

## Hannah Whitaker

April, 2017  
Interview by Frederic Caillard

### Hannah, can you please describe in your own words your practice & your work?

Even though they might look not traditional, I actually do make traditional photographs in the sense that they're made through purely optical means. I shoot with a view camera onto 4x5 sheet-film. The photographs are exposed repeatedly onto the same sheet of film, and each exposure is shot through a handmade screen. Each of the screens are conceived as a part of a set, which all go into the making of just one photograph.

### Where do you physically put the screens?

The screens are pressed up against the film inside the holder, which is how they can create a hard edge. If they were in any other position, the edge would be fuzzy.

### And what about your subject matter?

I often combine a limited set of subjects in a given photograph: silhouetted bodies; blocks of colors, which are out-of-focus sheets of colored paper; and black and white objects, like metal grates or blinds.

American, b. 1980 in Washington, D.C., based in New York, NY.

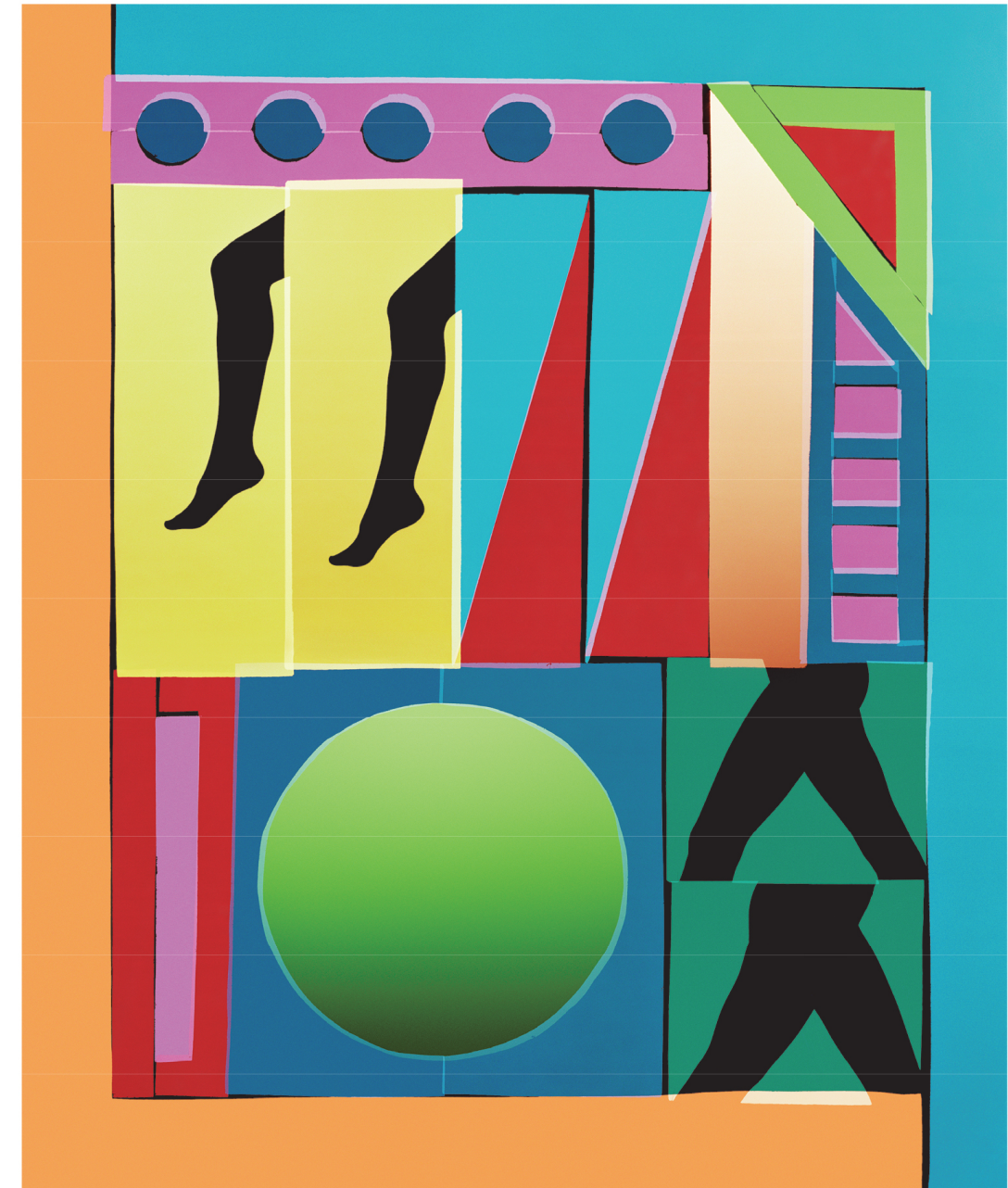
At first glance, Hannah Whitaker's photographs might seem like they are the product of cut and paste Photoshop collage, but she creates her images entirely in camera, favoring analogue experimentation to digital manipulation. In her new body of work, instead of deconstructing existing images, she mixes the conventions of photography and abstract art with silhouettes, geometric shapes and colors that play with the ideas of handmade and automated processes.

Hannah holds a MFA from The International Center of Photography and a BA from Yale University.

