

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Baker, Simon and Barbara Kasten. 'Through the Lens of Abstraction' *Tate etc.* Issue 43. Summer 2018 pp. 66 – 77

TATE ^{ETC.}

Through the Lens of Abstraction

**Through
the
Lens
of
Abstraction**

**by Simon Baker and
Barbara Kasten**

Shape of Light: 100 Years of Photography
and Abstract Art at Tate Modern

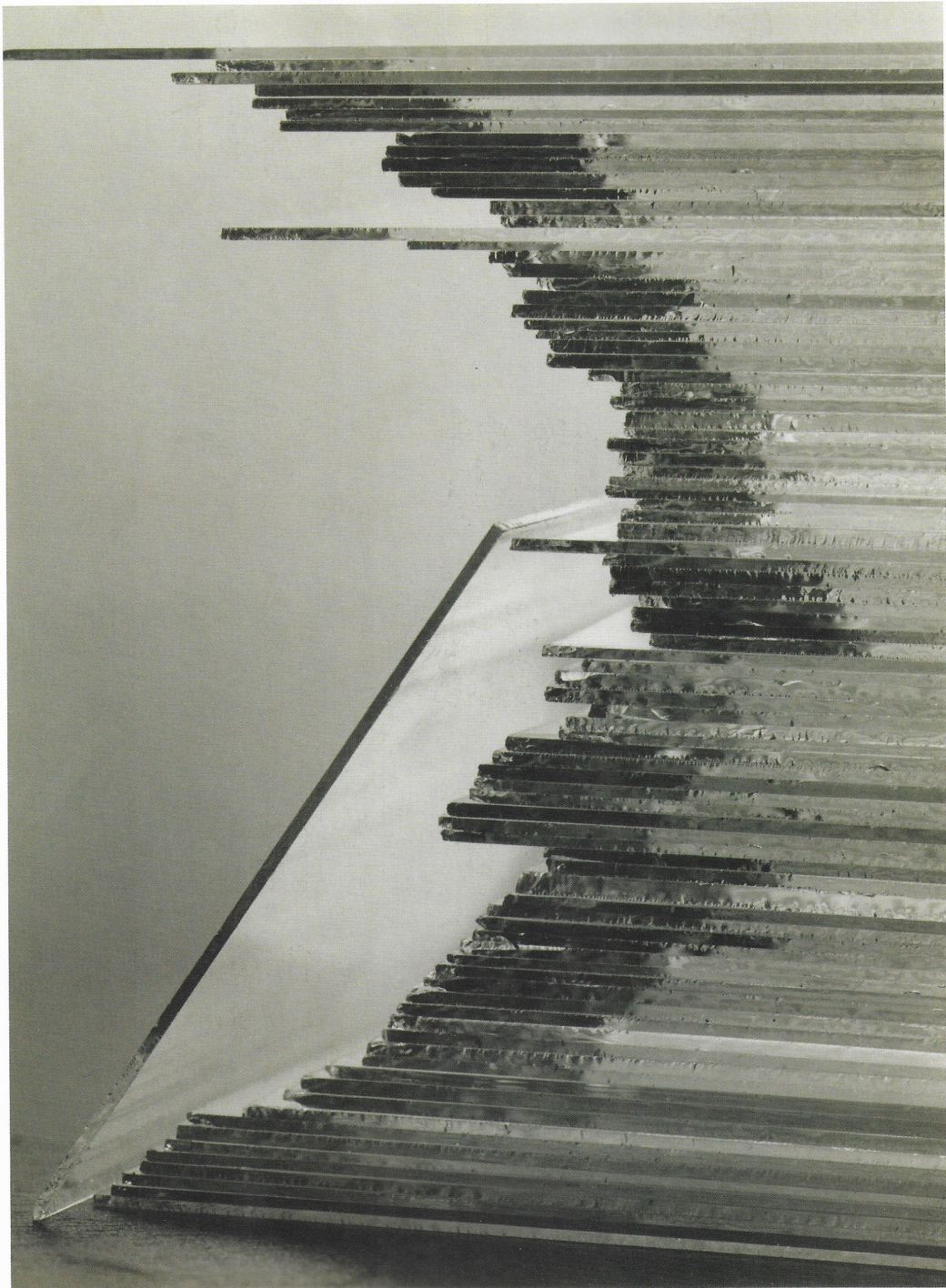
The arrival of 20th-century abstract art and developments
in photography reflected key periods in modern visual culture,
although their stories have been told separately – until now

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We see the world around us as a result of visible light; and photography, which literally means 'writing with light', depends entirely on it – whether the shadows and lights of black and white, or the full range of the visible spectrum in colour.

