In Search of the Sublime

Jake Sneath

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Introduction

Photography is dead and that’s okay. Photography has always had a rather anxious relationship to the world due to its connection to both the commercial and fine art worlds; the latter with greater suspect and criticism, as suggested in Matthew Thompson’s “The Object Lost and Found”.1 The digital technology revolution has permanently altered photography from its analogue past. No longer do professionals need to arduously fine tune the physical print for accurate color balance, optimal sharpness, etc.; the digital camera has finally, and unequivocally, perfected the image and made photography more accessible than ever before. A 2015 study by the Pew Research Group2 estimates that 64% of all adult Americans own a smartphone with the ability to take photos and videos; an estimated 159,670,545 adult Americans based on July 2016 Census Bureau data.3 Recent social media startup, Instagram, has a reported daily user base of 300 million global users as of November 2016.4 The social media app alone is responsible for an estimated 80 million photos shared per day. Photos posted to sites like Instagram are overwhelmingly representational in nature; depicting everyday situations. A recent report estimates that 1.2 trillion photos will be taken worldwide in 2017; a number that will continue to grow by 9% annually.5 Charlotte Cotton describes in

her essay, “Photography is Magic” how recent changes in photography have provided an opportunity for artists to make work that reference both photography’s analogue past as well as its current place in contemporary culture. My work responds to the engulfment of representational imagery by creating opportunities to immerse the viewer in repeated sensations of beauty and the sublime. In this document, I will cover the evolution of my work from abstract, camera-based photographs through analogue, camera-less photographic processes, to installation work that invites viewers to contemplate and experience the awesome beauty of light directly.

**Science Fiction and the Sublime**

The sublime is a term that evades quick definition. Gaining popularity as a result of Edmund Burke’s “A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful”, we have understood the sublime as that which produces strong feelings of awe and terror. For my part, I am most interested in sublime experiences of awe and wonder which I have seen most clearly through science fiction films. In such films as “Star Wars” and “2001: A Space Odyssey” a pungent and profound example of the sublime can be found. Sean Redmond writes that the sublime is, “that imperceptible moment in life or art when reason is absent and sensation consumes one with an overwhelming and indescribably profound intensity or chaos or force.” This can be seen in the “star-gate” sequence of “2001: A Space Odyssey”; a scene that has overwhelmed and confused audiences for

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decades. The sublime elements of “Star Wars” are much different, depicting vast space
battles that expose the viewer to images of laser blasts and explosions over sprawling space
vistas. However, when it comes to photography, most of my experiences can be summed up
in one word: boredom. Recognizing that the attention span of viewers looking at art,
specifically traditional flat photographic work, is extremely short, my work pushes beyond
the figurative towards the abstract. The increasing speed and processing power of personal
computers and mobile devices has further diminished our patience with photography. I
provide an experience that entices the viewer to a meditative contemplation of the image,
rather than a theoretical dissection of signs and symbols. By slowing down, I become aware
of forms that interest me and, when deconstructed from their environment, produce a
profound curiosity. “Murphy’s Landing” is my first successful foray into this way of
working. I had noticed the unique forms that existed in the light fixtures outside my
apartment and how each one collected dust and dirt in a unique way. Similar to Ed Ruscha’s
“Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations,” I was interested in the forms present in these commodified
objects. Through a methodical process of imaging each light in the complex, I produced an
image grid of circular forms. The composition as a whole resembles a map of the lunar
cycle. Each image was taken at the same focal length and exposure setting to contrast the
manufactured uniformity with the uncanny way in which the natural elements effect each
light. Even those that had burnt out were photographed, producing dark voids. The physical
manifestation of this investigation is a forty-two by one-hundred inch pigment print. At this
size, the viewer is invited to experience the print in two ways; both as an overall composition
and as a contemplation of the individual parts. At a distance, the image references outer
space and the desire of early photographers to capture celestial bodies. The title of the piece, “Murphy’s Landing” encourages this reading while remaining tied to the location of the artist’s home. This work began my interest in work that abstracts reality and forces the viewer to consider the work differently than the type of everyday images commonly seen online. Since there are no figurative elements that can be quickly recognized and glossed over, a curiosity develops that engages the viewer and invites a closer, prolonged viewing.

![Image of Murphy’s Landing](image)

**The Chemigram and Working Camera-Less**

Paul Ambroise Valery describes sensation as “that which is transmitted directly, and avoids the detour and boredom of conveying a story.” The success of “Murphy’s Landing” was the first step towards a studio practice that is less concerned with describing or critiquing what can be seen with our eyes. Instead, my work has transitioned toward the purely visual and direct. This practice has been rooted in exploring my experience of working with analogue processes and my attraction to the alchemical reactions that occur in the dark.

