

The background features abstract, low-poly blue shapes that form a stylized figure of a person with arms raised, positioned on the left side of the page. The shapes are composed of various shades of blue, creating a sense of depth and movement.

# *watching* H A N D S

*Artists respond to* K E E P I N G W E L L

September 24, 2011, through January 13, 2012

David J. Sencer CDC Museum  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
Atlanta, Georgia

In partnership with Georgia-Pacific Professional through  
the CDC Foundation



## THE MESSAGES FROM THE CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION ARE DIRECT AND SIMPLE:

*Keeping hands clean is one of the most important ways to prevent the spread of illness and disease.*

*Clean hands prevent infection.*

*Healthy habits stop germs.  
At home, work and school.*

The result of an innovative partnership among Georgia-Pacific Professional, the CDC Foundation, and the David J. Sencer CDC Museum, *Watching Hands: Artists Respond to Keeping Well* asks how art can communicate and interpret the practice of one of the most simple and effective disease prevention strategies. Across CDC, public health professionals work to educate children, parents, healthcare workers, food service workers, and basically all of us about when and how to wash our hands. During the 2009-2010 H1N1 influenza pandemic, prevention messages from CDC and other partners, like Georgia-Pacific Professional, urged us to clean our hands carefully and frequently. One could argue that the mild impact of the pandemic across the globe can be partially attributed to getting the word out about proper hand hygiene.

The history of clean hands is a fascinating one: certainly practical before eating utensils were widely used, handwashing is also intricately connected to social and religious practices. Even before the understanding of how germs spread disease was widely accepted in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, our forebears intuitively knew that “cleanliness is next to godliness.” Today, in an era where consensus can be difficult to achieve, the public health and medical communities are in 100% agreement that the low-tech habit of washing one’s hands properly is the best defense against getting sick.

As citizens of the world, artists have a long history of engaging with social and political issues. On occasion, public health concerns have intersected with the urgencies of current events to compel artists to create work that can range from the introspective and personal to a community call-to-arms. One of the most striking examples in recent history is the artist response to the unfolding of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and early 1990s. In the United States where the creative communities were disproportionately impacted by AIDS, artists working across all disciplines produced, in retrospect, an unprecedented collective body of work that documents the cultural impact that a specific and deadly disease can have upon society. In terms of the visual arts, much of the iconic work produced by groups such as ACT-UP and artists such as Nancy Burson can be classified as public health messages.

Handwashing, because it is a daily task shared by all, can seem routine in comparison to the urgent response to the AIDS epidemic twenty-five years ago. (Healthy habits are rooted in the routine, by definition.) When one considers that proper hand hygiene is “the single most important means of preventing the spread of infection,” it is equally impactful—and one could almost argue urgent—to inspire people to adopt healthy behaviors through art. The H1N1 influenza pandemic reinforced this message, and brought handwashing to the top of the public health communications agenda.

*Watching Hands: Artists Respond to Keeping Well includes new work that ranges from the humorous to the spiritual. Six artists from across the country were invited to participate based on their artistic practice and their willingness to consider the act of handwashing as content in the production of creative new work. Collectively, the exhibition offers new ways to examine the act of handwashing and its consequences, which, in the parlance of public health, can lead to behavior changes and healthy habits.*

Initially, the artists were provided background material about the benefits of handwashing, including from CDC and the World Health Organization (WHO), and were offered use of Georgia-Pacific Professional products to use as art mediums if they so wished. They were instructed to work from the premise that safe, clean water is available. (Hand hygiene takes on other levels

of complexity in places where access to safe water is limited.) Interestingly, all the artists observed that the more they delved into the handwashing theme, the more rich the topic became.

While the public health messages are meant to be taken literally, each work of art is an interpretation and expression of those messages. Iconic images of hands, water, soap and bubbles abound in the exhibit, and the vocabulary of handwashing has been transformed by each artist into distinctive visual metaphors reflected in the exhibition’s installations, paintings, drawings, sculptures, graphics and videos.

