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ArtReview

Walead Beshty

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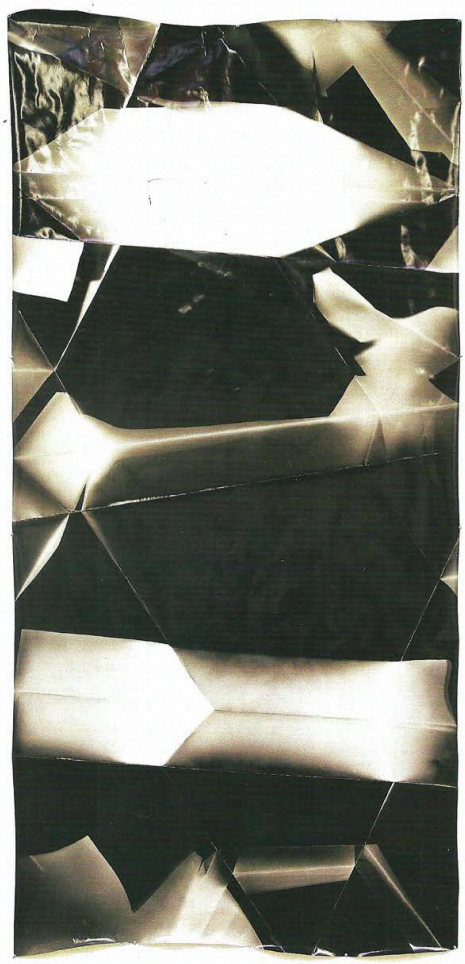
by Helen Sumpter



How the LA-based artist turns both his process and society's rules and restrictions into his art

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September 2014: I meet Walead Beshty at London's Barbican Centre, where he is working on his commission for the Curve gallery, an installation of over 12,000 blue cyanotype photograms titled *A Partial Disassembling of an Invention Without a Future: Helter-Skelter and Random Notes in Which the Pulleys and Cogwheels Are Lying Around at Random All Over the Workbench*. Beshty and his assistant are completing the final photograms: holed up in a temporary studio hidden behind the Barbican's main gallery, they coat objects made from paper and card with the light-sensitive cyanotype solution. The materials on which all these prints are being made – from flattened-out cardboard boxes, newspaper pages and paper plates to dinner menus, sugar sachets and business cards, as well as the objects exposed on them, which include paintbrushes, a spoon, a hammer, pliers, scissors, a step-ladder, a G-clamp and goggles – are all tools, remnants or debris from the artist's working life.

The opening of *A Partial Disassembling...* will mark just over a year since Beshty began making these cyanotypes back in LA, where the British-born artist has lived for the past ten years. When unveiled, the prints are presented in a chronological, packed, salon-style floor-to-ceiling hang, along the full length of the long, arcing Curve space. It's an overwhelming, poetic, sweeping patchwork mosaic, impossible to view in its entirety from one position; a bank of ghostly images, both remnants and reminders of over a year of artistic activity and an installation that is both the work and the document of the artist's making of it.

Despite the show's looming deadline Beshty is happy to talk and we begin our discussion with the proposition of 'transparency', a term increasingly used by politicians to indicate openness and honesty. It's a proposition that's particularly relevant to this project. "In the politics of aesthetics, power can be as much about concealing as revealing the process of how something is made," Beshty points out. "*A Partial Disassembling...* is about inverting that and trying to turn that idea of total disclosure into the product. It's a work that self-narrates, but because there's an excess of information, the narrative is both totally transparent and totally incomprehensible."

The idea of a duality of visibility and invisibility runs through Beshty's work. The artist made *Island Flora* (2005), a series of colour photographs of planted highway median spaces (traffic islands), shortly after moving to LA, because he found something compelling in these areas of lush vegetation that could be seen by anyone driving past but at the same time were totally isolated and inaccessible.

above *A Partial Disassembling...*, 2014 (installation view). Photo: Chris Jackson/Getty Images. Courtesy Barbican Centre, London

facing page *Fold (300/600/900/1200 directional light sources), December 31st 2012, Los Angeles, California, Ilford Multigrade IV MGF.1K*, 2013. Courtesy the artist and Thomas Dane Gallery, London

His *Travel Pictures* (2006/08) – photographs that show the striped marks caused by X-ray damage when unexposed photographic film is put through airport security – had their beginnings in a series of photographs Beshty took in 2001 in the abandoned Iraqi diplomatic office to the former DDR in Berlin. Beshty recounts the story of how this building had been partially destroyed by a fire that had raged out of control because the German government didn't know who to get permission from to enter the space, and how, because Iraq had another embassy in the former West Berlin, this was not only an obsolete embassy but an obsolete embassy in an obsolete country. "Those tensions were interesting to me, because they're about the abstraction of international law. Here was this real building in Berlin, but because of the Vienna Convention, it wasn't Berlin, it was a sovereign territory of another country, and on top of that, it was a modern ruin, a leftover space."

