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ELLEN CAREY DINGS & SHADOWS

March 18 – April 22, 2017

Opening Reception

Saturday, March 18, 2017 from 6 to 8 pm

M+B is pleased to present *Ellen Carey: Dings & Shadows*, the artist's second solo exhibition with the gallery. The show runs from March 18 through April 22, 2017, with an opening reception on Saturday, March 18 from 6 to 8 pm.

One of the country's foremost experimental photographers, Ellen Carey's pioneering work spans several decades and anticipated major themes in contemporary photography. As part of the avant-garde group at SUNY Buffalo, Carey studied alongside Cindy Sherman, Robert Longo and Hollis Frampton, and first exhibited her work at the legendary Hallwalls artist-run space. The artist has been the subject of several major institutional shows and is in the collections of the Whitney Museum, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Art Institute of Chicago, among others. Throughout her career, Carey has expanded the boundaries of abstraction in the medium. From the complex patterns in her early *Self-Portraits* from the 1980s, to the minimalist parabolas of her 20x24 Polaroid *Pulls* in the 90s, through to the current *Dings & Shadows*, each subsequent series marks an increasing focus on abstraction and color.

Carey's new work investigates the very fundamentals of capturing color on paper through light utilizing the photogram process and signals a return to the darkroom after years of working with the famed 20x24 Polaroid camera. Traditionally, photograms are made through a cameraless process by placing an object onto photosensitive paper and exposing it to light, thus creating a shadow-image. However, Carey eschews using any objects in the darkroom and instead uses only light, color and the actual paper itself to create the works. In complete darkness, she first creases and bends large sheets of photo paper. Once the paper has been shaped, different parts are exposed to and activated by light. Finally, the paper is flattened and processed. By removing the referent—the pictorial sign that has been the hallmark of photography—Carey is able to achieve purely abstract compositions.

While the photogram usually introduces chance operations because results are not entirely predictable, Carey's versions enjoy a play between skillful control and improvisation. In these works, one can see traces of the artist's physical engagement with the material. It is through this performative action—the deliberate, sculptural "dings" and fluid transitions of color—that an alchemical magic occurs. The creases and folds create a relief map of geometric shapes and ridges and work in combination with photographic color theory to create bold, jewel-like abstractions.

Ellen Carey (b. 1952, New York) has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions at such institutions as the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT and International Center of Photography, New York, among others. Her work was recently acquired by the Centre Georges Pompidou and included in their exhibition, *The Unbearable Lightness – The 1980s: Photography, Film*. Upcoming group shows include *The Polaroid Project*, which will travel to the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth; MIT Museum, Cambridge and Westlicht Museum for Photography in Vienna. Recent museum group shows include *A Matter of Memory* at the Eastman Museum, Rochester; *The Edge of Vision: The Rise of Abstraction in Photography* at the Aperture Foundation, New York; *Part Picture* at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Toronto and *The Persistence of Geometry* at the Cleveland Museum of Art. Carey's work can be found in the permanent collections of The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Art Institute of Chicago; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C. and Cleveland Museum of Art, among others. Ellen Carey lives and works in Hartford, CT, where she teaches at the University of Hartford.

Location:	M+B, 612 North Almont Drive, Los Angeles, California 90069
Show Title:	Ellen Carey: Dings & Shadows
Exhibition Dates:	March 18 – April 22, 2017
Opening Reception:	Saturday, March 18, 6 – 8pm
Gallery Hours:	Tuesday – Saturday, 10 am – 6 pm

For press inquiries, please contact info@mbart.com. For all other inquiries, contact Shannon Richardson at shannon@mbart.com or Jonlin Wung at jonlin@mbart.com.

