

conveyor

Spring 2011



Issue No. 1 \$15

ISBN 978-0-9834183-2-0



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conveyor

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ISBN: 978-0-9834183-2-0
\$15.00

Conveyor is published twice a year, Spring & Autumn

Publisher Jason Burstein

Editor-in-Chief Christina Labey

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Dominica Paige

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Conveyor is an organization dedicated to supporting photographic-based artist, we provide resources that facilitate the production and circulation of photography, by way of print, exhibition and publication.

Conveyor Magazine and all of our artists' publications are lovingly printed in-house, at Conveyor Print Space.

Conveyor wishes to thank the following: Simone Douglas, Arthur Ou, George Pitts, D. Eric Bookhardt, Jim Ramer, Penelope Umbrico, Neima Jahromi, Jim Harris, Bob Tinkham, Gerry & Lorraine Burstein, Susanne Burstein & Louis Gerber, Hope Engele, the Labey Family, G&H Soho Inc., and all of the other contributors and supporters that made this publication possible. We love you all.

Subscriptions. 1 Year Subscriptions (2 Issues) \$28.00

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Cover Image: Laura Bell. Ferry from Adrossan Harbor, 2010

Opposite: C. Owen Lavoie. Gerenuk, 2010

Following Page: Arthur Ou. Untitled (Screen Test 1), 2007

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Lovingly printed at Conveyor Arts.
Manufactured in the USA.

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The Total Archive

Essay by Simone Douglas

The universe in return.

Light falls. Moving over objects with a heavy tongue. Tracing. Imprinting. Blind. Staining the paper. The image slips from the field of vision. Dislodged it may have been once familiar, imitating the field of vision. (Imitating the form of an object known but unexplained). A transient state, dark and indistinct. A small breath. A repose.¹

Photography has been in revolution since its inception. Even before it existed, the idea of it was a radical departure from the way we saw ourselves and the world around us.

In the most remote, darkest corner of our universe, there is still light. Consider the now famous image made using the Hubble telescope. Pointed into the darkest area of space and exposed for days, light traveling for an incomprehensible period of time was arrested on the photographic plate. What a beautiful conundrum it caused. The light at the original source no longer existed, but it did exist some multitude of light years away in time, and part of that light came to rest in the photograph.

It remains true that the process of creative work is difficult to describe. The narrative or the words that have to be used to articulate the process are not necessarily apparent during the slow process of development and production. Ideas and influences become more and less focused. The work shifts, gestates, lies dormant, develops, regresses, transforms. There is no clear path. No line. No end. Instead a process of constant consideration, reconsideration, rethinking and attempting, analysis, trial, error, and occlusion. I consider the laying down of words in this essay to be somewhat like a vapour trail. Like the remnant trace of light. It is an acknowledgment that one position must inevitably provoke or illuminate the next and challenge the previous.

Eye Storm; Intensity & Extensity.

“...a photograph is an event transformed into an object. Rather than being a record of things, as we often suppose, it is the fixing of light in space over time.”

Photographic images, however abstract, are primarily understood as a record of the material world and consequently a particular kind of material understanding is expected to be derived from the photographic. Historically, the photographic image was seen as one of purity, “nature reflecting her true face.”² Underlining this belief was the idea that a photograph’s purity was derived from the perceived non-intervention of the human hand and its pure derivation from light, light being pure. William M. Ivins, Curator of Prints at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York from 1916–1946, continued this line of reasoning by arguing that the photographic image and photo-mechanical processes had no syntax. Ivins believed that photography’s greatest achievement was to make possible communication through exactly repeatable statements.

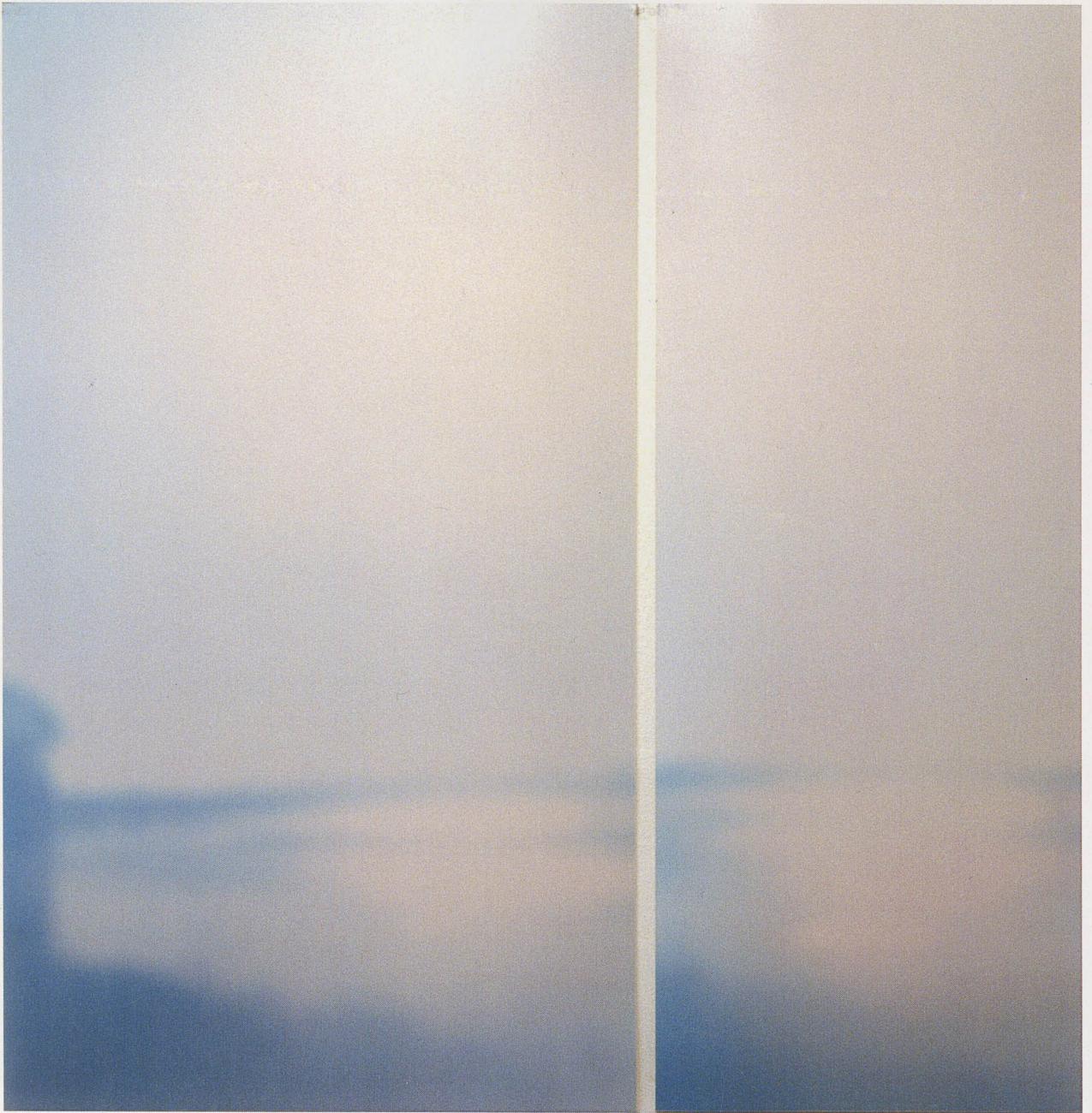
But the lines or syntax, apparent in even the most detailed of images made through the printmaking processes, still bore the mark of the human hand and, although repeatable, the image shifted with each rendition. This was a characteristic, a stain, that Ivins believed the photographic process was “free” of.³

