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Artist Ellen Carey is pushing the boundaries of photography

By James Chute
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Don't even mention the word digital photography to lens-based artist Ellen Carey.

"I'm not sure it's a correct description," said the pioneering photographer, whose images have been widely exhibited and are in the collections of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, among other institutions.

Carey prefers the term "digital imaging technology."

"I think one has to be careful when one talks about photography," she said.

If Carey is a purist when it comes to defining photography, she's anything but when it comes to making images.



Ellen Carey: "Multichrome Pulls" (2007)

Even as she employs what could be considered archaic technology — one of only five, large format, 20 X 24 Polaroid instant cameras still in existence — she is pushing the boundaries of the conventional preconceptions associated with what a photograph should look like.

"Minimalism and abstraction in photography could be considered a kind of contradiction in terms," said Carey, who teaches the Hartford Art School. But clearly, that's not the way she considers it.

Although she had been working on the large-format Polaroid cameras since 1983, her images were mostly representational until 1996, when by accident, she continued pulling the paper out of the camera and created an abstract, parabolic-shaped form on a scroll-like sheet of paper.

In that single, unintended "pull," which is the name she's given to that form of art work, she moved from representation to abstraction, from a way of working where the process served the image to where the process was the image.

"It was a metaphor for what was happening in my life," said the 60-year-old Carey, who at the time had lost her brother, her mother and a aunt in rapid succession. "Because in photography, one thinks about it being a record and document, a snapshot of human life. My whole life had sort of collapsed..."

Just like that photo, which she quickly realized was not a mistake but a gift that continues to inform her art making.

With the elimination of the narrative and her rejection of the literal image in favor of mystery and metaphor, she's dubbed her art practice "Photography Degree Zero" (inspired by the Roland Berthes' 1953 book, "Writing Degree Zero").

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Sometimes she puts the paper through the camera with the lens closed, but most of the time the lens is open, allowing the light to excite the often unconventional combinations of inks that create colors that often no one has ever seen before, and given the inexact nature of the medium, colors that are unlikely to be produced again.

Every time she puts a piece of paper in the camera, she can't be entirely sure of what's going to happen. That's the nature of her medium.

"That doesn't bother me," Cary said. "Part of being a pioneer, or an avant-garde artist, is abandoning and letting go of control."

But is she a pioneer, boldly shattering photographic conventions, or is she a dinosaur, wedded to a outmoded, barely breathing technology that has already died twice (Polaroid declared bankruptcy in 2001, then the company which had picked up the name filed for bankruptcy in 2009. The current "Polaroid" company is associated with Lady Gaga and no longer makes instant film. A couple entrepreneurs have taken that on, at least for the moment).

"Polaroid called me in 2000 and said it was over and here it is 2012 and I'm still shooting," she said. "I'm committed to the materials; they have a soft edge brilliance and character all their own."

And she's committed to the process, whose limitless possible outcomes still excite her.

"There's nothing like it," she said. "I'm having a blast. And I'm going to keep on going."