

PHOTOGRAPHY & MATERIALITY

MONA KASRA
EMILY LOVING
VARGHA MANSHADI
SHAWN SAUMELL
SUZANNE WILLIAMS
BETSY WILLIAMSON



MONA
KASRA

*Being a woman is not a tool
to humiliate or punish anyone.*
#selfportrait #activists series,
2013, DVD. (image still)

SUZANNE
WILLIAMS

Osteosarcoma, Cognizant series,
2013, 12" x 12", digital print

CURATED BY MARILYN WALIGORE

Author and curator Susan Bright has discussed the concept of photography and materiality, how contemporary artists are creating "photography about photography" using a variety of methods (222). Digital technology has guided the transformation of photographers' attitudes toward the medium, prompting them to revisit and renew modernist experiments, while often maintaining a critical distance. The artists in this exhibition seek to transcend representation, to investigate the potential of abstraction, working in the studio to connect to traditions in collage, painting, and sculpture, while often being informed by digital processes.

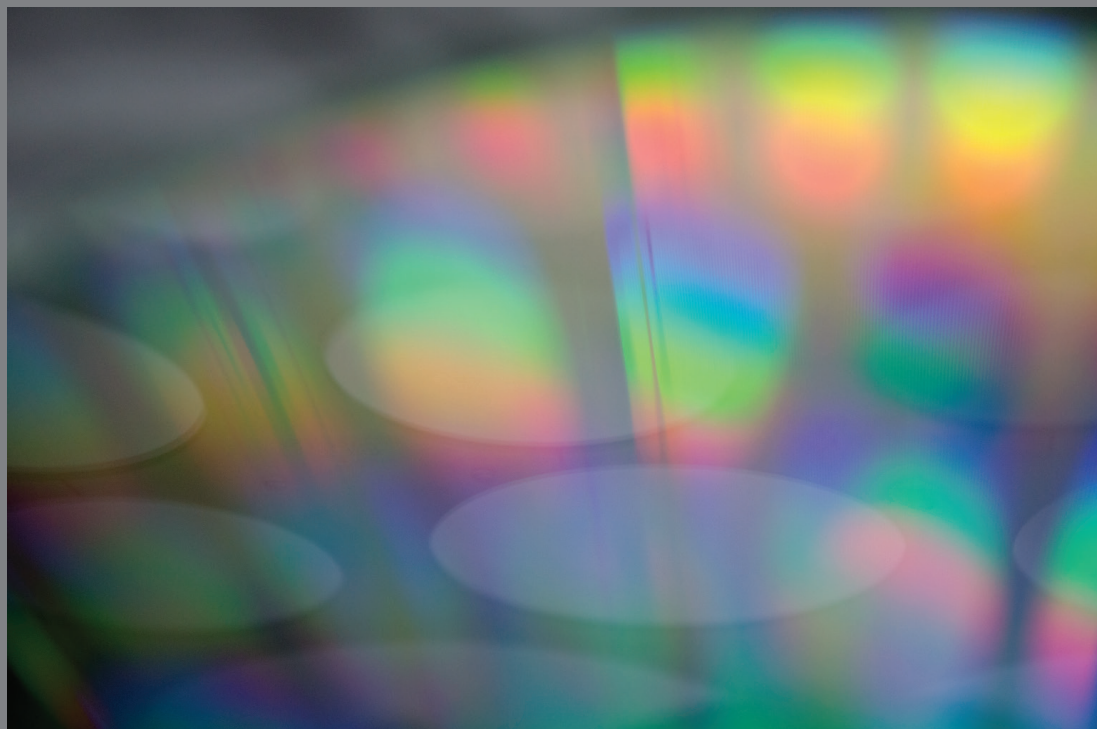
Mona Kasra merges the photograph's documentary function with self-reflexive awareness, to comment on both global discussions and contemporary art practice. Kasra appropriates and superimposes socially engaged self-portrait photographs in her video sequences, championing the dialogue generated by online activists. The practice of borrowing and recombining internet images informs work by artist Penelope Umbrico, for example, who combines millions of photographs of commonplace subjects, as in her composite image of suns downloaded from Flickr.



Kasra goes one step further, investigating the online posting of self-portraits generated within a specific cultural context, that demonstrate political engagement. Her series “#selfportrait #activists overlays socially engaged self-portrait photographs (selfies) that circulate on social media websites in response to various environmental, economic, political, and social issues around the world. The project alludes to the fact that while, in isolation, these socially engaged selfies seem to follow simple aesthetics and act as individual conduits for self-expression, together they signify a new form of visual activism in the networked digital era” (Kasra). The artist removes herself as author and takes on the new role as archivist, as cataloguer of visual information, to filter and to make coherent for the viewer these patterns that demonstrate image-sharing.

