

20 VAN LEO

32 MARK ALICE DURANT

33 TABITHA SOREN

44 NYPD

60 ELLEN CAREY

61 BILL ARMSTRONG

70 ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG

80 DAVID BRANDON GEETING

# DEAR DAVE,

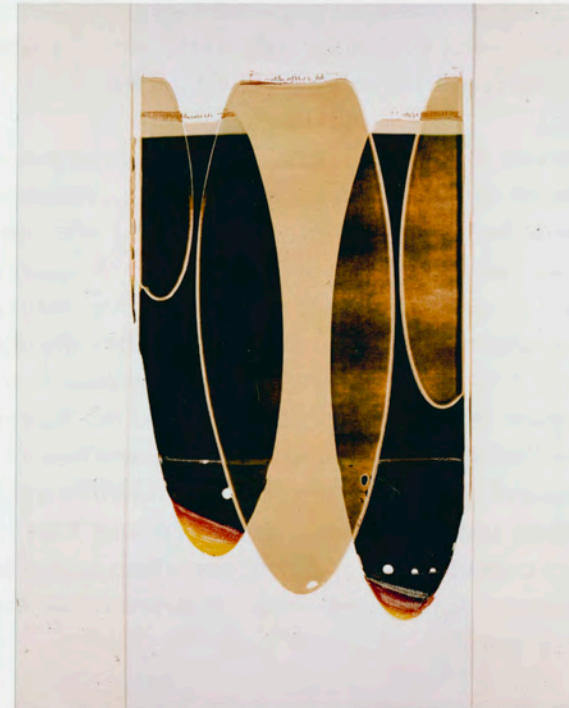
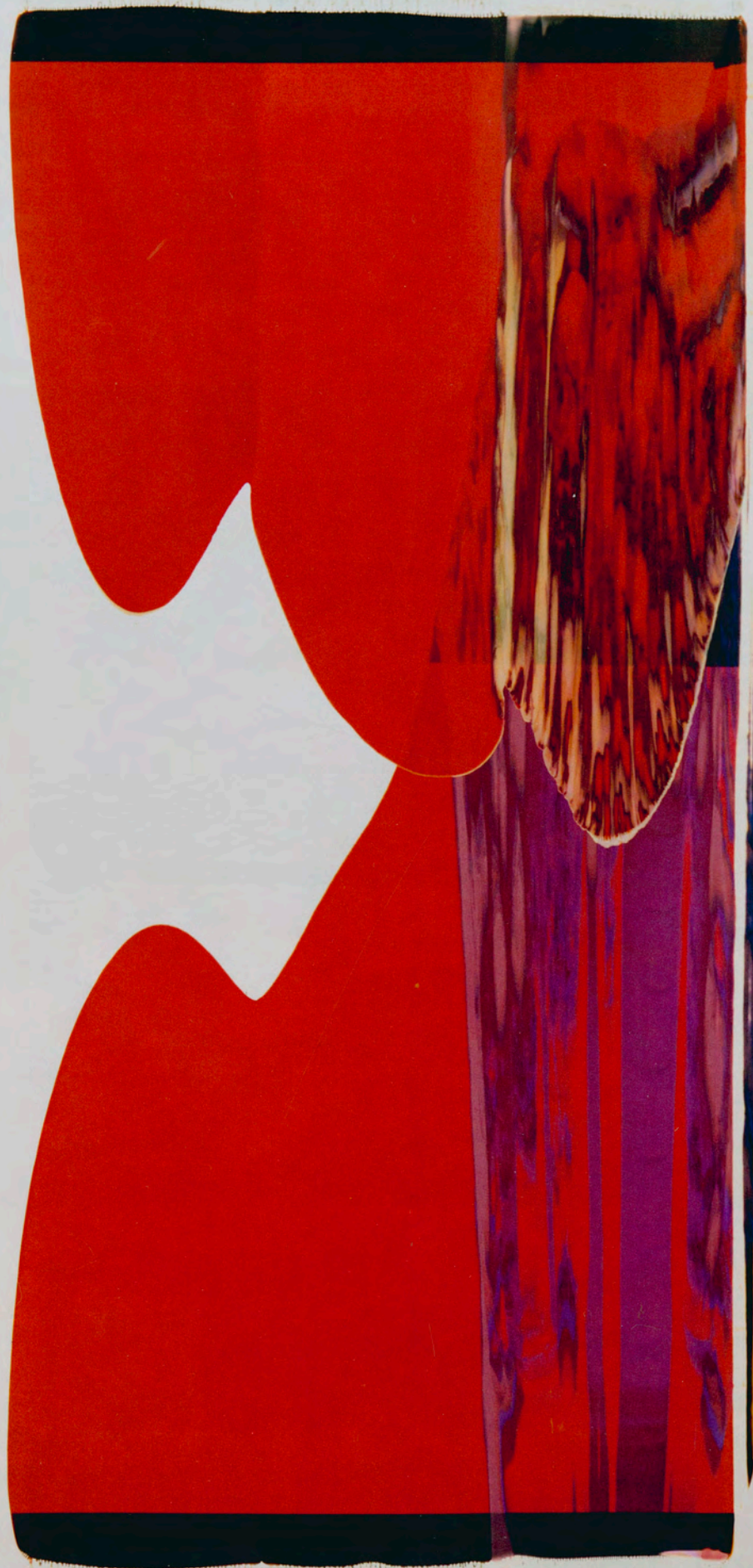
\$15



