

## Depth of Focus

### PHOTOGRAPHY

In recent years, a number of US-based artists have been taking new approaches to photography, emphasizing process, digital manipulation and the physical support



Talia Chetrit *Triangle*, 2008, inkjet print

Since the middle of the last decade, critics and curators have been reticent to identify significant movements in photography. Back in the early 2000s we witnessed the collective cresting of the Vancouver school, a moniker under which a collection of artists like Jeff Wall, Rodney Graham and Stan Douglas have been grouped; the Becher school, a collection of students taught by Bernd and Hilla Becher at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, which includes Thomas Struth, Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer and Thomas Ruff; and an American school of scenographic photography, partly spawned by Yale-based artists and teachers Gregory Crewdson and Philip-Lorca diCorcia. This is not to say that whatever powers are in charge of arbitrating taste have reneged on what appeared, during this brief window of photography mania in the early 2000s, to be a promise to decisively legitimate photography as an art of equal standing with all others.<sup>1</sup> Photography, after all, still benefits from significant exhibition platforms in the US, such as the New York Museum of Modern Art's annual 'New Photography' show, which has been running since 1994; serious academic consideration from figures such as George Baker, Geoffrey Batchen, Kaja Silverman and others; major symposia including San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's 2010 series 'Is Photography Over?'; and publications such as *Blind Spot* magazine and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's watershed *Words Without Pictures* (2009). What is missing is the impulse to identify schools or movements within

One might suspect that the answer lies in the fact that this mode of thinking has become somewhat *déclassé*: in an art world that increasingly values pluralism and interdisciplinarity, medium-specific concerns and the impulse to group artists together have given way to a relatively decompartmentalized field of art production, in which, somewhat paradoxically, the individual tends to take precedence over the group. However, over the course of the past five years or so, a number of artists based in the US have been developing new approaches to photography. These efforts have been largely unsynchronized and spontaneous – unaffiliated with any school and beholden to no specific set of theories. These artists are operating according to a set of terms that diverge from those that have been commonly used to understand the medium.

Institutional discourse around photography remains encumbered by certain established strictures. These are intimately tied to a specific history of photography that is concerned with the camera's status as a tool used to depict states of things in the world. This history could be said to revolve around confirming or problematizing Roland Barthes's assertion that the medium's essence (or *noème*) is the ability of the photograph to testify: "That-has-been."<sup>2</sup> Inextricable from this history is the idea that photography acts as a kind of window onto the world, that the medium itself is a kind of transparent glass through which we see images. This tends to repress, or at least discount, several integral aspects of the medium: the physical support upon which the image is registered, myriad chemical and technical processes, as well as the numerous choices that were made by the photographer in capturing the image. This repression is present even in elaborate forms of staged photography, such as those practiced by Wall, DiCorcia and others, and the baroque digital fabrications of an artist such as Andreas Gursky. While these types of images certainly problematize Barthes' photographic *noème* and ask us to question the veracity of what we see through photography's imaginary window, they nevertheless speak in the same basic formal language as have photographers stretching back to Louis Daguerre: they are presenting us with a view, whether credible or not.

Artists such as Michele Abeles, Walead Beshty, Lucas Blalock, Talia Chetrit, Liz Deschenes, Sam Falls, Elad Lassry, Carter Mull, Eileen Quinlan, Mariah Robertson, Erin Shirreff, Sara VanDerBeek and a host of others, have begun to turn away from this well-worn photographic language in favour of a different one. This still-inchoate tongue is one that speaks of photography's repressed aspects – the support that holds the image, and the techniques used in the process of its creation. The work attempts to move photography away from an idea of it as a conduit through which images are channeled, towards an idea of photography as a medium whose specific properties can be tinkered with, stretched and placed into dialogue with those of other media.

Though the work of each of these artists is distinct and multifaceted, for the sake of clarity they can be loosely grouped into two camps: those whose experiments overlap with painting and those whose experiments are more geared towards sculpture. Many of the artists in question straddle the line between the two, and occasionally produce discrete works that could be said to functioning both. For those who have more of a relationship to painting, the work involves an attention to the materiality of the photographic support and an engagement with the photograph's physical or digital surface. Those making work that relates more to sculpture, on the other hand, are more directly concerned with choices involving the boundaries of the photographic frame and the placement of objects within it.

# frieze

The discussion of the intersection of photography and painting is as old as photography itself. Around the beginning of the decade, this discussion reared its head in earnest through the attempts of artists such as Wall and Gursky to create photographic works that would match painting – particularly that of the 18th and 19th century – in both scale (monumentally sized prints made possible by the advancement of digital printing) and allegorical heft (using elaborate, cinematic staging techniques and digital illusion). However, recent years have seen a resurgent interest in lensless photographic techniques and investigations of the painterly possibilities of digital imaging software that move photography into a relation with painting that is less concerned with rivalry than it is with the creation of a dialogue, or a space in which the two media can intermingle.

