

Revealers

by

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Abstract

Revealers is a collection of artworks that centres on photographic logic and the way that it shapes light into images of the world. Through diverse processes of seeing, making and exposing, the exhibition showcases alternative visions of reality that have been enabled through engagements with light as both subject matter and material. Rooted in the idea of photographic exposure, each work separately examines how light interacts with thresholds, forms impressions, and gives shape to multiple and diverse visual worlds. Rather than considering the transference of light as having any kind of processual resolution, these works are formed under the leitmotif that light is a field and, as such, is constantly active — before, during, and after images are formed.

Keywords: photography; light; optics; vision

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All images provided by the author.

Revealers

Introductory

Standing roughly in the centre of the Audain Gallery is an 8-foot tall by 7-foot wide wooden structure. This structure has a few functions. Firstly, it is meant to be a room divider - a way to allocate space and distinguish the layout between my project and that of my colleagues'. It is built with a sequence of thin painted strips running vertically across its width, sequenced according to the Fibonacci sequence (1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 35, and on...).¹ The space between these strips is left open, allowing one to see through the divider to the other side. Two photographs are hung on either side of the divider: one depicts the setting sun as it begins to dip into a distinctly West Coast seascape and mapped directly onto the opposite side is an overexposed, close-up image of the early, but robust, stages of a growing and expanding plant. Six other artworks are placed throughout the space created around the divider and range in materials from straightforward photographic prints, darkroom experimentation, handmade wooden objects, and a chalk and pastel drawing hinted with traces of neon light.

This defence statement accompanies my Graduating Project, titled *Revealers*. This project represents the development of my work throughout of my Graduate degree, during which I have attempted to extend the scope of my practice beyond previous photographic projects. My work continues to be centred within photographic discourse - acknowledging the prescience of photographic logic - however at its core *Revealers* attempts to shirk that same logic in order to suggest that photography is not contingent on its technical apparatus, and instead is activated by a force outside of itself - something akin what Vilém Flusser dubs "the world of magic."²

Notwithstanding photography's immediate reliance on light-tight seams and precise calculations, this project seeks out the active and vital conditions under which

¹ Throughout the two years spent working towards this body of work I have also developed an adjunct body of work/research that is oriented around the conceptualization of Phi, an irrational Greek number which is also the mathematical formula that describes the Golden Ratio, Section, and Mean. This research is ongoing, and while explorations into the processes of expansion, spiraling, and phyllotaxis have influenced the development of *Revealers*, for the purpose of this Defense these adjacent ideas will not be further mentioned.

² Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000) 9.

images and their subsequent photographic worlds rely on notions of contingency, chance, and contradiction. To this end, these works have been intentionally developed in relation to the physical properties associated with an experience in/of the material world. I acknowledge the ubiquity of the digital image and its capacity to complicate our notions of reality, as is noted through emerging CGI developments and virtual realities. I have not been inspired by this drive to continuously reshape the world with emerging technologies - instead my ambition has been to search for and engage with other new materialist realities that are perhaps being formed out of sheer necessity in the wake of technological accelerationism. The works included in this exhibition are presented through the materiality of the photographic print itself as well as the structures that house each work - all of which comes from an ongoing drive to *get closer* to the material worlds that are formed when light acts upon the camera, the eye.



Figure 1. Installation View



Figure 2. Installation View

Thresholds, Contexts

As a chain of operations, the photographic process is straightforward. The apparatus of the camera controls how light interacts with its lens. The result is an image that bears a likeness to the world from which it came. The camera is a tool that shapes light from outside of it and forms its own image of that world. This process mimics the physiology of the eye, and is something that has been at the forefront of photographic thinking since its inception.³ The eye's pupil either narrows or expands as a means to control the amount of light that passes through to the retina; the camera operator sets the camera's aperture, its shutter speed - maintaining a balance and relation in which the light that passes through yields an image against the sensitive surface of film stock or sensor. Because of the way the final image seemingly reproduces reality, it usually accrues most of the theoretical attention given to the photographic process. Barthes introduced notions of the *punctum* and the *studium*, and through this we talk of the

³ Henry Fox Talbot, "Introductory Remarks and Selected Plates from *Pencil of Nature*," in *Picture Industry*, ed. Walead Beshty (Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College: LUMA, 2018) 36.

photograph's subject and discuss its issues of depiction and representation, while always hesitating on the ever-vague caveat of "nice lighting".

Despite the proliferation of images and their enmeshment within visual culture, Image-speak has failed to account for the nuanced conditions in which images render light in an altogether different manner than through the immediate visual world. These differences occur either in the threshold of the camera's lens, or in the equivalent threshold of the eye's retina; they are both sites that represent measured axes that either limit or grant access to illumination. In this way, a threshold illustrates a duality: it is a membrane of potential - a means of access from one place, site, or time into another. Yet on the other hand, that same threshold can simultaneously perform the opposite role: either limiting or denying any given thing's passage through its barrier. A threshold both reveals and simultaneously conceals.

The impetus behind *Revealers* has been to step outside of this standard flow of photographic thinking and expand on the analogy that links photography to vision. As such, an integral consideration during the production of the works has been each site of transference. At what point does light begin to act expansively, rather than limiting itself to the logic of the image's technical expectations? My approach considers light not just as a procedural flow of particles from source to recipient, but instead encourages the idea that light is a field and thus is limitless in how its rays move and interact within multiple adjacent worlds.