DISPLAY UNTIL JULY 31, 2015



0 74470 25543 7



## Ellen Carey

**Bill Armstrong:** Many abstract artists started with a representational style and then evolved into abstraction. How did you come to abstraction?

**Ellen Carey:** The Polaroid *Pull* from 1996 is a defining moment and introduced *Photography Degree Zero*, as the name of my practice; the phrase refers to *Writing Degree Zero* by Roland Barthes, which offers a critical discourse on the departure from descriptive narrative in French avant-garde literature. In related fashion, my work represents the absence of a picture “sign” found in most photography and instead, consists of an image made without a subject, without any reference to a place, person or object. This was not so much an evolution towards abstraction and minimalism but an emptying of the “frame”—away from picture signs—to pictures of nothing introducing an aporia in the work.

From this experience, light is emphasized, and used in unusual combinations. Characteristics of light—silhouette and outline, shadow and negative image—the idea of absence, emerged. Color grew bolder. Photographic color theory serves as a palette and formal choice, and a visual form called the parabola is introduced as a conical loop, or a hyperbola.

*Struck by Light* references my photograms made without a camera. In color printing, the paper is so sensitive, no light is allowed except upon exposure; I work in total darkness. My new work titled *Dings & Shadows* contains visceral and multiple “dings”—errors in traditional printing—acting as the catcher of my “shadows” extending abstract forms and minimal spaces within a spectral range in a kaleidoscope of hues. Light finds color

through the rainbow, a distinct phenomenon equal to the one found in photography.

My work intentionally upends traditional methods of rendering a photographic image, forcing a break from the past, freeing a picture from a hierarchy of things to be captured to a picture that is made. The 'what' that is in front of the lens is reversed. "How is this picture made?" followed by "What is this a picture of?" are questions asked about my work. The first addresses *process*, and it is this very process, which *becomes* the subject; the second finds an image *without* a subject. Or is it—or is it not—altogether *something* else?

**BA:** Wow, you've answered a lot of questions here, but not necessarily the one I thought I'd asked. You say the discovery of the *Pull* in 1996 was the defining moment, could you elaborate on that?

**EC:** There were a number of personal losses in my life at this time. They brought about shifts and with it all the paradigms and promises of photography collapsed. How to describe my new experiences? What was *the* record? The *document*? While in a state of mourning, I decided to create my own version of *Family Portrait*. I was surprised and confounded, yet free and challenged—to *see*—what was possible.

