

DENIS BRIHAT
PIERRE CORDIER
JEAN-PIERRE SUDRE:
A EUROPEAN EXPERIMENT

by

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Raquel Moliterno

Abstract

Denis Brihat - Pierre Cordier - Jean-Pierre Sudre: A European Experiment

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The most evident aspect that the photographic works of Pierre Cordier, Denis Brihat and Jean-Pierre Sudre have in common is their use of chemical interventions in the printing process to produce unique photographic objects.

Sudre, Brihat and Cordier are important to the history of photography because their work questions the mainstream practices of 20th century analog photography. They do this by transforming conventional photographic materials into non-conventional images, and by being active agents in the creation of these images. Sudre's, Brihat's and Cordier's works bring questions about photographic materiality back into the critical discussion of what defines photography.

I intend to investigate how the nature of photographic materiality has been addressed during significant periods and movements in the history of photography before Sudre, Brihat and Cordier did their work, in order to understand how and why their approach is innovative and important.

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To my parents. Wish you could see how much I grew and how far I have come. I miss you.

Dedication

To my grandfather.

You taught me kindness is the most powerful force in life. It changes the world.

You taught me that seeing poetry in the daily life is as vital as oxygen.

For that, I will always be grateful.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

On April 26, 1967, the Museum of Modern Art in New York opened a photography exhibition called *A European Experiment*. The show was organized by John Szarkowski, the photography curator of that institution at the time, and it was comprised of 22 photographs produced by three European photographers: one Belgian and two French. The most evident aspect that Pierre Cordier's, Denis Brihat's and Jean-Pierre Sudre's works had in common was their use of chemical interventions in the printing process to produce unique photographic objects. In Szarkowski's own words, in the press release for the exhibition, he stated that:

These three photographers have concerned themselves with questions and potentials that have lain outside the mainstream of photography....The pictures here... attempt to deal with the universal through abstraction rather than through symbol; the prints are conceived as unique or semi-unique objects, rather than as the copy for mass media reproductions; they are not to be regarded as windows on the world, but rather as small bits of the world itself, with their own color and texture and shape and provenance.^{1 2}

Why would an important curator such as Szarkowski, who was known to advocate for the Straight Photography movement, select these unique, abstract images to show in an exhibition? This question is what I intend to examine in this thesis.

Despite showing at the Museum of Modern Art, and some later critical attention paid to their work, it is difficult to find information about these three artists in conventional sources of photographic history. If Brihat, Cordier and Sudre are mentioned at all in most history of photography books, usually their work is given a mere paragraph.³ It could be argued that what they were doing

¹ Museum of Modern Art, Public Information, "Press Release Number 40," news release, New York, NY, 1967 (Museum of Modern Art).

² "A European Experiment" *Museum of Modern Art*, accessed May 27, 2017, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2602?locale=en>.

³ A few examples: Michel Frizot's *A New History of Photography*, Helmut Gernsheim's *Creative photography: Aesthetic trends, 1839-1960*, Juliet Hacking and David Campany's *Photography: The whole story*, Peter Pollack's *Picture history of photography: From the earliest beginnings to the present day*, Naomi Rosenblum's *A world history of photography*.

was not significantly different from what more prominent artists were doing. Nevertheless, during my research I found evidence that this hypothesis is not necessarily true.

Sudre, Brihat and Cordier's works are important to the history of photography because, as Szarkowski pointed out, their work questions "the mainstream of photography".⁴ They do this by transforming conventional photographic materials into non-conventional, active agents in the creation of their images. Sudre's, Brihat's and Cordier's works bring questions about photographic materiality⁵ back into the critical discussion of what defines photography.

I intend to investigate how the nature of photographic materiality has been addressed during significant periods and movements in the history of photography before Sudre, Brihat and Cordier did their work, in order to understand how and why their approach is innovative and important.

Initially I chose to focus my thesis on these particular photographers because of my interest in the material qualities of nineteenth and twentieth century photo-chemical processes. As an undergrad student studying photography in Brazil, I was drawn to the work of artists who challenged the accepted norms of the medium. In my first year of graduate study in Toronto I did additional research into the work of Brihat, Cordier and Sudre as well further study of their MoMA exhibition in 1970. Through this investigation I discovered that the work of all three artists are held in the collection of the Center for Creative Photography (CCP) in Tucson, AZ and knowing this, immediately selected this institution for my second year placement so I could study these works firsthand. Once at CCP, I learned that Sudre's work was acquired in 1979 and the work of Brihat and Cordier followed later as part of the Aaron Siskind Archive acquisition.

Although these works were recognized by MoMA almost a half century ago there has been little follow up by way of exhibitions and publications on the significance of these artists and their

⁴ Museum of Modern Art, Public Information, "Press Release Number 40," news release, New York, NY, 1967 (Museum of Modern Art).

⁵ What I mean by photographic materiality is the photographic matter and its unique characteristics. That includes the light sensitive matter and also all the chemical interactions necessary to create a photographic image. Or in other words, the light sensitive matter and how it can be used, according to its unique characteristics to create an image using light and chemical reactions.

contributions to history of twentieth century photography. At this juncture, as art museums are becoming more aware of photography's material qualities in a digital age, my objective is to relook at Szarkowski's exhibition, *A European Experiment* and the role these artists played in the development of photography as an art form.

Chapter 2:

Who and what?

Biographies (in chronological order) and Description of Processes

Jean-Pierre Sudre

Jean-Pierre Sudre was born September, 27 in 1921 in Paris. He began his professional career in photography as a laboratory assistant and reporter for the daily *Le Journal*, where he worked for a year between 1939 and 1940. He studied cinema at the École Nationale de Cinéma in Paris from 1941 to 1943, and tried to work in cinema for several years but could not find good opportunities in that field. After getting married to Claudine Richard in 1947 and having a baby the next year, he decided to become a professional photographer in 1949. That same year, he got his first commissions as a professional photographer doing industrial photographs, and eventually became a renowned specialist in that area.⁶ By 1957, he was collaborating with some of the most important French magazines such as *Recherches*, *Le Trait d'Union* and *Le Calendrier BP*.⁷ In 1973 he decided to leave Paris and moved to a family property in Lacoste, Vaucluse, where he lived until 1994, when he moved again to Aix-en-Provence, where he lived until his death on September 6, 1997.

Sudre received many awards during his career, such as the Lion d'Or at the International Biennial of Photography in Venice, Italy in 1957 and the Davanne medal from the Société Française de La Photographie in 1967. He was made Knight of the French Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 1981 and was later promoted to a higher rank of the same order, on 30 July 1997, just a few months before his death.⁸

⁶ "Jean-Pierre Sudre," *Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon*, accessed May 26, 2017, <https://www.bm-lyon.fr/expo/11/sudre/biographie-jean-pierre-sudre.php>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

In 1957 Sudre also began his teaching career at the École des Arts Appliqués by creating the Department of Industrial Aesthetic. He continued to teach photography throughout his life in many institutions, and was the creator of some important photography programs in France. One example is the program at the École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture et des Arts Visuels de La Cambre, in Brussels, where he served as a lecturer alongside his colleague Pierre Cordier from 1965 to 1970. In 1968, he created the Photographic Department at the École Supérieure d'Art Graphique (Académie Julian) and the Photographic Department at La Demeure Gallery in Paris. After moving to Vaucluse, he and Jean-Claude Lemagny inaugurated a center named Abbaye de Photothélème, in 1974. The same year, he opened with his wife Claudine the Stage Expérimental Photographique, considered one of the first research centers for experimental photography in Europe.⁹ In 1976, he created a History of Photography course at the Université de Saint Charles in Marseille, which was abandoned the next year. Another course in the History of Photography was created by Sudre in 1977 at the École des Beaux-Arts in Marseille-Luminy. Sudre and Claudine gave many lectures during their careers on ancient processes such as platinotype, kallitype, albumen printing and Sudre's special method, the Mordançage process. Most of those lectures were presented in important institutions such as the Archives Photographiques des Monuments Historiques in Saint Cyr, at the École Nationale de La Photographie and at the R.I.P (Rencontres Internationales de La Photographie), both in Arles.¹⁰

Sudre's first personal photographic work was done during the late 1940s and the 1950s, and consisted mainly of landscapes and still life images with strong formal compositions.¹¹ Those images were the result of his interest in nature, which began during his childhood when exploring the

⁹ "Jean-Pierre Sudre," *Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon*, accessed May 26, 2017, <https://www.bm-lyon.fr/expo/11/sudre/biographie-jean-pierre-sudre.php>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Dean Brierly, "Mordançage," *B&W*, April 2008, 58.

woods around his family property in Lacoste, the same place where he would live later in his life.¹² In 1949, his first attempts with still life became the series *Sous-Bois and Natures Mortes*, composed of 30 x 40 cm black-and-white prints.¹³

(see images 1 thru 6 in Image Appendix)

Although he began his experimentation with bleaching and etching in 1946, Sudre's first tests with Mordançage were done only in 1960. The Mordançage process makes it possible, through a series of chemical baths, to separate parts of the photographic emulsion from the photographic paper. Then the photographic surface can be manipulated and the images distorted by physically moving the emulsion and by changing its colour with toners.¹⁴

Sudre used the fundamentals of the etching and bleaching processes developed at the end of the nineteenth century to create the term Mordançage - which means "to etch the surface" in French. The Mordançage process uses a sequence of chemical baths into which the artist submerges a black-and-white silver gelatin print and then manipulates the emulsion surface. This process can be done after developing the print and before fixing it. The first bath is a solution of copper chloride, hydrogen peroxide and glacial acetic acid, which will bleach the images and loosen the layer containing the silver gelatin emulsion from the paper base. The darker the area, the better the solution will work and the more it will lift the emulsion from the paper, transforming the print in a reverse relief. It is the photographer's choice to then remove the emulsion entirely or not, after it is lifted from the paper base. The white and gray areas are kept intact. The second bath can be a developer to re-develop the dark areas, or a toning solution or dyeing bath to change the colour of the

¹² "Jean-Pierre Sudre," *Gitterman Gallery*, accessed May 26, 2017, http://gittermangallery.com/exhibition/74/press_release/

¹³ "Jean-Pierre Sudre," *Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon*, accessed May 26, 2017, <https://www.bm-lyon.fr/expo/11/sudre/biographie-jean-pierre-sudre.php>.