Far away, so close.

Roland Barthes describes the photograph in his essay “Rhetoric of the Image” as a perverse enfoldment of denotation and connotation, as a system of meaning torn internally between culture and nature. “The type of consciousness the photograph involves is truly unprecedented, since it establishes not a consciousness of the being-there of the thing (which any copy could provoke) but an awareness of its having-been-there. What we have is a new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, the photograph being an illogical conjunction between the here-now and the there-then.”⁴ He is describing photographic image as appearance as disappearance, absence within presence, blindness in knowledge. The reality offered by the photographic image is not truth to appearance but truth to presence, proof of something’s existence in space and time rather than its resemblance.

Geoffrey Batchen extends the theoretical lineage of these ideas. He proposes that photography can still lay claim to some sort





Simone Douglas. Blind I - IV, 2000

of objectification (as opposed to digital photography, which he describes as being made by the creative human hand.). "We can at least be sure he or she was once there in front of the camera. We can be sure they were at some point present in time and space. For what makes photographs distinctive is that they depend on this original presence, a referent in the material world that at some time really did exist to imprint itself on a sheet of light sensitive paper. Reality may have been transcribed, manipulated, or enhanced, but photography doesn't cast doubt on reality's actual existence."⁵ What is being supported here and in earlier theories is a very particular understanding of photography. "Photography's plausibility has long rested on the uniqueness of its indexical relation to the world it images, a relation regarded as fundamental to its operation as a system of representation. As a footprint is to a foot, so is a photograph to its referent. It is as if objects have reached out and touched the surface of a photograph, leaving their own traces, as faithful to the contour of the original object as a death mask is to the face of the newly departed."⁶

Staring into space.

"The 'space' of knowledge and the 'space' of perception are merging."⁷ Timothy Druckrey is referencing here his theory of the collapse of knowledge and perception that occurs when looking at a digital photograph. Druckrey, like Batchen, proposes that the digital images, is disconnected from "truth" or "resemblance," and that the creative process of making the digital photograph is more like that of a painting. Even though we may recognize the content of a digital image we simultaneously know that there is a potential human manipulation of "fact" by its very process. Hence the space between what we know and what we perceive is closing. I would argue that this merging of knowledge and perception is inherent in looking at certain kinds of photographic images. Photographic imagery, images made from light, cannot all be defined as producing a similar understanding of knowledge and perception.

Blind is the culmination of a long-term investigation into a contemporary understanding of the photographic in relation to the sublime, excess and immateriality. An initial body of some six hundred images was collated. The final images were made via a process of light staining and analogue processes. They were formed from a construction of prints made from negatives and light staining in the darkroom. It is important to emphasize here that "Blind" was made using analogue photographic processes. Indeed technical tests undertaken demonstrated that the images could not be made using digital processes. This is not because the images have some kind of hold on truth via the analogue process but rather that the visual outcomes produced in questioning the "it exists" are not technically possible using the digital photographic processes. I raise this in light of writings that support digital photographic images as being the only photographic images that are returned to the production and whim of the human hand.⁸

It was an investigation and a re-evaluation of the "sublime" and the perceptual uncertainty of the photographic. I have looked at different modes of visual knowledge, and then at how notions of image, perception and illusion can create a vocabulary for representing "the not known." The dominant use of blue in the work was a reference to my research into 18th-century scientists, their desire for perfect knowledge via the conduit of the sun, and their consequent blindness caused by the excess of light. Blue is the last color we are able to perceive before blindness.

"... Blind I am safe... it is not the darkness resulting only from the withdrawal of light, it is the primary darkness, the first layer, the first condition of light, its foundation; its darkness which gives birth to a light that does not suffer the stain of human vision; a pure light resting, like a bandage, close to the deepest wound of the dark."⁹

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