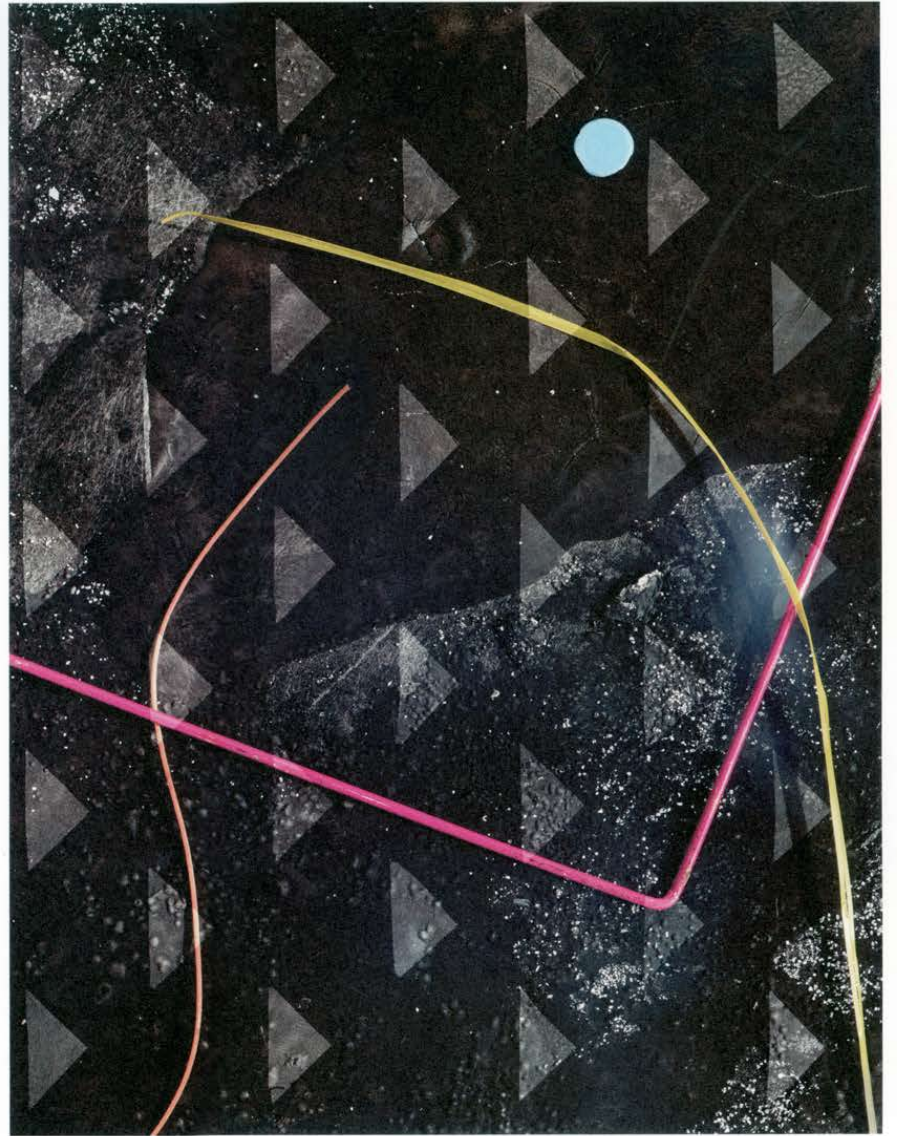
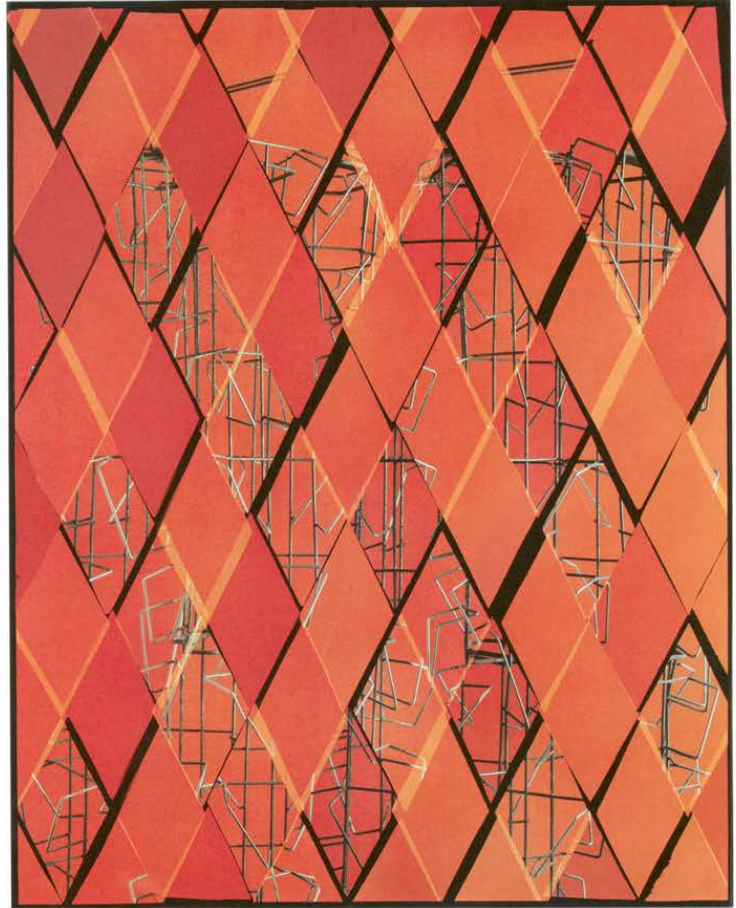


