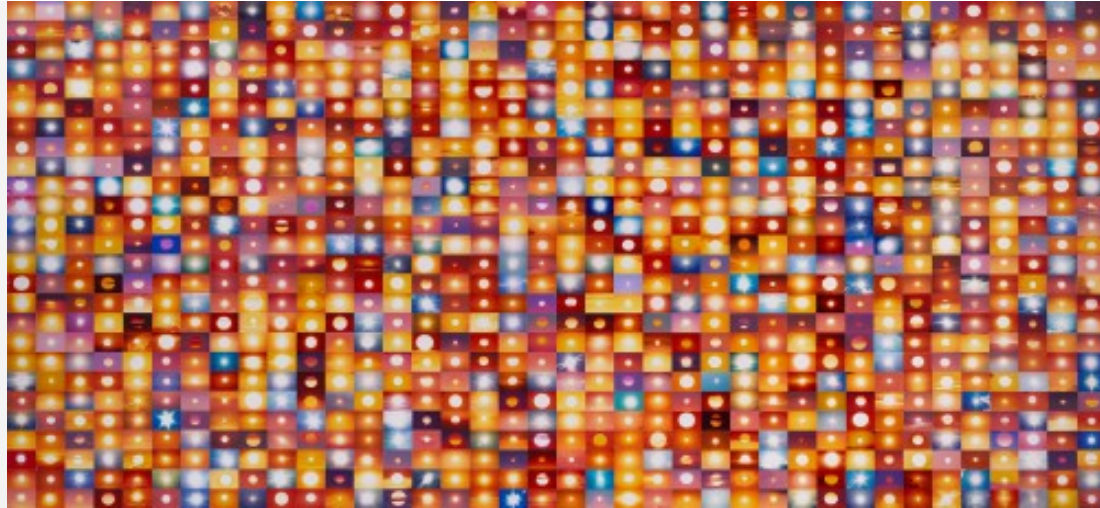


Hoffman Gallery: Extreme photography and abstract states

BY [BARRY JOHNSON](#) · FEBRUARY 4, 2012 · [POST A COMMENT](#)

["THE EDGE OF VISION: ABSTRACTION IN CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY"](#), [ELLEN CAREY](#), [HOFFMAN GALLERY](#), [PENELOPE UMBRICO](#), [SILVIO WOLF](#)



Penelope Umbrico's "5,332,272 Suns from Flickr (partial) 4/22/09"/Courtesy San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

By Graham Bell

A peculiar thing happens when you cannot see into a photo; when there is no illusion, no visual depth, no window into a captured moment. Representative photographs are windows into a world (whether real or imagined), and the general practice when viewing them is to look through the medium to get at the subject. Rare is the audience member who notices the glossy finish before the picture it contains.

For painters, it is easier to give in to total abstraction. They start with materials that must be built up in order to make something recognizable. For photographers, the film and camera are specifically designed to capture the world through photons, delivering varying levels of reality.

A traveling exhibition mounted by the Aperture Foundation, "The Edge of Vision: Abstraction in Contemporary Photography," now showing at the Hoffman Gallery at Lewis & Clark College, brings together a cadre of international artists interested in the ways that the photograph and photographic process can be used in art making. Curator Lyle Rexer has taken the idea that abstraction has always been an inherent part of the medium and taken it to extremes.

Accompanied by a catalog of the same name, "The Edge of Vision" presents a stark contrast to the figural, landscape and otherwise representational works of other photographers who rely on the more documentary aspects of the camera. Instead, these artists set their focus on a more formal depiction of the very limits of what the medium has to offer.

Whereas artists like Jeff Wall and Stephen Shore succeed in altering how we see both truth and fiction, the artists in "The Edge of Vision" succeed in altering how we see photographs themselves. Wall cleverly constructs falsifications of life that, although representational, showcase the artist's decisions in the editing room over the natural occurrences he purportedly is

presenting. Shore starts with what exists and, instead of moving it around like Wall, moves himself and his tools around in order to capture a more ordered construction. Pieces like Shore's [*Beverly Boulevard and La Brea Avenue, Los Angeles, California, June 21, 1975*](#) (1975) are snapshots of the American everyday and have been integral in the growth of many contemporary photographers. By eschewing recognizable imagery, though, artists like Penelope Umbrico, Silvio Wolf, Ellen Carey, and their compatriots at the Hoffman investigate the very nature of the process, its use, and its perception.



