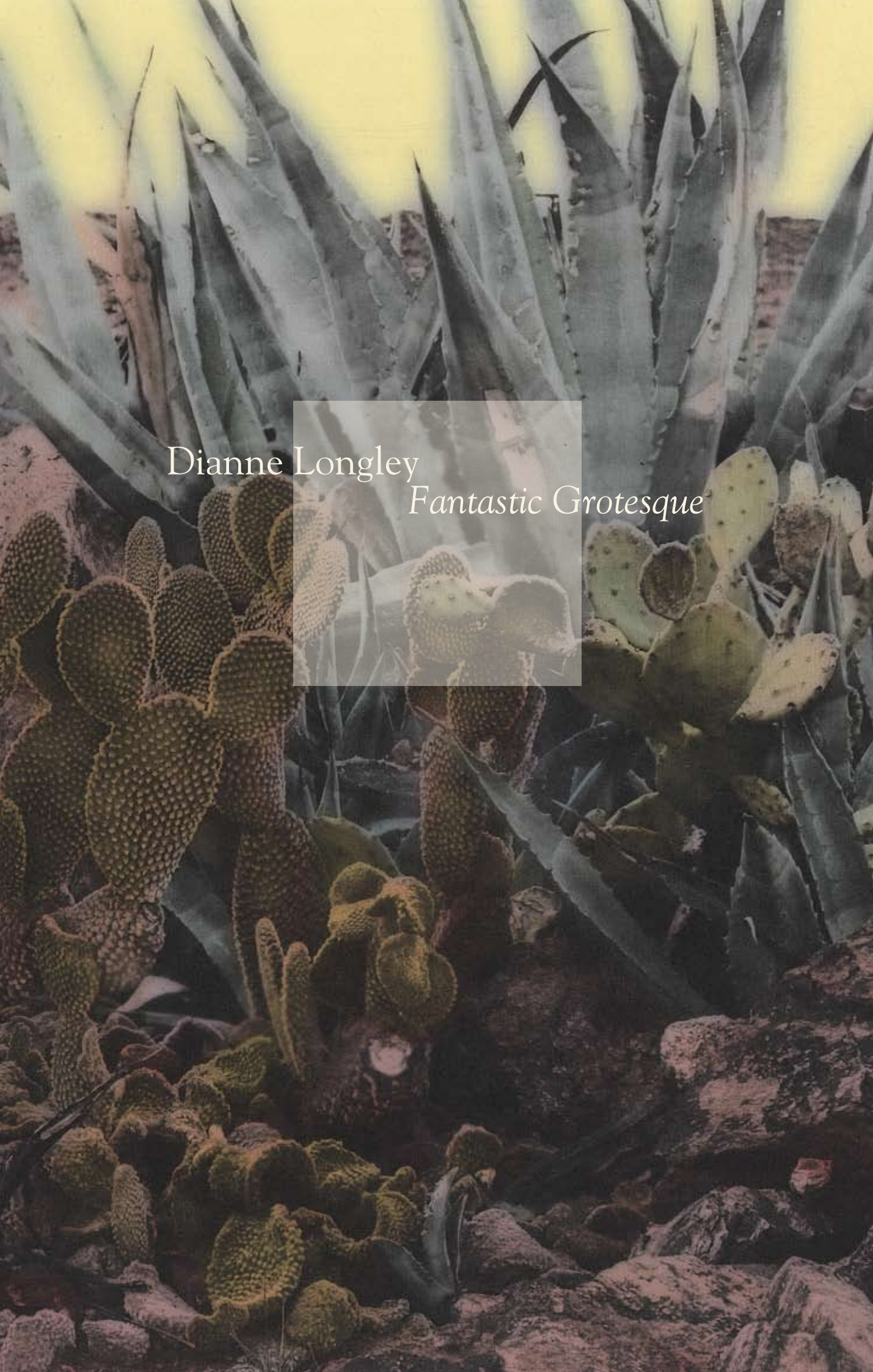

Dianne Longley

Fantastic Grotesque

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Wolfgang Kayser was the first writer in the modern era (1957) to chronicle the appearance of the 'grotesque' in art and literature. [1] His work reflected an increasing awareness and connection with the artistic conceits of the Gothic era (12–13th C), with its decorative embellishment of cathedrals and manuscript and cartographic illumination. However, its stylistic roots can be traced back to the ancient Egyptians and the ornamental and cloisonné work of the Gothic tribes and other barbarians and pagans. [2]

Indeed, the term 'grotesque' is aligned to the discovery of murals in the underground passages of the Baths of Titus in the ruins of Nero's *Domus Aurea* (Golden House) by the court artist Fabullus, dating back to c 64–68 CE. These were reproduced as engravings in 1778 and then 1786 and have since fallen into decline, [3] but stylistically this kind of decoration was already commonplace in the aforementioned forms. So the source of the word is 'grotto' and it is related to burial places and the subterranean world; and the word 'grotesque' was first used to describe an artistic style in 1502 and made its way into the cultural mainstream of Europe in Renaissance Italy.

