

M+B

frieze

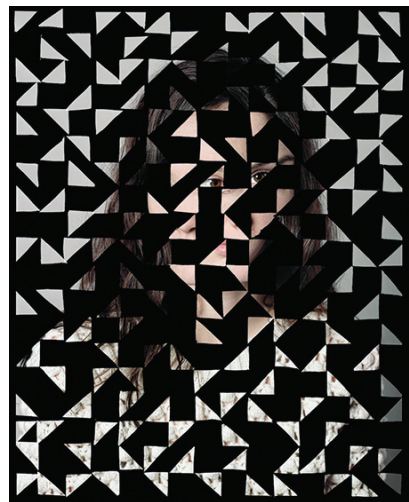
“Construction Sight: How a generation of artists is re-ordering the building blocks of photography.”

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By Aaron Schuman

Given the shape-shifting flexibility images have acquired in the digital age, photographic content should have gained prominence over photographic form. Indeed, as photographs migrate with ever-greater ease from the camera to the screen, to the internet, to print, to the increasingly relevant photo-book and to mass-media outlets, their physical properties fluctuate. So much so that many artists working with photography are focusing less on how a photograph is made than why.

For these artists, photography is defined more as a medium in the most fundamental and intangible sense of the word – as a means by which something is communicated or expressed – rather than as a singular object or substance in its own right. But a number of young artists in recent years have been countering this definition. As the artist and writer Chris Wiley noted in his essay ‘Depth of Focus’ (published in *frieze* in late 2011), they are choosing to foreground the formerly ‘repressed’ aspects of the medium – ‘the physical support upon which the image is registered, myriad chemical and technical processes, as well as the numerous choices that were made by the photographer in capturing the image’. These artists were born in the late 1970s and early-’80s and were the last to be educated primarily in darkrooms and photographic studios, spellbound early on by the alchemical magic and intimate physical connection to the photograph that these environments provided. They were also the first to mature alongside a rapidly evolving and increasingly ethereal digital medium, which has rendered the darkroom – along with nearly all of the analogue machines, methods and materials associated with it – practically obsolete.

Hannah Whitaker’s ‘Cold Wave’ (2014), an exhibition held at Los Angeles’s M+B gallery, was inspired by the logician Kurt Gödel’s notions of incompleteness and unknowability. Here, Whitaker presented works that used hand-cut geometric interruptions in the film plane to prismatic and kaleidoscopic effect, transforming a selection of landscapes, portraits and still lifes into complex and disorientating structures. Her idiosyncratic, yet seemingly systematic, processes are certainly foregrounded, complicating the conventionally straight photographic images that underpin them. A snowy wood at dusk is filtered through a cut-paper illusion of stacked cubes (Artic Landscape (Pink Sky), 2014); a serene portrait of a young woman in an intricately woven, woollen jumper is scattered into an irregular pattern of small rough triangles (Portrait with Sweater (Albers), 2014). But, rather than entirely obscuring or abstracting the view, Whitaker draws our eye ever-deeper into her richly detailed works via the picture plane itself. Recognizing the photographic material at their core, we instinctually attempt to piece together the dispersed, but not entirely disparate, parts – eager to make sense of these visual puzzles.



Hannah Whitaker, Portrait with Sweater (Albers), 2014
archival pigment print
64 × 51 cm.
Courtesy: M+B, Los Angeles