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9 Deleuze, Gilles. Francis Bacon: the logic of sensation. London: Continuum, 2005
Seeing light and chemistry activate a print or shooting a roll of film and feeling the excitement and mysterious expectation for the latent image leaves me desiring a repeat experience. My inspiration for work that directly engaged this alchemical experience came from the discovery of artists working in what has become known as “camera-less” photography. Marco Breuer, Pierre Cordier, Adam Fuss, and Garry Fabian Miller are a few of the artists associated with this movement. These artists have forgone the camera for a direct manipulation of the print through alternative and often destructive processes.

Choosing to avoid any semblance of nature, I began to work with the Chemigram process. The process is relatively simple. Traditional black and white photography paper or silver gelatin paper is used as the main medium. To make a Chemigram, a substance is adhered to the light sensitive surface of the print. Traditional photographic chemistry is used, which at its most basic is a developer solution which produces black tones and a fixer solution which preserves the areas meant to remain white. When the print is submerged in the chemistry baths, the applied substance resists the activation of these two chemistry solutions for an undetermined period of time. Almost anything can be used as a resist as long as it can adhere to the surface of the print for a short period of time. This multiplicity of materials allows for the insertion of biographical meaning into the print. Substances such as honey, syrup, and Elmer’s glue are considered soft resists as they rapidly become soluble in water and produce warm, smooth forms similar to water-color paints. Acrylic varnishes and
domestic items such as nail polish are considered hard resists as they take a very long time to become soluble. These substances produce clearly defined lines within a print. Outside of choosing the resist substance, a large variable is the amount of time in which the print rests in each chemical bath and the type of agitation the print receives while in each bath. A shorter amount of time in each bath will produce complex forms of repeated black and white lines over a long period of time. A longer amount of time in each bath will produce large black and white shapes. All of these variables create the potential for endless possibilities as each Chemigram print is created through a combination of orchestration and chance happenings.

Realizing the aesthetic strength of the geometric shapes in “Murphy’s Landing,” I carried the composition through to my Chemigrams. The print is coated with an acrylic varnish available at most art stores. After the varnish dries, I score a grid into the hardened surface of the resist. Through repeated submersion in developer and fixer baths, the layer of acrylic varnish gradually releases from the print to create back and forth lines of black and white that cover the surface of the print. Experimenting with butter, honey, syrup, peanut butter, cloth stickers, and different varnishes all produced various results. With different dilutions of chemistry, I could further vary the tone of the print. A print submerged in a weak dilution for an extended period of time would produce a gold tone. In comparison, a print submerged in
a normal or strong dilution for shorter periods of time would produce a high contrast image of black and white. To further push the process, I made a series of prints where peanut butter was used as the resist substance and the chemistry solutions were applied using large paint rollers. As I rolled out the chemistry, the texture of the roller would make an indentation in the surface of the print and thus remove some of the peanut butter. One of the most interesting Chemigrams was created using color, chromogenic, paper and RA-4 chemistry. Using the same grid composition as before, a print of subtle color emerged after a lengthy period in chemistry. The rapid exhaustion of the color chemistry further adds to the variation of each print.

After months of experimentation with different papers, chemicals and resists, a body of work emerged that puts the physicality of the photograph on display for contemplation. In a time when images exist as endless digital copies traveling from screen to screen, this work reintroduces the experience of viewing a one-of-a-kind image. The viewer is invited to consider the complexity of detail and randomness of the process. When all analogue photographic processes are becoming alternative processes, this work questions culture’s current relationship to photography in a rapidly changing, technological society.
A Desire for Color

In Moholy-Nagy’s “In Defense of Abstract Art,” he describes contemporary art as that which pushes forward the supremacy of color over “story.”¹⁰ The process of producing color analogue photographs is a spiritual exercise in faith. Unlike the black and white silver gelatin process, color photographs must be made in total darkness; no safe light may be used. Like the beginning of the universe, light and color flash onto the print where once existed only darkness. Seeing the work of Garry Fabian Miller changed how I worked. Fabian Miller’s color works have a potency of color and vibrancy that seems as though color is emitting out or is at one with the surface. Being struck by the intense vibrancy of Fabian Miller’s work inspired me to create images that felt as if they were objects that carried the weight of light with them through sheer accumulation. I wanted to test Hans Hoffman’s claim that, “if the creation is not magic, the outcome cannot be magic.”¹¹ Like the Chemigram, I chose to work without a camera or a film negative. Unexpectedly, I turned to the materials associated with my father’s work as a pipe-fitter, a profession whose main occupation is welding. The process of welding involves the fusion of two materials using intense heat. Along with intense heat, a blinding light is produced with such intensity that the practitioner must wear specific vision protection. This helmet has a small viewing area where the welder can see through to his/her work. To protect one’s eyes, a dark piece of welding glass separates the welding arc from the worker’s face. I am fascinated by the sublime qualities inherent in this method of working. When my dad would weld, I would