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Ellen Carey
Dings & Shadows, 2017
unique chromogenic print on glossy paper
24 x 20 inches (60.1 x 50.8 cm)
(ECa.03.1701.24)

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Ellen Carey

Dings & Shadows RGBYMC (polyptych), 2012
six unique chromogenic prints on matte paper
24 x 20 inches (60.1 x 50.8 cm) (each)
(ECa.03.1205.24)

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Ellen Carey
Dings & Shadows, 2017
unique chromogenic print on glossy paper
24 x 20 inches (60.1 x 50.8 cm)
(ECa.03.1702.24)

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Ellen Carey
Dings & Shadows, 2016
unique chromogenic print
24 x 20 inches (60.1 x 50.8 cm)
(ECa.03.1604.24)

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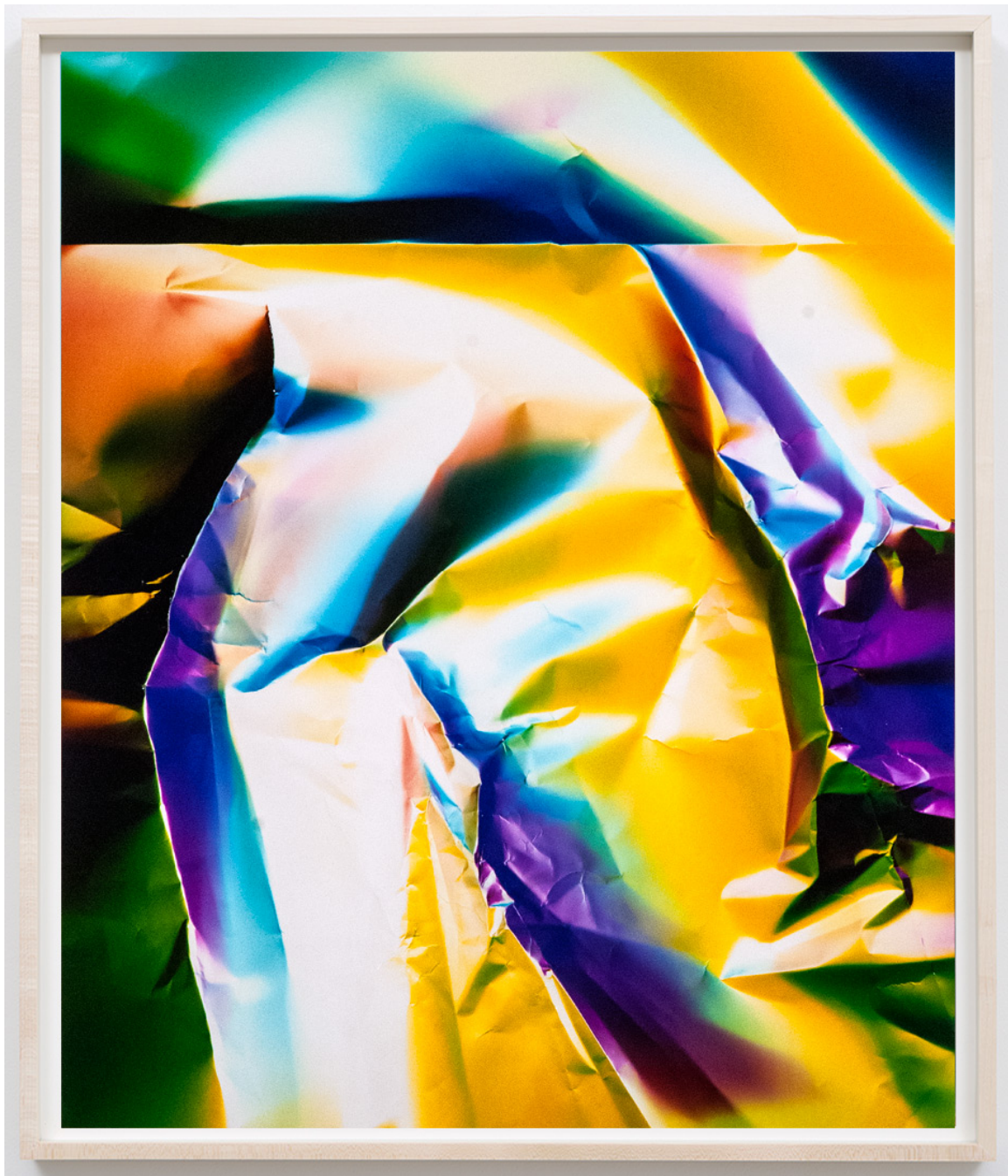
Ellen Carey
Dings & Shadows (diptych), 2016
two unique chromogenic prints
24 x 20 inches (60.1 x 50.8 cm) (each)
(ECa.03.1706.24)

