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ARTnews

THE INDECISIVE IMAGE

In pictures of ethereal specks and kaleidoscopic explosions of color, photographers are embracing abstraction.

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By Eric Bryant

In Marco Breuer's recent photographs, black specks dance across a white surface, leaving faint trails that mark the passage of time. Sensuous blocks of yellow glow like crystals lit from within, and drippy parallel lines that seem to sit on top of the paper call to mind Action Painting. Made without camera or film, these lush, textured works, collected in Breuer's 2007 book *Early Recordings*, defy our basic notions of what photography can be. Breuer achieves his effects by burning photographic papers, scraping their emulsions, and experimenting with chemical formulas that were popular in the 19th century.

Breuer is one of a wave of photographers now gaining recognition for work that abandons recognizable subject matter. "Abstraction goes back to the very beginnings of photography and has come back in different revivals," says Roxana Marcoci, photography curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. "There were the New Vision people in the 1920s and another group in the 1960s, and it is here again right now."

The range of work recently on view testifies to the current strength of abstract photography. Last fall, a miniretrospective of Breuer's explorations of light-sensitive materials was featured at Von Lintel Gallery, and Eileen Quinlan's disorienting close-ups of spaces fractured by mirrors and light were showing on the other side of Manhattan at Miguel Abreu Gallery. This winter Walead Beshty exhibited his folded-paper photograms in lurid colors at China Art Objects Galleries in Los Angeles, while Alison Rossiter's foggy prints made on unexposed photographic paper were on view in "The Death of Photography" at Stephen Bulger Gallery in Toronto. And when the Whitney Biennial opens this month, it will include photograms of screens that appear digital by James Welling, one of Beshty's teachers at UCLA and an influence on a whole generation of photographers looking at abstraction.

The reasons for the resurgence of abstraction are almost as diverse as the work itself. "The question of what sort of object the photograph is inevitably leads to the examination of abstraction," says Lyle Rexer, whose book tracing the history of abstract photography is scheduled to be published by Aperture in the fall. That question has loomed ever larger in recent decades as the notion of photographic veracity has come under assault. The idea of photographic "truth" is undermined by the conceptual investigations of subject matter in Cindy Sherman's film stills and Philip-Lorca diCorcia's staged street scenes as much as by the mass media's embrace of Photoshop. Digital advances in the commercial realm have drawn art photographers' attention back to a range of earlier methods. "I find 19th-century photography most interesting because the medium was not yet standardized," says Breuer. "Now, too many people automatically make 30-by-40-inch color prints, just like printing 8-by-10 black-and-white was the default 30 years ago."

And while recent years have witnessed a market enamored of pristine oversize prints that require labored postproduction, cameraless photography reintroduces immediacy and chance into the process. "Rather than working six hours on the perfect print, I can go into the darkroom without an idea and just let a direction appear as I work," says Rossiter. Other observers see the pull of art-historical influences. "I think that a lot of these artists are getting back to these movements in the history of photography connected with light experiments," says Marcoci. "But they are also looking beyond photography or even abstraction to the artists in the 1960s and '70s who used unconventional techniques, like James Turrell, Gordon Matta-Clark, Anthony McCall, and Robert Smithson."

M + B

While various 19th-century photographers inadvertently skirted abstraction, Alvin Langdon Coburn was the first to deliberately embrace it nearly a century ago. Around 1916 he used crystals and mirrors to create works he called Vortographs, tying the images to Vorticism, a movement of Cubist-inspired painters and sculptors in Britain. Since then, many of photography's best-known names—from Paul Strand, Lotte Jacobi, Man Ray, and Harry Callahan to Wolfgang Tillmans—have been drawn to abstraction, but just a handful have made it the centerpiece of their endeavors. "Abstraction was seen as being contrary to the supposedly genuine nature of the medium," observes photographer Joan Fontcuberta.

No single movement has emerged in the field, although a number of loose-knit groups have advocated for the abstract potential of photography: the teachers at the Chicago Institute of Design in the middle of the last century, the Association of Heliographers and the Generative Photographers of the 1960s, and the Concrete Photographers, largely based in Germany, today. But none of these could rightly be called a school, and each embraced a number of approaches.

The Chicago Institute was an outgrowth of the New Bauhaus school, founded in 1937 by László Moholy-Nagy. He had begun experimenting with photograms as early as 1922, and they played an essential role in his "New Vision" theory, which sought to expand human perception. Although an object, such as an eggbeater, may appear in Moholy-Nagy's photograms, that specific image is completely beside the point. The artist's concern was making a fuller range of light effects visible to the human eye.