*"I asked myself how to automate a photograph, how to remove the artist's expressive voice as much as possible"*

Your work seems to be moving away from classical photography. A few years ago your compositions included recognizable landscapes or full bodies, and you used effects that are quite widespread like light reflections. In your last few shows, colors are getting flatter and body parts are mainly reduced to their shape.

Yes, definitely. My work has evolved over the past few years to become more mechanical looking. Part of that has to do with an interest I developed over the years in forms of automation, the history of computing, and in a screen-based visual culture. I ask myself how to automate a photograph, or how to remove the artist's expressive voice as much as possible, and if it is possible to program a photograph as one does a computer. Photography is already an art form dependent on a machine. For me, once the initial idea is conceived and the visual schematic is thought through, the process becomes very automatic. Making a photograph requires painstaking execution and recordkeeping - a kind of automated system takes over. I have a coding system to keep track of which screens I have already exposed onto which sheets of film. There is very little room for spontaneous expression.



Hannah Whitaker, *Stride 1*, 2016 / archival pigment print / 128 x 102 cm / edition of 3 ex + 2 AP.  
© Hannah Whitaker, Courtesy Galerie Christophe Gaillard.

Hannah Whitaker prepared geometrical cut-out screens to mask her analogic 4x5 film before shooting each section of *Stride 1*. She exposed the same film numerous times and mixed colored surfaces and desexualized female body parts as elements of this hybrid composition.



# M+B

In the literature about your work, there are many references to early abstraction masters, like Matisse, Arp or Anni Albers.

A lot of people bring up Matisse to me, but that is not an association that I would offer. I do love Matisse but he doesn't directly influence my work. I think one reason that people bring him up is because of his cut-outs. I am also applying blade to paper in making my screens but to a

**"Bodies in my photographs are very desexualized"**

very different end. Matisse's cut-outs are very elegantly representational, and mine are resolutely not representational - they provide the armature for the content. I am dealing with an inherently representational medium and I am allowing the photographic process to do that representing for me.

In *Stride 1* the window shape of Matisse is referenced as well. I also see some formal similarities between your work and the work of Peter Klasen, from the narrative figuration movement, even though the works are very different in the atmosphere they convey.

I agree that the resulting effect is very different. One of the primary differences is that the bodies in my photographs are very desexualized. Even though they are clearly female body parts, which you could think of as highly sexually charged territory, I make it a point to present my bodies in this very deadpan, very flat way. Just from the work of Peter Klasen I am seeing here, it looks like he is employing the female figure very similarly to how you might see it in advertising.



Hannah Whitaker, *Verbs*, exhibition view.  
Courtesy Galerie Christophe Gaillard. Photo: Rebecca Fanuele.

# M+B

On top of being desexualized, the body parts in your work are shaded, inaccessible, often hidden behind shapes or patterns. Why is that?

It is a visual language that I have developed. I didn't always photograph bodies this way and I am sure I won't permanently. For the time being I am interested in being able to reduce a human form to a graphic system that has a lot of associations. It makes me think about clip art and highly reduced semiotic forms like Emojis. The bodies are deployed in this repetitious manner to refer back to the histories of automation and computation that inform its making. I also think it is interesting in an intuitive sense to see these hard edge forms butt up against what is recognizable as a human form. As far removed that I get from a conventional photographic process, I still think the photographic detail that is provided by a 4x5 negative can be really powerful. For example I shot some works recently where the body was wearing black tights and when I got the film back the forms were perfectly silhouetted. You could not see any details on her feet or legs: no skin, no hair, no veins. Even though the photographs took me weeks to make, I had to start over and reshoot them all with bare legs. Seeing these human details is an essential part of the experience of looking at the resulting photographs.

I am not sure that people who only see your work on the internet can realize this.

Everyone says this about their work, but when you see the work in person it looks pretty different than how it looks in jpeg form. This is why I make the prints large enough to actually experience those photographic details. When you look at the work in jpeg form, the forms become so reduced that they become almost indistinguishable from their source imagery. That tension between the elegance of photographic representation and the crudeness of a jagged cut on paper is lost.

**Can you tell us about your future projects or about new directions that your work is taking?**

One of the newer aspects of the work in a recent show is the introduction of seemingly spontaneous scribbling. The photographs have more wavy lines and organic forms than I had been using before. The process is the same as before, so this purported looseness is only an image of looseness. The forms are as painstakingly preplanned and repeatedly redrawn (in the making of the screens) as in the previous work. Conceptually I likened it to the automated voice that you get when you call a customer service line, how that voice has these preset mistakes, they say *oh*, or make strange vocal flourishes, or use idioms that make them sound more human. But ultimately their responses are all programmed and that spontaneity is a total façade. ■

Selected recent exhibitions  
*Live Agent*, M+B, Los Angeles, 2017  
*Verbs*, Galerie Christophe Gaillard, Paris, 2016  
*Metamorphosis* – H. Whitaker, R. van Beek, J. Cockburn, Flowers, London, 2015  
*Cold Wave*, M+B, Los Angeles, 2014  
*Limonene*, Locust Projects, Miami, FL, 2013  
*Les Rencontres d'Arles*, Discovery Award, Arles, France, 2012