Scholar and curator Fred Ritchen has noted the influence of social media on documentary photography, especially photojournalism: “And, as social media have repeatedly shown, digital platforms can help to foster community. The greater engagement of the reader and various kinds of specialists in assessing meaning, the amplified role of the subject in producing the imagery, and the larger framework made available, including space for dialogue—all this makes the mediation more collaborative in ferreting out any conclusions. It is a partial reinvention of the oral tradition, in which a group actively shares what may be contradictory insights as many contribute to both the narrative and its interpretation” (58). Ritchen emphasizes collaboration attained through a confluence of voices, drawing parallels to an earlier form of communication. Kasra underscores that posing for the camera, and generating, editing, and posting these images functions as part of this exchange. Her video *Being a woman is not a tool to humiliate or punish anyone* references attitudes toward women in Iran, which were exposed by a recent judicial ruling. She notes, “This selfie campaign was in response to an Iranian judge’s decision to punish some criminals by dressing them in women’s traditional Kurdish clothing. This decision was a violence both towards women and the Kurdish culture. In this judge’s mind, which I believe is a Persian judge, dressing these criminals in Kurdish clothing was worse than an actual punishment. So Kurdish men from around the world responded by posting images of themselves wearing women’s clothing - to support the Kurdish women and show them that being a woman is nothing to be ashamed of” (Kasra). The emphasis on wearing women’s clothing explores gender stereotypes, as these men conventionally would be seen as emasculated. Kasra’s merging of these individual actions, through superimposition, illustrates the solidarity of Kurdish men, as they challenge a gendered social structure. The images drift in and out, revealing fragments of faces, hands, patterned clothing, and mundane interiors, all contributing to evidence of a shared presence in support of women’s place in society.

Using photography to address social issues, **Suzanne Williams** obsessively colors, in the primaries, red, yellow, and blue, the interior surfaces she documents. She aims to raise awareness of the suffering endured by chronically ill children in her series “Cognizant.” She explains, “By meticulously covering rooms in my apartment in 1.5 inch squares a parallel is drawn to the considerable amount of time devoted to home care. A correlation is also drawn to the pain and effort patients experience with these diseases. Each room’s color was chosen based on the awareness ribbon of the illness” (Williams). *Osteosarcoma* reveals a canary yellow color field. Paper squares form a continuous grid covering a dozen books, a bulletin board, and a chair. The floor, table, and walls are hidden as well, including electrical outlet covers. On the desk chair hangs a small, jet-black, long, curly-haired wig. In each of Williams’s photographs, a single object interrupts the picture plane, referencing an aspect of the life of a child who faces serious health problems. The wig in *Osteosarcoma* may suggest the effects of chemotherapy and subsequent hair loss, along with the resulting emotional trauma. A breathing machine disrupts the purple space in *Cysticfibrosis*, while a blood pressure cuff appears in the red room corresponding to *Cardiovascular*. Details of the room have been removed; the sick child is not visible. Instead, the viewer becomes overwhelmed by absence, which communicates the artist’s sense of loss and evokes the viewer’s empathy.



VARGHA
MANSHADI

Untitled #1, Abstract Photography I
series, 2012, digital print, 48”x32”

Scholar Lyle Rexer comments on the “withdrawal of the subject” in his assessment of recent experiments in photography (181). **Vargha Manshadi** considers the function of the camera as machine, limited by the rules of physics, as he records “the behavior and properties of light, including its interaction with the subject matter.[and effects of the]..index of refraction or reflection” (Manshadi). In *Untitled #1*, white light has been dissolved into bands of a color spectrum; layers of repeating shapes suggest the production of circles of confusion—the result of light rays that are not in focus. Foreground and background become intertwined in translucent layers of patterns. Manshadi foregrounds optical properties in his photographs of iridescence; we are reminded that the camera lens bends light to form an image, underscoring the basic functions of the photographic process.

Reduction and recombination of photographic information serve as strategies to prompt reconsideration of the familiar. Art historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau has commented on Soviet artist Rodchenko who embraced photography as “a revolutionizing of perception” in his response to the concept of defamiliarization, the “key concept of *ostranenie*—the making strange of the familiar—developed by Victor Shklovsky in 1916” (90, 95). **Betsy Williamson’s** study of light reveals her awareness of modernist concerns, while her intentional removal of a clear subject frustrates viewer’s expectations. She embraces understatement through her achromatic abstractions, prioritizing the photograph’s existence as an object, rather than its conventional role as representational device. She comments, “The photograph is often not recognized as an object itself but seen only for the value of what it represents” (Williamson). Subject matter has driven our collective fascination with photography as a recording medium. In *Abstraction #09* of the “(In)visible” series, she carefully aligns forms and shadows, introducing visual complexity through spatial ambiguity. The objects in the scene are fragmentary and partial, marking light and dark planes floating in space, functioning as reflectors of illumination rather than elements to be decoded. Our search for a subject leaves us empty-handed.