Shape of Light offers a history of the ways in which artists, from the beginning of the 20th century to the present day, have explored how different photographic processes and technologies can be used to create abstract images – either through using the camera lens to transform the world around them, or by working directly with photographic materials and chemicals to make images that do not try to represent things in the real world.

The photographic artists in *Shape of Light* have responded to, and sometimes pre-empted, the developments in abstract art across other media, from painting and sculpture to film, kinetic art and installations.

As the earliest works in the exhibition make clear, artists working with photography at the start of the 20th century made connections between photography and painting in different ways: some sought to engage in the same avant-garde experiments as their contemporaries (with cubism or vorticism); elsewhere they paid homage to artists famous for their abstract work (like Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian).

And as it moves through time towards the present day, the exhibition shows how the relationships between photography and abstract art of all kinds changed, shifting from an early moment when the essential qualities of painting and sculpture and those of photography were clearly distinct, to our contemporary moment in which artists no longer define themselves by one medium or restrict their practice to a single process or approach.

Shape of Light: 100 Years of Photography and Abstract Art, sponsored by Hyundai Card with additional support from Tate Patrons, curated by Simon Baker, Senior Curator, International Art (Photography), Tate Modern and Emmanuelle l'Ecoctais, Curator of Photography, Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris with Shoair Mavlian, Director of Photoworks (formerly Assistant Curator, Tate Modern) and Sarah Allen, Assistant Curator, Tate Modern, Tate Modern, until 14 October.

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Previous:
Willy Zielke
Stacking of Glass Plates I
1929, gelatin silver print
on paper, 22.6 × 16.7 cm

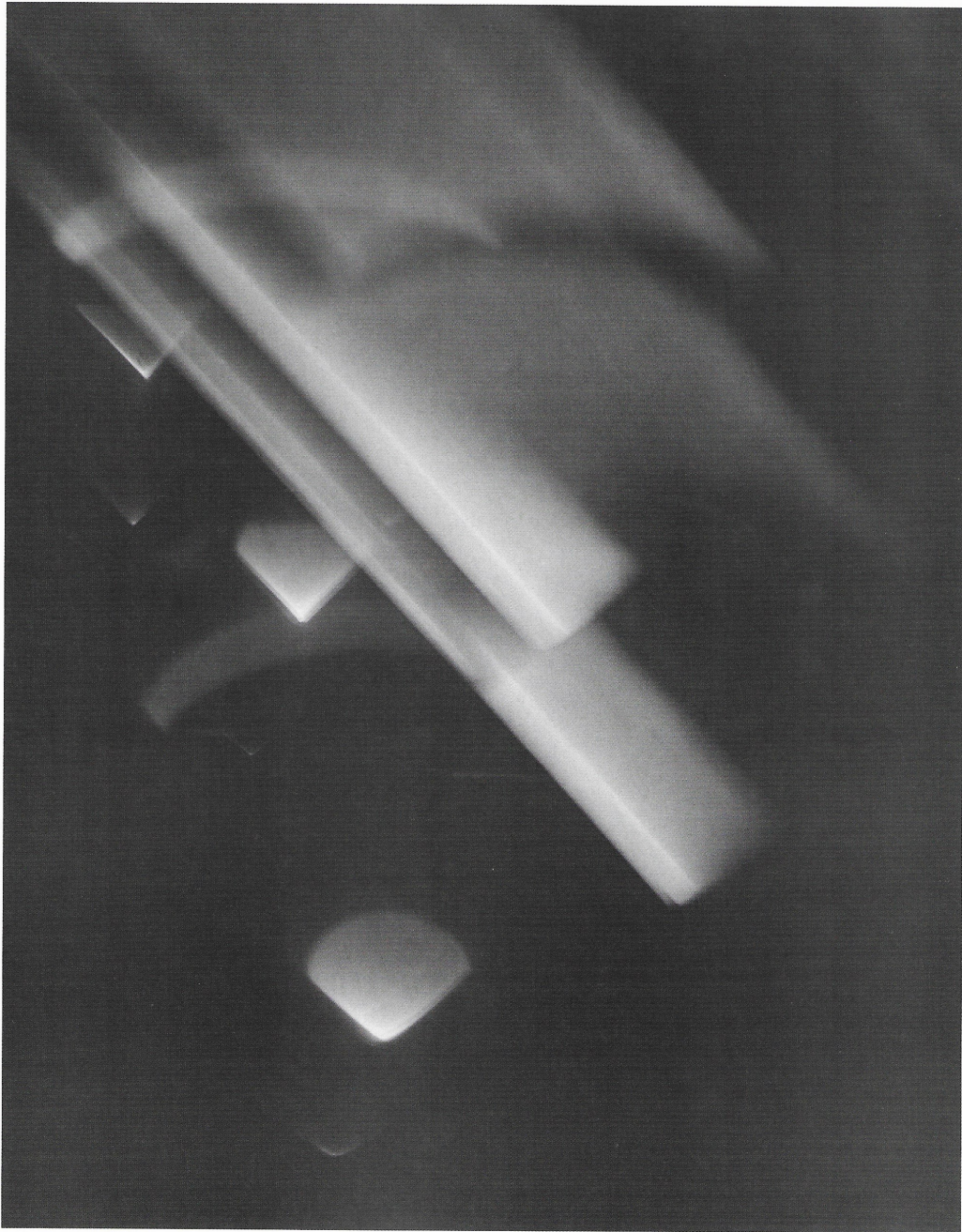
John Divola
74V13 1974, gelatin
silver print on paper,
17.7 × 17.7 cm

