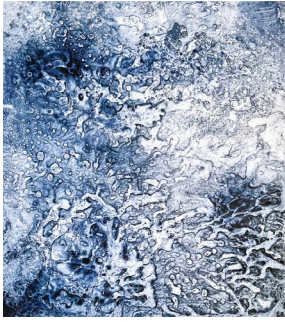




CORALLIUM

VIRGINIA BRADLEY



RAPTUROUS ALCHEMY: Virginia Bradley's *Corallium* Series

by Buzz Spector

Deep-sea divers always run the risk of nitrogen narcosis, when nitrogen in the compressed air of their Scuba tank enters the bloodstream at higher than atmospheric pressure. The resulting dangerous euphoria is sometimes referred to as rapture of the deep. This consciousness altering condition can cause disorientation—not knowing which way is up to the water surface—clouded judgment, increased intensity of one's senses, and even hallucinations. Rapture underwater, then, is a situational anesthetic, unlike the rapture we might feel, on dry land, encountering art. It is important to note here that Virginia Bradley, who has been a painter of abstractions of considerable distinction for more than thirty years, is also a serious reef diver.



Corallium 52, lightbox, 40" x 30"

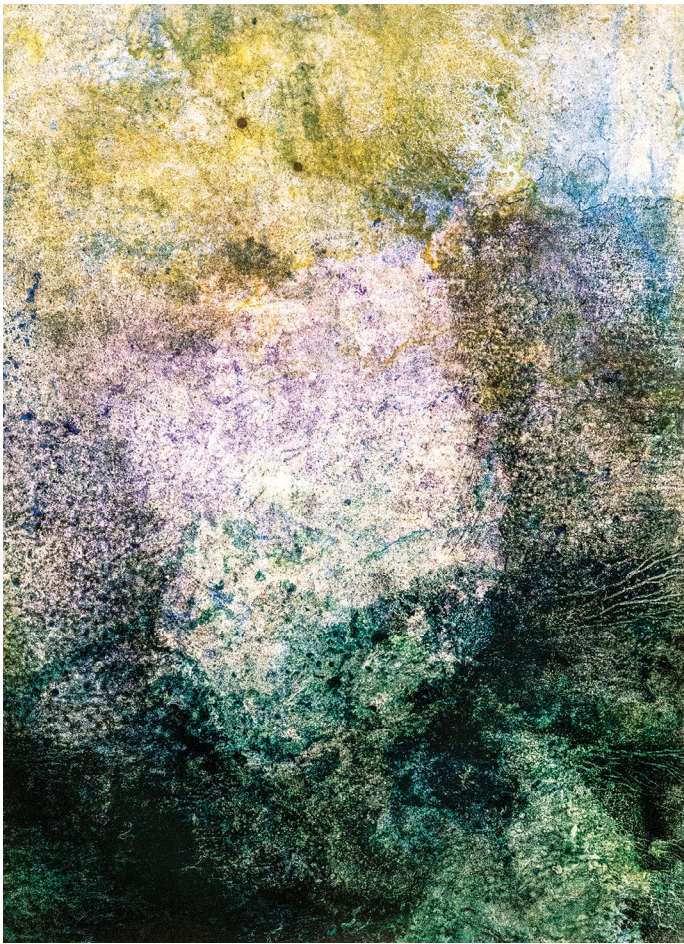
Bradley's current series of paintings, *Corallium*, is in part inspired by the coral reefs in Playa Santa Bay, off the southwest coast of Puerto Rico. The artist has snorkeled and swum among these reefs many times over the years. *Corallium* is a genus of reddish coral, commonly known as Precious Coral because it is often used in jewelry making. Bradley's titular reference is broader, however, including corals of all colors in this family of marine organisms. Were Bradley's oil on archival film works more emphatically realistic, there would be a case for calling them Eco Art. Bradley acknowledges her concerns with the welfare of coral reefs—and with other natural environments—in her daily life, but in the studio her explorations of material interactions reveal another, more poetic, influence; alchemy.