The benefits of handwashing are universal, and communicating those benefits in a meaningful way will always be at the top of the public health agenda. We thank the artists for pushing the boundaries of health communications, Georgia-Pacific Professional for working with CDC to remind us all about the importance of handwashing, and the CDC Foundation for facilitating this mutually beneficial partnership.

Louise E. Shaw  
Curator, David J. Sencer CDC Museum

WASH AND DRY YOUR HANDS  
OFTEN TO STAY HEALTHY.  
HERE IS THE CORRECT WAY:



1. Wet hands with water;



2. Apply enough soap to cover all hand surfaces;



3. Rub hands palm to palm;



4. Right palm over left dorsum with interlaced fingers and vice versa;



5. Palm to palm with fingers interlaced;



6. Backs of fingers to opposing palms with fingers interlocked;



7. Rotational rubbing of left thumb clasped in right palm & vice versa;



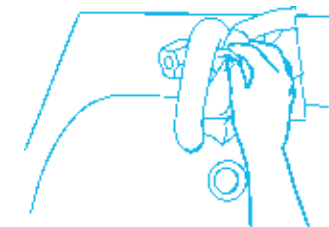
8. Rotational rubbing, backwards and forwards with clasped fingers of right hand in left palm & vice versa;



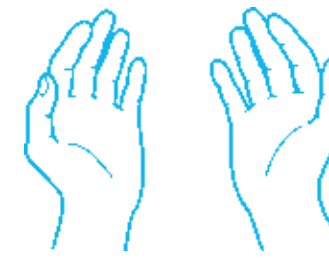
9. Rinse hands with water;



10. Dry hands thoroughly with a single use towel;



11. Use towel to turn off faucet;



12. Hands are now safe.

Adapted from *How to Handwash* poster, World Health Organization, 2009



# JOHN BANKSTON

## *Magic Handwashing*

Acrylic paint on Saunders Waterford paper, each 30" high x 60" wide  
2011

- |                           |                           |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| #1 Strange Water          | #5 "Can you help?"        |
| #2 "My Hands"...Drip Drip | #6 To the magician's cave |
| #3 Hands to Claws         | #7 Rub a Dub              |
| #4 Tug and Pull           | #8 All Clean              |

Courtesy of beta pictoris gallery / Maus Contemporary, Birmingham, AL  
and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, NY



*Magic Handwashing: Strange Water (Panel 1 of 8)*



*Magic Handwashing: "My Hands"...Drip Drip (Panel 2 of 8)*

John Bankston is a self-declared storyteller and visual novelist, whose work is particularly relevant and adaptable to the handwashing theme. Based in San Francisco and trained as a painter, Bankston began to use the visual structures of children's coloring books in the early 2000s to create fantastical stories exploring personal identities and inner worlds. Coloring books—whose bold black outlines of storybook characters, animals, etc. are commonly intended for eager children to color in as a participatory activity—offered him a visual trope from which to create imaginary landscapes and characters. Over the past decade, he has constructed a deeply personal iconography that continues to challenge him. On a formal basis, he has been able to use the structure of a coloring book page to meld his interest in the interaction between the linear and the painterly.

Bankston is particularly interested in constructing what he calls "sustained narratives" using visuals, not texts, to create content. He often sends his imaginary characters, frequently human/animal hybrids, on journeys of transformation. These tales can seem childlike at first glance, but they very much mine more adult examinations of our relationships to the subconscious, as well as how we construct our personal identities. His references to popular culture, folk tales, fantasy literature, and African-American and African culture offer all of us entry points into his world regardless of our age, gender or ethnicity.

On a parallel track, public health has a long history of using storytelling in campaigns to encourage healthy habits and to influence behavior change. There is much evidence to support the effectiveness of using popular

culture tools, including illustrated stories, comic books, plays, music videos, radio shows, and posters, to speak directly to target audiences and to influence behavior in areas such as eating well, exercising, and taking personal responsibility.