Shawn Saumell’s “A Ply” series presents a wry commentary on modernist masters. Saumell references Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* and Edward Weston’s *Excusado, Mexico*: “Echoes of Duchamp and Weston may be found in the process of creating this work with the inclusion of American plumbing” (Saumell). The delicate surface representing the white tissue in *hatch* resembles a silverpoint drawing, yet documents the most banal of subjects, combining the force of attraction with an attitude of indifference. Saumell uses abstraction as a “distancing device that challenges us always to an awareness of artifactness and the problems of interpretation posed by even the simplest of photographs” (Rexer 183). Through understatement, his images quietly draw the viewer into the image, promptly a response of puzzlement. Both Rexer and Bright acknowledge the effect of digital technology on our attitudes toward photography, transforming and undermining our concept of the photograph’s indexicality, its function as trace and connection to a specific time and place.

In “Another History” curator Matthew Witkovsky’s observes the work of many contemporary photographers with their “emphatic attention to the body of the photographer and that of the viewer, each of which is animated by language, humors, and desires” while also affirming “the photograph’s existence as image and as object” (215). These comments relate to the act of seeing, of being aware of one’s surroundings, of perception, and how the machine, the camera, enters into the equation. **Emily Loving** creates “marks of interruptions” in the seamless photograph by cutting, marking, and editing her images of architectural forms and patterns (Loving). The photograph is never a fixed image, but undergoes physical transformation, resulting in an installation or even sculptural form. Her actions point to the tension between three-dimensional space recorded by the camera—as well as the space of the gallery itself—and the two-dimensional photographic picture plane. Through her constructed records of interior space, Loving foregrounds human perception by creating a sculptural, interactive environment for the viewer.

These artists use photography to edit visual information, to distill and reframe realities, to prompt a more nuanced reflection on daily experience.

--Marilyn Waligore, 2014

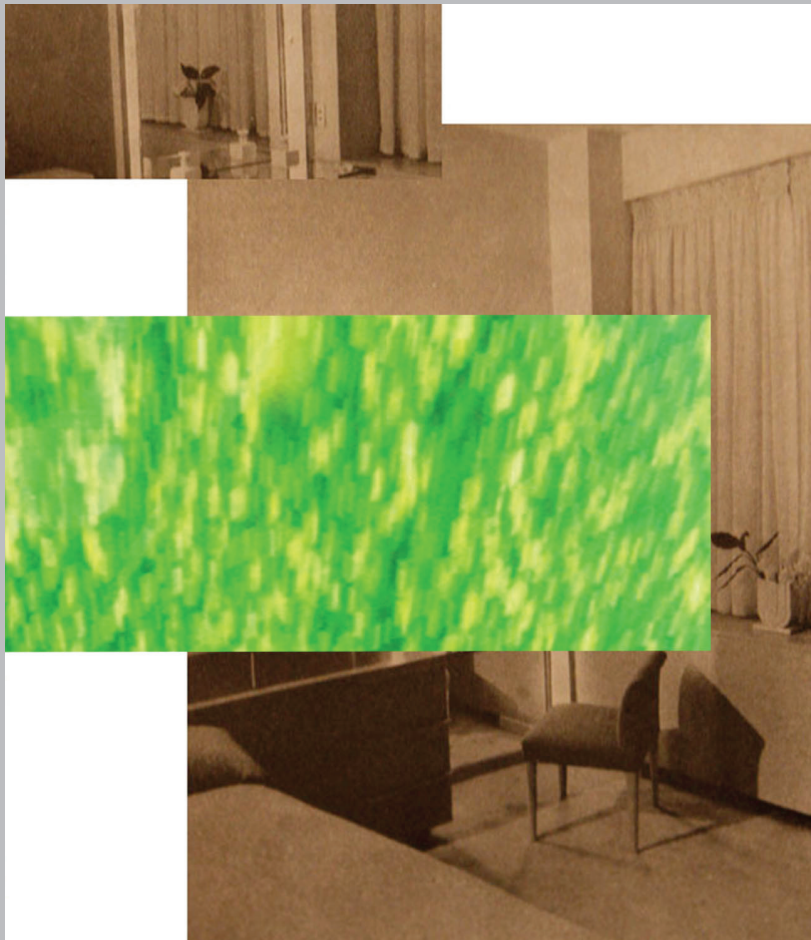
B E T S Y
W I L L I A M S O N

Abstraction #09, (in)visible series, framed to 16” x 20”, 2011, digital print



SHAWN SAUMELL

hatch, A-Ply series, 18" x 12", 2012,
digital print (framed 24" x 18")



EMILY LOVING

Home is Yet a Memory, Installation
mixed media, size variable, 2013 (detail)

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