Hannah Whitaker  
Untitled



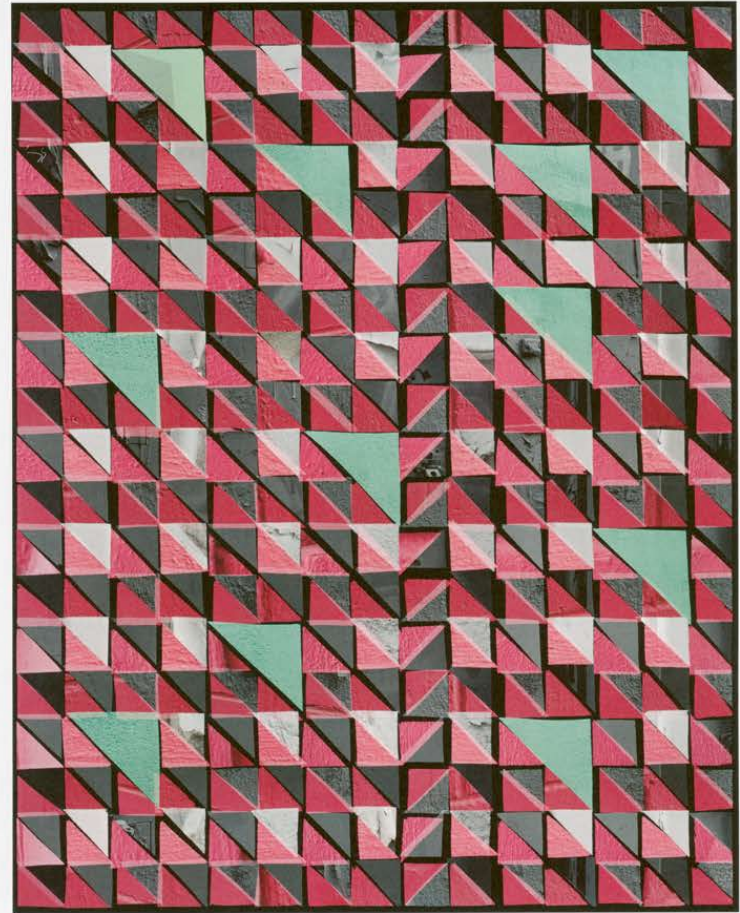
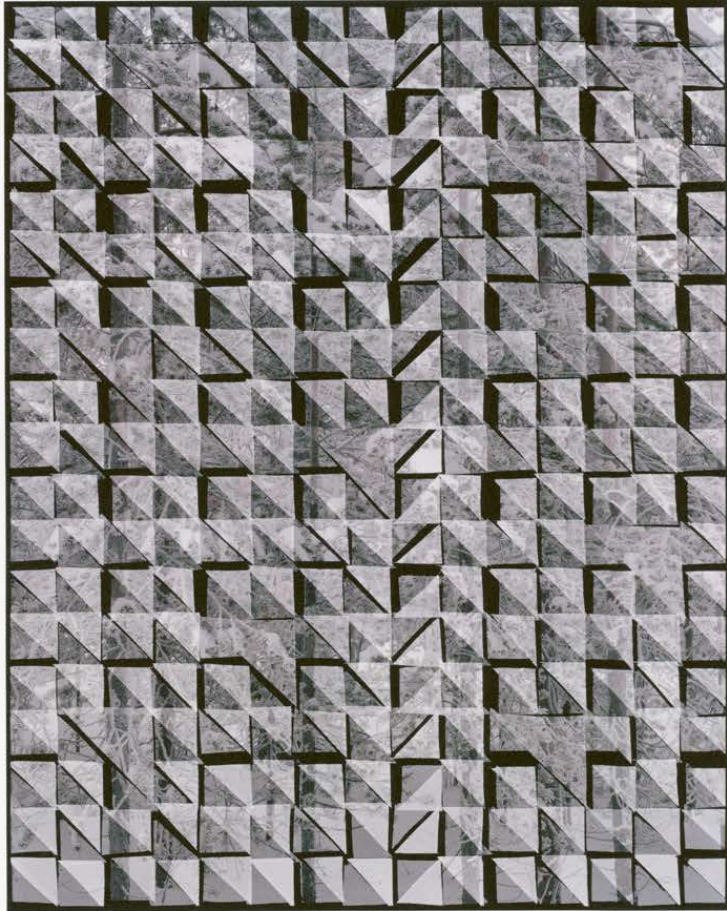








