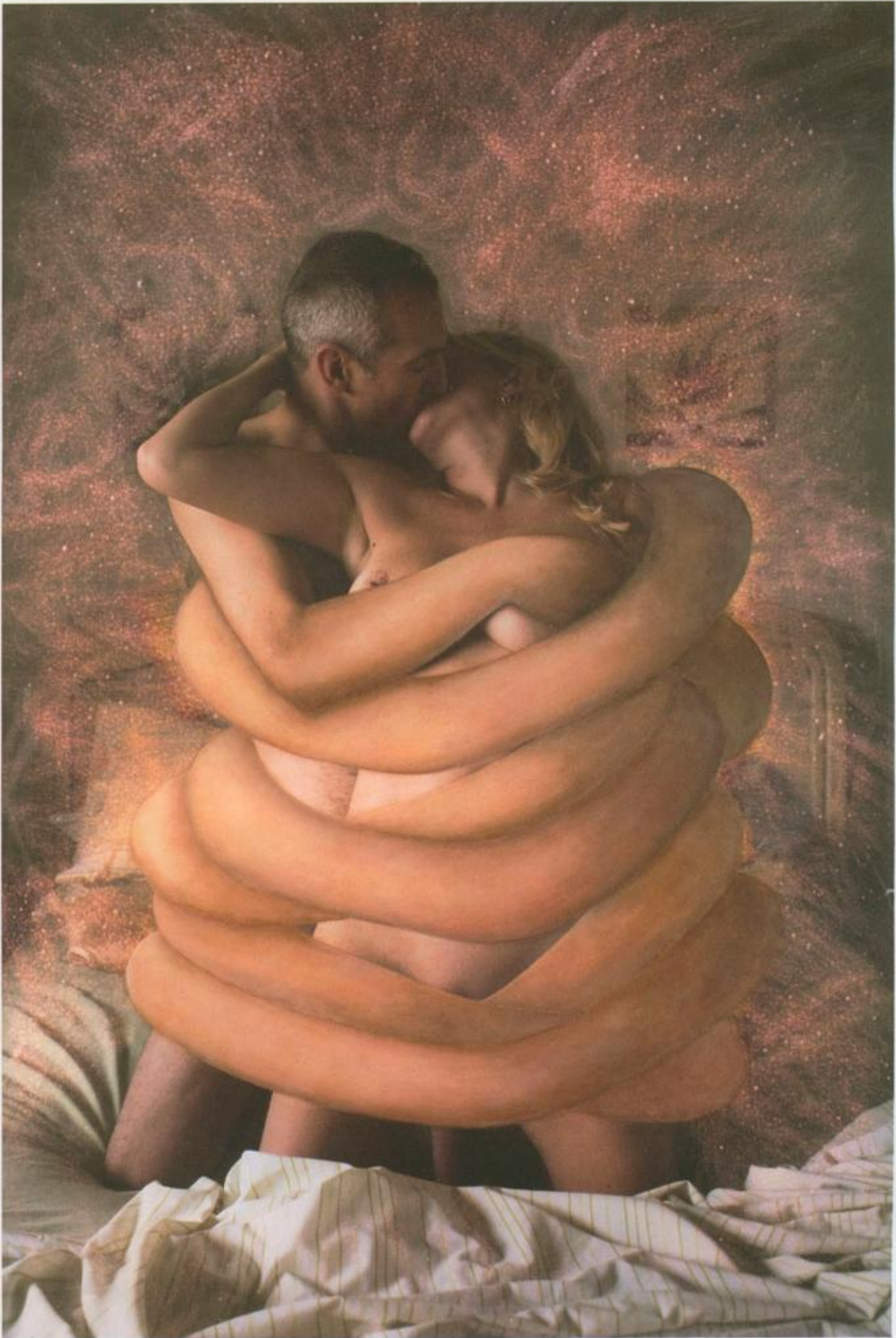
In the process, the camera served as a screen behind which Sarah Johnson could disappear, a distancing device between her person and the acts of intimacy she was recording. Once printed she was again looking at documents of intimacy on which she wanted to comment by making her own impressions and interventions, her own responses.

