

## Penelope Umbriko: Variants

Tenth in the series, NEW DIRECTIONS, supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Jerome Foundation.

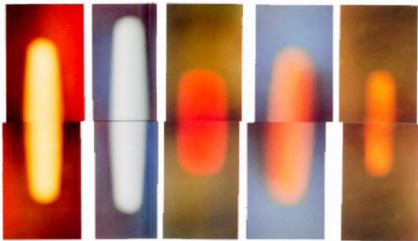
Photography seems an unlikely medium for the exploration of abstract form. The camera's image is so accurate that it is difficult to see accurate reproduction of objects in front of the lens that we tend not to think of it as a tool for the manufacturing of the world. While most of us value the camera's ability to provide infinite detail, Penelope Umbriko discards sharply focused representation to imply more fundamental aspects of perception. Umbriko's works are suggestive of the mental operations through which we recognize and understand hazy physical form and give them meaning.

Umbriko combines photographs of simple objects, rearranging them to create something all together new. Often she photographs objects either in motion or severely out of focus, against colored backgrounds. The identification of the original object is impossible, and exact description is irrelevant. Umbriko wants us to think only the essence of the resulting form. These works primarily provide us with experience, more than meaning, making us aware of the construction behind the physicality of seeing and the cognitive act of understanding.

Umbriko enhances the viewer's response through form and presentation of her work. Her photographs are not singular images presented in a traditional manner. Instead, she uses multiple images, forms of unique character. Often her works are made from the same image photographed in two separate panels which combine to make a new form. These are joined symmetrically and presented as single units or in groups.

The viewer's experience of the work is also affected by shifts in scale from 4x6 inches to 3x6 feet, shifts in color, which explore changes in the relationship between the object and its background, shifts in shape, as works vary in form from rectangles, to joined rectangles which create squares, to ovals of color running linearly across the wall.

When presented as a group, each work interacts with the others in a way that

Untitled  
1991

amplifies their character and relationships in space. As one observes the works, perceptions of their scale, color and shape are influenced by distance and angle as well as Umbriko's concern for the viewer's physical interaction with the work is a strategy more common in installation art, aiming to create an intimate display of abstracted photographs. However, it is this physical relationship that forms the basis for our understanding of the work.

Trained as a painter, Umbriko was drawn to photography as a method for cataloging forms which she could then easily reproduce. It was also important to her that photography accomplished these tasks in a mechanical way that was more anonymous than painting. To enhance the presence of the artist's hand Umbriko has used the drawing qualities of the computer to create nondescript forms, making intricate variations rapidly. Photographs of these drawings are spliced together to expand on the original configuration. These notions exist in vast numbers, but are expressed and used for the creation of other works. For instance, starting with a computer drawing of four connected spheres, Umbriko

photographs it four different ways vertically, horizontally, bisecting the form to show only the top, and then only the bottom. She then erases the resulting images in a variety of ways creating four new forms out of many possibilities; the single vertical of the whole image, a symmetrical image made by joining two of the bisected images of the top of the shape, another image combining two bisections of the bottom in the same manner, and an image made by combining the two horizontal frames. These processes of replication and reproduction are central to her activity, as she builds a never ending inventory of permutations.

In the most recent works Umbriko combines a number of different media to experiment with the relationship between perception, surface and perception. Umbriko photographs drawings of abstract forms directly from the computer screen. She then overlays the print with a sheet of glass so that she paints a complementary form based on her inventory of computer drawings. These overlapping images do not touch, with a space of one inch separating the abstract photograph from the opaque painted form on the glass.

While the transparency of the glass allows us to see sections of the photographed form beneath, it is largely obscured by the parallel relationship to its mirror form. While we mentally complete the photograph there is a barrier between the amount of information the image contains and what we are able to perceive.

Penelope Umbriko's work began with an awareness of shapes in her daily life that physically, visually and psychologically had a relevance and meaning further. Her art is an attempt to understand her own perception of the world by uncovering the essence of their basic forms. Simple shapes are the building blocks she uses to create a variety of variations within the construction of her image. Through abstraction and sculptural presentation her works become primary objects unto themselves, related to but vastly altered from the original subjects. For the viewer, this is an opportunity to explore the relationship between what we define as form and the perceptual experience in confronting her abstracted forms.

Willis Harshbarger  
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## Biography

**Born**  
1957, Philadelphia,  
Pennsylvania

**Education**  
School of Visual Arts,  
New York City,  
M.F.A. Honors, 1989  
University of  
Toronto, 1984-85  
Ontario College of  
Art, Toronto,  
AOCG Diploma,  
Honors, 1980

**Selected Group Exhibitions**  
Museum of Modern Art,  
*More Than One Photography*,  
New York City, May 1992

Liderman and Saul Gallery,  
New York City, May 1992  
R.S.122, *Profile Symmetry*,  
New York City,  
January 1991  
Liderman and Saul Gallery,  
New York City,  
October 1990  
Visual Arts Gallery,  
*Photart*, New York City,

The Drawing Center,  
*Selections II*, New York City,  
February 1988

Visual Arts Gallery,  
New York City, March 1989,  
November 1987  
Pin International Gallery,  
Vancouver, August 1986  
A Space, Toronto, May 1986  
Architecture Resource Centre,  
Toronto, April 1985  
Group Material, *Substance:  
Art in the Suburbs*, New  
York City, September 1981

**Selected Bibliography**  
*The Village Voice*,  
Vince Aletti, New York City,  
October 17, 1989

*Impulse Magazine*,  
Toronto, Fall 1986  
Toronto Star,  
Christopher Home,  
Saturday, Sept. 11, 1982  
*Artist Review*,  
Tom Hodgson,  
Toronto, February 1980

**Awards, Grants, Scholarships**  
Paula Bruckes Memorial  
Award, 1987

School of Visual Arts  
Tuition Scholarship, 1988  
Ontario Arts Council,  
Artist Residency, 1983, 1984  
Ontario College of Art  
Tuition Scholarship, 1978

**Collections**  
International  
Center of Photography,  
New York City  
Museum of Modern Art,  
New York City