Figure 3. Installation Detail



Figure 4. Installation Detail

Light in the Camera

As an entire installation, *Revealers* has been organized around a constructed, spatial divider which quite literally presents itself as a threshold on which each artwork could be activated. Hung on the divider and facing outwards from the main body of works, *Mullen* is a photograph that was made as a result of a light leak while shooting with a large-format camera. Mistakenly, I momentarily removed the dark slide from the film holder, exposing the film to uncontrolled light. Unsure of just how “ruined” the image might be, I debated the pros and cons of even bothering to pay the cost to develop the negative. Ultimately, I opted to see the process through - the resultant image showing incredibly nuanced detail and luminescence that exceeded my expectations of what an image could capture. Amidst the botched exposure’s blown-out highlights and unexpected prisms of light, precise detail of the plant’s tactile formations is revealed against the fuzzy edges of each leaf. The initial upset of this failed exposure has instead yielded a kind of visuality in which the photograph of the plant has accrued extra-

ordinary detail contingent not on the camera's technical functionality, but upon the event of chance during an uncontrolled accident.

The process through which this image was made sparked a more invested interest in studying the flow of light transference between source and surface. This light-leak became a metaphor of the latent potential in the photographic process; light is not bound to a linear logic, but is ever-present, only ever just held at bay by delicate systems of threshold and boundary. The photographic process is not one of beginnings and endings, and as my light-leak demonstrates, the image has the potential to be continuously formed throughout its process. Michael Taussig reminds us of the unassuming potential of imaging when he cautions that "to ponder mimesis is to become sooner or later caught ... in sticky webs of copy *and* contact, image *and* bodily involvement of perceiver in an image, a complexity we too easily elide as nonmysterious."⁴ I interpret Taussig's challenge as being against the assumption that a photograph reproduces any cogent likeness of the world. In dialogue with Flusser's previous suggestion that photography is magic, Taussig also speculates about the extraordinary nature of images: "Where do we really end up? With technology or magic, or with something else altogether?"⁵

⁴ Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 21.

⁵ Taussig, 24.



Figure 5. Mullen, 2019

Visible through the room divider on the gallery's far wall, a modestly sized photographic diptych titled *Herding and Shaping* is hung centred on the otherwise empty wall. The two images that make up the work were made sequentially, and depict instances in which the rays of the sun shone through a standard ball cap. This past summer while lying out underneath the midday sun I found myself uncomfortably overwhelmed by its heat, its brightness. I held my hat up against the sun, giving myself a slivered moment of reprise. During which, however, I witnessed the shimmering material reactions occurring between the fibres of my hat and the light that filtered through. In that moment I felt that I was glimpsing the formation of my own ocular perspective projected

onto the surface of the hat. Much in the way that Walter Benjamin describes a “profane illumination”⁶, I was entranced by the process of dynamic light beams materializing a micro-cosmic world on the inside of my hat. Light seemed to shine both ways through the hat’s semi-transparent membrane. Direct rays often blasted through one of the hat’s six larger holes, an even deeper moment in which the hat formed into its own camera obscura. Lying there, I began to make photographs that were attempts to use the camera to see the same way I saw with my eyes.

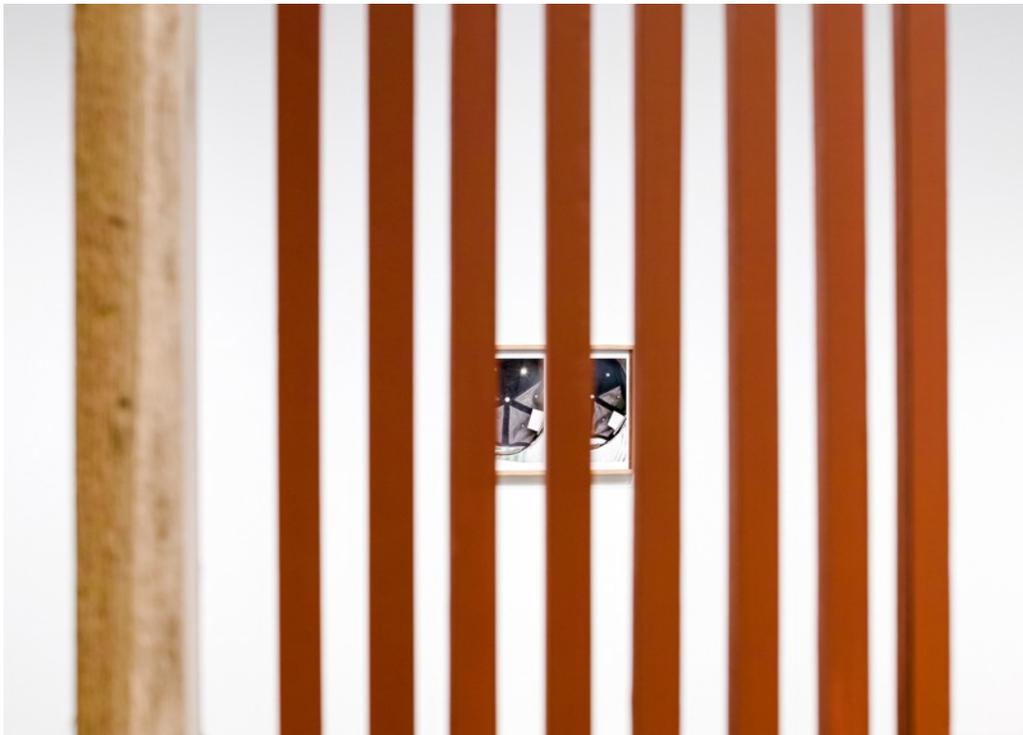


Figure 6. Installation Detail

⁶ Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of European Intelligenstia,” in *One-Way Street, and Other Writings* (London: Verso, 1997) 227.