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Ellen Carey
Dings & Shadows, 2017
unique chromogenic print on glossy paper
24 x 20 inches (60.1 x 50.8 cm)
(ECa.03.1704.24)

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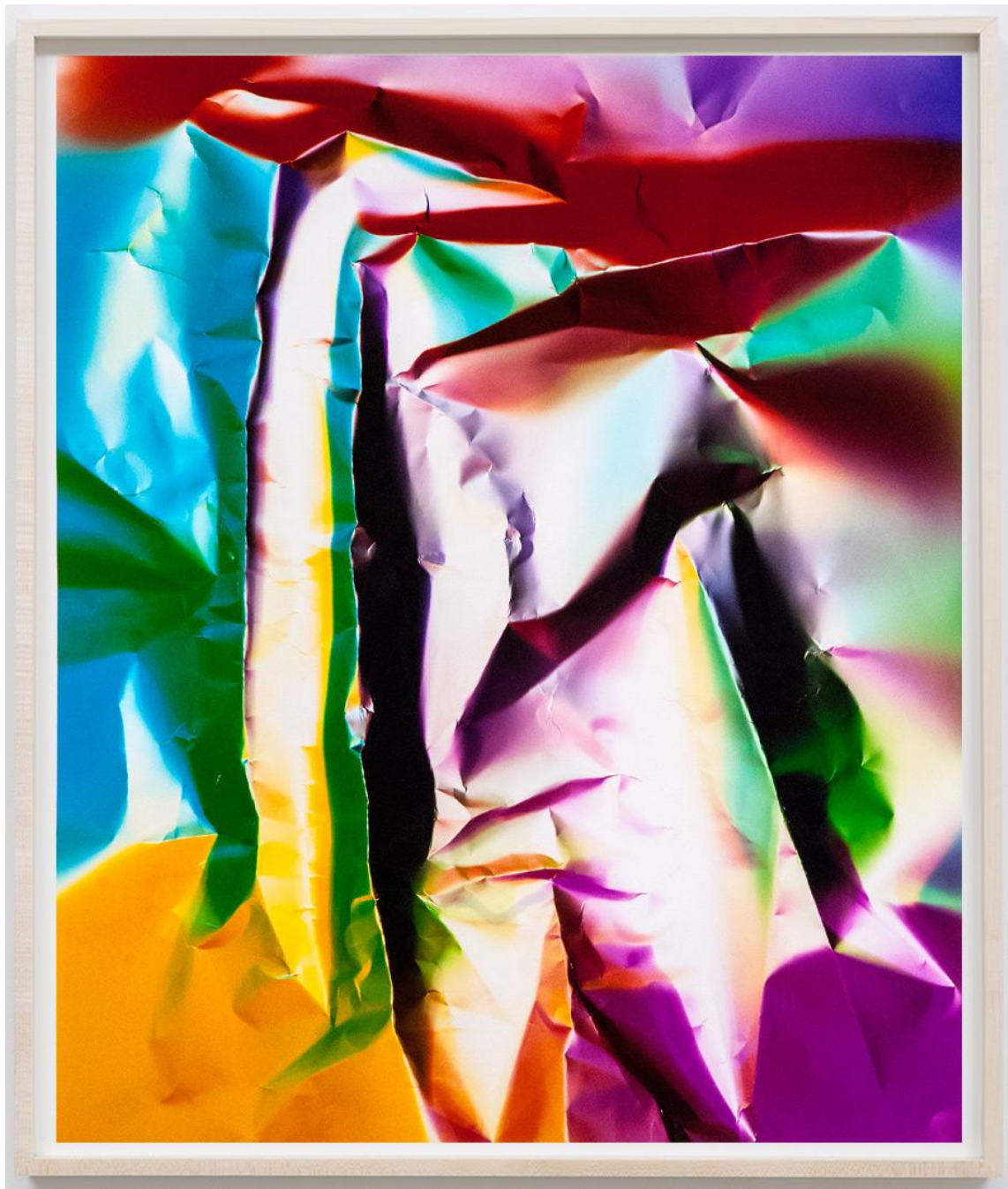
Ellen Carey
Dings & Shadows, 2016
unique chromogenic print
24 x 20 inches (60.1 x 50.8 cm)
(ECa.03.1601.24)