¹⁴ Allison Hersh, "Haunting beauty: venerable technique of 'Mordançage' produces remarkable images," *Savannah Morning News*, Feb 13, 2000. <http://ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/381743205?accountid=13631>.

silver gelatin emulsion left on the paper base. After drying, the lifted emulsion will re-attach itself to the paper base and it will be stable.¹⁵ In 1969 Sudre opened the exhibition *Apocalypse* with a large series of 30x40 cm mordançages.¹⁶

(see images 7 thru 10 in Image Appendix)

In the 1960s, he also experimented with another nineteenth century process: the cliché-verre. A cliché-verre is made by drawing or painting an image on a glass plate, and then using this as a negative from which to print the positive image on a photo-sensitive surface. Sudre used this concept, and by letting a mineral solution dry and crystallize itself on a glass plate, he created images which he used as negatives from which to make prints on photographic paper.¹⁷ In 1967, he was part of the exhibition *A European Experiment* at the Museum of Modern Art, along with Denis Brihat and Pierre Cordier, as mentioned earlier. In 1972, the *Materiographic* exhibition showed further experimentation with the process of crystallization on glass plates.

(see images 11 thru 14 in Image Appendix)

Sudre's interest in experimenting with the mordançage and cliché-verre processes shows how the question of photographic materiality is his field of interest. In his own words in 1986, he said:

I have been for some years inside the material itself, which is no longer bark of trees or starry mosses but crystal, the first object, to be discovered as a universal secret. Superstar in the art of directing, the crystalline material possesses a repertoire that has no limit: fairy and demon stories, spectacles of suns or summer nights, impassable mountains or immense plains, it is up to you to choose according to the mood of the moment, and then to record it photographically.¹⁸

¹⁵ Christina Z. Anderson, "Mordançage," *Unblinking Eye*, accessed May 26, 2017, <http://unblinkingeye.com/Articles/Mordancage/mordancage.html>

¹⁶ "Jean-Pierre Sudre," *Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon*, accessed May 26, 2017, <https://www.bm-lyon.fr/expo/11/sudre/biographie-jean-pierre-sudre.php>.

¹⁷ "Jean-Pierre Sudre," *Gitterman Gallery*, accessed May 26, 2017, http://gittermangallery.com/exhibition/74/press_release/

¹⁸ "Hommage à Claudine et Jean-Pierre Sudre," *Maison Européenne de la Photographie*, accessed May 27, 2017, <https://www.mep-fr.org/event/hommage-a-claudine-et-jean-pierre-sudre/>.

By saying that, Sudre indicates how materials play an important part in his creative process. He expands on that idea when he chemically alters these photographic materials. His interventions allow photographic processes and reactions to be active in the construction of the final unique photographic object.

The main body of Sudre's work that I used in my research is composed of 10 Mordançages on gelatin silver print material, a part of the Center for Creative Photography Collection located in Tucson, Arizona, USA.

(see images 15 thru 24 in Image Appendix)

Denis Brihat

Denis Brihat was born in 1928 in Paris. He began his relationship with photography as an amateur, when he was fifteen years old. He studied from 1948 to 1951 at the École Nationale de Cinéma in Paris. Later he became a very successful photographer, commissioned to make portraits, architectural photographs and also to do photographic reportage.¹⁹ Between 1952 and 1955 he worked for various publishers making illustration photographs, until his friend Robert Doisneau persuaded him to join the RAPHO photography agency, founded in Paris in 1933 by Charles Rado (1899-1970). After spending a year in India, in 1957, he published the material he produced during that journey and was granted the very prestigious Prix Niépce for his reportage. That same year, Brihat organized an exhibition of that material at the Société Française de Photographie.²⁰

However, after coming back from India, Brihat felt dissatisfied working with commercial photography as well as with living in a big city such as Paris. He decided in 1958 to move to Provence in search of a simpler life, and settled at Bonnieux (Vaucluse), where he lives to this day. He

¹⁹ André Rouillé and Jean-Claude Lemagny, *A History of Photography: Social and Cultural Perspectives* (Cambridge: University Press, 1987)

²⁰ "His life," *Denis Brihat*, accessed May 27, 2017, <http://www.denisbrihat.com/en/the-man-2/his-life/>

first moved into a house with no electricity, built a darkroom, and began experimenting with print-making. His goal was to concentrate his attention on exploring the natural world around him, however with a more personal approach than was possible with his commercial work. Brihat focused on the daily objects that surrounded him. In his own words, during the period from 1958 to 1967 when he was secluded in Provence, he had an “intense period of reflection and creation.”²¹ The abundant nature all around caught his attention and became his motif. That period was fruitful in many ways for Brihat, including the exhibitions he was part of at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris in 1966, at the Museum of Modern Art (New York) with Cordier and Sudre in 1967, and the Prix Nadar he received in 1963.²²

(see images 25 thru 29 in Image Appendix)

In 1966, he started experimenting with toning black-and-white prints, and developed his most important creative work. Brihat made portraits of fruits and flowers as black-and-white darkroom prints. Then, by selectively bleaching and toning parts of those images with several different mineral salts, such as gold, iron, selenium, vanadium or uranium, he transformed the monochrome prints into coloured images. The chemical reactions between the silver and the metals present in the toning baths produced original and permanent colours.²³ He called this process grignotage, and has been perfecting it since the late 1960s.

(see images 30 thru 34 in Image Appendix)

In 1969 he started his teaching career. Along with Jean-Pierre Sudre, he co-founded the Association “Etudes et Recherches d’Art Photographique du Luberon, with the goal of teaching an ex-

²¹ “His life,” *Denis Brihat*, accessed May 27, 2017, <http://www.denisbrihat.com/en/the-man-2/his-life/>

²² Ibid.

²³ “Denis Brihat,” *Nailya Alexander Gallery*, accessed May 27, 2017, <http://www.nailyaalexandergallery.com/artists/denis-brihat>

perimental photography course. The course lasted for 8 years.²⁴ His teaching career continued until 1988, when he retired to focus on his personal work. Brihat worked and created courses in a number of prestigious institutions such as the American School of the Arts at Lacoste (Vaucluse) and the University of Provence-Marseille.²⁵ In 1987 he received the Grand Prix Photographie de la Ville de Paris.

Brihat's work presents nature as art objects. In his own words:

My search is for a photograph not intended primarily for reproduction, but a photograph worthwhile for itself, more personal perhaps in the approach... My favorite subject is nature. I immerse myself in it and there I find reflection, contemplation, pleasure, and using my craft, I try to translate, to transcend, to bring it to a future spectator's gaze. I want to reveal things and going beyond, I want to go to the other side of the mirror.²⁶

Brihat succeeds in transforming black-and-white silver images into colorful art objects, meant to be hung on walls, like paintings.²⁷ This choice should not be confused with an attempt to replicate a painting. It was simply a choice which made it possible for the observer to engage with the object in a different way.²⁸

Brihat's way of interfering with the photographic materials and processes to create his images may differ from Sudre's, but the goal is the same: to change the role given to the photographic material in the creation of his images.

²⁴ "His life," *Denis Brihat*, accessed May 27, 2017, <http://www.denisbrihat.com/en/the-man-2/his-life/>

²⁵ "His life," *Denis Brihat*, accessed May 27, 2017, <http://www.denisbrihat.com/en/the-man-2/his-life/>

²⁶ Roland Quilici, "Denis Brihat," *Photophiles Magazine Photo*, accessed May 27, 2017, <http://www.photophiles.com/index.php/biographies/1189-denis-brihat>.

²⁷ Georges Monti, "Texts," *Denis Brihat*, accessed May 27, 2017, <http://www.denisbrihat.com/en/the-man-2/texts/>.

²⁸ John Bailey, "Denis Brihat's Humble Onions," *ASC Web Site*, accessed May 27, 2017, <http://www.theasc.com/site/blog/johns-bailiwick/denis-brihats-humble-onions/>.

Pierre Cordier

The first two events Pierre Cordier highlights in his biography in his book *Le Chimigramme* are his birth on January 28, 1933, in Brussels, Belgium, and his invention of the chemigram on November 10, 1956. He disregards all the events that contributed to his formation as an artist and concentrates on his invention, which he describes as a “technique that combines the physics of painting (varnish, wax, oil) and the chemistry of photography (photosensitive emulsion, developer, fixer); without a camera, without an enlarger, and in full light.”²⁹

However, there were some important events that influenced Cordier to create his body of work and to invent the chemigram. His encounter with the French poet Georges Brassens in 1952 was one such occurrence. As Cordier himself says in another biography, Brassens told him to “follow a road not yet traveled and full of obstacles” — advice which Cordier followed to the letter.³⁰ Although Cordier is almost entirely a self-taught photographer, the four months he spent studying at Otto Steinert’s school in Saarbrücken in 1958 definitely left a strong impression on his way of thinking about photography.³¹ Another important aspect of Cordier’s biography is his teaching career. He was a lecturer at the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Visuels de La Cambre in Brussels, from 1965 to 1998.

In his biography, Cordier also highlights the exhibitions he took part in throughout his career. The most important one, in his own opinion, was the one organized by Szarkowski at the Museum of Modern Art in 1967. In his own words: “... at that time when artistic photography was still little accepted in Europe. It was thanks to the flair of the great curator John Szarkowski. Make sure

²⁹ Pierre Cordier, *Pierre Cordier Le Chimigramme = The Chemigram* (Bruxelles: Éd. Racine, 2007).

³⁰ Pierre Cordier, “Curriculum Vitae” *Aaron Siskind Archive*, Center for Creative Photography.

³¹ Pierre Cordier, *Pierre Cordier Le Chimigramme = The Chemigram* (Bruxelles: Éd. Racine, 2007).

to [allow] space to pay tribute to him in your work”. Szarkowski’s exhibition validated his works, as well the works of his close friends Sudre and Brihat.³²

Another important exhibition and one of the first he was part of, also alongside Sudre and Brihat, was the last edition of the *Subjektive Fotografie 3* in 1958.³³ It was organized by the Fotoform Group, led by Otto Steinert, Cordier’s former teacher. It was also in that show where Cordier, Brihat and Sudre met. Cordier mentions other important shows as highlights in his career, such as a retrospective of his work at the Musée d’Art Moderne in Brussels in 1988. The same year he became a member of the Académie Royale de Belgique, and had one of his pieces integrated into the Brussels subway system. In 2008, he exhibited five chemigrams at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. Cordier also mentions exhibitions in which he took part at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, in 2010, and at HackelBury Gallery in London and Haines Gallery in San Francisco, both in 2011. In 2013, he took part in Paris Photo and had a show at the Lintel Gallery in New York. In 2016, he made a video explaining how he invented the chemigram, as part of a series of videos the V & A Museum did on camera-less photography. Called “The Shadow Catchers” the series is available on Vimeo.³⁴ In 2007, Cordier published his book “Le Chimigramme” with Racine, in Brussels.³⁵

Cordier was also one of the creators of the *Generative Photography* movement in Germany in 1968.³⁶ Its goal was to rethink the way we think about photography. In Allan Porter’s words, “The concrete thinker became more important then, than the previous abstract and ideological thinker.”³⁷ And that was something Cordier and his peers in the *Generative Photography* movement

³² Pierre Cordier, e-mail message to author, February 16, 2017.