Figure 7. Herding & Shaping, 2019

Returning to the images later, I realized the hurdle of that goal; the eye is continuously opening up to rotating fields of light while the fixed image hits its limit when it becomes materialized. Because of this, the stillness of the photograph is not granted access to the flow and acuity of the world, however the potential of the fixed image is still not stifled by its determinism. Photography is seemingly able to pressure its own fixity - an idea Francois Laruelle points to when he speaks of a philosophy of photography and suggests the medium's potential in "diverse technological and optical forms of the imaginary."⁷ To complete *Herding and Shaping*, I set out to employ both of Laruelle's suggestions. By using separate images very similar in both appearance and form, the final work gives the brief illusion of being mirrored, although it quickly becomes evident that the light's presence in each image is not the same. Also, in that illusion, the diptych becomes more of an amalgam or collage that presents light as an abstraction in how it transitions between two images, two spaces.

⁷ François Laruelle, *Photo-Fiction, a Non-Standard Aesthetics*, trans. Drew S. Burk (Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2012) 74.

Hung on the inward-facing side of the divider is another photograph titled *When the Moment or Hour Becomes Part of the Appearance*. Here too, the presence of the sun's rays is captured in the picture, albeit in the context of a clichéd view of the setting sun. The title of the work is in reference to a passage in Walter Benjamin's *Little History of Photography* (1931) in which he seems to first conceive of his notion of the "aura":

What is aura, actually? A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be. While at rest on a summer's noon, to trace a range of mountain on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer, until the moment or the hour become part of their appearance – this is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch.⁸

Taking note of Benjamin's bliss, my photograph seems to be descriptive of the ways that Benjamin uses light as the metaphor that valorizes experiences and phenomena in the world. Parsing through Benjamin's lucid prose it seems that one can best access the aura through the celebration and wonderment of the potential inherent to the nature of light. However, photographs do not necessarily spark uncanny formations every time one is made - oftentimes photographs are unconsidered and therefore inconsequential. In that spirit, my image of the setting sun should be encountered in opposition to the kind of poetic associations Benjamin made while lying in the grass. In this case the photograph is used objectively - it displays the sunset as subject matter rather than material, resulting in an altogether underwhelming composition, perhaps void of Benjamin's aura. Now, the camera has carried out its technical responsibilities: image rendered, but perhaps without care given to the photograph's aesthetic potential. Acknowledging the banality of *When the Moment or Hour Becomes Part of the Appearance's* composition, I have intentionally employed this image within my project as an interlocutor meant to objectively show light as *subject* rather than content. This has become a way to anchor differing methodologies that occur across the works included in the show.

⁸ Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," in *Selected Writings Volume 2, Part 2 1931 – 1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005) 518.

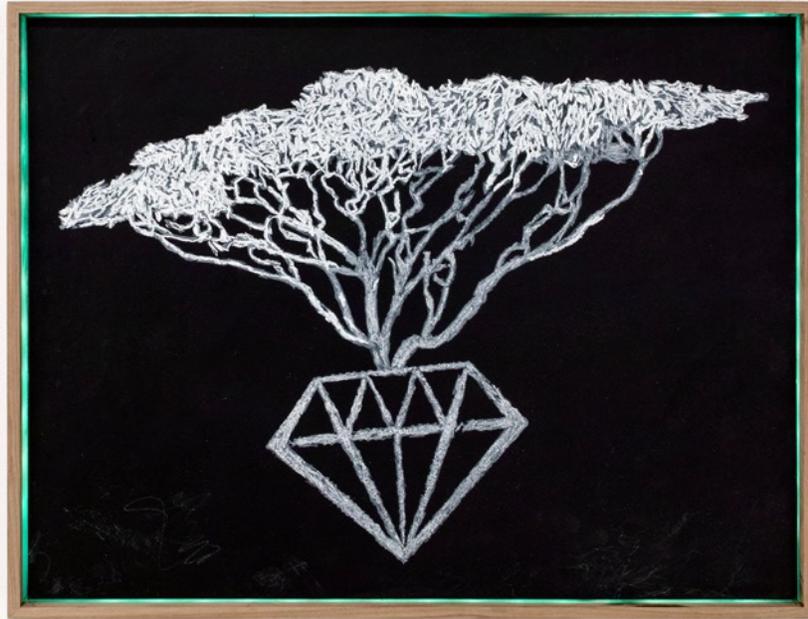


Figure 8. Growth Transfer, 2019

Impression

Clustered against the East wall of the gallery is an arrangement of smaller and more materially diverse artworks that make up what has now established itself as a separate segment within *Revealers*. An element of the work now involves a site-specific, sculptural installation designed in relation to the gallery's architecture. At the threshold at which the gallery's ceiling drops from 18-feet to 9-feet, a custom-cut wooden post has been installed from the ceiling down. Its base hovers a few feet above the floor but is braced atop a painted rod that connects it the rest of the way down. An artwork that bears the same title as the entire project is hung off-from-centre on the wooden post. *Revealers* is a photogram that spells itself in graphic script and was made in the darkroom through analogue processes of cut, paste, and print. It is set in a custom wooden frame whose right-side angles away and recedes in dimension as it transitions between the threshold of the gallery's architecture. A separate fabricated wooden sculpture hangs on the wall a short distance beyond the post. The format of this work mimics that of any domestic window, however this window's blinds are set into a

diagonal patterning, revealing behind them a paled blue and abstract cyanotype. The cyanotype's image shows speckled blocks of white littered across the paper's blue surface, altogether blending into the distinct grain of the watercolour paper used. Two other works complete the arrangement within the gallery's smaller "room": a framed drawing of chalk and pastel on paper that depicts a monochromatic graphic of a tree growing out from a diamond. Opposite to this is a small photographic print mounted full bleed directly to board. The image magnifies in on, and anthropomorphizes a shriveling plant specimen, rendering it as a seemingly hallucinogenic and alien body.⁹

