

LIGHT MOVES

Turning away from camera gadgetry, several artists choose to remove the instrument between the light and light-sensitive paper, producing sophisticated images with dreamlike, ghostly qualities. *By Jean Dykstra*

LIKE VERY DRY MARTINIS and Burberry plaid, everything old is new again. After all, in the photo world, you don't have to look far to see that some of the most sought-after contemporary works are being made using a technique as old as the history of photography itself: the photogram.

In the simplest terms, a photogram involves putting an object on a sheet of paper coated with light-sensitive emulsion and then exposing the paper to light. This cameraless technique has been commanding the attention of dealers and collectors, who are drawn, in particular, to the work of the so-called Gang of Four—Adam Fuss, Susan Derges, Christopher Bucklow and Garry Fabian Miller—front-runners of an old-now-new trend gaining popularity among commercial photographers as well.

In point of fact, Bucklow does use a camera, albeit a very basic, custom-built pinhole camera, but all four of these photographers are interested in "the metaphysical possibilities of the medium," as San Francisco deal-

er Jeffery Fraenkel put it in the catalogue for a 1996 show of their work. These qualities—ethereal, dreamlike images of ghostly objects—have attracted other photographers to various cameraless techniques. These can range from putting objects directly in the enlarger to create a projection print to using heat guns and matches to create chemical reactions directly on the paper's coated surface.

"Esthetically," says Fuss, "you can make a very sophisticated image with cameraless techniques, but those techniques are very simple. Basically, there's no instrument mediating between the light and the light-sensitive paper."

The techniques of cameraless photography have produced some desired images. At the photography auctions at Christie's New York in October, Fuss's "Untitled (Blue Water Photogram)" from 1994 sold for \$12,925 (it was estimated at \$5,000-\$7,000), and Susan Derges's "Shoreline 29 September 1998," also a photogram, sold for \$11,750 (estimated at \$12,000-\$18,000).

Other artists creating cameraless images include Nadav Kander, Sivan Lewin, Amanda Means, Marco Breuer, Katurah Hutcheson and Carol Pfeffer. Their images are often large in scale, often in color and frequently characterized, to use Miller's words, by "an interest in the relationship between nature and science, and the belief that revelation is contained in both."

Their techniques vary widely. Miller and Means have placed objects (in Miller's case, leaves, and in Means's case, flowers and lightbulbs) on the head of an enlarger, then made a projection onto photographic paper to create a print. (Means's lightbulbs were on view this fall at New York's Ricco/Maresca Gallery.) For her photograms of England's River Taw, Derges worked with Ilfochrome paper, which she housed in a light-safe container that she took directly into the river, at night. She then removed the top of the container and exposed the paper with a flash strobe light, so that everything above the paper—water, fauna, trees, ivy—was all printed directly on the paper.

Why take all these steps when you could just press a

shutter? "You need another way into people's imaginations," says Derges. "Camera-based photography is so ubiquitous, it becomes difficult to do something that moves somebody conceptually, intellectually. . . . poetically," she adds. "It's that slight unfamiliarity of photograms—you think you're looking at a photograph, but there's something subtle and mysterious."

Winner of a 1999 ICP Infinity Award, Fuss's evocative images may be the best known: a floating baby suspended in an orange pool; two eviscerated rabbits facing each other, their innards entwined (it's titled "Love") "I was bored with most of the pictures that I was seeing," he says in a soft-spoken English accent. (All of the Gang of Four are British.) "I wanted to create something that I hadn't seen before, and I felt that cameraless photography opened up a different visual syntax." His series "My Ghost," from 1999, includes luminous gelatin silver print photograms of a lace christening dress and a plume of smoke.

Bucklow's "Guest" series, featured in current ads for Vertu, is of silhouettes of people, seemingly made of thousands of small suns, but were in fact produced by piercing as many as 25,000 pinholes into a template drawn from a projected shadow of the sitter and then using that template to expose a sheet of color photographic paper to sunlight.

Breuer's work is a matter of chemistry rather than light: he uses a range of techniques to create his images including lighting a fuse against the surface of photographic paper in a darkroom; striking a match against photographic paper and moving a heat gun along the surface of the paper. The emulsions on the paper turn various shades of red and gold before charring, leaving abstract tracings. Hutcheson, whose images (along with Fuss's) will be included in a show at Philadelphia's Institute of Contemporary Art this month called "The Photogenic," makes paintings on acetate of the scene out the window of her Brooklyn studio, then lays that painting on photographic paper and exposes the paper to sunlight to make a negative. And Pfeffer creates abstract conceptual color images involving a variety of techniques, among them painting various pigments onto treated acetate sheets and then putting the sheets in an enlarger to generate a projection print.