When the events of 9/11 took place shortly afterwards, followed by the Iraq War, Beshty chose not to exhibit those images to avoid an inevitable association with the conflict. But after the film was accidently damaged by X-rays at airport security, he did show the resulting prints – the distorting pinky-purple and green glare on the images shifting their subject focus to that of visible markers of invisible borders, a reference both to the limbo of airport security and to the limbo status of the embassy. These works are less about the individual images than the process used to make them, what Beshty has described in terms of a game that's made up of its rules, rather than of achieving particular outcomes. His related series of *FedEx* works (2007–) – glass sculptures constructed with dimensions to fit exactly inside FedEx postal boxes, also operates under sets of rules, those of both FedEx and Beshty. Each time the sculptures are exhibited, they are 'FedExed' to their destination and displayed on top of the packing boxes, any travel damage – cracks and chips in the glass – functioning as a set of visible markers of their otherwise invisible journeys.

A Partial Disassembling... uses diaristic conventions, but it's not a diary. Beshty's use of studio 'debris' in this way is not to focus in on the minutiae of his own life, but to reveal and give equal value to everything in his working life and to show how it all connects. Beshty also makes a point of photographing people he works with – assistants, fabricators, framers, graphic designers and writers too: after we've talked I pose in the gallery, to be added to this process. Beshty uses the photographic medium, but he's not a photographer in the truest sense of the word: "I was never engaged with making the perfect print.

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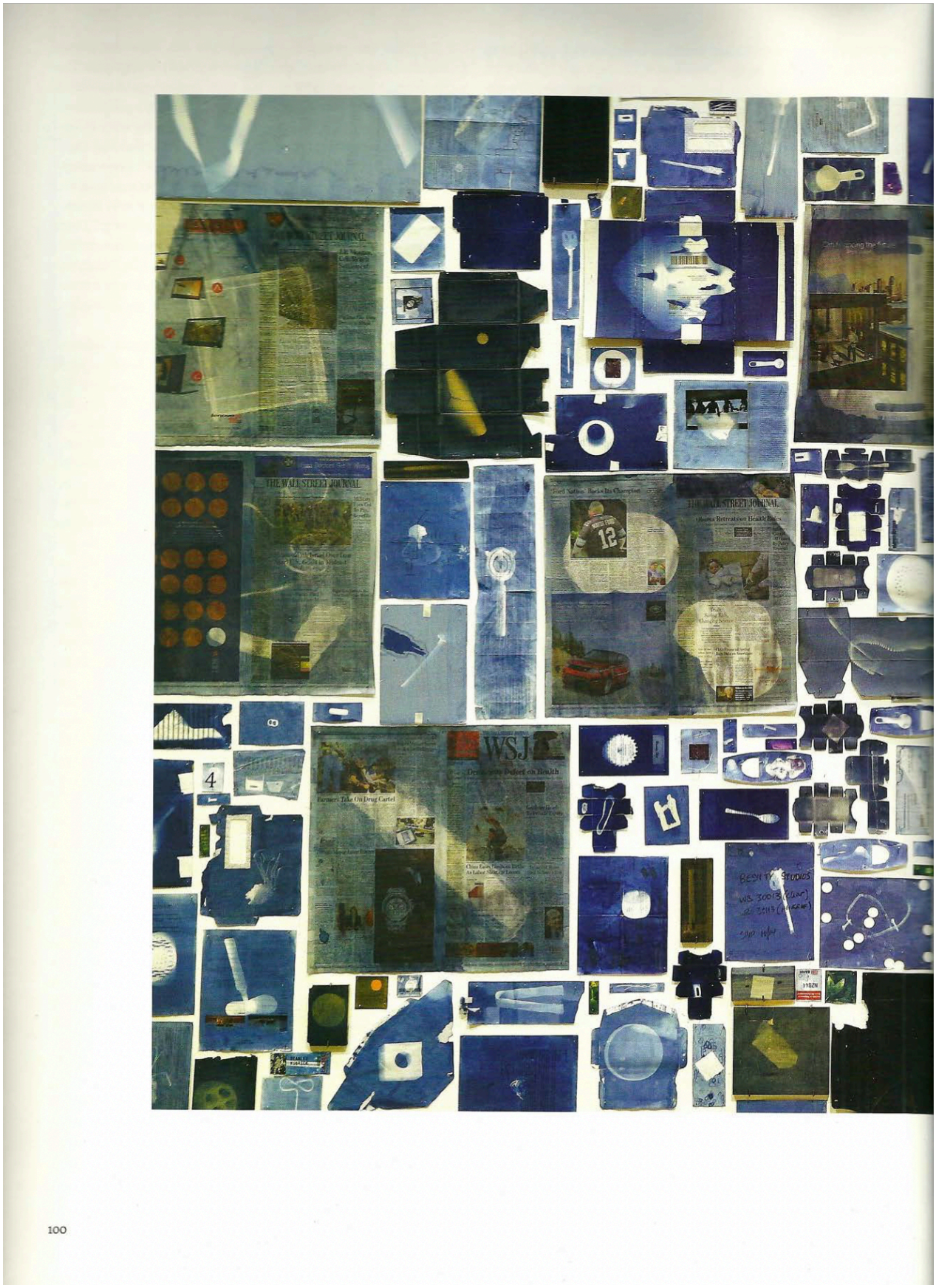

