

CONSTRUCTION SIGHT

How a generation
of artists is
re-ordering the
building blocks of
photography
by Aaron Schuman



Given the shape-shifting flexibility images have acquired in the digital age, photographic content should have gained prominence over photographic form. Indeed, as photographs migrate with ever-greater ease from the camera to the screen, to the internet, to print, to the increasingly relevant photo-book and to mass-media outlets, their physical properties fluctuate. So much so that many artists working with photography are focusing less on how a photograph is made than why. For these artists, photography is defined more as a medium in the most fundamental and intangible sense of the word – as a means by which something is communicated or expressed – rather than as a singular object or substance in its own right.

But a number of young artists in recent years have been countering this definition. As the artist and writer Chris Wiley noted in his essay 'Depth of Focus' (published in *frieze* in late 2011), they are choosing to foreground the formerly 'repressed' aspects of the medium – 'the physical support upon which the image is registered, myriad chemical and technical processes, as well as the numerous choices that were made by the photographer in capturing the image.' These artists were born in the late 1970s and early '80s and were the last to be educated primarily in darkrooms and photographic studios, spellbound early on by the alchemical magic and intimate physical connection to the photograph that these environments provided. They were also the first to mature alongside a rapidly evolving and increasingly ethereal digital medium, which has rendered the darkroom – along with nearly all of the analogue machines, methods and materials associated with it – practically obsolete.

A remarkable shift has occurred in the years since the publication of Wiley's text. Many of the artists he cited – including Michele Abeles, Walead Beshty, Lucas Blalock and Mariah Robertson – have become increasingly visible and fluent in this new-found language. In tandem, many of the recent discussions within both art and photographic circles have revolved around photography's formal properties, material processes and technical histories. A growing number of artists working with photography are successfully countering

both the deconstructionist tendencies of 20th-century postmodernism and the increasing ubiquity of digital imagery. Evidently gathered under the banner of 'constructed photography', their work makes the scaffolding of the photographic medium explicit and intricate. In so doing, it is re-establishing and, as the term implies, re-building photography as both a technical endeavour and a physical medium.

But with this emphasis on photographic form, certain fundamental structures upon which the medium is built – and which these constructions still contain – have perhaps been obscured. Several exhibitions in 2014 – including 'What is a Photograph?' at the International Center of Photography, 'Fixed Variable' at Hauser & Wirth New York and 'Under Construction' at Amsterdam's Foam Photography Museum, amongst others – centred upon formal and material concerns to such an extent that content outside of these aspects was often rendered secondary or even superfluous; so much so that the introduction to 'Fixed Variable' confidently stated: 'These works are not about the content of the photograph.'

In the face of a dominant digital culture, it is certainly valid to recognize and reassert the formal potential of the photographic medium. But, no matter how introspective, process-driven or structurally focused it is, photography is foremost a medium based on seeing; it is always about content, even if that content is photography itself.

Looking at the latest output of some of the contemporary artists working with constructed photography, it becomes apparent that their content is not arbitrary; rather, it is often precisely what determines its form. Furthermore, much of these artists' work continues to reflect upon traditions established within the medium long ago. It remains a 'window onto the world', albeit one that explicitly calls attention to the window-frame itself, and often bears partially obscured, shattered, distorted, stained or digitally etched – rather than transparent – glass.

Wiley's own recent series, 'Dingbats' (2013–14), comprises frames made of materials ranging from faux ostrich leather to seashells to carpeting to corrugated steel. Within these frames are elegantly abstracted, closely cropped images of various urban corners, surfaces and architectural details found throughout Los Angeles. The framing, in fact, complements and powerfully emphasizes the photographs' potent textural qualities, as well as their rigorous compositions. The matte tactility of the faux ostrich leather frame that surrounds *Dingbat 12* (2014), for example, is not simply an ostentatious gesture; it emphasizes the rough finish of the sun-drenched red stucco, concrete and chipboard seen within the image, and intensifies its glistening redness to almost blinding levels. Reminiscent of canonical works by figures such as Paul Strand and Minor White, 'Dingbats' is a concentrated meditation on how physical spaces can be creatively seen and lyrically constructed within the photographic frame – aspects amplified by the eccentric framing.