Every painter's chemistry resonates with the alchemical project of material transmogrification. In his influential 2000 book, *What Painting Is*, art historian and critic James Elkins offers specific comparisons between painting and alchemy, arising from a mutual concern with fluids and particles:

"...as in painting, most of alchemy does not have to do with either pure water or hard stones, but with mixtures of the two. Alchemists worked with viscid stews, with tacky drying, films, with brittle skins of slag; in short, they were concerned with the same range of half-fluids as painters and other artists."¹

Bradley's work over the years shows the constancy of her extraction of form from color as applied to canvas and paper, but for the *Corallium* Series she uses polyester sheets. The translucency of the film allows Bradley to mount it in armatures holding LED bulbs, adding backlit illumination to the material and chemical effects of the work.

Bradley acknowledges the role of chemistry and physical forces in her art, but qualifies her



Corallium 48, lightbox, 33" x 25"



Corallium 41, lightbox, 33" x 25"

interest as one of going beyond the purely phenomenological. She invokes Rumi, the 13th Century Persian poet and scholar:

"[My] use of alchemy is not only a physical process. As Rumi says, it is also a search for the 'other.' The alchemists were searching for 'the prodigal son' and a higher level of consciousness. It was not just about the creation of gold. In my studio the results of uncontrollable (and unknown) chemical reactions enable the painting to take on a life of its own."²

This "consciousness" that Bradley has in mind arises both from observation of her studio techniques and the memory of exquisite suspension that every diver experiences in the water. The *Corallium* works are mostly poured. Bradley mixes pigments, various binders, and solvents, before tipping the vessels (for alchemists it would have been crucibles) onto the film substrate. As the poured mixture dries, Bradley works into it with

scraping implements or steel wool. She describes her intent to embody a "process of erosion...that evokes the wearing away of rocks or coastlines through wave action over time."³

The terminology of "erosion" here might bring the dryness of deserts to mind, but Bradley's experience of being in the sea is made manifest through the LED lighting in her armatures, investing the work with a liquid aspect. An essential distinction, then, between Bradley's art and the rest of a modern tradition of phenomenal abstraction, is the aqueous experiencing it invites. Mark Rothko's fields of vaporous color, Ronnie Landfield's torqued and clouded landscapes, even Helen Frankenthaler's soaked and stained canvases; all result in surfaces of visible dryness. The emanation from within Bradley's play of color and brightness is like water seen from beneath the surface, as if viewers were rising toward the light.

1 Elkins, James. *What Painting Is*, New York and London, UK: Routledge, 2000, p. 2.

2 Bradley, Virginia. Email correspondence, October 12, 2023.

3 Studio conversation with the artist, September 26, 2023.

4 *The Essential Rumi*, translated by Coleman Barks with John Moyne, New York: Harper Collins, 1995, p. 51.

Bradley understands that different pigment chemistries, differing energies of pouring, and different returns to scrape and abrade the surfaces adds elements of chance to her working methods. Further surprises occur once the sheets are mounted on their armatures. The arrangement and numbers of LED lights in each individual work will vary. Some are more brightly lit than others, and when installed together, as is the case with Bradley's *Corallium* installation in Palazzo Bembo, Venice, visitors to the gallery will experience something akin to a rapturous floating among seaweed fronds and spikes of reef coral.

The nearly square chamber in which Bradley's work is encountered has a very high (five meter+) ceiling. The room is painted dark blue, so the only illumination comes from six works, mounted on three of the four walls. The fourth wall is also the access to the room, and on it is a didactic text plus a seventh *Corallium*

work, the only one in the series that isn't backlit. This painting on paper, referencing dead coral, is floated in a conventional frame. It becomes, in comparison with the vivid other paintings, an artifact on the wall it shares with words.

Bradley has bookmarked a poem by Rumi, "The Diver's Clothes Lying Empty," in *The Essential Rumi*, on a shelf in her studio. The second stanza of that poem reads:

"In the ocean are many bright strands
and many dark strands like veins that are seen
when a wing is lifted up.
Your hidden self is blood in those, those veins
that are lute strings that make ocean music,
not the sad edge of surf, but the sound of no shore."⁴

Buzz Spector is a renowned artist, writer and curator, now based in New Windsor, NY.



