

D I A N E F E N S T E R

Photographic Arts

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SECRETS OF THE MAGDALEN LAUNDRIES A PHOTO INSTALLATION WITH SOUND ENVIRONMENT

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Fantasy is sanctuary.

For me, the imagination is a threshold to an inner world. I uncover the tension between an image that conjures its mutable revelations and the *idee fixe*. My work embodies the hidden poetry of the ordinary, making visible what previously was hidden.

Secrets of the Magdalen Laundries explores the theme of imagination in the inner life. Dreaming, reverie, and fantasy are ways of being that make the reality of circumstances more tolerable.

As a point of departure, I was drawn to the history of the Magdalen Laundries. These convent industries in Ireland existed from the mid 19th century until the late 20th century. The Magdalen Laundries institutionalized women who were smeared with the reputation of being immoral, or who were indigent, and kept them imprisoned through the social machinations of the Church. These misused women lived in punitive labor, lost to both their families and themselves. Henceforth, they became invisible, concealed beyond the margins of society.

At the boundaries of the visible exists the invisible.

In my images these women live in a private world of desire, longing, and unreachable fulfilment, forced into a mundane ritual of service without pleasure or amenities. Their vitality and eros, bound by the superficial morality of the Church, reemerges as images on the sheets that they repetitiously wash, a reminder of their stained existence.

They dreamed until the secret images were burned onto the sheets.

Sheets facilitate dreaming. They enfold the body, carry its warmth, desire, perfume, and wrap it in death. I work on discarded sheets to give form to the imagination that releases desire in spite of circumstances. The sheets move from matter to metaphysics, reminding us of the body and its dreams. The portraits from the Magdalen Laundries appear and disappear as you move around them. Viewed from the oblique perspective, the images vanish like the women lost in time. Facing them, they assume their own dreaming existence.



*Below: Installation views
Gallery Henoeh, NY, NY October 2000*

