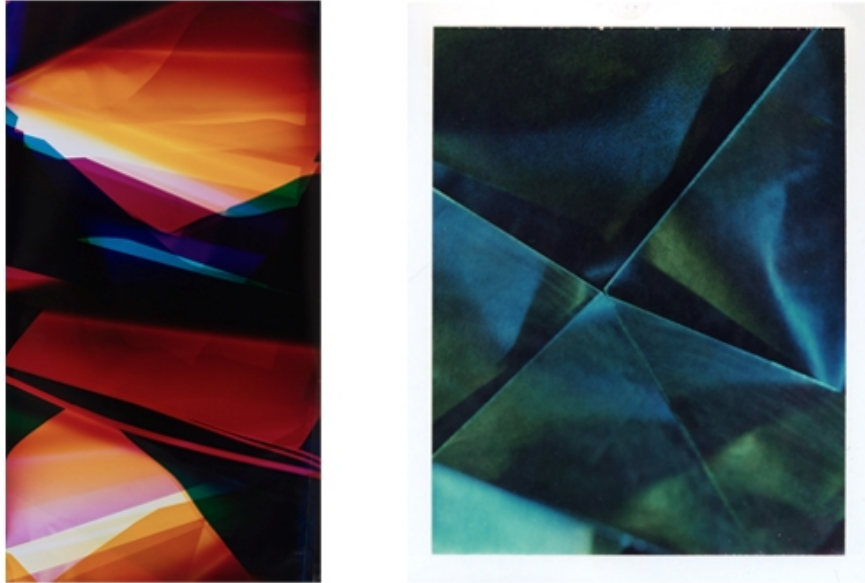


THE ARTIST'S VOICE SINCE 1981

BOMBSITE

Walead Beshty & Eileen Quinlan
Web Only/Posted Sep 2009, ART



[Left: Walead Beshty, *Six Color Curl* (CMMYYCC: Irvine, California, July 17th 2008, Fuji Crystal Archive Type C), 2009, Color Photographic Paper, 50×94 inches. Right: Eileen Quinlan, *Satin Star*, 2007, Unique color polaroid, Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Buchholz.]

Head over to BOMBLOG for a [slideshow](#) of works by Quinlan & Beshty.

Both Walead Beshty and Eileen Quinlan make photographs that look out of time, out of place. If there's an initial inclination to label their photographs "abstract" based on their *look*, they agree in the conversation below that the designation is problematically founded on a modernist painting paradigm and, especially in the case of Beshty's photograms, is simply inaccurate. Better to say that each artist is involved in the material concerns of photographic practice. Quinlan creates images of dimensional confusion by photographing modest studio constructions of foam, mirrors, and other common materials, and she exposes the construct of the artificial scarcity of the edition by often displaying an entire edition side by side and treating it as a singular piece. Whereas Quinlan doesn't manipulate her photos in the darkroom, Beshty's darkroom practice for his photograms is dependent on chance operation; to make them, he exposes multicolored paper to light according to a predetermined and self-imposed set of rules. The Los Angeles-based Beshty and the Brooklyn-based Quinlan both taught briefly at Bard this summer, and they met to record this conversation on a rooftop in New York's Chinatown.

WALEAD BESHTY Maybe it's good to start with basic questions about your process, specifically your choice to avoid making decisions in the darkroom.

EILEEN QUINLAN I made a decision when I went to graduate school that I didn't want to go out into the world and shoot anymore; I only wanted to be in the studio. So in order to limit my options in searching for a subject, I decided I wouldn't pursue any effects or manipulation outside the studio itself. Then I would print in a really straightforward way. It's kind of the opposite for you, no?

WB Sort of, in the sense that the production of some of my work occurs exclusively in the darkroom, but several years ago I had a similar desire to go back to a discrete set of limitations and a conventional site of photographic production. For me, the place to regroup was the darkroom, probably because that was the place where I first confronted photography as something distinct from just taking pictures. The questions I had about your process hit me when I saw the show that you were in at Luhring Augustine, *Strange Magic*. If I remember correctly, you showed a whole edition in a continuous row.

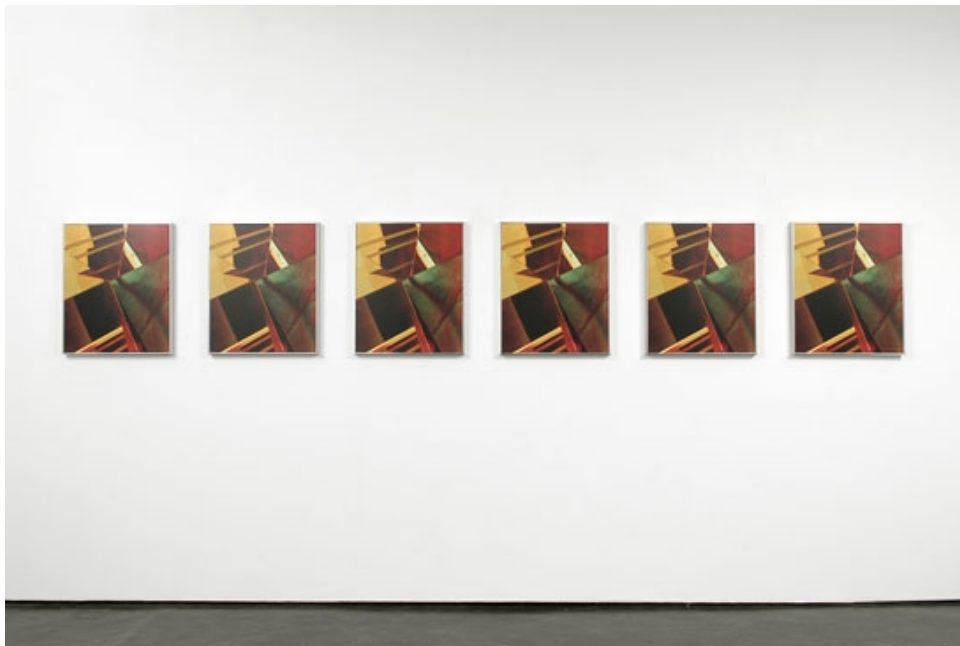
EQ I did, yeah.