This symbolic portrait of my family also represented our collective living and dying selves, as human beings, a process that is continuous; as we live, we also die. These twin realities I knew as a universal fact, intellectually, but they were abstract, visually far away, until this moment. With these unexpected insights, my photographic images described this internal state in these externally. They were radically different and visceral. When *Family Portrait* was hung in the studio, I felt in a flash, what Freud calls the 'uncanny,' a profound sensation. This powerful feeling went into my first *Pull* and yes, it defined a moment.

What resulted was a different kind of record, that of my picture-making and its process. This *Pull* was photographic and process, abstract and minimal, where the intersection of image and meaning created a paradox. I needed a new language to describe everything. In hindsight, letting go of the image had precursors, prescient in my previous work of experimenting and pushing boundaries. But in 1996, that day at the Polaroid studio,

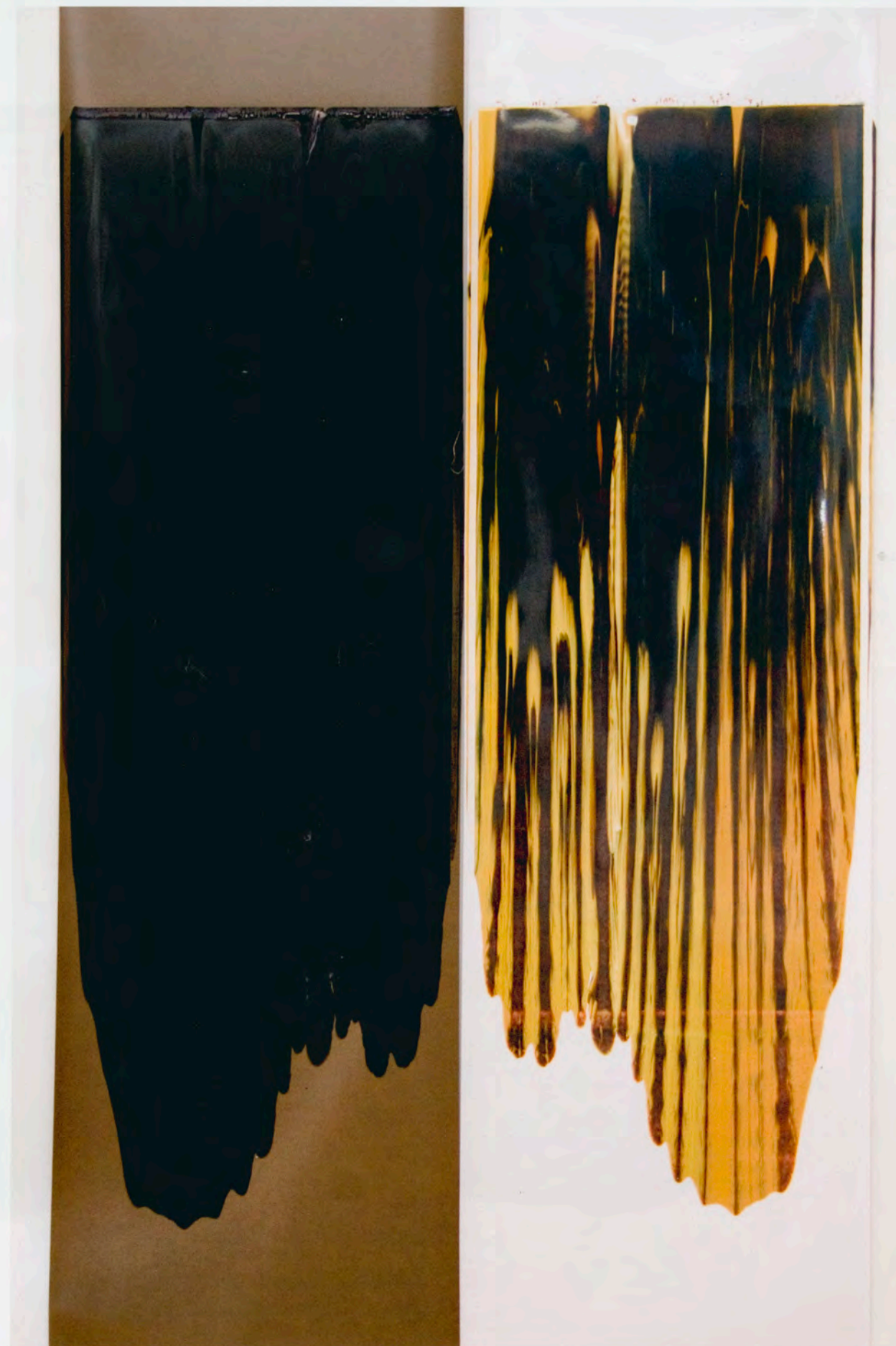
it was so obvious, *this* breakthrough. Life was changing, as was my life in photography, I created a new language around it as *Photography Degree Zero*.