³³ Pierre Cordier, *Pierre Cordier Le Chimigramme = The Chemigram* (Bruxelles: Éd. Racine, 2007).

³⁴ “Video: Pierre Cordier,” *Victoria and Albert Museum*, accessed May 27, 2017, <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/videos/p/video-pierre-cordier/>.

³⁵ Pierre Cordier, *Pierre Cordier Le Chimigramme = The Chemigram* (Bruxelles: Éd. Racine, 2007).

³⁶ Bernd Stiegler, “Texts about Gottfried Jäger”, Gottfried Jäger, accessed June 12, 2017, <http://www.gottfried-jaeger.de/>

³⁷ Alan Porter, “The Generative Photography,” *Camera Magazine*, February 1975, 2.

wanted to combat. They advocated for a less confined way of defining photography. Experimentations with other media such as painting or sculpture were welcome, and the concept of interdisciplinary was the base of the movement. That is what was most attractive to Cordier about the Generative Photography. His chemigram was a perfect fit to that proposal, because it did not fit in any category previously established in the realm of visual arts. Cordier's chemigrams have been defined as photography as well as painting since their invention, but never as belonging solely to either of them.

In order to understand what is a chemigram, Cordier's own definition may be helpful: "A chemigram is the process — or the resulting image — that owes its existence to the localized action of chemical substances on a photosensitive surface, without the use of camera, enlarger or dark-room."³⁸ Another way of explaining a chemigram is to say that it is produced by exposing a light-sensitive surface, such as a sheet of photographic paper, to light. The next step is to coat some parts of the paper with an almost infinite list of possible substances that will work as resists, and prevent the developer or the fixer from reacting with the photographic emulsion. The alternations and combinations of resists, developers and fixers are what forms the final image. He even developed a technique to produce colour chemigrams, from black-and-white photographic papers, by using colour dye couplers and chromogenic developers and fixers.

Cordier explains the process by creating an analogy between photography and drawing, where the pencil would be the developer, and the fixer the eraser. It is the interrelationship established between the light sensitive surface and how the chemicals react to it that creates the chemigram. The differences between a chemigram and a photogram are numerous. However, the primary difference is that a photogram uses selective exposure to light to form an image. In a chemigram, it is selective exposure to the developing or fixing agents that forms the image. In a chemigram, the chemistry, rather than light, creates the image. If the photographic matter was important in creating an image in both Sudre and Brihat's works, in Cordier's chemigram it becomes the main actor.

³⁸ Anne van Horenbeck, *Pierre Cordier: Chimigrammes*. (Brussels: February 1980).

(see images 35 thru 45 in Image Appendix)

The main body of Cordier's of work that I used in my research is composed of 6 chemigrams, part of the Center for Creative Photography Collection located in Tucson, Arizona, USA.

Chapter 3: Where and When?

Historical Context

Pictorialism

By the end of the nineteenth century, the photographic medium was becoming increasingly industrialized. Instead of mixing chemicals according to personal experiments and hand coating their papers, now photographers could buy commercially-prepared albumen papers and faster plates. These advances changed the way photography was done. On one hand, professional photographers benefited from faster and cheaper plates. On the other hand, the invention of roll film and Kodak's "you press the button, we do the rest" idea (1888), made it possible for almost anyone to make photographs.³⁹ Photography expanded from being solely the realm of the specialist, into an activity accessible to many. That fact divided photography into professional and amateur ways of producing images. It also divided professional photography into two practices: commercial or artistic. That division amplified the discussion about whether photography could be art or not.⁴⁰

After the introduction of Kodak's first amateur camera, aristocratic gentlemen with artistic ambitions no longer dominated the medium of photography.⁴¹ As an army of weekend "snapshotters" invaded the photographic realm, a small but persistent group of photographers claimed photography was a serious, fine arts practice. That was the beginning of the Pictorialist movement in photography. One of Pictorialism's main criticisms of what it considered non-artistic work was that careful, or even exquisite printing became less important than the recognizable rendering of a familiar sight or famous person.⁴² Pictorialist photographers rejected the point-and-shoot approach to

³⁹ Naomi Rosenblum, *A world history of photography* (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 2007).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

photography and embraced labor-intensive processes such as gum bichromate printing, which involved hand-coating papers with homemade emulsions and pigments, or the photogravure process, which is a combination of photography and engraving techniques.⁴³ The harder it was to do, the more unique the print, the more artistic their photographs would be. Such technical choices emphasized the role of the photographer as a craftsman and opposed the argument that photography was an entirely mechanical medium. Pictorialists defined photography as a medium of creative expression and distinguished it from its casual, commercial and scientific applications. They claimed for their craftsmanship the same status as painting: as an artistic expression, rather than a popular pastime or commercial pursuit.⁴⁴

While what the Pictorialist photographers pursued was recognition for their craft as art, the form they found to achieve it was to mimic the materiality of paintings. One of the methods they used to do this was altering the photographic image in the printing process, leaving brush strokes in the final print. That was a desired mark of authenticity and of a creative gesture, only made possible by human interference.⁴⁵ In other words, to be considered art, photography had to be faithful enough to reality — in a way that not even the most skilled painting could be — but not to the extent that it could be seen as made by a machine, and therefore not artistic or creative enough to be considered art. In the Pictorialist movement, the role played by the photographic matter was to provide uniqueness and artistic truth. Both items were indispensable to guarantee the artistic significance of a work of art, and now could also be applied to photography.⁴⁶

⁴³ Naomi Rosenblum, *A world history of photography* (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 2007).

⁴⁴ Franz-Xaver Schlegel, “Pictorialism” in *Encyclopedia of twentieth century photography*, ed. Lynne Warren (New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Straight Photography & Modernism

Between World War I and World War II, two art movements gained force in the realm of photography: Straight Photography and Modernism.

Straight Photography's goal was to oppose and distinguish itself from the blurred, vague look of Pictorialism, the previous dominant movement in fine art photography, from the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century.⁴⁷ Straight Photography embraced a modern, highly mechanized society. It made no sense any more to do things by hand, or to coat a sheet of paper and prepare one's own photographic material, when it could be purchased ready to use. A photograph captured through a camera, with no human interference, was the new avant-garde movement in photography. It makes perfect sense if we think that the Straight Photography concept was created in the industrialized culture of the post-WWI era. Therefore, by the 1930s Pictorialism would seem dated and retrograde.⁴⁸

The Straight Photographer looked at common, mundane objects with fresh eyes. But his work had to look crisp, in focus, and had to appear as if it was mechanically produced, with no signs of manual interference. Darkroom experiments and manipulations were deemed wholly "unphotographic" and condemned as a perversion of the photographic process.⁴⁹ This meant the photographer had to pre-visualize what he was seeing as it would appear after being framed in his viewfinder and printed in the darkroom, with as little manipulation as possible. Straight Photographers aimed to flatten a three-dimensional world into a two-dimensional image, through highly formal and geometric compositions.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Mark Pohlman, "History of Photography: twenty century developments," in *Encyclopedia of twentieth century photography*, ed. Lynne Warren (New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Juliet Hacking and David Campany, *Photography: The whole story* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

As with any art movement, Straight Photography appeared in different forms in different places at different times, but the term was originally conceived by Sadakichi Hartmann, an art critic.⁵¹ Hartmann defended the idea that a return to a ‘straight way’ to see and capture the world was necessary in opposition to the romantic, idealized and manipulated Pictorialist aesthetic. What he meant as a ‘straight way’ was that a photograph should be “untouched and left as the eye had originally seen it.”⁵² That is what he meant for a “photograph that looks like a photograph.”⁵³ For the Straight Photographers, photographic materials should work as a neutral repository for their two-dimensional representations of the world.

Modernism can be understood as an artistic response to the industrialization and mechanization that influenced all aspects of human life between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Modernist movement in photography also emerged after WWI in Europe as an artistic response to the war, and influenced some photographers who did not find the Straight Photography movement appealing or meaningful. It lasted until it was interrupted by WWII.⁵⁴

Aesthetically speaking, Modernism was an even bolder and more radical movement than Straight Photography:

The tendency towards abstraction in form of the aforementioned photographers illustrates what followed and lingered throughout the twentieth century, that is, the coexistence of two parallel views among American and European modernist photographers. These views included on the one hand, the inheritance of “pure” or “Straight” photographic aesthetic launched by American photographers such as Alfred Stieglitz, Aaron Siskind, and others; and on the other hand, an experimental aesthetic directly derived from the European avant-gardism of Laszlo´ Moholy-Nagy, Alexander Rodchenko, and others.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Stephenie Young, “History of Photography: post-war era,” in *Encyclopedia of twentieth century photography*, ed. Lynne Warren (New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Anne Barthelemy, “Abstraction” in *Encyclopedia of twentieth century photography*, ed. Lynne Warren (New York: Routledge, 2006).

The Modernist works being created by some European photographers while searching for an abstract image were very innovative. Modernist artists used tools such as the photogram, the manipulation of light, the freezing of movement in an image or the effects of photographic chemistry to pursue their abstract images.⁵⁶ The photogram was the perfect tool for their quest because it did not require a camera. This made it possible for the artist to create images through the combination of shadows and silhouettes, “Thus bypassing the mechanical or technical apparatus in favor of imagination and even surrealism.”⁵⁷ Although innovative, the photogram was not an entirely original idea. It was based on William Henry Fox Talbot’s experiments in the 1830s called ‘photogenic drawings’. The difference was the fact that it was used by photographers such as Christian Schad in 1918, Man Ray in 1921, and Moholy-Nagy in 1922, as an expressive creative process, and it influenced many other artists who came later. “The photogram permits its creator to investigate and explore with dematerialization, interpenetration of forms, distortions and lack of perspective.”⁵⁸ These were new possibilities that did not exist in images made by a camera. Photograms were the first time we had an invisible reality constructed by light acting directly on the photographic surface.

Photograms testify to the physical presence of the objects they represent; their status as evidence, however, distanced that evidence from everyday vision. Equally important among abstract practices, the use of light remains a fundamental principle with the function not only to reveal and make visible, but also to be exploited as a real material.⁵⁹

However, it was the possibility of breaking the rules, of trying new experimental paths brought by the surrealists, that made the modernist movement possible.

While photographic vision informed Futurism, Surrealism, and Dada’s dismantling of aesthetic hierarchies, it was these fine arts movements that helped to break open photography’s experimental paths. A good example of that was how Man Ray defied what a photograph should look like with his Rayographs (Photograms) and Solarizations (Sabbatier effects).⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Anne Barthelemy, “Abstraction” in *Encyclopedia of twentieth century photography*, ed. Lynne Warren (New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Kimberly Lamm, “Modernism” in *Encyclopedia of twentieth century photography*, ed. Lynne Warren (New York: Routledge, 2006).