WB It made me think of Sherrie Levine, particularly the way she would show full editions of her work side by side. That choice surprised me; I hadn't thought of your work in relationship to appropriation before. I thought your choice undermined the history that is usually ascribed to working non-figuratively, and connected the history of abstraction with the history of appropriation, two threads that are usually treated as discrete. That work prompted me to think of abstraction as a readymade form, which resonated with some problems I was considering at the time.

EQ In that piece I was looking for a way to encourage people to focus less on the image and more on the distribution form itself, the construct of editioning. I hadn't done many solo shows then, so the idea of hanging the whole edition as a singular work allowed me to put my photos out there and protect them from being lumped in with any emerging school (neo-modernist, concrete) or being misunderstood as nostalgic investigations of abstraction itself. I wanted to make it clear that my struggle didn't end with manifesting an image, but extended to grappling with photographs as objects. I wasn't thinking consciously about Levine, appropriation, or Pictures artists, but I was chafing a little at the way the discourse around the "new photography" was being framed—formally—in *Strange Magic* and elsewhere. I wanted to isolate myself and my concerns through a presentational device.

WB Was it sold together?

EQ Yes. I was interested in collapsing the idea of the edition by turning it into something unique. So the five prints plus the AP couldn't be broken up, and it was titled as one work: *The Full Edition of Smoke & Mirrors #24A*.



Eileen Quinlan, *The Full Edition of Smoke & Mirrors #24A*, 2006, UV-laminated chromogenic print mounted on Sintra, 24×20 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Sutton Lane Gallery, London.

WB Doing this acknowledged photographic reproducibility, complicating the idea of the autonomous artwork. In retrospect, I think your gesture stood out to me because the abstract picture is the quintessential autonomous artwork; I remember thinking, What better way to play with its transcendental purity, its

loaded history, than to accept the premise of abstraction but turn it into a sequence of copies or duplicates.

EQ I was interested in the way abstraction was mobilized commercially, via stock photography and graphic design. There are abstract forms, corrupting painterly geometric abstraction and abstract expressionism, for example, that we encounter daily in the non-art world around us. I was reflecting on that somewhat, looking to muddy those waters.

WB When you mention that you were “grappling with photographs as objects,” it strikes me that it is a particular way of thinking about a photographic object—one where it is a substrate for an image, a means to distribute a particular image, and where the material is also meant to disappear. When photographs are editioned, the object exists to facilitate distribution, to circulate the image it holds. It is the means by which the image becomes tangible and can be *possessed*, even if the object itself is provisional, one of many. So its individual character, the differences between iterations, is less important than what unifies them, i.e. the image. The image is the rarified thing, the material that holds it isn’t. I took it as an argument that what distinguishes photographs is their ability to *contain* images, that being a likeness of another thing defines something inherent to the medium.



Walead Beshty, *Three Color Curl* (CMY: Irvine, California, August 22nd 2008, Fuji Crystal Archive Type C), 2009, color photographic paper, 50×90 inches. All Beshty images courtesy of the artist and Wallspace, New York.

EQ Demonstrating that the prints are yielded from a negative—that they are prints and not paintings, drawings, or photograms—is important to me. And I do struggle with my orientation toward the image. I enjoy working with photographic objects as units that can be arranged in a space. The image itself isn’t always important. Through it I can begin to unravel how images are transmitted. Though sometimes I prefer to engage with a single image as a picture, emphasizing less the way it manifests and circulates and more the way it’s perceived visually, perceptually, historically, as media. I go back and forth.

WB So showing the whole edition also alludes to the potential to make an unlimited set of prints from a single negative because it is an artificially delimited sequence within a potentially infinite set.

EQ Right. The edition confers a kind of value on a photograph that would otherwise be de-valued if you could make 500 prints of it.

WB So the delimitation of the set is also a nod to its commodity status, its transformation from mass-producible good to a scarce good. Perhaps it also creates friction with the time when most photographs were open-editioned.

EQ They were? I hadn’t realized.

WB I remember being in school and seeing open-editioned work of my teachers’ generation; I don’t think that practice fully disappeared until the end of the ‘90s. I also remember being told that you *had to* edition your work, that you couldn’t just print as many as you liked. That didn’t make sense to me, and no one could

explain why a particular edition size was chosen over another. The only explanation was that with photography, one had to create artificial scarcity in order to have it operate as art. The arbitrary delimitation of the edition never stopped troubling me, but at the same time, the idea of any set of objects—even prints—being equivalents was equally troubling. I think producing rule-based photograms was an effort to reconcile the seriality of the photographic print with the heightened attention to object specificity that is an integral part of looking at objects within an art context. In general, photograms are discussed in terms of their uniqueness, but my photograms are interchangeable, repetitious, because they are produced according to a set of rules that are fixed, yet each execution of those rules is specific unto itself. With my photograms, the paper acts as its own negative—it is the thing that is imaged and the thing that registers that image, but the negative is generic, industrially standardized. Despite the limited set of variables, differentiation still happens. I would argue that all of my photograms are, in a conventional sense, “images” of the same thing, even though they are unique as objects. That dualism interests me. I think the way we understand industrial objects emphasizes their similarities, yet the distinctions between them are important and generally obscured. After all, uniqueness is always present in a photograph—even when using the same conventionally made negative to produce a series of prints of the same size—it is just deemphasized. Small shifts in temperature and the conditions of the chemistry all create variations in prints, even something as minute as a shift in the emulsion batch of a particular paper. But the question is the significance of these differentiations, and whether it is possible to open up what is treated as a closed system, to find the possibility of agency within a predetermined, standardized, structure. I felt like some element of this question of difference was in play within your *The Full Edition* . . . work, but from a drastically different angle. I was reminded that the same thing twice, or five times, is very different than that thing once. That resonated with me because the arbitrarily delimited edition as an unaccounted-for element of making photographs was something I’d been struggling with, and I thought yours was an ingenious way accommodate and use the convention of editioning as an integral part of the work.