John Bankston is first and foremost an artist, neither an illustrator nor health communicator. Yet, Bankston's instructive parable *Magic Handwashing* very much falls in the tradition of the best of public health storytelling. Once again, Bankston has created an imaginary world called the Rainbow Forest. His protagonist, Donkey Boy, finds himself in a dilemma when his hands are turned into claws after immersing them into a glowing puddle. Only through the help of many fantastical friends does Donkey Boy restore his hands when he learns how to

wash his hands properly. His story is meant to create visual permanent memories to be recalled during our daily handwashing rituals.



## DIDI DUNPHY

*Bubbles, Bubbles*

Installation

Vinyl, upholstery, embroidery, video, and Georgia-Pacific Professional enMotion® automated towel dispensers and paper towels

Dimensions variable

2011



Detail, *Bubbles, Bubbles*



*Bubbles, Bubbles*

Athens, Georgia-based artist Didi Dunphy is a perfect choice for *Watching Hands*: working in the intersection of art and design, she creates installations, objects, and interactive media that explore the concept of play. Her enthusiastic willingness to explore healthy handwashing habits through the filter of fun has resulted in an installation that is as motivating, as it is delightful.

Dunphy's installations occupy spaces in a big way in terms of scale, bright pop art-esque colors, and opportunities for participatory activities that often are on the cutting edge of new media. With training as a performance artist, she literally charms her audiences by actively engaging them. And because she is both an artist and designer, she does not shy away from diving into real-world challenges that are sometimes left to practical designers.

Launching her work off of contemporary culture and design, Dunphy is a sociologist and developmental psychologist as much as she is an artist. She often explores how individuals cooperate with one another and how objects of play are linked to cognitive development. By referencing childhood literally and conceptually, she makes her work equally appealing to both adults and children. Interestingly, this appeal to “kids of all ages” is an oft-used strategy in public health campaigns.

[Dunphy's installation \*Bubbles, Bubbles\* is multifaceted, featuring her signature vinyl cut-outs cascading down the wall, and enMotion® automated towel dispensers with towels imprinted with her designs. Precisely because she positions herself straddling the divide between art and design, Dunphy embraced the possibilities of collaborating with Georgia-Pacific](#)

[Professional by using its products as the interactive centerpieces of her installation.](#)

Dunphy began the project by developing a design vocabulary of iconic figures and handwashing-related objects silhouetted within brightly colored polka dots. She has used polka dots as design elements in the past, but in this context they also signify soap bubbles. She then adapted her designs for printed paper towels dispensed from the Georgia-Pacific Professional enMotion® automated towel dispenser—the first time GP has printed on towels used in institutional or business settings. By triggering the dispensers, visitors can obtain take-away paper towels.

There are other participatory aspects of her installation: interspersed with the vinyl polka dots are embroidered

QR (quick response) codes that link to videos she has made about handwashing. Taking a cue from feminist art of the 1970s and 1980s, Dunphy uses what has traditionally been considered “women’s work”—embroidery—and transforms the craft into action-focused art powered by the most current of social media. For those of us without smartphones to download the videos, we can still watch them in her video lounge, furnished with her trademark Naugahyde leather furniture.



## JOE PERAGINE

*Easiest, cheapest, needfull'st*  
Oil on canvas, soap sculpture, and animation  
Dimensions variable  
2011  
Courtesy of Solomon Projects, Atlanta, GA



Detail, *Easiest, cheapest, needfull'st*



*Easiest, cheapest, needfull'st*

On the faculty of Georgia State University, Joe Peragine is an Atlanta-based artist who uses painting, sculpture, and animation to make deeply personal and often poignant associations between the everyday and the human condition. He often draws upon the quotidian experiences of daily life to create portals from which to explore larger, universal issues. References to everyday experiences and images drawn from memories of childhood are often present in his work. By experimenting with scale and materials (*Brute Neighbors*, his public art installation of giant ants swarming over the baggage claim areas at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, is just one example), he emotionally and playfully reminds us of our shared humanity.

It is important to Peragine that his project interprets rather than illustrates the act of handwashing.