⁹ There is also an additional work that went unmentioned in this final Defence statement. *Growth Transfer* is a pastel on paper drawing that depicts a graphic of an Acacia growing out of a diamond. Set within the frame and hidden behind the drawing is a strip of LED neon lights that flash, fade, and pulse different colours out from behind the monochrome drawing.



Figure 9. Dancer, 2019



Figure 10. Window Closer, 2019

Between Rooms

In developing the arrangement of *Revealers*, I have maintained that the previously introduced smaller cluster of works are presented as if in their own “room.” Despite not actually being a separate room, a spatial difference is created by the site-specific post that borders the architectural threshold of the gallery. So then if *Revealers* could ostensibly be described as taking place across two rooms, how do these two spaces allude to the conditions of the camera? Studio for Propositional Cinema’s text-based work *Camera Manual* (2018) reads: “Every camera is a room, and each room a camera; all actions are possible within the logic of the room, as all images are possible within the logic of the camera. Images require rooms, rooms acquire images.”¹⁰ The Studio, which is operated as revolving collective of members, seems to be proposing a contingent interdependence between the camera and the room, as if each entity necessitates, but also and usurps the other in a Sisyphean amalgam of space, time, and depth.

While viewing *Dancer*, the small photograph that depicts the magnified, psychedelic plant formation, one can identify in it a formation that appears to reach out of its body, almost like an arm raised in motion. From this same perspective, another image can peripherally be seen in which another formation mimics that of *Dancer*’s limb-like extension. Located past the threshold and across both rooms of the gallery, *Filling Air* is a large-scale photograph in which a black abstracting field covers more than half the frame, blocking out a view that looks out over a body of water. Drip-like tendrils seep out from the black abstraction into the foreground of the landscape, further emphasizing the disorienting sensation of depth compressed into the photograph.

If one does recognize the formal similarities between *Dancer* and *Filling Air* from this perspective between the two rooms, it is necessary to emphasize that the actual scale in which the two shapes form within the viewer’s eyes is virtually the same. *Filling Air* is a substantially larger artwork than *Dancer*, however when viewed from across a distance it perceptively shrinks. The image traverses the space of the room, fluidly forming itself to be aligned with any sight cast in its direction. To this end, it seems that

¹⁰ Studio for Propositional Cinema, *Camera Manual*, 2018.
studioforpropositionalcinema.com/index.php/texts-by/cameral-manual/.

the Studio for Propositional Cinema's claim that "every camera is a room, and each room a camera"¹¹ is aligned with how I sequenced Revealers. Linking one "room" to the next, my process of arrangement has served to activate the optic equivalencies in which perspective, distance, and scale arranges light as it passes through either the camera, the eye, or the room.



Figure 11. Installation view

¹¹ Ibid.



Figure 12. Filling Air, 2019

Lamp in the Hand

Diogenes of Sinope was a philosopher in Ancient Greece who practiced the embodied philosophy of Cynicism - ostensibly acting against anything that represented the status quo of the era. It was said that “in the full light of day, lamp in hand, Diogenes used to go about crying I’m on the lookout for an honest man!”¹² Much in the way that this anecdote references the absurdity of Diogenes’ logic, I consider any photographic gesture as one made from a reversal of logic. In fact, this anecdote describing Diogenes is fitting in that it describes him venturing out through the world in broad daylight looking for “truth” all the while yielding a futile torch. The lamp in his hand is like that of the camera in my own - a tool with which to see what is presumably already visible.

Susan Sontag describes this contradiction in a different way when she writes that “[photographs are both] clouds of fantasy and pellets of information.”¹³ Photography must adhere to the objective task of reproducing a likeness - however within that process of reproduction, the nature of light obscures the techne of the camera, thus forming Sontag’s “clouds of fantasy.” Across all of the works included in this exhibition I have set out to examine the conditions in which light is formed and perceived through diverse material worlds. The results of these inquiries have been consistent with, and indicative of what many of the theorists referenced in this statement have proposed: Flusser’s “world of magic”, Benjamin’s stoned rambling looking into the sky, and now Sontag’s “clouds of fantasy.” The photographic condition evokes potential outside of itself, and through its own process reveals alternative situations in which visioning is formed outside of the logic of representation.

¹² *Anecdotes of the Cynics*, trans. Robert Dobbin (London: Penguin Classics, 2016) 32.

¹³ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977) 69.



Figure 13. Revealers, 2019

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Appendix

Marvelous Pictures

Every image is a sleep in itself.

(Walter Benjamin)

The work of art might be said to build a garden around the house of Being, and – in doing so – make it what it could not otherwise be: a site to which other men and women may journey to look.

(Kaja Silverman, World Spectators)

Great art is the arrangement of the environment so as to provide for the soul vivid, but transient, values. Human beings require something which absorbs them for a time, something out of the routine which they can stare at. But you cannot subdivide life, except in the abstract analysis of thought. Accordingly, the great art is more than a transient refreshment. It is something which adds to the permanent richness of the soul's self-attainment. It justifies itself both by its immediate enjoyment and also by its discipline of the inmost being.