EQ There’s always some variation in any set of prints, even from the same negative, since their production involves the separate handing of each piece of paper by a human operator. But inconsistencies within a set are all but invisible, even when installed side by side. The edition piece wasn’t a place where I wanted to emphasize difference, but rather open-ended reproducibility being artificially corralled. I was both giving the collector what they seemed to want, allowing them to possess the picture completely via the entire edition, including my AP, while demystifying, and potentially hobbling the seductive power of the works by framing them as technical images, straightforward photographs divorced from my hand. We seem to both struggle with the appearance of producing “satisfying” art objects, especially where their consumption is concerned. We both make colorful, sometimes beautiful and mysterious photographs, though you make many other things as well. Conversely, your photograms may be attractive to some because they can be possessed as singular objects, yet they have so many very close cousins that singularity becomes diluted.



Eileen Quinlan, *Smoke & Mirrors #18*, 2005, UV-laminated chromogenic print mounted on Sintra, 16×20 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York.

WB Their interchangeability is important, but I don't think of it as a dilution of a concept of singularity. I think of it as degrees of differentiation between and within sets. I'm less engaged with undermining (or asserting for that matter) a universal concept than establishing a provisional case. Singularity doesn't really exist in my thinking in any absolute way; it's just a question of how a context or a particular group of works can structure an understanding of difference or construct difference itself—but only as an instance, not in any universal sense. A problem is that often the particular is confused for the universal or the example is taken for a rule. So people might say my work is "about" chance, or "about" singularity or repetition, but really this depends on the context, and none of these concepts exist in isolation. I think of how difference is constructed in your work, especially the close aesthetic and compositional strategies that run through various series. I find it forces me to look more closely, makes me more attuned to subtle changes and the history of your work.

EQ My work exists both in actual multiples and in very close variations that circulate as other discrete editions, creating a surplus of images. If your fear is the arbitrary, false, edition, mine is the precious draw of the unique art object, though I do complicate that by presenting Polaroids as one of my formats. When you do make editions, how do you set your limits?

WB When I first showed the photograms they were accompanied by editioned sculptures; the edition closed when the casts wore out. I don't think of the work, even the work that is "unique," as singular—they're all duplicates in some sense. If there is a unique work, it's in the rules and context to which it is applied. I guess this is how I think of all artworks. My first photograms came from an appropriated source, generated from a drunken conversation with Dan Hug about a body of Moholy-Nagy's—Hug's grandfather—work that turned out not to exist.

Moholy-Nagy always stood out because his work was ideologically promiscuous, almost illustrative. His work, distinct from his writings, never seemed to veer into universal prescription; it was local in a formal sense, which was quite different than most photography that seemed to be about a singular type of approach. I admired artists whose use of photographs varied, like Walker Evans and William Christenberry, or later Michael Schmidt, Stephen Shore, James Welling, Catherine Opie, or Wolfgang Tillmans; it made me think of the connections between works, to treat their practices as a larger structure, beyond the aspects of a single work or group of works. While this felt common in art in general, it wasn't so common in photography. In the late '90s and early '00s, I had the feeling that photographic practice was stagnating in a late Victorian pictorial model that treated the photograph as a window, the frame as a

proscenium arch, and I was pretty suspicious of this sort of theatrical pictorialism. It was the only thing that seemed to be around, not just staged work, but also work that aped the New Topographics photography of the '70s, that was strongly influenced by Neue Sachlichkeit, and 19th century landscape photography like that of the US Geological Survey. This isn't to say I wasn't strongly influenced by that generation, but I couldn't make work in that way, and I had a problem with work that *looked like* that but was contemporary. So the photogram was both a way to try to get out of historical trajectories that felt like dead ends and figure out how I could contribute or participate in a conversation without reiterating or just performing it. So my conversation with Dan started by asking why contemporary photography all looked so similar, and I brought up a question I had discussed with Jim Welling: why had no one made a materialist photograph—one that dealt specifically with its condition as a material object—in the early 20th century? It seemed like it should have happened in the '20s and '30s—especially in Russia—because there was such a strong polemic being developed about pictorial images, and a pretty advanced argument about the politics of aesthetics, which manifested in an early form of the critique of representation. Dan said, "Moholy did it." So we came up with this whole story, fully believing it in the drunken moment. We even invented dates and titles.

EQ There was no evidence of the Moholy-Nagy work?

WB In the end, neither of us could find any work that fit the description we concocted. But that didn't matter. What was important to me was that it was a possibility that wasn't fully exploited. It was something that *should* have happened and didn't. And that was the premise for that first series of photograms, to reconstruct a missing link that, for me, solved some of the problems that I was confronting. We figured that the title for Nagy's work would have been *Abstractions Made by My Hand with the Assistance of Light* because he had these very verbose, spilling, descriptive titles.

EQ And very direct.

WB Yet so hyper-descriptive that they almost sounded like poetry. So I called mine *Pictures Made by My Hand with the Assistance of Light*, striking the word abstraction because I couldn't embrace that term in good faith. That term articulated the rift I felt with the history that was being obliquely cited.

EQ Well, it's a problematic term. Especially regarding photography. Obviously you could argue that all photographs are abstractions of, or from, reality.

WB I think all pictorial photographs are, but I was curious if there was a possibility for a non-abstract photograph, which is funny because of the tendency to describe the work that came out of this thinking as abstract. Strictly speaking, though, they aren't, they literally are what you are looking at, they image themselves and the context of their production. Abstraction is always something that stands apart or aside from what it means and what it represents. Abstraction as a category seems to be a problem for painting, too, but at least in painting there's a string of historical movements associated with the term. Describing a photograph as abstract usually implies a simulation of those painterly movements. Anyway, my first photograms used this fictive story as a way out of a set of problems.