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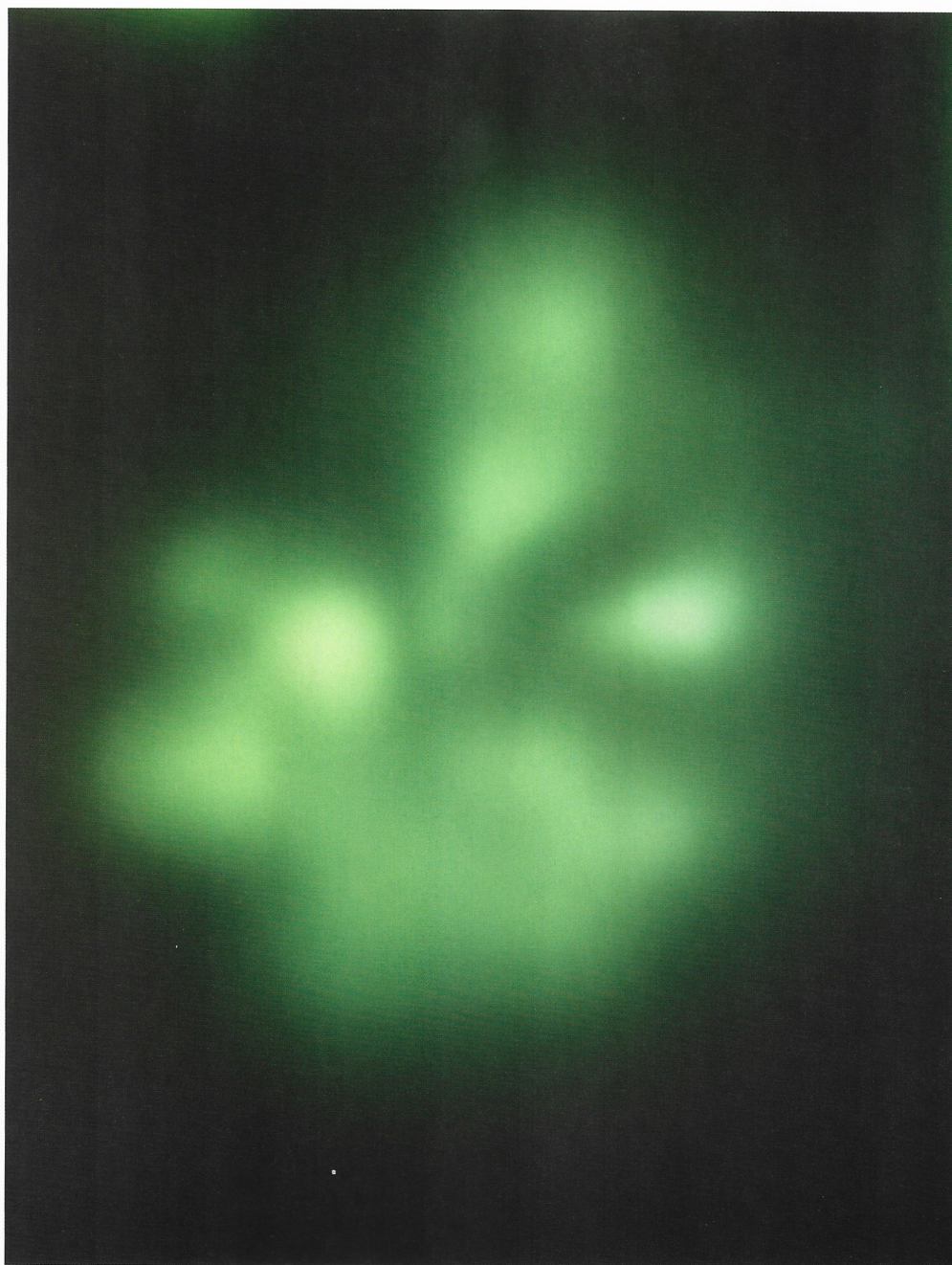


