

# M + B

## Ellen Carey

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### To start with, can you give me some background information?

I was born in New York City, the second eldest in a family of five children, three boys and two girls. We lived primarily on the East Coast and in the Midwest, around big cities. I attended all-girl Catholic schools up until the second year in high school; none had art programs. I spent a lot of time drawing from Jon Gnagy's *Learn to Draw*. In 1971, when my parents moved to Buffalo, I left for college, to the Kansas City Art Institute.

### You moved around quite a bit. What effect do you think that had on you?

I think that moving around afforded me different environments to respond to—the Northeast Corridor, the South, which at that time was still very segregated. My childhood gave me a foundation for learning to be flexible, to take risks, which helped with my work later on.

### How did you become involved with photography?

In high school my parents gave me a Polaroid Super Shooter. Then, during our freshman foundation classes at the Kansas City Art Institute [KCAI], we had introductions to various artistic areas. I had no response to the blank canvas in paint, couldn't throw anything in clay, nor sculpt, blow glass, or do graphic design—not even weaving in fiber arts! It was quite hopeless. Then I discovered printmaking, through having a superlative undergraduate experience with two great teachers: William McKim, who was taught by Thomas Hart Benton, for lithography, and Marvin Jones for etching.

I had a very generous peer group as well, who were very supportive.

During freshman year a fellow art student showed me the KCAI darkroom and how to print. The darkroom is where I fell in love with the whole process of photography. I would be there ten, twelve hours a day with my peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. The magic of developing and seeing the first image coming up in the amber light was so exciting. It was immediate. The ability to get my creative ideas out there quickly just wasn't happening with any other medium. It was a huge existential relief.

### Did you go to graduate school?

Yes, after KCAI, I went to SUNY Buffalo on a scholarship and got involved with the art scene there. I met a whole bunch of photographers like Les Krims,<sup>1</sup> who was a boyfriend for a while, John Pfahl, Bonnie Gordon, Nathan Lyons<sup>2</sup> from Visual Studies Workshop, and filmmaker Hollis Frampton. Robert Longo<sup>3</sup> and Cindy Sherman<sup>4</sup> were among the group; we all hung out at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery.

1. Les Krims (b. 1942), American. Conceptual photographer known for carefully arranged fabricated photographs.

2. Nathan Lyons (b. 1930), American. Artist, curator, and educator who advanced the study of the history and practice of photography.

3. Robert Longo (b. 1953), American. Artist known for his large-scale, detailed drawings.

4. Cindy Sherman (b. 1954), American. Photographer known for dressing in costume and using herself as the model to create images that explore identity and representation.



2015

# M+B



ELLEN CAREY 37

# M + B

## **When did you move to New York, and what brought that about?**

Moving around [in my childhood] helped me realize that moving was not a scary thing or overwhelming. After I finished graduate school I spent a year working with Linda Cathcart as a curatorial assistant at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery on her *American Painting of the 1970s* exhibition. I applied and received a CAPS [Creative Artists Public Service Program] grant for \$5,000 and she encouraged me to move to New York.

Those were very much struggling artist years. I got a great waitressing job at Spring Street Bar and teaching jobs at Queens College and ICP [International Center of Photography]. The curator Allan Schwartzman gave me a job photographing installations at the New Museum. So I managed to get through. It was very tough, and tougher because my dad had died suddenly right before I moved. But I loved New York, and I was there in that golden period when the SoHo art and gallery scene was developing.

## **Where exactly were you living at the time?**

In Little Italy, at 17 Cleveland Place, in a tiny tenement. Eventually, I established a studio at Spring and Mercer, right across from Donald Judd's<sup>5</sup> building. It was a very invigorating and lively time, while being tough, too.