(Alfred North Whitehead, Science and the Modern World)

Every time I work with a camera, I find myself falling into new fields of visual possibility. My engagement with the camera is not meant to be just a celebration of the acuity of things, instead I use the camera as a way to philosophically come to terms with what it means to be in, observe, and make worlds outside of myself. As such, I've found in my practice that the process of picture making allows for a kind of visualization that does much more than simply represent the likeness of a thing. This is a truism in photographic discourse: a copy of a thing differs from its referent inasmuch as it cannot hold its total likeness. Despite this, there remains pertinent and unravelling questions that stem from photographic copying. In Michael Taussig's *Mimesis and Alterity* he asks such a question of the process of copy and contact: "Where do we really end up? With technology or magic – or with something else altogether?"¹⁴ This kind of question pressures how we understand the resulting image once captured by a camera. What are we really seeing when we bear witness to an image? I sense that when photographed,

¹⁴ Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 24.

objects in the world become unhinged from their normal flow of being, and that when presented in a picture plane, these worlds become immanently *new*. I attribute this *newness* to the way that photography imbues its subject matter with an extra-ordinary presence. In saying this, I mean that while we understand and recognize what is being depicted, what we see in a photograph is more than we see with our eye. The German artist and photographer Wolfgang Tillmans describes this as the success of a photograph: when a viewer has the sensation of having-already-known, or seen, or felt, or smelled what is being depicted.¹⁵ What Tillmans is speaking to is what motivates my work: what kind of extra-visioning occurs during the encounter of a thing's likeness?

Moving forward, this paper is organized to reveal my own practical and theoretical engagements with photography; each section will anecdotally examine my own work and will look at how my artistic impulses have been formed by the ideas and process of theorists and historical movements. I begin by examining the shared mechanics between the seeing eye and the camera's lens, and in this I locate a distinction between seeing and perceiving an image as there is inherently elements of indecipherability in any given photograph. In attempts to better understand these conditions of optical indecipherability, I refer back to Walter Benjamin, specifically to his notes and journals in which he outlines a series of psychoactive experiments in which he puts himself under the influence of cannabinoids and other narcotics. From this, I make use of this state of mind to delve into my own material negotiation of photography. I consider how the camera itself elucidates the capacity in which one is able to make images that show much more than simply what is pictured. This work is invested in getting closer to photography itself in the hopes of locating the spaces where *new* pictures are made. In doing this, I look to material worlds for ways to position my work against photography's dogmatic axioms. I question if it is possible that pictures, albeit wrapped up in processes of reproduction, do in fact produce worlds steeped with emergent potential.

Kaja Silverman recasts the history of photography in her recent book *The Miracle of Analogy* (2015) and in it she makes an account for the optical discrepancies between the camera's lens and our mind's eye. In the 1830's, investigations began into the optical

¹⁵ "Wolfgang Tillmans – 'What Art Does in Me is Beyond Words'," Youtube video, 6:08, posted by "Tate," January 27, 2017, <https://youtu.be/aYIXGdoTwWA>.

phenomenon which became known as binocular disparity: the process under which the brain combines the two slightly different images captured by each eye. This process is what allows us to perceive the world three-dimensionally. Silverman focuses on the two original images that form on the surface of each eye the moment rays of light make contact. The individual images are themselves elusive because “an internal agency combines them, over which we have no control.”¹⁶ Binocular disparity suggests that we never actually see these images upon the eye, and this is because the modality of perception occurs as a kind of post-production to what has already been captured by the eye. One could liken this to what Walter Benjamin deems as the *optical unconscious*, which refers not necessarily to what is available to sight but instead what informs and influences what comes into view.¹⁷ However, Silverman’s conception of the optical flow is more physiological. She would concede that there is indeed an optical unconscious at play in the process of binocular disparity, however she retains focus on the original image as it manifests on each eye before it is combined and rationalized by our unconscious. While it is perhaps impossible for us to psychologically “get closer” to the original image of contact upon the eye’s retinal rods, there does seem to be richness in the attempts to suspend our optical unconscious. The decision to alter or otherwise interrupt this process perhaps shows the ways in which we can engage with the actuality of things. This implies that through the interruption of unconscious binocular disparity we are able to see the latent potentialities with which we build our own world.

Unlike the task set forth by the Surrealists in the 1920’s, which was to establish pathways into the unconscious, instead I am looking for methods to suspend the unconscious mind. Despite the antithetical language being used in both scenarios, there should not be much of a distinction made between these goals. In Andre Breton’s “Manifesto of Surrealism” he laments how we remain under the reign of logic inasmuch that “absolute rationalism” only allows us to perceive that which directly relates to our experiences. He claims rationalism to be a “cage” inside of which *true* experience paces back and forth.¹⁸ This is not so different from the observation put forth by Silverman,

¹⁶ Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy or The History of Photography, Part 1* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 75.

¹⁷ Shawn Michele Smith, *Photography and the Optical Unconscious* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 4.