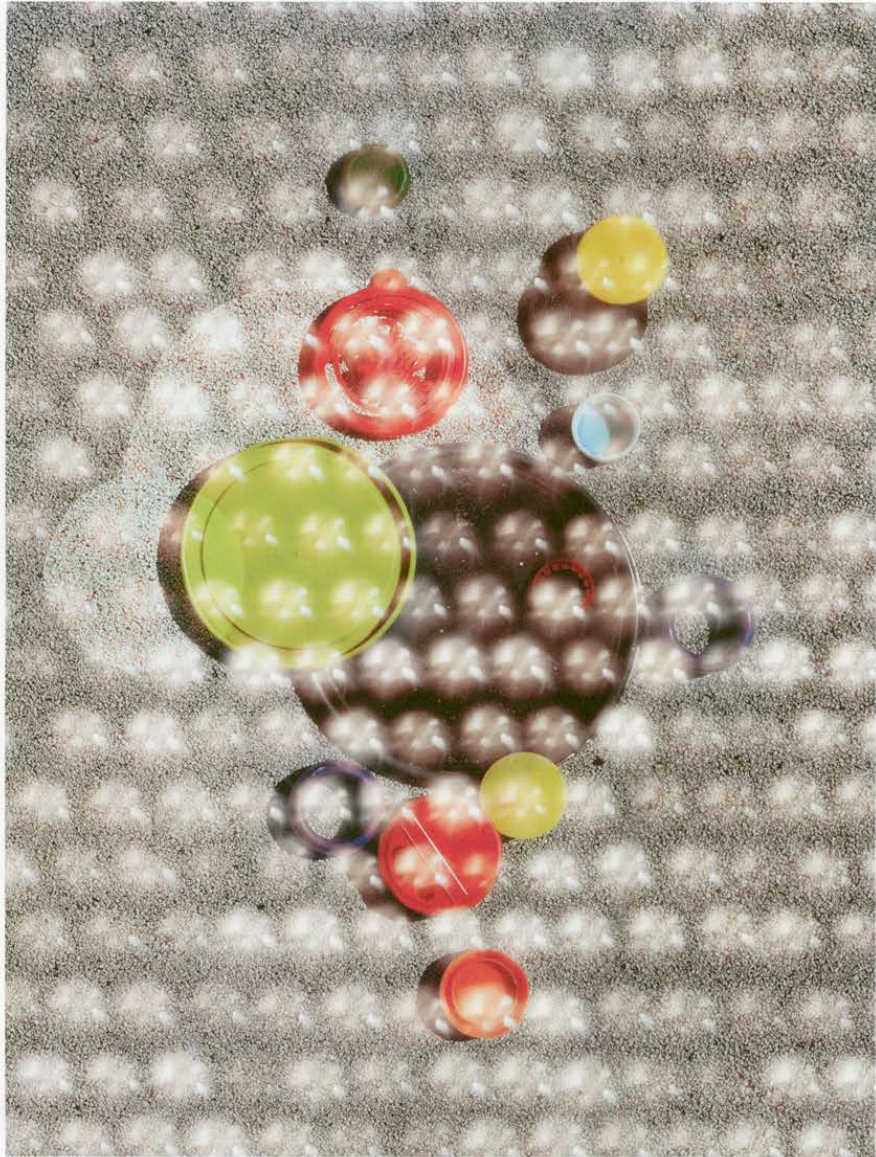




















# OPEN SYS- TEMS

by

Liz Sales



The structure of a photograph is often inaudible, muffled by the image it depicts. Hannah Whitaker amplifies this edifice, often working within strict, self-imposed structures derived from systems such as music and mathematics; the resulting work purposefully undermines its own logic by embracing chance and human error. Her light-based, in-camera work puts the material flatness of the photograph at odds with the dimensionality of her underlying, figurative photographic representations. The aggregate of ambiguity created by these paradoxes diminishes the certainties of photographic signification and compels us to contemplate the nature of photography.

*Limonene* is a body of work that Whitaker created early last year, with a multi-level site and material specificity, for installa-

tion at Locust Projects, a non-profit exhibition space in Miami. She states, 'I went into that project unsure what would transpire. I found a bunch of plastic lids and, when put together, they reminded me of a Kandinsky painting.' With an interest in exploring the formal qualities of these recognizable objects, Whitaker utilized the geometric shapes and vivid color of consumer waste, foraged from Miami streets, to create a series of still-life compositions that form a visible connection between mass production and art.

Whitaker picked up her title, *Limonene*, from the streets of Miami as well. A red plastic cap included in a still-life arrangement that appears several times throughout *Limonene* spells out the exhibition's name: '*Limonene* is a ready-made title,' the artist explains. 'It refers to the chemical naturally occurring in citrus fruits that is extracted and used to mask the smell of cleaning products. So, *Limonene* is a weird combination of the natural and the synthetic.'

