

# M+B

20X24 STUDIO

## Ellen Carey, 20×24 Polaroid Pulls and Rollbacks

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By John Reuter

One of the more unique artists working with Polaroid 20×24 technology today is Ellen Carey. Ellen first began using the 20×24 in 1982 while it was housed at the Museum of Fine Arts School in Boston. Ellen's first work was a series of self portraits, lit with colored gels and later painted with enamel paint. These evolved into another series of self portraits made in New York that combined close up portraits lit with colored gels with intricate collages of black and white graphic images.

These multiple exposures blended the abstract and narrative in compelling complexity. In the 1990s Carey moved on to produce the series of "Pulls" and "Rollbacks". Eliminating the figure altogether, Carey created these abstract images taking full advantage of the camera as a printmaking machine. Exploiting the roll film nature of the system, Carey produced pieces sometimes seven to ten feet in length by letting the camera run beyond its usual stopping point. At times, the positive would be cut away from the negative and "rolled back" into the camera for additional exposures and developing.

Here is an excerpt from the essay "Ellen Carey from Matrix to Monumental", by Ben Lifson.



There are artists who (we are persuaded) are afforded glimpses of another realm, of a better order, or of order itself and its possibilities, which glimpses inform their art from that point on. Ellen Carey is such an artist. Hers is a visionary world from which she has returned to give us reports, which are her pictures.

Abstract? Yes. But also concrete in their forms, details and imagery. Each form is precisely what it is.

She has stripped the photographic process down to its irreducible elements and handles these so as to make them almost concepts, almost representative of photography's means rather than the means themselves: a camera—the Polaroid 20 X 24 inch view camera; an object — a piece of white board; and very bright colored strobe light. This last is reflected off the board at the moment of exposure. And so the camera photographs not the object but only the light.

In a word, Impressionism.

Carey calls it "Photography Degree Zero", after the French writer Roland Barthe's Writing Degree Zero. Her process seems so much distilled to the basic elements of her medium that one might wonder how this can be photography at all. True, the instrument is a large version of the earliest cameras. But as Carey points out, photography "comes with certain historical associations" that its pictures will be descriptive or discursive: portraits, landscapes, still life. There are few truly abstract photographs. "So that when you have pictures that you don't know how they're made, and what they're pictures of—and this is especially true of my work—those expectations are challenged." Nonetheless, in her work light is recorded by a lens and photosensitive materials, which are the groundwork for creation in this medium. Hence the title, which seems to reduce Carey's part in the creation of her pictures to that of little more than a camera operator—a term taken from photography's earliest days in America.

Carey counters this implication by calling herself a "lens based artist", and indeed she is in artistic control throughout the process, choosing the colored gels to place over her strobe lights, choosing the dyes that will develop the image (having a strong sense of how colored light as interpreted by the dyes will behave on Polaroid's paper, she often uses two or more dye pods), down to the moment when she releases the shutter and pulls the Polaroid positive/negative material farther out from the camera than its default length of twenty-four inches—hence her term for these pictures: "Pulls"—and often separating positive from negative before both are ready, or re-exposing a Pull, or interrupting the camera's actions. "It's a very fluid process. I do sketches...but there's a lot of room for...chance, randomness, which of course is one of the activities in art practice." And cites "people like John Cage, Laurie Anderson..."

Thus she creates abstract photographs that are at once truly abstract and truly photographic.