EQ For me, stories are the problem. When I was studying photography at the Museum School in Boston in the early '90s, we lived in the shadow of these towering figures and former students: Nan Goldin, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, and the Starn twins. A foregrounding of narrative, via slices of life or highly composed film stills, was the first (but not the last!) approach to contemporary photography I was bothered by. Spielberg was not my hero. The cinematic style of Gregory Crewdson didn't speak to me, and I wasn't willing to plunder my life for subject matter the way Goldin had. At the time it looked like art photographers were either messily diaristic, nostalgically noirish, or artily retro-mythic like the Starns or JP Witkin. If your mind didn't work that way, there weren't a lot of other models. The teacher that took the most time with me, Bill Burke, was an adventurer, a Gonzo photographer, regularly tangling with the Khmer Rouge and documenting casualties of war in a very personal, powerful way. Using the camera as a means of trying to confront Pol Pot's horrors was a project I respected deeply but couldn't imagine engaging in. I was definitely interested in Cindy Sherman. Her awkward, shabby, cryptic "narratives" in the *Untitled Film Stills* implicated the viewer in the construction of the story. That

seemed true to me.

WB Staged work from the '90s still relied on Sherman or Jeff Wall as a template. Narrative was definitely something I was trying to excise from my own thinking. A photograph is, in depictive terms, static; there's no temporality. Narrative never really happens in a photograph, and it seemed like that impossibility was what staged photography was about—in other words what was absent—and the viewer was directed toward this missing component. It's kind of like abstraction, because the only thing that makes something abstract now is that it looks like something that was once called abstract, so it's an echo of something that once had a clear motivation. Also, it is about something that isn't present, simply by definition of the term: it is "abstracted" from something else. Likewise, narrative photography in the vein of Wall looks like religious painting or history painting; it plays off a time when certain stories were assumed to be part of a collective unconscious. Only the echo of these narratives remain. Sherman was different; compositionally it looks like street photography or documentary photography as much as film stills, but it relied on a similarly false assumption in viewers that turned something that was assumed to be direct—like photographic story telling—into something that was ambiguous. Narrative photography seemed duplicitous, cueing a certain interpretive approach only to present its lack of certainty, and it didn't seem to offer a way to think through this uncertainty, to propose something affirmative in its absence. In the cases of "narrative" or "abstraction," there is a formal trigger for an interpretive code, a relationship between shapes onto which one projects a script, but it really has very little to do with the object itself, it just describes an interpretive approach to a work, and asserts this as a rule. Still, there is something about that work that stuck with me. Its alienating effects felt ubiquitous; it paralleled an alienation that was present in the world at large, or at least my suburban upbringing. I think the prevalence of staged work is why I was first drawn to the perverse theatricality of malls.



Walead Beshty, *Phenomenology of Shopping (Filene's, The Danbury Mall, Danbury, CT) 3*, color photograph, 2002, 47 ¾ x 68 inches.

EQ It's interesting that you equate supposedly uncompromised abstraction with being scripted, associative, and clichéd, like narrative. I also felt that the staged photos I was seeing suffered from referencing either history painting or film to such a degree that they became abstract collages, ceasing to communicate any story directly. My attempt to dredge my unconscious for "new images" from a tightly controlled but highly "creative" studio practice only produced more clichés. What I see in my work are the ghosts of things I've internalized through looking at art, while working with graphic design, or advertising, or fashion, or commercial photography. I try to transmit this through the framing of it, so that the work isn't understood as purely formal, as being untainted by my time and experience.

The first works of yours I saw was the series you were doing in stores where you were plunging yourself into bins of products. They felt like performance documents. Was that the same as the work you were doing in malls?

WB No, I did those while in grad school. I guess those works do function like performance stills—they are pretty conventional in photographic terms—and I

was thinking more of the behavior being depicted than the act of depiction. The early mall photos were done in a street photography style. I was 18 when I was making them, which makes sense since my suburban adolescence was situated around the local mall and I was sweating that out. What I realized later was that malls were like stage sets; they constructed vision in a way similar to theater and implied a narrative relationship between objects. They were like theater sets for the public to inhabit, act within. The *Phenomenology of Shopping* photographs came later, and were a byproduct of my fascination with the constructed space of the mall, of display. I was reacting to that in a base manner, just forcing my body into displays and willfully misrecognizing the type of use they invited. If I came upon a hole the size of my head, I'd stuff my head in it, but there was no way to define the duration of the act, so making a photograph put brackets around it. I'd been thinking of the Situationists, and the idea of *detourning*, as an antipode to the idea of the *flaneur*; instead of being detached, distant, like street photographers, I wanted to stupidly interface with what I was provoked by. I didn't want to cynically reiterate the theatrical qualities of those spaces. The mall continued to be interesting for me because it doubled as an analogy for the exhibition space as well. Department stores, malls, and contemporary museum architecture have a shared origin in the rise of the leisure class in the 1800s. The transformation of the idea of a public was being constructed through democratic forms that often defined the voice of the public through its consumptive activities . . . I forgot where we started.

EQ We started with narrative, but first I want to respond to a few things you just said, beginning with our shared relationship to the document. I know you implicate your body, your physical presence, in the production of your work. Whether it be through titles like *Pictures Made By My Hand* . . . or a document of you performing an unauthorized activity like shoving your head in whatever space beckoned at the mall. I too related my *Smoke & Mirrors* series, particularly the early pieces, to documents of a private performance, staged only for the camera, where I tried to wrangle a slippery subject—smoke—into a desired position, center stage in my hall of mirrors. My aim was like that of the big game photographer, looking for something around the next corner—or even the amateur bird watcher, collecting a rare specimen by bagging it with her Nikon. There was a relationship for me to the document as evidence of something fleeting. Something conjured, pursued, captured. You also mentioned that you were looking to unmask how malls or galleries frame our experiences of everything within them. I was also looking for a way to foreground the set of assumptions we have about what a photograph is or should be by removing the subject and focusing rather on the way subjects—products in my case—are staged in a seductive atmosphere.

Speaking of staging, how did you “exhaust” your interest in it so quickly? You seem to still be pursuing that alienation effect, though your work offers a site for projection, for enjoyment as well.

WB There was already a great deal of work in that vein, so it seemed foreclosed. I also came to realize that I actually didn't agree with the cynical aspect of it; I didn't want to perpetuate forms which seemed to revel in alienation. No matter what, staged photographs reified dominant or automatic modes of looking at photographs and constructing their meanings, even if it was just to reject this reading. I'm not interested in creating alienation, in fact, I think far too much is designed to have an alienating effect. I want my work to produce affirmative possibilities. In terms of performance, there is still an element of this in the work for me—much of my work operates in this way, not only the photographs—but I think the performance is that of the apparatus, be it technological, social, or what have you, over a duration.

