

# M+B

## ARTFORUM

**Ellen Carey**

**Review by Barry Schwabsky at Ricco/Maresca Gallery (NYC)**

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Abstraction in photography can be such an insipid affair. It happens when the photographer conceives of abstraction as an already existing thing---a subject that can be represented like a battle or a nude. Much rarer is the case, as in Ellen Carey's new work, when abstraction represents a real disruption of the assumed link between photographic image and referent---in which an aporia is introduced that leads one to question just how what I am seeing relates to what it is I'm looking at.

In these photographs, I know very well what I am seeing: unframed, irregularly cut sheets of photographic paper on which appear simple, toothlike blobs of intense, saturated color or sharp black. Sometimes the blobs shift from color to black in the same work, but they always retain their identity as simple forms in the process of changing color. These forms are sometimes pierced by radiant circles of white or color, or crossed by thin horizontal bands.



Most of the sheets are limited to a single color plus black, white, and gray, but since the sheets are composed, for the most part, of two to four panels, multiple colors occur in a single work. In No. 78, 79, 80 (Birthday Portrait), 1997, one color is found on each sheet.

The relationship of all this to abstraction in the American painting of the '60s and '70s is pretty clear. The swoop of Ellsworth Kelly's simple curvilinear forms, each with its single bright hue, is an especially audible echo. The paradox is that while Kelly's colored shapes really are abstracted from things seen in the world, their strength lies in formal self-containment that never asks us to search for sources; Carey's shapes---simply because they occur in photography---insist that we imagine a preexisting referent. Their power lies in the frustration of that exercise.

We want photography to show us something. These photographs know that, and use that desire to show us what we don't usually think of as a thing, the light itself (and, in some cases, the darkness) through which images of things come to us. Everything else resides in the physical manipulation of film during the time of exposure and development (with the Polaroid 20-by-24-inch camera that has been Carey's primary instrument for the past three years)---a manipulation alluded to in the exhibition title "Pulls." Of course, something produced these particular shapes and colors, though I may never be able to reconstruct just what that was; but the primary referent here is something ordinarily treated as a medium but now to be experienced as a materialized presence.

There's a searing quality to the light, as Carey shows it to us, and even more to the darkness that is not quite its opposite. The sharp edges of her forms really seem to cut, and even when light seeps through the edges and makes them hazy, they maintain a burning quality. So although the colors are bright and transparent, the feelings that accumulate around them are far from weightless. Carey betrays a certain distrust of her work's abstractness, or perhaps of her viewers' ability to cope with it, by supplying specific, emotionally charged accounts of her intended symbolic contents for some of the images---as though they might otherwise have collapsed into insipid abstract photography. She needn't have worried. Just as the light of these pictures flows out of the gap between what I'm looking at---out of the bait and switch between referent and medium---so does their specificity of emotion.