

SECOND NATURE: ABSTRACT PHOTOGRAPHY THEN AND NOW



In 1925 Alfred Stieglitz did something unusual: he pointed his camera directly toward the clouds overhead. It was the first of his six-year *Equivalents* series: images of inky, horizonless skies. In that single imaginative gesture, Stieglitz produced what is widely considered to be the first abstract photograph. In so doing, he shifted the medium's fundamental essence; as with painting, Stieglitz (who made the images while his mother was dying) demonstrated that photography was capable of describing something other than itself.

What allows a visual mode to surface and sustain? Since that moment nearly nine decades ago, abstraction in photography has dropped in and out of vogue and critical prominence. In 1951 Edward Steichen curated the exhibition *Abstraction in Photography* at New York's Museum of Modern Art, which included seventy-five photographers whose images, according to the catalog, "rang[ed] from the scientific document to contrived arrangements, and from mechanical pattern to organic design." Not surprisingly, eight of Stieglitz's *Equivalents* were in that show. The subsequent decades were dominated by a factual, relatively unemotional application of fine-art photography; water towers, suburban developments, and austere portraits ruled within the prevalent movements of New Topographics and the Düsseldorf School of photography. This is the diet that today's crop of emerging photographers were largely educated on—an assembly of straightforward photographic description—and, having reached creative maturity, it is what they

now collectively expel from their systems. Contemporary art galleries are now teeming with young abstractionists, each necessarily biting the hand that fed them.

As they often are, museum shows have been slow coming. *Second Nature: Abstract Photography Then and Now* at the deCordova Museum and Sculpture Park in Lincoln, Massachusetts, is one of the first large-scale museum exhibitions—not dissimilar in aims from Steichen's 1951 MoMA grouping—to service this reawakened curiosity. The result is a grandly ambitious if overreaching exhibition. Curated by Lexi Lee Sullivan, *Second Nature* features thirty-six artists and over a hundred works, including photographs, videos, films, and a few sculptures. The selection is evocative but ultimately overhung; in some cases, Sullivan has stacked frames two and three high on

the gallery wall, and the thronged effect doesn't suit the already diverse work.

This diversity makes it difficult to highlight a small number of works in such a large group show; comparing a lens-less photograph, a digital image altered in postproduction, and a multiply exposed print is simply incongruous. However, the potential disparity among such photographic practices is also what makes the discipline, and the exhibition, so dynamic. A few highlights: Corin Hewitt created his *Decomposed Monochromes* by burying brightly hued C-prints underground for a period of time. The resulting works—unfortunately, photographs of the photographs rather than the real things—are caked in dirt and resemble partially decomposed mortal remains. Yamini Nayar's C-prints, such as *By a Thread* (2009) are intimate trickeries; her small-scale, handmade constructs confuse spatial logic and deny orientation. In making the four-and-a-half-minute *Electric Kool-Aid Fountain Swimming Film* (2008), Jennifer West submerged a 35mm movie negative into Los Angeles's Mulholland Fountain, then dripped Kool-Aid and liquid LSD onto its slackened surface. Its frames flicker past in ghostly, molecular pink chemical formations. Greg J. Hayes's 46-by-60-inch C-print *Memorial benches, joggers, or a house that controls the*

THIS PAGE: Yamini Nayar, *By a Thread*, 2009;
OPPOSITE: Aaron Siskind, *Chicago 16*, 1957.

Nayar: courtesy the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York; Siskind: collection of deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, gift of Pete and Constance Kayafas, 1995.63

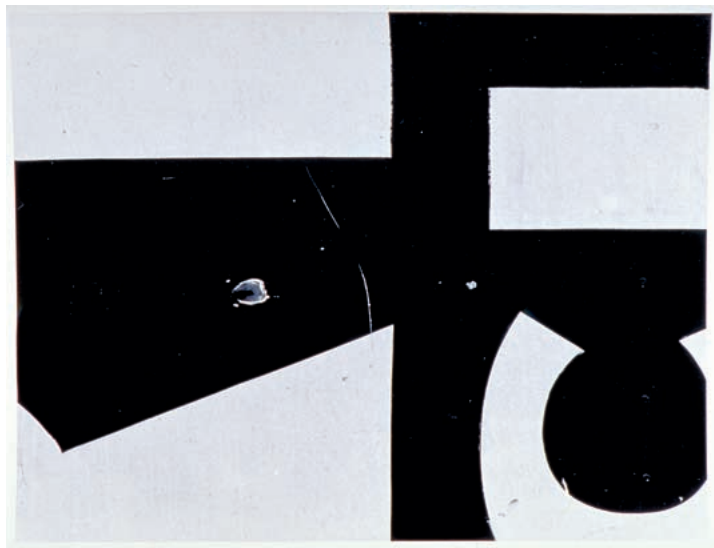
waterfall (2010) is an overexposed scene, so drenched in light that it is difficult to decipher what unexceptional event is pictured. It recalls the initial wash of bright light that, after closing and opening one's eyes in the glaring sunlight, floods initial vision. I could go on: Aspen Mays punched directly into her prints with a standard hole-punch; Luke Stettner photographed falling snow covering his own lone footprint in a series of four images; Sharon Harper exposed a negative over the course of twenty-five days, making eight one-minute exposures and three fourteen-second exposures of a star-filled nightscape. These photographers, and more like them, are still unwinding the fascinating, multifarious potential of "abstraction" in their medium.