Understandably, Peragine is attracted to its rituals. As he began to conceptualize his work for *Watching Hands*, he learned that every religion, including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism, has prescribed cleansing rituals that are as much connected to hygiene as they are to spiritual purification. For instance, daily handwashing rituals in the Jewish religion acknowledge how life is based on water; daily purification reminds how we are linked to every living creature. In Christianity, handwashing is linked to absolution, and cleanliness is considered a way of life. Similarly, most religious cleansing rituals are millennia old, grounded in an instinctive understanding that they are also a means to staying healthy.

From this starting point, Peragine began a series of paintings for *Watching Hands* that evolved into an installation of canvases, sculptures, and animations.

The actual sizes of the paintings and the things they depict descend in scale—sudsy hands, water draining in sinks, splashes of water, and soapy bubbles that verge on being microbial—and are installed salon-style. Sculpted sinks and drains made of soap sit on pedestals, drawing upon his frequent strategy to make objects in familiar, yet subversive materials. A skilled animator, Peragine also has created an animation of soap bubbles as the final component of his installation. The collective work is surprisingly comforting, as he captures the soulfulness of our daily handwashing routines, as well as a sense of a shared human experience.

*Easiest, cheapest, needfull'st*, the title of installation, is from a poem called *Cleanliness* by English poet Charles Lamb (1775-1834). In the first stanza, Lamb writes about “the rare structure of the hand, with its branching fingers

fine.” The second stanza continues:

All-endearing cleanliness,  
Virtue next to godliness,  
Easiest, cheapest, needfull'st duty,  
To the body health and beauty,  
Who that's human would refuse it,  
When a little water does it?

In other words, Lamb is making the same appeal we make today in our public health campaigns—that proper hand hygiene is the best way to keep well. Peragine came upon this poem several months into his journey in making his work for *Watching Hands*. The phrase “Easiest, cheapest, needfull'st” not only references the content of the work, but also how painting offers him a pathway to his own humanity that he hopes is embraced by others.



## KATHERINE L. ROSS

*Water Cure*  
Porcelain and video installation  
Dimensions variable  
2011



Detail, *Water Cure*



*Water Cure*

A mound of over 1,500 porcelain bars of soap lies on the floor. White porcelain can appear antiseptic, sterile and cold while also conveying notions of purity, cleanliness, and value. Porcelain is most often found in locations involving water and the body, such as bathrooms, surgeries, kitchens, and pools.

We all engage in small daily rituals of self-cleansing. The overabundant, ghostlike, mysterious mound of soap can serve to evoke thoughts on the purpose and multiple meanings of cleansing and the purification of the self, from the most practical to mythological and spiritual references.

The video, an endless repetition of handwashing and waves coming to shore, broadens the act of cleansing the body to include environmental cleansing.

The black and white, very slow, grainy film becomes a dreamlike psychological site for contemplation in contrast to the physical presence of the porcelain objects.

*Katherine L. Ross, Artist Statement*

Katherine L. Ross is a conceptual artist who uses ceramics as her primary medium to create haunting site-specific installations. Currently the Chair of the Ceramics Department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), Ross is concerned with the psychology of water, cleansing, hygiene, and contamination. Her artistic focus is the investigation of the body in relation to nature, and she frequently draws upon water as a metaphor for human psychological conditions such as anxiety, transcendence, and purification. She works in slip cast

porcelain, digital glaze decals, and video, and is an expert in porcelain production for large installations—clearly demonstrated by the 1,500 bars of soap produced for *Water Cure*.

Ross has explored the issue of cleanliness in previous works. The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard's take on the American cultural preoccupation with over-sterilizing our environment, published in *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena* in 1993, made a deep impression on her. That interest was translated into a 2000 installation titled *Prophylaxis/Hygiene* that examines the psychology of the cleanliness of our environments from a somewhat critical perspective. Does over-sanitizing our environments lead to a disconnection to the natural environment? Do humans not need some equilibrium with the microbial world?