**BA:** Your answer clarifies for me your use of the word *aporia* in your prior response. As I'm sure you know, the classic example of *aporia* is the story of the Cretan king who said "All Cretans are liars" creating a conundrum—is he lying then and they are not all liars? Your discussion of the void and emptying the frame make sense to me in the context of personal loss, and it becomes an *aporia*—the void is the subject because the nothingness of loss is still something. Now, I get it!

I relate to the idea of making work about the void. I began my *Apparition* series—ghostly portraits of old men made from Roman busts—six months after my father died, but it wasn't until I was halfway through that I realized I was making work directly relating to his death—the motivation was subconscious. When art making is driven by forces other than the conscious, it seems like a good thing, both for the artist and the viewer. I imagine that as a maker of photograms, working in the pitch black of the color darkroom, the relationship between intent and result can be pretty tenuous. Can you speak more about chance, the subconscious and other unplanned or unknown forces that determine the path of your work?

**EC:** In this black box of the darkroom, I work blind, so to speak. Though my eyes are open, I see light only upon exposure. What is not seen or perhaps fully understood, by the viewer or someone unfamiliar with color printing, is that all of my color photograms are made in total darkness, very different from the amber light of a black-and-white darkroom. Black box is also a metaphor for the mind. In this context, what is unique and exhilarating is the *experience*.

This *experience* parallels the unknown—subconscious—only now a more heightened sense of touch and sound are active, replacing sight. Colors fall randomly and by chance. Light drawing adds depth as my penlight strikes the dings to make dark shadows. In my newer series of *Dings & Shadows* (2010-14) no object is placed on the light-sensitive paper that traditionally made its outline; this breaks with an historic practice. My penlight drawing flashes across the landscape of my "dings" that were



purposely handmade to capture and create striking forms and synesthetic feelings—sharp angles or circular shapes, bright or soft colors; unusual patterns pinch color bursts—documenting my experimental activity while the visual universe creates bold compositions. A lot goes on in there!

In my printing sessions I keep notes and evaluate. There are definitely ineffable forces at work during my creative process, mysterious yet familiar. Creativity is multilayered and complex, simply elegant and extraordinarily beautiful.

**BA:** I am particularly drawn to the *Dings & Shadows* series because of the way you turn the physical aspect of color printing upside down. Many people may not know that one of the great challenges of large-scale color darkroom printing is physically handling the paper in the dark without causing “dings” or “creases.” It takes some practice to master the skill of making clean, ding-free prints, and the taller one happens to be the easier it is to handle the big paper. I liken it to the physical aspects large-scale painting that earned the Abstract Expressionist painters the sobriquet “heroic.” For me it is a classic post-modernist trope to turn that somewhat macho concept upside down and embrace the dings and creases, making them part of the work. Brava!