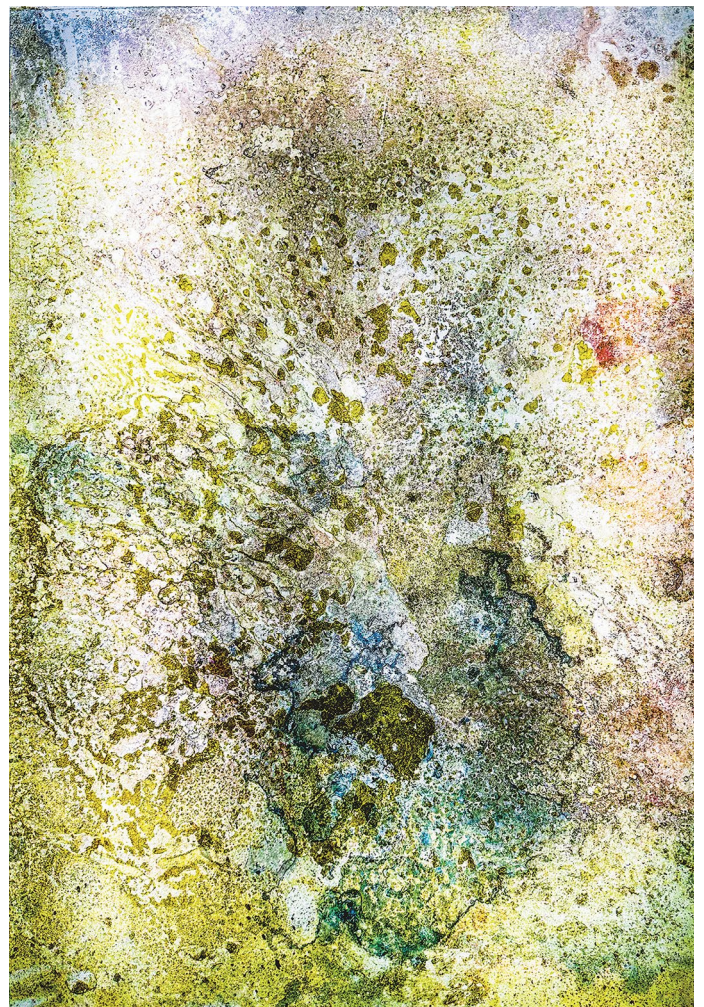
Corallium 53, lightbox, 40" x 50"



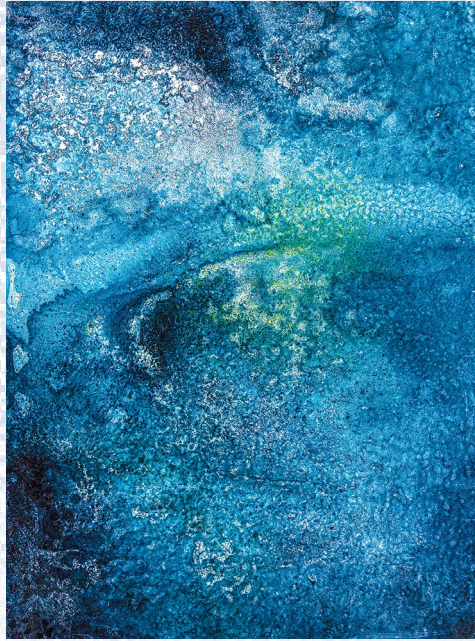
Corallium Installation preview video, exhibited by the European Cultural Centre at Palazzo Bembo during the 2024 Venice Biennale, April 19 –November 24, 2024.



Corallium 40, lightbox, 33" x 25"



Corallium 47, lightbox, 33" x 23"



Corallium 1, lightbox, 33" x 25"

Virginia Bradley is a contemporary abstract painter who resides in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. Prior to moving to the Berkshires, she was a Professor of Art at the University of Delaware where she taught painting and drawing.

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A very special thank you to the incredible European Cultural Centre Installation Team at Palazzo Bembo! And deepest gratitude to Buzz Spector who gave so generously of his time, counsel and appreciation.

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Photography by Tasja Keetman.