Rather than the modern masters of the photogram Man Ray and László Moholy-Nagy, Pfeffer points to Abstract Expressionist painter Jackson Pollock as the strongest influence. Indeed, many of these artists prefer to speak in terms of painting rather than photography "It's as if the light is this liquid," says Means, "and there's a very direct feeling of affecting the paper." Derges, who trained as a painter, observes, "That's why there's always this struggle with the medium to make it more direct—like painting with light."

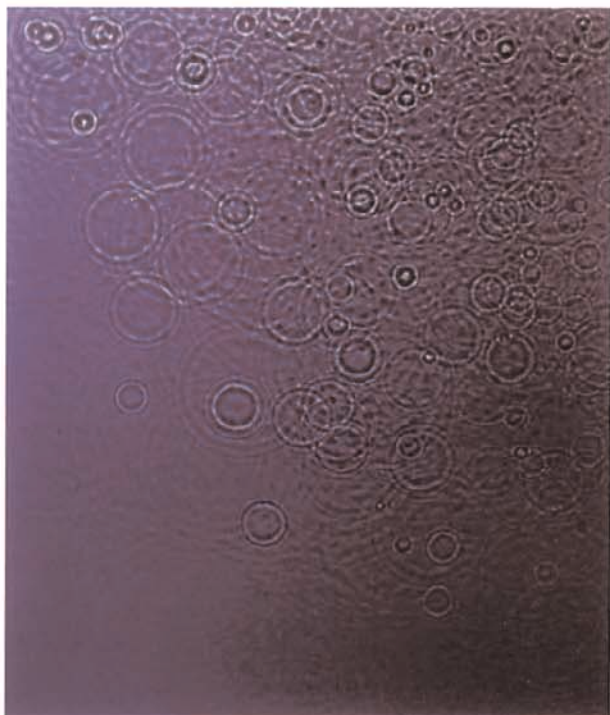
But light is an unpredictable medium, and cameraless images tend to be more conceptual, more ethereal and sometimes more abstract than lens-based images. In



"Guest 3:25 P.M. 25th of August 2000" (top left) and "Guest 12:03 P.M. 7th of August 1998" (bottom left) by Christopher Bucklow; Photograms (above images, opposite page) created by Sivan Lewin and styled by Jessica Hayns for a story on net fabrics featured in *The World of Interiors*; Nadav Kander's photogram (bottom, opposite page) for the Nicole Farhi ad campaign.

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Clockwise from top: A 1990 photogram by Adam Fuss; one of Susan Derges's photograms done at night in a riverbed; Carol Pfeffer's untitled piece is part of a larger series titled "Latency, the Subconscious and Exposure Differentials."



© CAROL PFEFFER

CAMERALESS TECHNIQUES

Artists have been making photograms since the 1830s, when William Henry Fox Talbot laid a piece of lace on a sheet of paper coated with emulsion and exposed it to light, creating a delicate, ethereal negative image.

The expressive potential of cameraless techniques was realized in new ways in the 1920s, when Man Ray began making his Rayographs, Surrealist-influenced photograms with a dreamlike quality, and László Moholy-Nagy began creating his Bauhaus-inspired photograms using metal pins and translucent discs to create asymmetrical, explosive images. The cameraless experiments of Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray are highly valued today: at the fall Christie's auction where work by Adam Fuss and Susan Derges were on the block, a Rayograph from 1924 sold for \$160,000 (estimated at \$150,000-\$200,000).

CAMERALESS PHOTOGRAPHY, KANDER NOTES, IS WELL SUITED TO FASHION OR PERFUME ADVERTISING, CAMPAIGNS WHERE YOU'RE AFTER A MOOD RATHER THAN SOMETHING CONCRETE.

deed, many of the artists seem to think of their work in abstract, personal terms. Pfeffer calls her images "a metaphor for the unconscious," while Bucklow describes his "Guest" series (all of people he knows) as a kind of extended self-portrait. "It's odd that the people who are using this work are all absolutely involved in a very personal, autobiographical exploration," he says. "Really, it seems to me, the antithesis of being able to make commercial work."

Kander disagrees. A successful commercial and fine-art photographer, Kander decided to incorporate photograms into the 2000 ad campaign for fashion designer

Nicole Farhi, pairing black-and-white photographs of models wearing her clothes with large photograms of a variety of objects inspired by the clothing or the concepts behind it, ranging from snakeskin to sand. "I don't really separate my commercial work and my fine-art photography," he says. "If something feels right for a good commercial project, I'll try it."

Cameraless photography, he adds, is well suited to fashion or perfume imagery, campaigns where you're after a mood rather than something concrete. "For me, it's quite a subtle part of your brain that enjoys photograms—it feels like they're from your imagination." □

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