

# **White Empty Earth:**

Photography and the Imagined World

by

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## I. Dedication

To Jennifer Rose Bonilla

for her patience and constant unwavering, unmatched support;

my silent critic

## II. Acknowledgments

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## IV. Introduction

“How will you go about finding that thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you?”

- Plato

Things are multiple, complex. They exist as singular states, a coordinate interface in a web of interconnectedness. They are informed by myriad sources and ideas. They are sentient and non-sentient, tangible and intangible, visible and invisible, imagined and real. In this case there are always at least two things happening. There is a singular cloud hovering in a black space, still and odd. Snow is falling at a rapid rate and dust is rising in plumes of smoke and smog. Rainfall is pouring down from Cumulonimbus clouds grey in color. The rain is reflecting an unknown source of light cutting through a dense black space. These things are atmospheric, elemental but still and fabricated. There are trees, dying or dead, or perhaps just waiting through the season, lined in successive rows through the distance. What exists before us is a view or landscape, but unclear as to where or when. There is something unreal about it, something fake, false. These are trees, but they are also twigs. They are large and small. They are growing from a chalky white ground, where they have been carefully placed. This ground is snow and plaster. The atmosphere extending into the beyond is white and grey. Yet, as the image seems to extend into the distance, it is jolted upon the appearance of wrinkled paper that is the sky. The viewer is reminded of the object and environment that once existed. It calls forth the essence of the photograph and its creation, the use of the camera, its functions. Upon further inspection a more subtle detail surfaces: dust and hair. These minute elements point to that unnamable, seductive, ephemeral quality of the physical world that lasts only briefly before changing again and again. They are the essence that the naked eye cannot see but that film registers. They point to the

provisional aspect of my working process and the myriad layers of my practice. The photograph recalls the fabricated environment that exists in a 'final' state for a brief time, until light fixes the image to a negative and the set is destroyed or recycled. It confronts the viewer with the photograph as an object, reminding that "images are mediations between the world and human beings" (Flusser 9). The dust and hair toys with photographic "perfection", while harkening back to the photographic process chemically, its history and addressing photography's continuous change in application, its digital process.

My use of photography is rooted in an interest in photographic representation and understanding the image technically. I am engaged in the medium's craft and the meaning behind the functionality of the camera through my studio based practice. Conceptually I am playing with concepts of Nature such as meaning of place, its use and it's representation in media and art. Through the use of photography and photo-based image making I am producing a body of work that builds on the tradition of landscape and representation of the physical world while considering the human uses and perspectives of the environment and its conceptual elements throughout history. The ambivalence that coincides with the human viewpoint of land and the space between those poles are my subject matter. The physical world and photography can be seen to have in common the characteristic that, based on perspective, may either contradict one another or balance each other out. In the photographic sense I find myself working in a strange verisimilitude where subtleties of perception denote and connote meaning. This includes ideas of "trace," "shul" and "index" which are all related through ephemera, transience and ideas of

photography. I play with the illusionistic and transparent qualities of tableaux or staged photography, the history of the photograph as document and the surface and objectivity or tangibility of the process and medium. The use of miniature sets, constructed spaces, staged tableaux and photography allow me to play with the actuality of a given place and the reasons for its conflicts. It requires the viewer suspend disbelief to stay in a state of in-between (what it is and what it might be) while lending itself to the thought that place has meaning only in perspectives held by those in and around it and thus is constructed, developed or created by the symbiotic nature of human and environment (the affects between the two).

By addressing photography and the physical world in a conflicted yet symbiotic way, my work finds itself dancing variously between two poles or conceptual nodes. Because of this, I am pushing to explore areas of ambivalence and what I call the “in-between” [Figure 1] in regards to my practice and thought process. The “in-between” is a concept that concerns the middle ground between two or more points of view, ideologies, practices, philosophies or ways of being. It is a term that denotes the magic of the image, the provisional aspect of my working process and the critical investigation that takes place before and after the photographs making. The ‘in-between’ is the interconnectedness of things: the physical world, my working process, the image and the conflict that arises between these things. “Space and time peculiar to the image is none other than the world of magic, a world in which everything is repeated and in which everything participates in a significant context.” (Flusser 9)

Can one achieve a work that illuminates both personally and collectively, privately and socially? By photographing constructed environments in the studio, can I challenge the photograph as “document” *and* the environment as fundamentally separate from human? With this work, I am hoping to accomplish several things through a hermeneutic based exploration: An engagement in a meditative, slow process, the revealing of a mindful, personal space, a deeper understanding of the environment and my place in it and the capability, functionality, conscious/unconscious uses of and meaning in photography and the photograph.

## V. In Silver and Dirt

“The true meaning of wilderness is rooted in the spirit of living nature and the relation of human consciousness to that world, not in human categorization or use or both.”

- Henry David Thoreau

Light reflects off of the environment beyond, streams in through a window and enters the uncapped lens of his camera obscura. The glass inside the lens bends the light to a point, focusing it onto a freshly coated, light sensitive pewter plate. The coating, a concoction of bitumen of Judea (an asphalt derivative of petroleum), reacts to the light resulting in an astounding and magical chemical reaction, revealing a direct image. Nicephore Niepce's *View from the Window at Le Gras* [Figure 2] would be the first known photograph of nature and the beginning of a shift in thought and the representation of nature. This photographic image remains a part of my thinking because of its importance to and parallel in the understanding of the use of photography and the environment. Niepce's photograph is a representation of the buildings, courtyard, trees, and distant land beyond the window of his upper-story workspace. It represents the 'out-there' (the distance, landscape, environment, the other or external) to his 'in-here' (the inside of the camera, the room or the internal, the mind). The window is a transparent fixture between the physical world and him, separating the viewer (internal) from the viewed (external). The window itself, like his camera obscura, enabled Niepce to frame his environment, much like the viewfinder, film-frame, easel and monitor would do in the years to come [figure 3]. The camera acts as a matrix bringing both poles (the 'out-there' and the 'in-here') to a focal point, allowing in one hand a better, more concise understanding based on the intents of its maker and in the other, an increasingly obfuscated representation of refracted light. "Photography recorded not the physical reality before the lens but its

visible aspect, determined by a specific point and scope of view, at a particular moment, in particular light" (Galassi 29). It simply continued and built upon, in a new radical way, the history of representation and human perception of the physical world as Landscape, a 16th Century Dutch term, and Nature.

The frame (through the photographic process) does two things: It isolates a particular thing, area or scene, giving it precedence over other possible selections while simultaneously denying the importance of what might lie beyond or outside it. In one sense it can turn an element of many things connected, into an iconic monad. For example, in Ansel Adams' *Monolith* we see a representation of the face of Half-Dome [Figure 4], a small, and from the work of many photographers [Figures 5 & 6], quite identifiable section of the Sierra Nevada. Through the photograph, Half-Dome has become an icon (not unlike depictions of humans such as the Fayum portrait paintings from Roman Egypt [Figure 7]) claiming its singularity or iconicity, detached from its place in the Sierra Nevada. It has shifted the understanding of the physical world from the purely experiential, relational or metaphoric one to a representationally photographic one; a physical world experienced by way of representation through photographs. This is partially due to, as Aaron Scharf states, "the persuasive power and the growing authority of the photographic image ... to subvert any ideas about the more metaphorical representation of nature" (Scharf, 77) through its "impersonal truthfulness for which a great number of artists had so long sought" (Scharf, 79). This creates an interesting affect where the idea of photographs as bits of information acts as 'objective' details to a larger system *and* as the entirety of a system. In Adams case, his photograph of Half-Dome becomes a part of the



history of iconising elements of the physical world, reducing them to symbols of beauty, the sublime and virigin-esque wilderness as separate from culture while simultaneously engraining the images into public consciousness as emblematic of the place they are representing. However, Adams' work, along with his peers, "played a role in awakening an appreciation of wilderness in the fledgling environmental movement," (Garner 160) and, in a way, justifying as a 'photographic document,' the basis for the place's importance as 'untouched' wilderness.

The way a photographer frames and photographs the subject has an incredible power on the viewer's understanding of the content and context. It can reveal the image's meaning and, therefore, the photographer's intent. This was understood almost immediately into the widespread use of photography. "By mid century, certainly, it was clear that the photographer was able to make 'duplications' of a landscape scene in either soft or sharp focus" (Scharf p.79). Looking at Ansel Adams' Petroglyphs, Monument Valley, Utah 1958 [Figure 8] and Terry Falke's Cyclists Inspecting Ancient Petroglyphs, Utah, 1998 [Figure 9] one can understand how a simple gesture, that is framing, can completely alter the meaning one reads from a photograph. In Adam's version the petroglyphs and photographic beauty are the subject matter as the viewer is presented with an up-close, almost detective like, anthropological representation of a small area in his chosen field of vision. In Falke's version the petroglyphs are less discernable as he has pulled back in his field of vision, photographing the glyphs from a distance, allowing the three cyclists on the street directly beneath the historic rock face to be visible. For both framing is key as Falke addresses cultural conceptions of wilderness and the perception that it

somehow remains distinct from the human realm and Adams removes the place's context, isolating it as a bit. As Vilem Flusser notes, photographer's intentions are "first, to encode their concepts of the world into images" (Flusser 46). This often causes, through concept, intent and representation, the construction or reiteration of perspective, viewpoint and ideology. As an image-maker, I am aware this quality of photography and aim to play with the veracity of the photograph and its affects socially.