Miami finds its way into *Limonene* many times over; after shooting her detritus assemblages, Whitaker created intentional light leaks in her equipment in order to re-expose portions of the film directly to the Miami sun. Whitaker explains, 'I started doing in-camera work with the film itself after an experience where some of my film had accidental light leaks. The leaks created an interesting tension between the material of the film and what was actually depicted photographically. So, I started thinking about different ways to take ownership of it. I became very interested in mining that

territory, that space in between the photographic plane and the actual plane of the film. I poked holes in the film holder, which created hot-spots on the film itself, which became interesting to me as a theoretical proposition – they destroy the image, but are simultaneously generative of something else.'

Similarly, Whitaker also exposed multiple images onto single sheets of film, layering, for example, in *Limonene 18*, a geometrical pattern of triangles across an impromptu still-life image of a roll of reel-to-reel tape strung through a compact disc on the street. These playful, in-camera techniques add a formal layer of mark-making that calls attention to both the flatness of the photographic frame and the dimensionality expressed by the primary, figurative representation.

Burned into her negatives in simple graphic configurations (dots arranged in a grid, for example), these experiments created a formal connectivity across *Limonene* for Whitaker to further complicate. 'I shot five or so frames of film of each arrangement of objects, usually taking the exact same picture, and then I created a unique layer of marks on each of those five sheets of film, often with direct sunlight. When I got all the film back, I decided not to edit, to use all the images instead of selecting one. I realized that, together, the images created a rhythm through the repetition of the same arrangements of objects over and over again, with no two pictures actually being the same.' Repeating each figurative representation of found objects, which themselves contain repetitive shapes and col-



ours, as well as each configuration of light leaks, created a complex multi-layer rhythm across the installation, akin to a multi-instrument musical score.