EQ We have the document, and its subject, performance. Like you, I didn't want to stage it. So I had to work blindly.

WB Perhaps, but within your work there's also the idea of the image, the likeness, that persists—something passing for something else. The title *Smoke & Mirrors* offers the idea of revelation, of pulling back the curtain. The readymade answer is that, in materialist terms, it's “the real relations between things” that is obscured. At least in a European context, this seemed to be what postwar abstraction was grappling with; it seemed politicized from the start, a kind of ideology critique focused on the instrumental use of aesthetics and their potential for social change, like El Lissitzky putting one of his abstract paintings outside of a factory or his engagement with design. But your work implies that

there's nothing behind this surface, which is a potent argument, a Pop argument, perhaps. And it makes me think that the conversations around abstraction in the US seemed to be about something less social and more alienated. Pop seemed a direct reaction to painterly abstraction in the US, a negation of the arguments that proposed abstraction as a testament to unfettered subjectivity. Still, it seemed most polemical when considered in terms of self-expression. There were many more artists invested in abstraction in Europe who sought public modes of address or worked with mass media directly. To put it in shorthand, abstraction in the US seemed to point to self-expression, whereas in European context it seemed to develop as a materialist argument. I was wondering what you thought about the term "abstraction," where you situate yourself in relationship to it.

EQ For a long time I didn't think of my work as abstract, and I desperately hoped that it wasn't "expressive." I really thought of what I was doing as studio photography, as *nature morte*. Again, the effects come from photographing products. Maybe the effects themselves are the subject. I notice motifs in the world all the time that emerge in my photos. It could be a curving swoop of light in the background of a shampoo ad or the glow around a piece of tagline text. I'm curious about what these formless elements are supposed to be communicating. I was thinking about alienation in a Brechtian sense, about revealing what was at work in the process of viewing, of constructing meaning within a photograph. In that sense I have more to do with the American school of abstraction you describe than with the postwar European abstractionists who were seeking liberation, utopia.



Eileen Quinlan, *Backdrop and Bandit*, 2008, 6 silver gelatin matte fiber prints mounted on aluminum and 6 UV laminated prints mounted on Sintra, 30×40 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York.

WB You assisted a product photographer?

EQ I actually only shared a studio space with a product photographer. I was working for an architectural photographer who would always leave me behind because I was pretty inept with large-format architectural photo gear. So I would constantly watch this great photographer named Jack Miskell here in New York. He does a lot of work for Clinique, photographing makeup. Most of the things that I do in the studio—the ways that I set up pieces of foam or even the mirrors I use—come directly from that way of shooting. A lot of photographers have some history of working commercially but often separate that from personal work, as if it has a corrosive effect on their artwork.

WB I asked because I was an assistant to a product photographer when I got out of undergrad—a box photographer, to be exact. I'm sure I was the worst assistant. I liked the idea of photography as a 9 to 5 job; I thought it would be an escape from the self-indulgent way of talking I had grown tired of in art

school. What I found, perversely, was even more of this attitude, except in the service of hair care products or energy drinks. I guess looking for something to reject is a natural way to begin, but I didn't find what I expected. I realized that I couldn't get by with rejection forever; producing is affirmative, an *action*, and even if the action erases, it is motivated. I avoided this fact by thinking in terms of negation; shifting this thought process was an extremely important change in my work. What was initially provocative to me about the title *Smoke & Mirrors* is that it played off the narrative around materialist art, that it reveals the truth behind things. But behind the falseness of images you find more surface. Purity and abstraction simply begets more alienation, more image, so in your work there's no proposition of revelation. The truth is its surface, it's immateriality. Does that make sense?

EQ Some. (*laughter*) I was horrified when people called me a neo-modernist early on. I'm not sure I even know what that means, but I took it to suggest that I was seeking some kind of truth, an appraisal of the limits of my chosen medium or of my artistry. I only knew how to complicate my questions with more questions. I didn't believe there was an answer. I probably stop with revealing possible assumptions, while you go so far as to try to undo them.

WB Well, I think my early attempts at doing that were really naïve, hubristic.

EQ I don't see your project as hubristic at all. It's cautiously hopeful. I really appreciate that. It's so easy to disavow. You don't give up there, and it's plain in your work. I guess starting with *Smoke & Mirrors* I was looking to unpack what a photograph was—how it's a construction. Of course I was also interested in how photographs circulate via editing.



Walead Beshty, Installation view of *Legibility on Color Backgrounds* at the Hirshorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington DC, 2009.

WB That's something I really appreciate in that work, because pointing to that in an exhibition space is almost perverse. There's something impolitic about acknowledging editing. It represents the vulgar part of consumption; it's repressed. It takes a slap at art etiquette. There's this ludicrous idea that there's an art that's outside of economic traffic.

EQ The artist's artist?

WB Yeah, and that it's indiscrete to talk about certain things. MFAs are professional degrees and yet actual instruction about the literal mechanisms of the career is limited to studio gossip. At least this was the case when I was in school, and most of us lacked even the most basic tools to negotiate with it when we left. There are artists who are idealized for rejecting a marketplace, but those tend to be the artists who were independently wealthy or had other personal circumstances that made this choice part of the work. I remember thinking that any relationship to the market was a compromise, and absurdly, I

didn't know what that marketplace even was. Ironically, this puritanical attitude just exoticizes the market to the point where it becomes a singularly monolithic force, which it in fact isn't. A marketplace is just people trading goods and services. It's one of many systems that create meaning. It should be accounted for specifically, not invoked in general terms. It's one element in the way works become public, through their being bought and sold, but its mechanics are clear only to insiders, and this makes it seem like it is the chief agent in the art world. Any art effect people don't like, find alienating, is ascribed to the market. In this, and in all other aspects of art making, I think transparency is the only way to destabilize the mythologies of the art market, and of art in general.