The notion of a pictorial representation of nature as 'bits' or made up of bits and "the theoretical polarities of real and ideal", as stated by Peter Galassi in *Before Photography*, reaches back to the discourse of J.M.W. Turner on Claude Lorrain in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Gallassi 21). My work, especially pieces such as *Cloud* and *Rainfall*, are a direct engagement with this history of record, or study, making of nature [Figure 10]. As Galassi writes, "those that most deserve Turner's epithet 'picture of bits' are the ones that take forthrightly as their subject a single, namable thing" (Galassi 25). My piece *Cloud* complicates this idea of study or record making through it's staged photographic method revealing the representation of at least two things: a cloud (the imagined or 'ideal') and a portion of man made cotton or batting (record or the 'real'). Whereas "Turner of course preferred 'pictures made up of bits' (imaginative compositions) to 'pictures of bits' (straightforward visual records)" (Galassi 21) I am attempting to do both, photographically, playing with convention while rendering aspects of human perception visible.

The distinction and conflict between “the real and the ideal,” a simple node (record) and a complex entity consisting of many nodes, has been an ongoing discourse in the field of landscape & nature representation in Western art from Chinese painting, Nicholas Poussin, Caspar David Friedrich, J.M.W Turner through the enlightenment era to Thomas Cole in America. This discord came to a pivotal point during the nineteenth century, specifically in western landscape painting. Cole’s work [Figure 11] began to address this ambivalent idea during his tenure on American soil. “His art offers an initial statement of a basic dilemma: a polarity of the real and the ideal that was resolved by his successors in the Hudson River school through the development of a compromise formula – a formula for which his art was, in a sense, germinal” (Novak 43). I am interested in this conflict of ambivalence (‘the real and ideal’) as it concerns the physical world and image making (or how humans represent it) and, coming from a linear Western perspective of Landscape and the physical world, hope to criticize and expound on it.

The trouble with Nature (conceptual idea of the physical world) and Landscape (type of visual representation) is that it is always pressed upon the actual physical world; the image becomes the source of meaning to be placed on the physical world, rather than vice versa. “The American in love with nature approximated the aesthetic contemplation of a landscape painting with ‘the contemplation of virtuous deeds’” (Novak 42). Somehow, the representation dominates actual place and the interconnected relationship between human, the physical world and its transient nature.. What Cole’s, and his successor’s, work brought to the field of landscape painting was the grandeur of the American “virgin” landscape which was

comprised of both a sense of real and the ideal imbued by a sense of the sublime and religion with which many are still trying to get away from. The history of the physical world as a “virgin-esque” eden, untouched by humans is has been pressed on the North American terrain; its representation extended from the work of Caspar David Friedrich and others. Of the American landscape, Cole wrote, “All nature here is new to art, no Tivolis, Ternis, Mont Blancs, Plinlimmons hackneyed and worn by the daily pencils of hundreds; but primeval forests, virgin lakes and waterfalls” (Novak 41). These ideas all lend themselves to human perspective and projection informed by history and culture. By fabricating environments in my studio I am directly engaging the fact that human understanding of the physical world is based directly on perception, perspective and image.

In many ways photography has extended this use of representation with an increasingly inarguable sense of truthfulness or ‘the real’ and has incorporated a new element, that of the landscape as potential profit as in the Surveyors of the West. On the capability of photography in mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century Scharf notes that, “With unremitting persistence eulogies to the ‘truth of nature’ were invoked” (Scharf 116). The work of Carleton Watkins, Charles L. Weed, A.J. Russel, Timothy O’Sullivan, William Henry Jackson, and others, photographed the physical world with a similar kind of fervor, without human presence as an ‘untouched’ eden. This continued the human relationship with the physical world through the mediated image; in this case the “virtuous” contemplation of Nature through the veracity of photography. One exception during this time seems to be the work of Eadweard Muybridge [Figure 12], whose mammoth plate work in Yosemite shifted from those working in

a similar fashion. Rebecca Solnit writes that “what they most resemble in elements if not in mood is Chinese landscape paintings, though the two are not historically connected” (Solnit, River 88). The composition and other elements (pine, rock, the void) point towards many elements of historical Chinese painting [Figures 13 & 14]. However, the most striking difference of Muybridge’s work is the way in which people inhabit the terrain in his work. On his ‘wanderers’ Solnit writes,

They are not standing in the foreground as if discovering the view, nor are they dynamically engaged in making civilization or domesticating wilderness. The inexorable march of progress in the wilderness didn’t seem to engage Muybridge. His figures are not new to the landscape, not conquering it, not standing in for the public, for America, for the rational mind. They are obscure, not connected to each other, not connected to any practical purpose. And in this obscurity lies the great rift between Muybridge, the emigrant who was never naturalized, and his American peers. (Solnit, River 88)

However, as Muybridge’s landscape work was usurped by his motion photography, some of his peers versions and methods of photographing those same places would rise to prominence. Pulling from these peers, photographers, such as Ansel Adams, Eliot Porter, and Edward Weston would enhance and fix this form of Nature depiction. They “were in the forefront of an aesthetic movement that apotheosized the great glories of the American landscape” specializing in “uninhabited, pristine, breathtaking views” (Garner 160) picking up photographically where the Hudson River School of painters had left off. Photographers took this emphasis on uninhabited beauty and virtue to task in the 1960’s and 1970’s, reaching a pivotal point with the show *New Topographics* in 1975. The break with the aforementioned practice of photographing wilderness came through both style and content. Their work was seen as bleak and harsh in comparison to the tonal range of Adams’ and many “presented plain pictures of plain American houses, new subdivisions, or

roadside motels" (Garner 166). This new concern with the human impact on land "became *the* new definition of landscape photography" (Garner 166) breaking from the "attachment to the sensual transcendence that had saturated the great modernist landscapes of Weston, Adams, White, and Porter" (Garner 167). I am directly engaged in this, mostly male, mostly American, driven history of landscape and photography.

The use of photography, like any other medium, is ingrained in the environment through the use of certain materials in its making and, in the case of photography, can be an ambivalent relationship. Since its invention or discovery, the uses of certain materials in the photographic process have been considered harmful to the environment. Contemporary photographer Edward Burtynsky states, "At one point I was shooting a mine, and it was a silver mine. I arrived in my car made out of iron and filled with gas. I'd pull out a metal tripod and grab film that's loaded with silver and start taking pictures so, everything I'm doing is connected to the thing I'm photographing." (Manufactured Landscapes, min 41:25 – 41:46) Niepce's process is one such case where his material is very close to what is found in blacktop or asphalt today. Burtynsky's photographs exhibit a kind of beauty and human impact on the environment using materials that directly affect the thing being photographed [Figure 15]. The paradox of photographers depicting degradation of the environment is a prevalent one that is a bit concerning. Jose Saramago touched on this paradoxical spiral in his novel *The Cave*, "They say that landscape is a state of mind, that we see the outer landscape with our inner eye, but is that because those extraordinary inner organs of vision are unable to see these factories and these

hangars, this smoke devouring the sky, this toxic dust, this never-ending mud, these layers of soot, yesterday's rubbish swept on top of the rubbish of every other day, tomorrow's rubbish swept on top of today's rubbish, here even the most contented of souls would require only the eyes in his head to make him doubt the good fortune he imagined was his" (Saramago 73-74). These layers and concepts of layering or obfuscating are important in my understanding of the physical world, its representations and my practice and involvement in it.

"Thus, whatever its aesthetic merits, every representation of landscape is also a record of human values and actions imposed on the land over time" (Bright 127). This history, the idea of building up meaning, must be an active part of my practice and engagement with the history of pictorial representation of the physical world. My understanding of place comes from its history, culture and meaning in art. The conflict, or ambivalence, I am alluding to in one sense is that of the history of representation in landscape, how its been used and what its functions are. As Deborah Bright writes, "the sort of landscape I am referring to is that landscape which J.B. Jackson has called 'a field of perpetual conflict and compromise between what is established by authority and what the vernacular insists on preferring.' A landscape, in other words, whose construction by culture is made explicit – indeed, whose construction is made the very subject of photographic investigation" (Bright 130). The work of Patrick Nagatani, specifically his Nuclear Enchantment portfolio, embodies much of these ideas through photography, staged tableaux and landscape. His use of history (what he calls "New Mexico's marriage to the nuclear culture"), irony, tableaux and the revealing of the fabricated nature of the photograph's

construction provides an answer to Bright's question, "if we are to redeem landscape photography from its narrow, self-reflexive project, why not openly question the assumptions about nature and culture that it has traditionally served and use our practice to criticize them?" (Bright 127) Three such examples are his pieces *Nike-Hercules Missile Monument, St. Augustine Pass, Highway 70, White Sands Missile Range, New Mexico, 1989* [Figure 16], *B-36/Mark 17 h-Bomb Accident (May 22, 1957), 5 ½ Miles South of Gibson Boulevard, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1991* [figure 17] and *Trinity Site, Jornada del Muerto, N.M. 1989* [Figure 18]. In these photographs, the viewer is presented with complex histories embodied with irony, critical and humorous, and the nature of photographic representation. In *Nike-Hercules Missile Monument*, Nagatani has depicted several Japanese tourists bringing toy missiles to a Monument of a Nike-Hercules missile, the first ground to air capable of carrying a nuclear warhead. As Nagatani states, "Catholics bring rosaries to Rome, to the Pope to bless and Buddhist Pilgrims bring little Buddhas to Kamakura, to the Big Buddha, and so these people are bringing missiles to this missile here" and goes on to say "I'm beginning to think that instead of statues of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, of people, we have missiles, you know, like we honor them" (Colores "New Mexico's Nuclear Enchantment"). This clash of history, humor, irony and fabrication can be seen in Nagatani's *Trinity Site, Jornada del Muerto, N.M. 1989* [Figure 18]. In this piece the viewer is confronted with a photograph of several Japanese-American tourists (most clearly two-dimensional representations hanging by fishing line) photographing the Trinity Site, a memorial dedicated to the first testing of atomic bomb technology. In the atomic red tone sky, above the memorial, flies the American bomber (the Enola Gay) that was responsible for dropping both Atomic



Bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Nagatani remembers, of his experience of the site and the photograph inspired by it,

The Japanese-Americans photographing themselves was jumping on top of a perceptual thing that occurred on one of my trips to the Trinity Site. A bus load of Japanese drive in and they all get out of a bus and start immediately taking pictures as they do everywhere else they go, whether it be Disneyland, the Grand Canyon or the Trinity Site and I'm thinking, 'these guys have no sense of the irony of what is occurring here at this moment'" (Colores, "New Mexico's Nuclear Enchantment")

By 're-representing' a space, place and its history, he is affectively investigating the construction, human perception of and drama at the site. The capability of photography to contain such complex histories, criticisms and irony while revealing its verisimilitude, especially concerned with the physical world, is the spark with which I work. My interest in the relationships between human and non-human specifically involving ideas of wilderness and human perception of place is pushed through mixture of fog, haze, dust, pollution, slag, snow, and rain with actual places, politics, history and myth. The conflict between these two things, ephemera and place, rooted in history and art become the content imbued in the work as a whole, while allowing each piece to stand in its own relationship to history, context and art.

## VI. Shul

“And how beautiful was the falling snow! How large the snowflakes were, and how decisive. It was as if they knew their silent procession would continue until the end of time... how white and how mysterious!”

- Orhan Pamuk

Standing in the dead of night, snow falls silently, calmly undulating in and out of the darkness, covering everything in white. The coldness of the air allows my breath to be visible, momentarily. I try to produce a constant breath of fogginess without prevailing. It is as tangible as the clouds, as my ideas. As the flakes flutter, I am reminded of a passage from the novel *Snow* by Orhan Pamuk, “Once a six-pronged snowflake crystallizes, it takes between eight and ten minutes for it to fall through the sky, lose its original shape, and vanish...with further inquiry, he [Ka, the main character] discovered that the form of each snowflake is determined by the temperature, the direction and strength of the wind, the altitude of the cloud, and any number of other mysterious forces” (Pamuk 407- 408). This moment provides a realization that these kinds of ephemera are as much a part of the physical world as Half-Dome in Yosemite, its representation as important to our understanding of it. Its presence, although not prominent, in photography has been there since the medium’s inception, slowly building into artist’s conceptual minds. Etienn-Jules Marey’s studies of smoke [Figure 19], Eadweard Muybridge’s studies of clouds [Figure 20], Wilson Bentley’s [figure 21 & 22] photograph’s of snowflakes in the late 1800’s, Alfred Stieglitz’s *Equivalents* [Figure 23], Arthur Rothstein’s *Farmer Walking in a Dust Storm, Cimmaron County, Ok* [Figure 24] and Harry Callahan’s *Ivy Tentacles on Glass* [Figure 25] have all figured into my thinking concerning the photograph, ephemera and human perception of the physical world.

Untouched, the snow can render everything the same through its whiteness, leaving definition and clarity alone. Snowfall is both serene and meditative; it is seen as a natural phenomenon that can 'beautify' the environment while simultaneously providing a kind of bleakness with which can be seen as depressing or gloom. Ash is the complete reduction of a thing (usually sentient, i.e. animals, plants). It's last state changed through a transformation, is seen by the naked eye before it is returned to it's beginning, the Earth. It becomes, in a way, like dust. The development between snowfall and ash shows a linear transgression from creation to dissipation, things that are absent, rendered visible and vanish. My working process parallels this idea. Like the life of a snowflake upon its development, formation and vanishing, I work, developing a piece, forming it until it reaches its perfect state, its moment to be photographed. Then it is destroyed, vanishing only to leave a photograph behind. This part of my practice is reflected in the use of ephemera as subject matter, linking directly to the photographic idea of trace or, as I am referring it, shul. Can the photograph itself be shul? The idea plays an important role in the development of and meaning in my work. It concerns my interests in photography (the photograph as shul or indicative of shul), nature (as in ephemera, footprints, rubble) and their relationship to impermanence and history.

In Rebecca Solnit's book *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, she references this idea as cited from Stephen Batchelor's *Buddhism Without Belief*,

"'Emptiness is the track on which the centered person moves' said a Tibetan Monk, 600 years ago, and the book where I found this edict followed it with an explanation of the word "track" in Tibetan: shul, 'a mark that remains after that which made it has passed by - a footprint, for example. In other contexts, shul is used to describe the scarred hollow in the ground where a house once stood, the channel worn through rock

where a river runs in flood, the indentation in the grass where an animal slept last night. All of these are shul: the impression of something that used to be there.'" (Solnit, Field Guide 50-51)

In the case of any photograph, it's physical properties (assuming we're using a camera), are a rendering of reflected light at any given point in time, with any number of variables. It becomes an object whose surface displays representation of various concepts and visual instances. According to Vilem Flusser, "'Black' and 'White' are concepts, e.g. theoretical concepts of optics. As black-and-white states of things are theoretical, they can never actually exist in the world. But black-and-white photographs do actually exist because they are images of concepts belonging to the theory of optics, i.e. they arise out of this theory." (Flusser 42) As objects, photographs exist, but can also be seen as a kind of trace, even with the notion of the inherent or latent image seen as "never actually existing". Often photography is as much about absence as it is presence; about trace as it is flow. In my work, the ephemera are meant to invoke the transient nature of the thing being photographed and it's doubling (change in function and illusion), while conjuring elements of the photograph as fleeting object. David Levi-Strauss wrote, "Photographic images used to be about the *trace*. Digital images are about the *flow*" (Strauss). In many ways, photographs have always been about both trace *and* flow, through the mechanical reproduction, distribution and conceptual understanding of the photograph. Siri Hustvedt writes, "real photograph's always evoke loss" (Hustvedt 153). This loss extends the idea of trace and transience; something that was there and now is not; something that can be looked back on, with the photograph as its signifier. Although, real photographs also evoke gain in what they may add to the perception of any given thing and its understanding.

This trace has had an ambivalent relationship with photography. It has been seen as both a “beautifying” element and a source of anguish. I have been attempting to tap into this ambivalence in my work, by allowing those unintended elements (dust and hair) to stay (in many cases, attracting them) such as in my piece *futuregrove* and using them as actual subject matter as in my series *Dust*. A piece that has been in my mind consistently has been Man Ray’s photograph, *Dust Breeding*, 1920 [figures 26 & 27] which is an aerial-like photograph of Duchamp’s *The Large Glass*, that had been left intentionally to collect dust. Man Ray photographed it in a way indicative of landscape photography. This photograph is, in many ways, a progenitor of studio-based photography from fabricated miniatures. Considering this photograph, David Campany writes,

“Dust, like water, is an enemy of photography. It might be photogenic but it needs to be kept at a distance. Dust is a trace – a trace of mortality. A photograph is a trace of what was before the camera. So a photograph of dust is a trace of a trace. In this sense *Dust Breeding* emphasizes what is known in semiotics as the photographic ‘index’. Traditionally defined, an index is a sign caused by its object. For example, smoke is an index of fire because it is the burning wood; a footprint in mud is an index of the foot. Similarly, light bouncing off an object renders on a light sensitive surface, and thus the photograph obtained is the index of that light” (Campany).

The photograph of “a trace of a trace” deepens the complexity of the photograph, lending to the paradoxical spiral of layering meaning mentioned previously. Shul, trace, index all refer back to that magic of the photograph that takes place on, what Flusser calls, its ‘significant surface’ (Flusser 8).

These elements of the image and concept complicate it’s reading, adding to the understanding of it as representation. “For all its indeterminacy *Dust Breeding* has a realistic dimension too, rooted in the base materialism of dust. In the conventional

account of photographic realism it is the overlooked, the incidental details, that underwrite its claim to truth.” (Campany 50) This complication is ingrained in dust’s actual existence in the natural world, as a photographic element and its capability to blur or obscure things when stirred up (as in Rothstein’s photograph [Figure 24]).

As much as ephemera are about intangibility and transience, they are about time. Photography isn’t always about stopping time, but extending it, obfuscating it. Man Ray’s photograph would not have been possible without the slow accumulation of dust made possible by Duchamp’s insistence on leaving the piece alone. Bentley’s photographs of snowflakes would not have been possible without his patient waiting for them to fall in a particular way, in a particular place. My provisional practice brings in these elements through the slow process of construction and the immediacy of the photographic exposure, the expected and unexpected. It’s about the mysteriousness of presence. A temporal existence linked with space, capturing an uneasy or bizarre scene devoid of physical presence but full of human trace.