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Hannah Whitaker's 'Cold Wave' (2014), an exhibition held at Los Angeles's M+B gallery, was inspired by the logician Kurt Gödel's notions of incompleteness and unknowability. Here, Whitaker presented works that used hand-cut geometric interruptions in the film plane to prismatic and kaleidoscopic effect, transforming a selection of landscapes, portraits and still lifes into complex and disorientating structures. Her idiosyncratic, yet seemingly systematic, processes are certainly foregrounded, complicating the conventionally straight photographic images that underpin them. A snowy wood at dusk is filtered through a cut-paper illusion of stacked cubes (*Artic Landscape (Pink Sky)*, 2014); a serene portrait of a young woman in an intricately woven, woollen jumper is scattered into an irregular pattern of small rough triangles (*Portrait with Sweater (Albers)*, 2014). But, rather than entirely obscuring or abstracting the view, Whitaker draws our eye ever-deeper into her richly detailed works via the picture plane itself. Recognizing the photographic material at their core, we instinctually attempt to piece together the dispersed, but not entirely disparate, parts – eager to make sense of these visual puzzles.

Similarly, Daniel Gordon's series of still lifes, exhibited in 'Screen Selections and Still Lives' at Wallspace gallery in New York in 2014, determinedly rejects the transparency and clarity of the traditional picture plane. But rather than interrupting the structure of the images via the camera or print itself, Gordon borrows photographs from the internet and digitally manipulates, enhances, repeats and prints them. He then builds elaborate studio sets out of them, which echo traditional still-life compositions, and



Previous page
Noémie Coufal, *Observatoire VIII*
(Observatory VIII), 2014.
Lambda print on Baryta paper,
1.5 x 1.2 m

Facing page
Chris Wiley, *Dingbat 12*,
2014, archival inkjet print mounted
on aluminium; artist frame with
faux ostrich leather, 106 x 71 cm

Courtesy
1 the artist, Edel Assanti,
London, and Galerie des Filles du
Cavalier, Paris • 2 the artist
and Nicole Beauchene Gallery,
New York



ultimately photographs the sets themselves to create a dizzyingly multilayered yet singular image. The works explicitly reference the painterly approaches of Paul Cézanne, Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso (amongst others), in which classical perspective and realism are ignored and relationships between objects take precedence. Yet, because Gordon has originally culled each element from an ever-growing online archive of digital images, his is a new vision of our contemporary visual landscape: one in which photographic representations, rather than objects themselves, are the subject of composition and contemplation; one where images have become symbiotic with, rather than symbolic of, the physical world itself.

Artists such as Sara Cwynar and Matt Lipps also use pre-existing photographic imagery in their work, but they gather it from pre-digital sources that reference analogue photography. Lipps's series 'Library' (2013–14) draws from the 17-volume set of books published by Time-Life in the early 1970s, *Library of Photography*, which once served as a practical and historical guide to the medium. Lipps takes images featured in these educational publications and turns them into small, cardboard cut-out totems or souvenirs of photography's past – which he then places on shelves within a photographic cabinet of curiosities lined with colour-toned images from his own back catalogue. 'Library' exhibits the ways in which photography was once taught and understood, and how the world at large was once categorized within the confines of photography.

Similarly, Cwynar's interest lies primarily in dated darkroom manuals and pre-digital commercial photographic culture. In her series 'Flat Death' (2014) she applies forms of collage, sculptural construction, re-photography and manipulation to images that once served to glamorize and fetishize what they depicted. Mid-20th-century stock images, such as that seen in *Display Stand No. 64 CONS II*, 8 1/4" W, 2 3/4" D, 16 1/2", featuring a shop display of breath mints



1
Matt Lipps
Art, 2013, from the series 'Library',
2013–14, c-type print,
1.8 x 1.2 m

2
Hannah Whitaker
Portrait with Sweater (Albers),
2014, archival pigment print,
64 x 51 cm

3
Lorenzo Vitturi
Yellow Chalk #1, 2013, from the
series 'Dalston Anatomy',
archival pigment print mounted on
aluminium with coloured wood
subframe, 1 x 1.5 m

Courtesy
1 the artist, Jessica Silverman
Gallery, San Francisco, Josh
Lilley Gallery, London, and Marc Selayn
Fine Art, Los Angeles •
2 the artist and Yossi Milo Gallery,
New York

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and chewing gum, are dismantled and then refreshed through Cwynar's various processes. These highlight the antiquated trickery, waning effect and underlying banality of the images and, at the same time, accentuate their renewed contemporary value as forms of vintage curiosity and kitsch. Both Cwynar and Lipps make their methods explicit, yet the subjects within each work – in these particular cases, photographs themselves – are what captivate us.

