

YIELD | Snite Museum of Art

Interview with Sheree Hovsepien

Interview and photography created April 12, 2017 at AIPAD by Jaclyn Wright



I realize your work, in addition to being photographic, is sculptural and performative in nature, but I was wondering if you could tell me a bit about how you first became interested in photography, specifically?

When I was in college I knew I wanted to be an artist, but I was thinking that the smarter move would be to study art history because that seemed like a more definable path, and I thought I would be a curator or art historian. I found myself taking more studio classes and ended up doing a double major. I took a photography class and fell in love. At that time, we were shooting film. I remember that my dad always used to take pictures of us with his 35mm, and he always carried a camera. I also come from a family of scientists. I came from this background where my parents went to work in the lab. I used to love to visit my mom's lab where there was a sense of rigor and ritual conjured by the strange smells and machinery. The photo lab carries this sort of magic. It just seemed familiar.

Your education was in photography, but your work extends beyond the confines of traditional photographic practices. I'm wondering what prompted your interdisciplinary practice? I'm specifically thinking about the drawings and the sculptural assemblages that you are creating with the images.

When I was in school in undergrad, it was in the mid- to late '90s. At that time anything that was time-based, performative or considered new media—anything, really, that had to do with computers—was lumped into the photography department. A lot of what I had considered the most exciting work at that time was in the photography realm—work by Ann Hamilton, Christian Boltanski, Sophie Calle, Annette Messager, Lorna Simpson, and even the Strans Twins; I always had warm associations with those artists. They were the artists, at that time, that seemed to be the most cutting edge and cool. Whereas painting seemed outdated or stagnant, this was stuff that was malleable; it was different. There were so many possibilities, and it was all lumped into photography. I always had a self-reflexive approach to photography. Treating the object or the act of photography was part of the experience; I wasn't trying to make an illusion. The camera was implicit in what I was doing. That self-aware quality, I think, is what ties my work together from the beginning.

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Speaking of the performative quality, the photogram seems to play a central role in your work. I think something that I find really interesting about the photogram is that it's simply a light reacting with light-sensitive materials. But there is also this performative quality in making a photogram that is mimicked in the way that the figure in your work is performing as well. I was wondering if you could speak about how you see the photogram and its performance playing this key role—about the collaboration between you and the subject and you and the materials. Yes, that's a really a keen assessment, because that's exactly what I'm thinking about. The photogram for me has always been akin to gesture drawing, where you make something very quickly in a small amount of time, as if it's channeled straight from the unconscious to the hand, skipping the brain. I also saw it as recording a performance within a certain amount of time and space, kind of like a dance or ritual in the darkroom. Taking out the paper in darkness, moving it around to block the light, and putting it through the bath—all of that becomes this performance that is recorded on a sensitized sheet of paper. The images are not exactly reproducible, even though I would try to [recreate them] at times. I'd look at them and think, "Oh well, maybe this mark should be over to the left more; let me try another one." The movements are very conscious. I would often repeat the choreography of the exposures, trying to get a "perfect" image, but finding that it was impossible. The work exists in the process. Another thing that draws me to this method of working is that there is a sense of control versus chaos. I mean that the materials have agency. The work is the result of a collaboration between myself and the inherent properties of the materials, space, and time I am working with.

In addition to the photograms, there are a lot of prints that are either solarized or totally unprocessed so that, from the time that you installed the work, all the way through now and up until the end of the exhibition, they'll continue to change. This work has a lot to do with physicality, the body, and the performance. I am embracing references to the hand, the body, and elements of chance when making the work. Unprocessed paper is alive in a way. It is reactive and sensitive to its surroundings. I really like that analogy—that the work becomes influenced by what's around it. It will change and has a life outside of my control.

Being a little bit newer to the collection process, how do you navigate that as an artist? Do people approach you for private collections, and what has that process been like for you? I leave it to the

gallery. I feel that is the gallery's job. I don't really want to deal with that. I'd rather be in the studio making the work and let the gallery do the business.

That leads into my next question. I realize the primary goal of an artist is not just to simply be collected, and, of course, it's not the most glamorous part of the work, but do you think the fact that your work takes the form of photograms and malleable sculptures enhances the collectability? I was thinking about how the physicality of your work is more of a one-off than a digital print or even a negative, which can be reproduced over and over again. But with your work, it would be nearly impossible to exactly replicate one of your pieces. I can't replicate anything, even if I try. It never turns out exactly the same. I love that. There is a slippage that happens in my work between photography, drawing, and sculpture. The photographic tenet of the multiple is often averted in my work. I also touch the prints, and you can often find fingerprints or studio grime on the surfaces. I remember seeing the Louise Bourgeois documentary where, when she was finishing a sculpture, she would actually rub her hands together and on her neck, and then she'd wipe her hands on the piece. Then she would say, "There, now it's finished." It has the essence or the spark in the work. In the way I work, the actual physical object has spent time in the studio, and it's spent time with me. This means something; it has mojo.

When you think about that, do you think that that enhances the collectability of the work, or do you think that it changes the collectability of the work? You could see my whole art career as being a performance within a certain time and space. How many pieces will I eventually make? I don't know. It's not like having a negative that can be reproduced after I pass away or something like that. I guess it becomes, can I say it becomes more precious? I don't know. That's debatable, too.

Maybe I'm reaching here, but it seems that your work and the form it takes is a response in some ways to the flatness of viewing a work on-screen. After seeing your work online, I was really excited to see how it would look in person, and I was not disappointed at all. The work is totally different in real life, which I had anticipated. I often think about how many times I've gotten excited to see an artist's show based on how different a work can look online. I've been to shows of artists that I really admire and found myself thinking, "It looks exactly the same on the Internet," which can be a letdown. Your work is very activated in the space—not that it's not activated online—but it's a different experience. I'm wondering if, in your practice, you are actively thinking about how the work will look online versus in an exhibition space, and if you think about this work as being reactive to digital practices? I don't think about how my work will look online because I understand photography, and I know images can be manipulated to look good on a computer screen. Everybody's work should look good online. If your work doesn't look good online, you need a new photographer/retoucher. I am not reacting to digital spaces either. I'm not opposed to using tools like digital cameras or digital printing at all. I feel there's a time and a place for everything.

From the beginning for me, photography was more about a performance of power and a way of looking. How does a photograph of something change it? How does it change you when you hold the camera? These questions led me to think more about the idea, processes, and rules of photography. I like to think about ways to subvert the existing structure. I find there is a lot to think about there.