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Ellen Carey
Dings & Shadows (diptych), 2016
two unique chromogenic prints
24 x 20 inches (60.1 x 50.8 cm) (each)
(ECa.03.1615.24)

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Ellen Carey
Dings & Shadows, 2016
unique chromogenic print on glossy paper
24 x 20 inches (60.1 x 50.8 cm)
(ECa.03.1608.24)

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Ellen Carey

Dings & Shadows (polyptych), 2016
four unique chromogenic prints on glossy paper
24 x 20 inches (60.1 x 50.8 cm) (each)
(ECa.03.1617.24)

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Ellen Carey
Dings & Shadows, 2016
unique chromogenic print
24 x 20 inches (60.1 x 50.8 cm)
(ECa.03.1605.24)

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Ellen Carey
Dings & Shadows (triptych), 2015
three unique chromogenic prints
24 x 20 inches (60.1 x 50.8 cm) (each)
(ECa.03.1512.24)

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Ellen Carey
Caesura, 2016
unique color photogram
24 x 20 inches (60.1 x 50.8 cm)
(ECa.05.1610.40)

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Ellen Carey
Caesura, 2016
unique color photogram
24 x 20 inches (60.1 x 50.8 cm)
(ECa.05.1602.24)

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Ellen Carey
Caesura, 2016
unique color photogram
24 x 20 inches (60.1 x 50.8 cm)
(ECa.05.1607.24)

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Ellen Carey
Caesura, 2016
unique chromogenic print on glossy paper
24 x 20 inches (60.1 x 50.8 cm)
(ECa.05.1608.24)

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Ellen Carey
Caesura, 2016
unique color photogram
40 x 30 inches (101.6 x 76.2 cm)
(ECa.05.1616.40)

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Ellen Carey
Caesura, 2016
unique color photogram
40 x 30 inches (101.6 x 76.2 cm)
(ECa.05.1617.40)

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Ellen Carey
Caesura, 2016
unique color photogram
40 x 30 inches (101.6 x 76.2 cm)
(ECa.05.1619.40)

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Ellen Carey
Caesura, 2016
unique color photogram
40 x 30 inches (101.6 x 76.2 cm)
(ECa.05.1621.40)

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Ellen Carey
Caesura, 2016
unique color photogram
40 x 30 inches (101.6 x 76.2 cm)
(ECa.05.1622.40)

ELLEN CAREY'S ZEROGRAMS – NO REFERENT REQUIRED

by Seth Katsuya Endo¹

In 2005, author David Foster Wallace² delivered the commencement address at Kenyon College, opening with a small joke:

There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says “Morning, boys. How's the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes “What the hell is water?”³

Wallace's point, of course, was that “the most obvious, ubiquitous, important realities are often the ones that are the hardest to see and talk about.”⁴ And, at its best, whether through images or words, art helps us see the water in which we daily swim. Ellen Carey's “Dings & Shadows” color photograms⁵ do exactly that: like a prism, her work separates and gives order to light waves, revealing the hidden, omnipresent colors that abound.

Carey has been creating works in the “Dings & Shadows” series since 2010, making it difficult to describe a perfect exemplar. The color photograms are printed on both matte and glossy paper, often 20”x24” but sometimes larger. Some of the pieces are a riot of colors. Others are a mix of shadow, white background, a single accent color. In many of the works, one can see where Carey handled the photosensitive paper—marks of her literal handiwork that vary by individual work.

Some of Carey's pieces are part of a set such as the 8'x8' grid featured in the Aperture's 2016 “Photography Is Magic” exhibition curated by Charlotte Cotton. This particular piece also showcases the cerebral elements that consistently appear in Carey's work as its palette follows from photographic color theory's understanding of additive and subtractive colors.