watch from a distance, enthralled with the other-worldly light that would emit from the welding torch. To replicate this experience of sublime light, the rectangular sheet of welders glass is used to make color field prints. The glass is either placed in the enlarger head where film would normally go or placed directly onto the print to create a photogram. Having much greater density than a traditional film negative, the exposure time is longer than a normal print. This brought into question the problem of reciprocity-failure. Since the light coming through the glass is so dim, the time needed to expose the print becomes longer and longer. This accumulation of time and light is conceptually interesting. The print becomes a time capsule, embodying a period of time on a medium typically used to capture a single moment. The creation of these color fields becomes a metaphysical search for something beyond reality. Upon a field of black appear squares of vibrant magenta, red, or blue. I create masks to ensure that the final image is perfectly aligned in the center of the page. This is important to me as color is meant to have primacy of focus. At different durations of time, different shades of colors may be produced. One of these series is titled, “Dad or the Danger of Long Exposure to Labor.” The series is made up of six red color field prints each with another, smaller field of red stacked on top of the darker shade. When viewed from left to right, the smaller field of red gradually shifts from one print to another from a vibrant pink to a deep scarlet that nearly disappears into the background. Making this work with elements of
my dad’s profession reminds me of the color of my father’s skin after a day of working. The surface of the print has a clear connection to skin: sun tanned through exposure to the sun, achieved through labor. This is a deeply photographic notion that the print is a skin which can be exposed through light. Similar to what I believe was my father’s experience with work, there is a sublime allure to these images. While this work has a clear biographical connection, later series focus more on the sensation and endangering quality of color. “Blue Hazard” consists of the same progression as the above work but within a palette of blue. The title refers to the wavelength of light around 440 nano-meters (nm) that has the potential to irritate and even blind the eye. Without appropriate eyewear a condition known as “arc eye” results and is known to produce a gritty sensation in the eye. The sapphire color is one that is difficult to achieve in a digital medium and further enhances the alluring power that produces sensations of beauty. Just as arc welding is a dangerous activity, this work seeks to endanger the viewer with powerful sensations of color.

Searching for Stillness Through Installation Work

Texts, Tweets, posts, and feeds satiate the liminal spaces in our day. It is reported that 55% of Facebook users, 93,307,475 people, check the app several times a day.12 To a slightly

lesser degree, 35% of Instagram users, 24,449,552 people, check the app to view images throughout the day. However, rarely do we attribute more than a moment to any given image delivered via a pixel-based screen. This constant return to screens as an escape from reality frustrates me on a daily basis, yet I find that myself and others go through the same motions repeatedly. I long for experiences that induce stillness: that quiet my mind, body, and spirit. Spiritually-led exercises are the clearest representation of situations in my life that have delivered such experiences of meditation and contemplation. In church sanctuaries and chapels, dimly lit by candles and stained glass, I have had sublime experiences of love, empathy, regret, worship, ecstasy and wonder. Jane Bennett talks about the sublime as a state of enchantment which induces a “temporary suspension of chronological time and bodily movement. To be enchanted, then, is to participate in a momentarily immobilizing encounter; it is to be transfixed, spellbound.” My work invites the viewer to enter an enchanted liminal space between the outside world and the infinite, to be stimulated by direct visual experience. In my latest work, “After Image,” viewers enter a darkened room through a revolving door, commonly used in darkrooms, that eliminates all light. I offer viewers the opportunity to engage with beauty and to be affected by it without consideration for a narrative or societal critique.


The desire for repeated experiences of beauty and wonder drives my photographic exploration. The experience of surprise is heightened when working with color chromogenic paper. Unlike black and white papers, there can be no light whatsoever in the vicinity of color paper as it is sensitive to every wavelength of visible light. Therefore, when you see a color print come out of the processor, it is as if magic has happened before your eyes. The disappointing thing is that all of the effort to make this magic happen is lost on the viewer. Taking the basic composition of my color field works, I have increased its scale to provide an immersive experience of slowly changing colors one on top of another over top of a seemingly-flattened plane. Similar to the rectangular prints I had been working with, I constructed a three-dimensional rectangular form from plywood measuring 4’(w) x 6’ 3/4”(h) x 18’ 1/2”(d). This geometric shape, while part of the evolution of my previous work, is inspired by the minimalist objects of John McCracken. I resonated with McCracken’s desire to create objects that can be thought of “as having a kind of quality where if you could make a form that is made of color, that from the outset it would be oddly abstract.”