Sarah Anne Johnson is a canny artist. She knows exactly what she intends with her work, even when it's in its early stages, as this new project is. But looking at the work

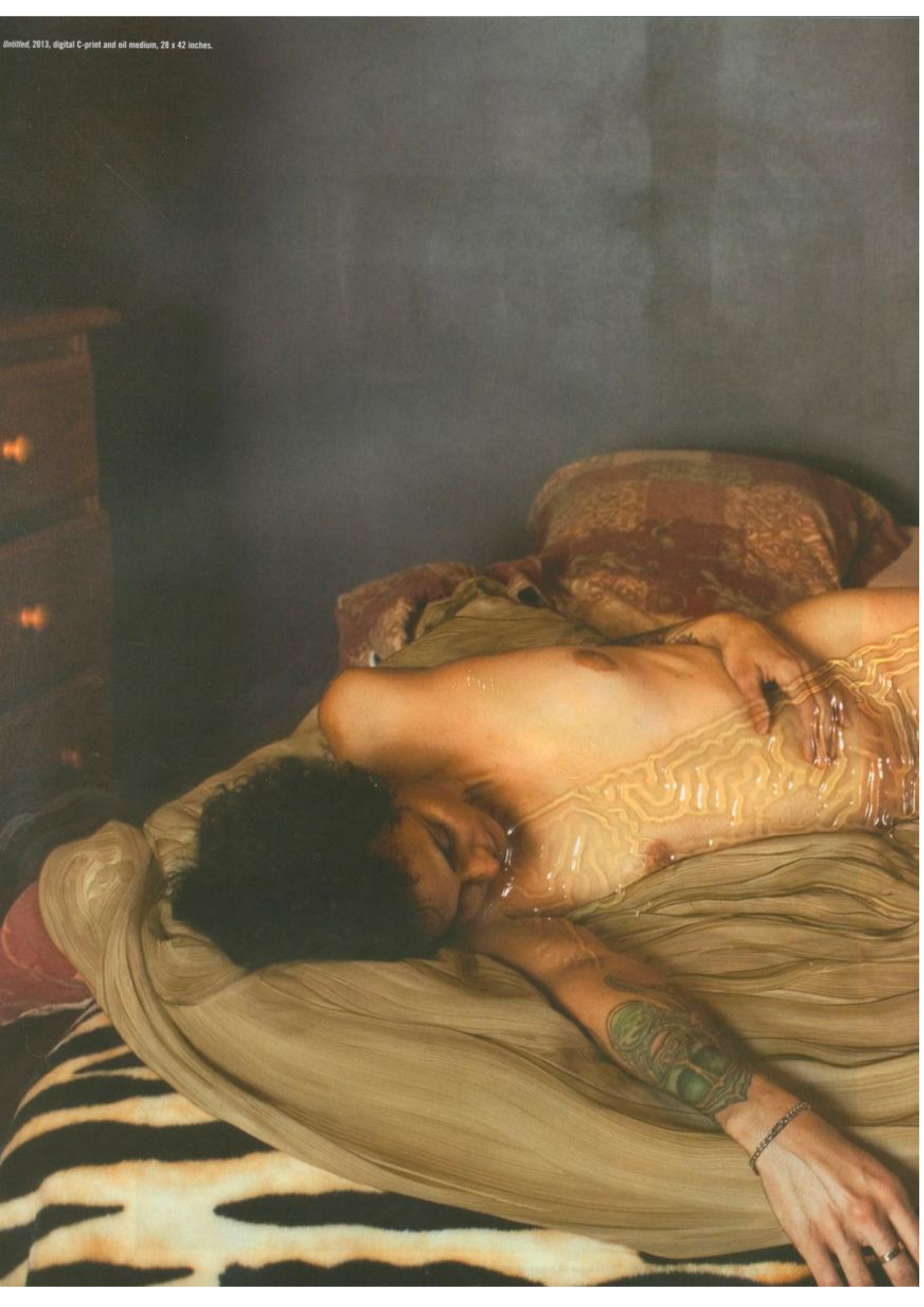
spread out on my desk I see a naïveté and almost childlike innocence—subject matter aside—in her interventions on the surface of the photos. Awe and exuberance, and admiration and some envy, for the containment that intimacy generates, and even the controlled violence that it can provoke. Her alterations repeat or mimic, in the gestures she sees, the sense of the event enacted by her marks. It's this transposition that gives them the power I believe they have.