EQ When I visit the studios of artists who aren't yet showing, I often try to imagine how their work will translate from the private world of the studio to a public context. I've noticed that they sometimes get upset if I ask about the final form they envision a work taking, or what audience they believe they're speaking to. Some artists want to protect their vision from the effect of "the art world," but I think it is best to try to armor artists against outcomes they want to avoid. Maybe I'm giving the market too much power. But I feel uneasy whenever a subject becomes taboo. And when a grad student claims they don't want their work to have a public life, it seems disingenuous.

WB Also disingenuous is that the people who most vehemently express their outrage with the market are the same ones who create the buzz. The popular critics who decry the marketplace simultaneously reinforce it. It's often the same ones who go on tirades about theory or academic discourse, as though it is a unified thing, as though they are protecting art from it. How noble! I find that sort of faux populism to be condescending and repugnant. It's those instances that seem the most insidious—the lack of honesty, and transparency.

EQ I agree. And now that the market is bad, people sometimes say it will be "good for art," because the artists who will survive these troubled times are the ones that should survive. So there's still this faith in the wisdom of the market as a kind of hive mind to decide who is good and who isn't. Natural selection?

WB Well, to me it sounds like Hitler's famous comment to Spear when he received news that the Allies were closing in on Berlin. He said something to the effect of, "It's great that the Allies are here. They can bomb the city to the ground saving me the trouble of knocking it down to rebuild it how I intended." (*laughter*) When I hear people say things like that, I'm perplexed. A crash does the opposite of what they claim. It makes what little money is out there even more powerful, and the desperation it creates invites abuses. I have no idea how a sane person could argue that less money is good for art. Fewer resources don't mean good things will be supported, in fact I think the opposite is more likely. I believe the more flow of capital there is, the more art venues survive, the more public discussion and consideration is made possible, and the more freedom there is to take chances. My concern is that the smaller projects running on shoestring budgets are most vulnerable and will be hurt first, and that larger institutions are less likely to take risks because of the financial repercussions. Sure, the frantic marketplace produced its own set of problems, but at least there's a greater potential for a diversity of thought within art when more people are able to support themselves through it. There's more freedom to do things on the side, develop projects that don't need to make money, but are borne of excesses in other areas.

EQ What was awful for artists before the crash was the speed of everything, how quickly you had to deliver work for art fairs. Then you had shows, and if you had more than one gallery you had to produce work for several galleries for every art fair. Now that there aren't as many galleries participating in fairs it allows more time to develop work, but if you don't have another source of income, it's difficult to continue working at all. It's true: it's easier to be untainted by serving the market if you don't need to support yourself with your work.

WB I think the discomfort people express about the market comes out of wealthy etiquette, a type of aristocratic shame. People want status objects, but also want this myth of their purity. There was never a point in history where any kind of production was outside the marketplace, especially art. Discussing this frankly begins to answer why certain works were available to a public, why they are a part of history. Again, I think transparency, in that regard, is important.

EQ Let's talk about the term "abstraction" for a moment. You said I'm more comfortable with the term than you are. I'm not so comfortable with it either. I wish I had a better word.

WB It doesn't work for me because it short-circuits some of the reasons I'm doing what I'm doing. My problems with the term have been generative, and perhaps I engage with these issues because it gives me clarity about what I'm doing. I feel similarly about the word "image." An image is always an abstraction no matter what, because it's a likeness and any likeness is subject to a set of transformations, a code of translation, that are used to create an "abstraction" of a state of affairs. Abstraction, like the term "conceptual," gets kicked around in an ahistorical way. I don't really know what people mean when they say it. It's slippery.

EQ "Conceptual" seems to be applied today to anything that is highly intentioned or smart or has a thesis that drives it, that doesn't function intuitively. Usually when people call something "conceptual," they are telegraphing the fact that they don't understand it.

WB And it's often used pejoratively and implies elitism, which is hilarious because conceptual art actively sought popular outlets, like the magazine page, or accessible forms like the Xerox, map, or graph paper; it made artmaking available to anyone with the most basic means. It connected artmaking to the mundane, to daily life. But what I meant was that the term "abstraction" seems important to how you were discussing the function of images—again, how they can slide from material substrate to material substrate and stay, by definition, unchanged, which is the case for the true sense of abstraction: it operates on a metalevel, it organizes the thing it refers to, stands aside of objects.

EQ I'm not sure that they do stay unchanged. My obsession with formats, with presentational modes, is partially driven by a desire to see the same image transformed via its travels from one material substrate to another. When I made the piece *Red Goya*, a diptych where two prints from the same negative are juxtaposed in 40×30 and 24×20 formats, I wanted to force an engagement with the question of the viewer's taste, to examine the power of the physical manifestation of the image to alter its impression on a person. Does the bigger print have more authority because of its relationship to a body viewing it in a space, as something you can't take in with one glance? Something that envelops you? Or is the smaller print more powerful with its higher resolution? More jewel-like in its intensity of color? More precious in its scale? By working with imagery that is less assertive in terms of its subject, I can highlight decisions of presentation because people are less involved in what they're actually looking at.



Eileen Quinlan, *Red Goya*, 2007, UV-laminated chromogenic print mounted on Sintra, Left: 30×40 inches, Right: 24×20 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York.

WB Well, working that way sidesteps the question of what the photograph is

“of” or “about” by making the answer both mundane and irrelevant.

EQ Regarding pesky abstraction again, there’s a real consolidation going on of a number of artists, you and I included. There was that story in *ARTNews* about new abstract photography and your work was on the cover. It was funny because I got 10 phone calls from people thinking it was mine and I had to say, “That’s Walead Beshty’s, actually.” We’ve been crammed into this emerging school that is supposed to represent some kind of new direction for what was becoming an exhausted medium.

WB The irony is that calling it “new” and putting on the cover of a magazine means that it’s already past. (*laughter*) This is true in a sense, since work considering the material conditions of photographs had been largely dismissed and was usually treated as a dead-end experiment.

EQ Exactly. The history of materialist photography isn’t really taught art-historically, though it has always been practiced.