Richard-Smith's desire for the form to embody color is at home in my work. The entire object was carefully constructed as to eliminate a seam. Painted white, it was my desire for the monolith to have a sculptural presence, to have an “object-ness”. With a projector installed on a wall in front

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of the constructed form, a video of color is projected on its vertical surface. When sitting on a bench in front of the monolith, the viewer is at eye level with a 10”x10” square that acts as a viewport to another, similar projection of color. In a darkened room, the viewer experiences a slow progression of light and color from black through blues to yellows and reds that lead back through blue to black. The entire span of the video sequence is sixteen minutes. Rather than a quick progression through the spectrum of colors, viewers begin to question if the light is truly changing. This curiosity encourages the viewer to patiently wait to discover that after a period of minutes, the light on the object and subsequently in the room has, indeed, changed.

When creating the video animation, I was inspired by the work and writing of James Turrell. He says that, “In working with light, what is really important to me is to create an experience of word-less thought, to make the quality and sensation of light itself something really quite tactile.”16 In the same way, my work creates an experience of internal contemplation on the sensation of light in the room. A slowness is required to truly experience the subtle transitions of color.

During the creation of the video, I was careful to only pick colors that would be experienced during the course of the sun’s illumination. In truth, the entire installation

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follows the sequence of light seen during a day starting with pre-dawn blacks and blues which transition through daylight colors of white and yellow that crescendo to oranges, reds, and magentas and finally return to the purples, blues and blacks associated with night. What was unplanned was the brief period in time before the video loops back to the beginning. For ten to fifteen seconds, the room, while thought to be black, is dimly illuminated by the light of the projectors giving a subtle sensation of the type of light that exists under a full moon. The sound that permeates the installation was the final component to be added. Rather than allow the room to be silent and risk viewers becoming too aware of the shifting sounds of their bodies, the near white noise of the audio track fills the space and allows viewers be immersed in the visual experience. The audio is produced by the radiation and interference of the electromagnetic spectrum picked up by the Voyager satellite traveling above the earth. This seemed fitting as the darkened room and slow transition of color creates a sense of metaphysical mystery.

Testing Theories of Color

Hans Hoffman talks about color as having the possibility for a “push and pull” relationship where forces of color expand and contract before the viewer. There are two videos working in “After Image”. The video projected onto the monolith transitions between

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colors at a rate of two minutes while the rear, oval, projection transitions between colors in one minute, stays constant for one minute, and then transitions to another color. This staggered transition period creates a push and pull effect in the viewer’s vision that allows some colors to advance while others recede, heightening the emotional experience of depth. As such, a clear connection can be made between this piece and the work of Josef Albers. The clue to my work is in the title. Interested in the possibility of producing uncanny sensations of color, I studied what Albers describes as simultaneous contrast. Aware that the human retina is made up of rods and cones, “staring at red will fatigue the red-sensitive parts, so that with a sudden shift to white, only the mixture of yellow and blue occurs. And this is green, the complement of red.” 19 The color transitions in my work are slow so as to immerse the eye in one color for an extended period of time so that when the focal planes shift to another color, an afterimage color remains. It’s these sensations that I want the viewer to

become keenly aware of. I am interested in providing an escape from representational imagery. I am in search of imagery that acts directly on the nervous system rather than telling a story. Rather than engage the viewer through “a long diatribe through the brain” I seek to engage the body.\(^{20}\) I’m after the “best” sensation that “fills the flesh at a particular moment of its descent, contraction, or dilation.”\(^{21}\)

**Conclusion**

A short time ago, I was in an artistic slump living in rural Texas. I was blocked by the false teaching that art could not be influenced by experiences of beauty, spirituality, and the sublime. Reflecting on working in the darkroom and the excitement of making prints from the purity of light, I embarked on a journey to focus my artistic creation on work that distilled


photography to chance happenings via the Chemigram and sublime beauty through chromogenic color field prints. The sculptural work activated by projections of the visible color spectrum is the most recent evolution in my work. When viewed in succession or on subsequent viewings, the work produces unique sensations of color. It is my desire to continue to explore possibilities for inviting viewers to exit the fast-paced world of digital technologies and to instead be engulfed by color and form. Although analogue materials and processes hold a natural appeal for creating this experience, if it can be done with the same digital technologies that sap us of quiet reflection, all the better.
Bibliography


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