The term “solarization” is used to describe the effect occurring when a negative or print is re-exposed to light during development.⁶¹

Photograms and Solarizations are good examples of how the Modernist artists — especially Man Ray — began thinking about the photographic material in a different way: not in the way the Pictorialists would, as proof of a creative gesture, nor as a blank canvas as did the Straight Photographers. The Modernist photographers allowed both light and the photographic materials to participate actively in the creation of the image. That is especially true regarding the Solarization process. It is the reaction between the developer and the light sensitive material that creates the final unique image.

⁶¹ Mike Crawford, “Solarization,” in *Encyclopedia of twentieth century photography*, ed. Lynne Warren (New York: Routledge, 2006).

Subjective Photography

The post-WW II period in Europe saw a rebirth of photography as an expressive and artistic medium, attributed to the freedom of expression regained after Nazi ideology was defeated, and also to the need to escape the horrors of the war.⁶² The concept of Subjective Photography matured in different directions in the United States and Europe, but maintained a dialogue between them. In both continents, the influences for this new concept born in the 1950s came from the same artistic movements developed in the 1920s in Europe. After WW II, photographers all over Europe and in America were searching for ways to expand the concepts created by László Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray for creative photography.⁶³ In America, Harry Callahan, Aaron Siskind, Frederick Sommer and Minor White were examples of artists pursuing an abstract, metaphorical style of art photography as part of the Subjective Photography movement.⁶⁴

In Europe, the Subjective Photography movement is mainly associated with Otto Steinert (1915-1978) in Germany. He was an important figure in creating the concept behind this new experimental photography, and also in promoting it.⁶⁵ After WW II, he opened the School of Arts and Crafts in Saarbrücken, willing to continue the investigations initiated by Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray with the New Vision movement in the 1920s. As a teacher, he had an important role in encouraging his students to experiment with the creative process in photography. Like Minor White and Alfred Stieglitz, Steinert believed that photography's full potential could only be reached if, as an expressive medium, it had the freedom to explore both internal and external worlds as its subject. However, Steinert went further than White, and especially further than Stieglitz, when he encouraged his students to "use the widest possible variant of techniques in photography, to explore the

⁶² Shelley Rice, "Beyond Reality: The Subjective Vision" in *A New History of Photography*, ed Michel Frizot (Köln: Könemann, 1998).

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Juliet Hacking and David Company, *Photography: The whole story* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012).

⁶⁵ Ibid.

creative possibilities of ALL aspects of the photographic process.”⁶⁶ That was important because it made it possible for all of Steinert’s students, including Pierre Cordier, to experiment with their creative process without any kind of limitations. Steinert believed that Subjective Photography encompassed all forms of creative personal expression through photography, from reportage to the abstract photogram.⁶⁷ He encouraged his students and peers to explore manipulations and interventions in the photographic process.⁶⁸

Another important role that Steinert took upon himself was to organize exhibitions. He was the leader of a group called Fotoform, which was founded in 1949 in Germany. They participated in the first Photokina — the world’s largest photography fair — in 1950 in Cologne, Germany. There Steinert got to be known for breaking the rules of many photographic practices. That became clear when Steinert claimed in the Fotoform founding manifesto “the need for a new photographic style that served the demands of our time.”⁶⁹ In other words, Fotoform's goal was to find a new way to explore all uniquely photographic possibilities as a creative means for personal expression. Steinert’s goal was to bring back Man Ray and Moholy-Nagy’s legacy through his students and through the exhibitions he organized to show what his students and contemporary photographers were doing.

Steinert and the Fotoform group organized three exhibitions in 1951, 1954 and 1958, called *Subjective Photography: An International Exhibition of Modern Photography* in Cologne, Germany.⁷⁰ In his introduction to the 1951 exhibition catalogue he says: “So this exhibition is devoted mainly to a type of photography in which the artist has altered the basic material of exterior reality

⁶⁶ Jones, Bernard S., and Peter C. Bunnell. *Encyclopedia of photography*. (New York: Arno, 1974).

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Shelley Rice, “Beyond Reality: The Subjective Vision” in *A New History of Photography*, ed Michel Frizot (Köln: Könemann, 1998).

⁶⁹ Juliet Hacking and David Company, *Photography: The whole story* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012).

⁷⁰ Helmut Gernsheim, *Creative photography: aesthetic trends 1839-1960* (New York: Dover, 1991)

by means of transformations suggested to him by his personal vision of the world.”⁷¹ The 1951 exhibition showed works from European groups such as Fotoform, and works from László Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray as a means to create historical continuity. The 1954 exhibition showed works from American photographers such as Harry Callahan, Aaron Siskind, Frederick Sommer and Minor White. Pierre Cordier, Jean-Pierre Sudre and Denis Brihat were part of the last of the Subjective Photography exhibitions in 1958.

Steinert and the Subjective Photography movement’s acceptance of all investigations within the photographic realm, including chemical interventions in the photographic materials, made it possible for Cordier, Sudre and Brihat to explore the aesthetic possibilities obtained through that kind of intervention, which means they had the freedom to explore new forms of using the photographic matter as an active agent in the construction of their images.⁷²

⁷¹ Otto Steinert, *Subjective Fotografie* (Exhibition catalogue, 1951) quoted in Michel Frizot, *A New History of Photography* (Köln: Könemann, 1998).

⁷² Naomi Rosenblum, *A world history of photography* (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 2007).

Chapter 4: How?

Comparison

Pierre Cordier, Jean-Pierre Sudre and Denis Brihat used the darkroom as a tool to transgress the frontiers and aesthetic codes which restricted photography to a descriptive function. The re-appropriation of techniques from the end of the nineteenth century was used by these individuals to create abstract images, with their goal being to reveal the plastic creative and poetic potential of photography. In Cordier's, Brihat's and Sudre's experimental photography, the photographic materiality itself works to create the image.

There are similarities between what Sudre, Cordier and Brihat did and what Harry Callahan, Aaron Siskind and Frederick Sommer did. But difference resides in how they pursued the same goals or tried to answer the same questions. All of them manipulated the real world to construct a new world, a more personal one. But while Callahan, Siskind and Sommer did it through a camera, Cordier, Sudre and Brihat did it through altering the photographic materiality of their objects. They confronted the rules that limited and defined what was photography.⁷³

The kind of abstraction that Siskind, Sommer and others were doing had two main characteristics: they were croppings, close-ups, perspective distortions of the real world seen through the camera. They were mediated by the camera, not by the artist. Abstractions done through a camera were forms of transforming a known world into an unrecognizable one. At the same time, what Brihat, Cordier and Sudre did was transform an unseen, unknown world into a recognizable known one. The most radical form of abstract photography is the one closest to the limit where there is no actual photography any more.⁷⁴

⁷³ André Rouillé and Jean-Claude Lemagny, *A History of Photography: Social and Cultural Perspectives* (Cambridge: University Press, 1987).

⁷⁴ André Gunther and Michel Poivert, *L'art de la photographie: Des origines à nos jours* (Citadelles & Mazenod, 2007)

On Brihat's work

In the introduction for the book *I Grandi Fotografi Denis Brihat*, Jean-Pierre Sudre argues that in the 1960s, photography could be seen through two different concepts: one where the artist could chase a decisive, unique, dramatic moment using what he called an aggressive and violent technique (Straight Photography), or the other, where the artist could create an emotional synthesis of life.⁷⁵ For Sudre, the way Brihat achieves that synthesis is by interfering in the photographic materiality, using a time consuming process to create his images.⁷⁶

Straight Photography says that photography is supposed to capture reality in the most objective way possible, interfering to the least possible extent with the entire process. Despite turning his camera towards the same common world captured by Alfred Stieglitz, Ansel Adams or Minor White, Brihat does it so that he can later transform it through chemical manipulations, and recreate his version of that same reality.

Brihat photographs fruits, vegetables, flowers and the most mundane objects in black-and-white film. After capturing a sprouting onion from his backyard, he prints that image in black-and-white silver gelatin paper. The next step he takes is to give back to the onion its natural and faithful colours, by toning each part of the onion, one colour at a time. Brihat defies Straight Photography's concept that, in order to maintain its faithfulness to reality, a photograph should not be manipulated. He does that when he recreates a faithful image of the 'real world,' by exploring the unique characteristics of the photographic materials he uses. Sudre exemplifies that when he describes how a simple pear given its natural colours back through toning, can be transformed into "a malicious mocking pear."⁷⁷ In other words, what he is saying is that through his work, Brihat manages to confuse his audience. When he creates a colour image from a black-and white photograph, he asks the

⁷⁵ Jean-Pierre Sudre, introduction to *I Grandi Fotografi Denis Brihat*, ed. Gianni Rizzoni (Milan: Gruppo Editoriale Fabbri, 1983).

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

public to question what they are looking at. And by doing that, he makes them remember the infinite possibilities in that medium.

Further on in the preface, Sudre describes Brihat's creative process in this manner:

At a time when photography, to be distributed and become profitable has to be printed on a massive number of copies, Brihat goes against the current and maintains that the photographic print may well be displayed on a wall. Thanks to his perfect technique, Brihat's always limited, often unique prints will be defined as art and be framed and hanged on walls as paintings.⁷⁸

At that point, Sudre addresses a soft spot for photography: the decision to make a limited edition of prints from a negative that is capable of producing infinite copies. To explain his point of view, Sudre reminds us how achieving a satisfactory final print is in itself not an easy task, even for the most skilled photographer. Due to his creative choices, for Brihat that was even harder to achieve. His series of interventions in the black-and-white print to transform it into a colour image can take up to a week for each image to be produced. And all of that can easily escape the viewer's perception. That level of difficulty is the reason why Brihat choses to limit his prints to a few copies of each image.

Sudre is saying that Brihat uses the photographic materials unique characteristics to question concepts and ideas stablished in the photographic realm. When Brihat choses a process that is labour intensive, time consuming and therefore difficult to produce many copies, undoubtedly he is defying the idea of mass production, the reproducibility attributed to photography as one of its inherent characteristics. Brihat questions the idea that the possibility of mass producing images defines photography as a medium, and he uses the photographic materiality to do so.