## **What would you consider your first real gallery show?**

Back then I was part of the avant-garde of the 1970s in Buffalo. Alternative places like CEPA Gallery [Center for Exploratory and Perceptual Arts] and Hallwalls [Contemporary Arts Center] were just beginning. The Albright-Knox Art Gallery hired Linda Cathcart, Marcia Tucker's protégé from the Whitney Museum, to be contemporary art curator, and she began the biannual exhibition *In Western New York*. She championed us all.

Later she was one of the curators of a 1979 group exhibition at PS1 in New York titled *The Altered Photograph*. I had about ten or twelve photographs from my *Painted Self-Portraits* series in it. [My first one-person show in New York was in] the early 1980s at Concord Gallery.

I had faith, little money, my small portfolio case, and a trunk of clothes—that was it. Cindy Sherman's photograph of herself on the road with a suitcase, a metaphor of the future and the unknown—alone—was often how I felt.

## **What brought you to Hartford?**

I was hired by the Hartford Art School in the spring of 1983 as a visiting artist to replace Robert Cumming while he was on leave; he never came back. A few years later, in the summer of 1987, I lost my SoHo studio. I looked around in New York but chose instead a two-thousand-square-foot loft up here in the Colt Building, while keeping my apartment in New York. The timing could not have been better, as the stock market crashed that fall. Black Monday and the art world pretty much closed up. In 1991 I received tenure with promotion.

## **Did you have a darkroom in the loft?**

I didn't, because I used the one at school, but I had a big shooting studio. At that time I was using black-and-white film with a medium-format camera. I began to reevaluate my work. My projects often begin with questions: What does an abstract/minimal photograph look like? I began to look at the dawn of photography, the origins found in the photogram cameraless work of William Henry Fox Talbot<sup>6</sup> and Anna Atkins,<sup>7</sup> really looking at the shadow as negative image.

## **You have done a lot of work using the large-format Polaroid camera. Can you tell me what a Polaroid studio would look like and explain the process?**

It is fully equipped with lots of lighting equipment, tripods, and so forth. Yet unlike the conventional studio, it has this enormous custom-built camera, circa 1980. It is very special, this Polaroid 20 x 24! There's a big, unique photograph, a positive with its

5. Donald Judd (1928–94), American. Artist known for his minimalist and fabricated sculptures.

6. William Henry Fox Talbot (1800–77), British. Inventor and photography pioneer who made major contributions to the development of photography as an artistic medium.

7. Anna Atkins (1799–1871), British. Botanist and photographer considered to be the first woman to create a photograph and publish a book illustrated with photographic images.

# M + B

negative. I keep and show the individual negatives too. Some of the colors and patinas are informed by the Polaroid film—say, if it's color or black-and-white. My experiments with the film create new forms and vibrant colors. Most of the negatives, which I keep, oxidize and change over time.

**Can you describe a typical day, being as specific as possible?**

When I work on the 20 x 24 Polaroid camera, I have to book time at the Polaroid studio in New York in advance. I have to do preproduction, meaning get everything packed ahead of time: my tubes, the foam cylinders, Bubble Wrap, and so forth. My black portfolio case contains my color gels, drawings for my ideas, color magic markers, my notebooks, white foam board, and a few other things.

Usually, I'll shoot on a Thursday because the negatives have to dry overnight. I can get a lot done in a day. We start getting ready at nine o'clock, and I'll be shooting by ten o'clock. We'll have a working lunch and usually end by seven o'clock at the latest. My dealer may stop by to look, maybe a friend or two, perhaps a collector or a curator. Next morning, off to the studio by six or seven o'clock, pack everything up, and drive home.

**How many images can you get in a day?**

If I get one outstanding artwork, I'm happy. My aim is pure abstraction, minimalism, vibrant colors, and new forms with high visual impact, all about light or no light, exposure or none. I work until I get a great picture, and then I try for another. I want to end the day on an up note.

**With the Polaroid, you're working with-out a typical negative—they're all individual prints?**

I do have negatives, but you're right—they're not traditional negatives in that they can't be used to print additional pictures. All my works are one-of-a-kind prints. Some people would say I'm not a photographer; I'm a lens-based artist.