Though the majority of the work on view in *Second Nature* is by emerging artists, Sullivan has also featured photographs by Aaron Siskind, Mel Bochner, György Kepes, and Harold Edgerton. This was a wise move. The younger photographers owe a profound debt to these pioneering forebears (in addition to those not present: Alfred Stieglitz, Man Ray, László Moholy-Nagy, Minor White, Tina Modotti, James Welling, John Divola, etc.). And lest we forget, generative influence is also formed by what it rejects; these young photographers are equally indebted to the representational photographic legacies they so readily deny. ♣

—Carmen Winant

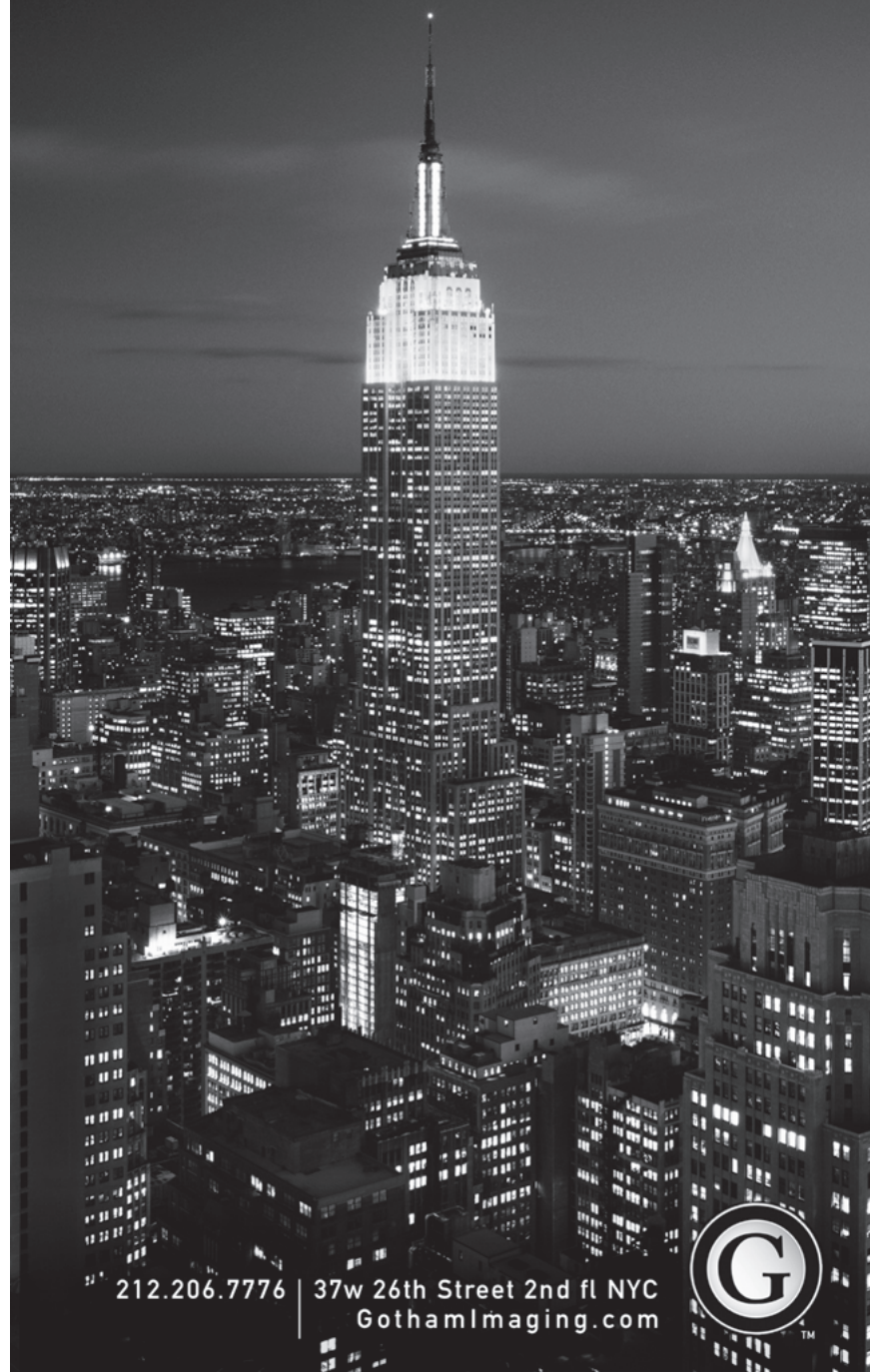
Second Nature: Abstract Photography Then and Now opened at the *deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, Lincoln, Massachusetts, May 26, 2012; it will be on view until April 21, 2013.*

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