WB Or it’s fabricated. That article said that I studied with Jim Welling, and that I went to UCLA, both of which aren’t the case (I taught some undergraduate classes there). I learned a great deal from knowing Jim, and he continues to be extremely generous, but there were teachers I had that don’t fit into that argument who had an impact on me; Cathy Opie, Roni Horn, Stephen Shore, Mel Bochner, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, or Gregory Crewdson all impacted the development of my work. Large positions of my practice are similarly left out of that story. It’s the impulse to create false genealogies that’s disturbing; what’s lost when history is smoothed out.

EQ Strange that *ARTNews* felt the need to create a neat little story, somehow accounting for your formation as an “abstract” photographer. People often ask me what I’m going to do when I’m not doing this “new photography” anymore. I find that a funny question because it’s like their way of saying, “It’s time for you to move on.” Maybe they’re really wondering what comes next for those of us who seem to be playing the endgame of emptying everything out? I admit that I am interested in the notion of doing something a little too much. I want to take this project to the point of utter collapse, to resist the urge and the pressure to produce something novel. To imagine other possibilities for this seemingly inflexible way of working.

WB When something gets old, you can begin to fully understand it. The endgame thing is a problem; I don’t think of myself as playing an endgame, actually quite the opposite. I think of making work as being propositional, about it containing a possibility for future work, endlessly recombinatory, able to be repurposed. This is sometimes quite literal; like when the work enters into installation, the recombinatory gesture continues. An individual work has a new life within each moment of exhibition. I think of the work like a modular component, endlessly rearrangeable, a spatial tool. Each exhibition is a mechanism made from standardized parts.

EQ You work in some very big scales, but you also make things that are smaller. When you think about installation and how things break up the space, how are you making those format choices?

WB The photograms are scaled off of my body, and the scale of the material produces different kinds of formal effects on the paper. In my work, there’s no real possibility for compositional choice. The conditions of production generate compositional arrangements. The shift between series of work is the result of different rules being implemented. Before and after a work I’m more of an author—maybe the term “organizer” is more accurate—but as it’s being made I’m just a dumb machine, pure labor. If I’m dissatisfied, I have to change the whole process and think of it as a whole, not just in terms of what comes out. I try to take the intuitive moves out, to have everything be about the resistances between forces at work. I find intuition is just another word for convention, an automatic choice made without thinking, because it has been ingrained through repetition. Artists hide behind that, and it creates art that just looks like art, or makes the production of artwork a hermetic and private endeavor. I think of making work like gambling or a game. A game isn’t a single outcome, but a range of outcomes and the parameters that produced them. Intuitive moves change the rules midstream, they destroy the game itself, make the game illegible, ambiguous.

EQ But your subjectivity is at work because you edit; it's not like you present everything that you do. There are failure photographs, I'm sure.

WB The failures become other works. The choice to show some of the work means that other outcomes aren't shown. So I shred the work that doesn't make it into a show and reconstitute it into bricks or slabs and then show these. They are called *Selected Works* but are really selections made by the existence of other selections. So there aren't really "failures," per se. A failure would be breaking the rules, being inconsistent, or second-guessing a process because of an unexpected outcome. Installations have recently started working in a similar way, according to rules, which gets me out of a sort of "placing by feel" decision-making during installation.

EQ I too operate within a set of self-enforced rules, but I enjoy transgressing them sometimes. It's difficult, this question of the intuitive. It's obviously problematic to think about producing what you said are either naïve art objects or things that you cynically create with a *look* in mind that you know is some kind of readymade for what looks appropriate as art. I spend hours setting up and adjusting lighting and I don't think much about what I'm looking for. I don't set out to make something resembling Suprematist artwork, for example, even though the result may feel like that sometimes. At other times, things come out referencing stock photography or other things I've been exposed to. I do work in this kind of unconscious way that isn't completely governed by the apparatus itself. After the fact, I produce and configure these materials, these outcomes as you put it, to function in a more critical or intentioned way or to make claims about their context and to not just focus on them as singular images. I oscillate between the two positions. It's very uncomfortable for me to think of myself as "expressive," but there is some of that in the work. There is something intuitive operating. I'm not convinced it's simply internalized convention. I do occupy that awkward position of trying to come up with whatever a "good" composition is. I'll put it through all these dogged iterations, reflecting mostly on the process of coming up with a range of images that can be mobilized later ... This is the mechanical anti-intuitive aspect of my efforts. I guess I haven't completely abandoned the idea of seeking something. I feel ashamed about that, and definitely suspicious. But the unconscious is still there, and my ambivalence about it is at the core of my work.

WB I don't think it's a problem for unconscious aspects to be present, it's just when an artist's unconscious is mythologized. I try to work against that impulse. I think of the material as having a kind of aesthetic unconscious, a trace of its past uses ingrained within it that become manifest in future use.

EQ I'm also interested in your titles. Are they always descriptive of how things are created? *Smoke & Mirrors* was a generous title for me because it's straightforward while having a double, winking meaning. Later on, starting with the '08 Armory Show, I stepped away from it, because I realized that a.) *Smoke & Mirrors* wasn't so much a project as a process, and b.) I was curious about how titles could serve to either demystify or mystify a work of art. I began using perfume titles for some of the bodies of work. *Shalimar* was the first motif named in this manner—as a way of coloring the viewer's perceptions of an otherwise opaque image. Perfume titles were especially apt because they subtly linked my work to my very real involvement with commercial photography, all while being somewhat meaningless. *Shalimar* is a garden in India, but even if you didn't know that, there's an exotic sound to it. It didn't matter if people knew about the perfume reference or not, but I did choose to avoid very obvious titles like, say, *Chanel Number 5*.

WB Titles are tricky. They don't take center stage, yet they evoke a context for a work and can easily close things down. My titles are obviously literal, in part because I don't want to imply any grand symbolic reading or be coy, but in their description there is the potential for an associative reading that stays secondary or tangential, such that if a viewer reads it as symbolic, it's meaning is not imposed by me. Sometimes I think I should abandon descriptive titles. Just choose an arbitrary system and stick with it, like titling everything by the most popular boys and girls names for that year; in a way that would be just as legitimate as the descriptions. A viewer might imagine a person in relationship to it; that amuses me.

EQ That's like Tomma Abts.

WB She does that? I hadn't realized.