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Hanaya Kanbee
Light B 1930, printed
1970s, gelatin silver
print on paper,
25.7 × 20.3 cm

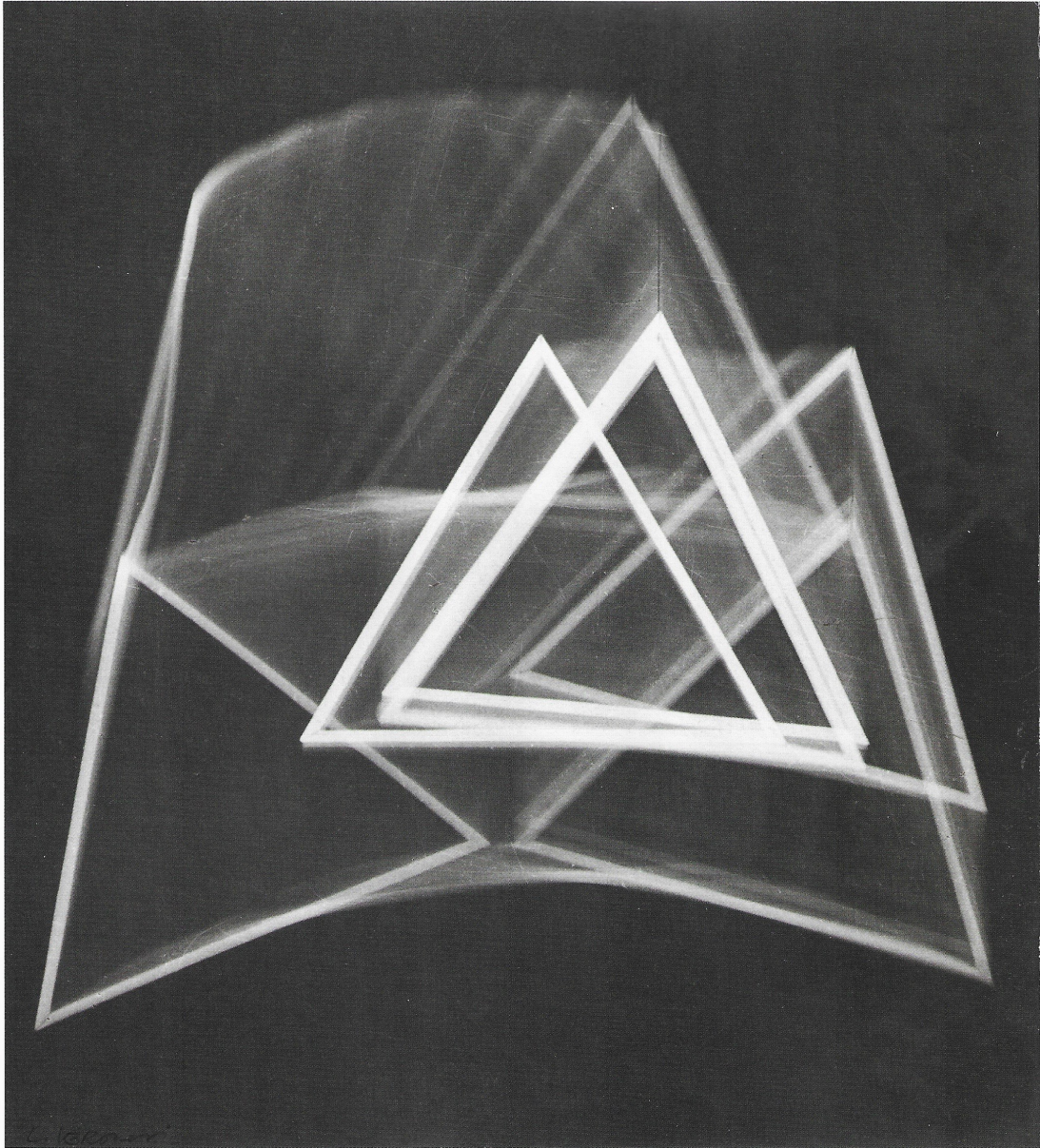
Sigmar Polke
From the series *Untitled*
(*Uranium Green*) 1991,
dye destruction print
on paper, 61 × 50.8 cm