I would locate my work within the context of the twentieth-century avant-garde, with Man Ray,<sup>8</sup> the Russian constructivists, the Bauhaus,<sup>9</sup> with the lineage of cameraless images in the nineteenth century, as well as the very experimental contemporary artists who happen to have links to photography, such as Adam Fuss,<sup>10</sup> James Welling,<sup>11</sup> Christian Marclay,<sup>12</sup> or Susan Derges.<sup>13</sup>

I have some painterly ideas. I think I'm considered a maverick and a pioneer in photographic minimalism and abstraction. I have been very fortunate to bear witness to the great art movements in America after World War II: abstract expressionism, minimalism, conceptual art, and the social changes brought about by feminism.

**With painters, they're having conversations in their heads with the history of painting.**

**Is the conversation in your head more with the history of photography?**

I always say that if I were in art heaven, I'd love to talk with Talbot, Anna Atkins, and Man Ray, as well as Jackson Pollock,<sup>14</sup> even Eva Hesse.<sup>15</sup> Their relationship and sensitivity to materials and process is embedded in their art. I would like people to think about photography less as a picture sign and more as looking at the possibilities of a picture process.

My role models would be people who break ground. I love experimenting. I was very fortunate to meet other artists when I was in New York;

8. Man Ray (1890–1976), American. Visual artist renowned for his photographs and photograms. He was a contributor to the dada and surrealist movements.

9. Art school that existed in Germany between 1919 and 1933, known for its avant-garde approach to design.

10. Adam Fuss (b. 1961), British. Photographer known for his cameraless technique, using the basics of photography: objects, light, and light-sensitive material.

11. James Welling (b. 1951), American. Artist and painter who uses a range of photographic tools and mixed media.

12. Christian Marclay (b. 1955), Swiss/American. Visual artist and composer whose work explores the connections among sound, noise, photography, video, and film.

13. Susan Derges (b. 1955), British. Visual artist specializing in cameraless photography, most often working with natural landscapes.

14. Jackson Pollock (1912–56), American. Influential painter and a major force in the abstract expressionist movement.

15. Eva Hesse (1936–70), American. Sculptor known for works using latex, fiberglass, and plastics.

# M + B



Linda Cathcart introduced me to Nancy Graves,<sup>16</sup> who was fantastic. You meet artists throughout life; you learn a lot from each one. Later examples would be my long friendships with John Coplans<sup>17</sup> and Sol LeWitt.<sup>18</sup>

**Do you listen to music when you're working?**  
**Do you feel it affects your work in any way?**

I do. I feel that music has a kinship to the feelings and the spirit in my work. Though I have to be able to listen and concentrate when I'm doing my art. It's an emotional, psychological, uplifting experience, and it's very technical and visual—a kaleidoscope of various forces. Silence also works, especially when I work alone in the total darkness of the color darkroom. To focus like that for hours on end takes lots and lots of experience.

Since my works are unique prints, I only get one chance. Once, after printing for many days, I was down to my last piece of paper. This was the last piece of Kodak precut 30-x-40-inch color paper on the planet! I went into the darkroom and I said a little prayer: "OK, Talbot, Anna Atkins, Man Ray, I really need your help. I only have one piece of paper left." And I got it—I nailed the print! It's about setting a really high performance goal for yourself. It's like you're an athlete, it's the Olympics, and this is what you've been training for.

**Do you have a favorite color?**

I love all colors, especially rainbows. I think my love of color comes from being Catholic, staring at stained glass windows for a long time. But if there is one, it would be blue, what they call in Irish "the violet hour"—the end-of-the-day blue, where the

silhouette of the trees is hard to differentiate as the sun goes down. That's my favorite moment of color.