Rather than addressing particular histories, Asger Carlsen's 'Hester' (2011–12) and Noémie Goudal's 'Observatoires' (Observatoires, 2013–14) take on the familiar photographic tropes of the female nude and architectural typology, respectively. Both artists apply contemporary techniques to well-worn territories in a bid to reinvigorate them. Carlsen's deformed, excessively limbed and headless nude bodies – created entirely on screen but bearing the influence of artists such as Hans Bellmer – take full advantage of photography's digital flexibility and seamlessness. Carlsen's manipulation is so upfront and extreme that it's impossible to ignore – and yet the raw, physical presence of these figures is powerful enough to introduce an entirely new photographic perspective on the

human form. Goudal also invents realistic yet fictional photographic constructions through the amalgamation of existing ones – in her case, by digitally aggregating fragments from images of concrete architecture found throughout Europe. She then reworks them into large-scale photographic backdrops that she re-photographs within barren landscapes or seascapes. The series reflects the influence of Bernd and Hilla Becher, yet catalogues a group of imagined rather than real post-industrial architectural monuments, which nevertheless convey a sense of rigour, purposefulness and stature.

Lorenzo Vitturi's cycle of work, 'Dalston Anatomy' (2013), is an evocative exploration of London's Ridley Road Market, an area threatened with rapid gentrification. Vitturi attempts to preserve the spirit of the market and the neighbourhood by redefining the role of the traditional photographic documentarian. In making this series, Vitturi not only photographed on site in a traditional documentary manner, but also brought debris from the market into his nearby studio to create precarious and exotically imaginative sculptures and intricate collages, which he then re-photographed. Small





towers of artificial flowers, hair extensions, potatoes, pig's trotters and powdery pigments are held together in a slapdash manner by long nails, strings and skewers; photographic portraits of market-goers are littered with, and obscured by, colourful dust and detritus that chimes with their outfits. Blatantly manhandled and multilayered, 'Dalston Anatomy' places the emphasis on its own making, but the content of these pictures also indicates a profound desire to commune with and communicate the world outside of the limits of photographic production. As Vitturi explained in a 2013 interview: 'These images [...] were not just simply the result of my secret imagination, but were, in fact, deeply connected with a wider reality.'

Edward Weston — the celebrated practitioner and champion of photography as a distinct art form — wrote in his 1943 essay 'Seeing Photographically': 'The photographer's most important and likewise most difficult task is not learning to manage his camera, or to develop, or to print. It is learning to see photographically.' By contorting, Twister-like, across the realms of the darkroom and the studio, the analogue

and the digital, the artistic and the vernacular, and the historical and contemporary, these artists collectively reflect the seismic changes that have occurred within photography, and culture at large, during the rise of their generation. Keeping up with revolutionary shifts in technology, they have had to learn and then relearn their medium over and over again and, in so doing, are experimenting with, and stretching the reach of, its processes and properties. But in creating work that blatantly bears the marks of its making, and wears its structural form like an exoskeleton, they have also cleverly established new ways in which the content at photography's core can be represented and understood. In renovating and rebuilding photographic form, they are also constructing new ways to see, and to learn to see, photographically. ♦♦

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1
Daniel Gordon
Skull and Senshells, 2014,
c-type print, 1.5 x 1.7 m

2
Sara Cuyinar
Display Stand No. 64 H. 8 1/4"
W. 24" D. 16 1/2", 2014,
chromogenic print, 76 x 91 cm

3
Ager Carlsen
from the series 'Master', 2012,
pigment print, 50 x 70 cm

Courtesy
1 the artist and Wallpace,
New York •
2 the artist and Foxy
Production, New York • 3 the
artist and V1 Gallery,
Copenhagen



No. 64 CONS. H. 8 1/4" W. 24" D. 16 1/2"



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