Whitaker entitled her solo exhibition at Galerie Christophe Gaillard in Paris *The Fifth Hammer*, after the story of Pythagoras, the historical source of Western musical theory who discovered the mathematical principles of musical tuning. Pythagoras is said to have tested a blacksmith's hammers, realizing that the hammers that were harmonious with each other had a simple mathematical relationship. The fifth hammer was discordant with all the others, so Pythagoras destroyed it. Whitaker's choice points to the limits of any attempt to quantify aesthetic experience, and congruently, her exhibition disrupts the logic of previously discreet bodies of work.

In the spirit of the fifth hammer, Whitaker included work from *Limonene*, as well as work made for her artist books *Imaginary Landscape No. 1* and *Red*, thus disrupting the internal logic of these previously discreet bodies of work. Whitaker explains, 'I wanted to mix all the projects up because I felt like they were all dealing with similar issues in different ways. So, I thought that threads in previous work could be complicated by their proximity to one another. I am interested in the malleability of the photographic image. Our experience of any given image in a book is entirely different from our experience of a conventionally framed photograph. I wanted to see specific images re-substantiated for the exhibition in Paris.' *Imaginary Landscape No. 1* appropriates the title and

structure of John Cage's historic 1939 score. *Imaginary Landscape No. 1* is about borrowing a preexisting organizational structure. It's not about visualizing his music. The experience of looking at the photographs has nothing to do with the experience of listening to Cage's composition. It's a borrowing of his structural approach to composing music.' This visual strategy is echoed across *The Fifth Hammer* in works like *36 Antipopes*, in which 36 points of light complicate the depth and texture of a mass of tropical foliage, or, conversely, in works like *Jean Lafitte*, in which Whitaker's optically shaded cubic pattern creates a uniform depth across a shallow landscape. *Imaginary Landscape No. 1* expresses Cage's musical notation atop conventional landscape photographs. Their linear perspective strikes a palpable tension once overlain with a grid comprised of points of light, each resembling a distinct sun.

Whitaker's other publication, *Red*, is the first in a series of artist books entitled *Visible Spectrum*, in which each participating artist was assigned a color from the spectrum to manifest in book form. Whitaker's project takes a single photograph, shot by her in 2006, showing a young woman in a red jumpsuit, which she

re-photographed 36 times. Each iteration employs a number of light-based interventions that are built upon a sequence of numbers that culminated at the thirty-sixth integer.

'I knew that I should plan to make the book either 24 or 36 pages because of how books are made. So, I used the page count as a limitation and a starting point.' She employed a numeric sequence consisting of 36 numbers. Each integer is added to the next ( $1 + 2 + 3$ ,  $1 + 2 + 3 = 6$ , etc.). The sum of all the integers from 1 to 36 is 666. 'I love the absurdity of this incredibly pregnant number that has cultural associations with the color red.' Calling to mind Marco Breuer's simple mathematic system for material interruption, each iteration of the image articulates its place in this numeric sequence

by employing light-based mark-making techniques, echoing those utilized in the creation of *Limonene*.

Reorganized into an exhibition, it becomes more apparent that a soft red circle is evident in the top-left corner of each image from *Red*, and that this idiosyncrasy is not an intentional intervention but the photographer's out-of-focus thumb in front of the lens. 'I've always loved that about this photograph,' Whitaker laughs,

I am interested in the malleability of the photographic image.



# I like the idea of forcing your eye to move across photographs like they do when you read.

'because accidentally photographing one's thumb is the dumbest mistake a photographer can make.' Whitaker's visual wit is echoed in *Cohen's Fashion Optical*, in which a slit in Whitaker's negative carrier allowed for a white-hot streak down the center of her frame that reads like a rip in space-time or a portal to another universe. This drama is humorously staged in stark contrast to the advertisement for eye-glasses depicted within the frame.

'*Imaginary Landscape No. 1* and *Red* coincided with a growing interest in applying the overarching structures of music, language, and mathematics to photographs. I was interested in using the book form as a way to place limitations on a particular group of photographs. Making an artist book forced linearity into the process. Also, I like the idea of forcing your eye to move across photographs like they do when you read.' Including these projects in *The Fifth Hammer* allowed Whitaker to revise them for the wall and create new points of triangulation among previously self-contained projects.