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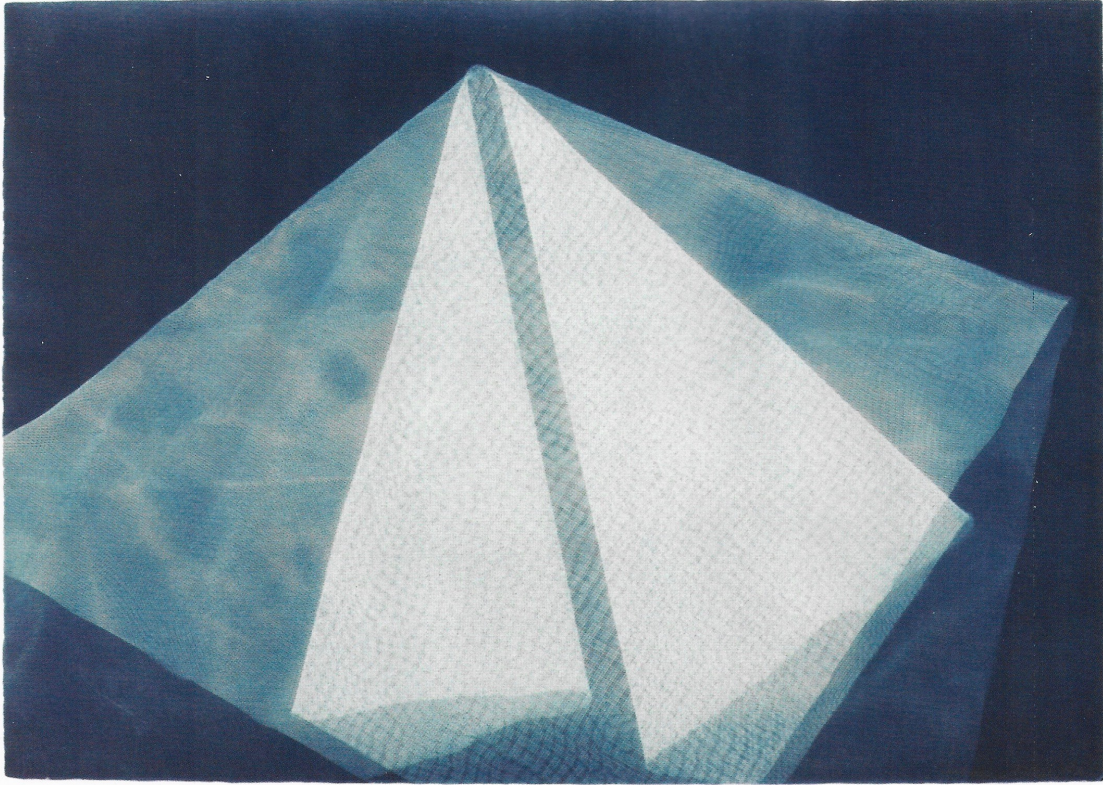
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Luigi Veronesi
Photo n.145
1940, printed 1970s,
gelatin silver print
on paper, 31 x 28 cm

Barbara Kasten
Photogenic Painting,
Untitled 74/13 1974,
cyanotype photogram,
76.2 x 101.6 cm