Kayser drew on the writing of Cristoph Martin Wieland (1775), who identified three types of caricature: *true caricature*, *exaggerated caricature* and *fantastic caricature*, which he called '*grotesques* … where the painter, disregarding the verisimilitude, gives rein to unchecked fancy … with the sole intention of provoking laughter, disgust, and surprise about the daring of his monstrous creations by the unnatural and absurd products of his imagination.' [4]

Dianne Longley connects with the latter form's long history in her contemporary practice, conjuring personalized versions that are informed by an interest in illustration since the Middle Ages and contemporary, popular culture. Her references range from the aforementioned distant European origins to Japanese *anime* and *kawaii*. Such influences are particularly discernible in the intaglio and chine collé prints such as *Unfolding* and *Steadfastness*.

One fascinating aspect of her work is the continuity of its style, as her art has remained firmly grounded in a certain type of illustrative drawing, neither classical (for she avoids fastidious realism), nor modern (for she avoids recourse to the deconstructive impulses of tachism and expressionism). It centres on the fine rendering and detail offered by drypoint engraving, but in recent times she has incorporated photography as part of an expanding repertoire of tools and devices, and has transformed such source material via the electronic means of Adobe Photoshop to allow her to explore media on and off the page.

In *Fantastic Grotesque*, Longley's imaginative starting point was a workshop in photopolymer printmaking in April 2008 at Broken Hill Regional Art Gallery which stemmed from the donation of Pro Hart's etching press and a subsequent residency in July that year. The botanical settings her hybrid creatures and human figures inhabit are sourced from that arid environment, vaguely threatening to many city-dwellers and for such reasons chosen as the location for the grand-guignolesque *Mad Max* films.

Initially Longley selected three sites from gardens in Terowie and Silverton and recorded them as digital photographs, then transformed the photographs into a series of computer enhanced, colour-heightened prints that provided a framework for her imaginative legerdemain. Individual items were dislocated from their original contexts, isolated and then re-formed into new, surreal landscapes, in which she could situate her menagerie of grotesques.

After that beginning, Longley found more possibilities for her characters, by changing their scale and adopting new roles and forms, and by linking past explorations with these new elements of her expanding universe of formal and fictional language. This process adds to the sense of an overarching narrative or cosmology in her oeuvre.

Longley's media here ranges from traditional intaglio prints to bronze and pewter casts of cuttlefish carvings of various succulents that are transmogrified into bonsai-like three-dimensional miniatures; there are also pokerwork and hand-painted Jelutong wood panels; and an installation of five extraordinary wooden prints cut by CNC router from vector files. The largest is life-sized and features her central fantastic grotesque—*Fisher of Dreams*—a woman emerging from the mouth of a fish like a female Jonah. The corresponding, deftly coloured major print on paper strongly evokes the type of imagery in the embroidered edges of Fabullus' murals. Similarly, some of the pages of the artist book, *Remember to Die, Remember to Live*, an autobiographical meditation inspired by a 1924 photograph of the actress Gloria Swanson, are decorated in archaic drolleries.

Experimentation with new techniques and media reinvigorates Longley's creativity and sustains her capacity to imagine, but her respect for historical forms is deep and enduring. The fusion of all these elements is attended by her felicity of expression and feminine aesthetic. In Longley's world the grotesque is beautiful.

Dr Adam Dutkiewicz, Art Historian and Writer
September 2009

Digital wood engravings
Oregon veneer on hoop ply,
oil paints, Danish varnish
left to right:

Hedging Dreams (of Prickly Pear), 2009
110 x 74cm

Fisher of Dreams, 2009
210 x 50cm

Flower of Destiny i, ii and iii, 2009
each 50 x 27cm
photography: Grant Hancock

left to right:

From Darkness, 2007, carved Jelutong panel with pokerwork, oil paints, gold leaf, 30 x 42cm

Bridge, 2007, carved Jelutong panel with pokerwork, oil paints, mica pigments, wax varnish, gold leaf, 30 x 42cm
photography: Grant Hancock