For *Cold Wave*, Whitaker's solo exhibition at M+B in Los Angeles earlier this year, the artist inverted the expansive approach she adopted for *The Fifth Hammer* in favor of constructing a more insular body

of work. 'When I got back from Paris in November, I wanted to approach the next show differently and conceive of it from A to B as a discrete exhibition.' While this work is distinctive, it also expands on previous themes, employing repetitive shapes, patterns, objects, figures, and scenes, both within single images and across multiple photographs, and binds itself through an even more complex material connectivity.

*Blue Paper*, which at first glance appears to be the source of the geometrical pattern of triangles across several other images in *Cold Wave*, reveals itself to the careful observer. The pattern continues just past one corner of the paper, indicating that it is not actually printed on the paper but exposed over it. *Cutouts (Green)*, *Cutouts (Pink)*, and *Cutouts (Orange)* are three still lifes comprised of the scraps Whitaker cut out of her dark slides in order to create the 4" x 5" masks used in marking the other photographs in the exhibition with light. She arranged and photographed the cutouts on three colored paper backgrounds, establishing a material connection across the exhibition and creating a closed system with a sort of internal logic.

The images that comprise *Cold Wave* are, on the whole, formally darker than Whitaker's earlier work, with black space occupying large areas of the artist's frame. Despite these vast territories of nonrepresentational space, the remainder of Whitaker's initial subject is always resolutely legible. Snow-covered landscapes, portraits, and still lifes peek from behind dark geometry, recognizable despite gaps in their representation.

*Cold Wave* strikes a difficult balance, articulating itself pictorially while simultaneously bringing its edifice for articulation into sharper focus. 'I titled the show *Cold Wave*. I wanted to acknowledge the winteriness that, in spite of an emphasis on the conceptual framework, must come through. There is a certain futility to ascribing fixed meaning to a photographic work because so much of a photograph's literal content is arbitrary. I use what I have access to, what happens to be in my life, where I happen to go. But, even when we recognize this futility, we don't lose the impulse to look at an image and create meaning.' Here, laying bare the photographic apparatus counter-intuitively also heightens the viewer's attention to the representational images.

Human beings are evolutionarily hard-wired to seek out human faces. Hence, in *255*, the light-based grid that obscures the subject's gaze serves to intensify it. Likewise, in *Torso*, a work that recalls James Welling's photogram series, the viewer can easily piece together a female form from fifteen interlaced exposures. Moreover, diamond-shaped gaps in the black layer obscuring *Untitled (Blue*



*Shirt*) reveal selections of one woman's face from multiple vantage-points, with only slivers of her defining features visible. 'I find it interesting that when we see a person, even if part of their face is obscured, the expression they're making and their bodily gestures are still legible. That's what we're wired to look for in a picture. It doesn't take much. I can mask out most of an image, and the tiny remaining sliver is all you need to make a human connection.'

All images in the current portfolio from the series *5th Hammer*, *Cold Wave* and *Limonene* © Hannah Whitaker, courtesy of the artist

**HANNAH WHITAKER** (b. 1980, United States) is a New York based artist and photographer. She received her BA from Yale University and her MFA from the International Center of Photography/Bard College. Whitaker is a contributing editor for *Triple Canopy*, she has co-curated *The Crystal Chain*, a group exhibition at Invisible Exports, and co-edited *Issue 45 of BlindSpot*. She has shown her work at Thierry Goldberg Gallery and Casey Kaplan, New York; Pepin Moore, Los Angeles, and internationally. She is represented by Galerie Christophe Gaillard in Paris and M+B Gallery in Los Angeles.

**LIZ SALES** (United States) is an artist, writer, and teacher who currently lives and works in New York City. She graduated with a MFA in Advanced Photographic Studies from the ICP-Bard College Program and with a BA from The Evergreen State College. Her background as motion picture camera technician endorses her work, as she deals primarily with the relationship between technology and perception. She has written articles for various publications, including *International Street Photographer*, *Triple Canopy* and *Musée Magazine*; she is also the editor of *Conveyor Magazine*.