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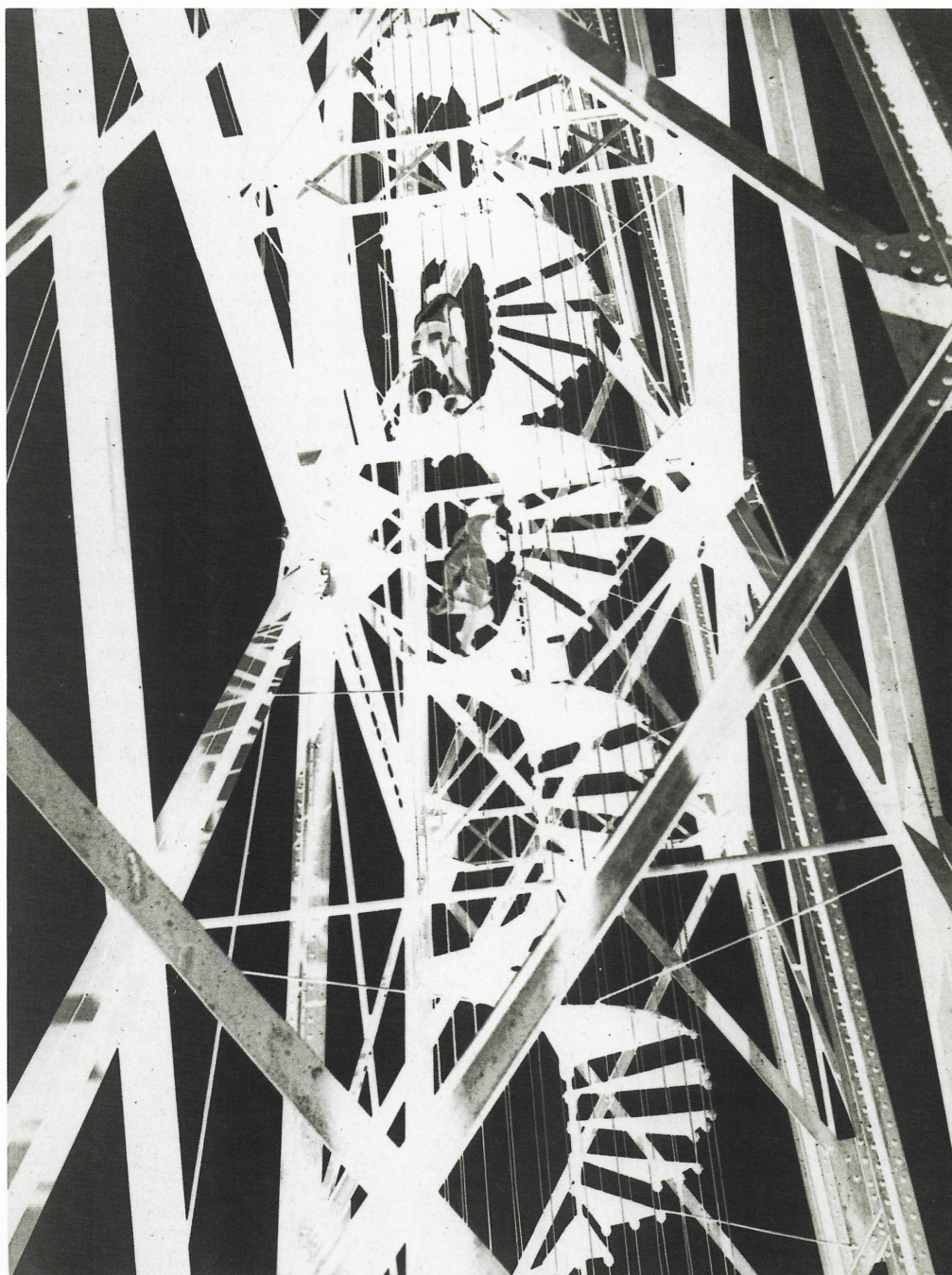


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Francis Bruguère
Design in Abstract
Forms of Light c1925,
gelatin silver print
on paper, 24 × 19 cm

László Moholy-Nagy
Pont Transbordeur.
Marseille 1929, gelatin
silver print on paper,
23.7 × 17.9 cm

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American photographer Barbara Kasten
pays homage to the modernist practitioners
who have influenced her

Painting and sculpture are often thought of as major influences on photographic abstraction. The works in *The Shape of Light*, however, make me consider the degree to which this influence may be the other way around. The Bauhaus, established in Germany a century ago, had a profound impact on the direction of photography as a new art form: one of the movement's prime directives was the exploration of light as a medium. The group's material experimentation and explorations of light and space instigated new attitudes toward art and design.