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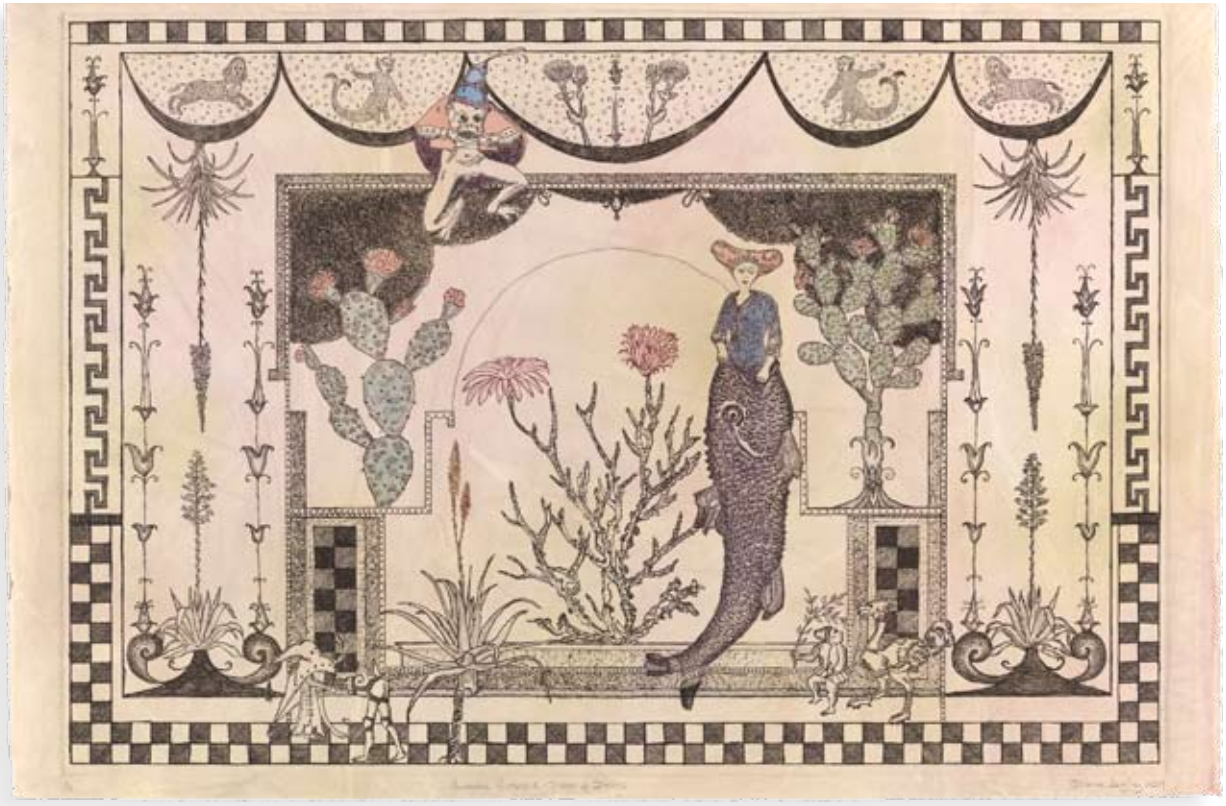
1 Wilson Yates, 'An Introduction to the Grotesque: Theoretical and Theological Considerations' in J L Adams & W Yates (eds) *The Grotesque in Art and Literature: Theological Reflections* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1997), 14–15.

2 Germain Bazin, *A Concise History of Art: Part One—From the Beginnings to the Fifteenth Century* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1958), 143.

3 W Yates, ibid, 5. Fabullus was also known as Famulus. The mural designs were on the walls and ceiling, both *al frecco* and *al stucco*. They were documented for the art dealer Ludivico Mirri by a team of artists, and later recorded by Nicholas Ponce and published in his volume *Description des bains de Titus*. After their initial discovery in 1480 the murals were credited as a source of inspiration for Raphael. To view the 18th C colour reproductions see the exhibition *Nero's Golden House* at the National Museum of Warsaw, 6 May–13 July 2008. Go to: www.zlotydom.mnw.art.pl/en.html

4 W Kayser in W Yates, ibid, 15.



Fantastic Grotesque – Fisher of Dreams, 2009
acrylic engraving on hand-coloured
Rives BFK 300gsm paper
76 x 110cm
photography: Grant Hancock

Remember to Die, Remember to Live, 2008
concertina artist book, inkjet prints on
Hahnemühle Photo Rag 188gsm paper
book closed 21 x 21cm, open 21 x 378cm

detail below, left
photography: Michael Haines

top to bottom:

Unfolding, 2008, (detail)
intaglio print with inkjet chine collé
41.5 x 29.5cm
photograph: Michal Kluvanek

Fantastic Garden Succulent Grotto – Terowie, 2009, (detail)
polymergravure print, inkjet chine collé
42 x 59cm

Fantastic Garden Hedging Plants – Silverton, 2009, (detail)
polymergravure print, inkjet chine collé
42 x 59cm
photography: Grant Hancock

top to bottom:

Steadfastness, 2008, (detail)
intaglio print with inkjet chine collé
41.5 x 29.5 cm

Primordial Grace, *Primordial Metamorphosis* and *Integrity of Grace*, 2009
cast bronze and oil pigments
between 9.5 x 5.5 x 2.5cm

Classic Cactus, *Friendly Succulent* and *Double Cactus*, 2009
cast bronze and oil pigments
between 13 x 5 x 3cm
photography: Michal Kluvanek

Dianne Longley grew up on a sheep and wheat farm near Forbes in rural NSW, later moving to Newcastle where she completed a Diploma in Art at Newcastle College of Advanced Education. Since 1979, she has lived in Adelaide, South Australia. She received her Masters degree from Finders University in 2000 and is currently undertaking PhD studies at Australian National University with Sasha Grishin.

Longley works across a range of media including printmaking; encaustic, oil painting and pokerwork on wooden panels; artist books; on-glaze porcelain; and small scale bronze casting. She runs an access printmaking studio, The Print Studio, teaches part-time at Adelaide College of the Arts, and has presented workshops and classes in photopolymer printmaking in Australia, USA, Japan, and the UK.

Her work is held in numerous public and private collections in Australia and overseas, and she has undertaken international residencies in Japan, Scotland, and USA.

In 1998 Longley published 'Printmaking with Photopolymer Plates', a book about a new, safe versatile printmaking technique. A second edition was printed in 2003, and a third edition in 2010. Longley was convener of the South Australian Printmaking Forum 2009, a Print Council of Australia initiative, held at Adelaide College of the Arts, and supported by ArtSA.

Further information about the artist, including curriculum vitae, is available from her website:
www.diannelongley.com.au

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cover image:
Fantastic Garden Agave and Cacti – Terowie, 2009, (detail)
polymergravure print, inkjet chine collé
42 x 59cm
photograph: Grant Hancock

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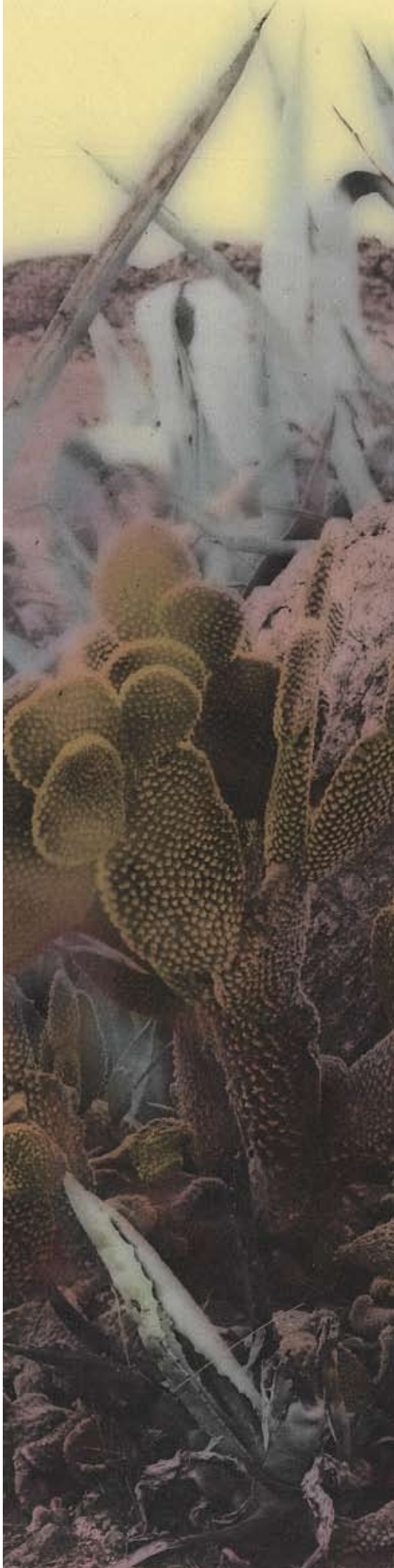
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