I would like to go back the earlier discussion about “emptying the frame” for a moment. For me, non-representational abstraction, devoid of traditional subject matter or content, must rely on design and color to make its point, convey its meaning. You refer to the shapes of circle and squares as universal codes and mirrors implying multiple levels of meaning and interpretation. As a colorist, I see color, also, as being content, as having meaning with multiple levels of interpretation. When I show your work in class, I give my interpretation of the colors, so I’m very interested in how *you* think about it. Can you talk about how you see the colors as creating psychological, symbolic or emotional meaning in your work?

**EC:** Color is the *sui generis* of light, and light, of color. Both are intertwined in my work, like a DNA helix. My given Irish name in Celtic or Gaelic means “bringer of light” or “light,” a prescient gift from my parents. In this context, light carries religious weight, a symbol echoed in the phrase *ray of light* or *seeing the light*. The circle

is found in the nimbus of a golden halo; the square is found in the frames of stained glass church windows. And both structures are universal in visual thinking

The *Mourning Wall* artworks are monochromatic; I describe them as non-color. This references the early photograms of Talbot, whose tonal variations of earthy brown, aubergine, and sienna are also visual expressions in non-color. My austere palette in Polaroid black, white and grey were the colors I was feeling, the void of nothing, no “real” color, empty frames. The state of “in mourning” is exactly that; rich in feeling but atonal, or colorless. Mourning is a process, like Polaroid and Photogram, and it has various stages, shifting interiors, picture signs that for me were symbolic, psychological and emotional. Minimal and abstract, the Polaroid work presented art objects that were wholly new, simultaneously photographic and process, a huge contact print, producing a positive with its negative, in a one-step, peel-away transfer method developed in 60 seconds.