László Moholy-Nagy, a Bauhaus master appointed by founding member Walter Gropius, was a prolific creator of photograms, considering them to be the most abstract way of seeing. Using industrial materials in his photograms, he created planar geometric shapes inspired by the constructivists, exploring motion, transparency and reflectivity. Moholy-Nagy's fascination with the photogram emphasised individual expression and established the photogram as a means towards abstraction for many artists, including me.

My mentor, Trude Guermonprez, brought Bauhaus textile experimentation with her to California College of the Arts (CCA), and that influence guided my work from painting to textiles to photography and sculpture. My work often begins with an exploration of materials, and my initial attraction to photography stemmed from an interest in how the photographic process could provide innovative means to create paintings. The photogram, free from technical restraints and training, offered a direct way to merge a painterly technique with light-sensitive emulsions. The fibreglass window screening I used for the cyanotype *Photogenic Painting* series 1974–5 was an industrial textile that I first stretched then painted on, before exposing it to sunlight. The result was ephemeral and surreal, even though the material itself was bland and meant for practical purposes. In 1978, inspired by the interdisciplinary

experiments of the Bauhaus, I expanded the scale of my photograms by constructing a sculptural assemblage of paper cartons on photo mural paper. Segmented into four panels, painted with oil sticks and then stretched on canvas, the result was a hybrid object – half painting, half photograph.

Throughout my practice and career, I have searched to identify the intrinsic qualities of a material and use them as content for work. An artist's choice of materials can trigger unexpected interpretations that invoke open responses to life

**'The interdependency of
shadow and light is the essence
of photographic exploration
and an inescapable part
of the photographic process.'**

in turn. I discovered a kinship with the many artists in this exhibition who have pursued similar goals to mine. Francis Bruguère examined the pliability of paper to create a fantasy of space in an elegant study of form. I have admired his work since the 1970s when I acquired one of his cut paper photographs. The inherent rigid materiality of the plate glass photographed by Willy Zielke implies an ambiguous monumental structure reminiscent of architecture, which my work often alludes to as well. Having explored fibre sculpture as a graduate student, I relate to the fluidity and malleability of the textiles that Jaroslava HatlÁková manipulated into a suggestion of a ripple on still water. Jacques-André Boiffard created photograms using a mysterious liquid substance that appears

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to grow before our very eyes, creating forms that are echoed by my painted cyanotypes.

The interdependency of shadow and light is the essence of photographic exploration and an inescapable part of the photographic process. I see the play between these two phenomena as basic components of photographic abstraction, with their exchanging roles of solidity and transparency. In my work, shadow transforms the three-dimensional space of my constructions into the two-dimensional surface of the photograph. It is the same magic that Hanaya Kanbee used in 1930 to photograph mysterious subjects, encapsulating them in shadow, suggesting a convoluting journey into space. On the opposite end of the grayscale is the ephemeral light with which Lotte Jacobi traced a mere tinge of shadow, providing only a breath of its presence. Jaromír Funke cast a spotlight upon a simple geometric construction to suggest a formidable architectural structure, while Luigi Veronesi added the dimension of time to his geometric configurations of motion studies made in 1940.

All of these photographers understood the power and transformational abilities of light and shadow. The combination creates content by its own presence and is one of the many methods that artists, including myself, employ to create abstraction within photography, a process that requires 'a subject'.

In exemplifying how early Bauhaus pedagogy has appeared through generations, my observations here touch upon only a few artists of many. Those early 20th-century artists pushed boundaries that contemporary practitioners now unabashedly erase to produce work that mixes any desirable mediums. Today, photography is used in installations, performance, video and any means of artistic expression that one can imagine.

Barbara Kasten is an artist living and working in Chicago. Works from her *Photogenic Painting* series are featured in *Shape of Light: 100 Years of Photography and Abstract Art* at Tate Modern.



Barbara Kasten
in her New York
studio, 1983