¹⁸ Andre Breton, “Manifesto of Surrealism,” in *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 10.

which suggests that the “internal agency” of binocular disparity is a kind of unconscious rationalization of how light makes contact with the eye. Much in the way that the Surrealists saw logic and rationalism as hindering access to unconscious dream worlds, we can also conceive of this same unconscious as hindering our access to the material worlds amongst which we live. Therefore, the task becomes to skirt around the unconscious and instead looks towards the what I will call the “haptic image” that forms directly upon the surface of the eye. What I’m referring to could also be thought of as direct and immediate experience. This is well described by Jane Bennett when she recalls her encounter with debris collected in a storm drain. In the drain she saw:

One large men’s black plastic work glove,

one dense mat of oak pollen,

one unblemished dead rat,

*one smooth stick of wood.*¹⁹

From this, she locates a type of “thing-power” in each discarded item that provokes the “energetic vitality inside each of these things [which are] generally conceive[d] of as inert.”²⁰ She reflects on the “impossible singularity” of each object, and that “had the sun not glinted on the black glove,” she perhaps would not have been struck with the bodily significance of the entire drain assemblage.²¹ Here we catch the haptic image as it forms upon Bennett’s eye; her embodied knowledge of how light reflects from a material surface created an entangled space in which each object instantaneously became vital and active. I attribute Bennett’s extra-ordinary experience as being the result of witnessing what was previously described as Kaja Silverman’s impossible original image as it forms on the surface of the eye. What Bennett saw in the storm drain was not a rational amalgam of signifiers developed by her optical unconscious but instead was the direct contact of material worlds operating preemptively to our thinking mind. I’d suggest that in Bennett’s moment of eccentric observation we can note the emergence of a *new* kind of seeing - one that is contingent on any given

¹⁹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 4.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 5.

²¹ *Ibid*, 5.

thing's material latency. I want to hold on to the way Bennett sees the glint of light off the surface of the black glove. She knows the quality of light before she knows the material of the object itself, and in this sense it seems worthwhile to think of how a "glint" of light is depicted in a still photograph.

Take for example my own photograph, *3 Red Snips*. In it, two red sets of scissors are arranged with a third set of gardener's secateurs. All three are propped up against a red, metal bookend and sit atop another plush red surface; the blades are pointing upright and set open. In the picture's stillness the arrangement accrues a tension between the sharpness of the blades and how the cushion dimples beneath the weight of the arraignment. The stillness of the photograph suspends the temporality of any given thing and in that blade reflects a light that lasts. Not just a "glint" of light - when set in the stillness of the photograph - the blade actually emits a light of its own. This light lingers on the surface of the eye. This image is haptic, and in contrast to Bennett glimpsing the brief incantations in which material worlds coalesce, there seems to be a way that through still photography it is possible to render prolonged engagements under which *new* relations occur between material worlds.

The problem with trying to point to situations in which we see things as *new*, is that there is no formula with which to anticipate newness. In our attempts to conceive of things as new, we fall into the domain of the optical unconscious. Before we even have the chance to think a thought, it has already been subject to our own unconscious rationalization. The poet and critic Charles Bernstein reminds us of our own selfish expectations of the new: "The new is never new but we make it new in order to keep it from becoming dead to us."²² This implies that in each of us there is a tacit longing to make our own world immortal - meaning that we trick ourselves to see things as new out of fear of losing them forever. The *newness* that Bernstein describes comes from a position of self-reflexivity in which whatever is deemed new is in fact formed by what one has experienced in the past. For Bernstein the conception of newness emerges comes from a past-tense, but I'm interested in locating a newness that emerges from the present tense.

²² Pennsound, "Charles Bernstein - The Task of Poetics, University of Chicago," Youtube video, 1:05:12, February 6, 2013, <https://youtu.be/lcourVC1jKY>.

But the question now becomes: is it even possible to experience things as they actually happen, meaning, how can we actually be *in* the present tense? In Raul Ruiz's sprawling anecdotal essay *Images of Nowhere* he writes that "new images act directly on the eye; they make us believe in transitions, races, jumps, impossible movements..."²³ This is a useful formula to use in thinking about newness as it relates to the haptic image. In the moment of contact the logic of the optical unconscious is suspended, and we are free to "believe" in such "impossible" interactions. This also seems to account for how Bennett perceived the detritus in the storm drain; the glint of light "acted" on her eye in such a way that the objects in the storm drain became impossibly rendered in a kind of harmonic newness. This is the crucial moment of contact in which the haptic image reveals the latent potentialities of the world before being superseded and rationalized by our unconscious. Ulrich Baer describes the status of the haptic image when he suggests that the photograph should be considered an *occurrence* rather than an experience.²⁴ My reading of this differentiation is that an "experience" tends to be predetermined - meaning that it runs itself out and expires - whereas an "occurrence" instead is collaboratively formed by tangential sources that are spatially and temporally varied. This idea of an occurrence decries the distinct humanist notion that any single perspective claims perception, and instead creates a conception of the image (or the world) as arising from a plurality of incompatible perspectives.²⁵ Therefore the *newness* of the haptic image is contingent on the capacity to disassociate from the tyranny of any singular perspective. Images of the world do not form *for* us but are rather formed *by* us in collaboration with the intricacies of adjacent material worlds. Baer goes on to describe photographs as "waiting machines for a future that may be different."²⁶ This suggests that the mechanics of the camera do not simply represent a likeness, but it also suggests that pictures also hold agency in the process of determining how one will see and encounter future worlds.

The point so far has been to suggest that there are images caught on the surface of our eyes that are not so much *seen* as they are *felt*. I have used Jane Bennett's

²³ Raul Ruiz, *Poetics of Cinema* (Paris: Dis Voir, 2005), 41.

²⁴ Ulrich Baer, "Photography and the World: The Total World and Many, Many Worlds," *The Yearbook of Comparative Literature*, no. 60 (2017): 288.