Among those spurring on the re-engagement with lensless photography, Walead Beshty, Liz Deschenes and Mariah Robertson are perhaps the most significant. Beshty, who has also emerged as a prominent voice in the field of photographic theory, produces monumental, candy-coloured works made by baroquely folding scroll-like sheets of traditional c-type photographic paper and exposing them to a variety of different coloured light sources shone from multiple angles, a process that amounts to the painting, with light, of a topographically restructured photographic surface. (The act of folding the photographic paper is significant here in that it foregrounds the materiality of the support, but it also serves to slot the work into Beshty's broader explorations of surface registration that occurs by chance, such as those produced by shipping glass cubes fitted to the interior of FedEx boxes that crack in arbitrary patterns determined by their handling in transit.) Robertson's lush, variegated photograms are also made using large sheets of c-type paper, but their materiality is emphasized in a more visceral manner: often ripped and irregularly shaped, they slump and dangle loosely in their frames, or snake in sinuous ribbons around the walls and ceilings of the exhibition spaces in which they are shown. The work's imagery, such as it is, is a kaleidoscopic *mélange* of geometric forms and swathes of colour – punctuated by the occasional intrusion of photographic representation – that have been directly registered on the paper's surface and embellished during the developing process with drips and splashes of photographic chemistry that resemble child-like experiments with watercolour. The result is a frenetic, slap-dash maximalist approach to photographic surface experimentation that could be set up in near-direct formal opposition to the works of Deschenes, whose technically exacting approach to lensless photography recalls the experiments of artists such as Bridget Riley and Ellsworth Kelly. Many of Deschenes's works are starkly monochromatic – striking fields of undifferentiated colour, or murky, semi-reflective, silver-toned surfaces that have the look of weathered mirrors. In these works, photographic processes are pared down to their barest essence, in both literal and metaphoric terms: colour field works such as *Red Transfer (diptych)* (1997–2003) deal plainly with the material technology of image making (in this case, the red dye used in the production of the now-obsolete dye transfer printing process), while silver-toned photogram works like *Tilt/Swing, #3B* (2009) speak obliquely to photography's status as a rough mirror of the real.

The experiments of each of these artists have deep roots in photographic history stretching back to some of the foundational works of William Henry Fox Talbot in the 19th century and extending through the works of early-20th-century artists including László Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray, on to the more contemporary works of artists such as James Welling. However, other artists currently making work in dialogue with painting have a less direct lineage: they engage with the photographic surface not as a physical support upon which painting-like gestures can be made, but as a field of pixels where painterly marks can be simulated.

Recent works by New York-based Sam Falls, for example, see him explicitly addressing this idea of the digital photograph as a virtual canvas. These works have an uncanny resemblance to paintings – sometimes to those of David Hockney – but are in fact the result of a multi-part process that combines analogue photography, digital manipulation and painting. Falls begins by scanning one of his own analogue photographs – often one that conforms to the traditional genres of portraiture, landscape or still life – into a computer, which he then 'paints' upon using tools provided in Photoshop. He then makes an inkjet print of the digitally painted image, which he further embellishes with oil paint, pastels and air brushing, often in ways that mirror or extend the digital painting underneath and make it difficult to tell the difference between the two. The result is a work that occupies a space not only between photography and painting, but also, subtly, between reality and its digital double. Los Angeles-based Lucas Blalock also makes novel, painterly use of Photoshop in some of his works, but rather than virtually painting on top of the image, as Falls does, Blalock instead paints with the pixels that comprise the image – a process that reconfigures and combines rather than adds or overlays. These are photographic paintings produced through the duplication and multiplication of information. As a result, they look like they're infested by some kind of mutating digital blight, which causes their subjects to twist themselves into pixelated Gordian knots and blur into wavering psychedelic mirages.

Photography is seldom talked about in terms of its relationship to sculpture, except as a method for its documentation.<sup>3</sup> However, the recent re-emergence of studio-based photography, particularly where geared towards still life, signals a move away from this utilitarian view of the photograph's relation to sculpture towards one in which photography is used as a site where a type of sculptural activity can take place. Key to this is a shift in the treatment of the photographic frame, which supplants the dominant analogical model of the window, through which the world is viewed, with that of the box, inside of which the world is arranged. This has an obvious relationship to still life and, arguably, to studio-based photography as a whole. However, this model of the frame as box could be extended to a type of visual strategy that has its roots in the various photographic Modernisms of the beginning of the 20th century, one that treats the photograph as a space for the construction of compositions (of objects, sections of the landscape, or even of bodies) rather than as a tool to provide information about the states of things.