**Are there any specific items that you keep around your studio that have significant meaning to you?**

I like to keep objects that have color in them. I also collect dragonfly imagery. In 1995 my mother was diagnosed with cancer, having about a year left to live. During this time my middle brother, John, had an accident and died instantly. My mother's death followed. I did everything possible in this state of mourning, grieving, but nothing seemed to work. My brother had collected dragonfly imagery. Right after John and Mother died, I would see—either physically, metaphorically, or as a picture sign—rainbows and dragonflies, and that's when I had a breakthrough in my work and my life.

Color is the joy of celebrating, and there's its counterpart in sadness—gray and black. It's a metaphor for the shadow image or, in psychoanalysis, the hidden self or interior life. I had an incredible experience with what Freud calls the uncanny. In the summer of 1996 my mother and brother had just died. I decided to go to the studio and do a picture, a family portrait, never intending to exhibit it. There

16. Nancy Graves (1939–95), American. Visual artist known for her focus on natural imagery.

17. John Coplans (1920–2003), British. Photographer who made black-and-white self-portraits that are frank studies of the naked body and the aging process.

18. Sol LeWitt (1928–2007), American. Conceptual artist known for his wall drawings and structured minimalistic sculptures.

# M + B

were three Polaroid positives that were black rectangles, one each for my father, my mother, and my brother John. My older brother, myself, and my two other siblings were white. The interesting thing was that whether the negatives were exposed or not exposed, they were all a matte, tar-like black.

The first *Pull* came after this group. When it was time to reload the film into the camera we did a test, but the white positive area—which has the Polaroid tulips on the top and a black band on the bottom denoting the picture's end—went a little farther down past the regular cutoff point. I thought that was interesting and did it again, only this time it was made bigger. I knew right away it was major, even though I might not have understood it completely at that time. Then one was made all black, no exposure. I called them *Pulls*.

That was quite a day! I felt completely different in every way. It was visceral, spiritual, physical—everything and nothing. That day was the day I left my old life behind: my old self, all my photographs, all my cameras. I wouldn't use them anymore. I will never forget it. All this love now gone. All these pictures now meaningless. I was thunderstruck but inspired. It was the beginning for what would become *Mourning Wall* several years later. All these were new photographic documents of a different order, with different meanings—all very minimal and abstract.

#### **How did the recent *Dings and Shadows* series come about?**

I had been working on large, abstract color photographs for three years in a series titled *Penlights*. I was completely uninspired, so I tried something new in the darkroom. A little ding [crinkle] appeared on the color paper, which caused a crescent-like sliver of a shadow. I thought, Oh my God—that's it! I had missed the content of my work and forgotten that materials have meaning. The ding, traditionally taboo, became my shadow catcher. Bold forms, abstract and colorful, all done in the dark! My photogram practice is called *Struck by Light*. Literally and figuratively, the only thing that hits the paper is light.

#### **Have there been recent technologies in the last five years or so that have affected your work?**

I love digital in terms of its properties for speed, size, and scale. The iPhone is interesting as an apparatus for expression. It's really universalized the global picture culture. In a certain way, that's going to make it more challenging to make interesting photographs. At the same time, it's incredibly accessible, so everyone can join in. People are taking pictures all the time—they love pictures. I don't care if they are good or bad or indifferent; I just think it's great that people are visually engaged.

#### **Do you have a motto or creed that as an artist you live by?**

I love Polaroid's phrase "See what develops," which reflects my journey as an artist. Approach your work like an Olympic athlete and always go for the gold. For the truth and beauty that Keats<sup>19</sup> wrote about in the poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

#### **What advice would you give to a young artist that is just starting out?**

I would not be the artist I am today without my mentors—that's really key. Look at a lot of art. Read about it and about artists' lives. Read books, study philosophy, see films. Engage in the world, travel. Have a sense of humor—have fun, and don't do anything you can't reverse. The grim reaper is going to come along anyway, so I wouldn't accelerate that process. Have a connection to nature and protect your gifts.

19. John Keats (1795–1821), British. English romantic poet known for works characterized by sensual imagery.