

Veils Are Diaphanous
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While it seems redundant to ponder the relevance of photography in artistic discourse today, it would appear that it has not, unfortunately, found its footing as an uncontested medium in contemporary art. Reliant upon camera bodies and chemicals mass-produced in nature, photography, as we are all well aware, suffers the slippery reputation of being a medium that observes and records, lacks evidence of the artist's hand, and thus reflects seemingly little intentionality. It is the dumb, nerdy kid brother to our charming Currins and Humes, the unhip sister to our unmonumental Boyces and Stockholders (who are, coincidentally, allowed to employ mass-produced elements in their work). The fight against the medium's indexicality and documentary function is a battle few have won, though it remains to be seen why we don't just reject the omnipresent conceptualist mandate on contemporary art and allow photography to embrace its technical support, or embark on whatever wild ride it wants.

So why is Lisa Oppenheim so committed to photography, given this burdensome history? The New York-based artist epitomizes the conceptualist ability to build and locate intention contextually and specifically within a body of work that is photographic in nature. The individual photographs in series like the solarized images of smoke clouds, for example, are meaningful on their own, but together they resonate as greater than the sum of their parts. (The same could be said of individual words strung together, which achieve greater meaning through their formulation as a sentence, or five fingers that, together, become a functional hand.) Oppenheim's solarized smoke plumes dualize their subject matter: what we see is a swirling cumulus, but information gleaned from the title reveals that the clouds are actually smoke from a massive fire that destroyed a Sony warehouse during the London riots of 2011, or a cloud of debris resulting from the bombing of Normandy. What's more, the fact that these photographs are solarized by fire heightens their performativity, challenging the "observe and index" function of photography.

A true proponent of the medium, Oppenheim employs photography both as form and content. Take her intricate photographs of overlaid *véritable hollandais*, for instance—a fabric aesthetically similar to Indonesian batik, but which is almost entirely exported to West Africa and produced in the Netherlands by the Dutch company Vlisco: a postcolonial role reversal of sorts. These works harken back to Henry Fox Talbot's experiments with lace in the 1840s, when the photography pioneer placed the items directly on photographic paper. Shining light through the lace revealed a perfect photographic replication of the fabric's intricacies, represented in binary form by the presence or absence of light. Talbot showed

these early photographs to his peers in order to champion the replicative function of photographic processes. In positioning swatches of *véritable hollandais* directly onto photo paper, Oppenheim creates moiré effects and patterns resembling fish scales. As color photographs, these works represent the exact opposite of the fabric in terms of color, and elaborate Talbot's association with the binary.

These fabric images are further informed by formal and conceptual binary oppositions such as the positive/negative, historical/contemporary, handmade/mechanical, and colonizer/colonized. Oppenheim's pictures featuring rolling plumes of smoke also exist in this state of oppositional hybridity; in solarizing these silver gelatin prints with fire—itself both a light source and form of destruction—the artist creates both physical smoke and the image of it. One billow exists privately and ephemerally for the artist in her darkroom, the other exists as an infinitely reproducible rendering taken from sources as disparate as war-museum libraries, Flickr, Shutterstock, and the Library of Congress. Herein lies another instance of binary opposition: the performed and the static, the actual and the represented. Subtle clues hint at the negatives' original time period and source: the older war-museum images appear slightly scratched while the Internet-sourced images, after several decades of technological advancement, appear more crisp. Oppenheim's expertly formulated titles, which basically dispose of artwork-titling conventions altogether, refer to the source of her negatives, the photographer who originally took the photograph, and the year the image was originally captured. Take, for instance, the rather verbose title, *A Handley Page Halifax of No. 4 Group flies over the suburbs of Caen, France, during a major daylight raid to assist the Normandy land battle. 467 aircraft took part in the attack, which was originally intended to have bombed German strongpoints north of Caen, but the bombing area was eventually shifted nearer the city because of the proximity of Allied troops to the original targets. The resulting bombing devastated the northern suburbs, 1944/2012* (2012), which was produced from negatives from the Imperial War Museum in London, or *Billowing. As we were driving up to Norfolk yesterday I saw the Enfield fire; where a Sony distribution centre set ablaze by rioters was just pouring out smoke over the motorway. The sheer amount of smoke was quite surprising, and today smoke was still covering the motorway. I feel such despair at people who have taken to looting; so angry at the destruction people can cause, 2011/2012 (Tiled Version II)* (2012), which was sourced from Flickr. The aesthetic universality of the smoke plume signals a sense of collectivity in the various points in time and location from which they are plucked—a shared mourning for the metaphorical conflagrations of our lives.

Oppenheim's monochromatic "Leisure Work" series reveals a logic similar to both "Smoke" and "Véritable Hollandais (Fish Scales)," which uses successive foldings of Devon lace as the negative for a photogram. Again, the artist references Talbot's

experiments with lace calotypes, which the elder artist used to describe positive and negative relationships. Talbot's invention of the calotype marks the first instance of the ability to produce multiple positives from a single translucent negative, as the daguerreotype had erstwhile only produced one opaque positive.

While the calotype failed to displace the daguerreotype for a multitude of reasons (among them, Talbot's propensity for patenting), it remains a watershed moment in the industrialization of photography. Incidentally, textiles—lace included—also saw the dawn of their own mass production around this time, and Talbot labored to introduce photography to this process, with the hope that his calotypes could serve as an easily reproducible pattern for textiles.

The 1841 invention of the calotype coincided with the Industrial Revolution's ideological reinvention of labor, when many skilled crafts such as textile production—once considered women's or leisure work—became mechanized.

Women and children were introduced to the workforce, often under degrading conditions. Oppenheim's subject in "Leisure Work" is the often-invisible human labor that produces both photography and crafts typically considered "women's work."

Again, similar to Oppenheim's flame-solarized prints in her "Smoke" series, the artist's darkroom performativity calls attention to a greater conceptual apparatus at play.

In "Leisure Work," we see sequences of photograms beginning with one layer of lace that is folded once, twice, three times, and so on, with each fold represented by a photogram. The perfectly rendered lace in the first photogram gives way to the visual cacophony of subsequent prints, appearing not unlike television static.

While Oppenheim often strives to elucidate the tacit chemical processes and human actions underlying a photograph's creation, the history and recognition of domestic labor is treated with a similar invisibility here. Again, we find the binary opposition of the seen and unseen, handmade and mechanized, black and white.

Oppenheim's states of binary opposition speak to the artist's ability to both reinvent and celebrate the indexical and documentary functions of the photographic image. Highlighting the dual state of the image's subject matter, she proves that, in the end, it is the artist's contextualization that specifies intentionality and locates meaning. Building on photography's propensity to observe and record, Oppenheim's work reintroduces the medium's ability to both historicize and emote, obscure and highlight.