In the epilogue for the same book, *I Grandi Fotografi Denis Brihat*, Attilio Colombo argues that to understand a photographer's work it is necessary to understand the time period during which he was formed, as well as the cultural background which influenced his work. However, he suggests that this procedure would not be enough to completely understand Brihat's work. In his case, Colombo argues, Brihat's work was shaped more by his desire to escape or refuse a lifestyle than by

⁷⁸ Jean-Pierre Sudre, introduction to *I Grandi Fotografi Denis Brihat*, ed. Gianni Rizzoni (Milan: Gruppo Editoriale Fabbri, 1983).

a search for a specific expressive style. According to Colombo, Brihat was trying to fight the institutionalized consumerism and the obsession with efficiency and speed, both of which were predominant in French society at the time he was creating his work.⁷⁹

Colombo also mentions that Brihat's unique art objects attracted enthusiastic collectors, although at first they were suspicious of the eccentric artist. But the guarantee of a unique copy was too enticing to pass over. The reason why Colombo addresses that issue is not to discuss the legitimacy of collecting, but instead to highlight the importance of the craftsmanship in Brihat's work. The expertise necessary to understand how Brihat creates his work may limit its access to a few experts. That is a risk he is willing to take. Choosing this path, Brihat bypasses any chance of becoming "an ideal model of work and production in the global context of contemporary culture."⁸⁰ His work doesn't fit at all into the predominant contemporary model of an easier, faster and cheaper photography. On the contrary, according to Colombo, Brihat aims to restore the way of producing and thinking about the photographic image that was predominant in the beginning of photography's history, "when the photographer was, at the same time, an expert in optics and chemistry, magician of light and alchemist."⁸¹

According to Colombo, Brihat's best contribution to the photographic medium is his refusal of consumerism. And the path he chooses to combat and question it, is by choosing a process which demands time for both creating and experiencing the work. Again, is the choice of dealing with the photographic matter in a unique way that allows Brihat to push the boundaries that defined photography.

⁷⁹ Attilio Colombo, epilogue to *I Grandi Fotografie Denis Brihat*, ed. Gianni Rizzoni (Milan: Gruppo Editoriale Fabbri, 1983).

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Attilio Colombo, epilogue to *I Grandi Fotografie Denis Brihat*, ed. Gianni Rizzoni (Milan: Gruppo Editoriale Fabbri, 1983).

On Sudre's work

Sudre explores the same concepts as Brihat, but in different ways. He also questions the idea of photography being faithful to reality when he creates his mordançages and cliché-verre images, but he goes even further than Brihat. While Brihat used a camera and had the 'real' world as his subject, Sudre went on a different path. He chose to create his landscapes, not by framing or using close-ups as Aaron Siskind or Minor White would, but by actually creating landscapes through the crystallization of chromium salts on glass plates.⁸²

His darkroom experimentation was not done solely to create striking effects, but to reveal new ways of identifying and transforming external and internal realities. He was in effect the architect of strange unknown worlds suggestive of alien topographies on some distant, forbidden planet...⁸³

He creates the world he photographs, he creates his reality using photographic matter to do it.

(see images 12 thru 14 in Image Appendix)

Mordançages are done by immersing black-and white prints in a series of chemical baths, in order to separate the emulsion layer from the paper base and then manipulate it into new shapes, or even remove it completely.⁸⁴ By doing that, Sudre adds chance as an active factor in his creative process. Although he knows that the dark areas are the ones which will be affected by the Mordançage process, he has no control over how the emulsion layer will respond. The only control he has is how much of the emulsion layer will be removed or replaced by the chemical baths. That means he has little control over how the final image will appear. In his own words: "a theater in which night after night a different play is staged."⁸⁵ The unpredictable nature of this process ad-

⁸² Dean Brierly, "Mordançage," *B&W*, April 2008, 58.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

dresses the discussion about the uniqueness of the object. Due to the fact that the chemical interventions cannot be entirely controlled, the final images cannot be replicated.

As Brihat, Sudre uses the photographic materiality to question the limits of what was considered photography. He does that when he creates the physical world he photographs in his glass plates and when he allows chance to be part of his creative process, producing unique images.

On Cordier's Work

Cordier discusses the reality of the world he photographs in a much different way than Brihat and Sudre do. Brihat uses a camera. Sudre doesn't, but he still uses a negative, either created by letting crystals form in a glass plate or using reproductions of botanical illustrations as his matrix. However, what Cordier does is even more innovative because he completely discards the camera and the negative. He uses the most basic photographic elements to create his work: a light sensitive surface, developer and fixer.

Allan Porter, Editor-in-Chief of *Camera Magazine*, says that the chemigram should not be seen as a new medium. He defines it as "a new use of an existing medium. A new way of "writing with light."⁸⁶ In other words, it was a new form of photography, since photography means writing with light.

Jean-Claude Lemagny is an important French curator who specialized in contemporary photography. He was also a close friend and collaborator of Jean-Pierre Sudre and Pierre Cordier. In a personal letter sent to Cordier, Lemagny discusses Cordier's invention:

Light and matter take turns in the creation of any photograph. The forms are usually determined by light and rendered visible by matter, but in a chemigram the process is reversed: made equally possible by light, all forms are determined by the reactions of matter. Light acts evenly and chemistry selects.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Alan Porter, "Editorial," *Camera Magazine*, October 1972, 10.

⁸⁷ Jean-Claude Lemagny to Pierre Cordier, November 13, 1978.

What he means is that Cordier managed to challenge the way photographs were made. Before the chemigram, light was the active agent in the construction of a photographic image. In the chemigram, light gives way to the action of chemicals. In the same letter, Lemagny also presents the idea that photography has two opposite poles: “photography as an idea and photography as material reality”⁸⁸. He opposes the chemigram as a purely conceptual use of photography. For Lemagny, the chemigram “explores the objective nature of photography, starting with its most elementary material components. Therefore, there is nothing more photographic than a chemigram. But the extremes of an art are generally just as poorly accepted as they are necessary to that art.”⁸⁹

Lemagny also addresses the always-present accusation, that the chemigram mimics the aesthetics of painting. To that accusation his answer is that the only way any art can evolve is by understanding what is unique about it, what it can present as original. For Lemagny, “the only way for photography to avoid stagnation was to overcome its inferiority complex towards other visual arts by seeking that which in itself is specially photographic.”⁹⁰ Lemagny highlights the chemigram’s uniqueness. He says that to understand it, one should not look for any verisimilitude to the real world in Cordier’s work. Instead, what should be done is to see how what Cordier has achieved is a unique way to materialize light. For Lemagny, while paintings “are matter in its rough state, the chemigram is light materialized. Cordier directs, organizes, disciplines the relations of light and matter.”⁹¹ Lemagny summarizes how he understands Cordier’s work:

The chemigram does not reflect phenomena, it lets them surface from within and grasps them as they appear visible. The image no longer comes from elsewhere, born by light through a lens, across the inner night of a camera. First, there was light, and the form of matter appears as they come into contact. A chemigram registers itself. It fixes and preserves the image of its own birth. Instead of determining a shadow, it begets a reality. Bearing the race of another reality, a traditional photographic image is a reproduction, while the forms in a chemigram are realities in themselves. Here, the union of light and matter does not capture the life of forms, it creates it.⁹²

⁸⁸ Jean-Claude Lemagny to Pierre Cordier, November 13, 1978.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

Here Lemagny highlights how Cordier not only does not follow the usual photographic path in search to “capture a moment of life”, but actually positions himself as its “necessary counterpart”. He also points out the fact that if Cordier is alone in this path is not by his fault. He sees it as a merit.

In an interview given to Pierre Baudson, the assistant-curator at Musée Royal des Beaux-Arts of Brussels in 1976, and published in the folder for the *20 Years of Chemigram* celebration exhibition at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, Cordier provides a clue about his intentions when he says: “It’s in the chemigram that I practice a sort of “photoclasy”; a deformation or disfigurement of photographic images that lets me search for the differential threshold between the figurative and the non-figurative.”⁹³ In that same interview he also mentions how once talking to Jean-Michel Folon he realized that he felt he was “falling between two stools”, meaning that because of the constant attempts to label his work as either painting or photography, he never found his place. To what Folon would have answered: “if you’re falling between two stools, you’ll never be seated.”⁹⁴

A clue to why Cordier’s work was not adequately historicized along with some of his contemporaries is given in Helmut Gernsheim’s 1962 book *Creative Photography: Aesthetic Trends, 1839-1960*. Gernsheim’s perspective becomes clear when he claims that photography’s attempts to follow other art trends, such as painting, were of no benefit for photography. He says: “I can conceive only one step that remains to be taken to bring photography quite up to date in art circles — photographic *tachisme*. Splashing chemical solutions on sensitive paper and exposing the “composition” to light: so simple and yet untried!”⁹⁵ However, Gernsheim seems to have changed his mind by 1976. In the folder for the *20 Years of Chemigram* celebration exhibition at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, we see a Gernsheim citation chosen by Cordier about the chemigram:

⁹³ Pierre Baudson, *20 years of Chemigram*. (Brussels: Palais des Beaux-Arts, 1976)

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Helmut Gernsheim, *Creative photography: aesthetic trends 1839-1960* (New York: Dover, 1991)

Cordier creates sensuous graphic designs in colour out of a controlled action of chemistry on light-sensitive material with a dash of accident. His chimmigrammes have fascinated me ever since I first saw them twenty years ago. Some pictures have an extremely delicate pattern like photomicrographs; some forms are bold; others again are progressive abstract variations after a chosen theme in homage to another artist. All are very original photo-graphics that give me as much pleasure as a colour lithograph by Hundertwasser.⁹⁶

Gernsheim is one of the few photography historians to mention the innovative aspect of Cordier's work, even though his opinion might not have been the same in 1962.

Another clue to why Cordier has been left out of many of the history of photography books, is given by art historian and Sorbonne professor Michel Poivert. He believes that when Cordier invented the chemigram in 1956, photographic experimentation was at its peak. He thinks its hour of artistic glory was in the 1920s with Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray, with the surrealist movement. However, he believes experimentation was supplanted by the conceptualism of the 1960s, and eventually overshadowed by it.⁹⁷

Poivert argues that, in a chemigram light is dispossessed from its form-defining role, and only the exclusively chemical properties of the medium are used to create the image. In addition to cancelling the object and the direct light, Cordier upsets the usual chronology of the photographic treatment. There are no photo shoots and no prints, and the fixer alternates with the developer. For Poivert, the chemigram links photography and painting, not according to resemblance and realism, but according to a technical approach. He states that Cordier pursues experimentation in a way that shatters the borders between mediums. However, knowing whether the chemigram is photography or painting — or even something entirely different — becomes irrelevant and brings us to conclude that previous criteria do not apply to it, according to Poivert: “The chemigram therefore transcends its own technique.”⁹⁸

Poivert also believes that :

The chemigram's invention condemns the artist to solitude. Not in a symbolic “far away from the world” sense with the banishment it entails, but rather in the birth of an otherness: experimentation as what does not exist before term and does not find a place which defines the artist as an

⁹⁶ Pierre Baudson, *20 years of Chemigram*. (Brussels: Palais des Beaux-Arts, 1976)

⁹⁷ Pierre Cordier, *Pierre Cordier Le Chimigramme = The Chemigram* (Bruxelles: Éd. Racine, 2007).