“How often the most trifling of incidents have formed the bases for terrible mysteries, as if they were some hydra-headed monster, and yet, when looked at closely, they were just smoke, air, illusion, the desire to believe in the unbelievable.” (Saramago 288) Like Hiroshi Sugimoto’s *Seascapes* [Figure 28 & 29] and Mike and Doug Starn’s *Attracted to Light* [Figure 30 & 31] my work believes in trace, shul, index, transience, time and timelessness that is ephemera.

## VII. Suspension of Disbelief

“An event known through photographs certainly becomes more real than it would have been if one had never seen the photographs...but after repeated exposure to images it also becomes less real.”  
- Susan Sontag

It begins with black cloth tacked up on the wall. It descends into a curve, lying on the table. Draped to the left and right, it creates a black chamber, capable of concealing light and depth of field. The fishing line is cut to a certain length. It is tied around the pvc overhead and stretched down until as tight as a violinist's strings. The torn up, shaped batting is spray-painted grey before it's attached up above. The lighting is set up, and turned on, exposing the fishing lines and revealing the batting, but not as they actually are. This is all for the photograph, all for an image. The resulting work depicts an image of a storm in a black void; my piece *Rainfall*. The illusion that occurs is one of verisimilitude, causing a shift in reading between real and unreal, authentic and fabricated, microcosmic and macrocosmic.

Photography has been aligned with truth, or at least a kind of parallel to physical reality, more than any other form of representation. This relationship between photography and reality has been a source of contention as long as the association has been made. Photographers have always taken liberty with the construction of an image. Muybridge's photograph's of animals in motion stirred up controversies of truth amongst painters and sculptors. Roger Fenton moved cannon balls from the ditch to the road in his photograph *Valley of the Shadow of Death*, 1855 [figure 30]. Timothy O'Sullivan was known to drag bodies around after battles during the Civil War for his great photographs of the time. Dorothea Lange directed several “scenes”

before settling on the great pose that is *Migrant Mother*. Edward Weston was staging for the camera when “he placed a green pepper inside a tin funnel in his studio” and “so was Arthur Rothstein when, by his own testimony, he told the little boy in his classic Dust Bowl [Figure 22] photograph to drop back behind his father” (Coleman 485). Photographers have always taken various degrees of free will with their work. Even Ansel Adams overworked images through development and printing and, like most artists, Henri Cartier-Bresson imposed his sensibilities when waiting for that decisive moment.

Concerning photographers in the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Rebecca Solnit writes, “What truth meant in photography was not yet settled - retouching was almost a universal practice, and some of the most respected photographers made composite images” (Solnit, *River* 48). This, of course, was not based on an interest between representation, reality and the shift (or should I say rift) between the two, as it would be for many later. It was an extension of a kind of believability where photographers felt it necessary to compose and composite either to mimic what they saw with the naked eye or mimic the look of something, for example the ideal as in painting. In many instances, photographers were merely trying to make up for what they thought as a shortcoming of the photographic process. The clearest example of this comes from landscape photographers during the mid to late 1800s, who, when photographing a scene, had trouble getting a correct exposure for both the sky and the land below. Scharf writes, “the photographing of clouds, particularly if the landscape was also to be included, was then a very difficult matter. Different exposure times were necessary if both the expanse of light sky and the darker tones



of the land below were to be recorded correctly" (Scharf 114). The result of this technical 'flaw' was one of two things: the stitching together of two separate negatives or the 'painting-in' of clouds. Accepted, all in the name of believability. Solnit writes, "The clouds were, in a way, the lie that tells the truth, the manipulation that made Muybridge's photograph look more convincing and more 'artistic,' as art was then imagined" (Solnit, River 48).

For others, such as Rejlander and Robinson, photography opened a door to another means of expression that would challenge "straight" or "purist" photographers for decades. Their practice, less concerned with realism, was initially based in the ideal. Removing aspects of veracity they would stage "events for the purpose of making images...involving the superimposition of one negative on another, which fictionalized the resulting print even further" (Coleman 487); a fiction that revealed, in many ways, a nature truer to photography. They would embrace this to the point of absurdity. Aaron Scharf writes, "In English pictorial photography, from about the 1850s, it was sometimes the practice to compose a photograph from a number of views taken under a variety of conditions. Oscar Gustave Rejlander's most famous large photograph, *Two Ways of Life* [figure 31], for example, was fabricated from more than thirty different negatives" (Scharf 108/109). Rejlander's, Robinson's and Cameron's use of composite and Tableaux vivant or "living picture," was an important idea and practice that, although considered a detriment to the medium in its youth, would influence many photographers later. A.D Coleman defines this mode of photography as the *directorial*, where

the photographer consciously and intentionally *creates* events for the express purpose of making images thereof. This may be achieved by

intervening in ongoing 'real' events or by staging tableaux-in either case, by causing something to take place which would not have occurred had the photographer not made it happen. Here the "authenticity" of the original event is not an issue, nor the photographer's fidelity to it, and the viewer would be expected to raise those questions only ironically. Such images use photography's overt veracity against the viewer, exploiting that initial assumption of credibility by evoking it for events and relationships generated by the photographer's deliberate structuring of what takes place in front of the lens as well as of the resulting image (Coleman 484-485)

My work is, in many ways, a response to many threads of thought throughout the history of photography concerning veracity, authenticity and realism where suspending disbelief plays a central role. It embodies this definition of Coleman's while playing with the very idea of veracity. True objectivity and reality have never been a function of photography. It is in degrees of verisimilitude, sensibilities and intent that photography lays. As Coleman wrote, "People Believe Photographs" (Coleman 483) and they should, just not without understanding that, as Buckminster Fuller said, "Seeing-is-believing is a blind spot in a man's vision" (Coleman 486).

The use of the miniature expands this blind spot into an increasingly foggy area by adding to the trembling verisimilitude of the photograph, the obfuscation of scale, depth of field and doubling. This doubling complicates the reading of the photograph providing several, often-competing elements that may be ambivalent at times. In Susan Stewart's text *On Longing*, she writes, "Whenever we speak of the context of reading, we see at work a doubling which undermines the authority of both the reading situation and the situation or locus of the depiction: the reader is not in either world, but rather moves between them, and thereby moves between varieties of partial and transcendent vision" (Stewart 44/45). Both the maker and the viewer act in this way, moving between two poles, to nodes or "situation within

situation, world within world" (Stewart 45). My photograph, *futuregrove*, acts in this way. The twigs are just twigs, but they are also trees, lined in successive rows in a monoculture, connected to any monoculture seen in the physical world. The miniature acts as itself, a small, fabricated environment *while simultaneously* as a landscape located in the physical world. Along with content "the depiction of the miniature works by establishing a referential field, a field where signs are displayed in relation to one another and in relation to concrete objects in the sensual world" (Stewart 45). This 'in-between,' is a mode of suspending disbelief, traveling between two places, the actual (the ground) and the imagined (the clouds). The doubling or 'in-between' relies on a balance between image and content, craftsmanship and human error. "Amid such transformation of scale, the exaggeration of the miniature must continually assert a principle of balance and equivalence existing between the body and nature" (Stewart 46). If the piece breaks this balance, the doubling affect vanishes, leaving the representation on either side of the scale. *Dust Breeding* [Figures 26 & 27] retains the balance between macrocosm and microcosm, between an aerial photograph of the earth and a photograph of a dusty tabletop.

Working directorially, staging and fabricating for the camera, enables me to capture disparate uses or functions of photography in an excitingly complex and symbiotic way. It reveals falsehoods and truths, beauty and ugliness, wonder and reality. It allows for a criticism to come through poetics and a slow process. It equates the speed of the shutter with the slow process and read of the work causing it to function multitudinously. Susan Stewart elucidated wonderfully when she wrote, "The miniature has the capacity to make its context remarkable; its fantastic qualities

are related to what lies outside it in such a way as to transform the total context”

(Stewart 46).

## VIII. Working in the Hermeneutic Circle

“For photographers, their concepts (and the ideas signified by these concepts) are the main *raison d’etre* for taking photographs, and the camera’s program is in the service of these *raisons d’etre*.”

- Vilem Flusser

All of these aspects are “nodes” that revolve and evolve in my practice. They move in and out of focus, inform each other, become abstract, complex, clear and simple. It is a practice the sits in a kind of fogginess, where things are mostly obscured but can become visible once moved within a certain opening, under a certain light, like a clearing in a deep forest. Yet, because of the fog they can become clearer, “And even when the fog doesn’t quite reach us, you should see the sight toward the hills. Maybe you can’t see a thing for a ways, and then something pokes up – a peak, a little church – and then just white again after” (Eco 51).

This revolving thought process could be visualized as a circle, like the eighth stage of the Zen ox story, [Figure 32] within which I work. The circle represents an orbit of ideas that inform the practice. For this reason, I relate it to the philosophy of the Hermeneutic Circle, which, like ecology, involves an understanding or interpretation of something based on the whole and its individual parts in a circular, cyclical or symbiotic way. Although traditionally meant for texts, Hermeneutics can be extended to the realm of art as it is encoded with information as diverse and disparate as any other form of expression or output. My thought process, practice and work can be seen best through its parts (each piece) in relation to the whole (body of work) and vice versa. In *The Idea of Wilderness*, Max Oelschlaeger considers the use of the hermeneutic circle as a way to reconnect to the human place in the

physical world, “By standing inside the circle we somehow engage ourselves in a self-conscious quest to escape the strictures of language (and therefore of culture) and reestablish contact with the ground (bios, ursprung) that lies beneath our feet” (Oelschlaeger 350). By working within the circle I am attempting to ground my practice in intuition while mindful of the orbit of ideas that inform my thought process, practice and work allowing everything from thought, theory, aesthetics, politics, history, process, image and material to brew and simmer during the provisional, completion and hindsight parts of the work.