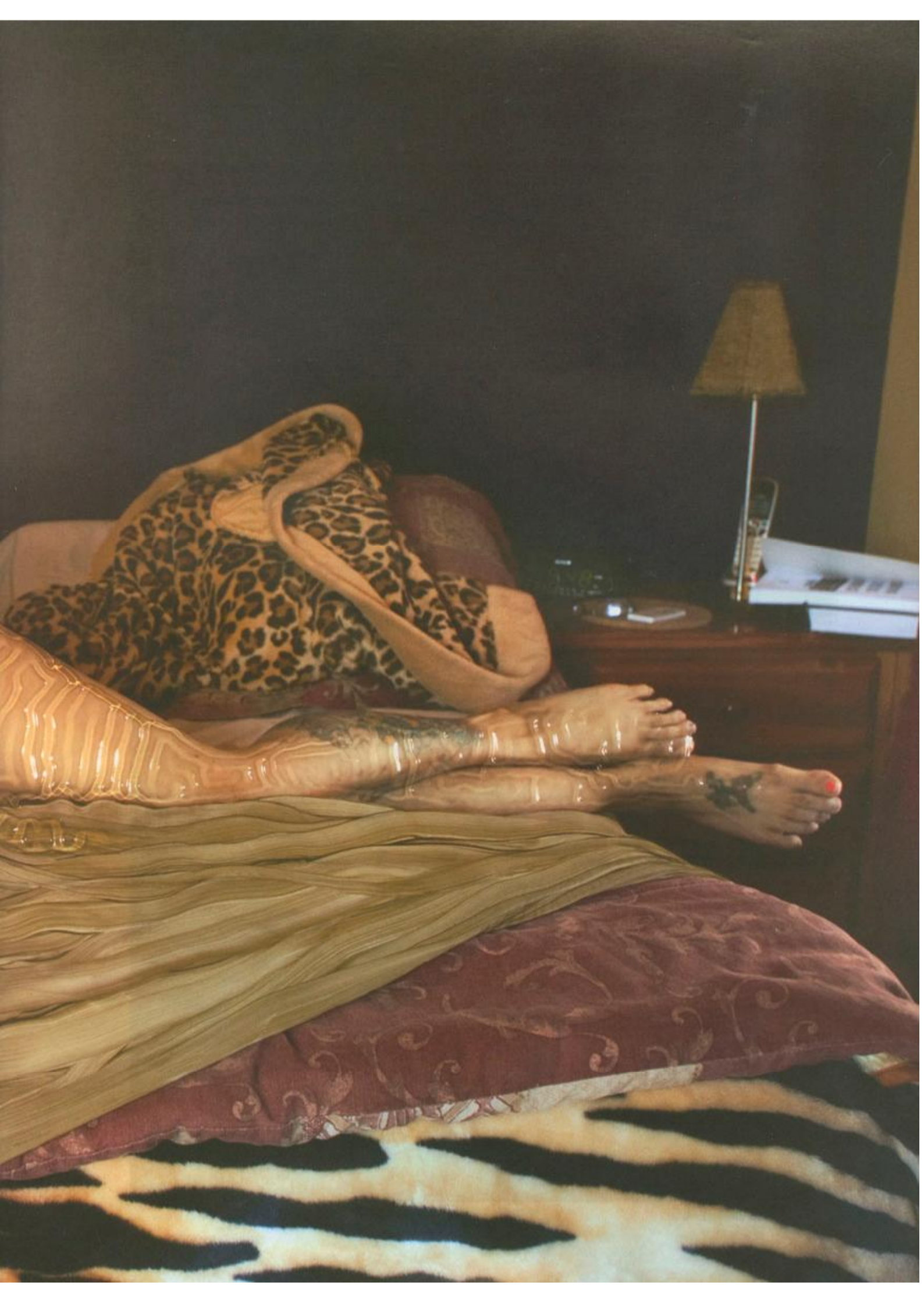
Long Arms is a couple so entangled they will never be able to disengage, so everywhere all over each other, so passionate, so anaconda-like. Sarah Johnson has altered the digital chromogenic prints' surfaces with oil paint, acrylic ink, photo-spotting ink and sometimes just the oil medium, which appears as a clear gel. The surfaces are sanded, the abrading reading as glitter and she has incised some of the prints with a thumbtack because as a tool it gives her the size and depth of line she likes. *Untitled* is a golden-hued odalisque as exotic as Ingre's painting of women in the perfumed oriental baths of his imagination. The subject has the soft nap of animal skins for her bed and she lies on a painted gauze drapery the artist has slipped under her. On the model's warm-toned skin Sarah Johnson has looped patterns of transparent oil medium, like a web fixing her in place. Alone, she appears at rest and complete. Anticipatory or self-delighting, she is contained.