²⁵ *Ibid*

²⁶ *Ibid*

encounter with garbage as an example of this condition of the haptic image as it manifests. However, the path on which to arrive at the haptic image remains unclear and Bennett provides us with no useful map. The haptic image precedes the work of logic done by the optical unconscious and therefore remains elusive and seemingly in-advance-of our capacity to access it. I previously mentioned the goal of suspending the unconscious as a means to access these haptic images but have yet to propose a formula of such suspension. To do this, I turn to what Terrence McKenna describes as the “willing suspension of disbelief” as a way to gain access to any situation of a “close encounter.”²⁷ For McKenna, the ingestion of psychoactive plant materials and the resulting intoxication provides the path to such “close encounters.” These encounters occur before, outside, or in opposition to how I am positioning the optical unconscious. The altered state of being *high* or otherwise *under-the-influence* does interrupt the senses in such a way to provide an individual with what Walter Benjamin refers to as a “profane illumination.”²⁸ In fact, in the years between 1927 and 1934 Walter Benjamin kept written records documenting his various experiences putting himself under the influence of hashish, a potent cannabinoid consumed either by ingestion or inhalation. These records were only published posthumously and consist of unfinished prose, sketches, and journal entries. I turn to these records now in my attempts to better understand what it means to see alternative or *new* images of the world. Since Benjamin’s work is so seminal in the progression of media criticism, thinking of his work under the pretense of hallucinatory thought is intriguing. In fact, Benjamin did conceive of his intoxications as methods of study; he refers to his experiences as “protocols” in which he set out to find “some kind of materialist magic that would provide a key tool in the transfiguration of modernity.”²⁹

Now of course, intoxicants and psychedelic experiences have cultural histories that extend long before the years that Benjamin experimented; he notes his own curiosity in hashish as early as 1919 after reading Charles Baudelaire’s *Artificial*

²⁷ Terrence McKenna, *True Hallucinations* (New York: HarperOne, 1994)

²⁸ Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of European Intelligenstia,” in *One-Way Street, and Other Writings* (London: Verso, 1997) 227.x

²⁹ Marcus Boon, “Walter Benjamin and Drug Literature,” in *On Hashish*, ed. Marcus Boon (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006) 12.

*Paradises*³⁰. So while Benjamin does fall in line within a long list of writers using drugs, what seems so pertinent about his contribution is that it all went largely unfinished and unpublished while he was alive and working. Baudelaire's work engaged openly and directly with the topic of hashish, however it is rare to find Benjamin explicitly speaking of drug induced intoxication. By parsing through the fragmentary notes left behind by Benjamin, one is able to establish a timeline that suggests that his most lasting contributions to cultural criticism may in fact have been first conceived with him very much so under the influence.

In 1931 Benjamin first published what continues to be a widely read essay, "Little History of Photography", and in it he first thinks through his conception of the *aura*:

What is aura, actually? A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be. While at rest on a summer's noon, to trace a range of mountain on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer, until the moment or the hour become part of their appearance – this is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch.³¹

What Benjamin describes here is something that many of us have likely felt ourselves: the leisurely bliss of sitting amongst nature during long summer days - a sensation which, especially now, is often augmented by a few tokes on a shared joint.³² I shared this sensation myself this past summer when I made the following photograph off our local coastline. Coincidentally, it seems that my picture could itself be illustrative of Benjamin's own experience of "breath[ing] the aura of those mountains, that branch." In my photograph, the sloping horizon line of a distant mountain range descends from the frame's right-hand side, eventually stopping against the rocky threshold between the land and the ocean. In the centre of the frame, the sun is getting closer to setting - its rays blend through thin, diffused cloud cover and just touch the highest most tips of a tree's branches. The sunbeams make contact with the camera in the same way light touches the surface of the eye.

³⁰ Ibid, 1.

³¹ Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," in *Selected Writings Volume 2, Part 2 1931 – 1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005) 518.

³² On October 17, 2018 Canada became the second country in the world to legalize the recreational use of cannabis.

So, in imagining Benjamin resting in a Berlin park in the summer of 1931, observing the “strange weave of space and time”³³, it seems pertinent to note that just a few months earlier he was ingesting hashish.³⁴ In the hours that proceed this intoxication, Benjamin’s companion Fritz Frankel makes written observations of Benjamin’s altered behavior; at one point noting him slowly raise his right hand with the index finger extended upwards before proposing that “Perhaps my hand will slowly turn into a little branch.”³⁵ If Benjamin felt such potential in his own limb to think it could transform into a branch, it is not so far-fetched to think that this hallucination remained in his mind as he sat in the shade of a tree and remarked on what it meant to “breathe in the aura” of such a branch.

As is often the case in studying Benjamin, what’s at stake here is the efficacy of vision. Both under the influence and sober, Benjamin’s work sets out to reconfigure the subject-object relationships that define the conditions of perception.³⁶ As such, the extraordinary visions that accompany cannabinoid use can indeed be poignant tools with which to augment the standard apparatus of perception. Short of inducing full-fledged psychedelic revelations like those triggered by substances like DMT or psilocybin, the *high* of cannabis instead tends to accent visual worlds while also fostering a nuanced focus on any given thing’s objecthood-ness. At this point one is not so-far-gone as to lose sight of their immediate world; instead the affected subject perceives a kind of visual effervescence that bubbles out of an active world. This kind of stoned perception is one of closeness – so close in fact, visual worlds often begin to take on tactile qualities, and in this tactility we again encounter the haptic image. Light does make contact with the eye, however, due to the residual high of the cannabis, this contact is prolonged - much in the way that a still photograph extends the temporality of what is pictured. However, this kind of visioning is not necessarily just the product of any given

³³ Benjamin, “Little History of Photography,” 518.