Penelope Umbrico's "TVs (From Craigslist)"

Penelope Umbrico is an American photographer whose works take on representation in a very different way than Wall and Shore. While initially simple visually, Umbrico's work *TVs (from Craigslist)* gradually illuminates a vast array of unintentional private interiors. The pieces are at once abstract and representational. The camera flash on each black-framed black print is blinding; but once your eyes adjust and focus, the subtle, hidden images of living rooms, garages, bedrooms, and their occupants become clear. So many people take pictures today and think nothing of it. Many of those photos are subsequently posted on the Internet, at once swallowed up by the indexical monsters that are Google Image Search, Flickr and Facebook. A few keystrokes can bring you to the shared visual creations of millions of photographers (whether professional or otherwise). So vast is the collective database that we can now search by ever more specific color, composition, subject and tag. Umbrico's other piece in the exhibition is like staring into the blinding light of nearly a thousand suns. Or more accurately, 782 sunsets. Employing a similar image trawl to that of *TVs*, the artist established a variable grid of 4"x6" digital printouts that fade from romantic snapshot to geometric abstraction. Each photo is a wealth of color with a singular solar disc in its center. En masse, the effect is breathtaking. Started in 2006, *10,291,373 Suns from Flickr (Partial) 1/12/12* is the result of an ongoing project in which Umbrico searched for the term "sunset" on Flickr (the title of each installation references the number of hits

she received from this search). Focusing in on the luminous orb in each photo before printing, the artist has constructed masses of suns in galleries, museums and the New York underground.

Millions of pictures of the same thing taken by different people at different times, the images lend themselves to a discussion of the Internet as an index for mediated human vision. Meanwhile, the glossy surface and myriad colors of the prints lend a plastic carnival ride look to the pilfered image amalgamation and you can't help but look at the bright, beautiful glow. As Yoko Ono instructed, "Watch the sun[s] until [they become] square."



Silvio Wolf's "Chance 03 (Horizon 16)"

Among the strongest examples of pure abstraction in the show are those of Silvio Wolf and Ellen Carey. Manipulation and pure chance combine to form vivid color forms that pose as the contemporary photographer's answer (at least visually) to Abstract Expressionism. Carey's large-scale Polaroids are dripping, expressive streaks of color. Only one aspect of Carey's explorations of abstraction in photography, her Polaroid pulls highlight the more hands-on side of the traditionally instant camera.

With the imminent Rothko showing at the Portland Art Museum, we might view pieces such as Italian photographer Silvio Wolf's *Chance 03 (Horizon 16)* as kindred spirits to the moody colorfields of the late painter. On a conceptual level, however, Wolf is much more chaos theory with cameras than multiform and emotion.

I don't know how many people get 4"x6" prints of their photos from an actual film roll anymore, but if you do or have, you'll know what I'm talking about. Ever develop a roll of film only to get back one print among the group that looks like melting, smeared color across your 10¢ image? Silvio Wolf has. His four works in "The Edge of Vision" take on this chance encounter at the leader of a partially-exposed roll, creating flukes that are transformed by means of scale and sheen into seemingly aesthetic compositions. Distant vistas emerge out of drastic color shifts, and we may be surprised to find that these light leaks actually depict nothing. The artist himself treads a metaphoric line when he titles these pieces Horizons, saying, "Each Horizon reveals a threshold, the clear limit between light and darkness, between matter and language. Through this series I develop the concept of photography before the picture."

The threshold is the key here. As the light seeps in, the true nature of the process before human intervention is obvious. How our mind tries to make sense of this purely physical phenomena as a 'picture' of something shows how deeply ingrained our ideas are about what constitutes a photograph.

It is a special treat to see a group of artists so drawn to such an intriguing topic, and curator Lyle Rexer has put together a well-rounded show. Rexer will be speaking about the exhibition at 5 p.m. Thursday, February 9, in Smith Hall at Lewis & Clark College.

The Hoffman Gallery is open Tuesday through Sunday, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. All gallery events are free; parking on campus is free on weekends. For information, call the Hoffman Gallery at 503-768-7687.

NOTES

The Edge of Vision is organized by Aperture Foundation and includes photography by Bill Armstrong, Carel Balth, Ellen Carey, Roland Fischer, Michael Flomen, Manuel Geerinck, Shirine Gill, Barbara Kasten, Seth Lambert, Charles Lindsay, Irene Mamiye, Chris McCaw, Edward Mapplethorpe, Roger Newton, Jack Sal, Penelope Umbrico, Randy West, Silvio Wolf, and Ilan Wolff.

Aperture Foundation, "Aperture Foundation | The Edge of Vision," Accessed February 1, 2012 at <http://www.aperture.org/edgeofvision>

Ellen Carey, "Ellen Carey Photography," Accessed February 1, 2012 at <http://www.ellencarey.com>

Yoko Ono, "Grapefruit," (Tokyo: Wunternaum Press, 1964).

Penelope Umbrico, "Penelope Umbrico," Accessed February 1, 2012 at <http://www.penelopeumbrico.net>

Silvio Wolf, "Silvio Wolf," Accessed February 1, 2012 at <http://www.silviowolf.com>

Full Caption information:

Penelope Umbrico

5,332,272 Suns from Flickr (partial) 4/22/09

2009

Kodak machine chromogenic prints

Installation at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Courtesy San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Penelope Umbrico (American, b. 1952)

TVs (From Craigslist)

2008

35 digital chromogenic prints

Various dimensions

Courtesy IMAK projects, New York

Silvio Wolf (Italian, b. 1952)

Chance 03 (Horizon 16), 2006-07

Chromogenic print, Plexiglas, aluminum

75 x 49 inches

Courtesy of the artist/ Robert Man Gallery, New York