⁹⁸ Ibid.

utopist, as the creator of a new world. The experimentation transforms art into a creation in the divine sense of the word.”⁹⁹

What he is saying is how innovative, provocative and new Cordier’s chemigrams were.

Other artists also praised Cordier’s chemigrams as a necessary investigation of photography’s boundaries. In 1968, Minor White said about Cordier’s chemigrams: “I am very interested in these images that you sent because I think you are doing some of the graphic experimentation which photography is so much in need of.”¹⁰⁰ In 1980, in the preface for the exhibition catalogue at the Musée Nicéphore Niépce, Brassai wrote: “Your “photos” were splendid. I say “photos,” but they are something else. Something magical and so refined in the colour, that painters might envy you. I only regret that your works were not presented in a scene more accessible to the public. But that will come, no doubt.”¹⁰¹ Unfortunately, in spite of a great effort and persistence, Cordier’s work is yet not well known as it should, for such a groundbreaking technique.

⁹⁹ Pierre Cordier, *Pierre Cordier Le Chimigramme = The Chemigram* (Bruxelles: Éd. Racine, 2007).

¹⁰⁰ Pierre Baudson, *20 years of Chemigram*. (Brussels: Palais des Beaux-Arts, 1976)

¹⁰¹ Anne van Horenbeck, *Pierre Cordier: Chimigrammes*. (Brussels: February 1980).

Conclusion

The importance of Sudre's, Brihat's and Cordier's works is how they bring the photographic materiality back into the discussion of what defines photography. They shift the center of the discussion from what should be portrayed or how it should be done, to how the photographic matter contributes to the creation of a photographic image.

Throughout photography's history its boundaries and expressive limits have been questioned and re-defined. Sudre, Cordier and Brihat do this too, but what is innovative about their work is how they use the photographic materiality to do so. They were not the first ones to investigate how the photographic matter creates a photograph. In that way, their work is more directly linked to the work of photographers in the beginning of photography's history, such as William Fox Talbot, Hippolyte Bayard, than to the contemporary works of Aaron Siskind, Harry Callahan or Minor White. However, Cordier, Brihat and Sudre used well-known techniques such as toning, etching and bleaching, or basic photographic concepts such as developing and fixing, through a new perspective to create their body of work. They transformed the photographic matter from a passive participant in the formation of the photographic image, to an active agent in its creation. That is what is innovative and challenging about their work.

Brihat does that when he creates realistic coloured portraits of everyday mundane objects found in his garden, by toning black-and-white silver gelatin prints. Cordier does that when he transforms light into a passive component in the creation of a photographic image, and gives to the materiality, to the chemicals, to the photographic matter the active voice in the creation of his chemigrams. Sudre does that when he creates landscapes with crystals in glass plates and uses them as negatives, to later tear the photographic emulsion from the print enlarged from that negative, creating a unique object. All of them use the one thing which is more inherently photographic than any other: the photographic materiality. They use what all the other movements and processes had in common throughout photography's history to show how the limits and boundaries determined by

theme, approach and intention are meaningless. What they are saying is, if one wants to delimit what is photographic, the best way to do it is by basing one's work on the limitations of the photographic materiality.

When they choose to use industrialized photographic materials and decide to chemically manipulate them in ways that were not anticipated by the manufacturer, Sudre, Cordier and Brihat position themselves against the photographic industry. Their position — against a pasteurized product produced by the photographic industry, which establishes rules on how to use the materials to get a standard and uniform result — is political. They are showing how to be creative and innovative, even when the industry controls the production of the photographic materials. They believe it is necessary to test the limits created by the industry and by the art market. It is necessary to defy labels and limits in order to continue being innovative and creative.

Michel Poivert in his essay along with Anaïs Feyeux "The Chemigram, milestone of an artistic experiment" published in Cordier's book *The Chemigram*, defines what I think is the reason why Cordier's, Sudre's and Brihat's works are fundamental in history of photography:

Resorting to the properties of the medium allows artists to reinvent it. Not by giving "the" definition or "the" characteristics, but by creating another self, by producing one's otherness on one's own bases, and thus by surpassing it. In this desire for experimentation as an artistic posture, Pierre Cordier looms large.¹⁰²

Defying and questioning the rules and boundaries established by their peers, the art market and the photographic industry, made Sudre, Cordier and Brihat photography pariahs. But as Jean-Claude Lemagny said in his personal letter to Cordier: "The extremes of an art are generally just as poorly accepted, as they are necessary to that art."¹⁰³ In other words, I think that what Sudre, Brihat and Cordier did was important exactly because it questioned how photography was defined. And that alone should grant them a special place in photographic history. But their contribution goes even further with the new creative and expressive possibilities that they made possible for future photographers.

¹⁰² Pierre Cordier, *Pierre Cordier Le Chimigramme = The Chemigram* (Bruxelles: Éd. Racine, 2007).

¹⁰³ Jean-Claude Lemagny to Pierre Cordier, November 13, 1978.

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<http://www.denisbrihat.com/en/the-man-2/his-life/>.
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Image Appendix

Jean-Pierre Sudre

Images 1-24

Image 1

Douze natures mortes (portfolio de douze) (12 works)

1948–1953

Gelatin silver print - 45 x 30 cm

Artnet¹



¹ “Jean-Pierre Sudre,” *Jean-Pierre Sudre Auction Results - Jean-Pierre Sudre on artnet*, accessed May 26, 2017, <http://www.artnet.com/artists/jean-pierre-sudre/past-auction-results>.

Image 2

Le pot aux chardons

1949–1949

Gelatin Silver Print - 40.6 x 29.8 cm

Artnet²



² “Jean-Pierre Sudre,” *Jean-Pierre Sudre Auction Results - Jean-Pierre Sudre on artnet*, accessed May 26, 2017, <http://www.artnet.com/artists/jean-pierre-sudre/past-auction-results>.

Image 3

Sous-bois

c. 1950

Gelatin silver print - 40 x 30.5 cm

Gitterman Gallery³



³ “Jean-Pierre Sudre,” *Gitterman Gallery Web Site*, accessed May 26, 2017, http://gittermangallery.com/exhibition/74/exhibition_works/list/.

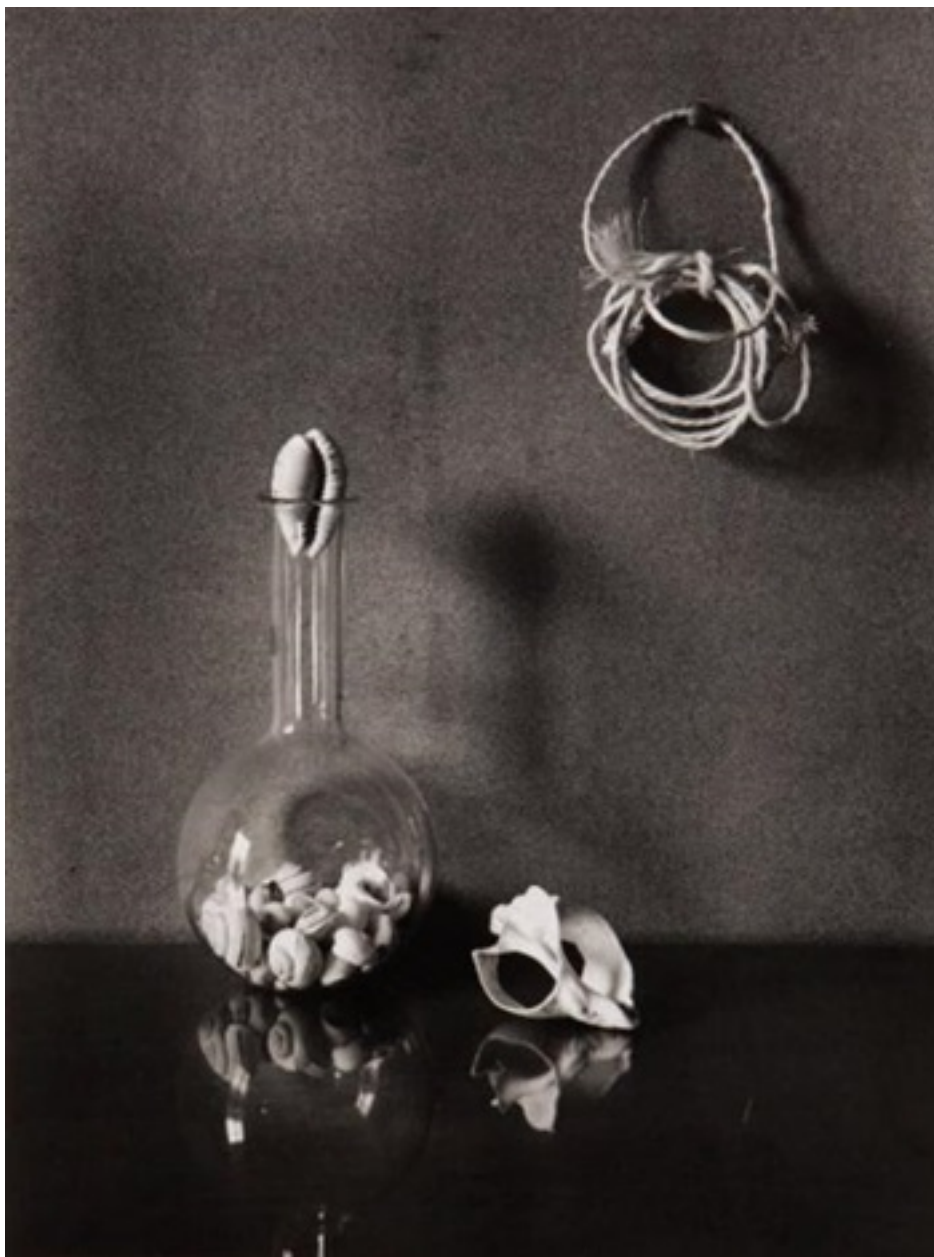
Image 4

Coquillages à la ficelle

1950

Gelatin silver print - 39.8 x 30.2 cm

Artnet⁴



⁴ “Jean-Pierre Sudre,” *Jean-Pierre Sudre Auction Results - Jean-Pierre Sudre on artnet*, accessed May 26, 2017, <http://www.artnet.com/artists/jean-pierre-sudre/past-auction-results>.