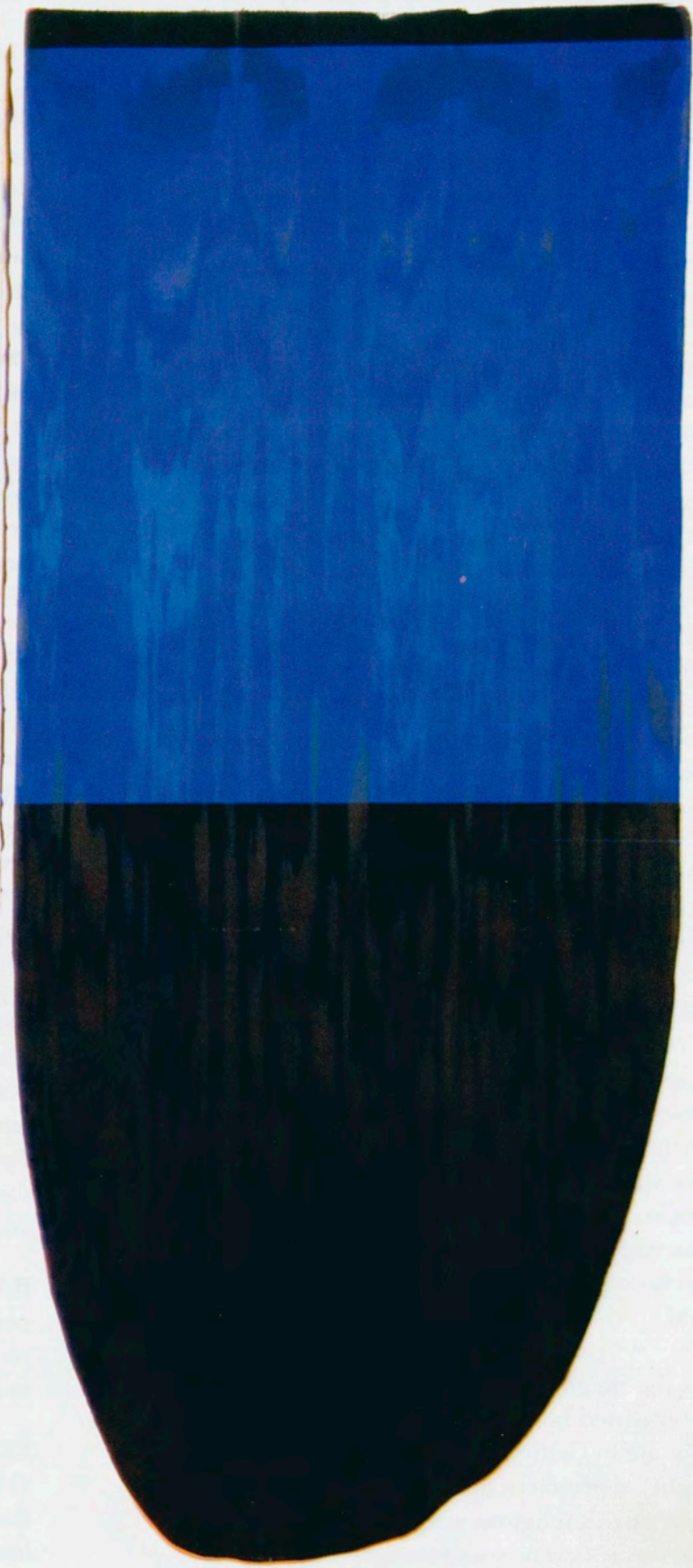
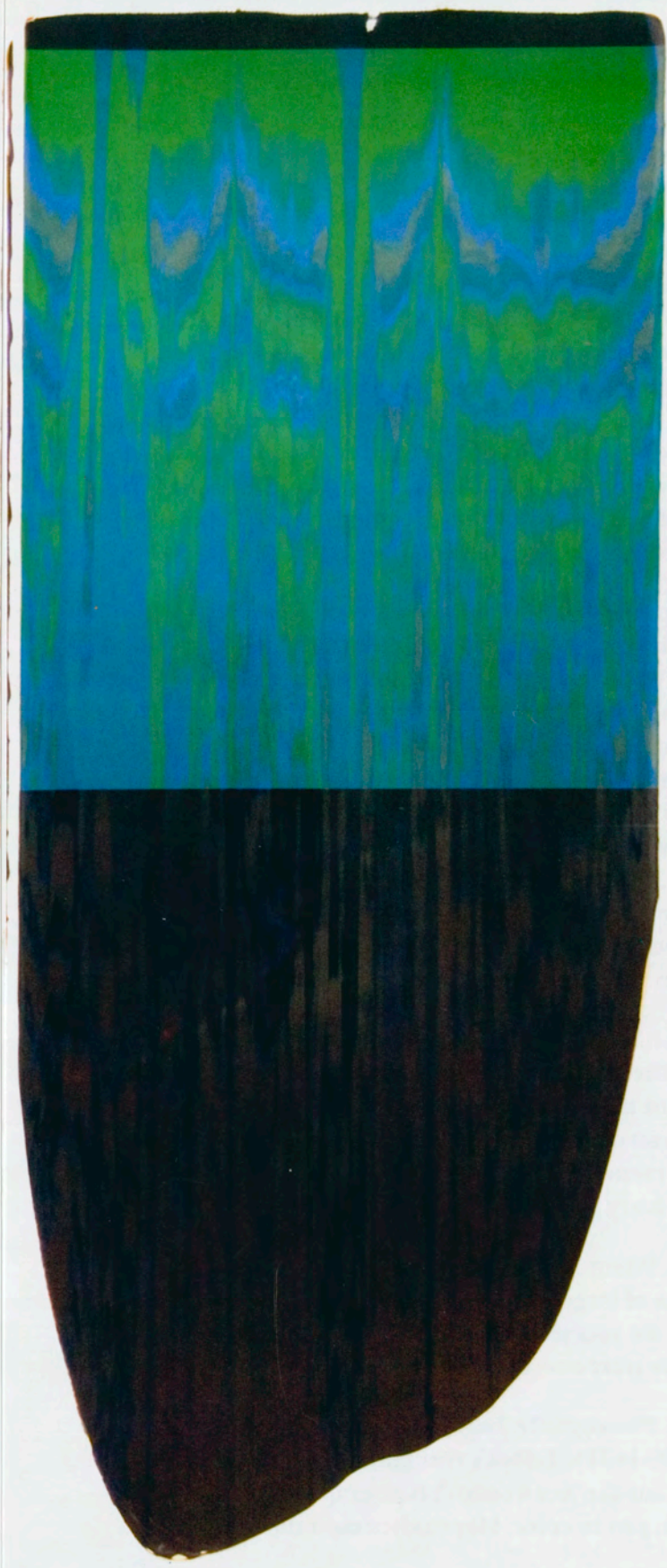
People often compare my work to painting, especially Minimal and Abstract Expressionism and that is an astute observation about upending that tradition, located in the male domain of the “heroic” as you mention. But painting doesn’t often have the same luminosity, opacity, intensity and saturation possible with the spectral variety and hues in color photography and light, especially the way I use it. The “action” takes place in front of my eyes, but I can’t see it, the light pours over the sensitive paper in nanoseconds. The performance aspect adds a fascinating experience, both in Polaroid and photogram.

