

## FOREWARD

There is proof in the undoing. Or so we tell ourselves: We dismantle small toys as young children, and whole countries as grown adults, with the hope that in undoing them, we may better understand (and perhaps even improve) their operative structures. Consider also the pockmarked landscapes that archeologists leave behind after excavating bygone material. The damage has, necessarily, been done; In what Faust might call a devil's bargain, we cannot rebuild what has been systematically disfigured in its own name. This is the astute and inherently counterintuitive point from which Curtis Mann's photographic practice originates.

Photography, as Mann has proven, is the ideal medium through which to enact this conundrum. Unlike paintings or sculptures, we tend to forget that photographs have surfaces at all; they appear to us as varnished gestalts, wholly intact and pre-configured. Photography is considered by most to be an anti-process: Too invisible and arcane to be factually understood (particularly in a digital age), the medium is viewed as both flimsy and mystifying. I once heard someone say that photography is the art form most enchanted with its own reflection, most careful and beguiled with itself, and it is hard to disagree. Bearing this tendency in mind, Mann has hit on photography's ripe potential to be defaced and unseen by virtue of its own chemical magic. Like a snake shedding its own skin, Mann's photographs are strategically scraped, bleached, scored, and torn. They are, all of them, at once more beautiful and mangled, possessing more recesses and protrusions, than I expect flat surfaces to allow. Perhaps it takes an outsider: Mann was trained as a mechanical engineer, a field that tests the limits of an object to withstand its own environment.

Beyond its capacity for technical illusion and fragility, we believe photographs, particularly journalistic ones, able to convey and project our world's collective truths. Imagining a world without photographs (I am thinking of reportage images here, or those from a personal trip) is similar to imagining a world before mirrors; how would we see ourselves or those sneaking up behind us? Here, Mann's process swells, becoming two-fold in front of our eyes: In selectively undoing the photographic surface, he not only demystifies its technical infrastructure, but, and perhaps more importantly, its conceptual and empathetic one.

By strategically burning or scraping away surface emulsion, Mann actually loads the photograph. How much lived experience, be it terror or tourism, can possibly be conveyed in a sheet of white paper? The resulting partial images are shadows of themselves: Distorted and oblique, they cannot ever be wholly disconnected from their source. I will resist here saying shallow things like Mann has exposed a visual system full of holes, instead concluding that the artist has revealed something profound and poetic in the act of strategic erasure.

Throughout his career, Mann has used bleach in the treatment of his photographs. The choice is telling, and allegorical: In addition to being a whitening agent, it is also a potent disinfectant. Though the content of the photographic imagery underneath the chemical has shifted – from graphic, acquired images during wartime, to abstract color fields, and even the studio of the artist Gordon Matta-Clark – Mann’s creative (or perhaps, curiously destructive) impulses have remained consistent. If anything, he has developed a more contained, refined working grammar. Rather than dipping his pre-treated paper in bleach, which eats away whole sections of emulsion, Mann has developed a system of “misting” his images, creating miniscule interruptions in the surface. These works, though quieter, are no less incisive; as always, Mann’s imagery is seductive enough to challenge, and confuse, the expanse it contains.

Here are things I am reminded when looking at Mann’s lens-less photographs: the high-resolution images of Mars that the robotic drone Spirit sent to NASA at the beginning of this century, before its feed suddenly broke. Sediment. Glittering, crystalline mica flakes, moulted snake skin, intaglio printmaking, alchemy, Clyfford Still’s life lines. I am reminded of looking directly, unflinchingly, into the sun.

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