EQ She uses a book of names to title her paintings, anthropomorphizing them in a way. When you make work like ours that isn't obviously *about* something, the title has great power to transmit meaning. What I was getting at is the impossibility of making art democratic by demystifying it through a long, overly descriptive title. As if anyone could then reproduce it, given that roadmap.

WB Presenting a recipe isn't the reason behind my titling; it's more about putting a tool or a methodology out there in a way that it can be accessed. I don't think of it as revelation. I think of it as "not concealing," and that's an important distinction for me. Being able to replicate the outcomes isn't important, but I don't want to repress the variables I was considering in making it; if I did, it would potentially mystify the process, which is actually quite basic. What I would say is that the title proposes that the production of the work is an open text, and one of the pathways into the work.

But I want to turn to something you said about availability. Using available means is very important to me. MoMA had this Sol LeWitt wall drawing from the early '70s, #273 I think, on display for a long time in the old building, just before they moved to Queens. It had this big painting feeling—it was beautiful—overwhelming, but it was also completely transparent about how it was made and the materials used. The artist as the initiator of the work wasn't mythologized; it was clear where LeWitt ended and the work began. That balance between total openness and aesthetic beauty allowed seductive beauty to be available, open for a viewer to consider as more than just a receiver, like an open-source version of abstract expressionism, which to me was a potent political assertion. Usually, seductive objects conceal how they're made—that's part of their power, the sense that there's an unaccountable sublime force behind it, whether it's artistic genius or institutional authority. Capital mobilization seems to be a recent extension of the idea of artistic genius. Like Olafur Eliasson's or Doug Aitken's public pieces in New York: really, the sheer magnitude of capital they mobilize to make these works is their initial effect. Massive spectacle and artistic genius become tied together. To an average person it's mystifying; how do you get \$10 million to stick a fucking waterfall on a bridge? How do you convince people that this is a good use of resources? That becomes the sign of the charismatic genius of the artist: a sublime mastery over capital. I was thinking about Paul Chan in contradistinction, specifically his work in the public sphere like the *People's Guide to the Republican National Convention* he was involved in or his New Orleans Beckett project. What was so amazing about his New Orleans project was that the ability to organize people and capital happened in a way that wasn't self-justified. As opposed to just signaling the ability to mobilize wealth, spectacle, labor, and capital for its own sake, he honed in on a latent resource embedded in a community that was torn apart and fractured, managing to create a production that took this untapped social power and created a legacy that made further production possible in the community. He created an organization where there hadn't been one before. It crossed class and racial lines, and used community organizing to create alliances between groups in the city. It doesn't matter that it was *Waiting for Godot*. The play has symbolic and historical relevance but that seems secondary. What is most important is that it created connections that were almost impossible but were needed. Jeremy Deller's *Battle of Orgreave* comes to mind as well. I admire the kind of intelligence that work required, the self-awareness and restraint. And importantly, it came out of an understanding of art and aesthetics as a social phenomenon. I wish I had that sort of fortitude, it really is an exemplary project of the potential of art.

EQ It's true that artists function more and more like directors these days, commanding capital, and crews, transmitting their visions on a grand scale. But you're right that the spectacle often ends there. Is the point that they produce something that has no use value? Like Eliasson's waterfalls? Is that gesture supposed to give the people hope? Is it outsized whimsy? Or vulgar hubris? Chan's project does offer much more than that. It's not grafted onto a site, but actively engaged in it. If this interests you, why can't you command that same power over resources?

WB It's not a matter of power, but a matter of skill. I think that Paul Chan is gifted at this sort of negotiation, and his work is at its best when that gift is capitalized on. That's not where my abilities lie, and that's probably why I admire that aspect of his work. I learned a lot from thinking about that project,

and it outlined the potential of working in the public sphere. Most public art seems wasteful and condescending. It's usually a game being played with someone who doesn't realize they were playing, like throwing a football at the back of someone's head and yelling "catch" after the fact. I prefer the gallery because people make an agreement upon entering that is conscious. I don't know that I'll ever feel comfortable with putting work on the street, in public, although I do think that when it's done well, it's the most invigorating type of work. It's funny, in school Stephen Shore made a comment on several occasions that artists only make good work for five years. I think about that a lot when I'm imagining where things are going in my work. It occurs to me that it's funny coming from somebody who has worked for so long. *(laughter)*

EQ Which five years would he say were his best?

WB I assume he thinks it was early on, but it was said with a sense of acceptance, an absence of anxiety. I admired that. Even if I didn't agree with his assessment, it felt humble, but not self-deprecating. I guess it spoke to his relationship to his students, too, his generosity. It wasn't part of the narcissistic hubris most artists cling to, talking about their own importance. Some artists are lucky enough that their work resonates with a conversation that is ahead of its time, that speaks to a latent need. I think Stephen's work did that. The Paul Chan piece is another example for me—Jeremy Deller's is also—it pushes the boundaries of the potential for art, and there are many works that do what these did for their respective time and place. I think those instances make whole careers salient; they speak to the potential of things to come. I try to remember those works when this job feels absurd and frivolous.

Head over to BOMBLOG for a [slideshow](#) of works by Quinlan & Beshty.

If you like this article, you might also like:

[Paul Chan](#) by Nell McClister (Editor's choice)

0 comments



Leave a message...

Discussion ▾

Community |

Share ▾



No one has commented yet.

ALSO ON BOMB MAGAZINE

What's this? ✕

BOMBLOG: The Shooting Star by George Negroponte

3 comments • 23 days ago



JOHN — Cool!

BOMB Magazine: A. M. Homes

2 comments • 19 days ago



Frances Uku — Knocked this one out of the park. Fine work indeed, JF and BOMB.

BOMBLOG: Night Science by Eric Amling

1 comment • 9 days ago



sasha fletcher — i love you ben mirov

BOMBLOG: BOMB Alert: by Giovanni Marchini Camia

1 comment • a month ago



TL27 — Unfortunately, the blurbs of Gary Shteyngart event has been postponed.

Comment feed

Subscribe via email

All rights reserved. © Bomb Magazine, New Art Publications, and its Contributors.