The history of color in art is well documented throughout the centuries, bearing different meanings at different times. Color is universal, like music. My *Family Portrait* reminded me of these links to color and music, this memory of my grandparents’ piano, the onyx black and ivory white keys.

**BA:** When I mentioned the “heroic” and “macho” aspects of large-scale printing I was wondering about how you see yourself as a woman artist. So you have led me to my next question. Could you talk about that?

**EC:** Photography began with a woman, Anna Atkins (1799-1871), Talbot’s contemporary. A British Victorian, she was the *first* woman photographer (albeit camera-less), *first* in color. Her studies used the cyanotype, a





method yielding a Prussian blue. Sir John Herschel taught her his method and she partnered it with Talbot's photogram (1834), his negative image rendered in non-color. Gender codes of blue/*feminine* versus brown/*masculine* (italics mine) underscore these divisions in content, context and concept. Her cyanotype-as-photogram includes her handwriting, another *first*. Historically, women began and advanced color in photography; this "underexposed" area offers a new area of scholarship. Some women have an extra genetic structure, newly discovered; it is called tetrachromacy and involves having four cones rather than 3 which significantly multiplies the amount of color one can discern. So there is scientific data to support my thesis. And color blindness is 20 times more frequent in men.

**BA:** My final question relates to your place in history. You have been making photograms for quite sometime, and I see you as the preeminent color photogrammist—if that's a word—of your generation.

**EC:** Thank you Bill.

**BA:** Perhaps surprisingly, there is a new generation of artists going against the grain of the digital revolution and making traditional color photograms today. Walead Beshty, Mariah Robertson and Bryan Graf, in particular, come to mind. How do you see these artists and the future of the photogram?

**EC:** It's the 21<sup>st</sup> century version of the Linked Ring. Very exciting and invigorating! We "photogrammists" are all in this together, an *esprit de corps* that is inclusive. The future is always unpredictable. Would Talbot and Atkins or Man Ray have seen this? Here *and* now?—envision the photogram's possibilities as "back to the future" from their vantage point located in the 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> century? Color has advanced so much in the chemistry and the ability to print big, but I do remember the excitement around digital and people predicting the end of analog, but it is just too rich a medium, too beautiful to let go; the amazing images, the materials and processes have meaning, the uniqueness of the physical print and by extension, the artist, also unique. The photogram *is* the beginning and to see the next generation of artists take it on, in their practices, means something—they get it. They are wonderful, bold and fearless. I see the work, understand and know their struggles, but this important legacy continues, against the many challenges, predictions and complexities. It enriches the picture culture with fresh ideas and new visions. Maybe my work is the "link" between that past and this present, as I remember when starting these photograms people looked at me as in: "Why bother? Digital is here! Color, Hah! You can do *everything* digitally." But you really can't, can you?