My practice is both intuitive and research based. It extends from the material and tangible to the conceptual and fantastic. It is an attempt at realizing my own awareness of things. My process begins with an idea or pre-visualized image, something that strikes me aesthetically, conceptually and critically. This is followed up by visual, textual and physical research that can inspire a change in the original idea. For my piece *Cloud*, I found it necessary to look through art history at many representations of clouds. From Coreggio to Constable and Muybridge to Steiglitz, clouds have been an important aspect of nature depiction, ephemera and concept. During this process I made several sketches of an intended image based on the original idea and research. The final sketch became the basis for the construction of a miniature set or fabricated environment, which was photographed. During construction, I use the original sketch and concept as a working block. By doing this, I allow for any unintended aspects of the work to come through, rather than stick rigidly to any “design”. This also happens when photographing. I take several shots from many vantage points to utilize the variable nature of photography. *Cloud* has

its connection to representation, illusion and material. Made from polyester, the cloud has an added absurdity in its representation of naturalness. The output is intended from the beginning to be a photograph and in this way mimics the idea of trace or 'shul' in the process as in the content. The process and the objects that materialize become provisional and are only known by the evidence within the photograph. The photograph becomes a record of the process, a ghost of an object or action and a representation of an actual thing.

By enlarging the photograph, the doubling affect occurs, allowing the viewer to stay in a similar state of 'in-between' as I am when working. The photographs recall the process of fabrication, the function of the camera and the idea, the representation. In this way, my work attempts to tie another knot in Ariadne's circular thread; criticizing methods of understanding while *simultaneously* using them as Patrick Nagatani did by exposing the fabricated nature of his tableaux. According to Vilem Flusser the Photographic Universe "challenges one to engage, on the one hand, in criticism of the post-industrial society that is coming into being, and, on the other, in criticism of cameras and their programs; in other words: to critically transcend post-industrial society" (Flusser 70). Ambivalence arises when the thing that is criticized is also the product of its being, it becomes a part of the orbit. Man Ray understood this when he wrote, "a certain amount of contempt for the material employed to express an idea is indispensable to the purest realization of that idea" (Coleman 488). In my work, the contempt is not negative, but based in an understanding of the power of photography and it's potential to illuminate through its functions, uses and capabilities.

The complexities of the elements (the things revolving in the hermeneutic circle) that make up my practice are like a spider web [Figure 33]. The crossing of threads as nodes all lead to the core, my practice, represented and symbolized by the photograph as an object. The myriad sources and ideas, whether abstract or concrete, become connected through simile and equivalence at these nodes. Like ephemera, the web is not meant to last, easily falling apart but easily reconstructed all around the heart of my practice. “The greatest potential source of photographic imagery is the mind” (Coleman 486). This statement, by Les Krims, embodies that sense of the wonderful that compels me to work and write. This is where the quality of the image starts and ends, the camera only a function of the mind and of one’s practice. As my work moves forward, with the orbit of ideas, I will carry one basic tenet, spoken by Linji Yixuan in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, “If you want to use this thing, then use it and have no doubts or hesitations!” (Watson 23)

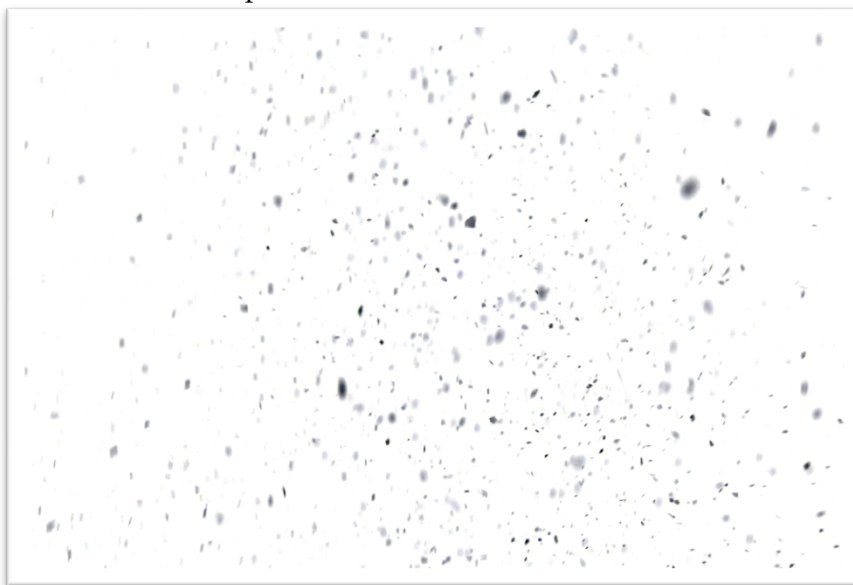


## IX. List of Thesis Exhibition Work

1. *Cloud*, 2009, C-Print Mounted to Sintra, 30"x40"



2. *Ash No.3*, 2009, C-print Mounted to Sintra, 13" x 20"



3. *Ash No.4*, 2009, C-print Mounted to Sintra, 13" x 20"



4. *Rainfall*, 2009, C-print Mounted to Sintra, 40" x 50"



5. *Dust No.1*, 2009, C-print Mounted to Sintra, 13" x 20"



6. *Dust No.2*, 2009, C-print Mounted to Sintra, 13" x 20"



7. *futuregrove*, 2009, C-print Mounted to Sintra, 47" x 60"



8. *Snowfall No.8*, 2009, C-print Mounted to Sintra, 13" x 20"



9. *Snowfall No. 15*, 2009, C-print Mounted to Sintra, 13" x 20"



10. *Snowfall No. 18*, 2009, C-print Mounted to Sintra, 13" x 20"



## X. Illustrations

Figure 1.

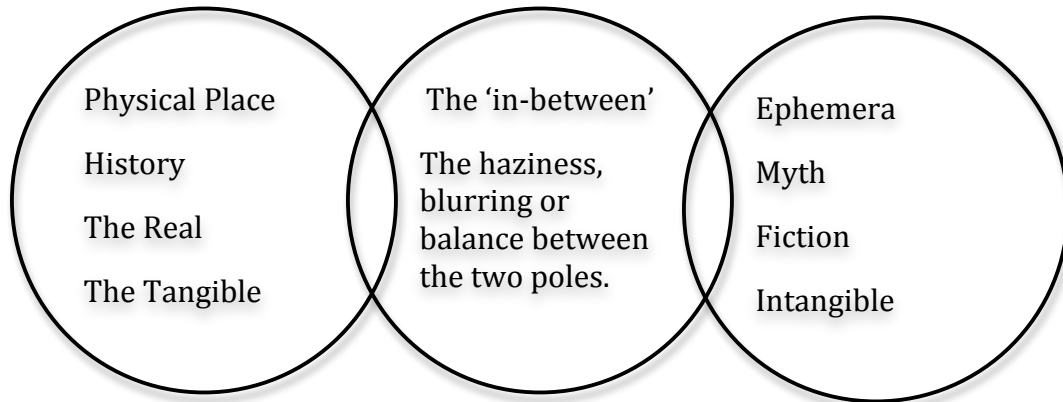


Figure 2.





Figure 3.



Figure 4.