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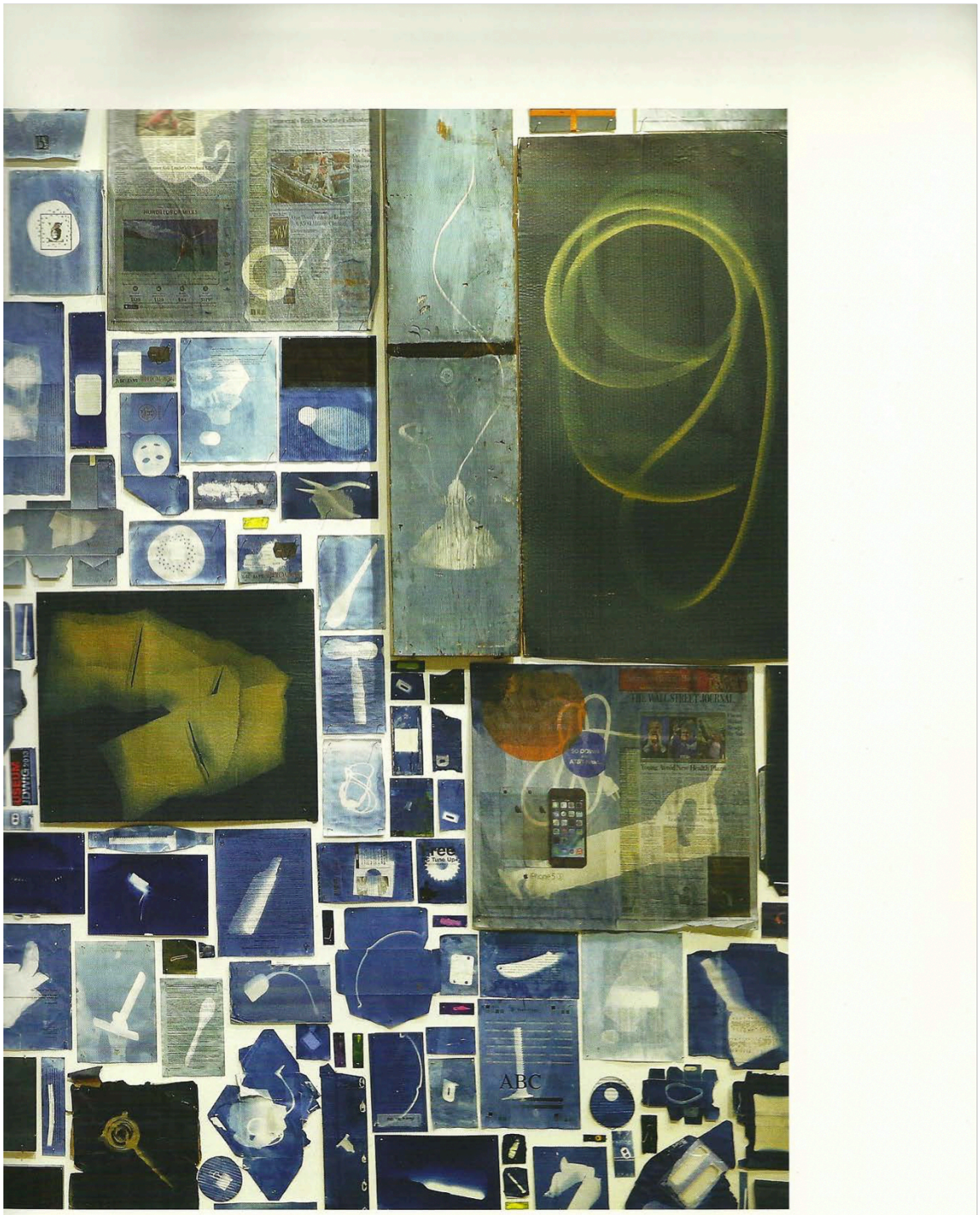

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above *FedEx Kraft Box* 2005 FEDEX 330504 10/05 SSCC, *Priority Overnight, Los Angeles-Miami trk#865344981299, October 29-30, 2008, Priority Overnight, Miami-Ann Arbor trk#861049125115, March 03-04, 2009, Standard Overnight, Ann Arbor-Los Angeles trk#868274625749, July 09-10, 2009, Standard Overnight, Los Angeles-San Francisco trk#878069766471, August 27-28, 2009, Standard Overnight, San Francisco-Los Angeles trk#870342520145, November 12-13, 2009, International Priority, Los Angeles-London trk#798269222978, April 10-12, 2012, 2008–.*
Courtesy the artist and Thomas Dane Gallery, London

preceding pages *A Partial Disassembling...*, 2014 (installation view).
Photo: Chris Jackson/Getty Images. Courtesy Barbican Centre, London

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