For two decades after World War II, the institute was also home to Aaron Siskind, whose abstract works could not be more unlike those of Moholy-Nagy. Siskind used a camera and photographed real things, but often in extreme close-up or in other ways that would eliminate the viewer's frame of reference. When stripped of their context, peeling paint or distressed wood became geometric forms and lush textures. Siskind, who showed at Charles Egan Gallery alongside Willem de Kooning, was the only photographer associated with the New York School, and his abstract work is rightly called expressionist.

Even today much abstract work can best be understood as tending toward one or the other of these masters' primary techniques: creating unique cameraless prints in the darkroom or rendering real subjects unrecognizable as a result of manipulations either before the camera or in postproduction. Over the last decade or so, these two techniques have been joined by a third: process-based work, which is indebted as much to recent research into the methods of 19th-century photography as to the process artists of the 1960s and '70s.

Breuer is perhaps the most radical of the process photographers, but he started his career at a very old and traditional school in Germany, the Lette-Verein Berlin. "After that, I needed to find some place where I could work outside the rules," he explains. So he moved to a remote village and began producing all the work that had been percolating in his mind. "I thought if I minimized new visual input—no television, no billboards, no magazines—and maximized my output, I could get everything out of my system. That is when I started digging deeper into the process and engaging with materials."

Today, at his home and studio in Upstate New York, Breuer pursues his work almost as a series of experiments. "Often I am trying to force materials to do things," he says, "and it is the material's resistance that suggests the image." In 2005, for instance, he set out to see if he could instill a sense of immediacy into the gum bichromate printing method, in which the emulsion is traditionally laid down in layers, in the case of color images, and can take days to build up. He eventually came upon the technique of abrading the emulsion with a palm sander. The finished images resemble colonies of mold spreading across the surface and puddling to form richly varied tonalities.

Ellen Carey, who works with a 20-by-24-inch Polaroid camera, also disrupts a carefully tuned process, albeit a relatively new one. Her ongoing series "Pulls" and "Rollbacks" present irregular shapes in deeply saturated colors, sometimes drawn out to several feet long. The work, which was on view through last month at IBU Gallery in Paris, is made by interrupting the dye-transfer process in which pigmented emulsion migrates from the contact negative to the positive print paper, or by mixing incompatible chemicals, such as color emulsions and black-and-white developer. The names for the series came from the physical work of manipulating the camera apparatus, but even after years of experimentation the outcomes are largely beyond Carey's control. "The materials inform the process, and the 'Pulls' are documents of their own making," she says. "In a certain way, this is the action of the thing making itself."

M + B

Carlos Motta went even further in letting the pictures make themselves in “A Tree Is a Tree Is Not a Tree,” which was shown alongside the work of Breuer, among others, in “Agitate,” a 2003 show at SF Camerawork in San Francisco that helped define the term “process photography.” For the series, Motta tacked unprocessed photographic paper to trees for a week at a time and let the elements go to work. The prolonged contact with bark, leaves, and rain resulted in surfaces that appear both liquid and corroded.

A desire to engage with the accidental motivates many of the artists whose work can be categorized as darkroom abstractions. To produce his “Chance” series, Silvio Wolf, whose show at Robert Mann Gallery in New York will be up through the 15th of this month, uses leader—the film at the beginning of a roll that is never shot through the lens but may be exposed while loading a camera. Wolf’s chromogenic dye-coupler prints, which are up to six feet tall, present intense monochromatic fields that mimic the compositions and emotional tension of Rothko paintings.

Though Wolf doesn’t control the exposures, he pores over hundreds of leaders looking for a usable frame. Alison Rossiter is more systematic in carrying out the project she calls “Laments.” Printing full sheets of commercial paper that have never been intentionally exposed, she is creating an archive with at least one example with an expiration date in each year of the 20th century. The project began when a search for discontinued film on eBay led her to the auction of a complete photographer’s studio, including paper that had expired in 1946. Rossiter printed a sheet and was surprised to find an ethereal image that looked like a cloudscape at dusk, the result of years of light leaking through the packaging. “The move to digital imagery is fantastic in terms of postproduction and especially in photojournalism,” the artist acknowledges. “But the way that silver gelatin materials make use of light and precious metals is astounding, and there is nothing like the beauty of 19th- and 20th-century materials.”

Rossiter has experimented with darkroom techniques, including “drawing” directly on paper with a light. She began by producing nearly unrecognizable outlines of land masses and now does the same for “pictures” of horses from famous paintings. “The image is not abstract, but the technique is,” she says. “It only requires light and chemistry, and it goes directly from idea to object without making reference to a thing.” Rossiter has also made photograms, the oldest and still most widely practiced cameraless technique.