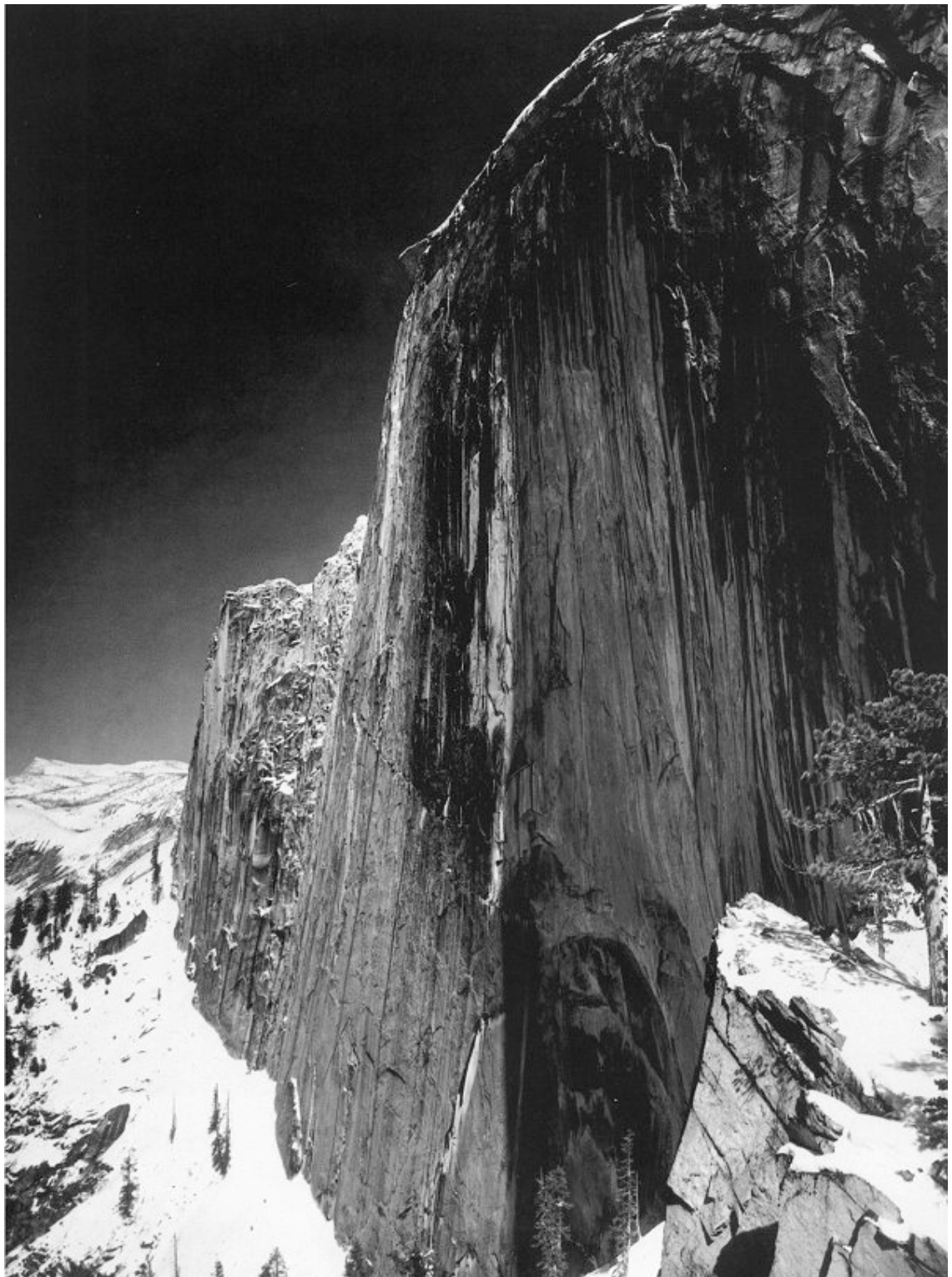




Figure 5.



Figure 6.





Figure 7.





Figure 8.



Figure 9.

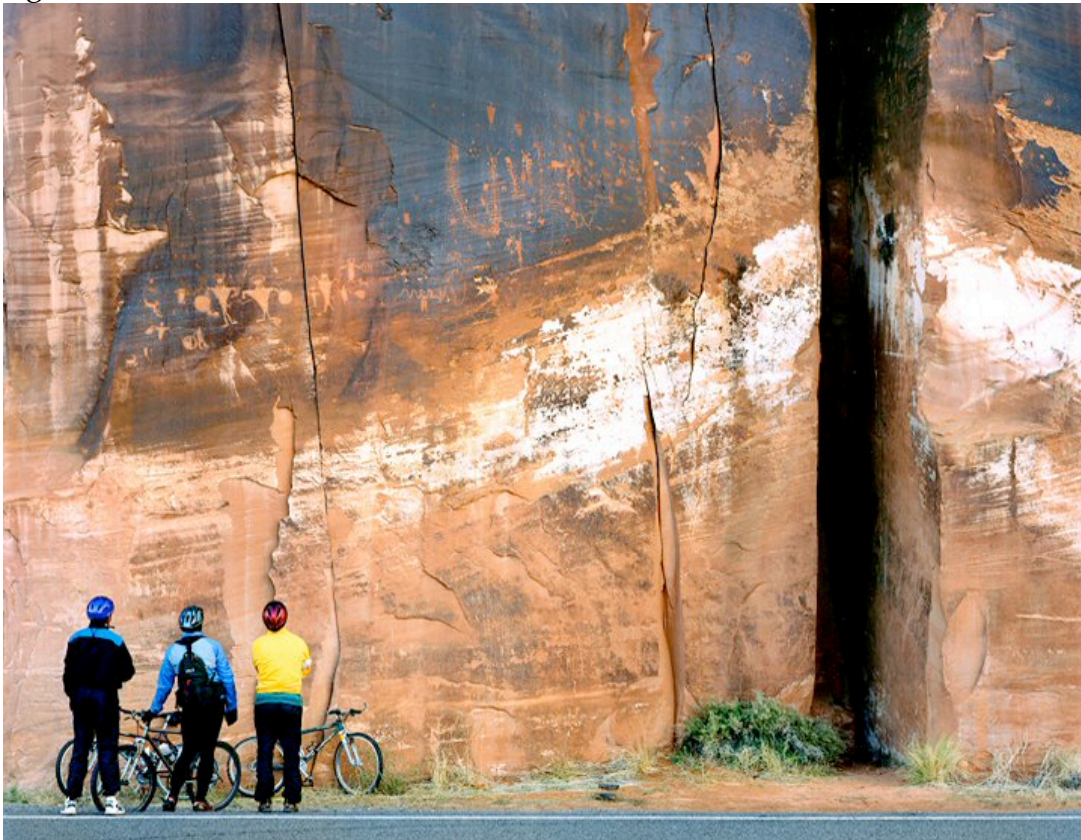


Figure 10.





Figure 11.



Figure 12.



Figure 13.





Figure 14.



Figure 15.





Figure 16.



Figure 17.



Figure 18.



Figure 19.





Figure 20.

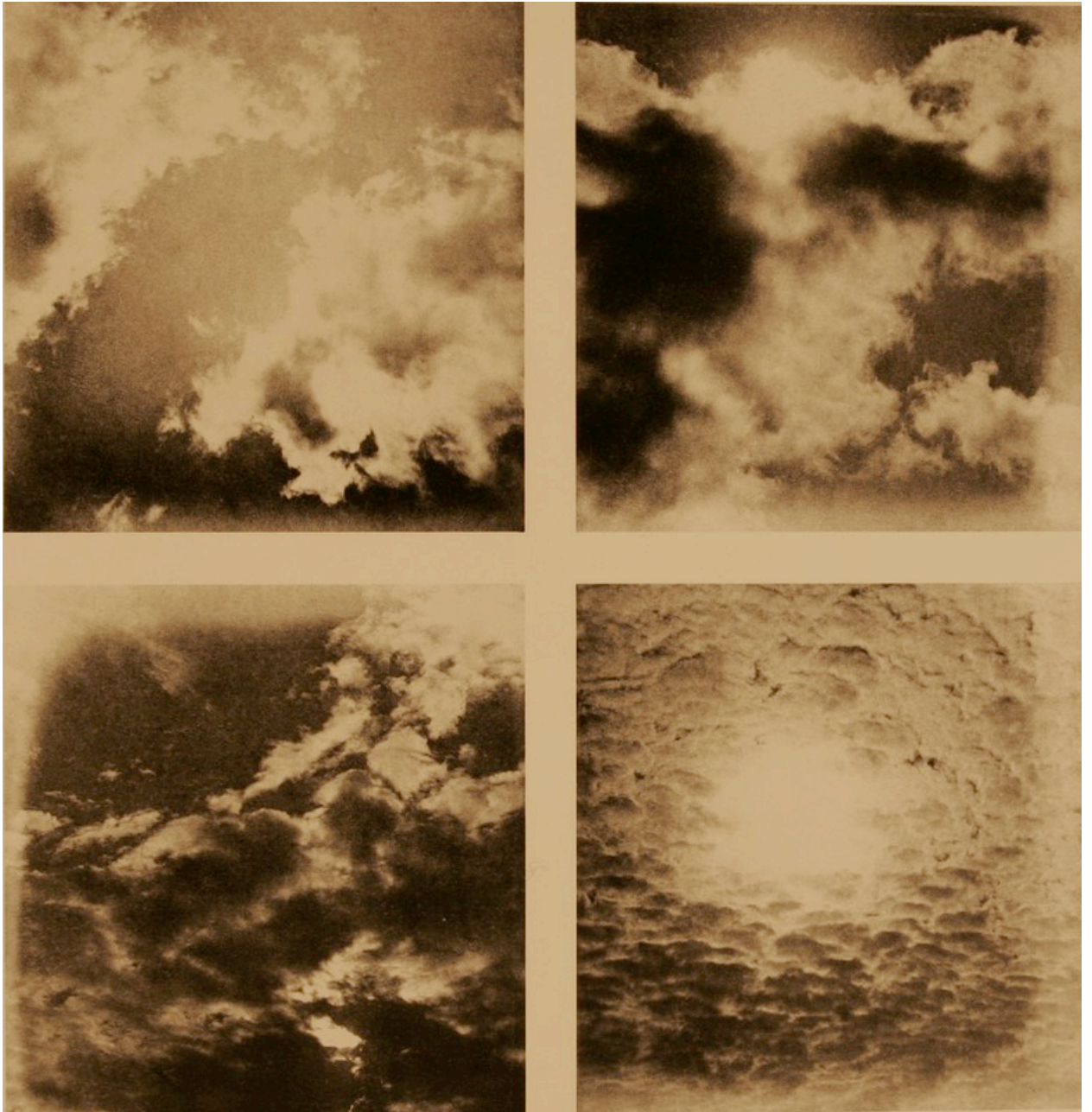


Figure 21.