¹ Seth is currently an Acting Assistant Professor of Lawyering at NYU School of Law after several clerkships and time in private practice. He received his JD, *magna cum laude*, from NYU School of Law and his BA, with honors, from the University of Chicago. He has written for Shout NY, Guernica, Timothy McSweeney's Internet Tendency, and various law reviews. His own art has been featured in group shows in Chicago, Minneapolis, and New York.

² David Foster Wallace was called “the most brilliant American writer of his generation” by The Guardian and was a MacArthur fellow. His most well known work was the novel INFINITE JEST.

³ DAVID FOSTER WALLACE, THIS IS WATER: SOME THOUGHTS, DELIVERED ON A SIGNIFICANT OCCASION, ABOUT LIVING A COMPASSIONATE LIFE 3-4 (2009).

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Although I use the term “color photograms” throughout the article, as discussed further in the main text, the “Dings & Shadows” pieces are created using a process that differs from traditional photograms and deserves its own term.

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In all of the color photograms in the “Dings & Shadows” series, there are creases and folds that create a relief map of a mix of regular and irregular geometric shapes and ridges. In combination with the color palette, an almost dreamlike sensation is fostered, giving rise to a sense of pareidolia as one finds patterns and images (or, perhaps, *emotions*) in the abstract images.

And all of these components ultimately come together to form works of art that document a performance. As Carey has previously described, in her works, “the *process* becomes the subject.”⁶ Thus, one can only truly understand a Carey piece when one knows how the final product visually represents each of the steps that went into making the work.

Carey’s process always begins with a question. And, in 1987, like the young fish in Wallace’s story, she asked herself, “What the hell is an abstract photograph?” The “Dings & Shadows” pieces illustrate her answer, which Carey found when she deconstructed the photographic process. And, in undertaking that inquiry, Carey began at the beginning, going all the way back to Talbot and Atkins works in the 19th century.

This answer builds from the artist’s prior oeuvre, which has moved from obscured self-portraits to photograms to Polaroid “Pulls & Rollbacks.” Each generation marks an increasing focus on abstraction and color as the subject recedes. The “Dings & Shadows” pieces are color darkroom-produced works given the umbrella title “Struck by Light.”⁷ This name evokes Carey’s practice of *drawing with light*, a process element that connects each of the series in the set.

To create the “Dings & Shadows” series, Carey goes into a completely dark and silent room where she creases, scrunches, and folds large photosensitive paper. The lack of light and noise heighten her tactile sensitivity, which guides her manipulation of the material. Once the paper has been shaped, she uses a color enlarger to expose and activate different parts of the six-layer paper (the drawing-with-light part of the process). Finally, she flattens out the paper and processes it.

Again, all of this takes place in what is, in effect, the lightless and noiseless interior of a camera box. It is as though Carey has gone into the camera itself and taken the place of its inner machinery. In this way, one might be reminded of Jackson Pollock’s revolutionary approach to painting wherein he stood over the canvas and applied paint to canvas in manner that understood the tradition of brushstrokes from a distance but was not limited by it.

In Carey’s color photograms, no longer is the end product a mechanical capture of a referent. Instead, the artist undertakes the primary means of impressing an image onto the

⁶ Donna Fleischer, *Let There Be Light: The Black Swans of Ellen Carey* (quoting Ellen Carey).

⁷ The other series in the set are described in Carey’s artist statement, which can be found at: http://www.ellencareyphotography.com/s/Carey_ArtistStatement_StruckByLight_2015.doc.

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substrate, an application of human artistry that relies on an intimate understanding of the technical processes. In other words, the end product goes from technographic to chirographic.⁸

When attempting to place Carey's process in the abstract-photography tradition of, amongst others, Stieglitz, Talbot, Atkins, Schad, Moholy-Nagy, and Man Ray, there are two elements that leap out as unique challenges to the traditional notion of a photograph as a mechanically-created pictorial sign (i.e., a technographic image) of an object: (1) Carey removes the referent from the photograph and (2) she deliberately creases the large sheets of photosensitive paper by hand.