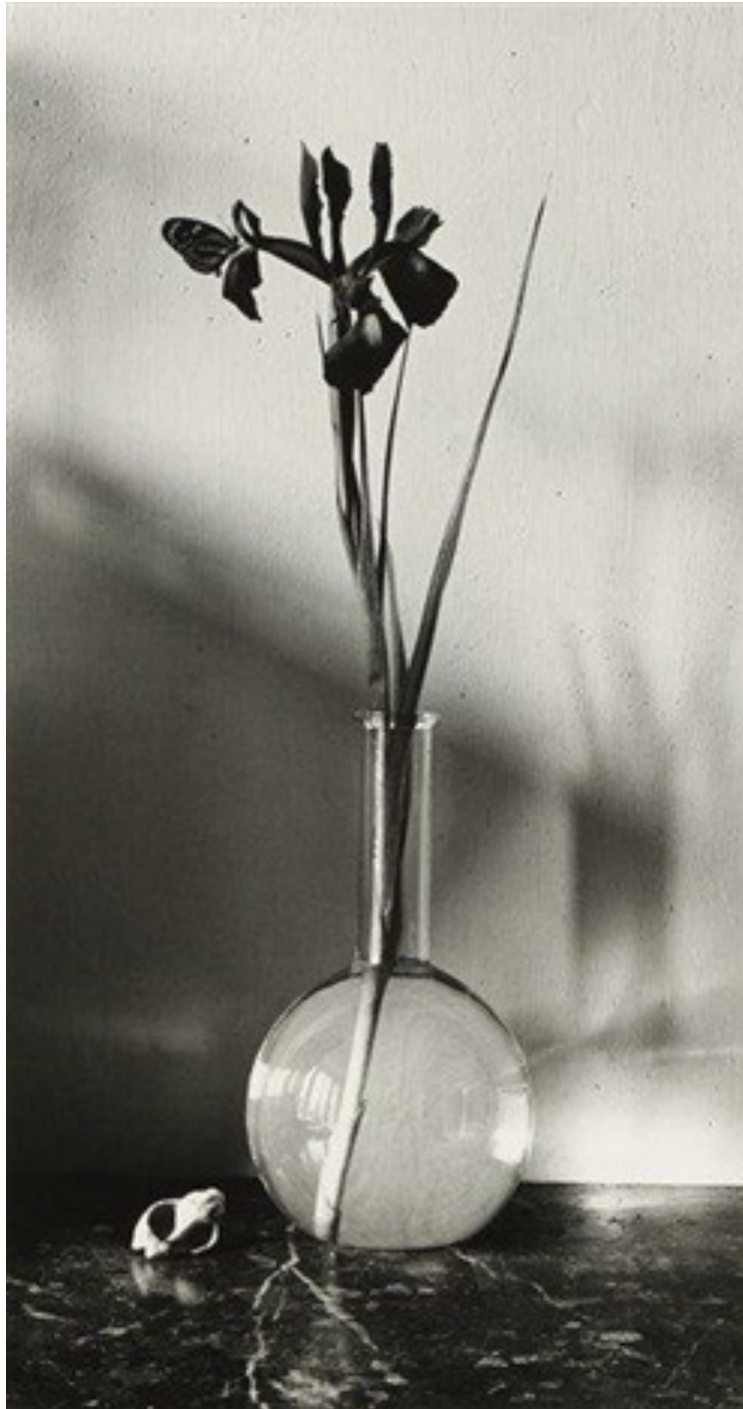
Image 5

Iris et papillon

1951

Gelatin silver print - 44.5 x 23.5 cm

Artnet⁵



⁵ “Jean-Pierre Sudre,” *Jean-Pierre Sudre Auction Results - Jean-Pierre Sudre on artnet*, accessed May 26, 2017, <http://www.artnet.com/artists/jean-pierre-sudre/past-auction-results>.

Image 6

La Panier aux Oeufs

1953

Gelatin silver print - 39.4 x 29.8 cm

Artnet⁶



⁶ “Jean-Pierre Sudre,” *Jean-Pierre Sudre Auction Results - Jean-Pierre Sudre on artnet*, accessed May 26, 2017, <http://www.artnet.com/artists/jean-pierre-sudre/past-auction-results>.

Image 7

Révélation

Apocalypse

1969

Mordançage on gelatin silver print - 30 x 39.9 cm

Gitterman Gallery⁷



⁷ “Jean-Pierre Sudre,” *Gitterman Gallery Web Site*, accessed May 26, 2017, http://gittermangallery.com/exhibition/74/exhibition_works/list/.

Image 8

Révélation

Apocalypse

1969

Mordançage on gelatin silver print - 28.9 x 38.5 cm

Gitterman Gallery⁸



⁸ “Jean-Pierre Sudre,” *Gitterman Gallery Web Site*, accessed May 26, 2017, http://gittermangallery.com/exhibition/74/exhibition_works/list/.

Image 9

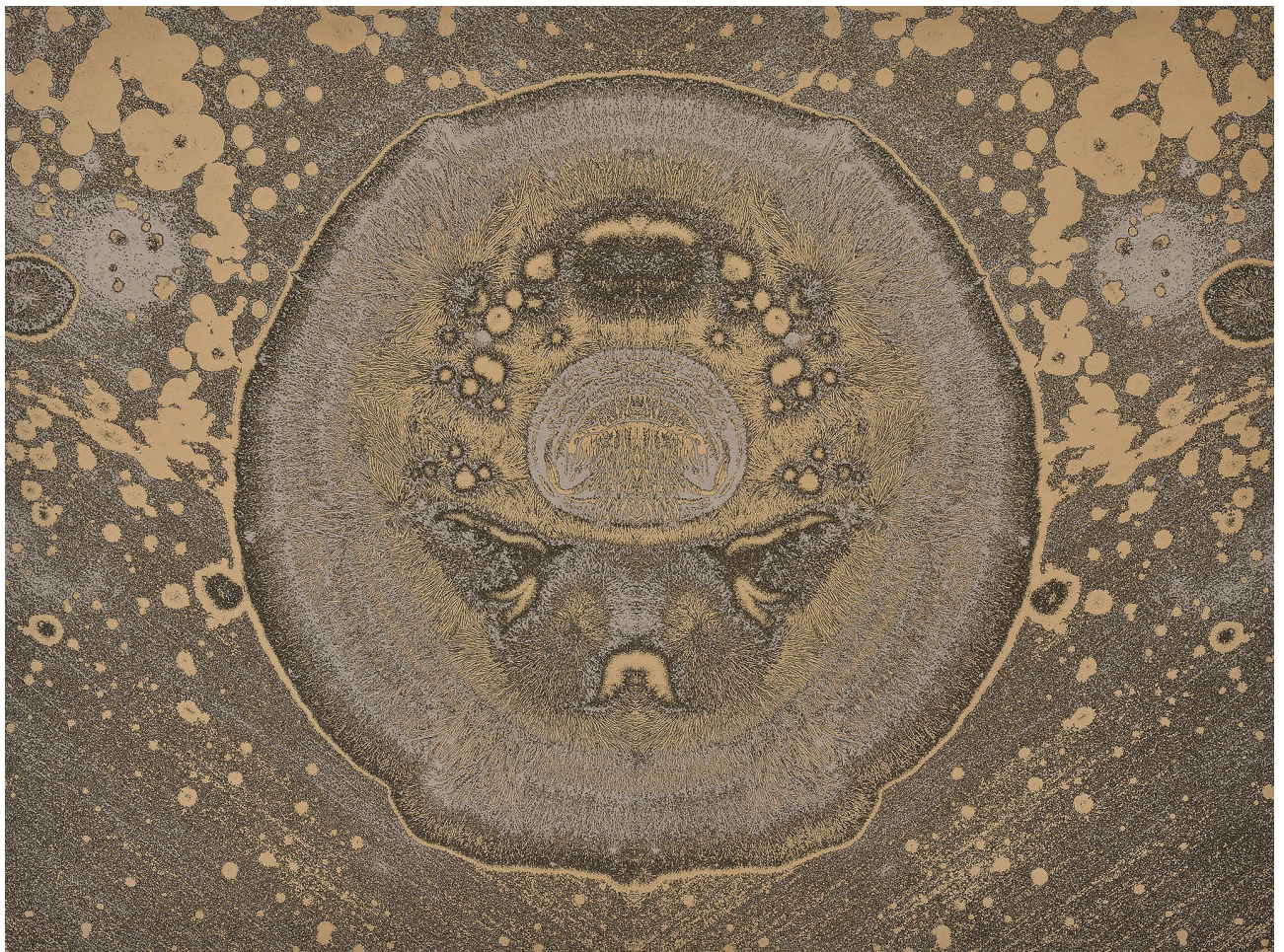
Révélation

Apocalypse

1969

Mordantage on gelatin silver print - 29.5 x 39.7 cm

Gitterman Gallery⁹



⁹ "Jean-Pierre Sudre," *Gitterman Gallery Web Site*, accessed May 26, 2017, http://gittermangallery.com/exhibition/74/exhibition_works/list/.