*Water Cure* is another take on hygiene: handwashing is a task that takes place many times a day. Bars of soap are familiar tactile objects, their various shapes and even fragrances associated with both old and new memories. White is the color that most connotes ideas of purity and cleanliness. If we are blessed to live in a developed country, water is pumped safely in our homes. In nature, water ebbs and flows in rivers, lakes, and the ocean. The "cure" that Ross alludes to in her title is the renewal that washing our hands offers us on a daily basis, reinforced by the looping black-and-white film projection of soapy hands and waves upon the beach. Washing our hands provides us the opportunity to balance ourselves within our environments. *Water Cure* is a chance to consider that balance.



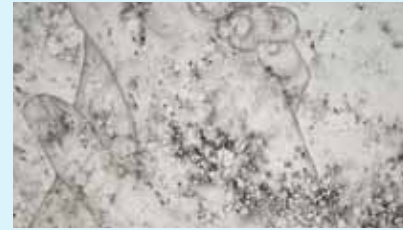


## LAURA SPLAN

### *Surface Tension*

Graphite and foam soap residue on clayboard panels  
24"-18" high x 24" wide x 2" deep panels  
2011

- |                         |                             |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| #1 "Wet With Water"     | #7 "Rotational Rubbing"     |
| #2 "Cover All Surfaces" | #8 "Backwards And Forwards" |
| #3 "Rub Hands"          | #9 "Rinse"                  |
| #4 "Interlaced"         | #10 "Dry Thoroughly"        |
| #5 "Palm To Palm"       | #11 "Turn Off"              |
| #6 "Interlocked"        | #12 "Safe"                  |



Details, *Surface Tension*



*Surface Tension*

A New York-based mixed-media artist, Laura Splan uses microbiological, anatomical, and medical images as points of departure to explore perception of the body and linkages between art and science. Her conceptually driven work employs a variety of materials and processes that usually have a feminine sensibility about them. She often combines scientific images and materials with more domestic or familiar ones, such as the ornamentation of wallpaper or the design of a doily. Unsettling, biomedical imagery is foiled by more comfortable domestic imagery and craft processes. Likewise, the seemingly familiar and benign are subverted by the anatomical and biological. She often uses her own body in the production of materials for her work.

For *Watching Hands*, Splan responded to the background materials about handwashing provided by CDC and to the

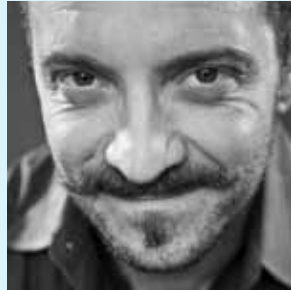
opportunity to use Georgia-Pacific Professional product as art material—both providing conceptual constructs for her final project titled *Surface Tension*. According to the artist, Splan's series of paintings allude to the invisible worlds that are at play as we wash our hands. Drawings of hands and microbes underlie a latent image of bubbles rendered in foam hand soap. Each of the twelve paintings depicts hands in a different position of proper handwashing as recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO). Renderings inspired by bacterial and viral microbes surround the hands. Using soap provided by Georgia-Pacific Professional, Splan playfully creates a unique patina for the series by using the foam soap as a wet media. When applied to powdered graphite, the soap bubbles distribute the graphite in and around their own shapes. Once dried, the spherical shape of each bubble is rendered in the graphite and soap residue. In

other words, the use of the soap as an artistic medium adds yet another formal dimension to the work, while at the same time underscoring its content.

The WHO poster that serves as source for Splan's *Surface Tension* targets healthcare workers, and is meant for global distribution. It has been well-documented that the spread of potentially fatal infections in hospitals from patient to patient and from patient to healthcare worker and vice-versa can be prevented through proper handwashing. By definition, the *How to Handwash* poster didactically instructs the 12 steps necessary to clean hands so that they are "safe." But, as Splan has noted, both the drawings and the language used in the poster are quite intimate and poetic. For instance, the instructions to "rub hands" in a "palm to palm" fashion, in addition to being an important step in handwashing, can also connote

emotional states, such as nervousness, or suggest prayer gestures used in rituals. In drawing upon the WHO poster illustrations as a departure point, Splan focuses on only the hands, eliminating details such as a sink or towels, thus enhancing this sense of intimacy.