**BA:** No, you cannot.



**BILL ARMSTRONG** is represented by ClampArt in New York and Hackelbury in London. His work is in the collections of Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Museum, the Houston Museum of Fine Arts and the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, and a retrospective of the work occurred at the Southeast Museum of Photography in 2010. He is on the photography faculty of the School of Visual Arts and the ICP in New York.

**ELLEN CAREY** received her MFA from the Kansas City Art Institute and is an associate professor of photography at the Hartford Art School. Her work is in the collection of the George Eastman House, the International Center of Photography, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, among many others. She has had 50 solo exhibitions of her work since 1978.

**MARK ALICE DURANT** has written extensively on the life and work of Maya Deren, the experimental filmmaker. He is on the faculties of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County and the Milton Avery Graduate School for the Arts at Bard College. He is the editor of the website *Saint-Lucy*, and is a frequent contributor to *Aperture*.

**DAVID BRANDON GEETING** has published work in *Bloomberg Business Week*, *The Fader* and *Nylon*. He received his BFA degree from the School of Visual Arts in 2011. A book of his work, *Infinite Power* has recently been published by Pau Wau Publications.

**VAN LEO** (1921-2002) was a studio photographer in Cairo from the post-war era until the end of the century. He was the recipient of the Prince Claus Award from the Arab Image Foundation in Beirut, and his work was featured in the exhibition "Here and Elsewhere" at the New Museum in New York in 2014. The archive of his work is held by the American University in Cairo.

**ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG** (1925-2008) had his first solo exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1951 and in 1964 was the first American artist to win the Grand Prize at the Venice Biennale. Retrospectives of his work occurred twice at Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. He was awarded the National Medal of the Arts in 1993.

**TABITHA SOREN** received a BA in journalism and politics at New York University, and studied photography at Stanford University. Over the past 10 years, her projects have been published in *The New York Times Magazine*, *Vanity Fair* and *New York* magazine, and she is represented by the Kopeikin Gallery in Los Angeles.

COVER PHOTOGRAPH: ELLEN CAREY

# DEAR DAVE,

## PUBLISHER

David Rhodes

## EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Stephen Frailey

## DIRECTOR OF DESIGN & DIGITAL MEDIA

Michael J. Walsh

## MANAGING EDITOR

Maria Dubon

## COVER EDITOR

Mary Ehni

## FASHION DIRECTOR

Lindsay Hart Thompson

## ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Sheilah Ledwidge

## EDITOR-AT-LARGE

Mark Alice Durant

## EDITORIAL ASSISTANT

Caroline Tompkins

## WEBMASTER

Eric Corriel

## EDITORIAL ADVISORS

Philip Gafter, Michael Kazam, Jimmy Moffat, Roger O. Thornhill, Jessica Craig-Martin

## DISTRIBUTION

Disticor Magazine Distribution Services  
Export Press

**THANKS & LOVE TO:** *Anthony Rhodes, Dawn Cresser, Beitressa Mandelbaum, Simone Monticelli, Malcolm Lightner, Kathryn Humphries, Jen Liang, Gary Jean-Pierre, Raymar Mitchell, Vidya Alexander, Jessica Jackson, Bradley Crumb, Mollie Bernstein, Gina Guy, Michael Foley, Adam Natale, Charbel Saad, Hala Tawil*

**DEAR DAVE**, is available at Barnes & Noble, Colette, Paris; Photographers' Gallery, London; Athenaeum Bookstore, Amsterdam; St. Mark's Bookstore, New York; International Center of Photography Bookstore, New York; powerHouse Books, Brooklyn; and fine bookstores and newsstands nationwide.

## SUBSCRIBE:

[deardavemagazine.com](http://deardavemagazine.com)

ISSN# 2151-2639

### VAN LEO combined credits:

Images on pages 22, 30: Collection AIF/Van Leo; © Arab Image Foundation.

Image page 28: Collection AIF/Van Leo; © The Rare Books and Special Collections Library, AUC/Arab Image Foundation.

Images pages 20, 23-27, 29, 31: Collection AIF/The Rare Books and Special Collections Library, AUC; © American University Cairo.