# frieze

The work of Elad Lassry serves as a usefully emblematic example. Principally, this is due to his insistent foregrounding of the boundaries of his images with custom-made lacquered frames whose colours match those found in the photographs they contain. As a result, whether Lassry's works take the form of portraits, individual object studies, re-photographed and appropriated imagery, or still lifes, they exude a similar feeling of being fully integrated objects – types of image/sculpture rather than simply images that happen to be presented in frames. However, it is in Lassry's still lifes and individual object studies – which often take the form of whimsical arrangements of foodstuffs and household goods or presentations of kitschy *objets d'art*, almost always placed on brilliantly coloured backgrounds – that this effect is most potently elaborated: a mildly uncanny doubling occurs in these works, in which the object or objects in the image reflect back on the object-like quality of the integrated image-and-frame.

Other photographers working in the sculptural vein, such as Michele Abeles, Talia Chetrit and Eileen Quinlan, are slightly less explicitly invested in the material presence of the photograph on the wall, but nevertheless exhibit a pointed concern for the way in which objects (and, occasionally, bodies) sit within the frames of their images and create spatial relationships. Abeles's studio constructions intermingle various generic still-life flotsam (potted plants, wine bottles) with lolling, nude male bodies whose heads are often truncated by the frame – a strategy that positions the works as canny rejoinders to the commonplace use of the anonymous female form as a prop for picture-making. More often than not, Abeles also overlays these studio arrangements with transparent, jagged swathes of colour, a compositional device that seems to indicate the intrusion of a digital hand, but is in fact achieved with entirely analogue means, through the use of layers of Perspex and coloured lighting gels. The resulting images are a strange mix of the anachronistic and the contemporary, one part *Blow-Up*-style 1960s editorial work and one part digitally amalgamated dreamscape.

This wavering between past and present is similarly evident in the practice of Talia Chetrit, whose recent works are redolent of glamour and product photographs from the 1940s, but with a cunning dash of perceptual sleight-of-hand. Her work *Drip Vases* (2011), for example, would have been a straightforward photograph of a pair of vases with exaggeratedly crenulated openings huddled together on a neutral backdrop, if Chetrit hadn't chosen to display the image upside-down, giving the impression that the inverted vases are being slow pulled, toffee-like, towards the ground. Other works, like *Drawing on Drawing* (2010), are engaged with similar perceptual trickery: what at first appears to be a photogram made in the style of Moholy-Nagy or Man Ray is revealed, upon further inspection, to be a photograph of a motley collection of objects arrayed on top of a looping, circuitous pencil drawing.

Quinlan shares Chetrit's interest in photography's capacity for creating illusion, but her work is more explicitly tied up with literal and metaphoric forms of photographic abstraction. Quinlan makes tightly composed photographs of puffs and tendrils of smoke lingering amid funhouse-like arrangements of mirrors that dizzily vacillate between abstraction and representation, never seeming to settle in either camp. These visual acrobatics are lent added significance by the pointed double entendre of titles such as that given to her 2005–07 body of work 'Smoke and Mirrors', which speaks to the illusion-making capacity not just of Quinlan's images, but of photography as a whole. Though their work is diverse, when taken as a group, these artists make a case for the reconsideration of the works of photographers such as Jan Groover, Barbara Kasten, Paul Outerbridge, Albert Renger-Patzsch and Paul Strand, putting forward the possibility that photography can be used as a tool for organizing space, in addition to its function as a tool for depiction.

But where, ultimately, might the significance of these shifts in recent photography lie? It is indisputable that we now inhabit a world thoroughly mediated by and glutted with the photographic image and its digital doppelgänger. Everything and everyone on earth and beyond, it would seem, has been slotted somewhere in a rapacious, ever-expanding Borgesian library of representation that we have built for ourselves. As a result, the possibility of making a photograph that can stake a claim to originality or affect has been radically called into question. Ironically, the moment of greatest photographic plentitude has pushed photography to the point of exhaustion. It is in the face of this waning of photographic possibility that these artists are attempting to carve a way forward by rethinking photographic subjectivity. They are, in other words, working at the task of what philosopher Vilém Flusser, in his increasingly influential text *Towards A Philosophy of Photography* (1983), deemed to be the essence of experimental photography: 'to create a space for human intention in a world dominated by apparatuses'.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This largely tacit – and, of course, slightly absurd – promise was made manifest in the breathless title of Michael Fried's most recent book, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, Hill and Wang, New York, 1981, p.77

<sup>3</sup> MoMA's mammoth 2010 exhibition 'The Original Copy: Photography of Sculpture, 1839 to Today', curated by Roxana Marcoci, is the most prominent recent example of this tendency.

<sup>4</sup> Vilém Flusser, *Towards A Philosophy of Photography*, trans. Anthony Mathews, Reaktion Books, London, 1983, p.75

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