Splan is trained as a biologist, as well as an artist. Her interpretive microbes floating on the clayboard surfaces of *Surface Tension* are based on actual viruses and bacteria, such as the H1N1 influenza virus, rhinovirus and *Salmonella*—all of which can be transmitted by not washing one's hands. On one level, she is quite literal as she makes the connection between hand hygiene and disease transmittal. Simultaneously, she is drawn to the microscopic world as formal design elements, and notes that microbial images are frequently appropriated into contemporary life and culture.



## JAMES VICTORE

*Washing Hands: The single most important means of preventing the spread of infection.*

Poster Series

Digital prints on Dibond panels

60" high x 42" wide

2011

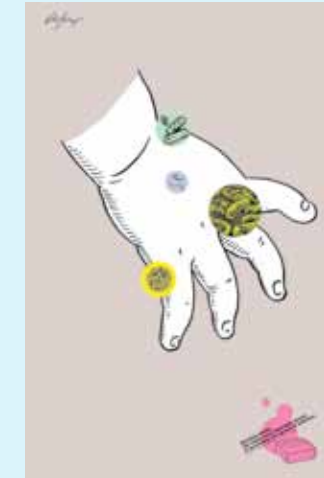
*In the particular lies the universal.*

- James Victore

*A good poster enters through the eye and explodes in the brain.*

- A.M. Cassandre (1901-1986)

French designer



*Washing Hands: The single most important means of preventing the spread of infection.*

The inclusion of the graphic posters of James Victore in *Watching Hands* acknowledges the contemporary blurring of distinctions between fine art and design. His participation is a nod to the importance of good design in public health communications, and a challenge to public health communicators to consider how effective, cutting-edge graphics can be used to message to the general public.

Health posters have been around since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Technological advances in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century led to the production of posters, films, brochures, and exhibits for widespread distribution. Taking a cue from the world of commercial advertising in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, social activists began to develop coordinated mass media campaigns in order to tackle pressing public health issues of the day, such as tuberculosis and venereal diseases.

Early on, the organizers of these campaigns learned the power of using visual images combined with language, storytelling, and an array of communication techniques to encourage, cajole, entertain, scare, and annoy their audiences in order to influence their behavior. As the decades advanced, the public health campaigns of the 1930s and 1940s became increasingly sophisticated—drawing upon the most talented designers and communicators of the times. In the 1980s and 1990s, there was another renaissance of the public health poster as design responded to the urgency of the AIDS epidemic.

A self-declared independent designer based in New York, Victore considers poster making his “preferred tool.” He believes that the poster is the “simplest, bluntest format in which to work (not to mention that it’s often the biggest)—like a large spiked club.” Over the years,

Victore has produced work for important causes, including AIDS and human rights, as well as created graphics for commercial clients—including a memorable *TIME Magazine* cover in 2008. His studio practice is distinctive: in this era of computer-generated graphics, a Victore design always reflects the hand of the artist (although his graphics, by definition, are ultimately computer-generated). In other words, his work is always personal. In a world saturated with visual culture, his work stands out precisely because it is so direct and visceral.

For *Watching Hands*, Victore accepted our challenge to design a series of four posters, which have been produced on a dramatic five feet high scale. Somewhat secondary to the visual images, the text on each poster declares “Washing Hands: The single most important means of preventing the spread of infection.” Each poster features

a hand of an adult man, an adult woman, an old person, or an infant, overlaid with bubble images of various pathogens that can be transmitted by not washing one’s hand, such as influenza and *E. coli*. Harking back to an era when health posters often incited anxiety, the posters are motivating because they tell you exactly what the consequences of not washing your hands may be. Lastly, in a serendipitous moment and in the midst of designing the poster, one of his studio team members actually contracted *Salmonella* from handling raw chicken—reinforcing why we must all adopt healthy habits!

Special thanks to Hank Richardson, of The Portfolio Center, for facilitating James Victore’s participation in *Watching Hands*.