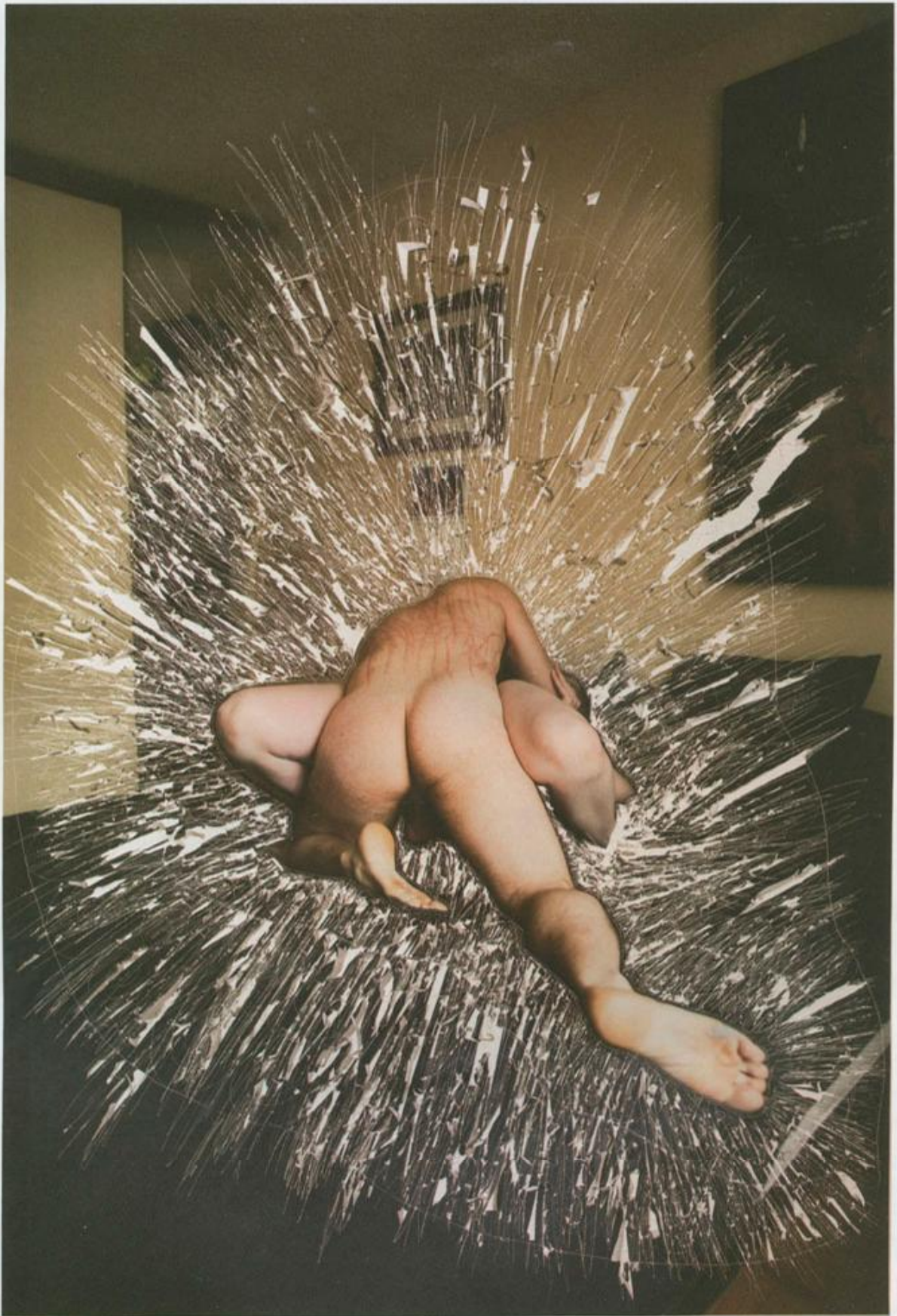
In the photograph *Scratches*, the surface has been deeply incised and strips have been pulled back in active gestures that required intention and sustained application. This is an image of passionate vehemence, a connection between the partners and/or the artist where the result is explosive and barely contained inside the image's frame. With *Monsters* the explosion is more localized and constrained; Johnson said that once she'd covered the model's faces she could do what she wanted with the rest. And the worked surfaces do deflect the intimacy for the artist and viewer, as well. As voyeurs we play the child's game of peek-a-boo where the young child covers her eyes and thinks she's not visible. *Happy Bubble* is a woman in a rosy, satisfied post-coital sleep, encased and protected by a bubble of happy airs and tinted vapours, drips of photo-spotting inks colouring her ample thigh and knee, her belly and all the world around her. Through Sarah Johnson's intimations, she embodies a complete visual achievement of felt intimacy. ■



Sarah Anne Johnson, *Long Arms*, 2013, digital C-print and oil paint, 42 x 28 inches. All images courtesy Stephen Bulger Gallery, Toronto and Julie Saul Gallery, New York.







Scratches, 2013, digital C-print, 30 x 20 inches.



Monster, 2013, digital C-print and oil paint, 30 x 20 inches.



Happy Bubble, 2013, digital C-print and ink, 28 x 42 inches.