By removing the referent, Carey pulls us into an inquiry about the relationship between form, representation, and meaning. Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart drew the world's attention to the photograph as an object of art by itself, regardless of its subject.⁹ But Edwards and Hart still treat photographs as a metonymic form where the photograph is the container of the image. Carey's "Dings & Shadows" series does away with this relationship, collapsing any distinction between the subject (i.e., the referent in a photograph) and the object of art (i.e., the photograph). Just as the etymological root of the term "photography" begins with light, in Carey's latest works there are only the colors created by the light striking the treated substrate. Imagine if, underneath the painting of the pipe, Magritte had written, "*Ceci est la peindre.*" This might give you a better understanding of Carey's color photograms, which tell us, "*This is light. This is color.*" And, in taking this approach, her art removes the pictorial sign from photography.

Likewise, by folding the photographic paper, Carey further distances her work from the mimetic. An unmarred photographic sheet permits the substrate to fade into the background, highlighting the pictorial sign of the referent. And any dings are taboo. But, by challenging this convention, Carey again calls our attention to the color photogram as an object of art itself with the type of physicality about which Edwards and Hart were concerned.

Additionally, the creases flout traditional notions of technical craft, given the difficulties of developing large photographs and the care generally taken to avoid such marks. But the creases and folds are not without their own craft. Carey's deliberate folds, fluid transitions of color, and use of color theory result in works that intertwine the organic and the formal, conveying an intellectual rigor, prowess of craft, and abstracted aesthetic beauty that subverts notions of photography as objectively representational.

Further, in a world in which some have argued that "any video, audio, or photographic work of art can be endlessly reproduced without degradation, always the same, always perfect,"¹⁰ Carey's folding of the delicate material is a mark of artistic authorship, ensuring the

⁸ See JAMES J. GIBSON, *THE ECOLOGICAL APPROACH TO VISUAL PERCEPTION* 260-62 (2014) (differentiating photographic methods from hand-based methods that he calls "chirographic").

⁹ See ELIZABETH EDWARDS & JANICE HART (EDS.), *PHOTOGRAPHS, OBJECTS, HISTORIES: ON THE MATERIALITY OF IMAGES* (2004).

¹⁰ Douglas Davis, *The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction (An Evolving Thesis: 1991-1995)*, Leonardo, Vol. 28, No. 5, Third Annual New York Digital Salon 381-386 (1995).

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uniqueness of each work and the importance of each as its own object that must be seen in person to be fully appreciated.

Throughout this article, I have used the term “color photogram” to describe Carey’s “Dings & Shadows” pieces. But photograms are generally defined as images created by a cameraless photography process that places an object between photosensitive paper and a light source, creating a shadow exposure.¹¹ As described above, in answering her own question about the essential nature of an abstract photograph, Carey came up with a unique photographic process that fundamentally differs from those before in that *there is no referent* used to create an image. Instead, the work is the product of Carey’s manipulation of the paper (i.e., the creasing and folding) and exposure to different colored light. And, in the end product, there is no real pictorial sign, unlike the abstracted shadow images of a traditional photogram that still indicate the referent.

By removing the referent, Carey created an entirely new type of photograph—one that deserves its own term. The artist has referred to these pieces as “zerograms.” This term captures the notion of the absence of light and objects in the creation process of the “Dings & Shadows” works.¹² At the same time, it alludes to her other practice—“Photography Degree Zero”—that encompassed the “Pulls & Rollbacks” set of abstract Polaroids. In contrast to the zerograms, the “Pulls & Rollbacks” are created with a 20x24 Polaroid camera but no darkroom. But in both the “Dings & Shadows” and the “Pulls & Rollbacks” works, Carey experiments with technique while discarding the pictorial sign that is the hallmark of traditional photography.

Regardless of terminology, Carey’s “Dings & Shadows” pieces are adding something new and wonderful to the world. And by breaking the traditional rules of photography to create these works, Carey is revealing the hidden elements of photography, both laying bare the inner mechanics of the camera and showing the essential nature of the photograph as a completely freestanding object of art on its own, no referent required.

¹¹ MICHAEL LANGFORD *ET AL.*, *LANGFORD’S BASIC PHOTOGRAPHY: THE GUIDE FOR SERIOUS PHOTOGRAPHERS* 324-25 (2010).

¹² Alternatively, I propose the term “photosciagram” to draw attention to the creation process that uses creases and folds (and the resulting shadows) rather than a separate referent object.