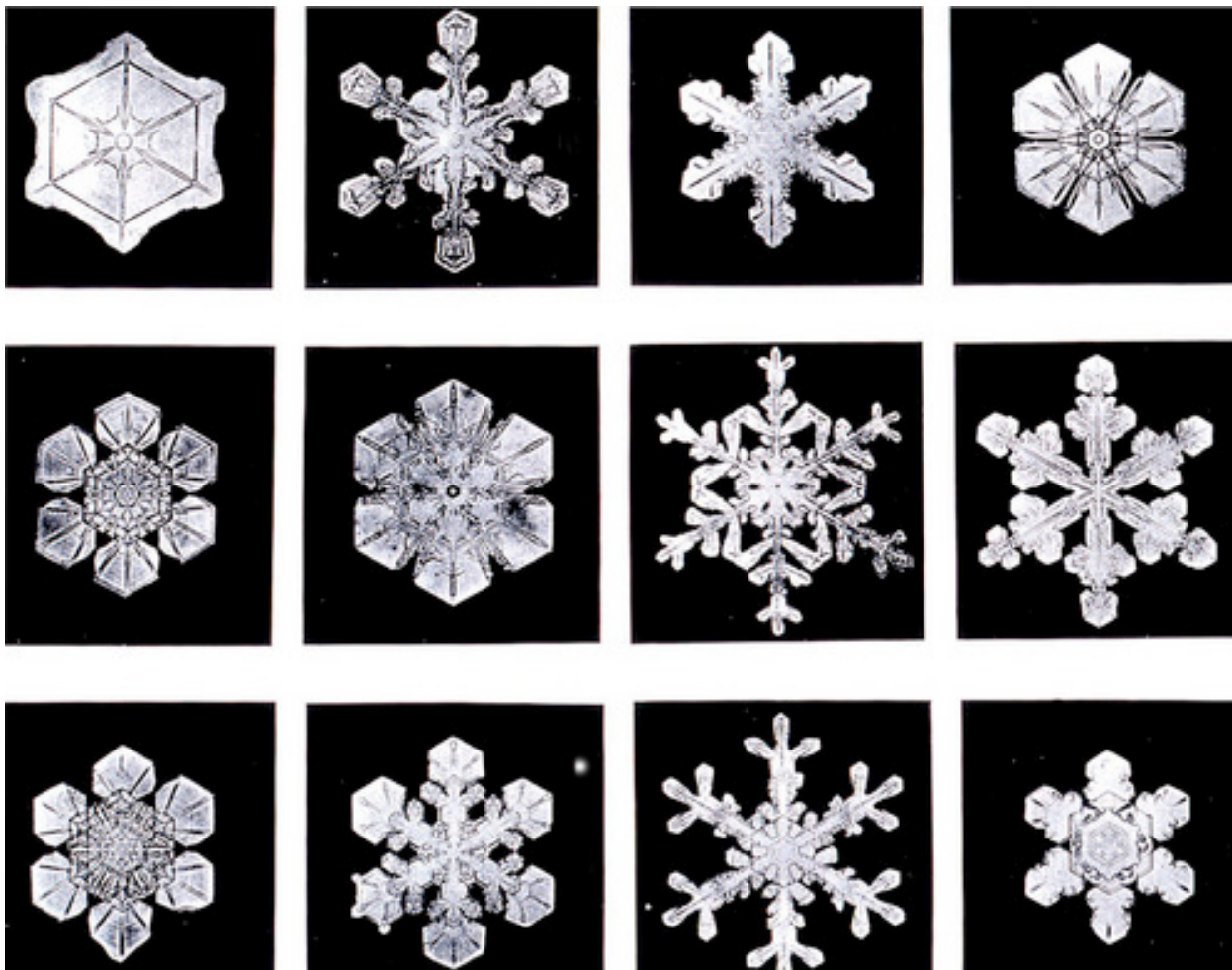


Figure 22.





Figure 23.



Figure 24.



Figure 25.

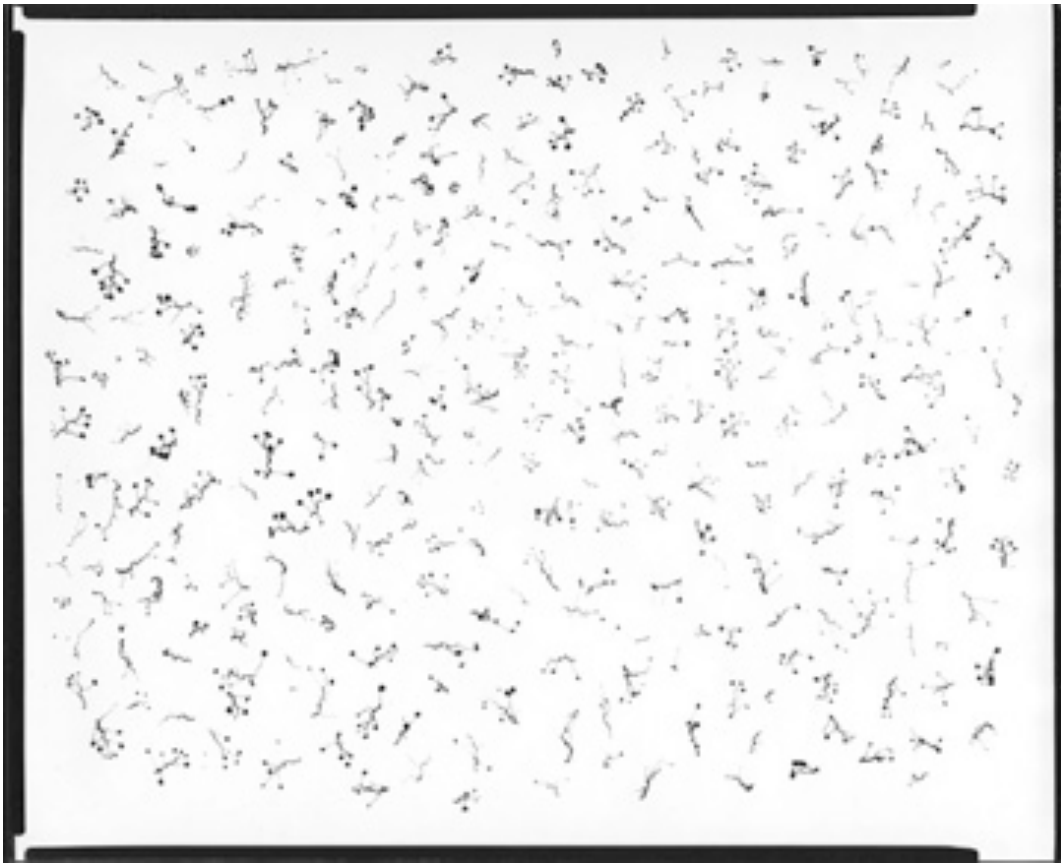




Figure 26.

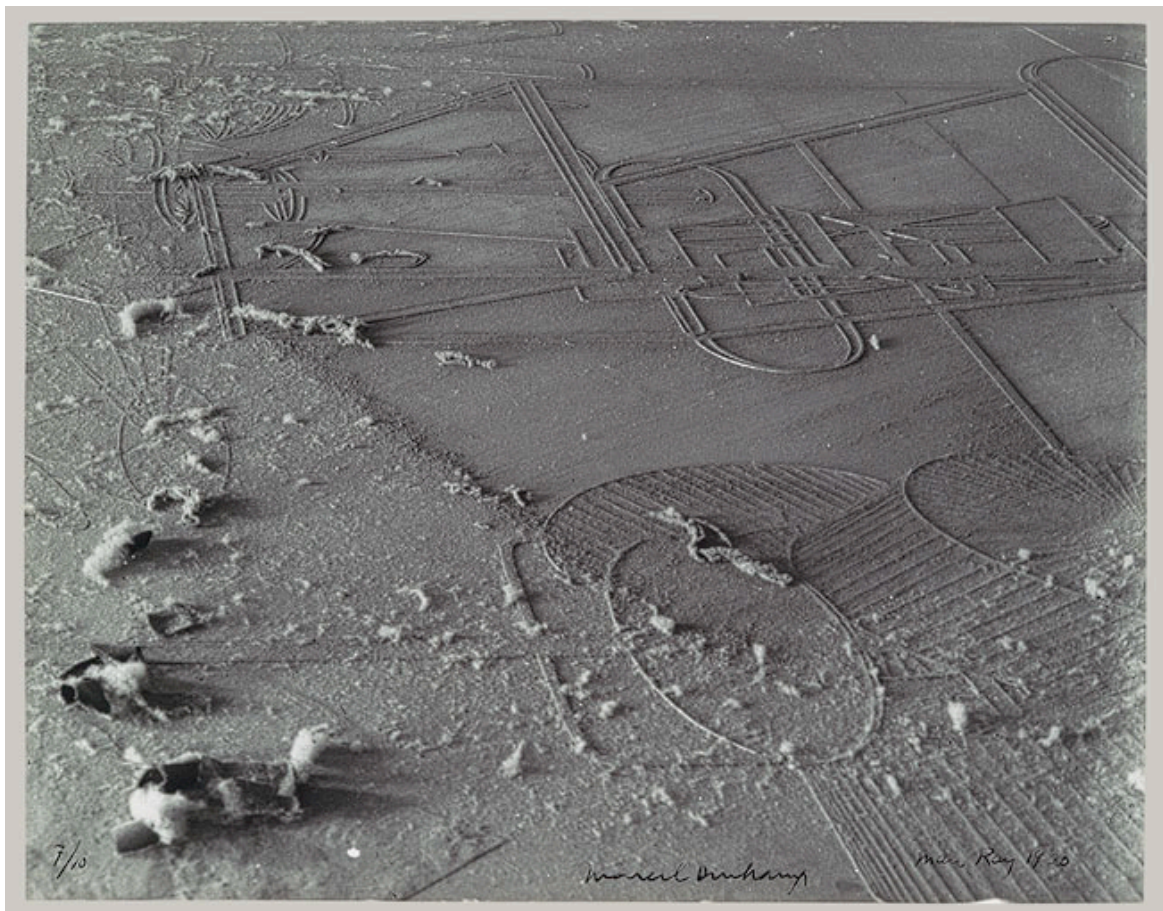


Figure 27.