Both light drawing and photograms figure in Ray K. Metzker’s recent work, on view at Laurence Miller Gallery last winter. Tearing and stacking photosensitive black-and-white papers, carefully controlling the exposures, he creates collagelike geometric images that feature stark contrasts as well as subtle shading.

The same restrictions are made plain in the title of Walead Beshty’s photogram *Picture Made by My Hand with the Assistance of Light*(2006). Just as the title highlights the lack of an outside reference, the artist has made a variety of such works by creasing and even crumpling the paper, a technique meant to draw viewers’ attention to the physical properties of the medium. Depending on the paper used, the finished imagery ranges from mottled gray tones to pastel mists to brightly colored kaleidoscopic jumbles.

Beshty “is interested in treating the image abstractly rather than the content being abstract,” Whitney Biennial cocurator Shamim Momin says of the photograms. That distinction helps link the photograms to Beshty’s other work, such as the group of multiple exposures included in the biennial that the artist says depict the abandoned Iraqi embassy in Berlin. In both bodies of work, Beshty is trying to make explicit the essential quality of the artwork as an object rather than an image.

A similar emphasis is evident in the work of James Welling, who is showing at the biennial for the first time after nearly three decades of photographic experimentation. “Welling has been tremendously influential on the post-Gregory Crewdson generation, the people who are not pursuing portraiture or setup photography,” Momin says. “But he is also included because this is a very fertile moment for him.”

For his show in the spring of last year at David Zwirner gallery in New York, Welling exhibited three series that exemplify the range of techniques available to those who create abstract images by distorting the figurative or removing its context. In the “Authors” series, for example, Welling printed photos he had taken of drapes two decades earlier as a sequence of high-contrast monochromes in negative. He named each work after a 19th-century writer, but the correlation between the moody colors and the individual authors remains unclear.

M + B

In contrast, Quinlan eschews technical manipulations in the darkroom. By carefully arranging objects, cropping, then enlarging the small scenes, she fashions almost indecipherable pictures. Titled “Smoke and Mirrors,” the works are honest about their attempt to deceive. The reflected planes and refracted light hark back to Coburn, but the angular compositions and strong colors more readily recall the experiments of Barbara Kasten in the 1980s. Kasten, however, reversed the play with scale, photographing fractured architectural spaces and printing them as small puzzle pieces. Last year Kasten showed some of these vintage works at Daiter Contemporary in Chicago, but recently she has been working on tabletop arrangements using wire screens shot at angles to create moiré effects.

Rather than manipulate the content before the lens, Roger Newton has manipulated the lens itself. By shooting through glass and plastic forms filled with fluid—water, mineral oil, corn syrup—he creates surreal distortions of the natural world. He has lately been working on a diamond lens; the resulting pictures are nebulous, and as with the earlier works, the lens is both a tool and the subject.

While these aqueous images have emotional resonance, they lack the direct expressive intentions of Siskind and those who dominated the last abstract photography revival, in the '60s. Conceptual concerns regarding the objectivity of the image, the limits of perception, and the intrinsic properties of materials have moved to the fore as photographers venture into the digital age.

A historian of the medium as well as a photographer, Fontcuberta over the years has revisited many earlier techniques, using them to explore these contemporary concerns. His “Hemograms,” enlarged depictions of a drop of blood, ask viewers what they expect from a “portrait.” His starry “Constellations,” made from photograms of his car’s bug-splattered windshield, prod viewers to question the source of photographic information. But recently Fontcuberta has concentrated on a number of digital projects, hoping to get beyond what he calls third-class surrealism and neo-pictorialism. “Digital photography should be much more than Photoshop and photomontage,” he says.

Two years ago, at Zabriskie Gallery in New York, he showed his “Googlegrams,” photomosaics that piece together miniature digital images selected by the search engine to create pictures with often ironic relations to the constituent parts—portraits of millionaires were assembled into an image of a homeless man, for instance. And Bellas Artes in Santa and Aperture in New York have shown his “Orogenesis” pictures, which use a software program that renders three-dimensional terrain to transform selective scans from art-historical works—a Turner landscape, for example—into otherworldly topography. While both series contain recognizable imagery, they call into question the boundaries of representation in the information age.

Jason Salavon takes these ideas a step further in his show at the Columbus Museum of Art, which runs through May 4. For his “Amalgamations” and “100 Special Moments” series, for instance, he converts similar images—of newlyweds or Playboycenterfolds—into data sets and compresses them. The fuzzy results, as with so much abstract photography, are at once vaguely familiar and completely meaningless.