³⁴ The accounts of Benjamin’s intoxications were recorded in various forms, sometimes in his own words during the experience, sometime afterwards. They were also often recorded by his companions who would often partake alongside Benjamin, or simply provide a watchful eye and make notes. Fritz Frankel, “Protocol of April 18, 1931,” in *On Hashish*, ed. Marcus Boon (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 73.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 75.

³⁶ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, trans. J.A. Underwood (London: Penguin, 2008), 34.

singular perspective. The light that manifests on the surface of the eye is itself shaped and determined by things outside of that perceiving mind. Our own physical and spatial presence will affect how light hits the eye of another perceiving body; and as such we are simultaneously the perceiving subject and the perceived object in any given encounter.³⁷ As we become aware of this contingency, which is augmented by the suspension of the unconscious, it could be suggested that being “under the influence” is instead a sensation of “becoming-aware” of that which forms the world. Benjamin continues this thought when he reflects on his own experiences under the influence: “All the insights that man has ever obtained surreptitiously through the use of narcotics can also be obtained *through the human*: some through the individual... and some, which we dare not even dream of yet, perhaps only through the community of the living.”³⁸ In saying this Benjamin suggests that the visions acquired through the use of narcotics are no more than simple representations of the ways in which webs of interdependence actively form our surrounding worlds.

The haptic image has been the central figure that I’ve used to speak about the extra-ordinary qualities of photographic representation. The site of contact is crucial for the haptic image and, as I have mentioned, occurs on the surface of the eye before being subjected to the optical unconscious. I have cited the ways in which cerebral intoxication creates a space to engage with the haptic image, and in all of this I have been attempting to locate the ways in which it might be possible to see *new* images. As such it seems worthwhile to examine my own process of image-making. In what way to I encounter the haptic image through my own working processes? This sensation of feeling by looking is central to my process of making photographs. To see an image form through a 4x5 camera it is necessary to cloak oneself in dark fabric that blocks out ambient light, allowing the image to render on the back of the camera’s ground glass. Reaching out from underneath the dark cloth your hand then turns the camera’s focus knob, extending or retracting the bellows, rendering the image on the ground glass either in or out of focus. While crafting the focus of the image, your fingers twist the knob in micro adjustments, toggling through the image’s range of clarity until settling on a particular focus plane. The minutiae of the hand’s movements imbue the image as it

³⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978), 183.

³⁸ Walter Benjamin, “From the Letters,” in *On Hashish*, ed. Marcus Boon (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 145.

manifests on the ground glass with a haptic opticality. In this, the entanglement of our perceiving modalities becomes evident – we cannot know one thing without knowledge of another.³⁹ Since the faculties of touch and vision belong to the same body, we are unable to be in them simultaneously, and instead we have no choice but to shuffle back and forth between being the *seer* and the *toucher*.⁴⁰ Making photographs is a way in which I am able to be in both of these faculties; I take the role of interlocutor between the two incompatible senses. Being in this position I sense that my work showcases a nuanced kind of seeing in which tactile and optic subjectivities coalesce, resulting in spaces in which new images of the world are able to emerge.

Oftentimes the spaces in which these worlds tend to emerge are located on boundaries, edges, and thresholds. The picture below looks at a piece of coloured paper hung in front of a window. The picture was made in situ in my studio and simply documents a coloured pencil drawing I made on a piece of 3D graphic drawing paper. The paper itself is pre-printed with vertical, horizontal, and perpendicular red and blue lines set just slightly askew - the function being to allow you to use the grids to design your own 3D illusion. While I coloured and filled in the grids, I consciously worked against the grids' design to render 3D shapes. I intentionally filled in sections that would interrupt dimensional planes from emerging from the paper. But through my attempts to avoid 3D representation, sections of the drawing took on spatial qualities despite my intention for the opposite. I sense in this situation the presence of a kind of spatial automatism: an unconscious tendency of my own mind to *make* perceptual depth. The drawing hung pinned to a shelf in front of a window for several weeks before I made the decision to photograph it. As previously described, the act of making this photograph involved using my fingertips to *feel* the image into focus; a dynamic process through which I am able to touch and feel through seeing. The scene was backlit by ambient light coming through the window, and the tactility of the paper's surface was amplified. In feeling this tactility on the surface of the camera's ground glass I was able to see how my previous *feeling* with the pencil crayons left pressured marks on the paper's surface. I see the physicality in how these markings either fight against or produce graphic three-

³⁹ See George Musser, *Spooky Action at a Distance* (Scientific American: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2015).

⁴⁰ Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy or The History of Photography, Part 1* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 88.

dimensional spaces. I think about how this picture manages dimensional space, and what kind logic is either employed or suspended by our modes of perception.

I have spoken throughout this text to the idea that photographic visioning is a way to make *new* images of the worlds that surround us. By being present, concerned and observant with the slippage of opticality, I contend that my process of making pictures suggests a way to bear witness to the unconscious ways in which pictorial ratiocination produces distinct and active visual worlds. Optical paradigms are perhaps not as static as we thought; there is potential to see more than just what manifests in the mind's eye. A haptic image: when seeing something becomes almost like touching it, feeling it, *knowing* it. The potential of any picture relies on what any viewer allows themselves to see in it. To see images in all their potentialities we must admit the conditions under which we see them, meaning that we must acknowledge an encounter with any given picture will always be formed by so much more than our own mind.

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