Figure 28.



Figure 29.





Figure 30.



Figure 31.

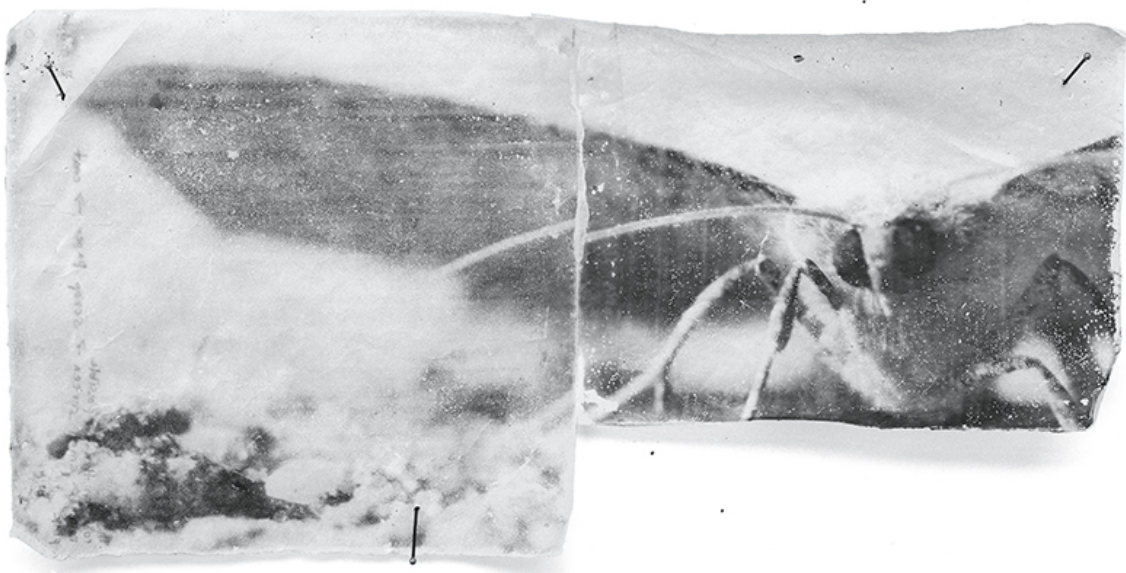


Figure 32.



Figure 33.

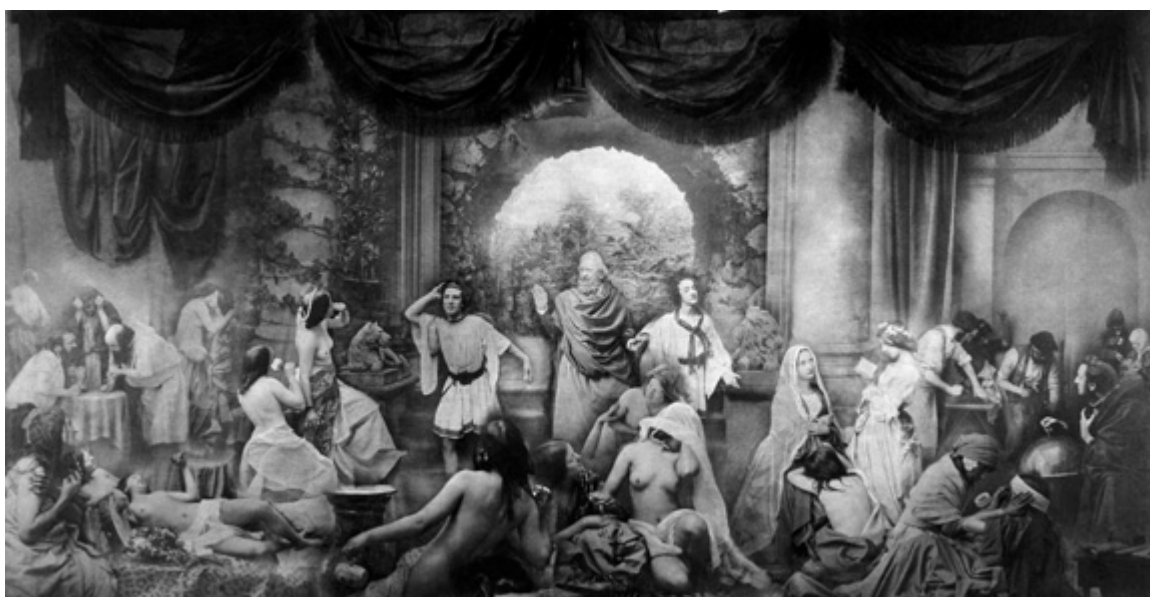




Figure 34.

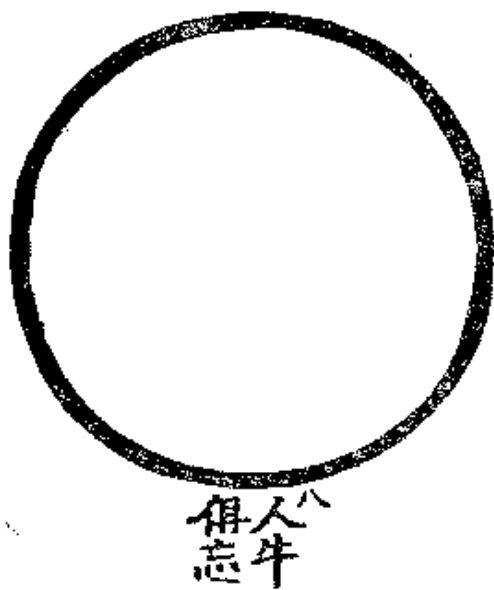
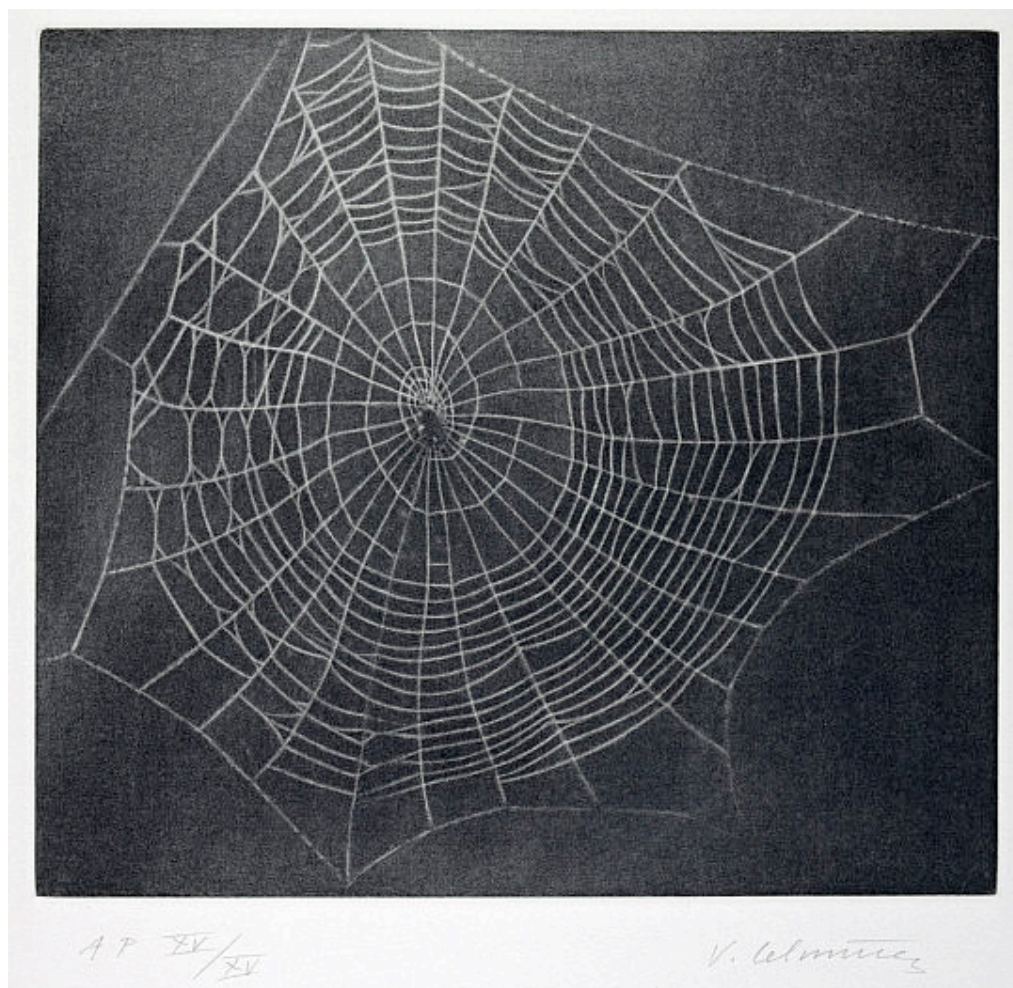


Figure 35.



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