Image 10

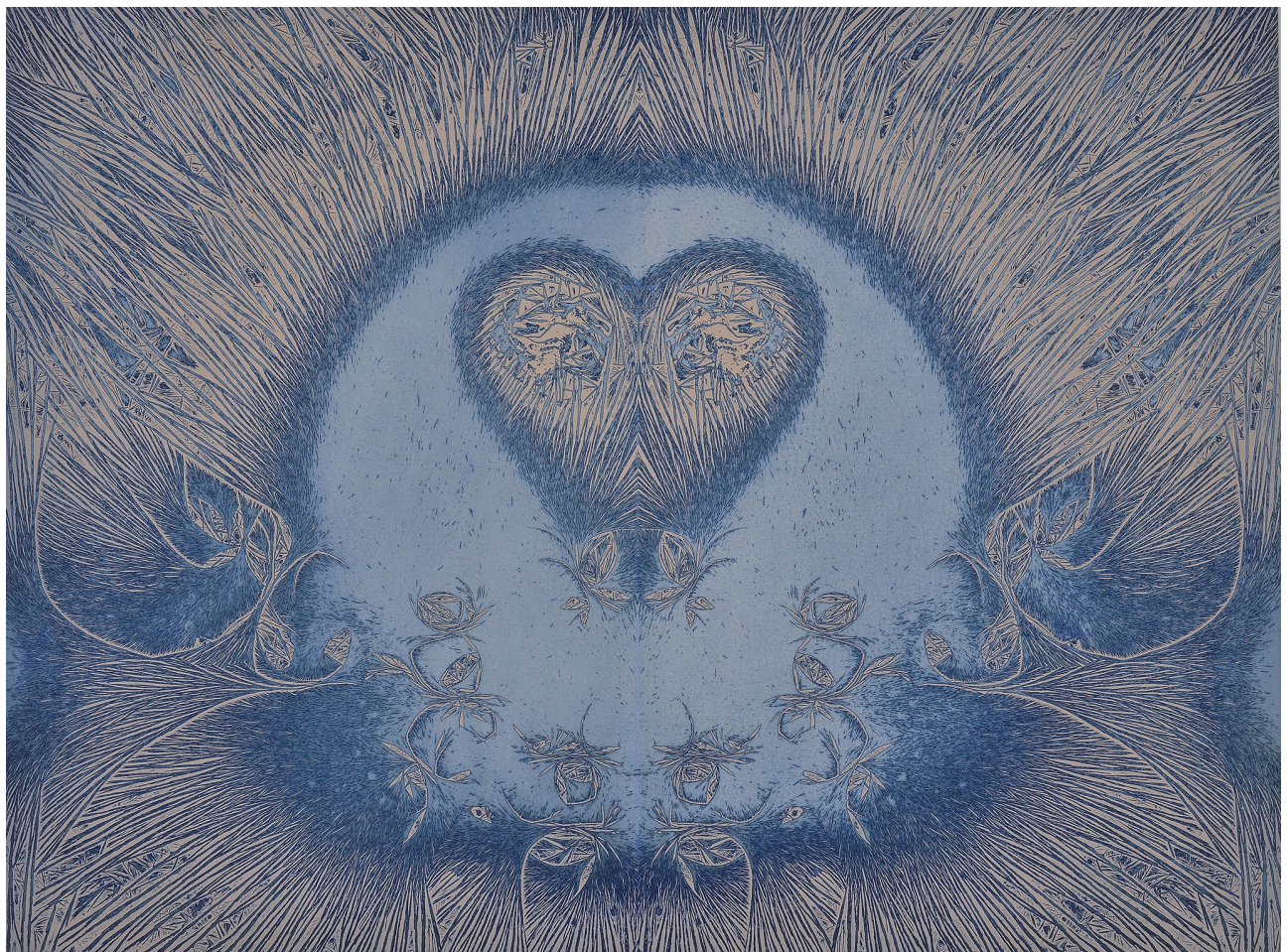
Révélation

Apocalypse

1969

Mordançage on gelatin silver print - 29.7 x 39.9 cm

Gitterman Gallery¹⁰



¹⁰ "Jean-Pierre Sudre," *Gitterman Gallery Web Site*, accessed May 26, 2017, http://gittermangallery.com/exhibition/74/exhibition_works/list/.

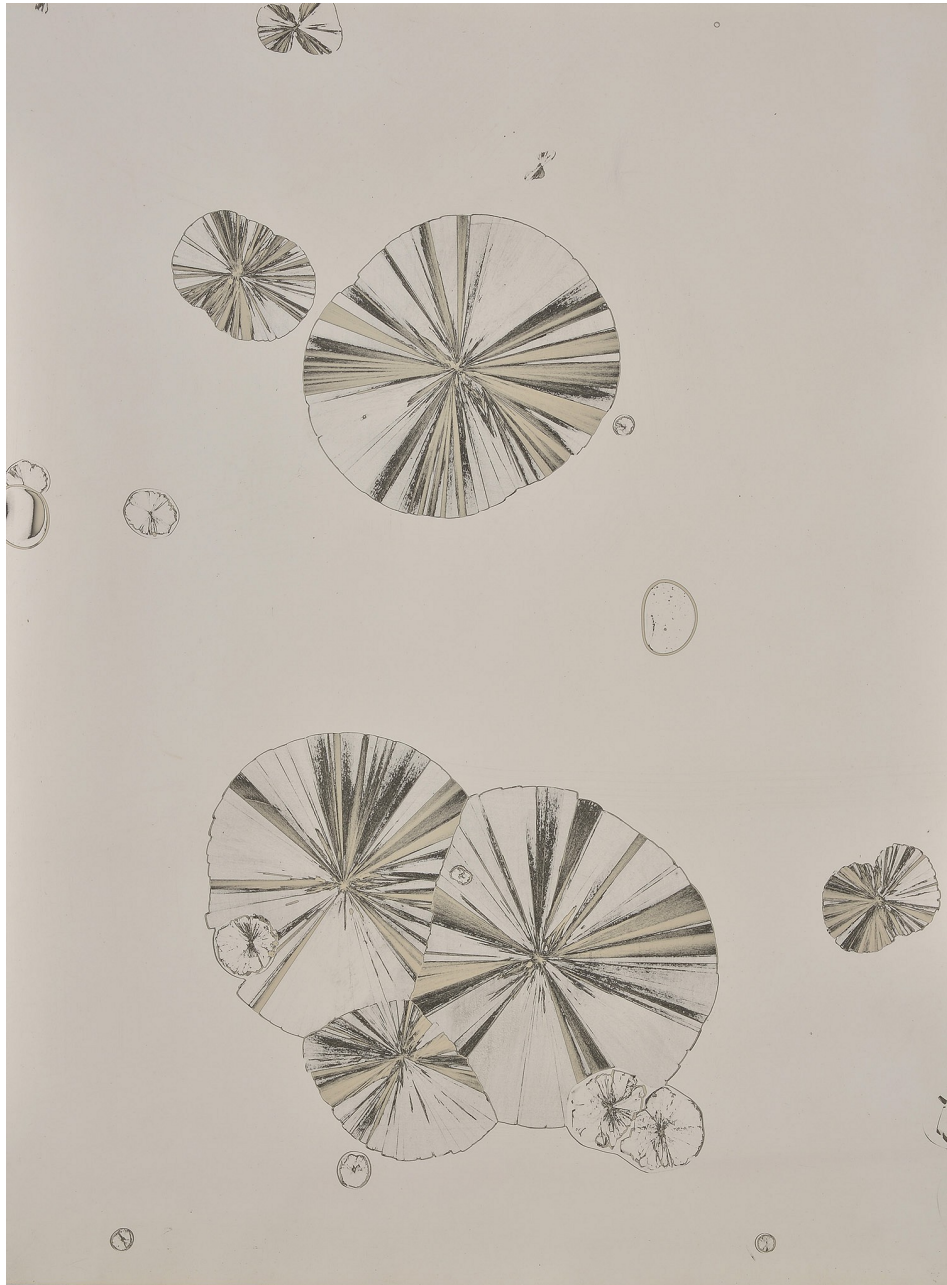
Image 11

Matériographie

1965-1970

Mordançage on toned gelatin silver print - 39.7 x 29.9 cm

Gitterman Gallery¹¹



¹¹ "Jean-Pierre Sudre," *Gitterman Gallery Web Site*, accessed May 26, 2017, http://gittermangallery.com/exhibition/74/exhibition_works/list/.

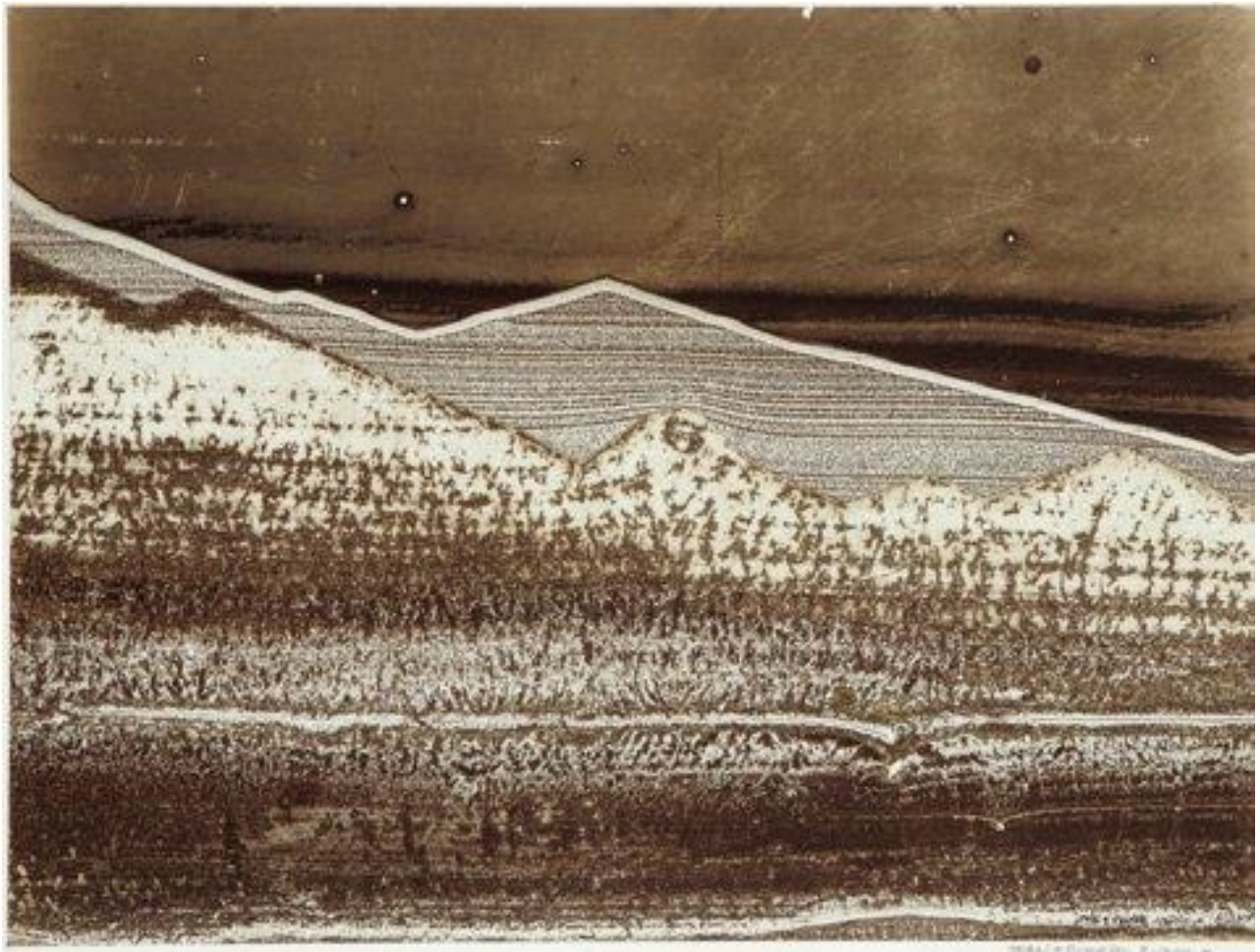
Image 12

Paysage Matériographique

1971

Gelatin silver print - 29.7 x 39.7 cm

Artnet¹²



¹² "Jean-Pierre Sudre," *Jean-Pierre Sudre Auction Results - Jean-Pierre Sudre on artnet*, accessed May 26, 2017, <http://www.artnet.com/artists/jean-pierre-sudre/past-auction-results>.

Image 13

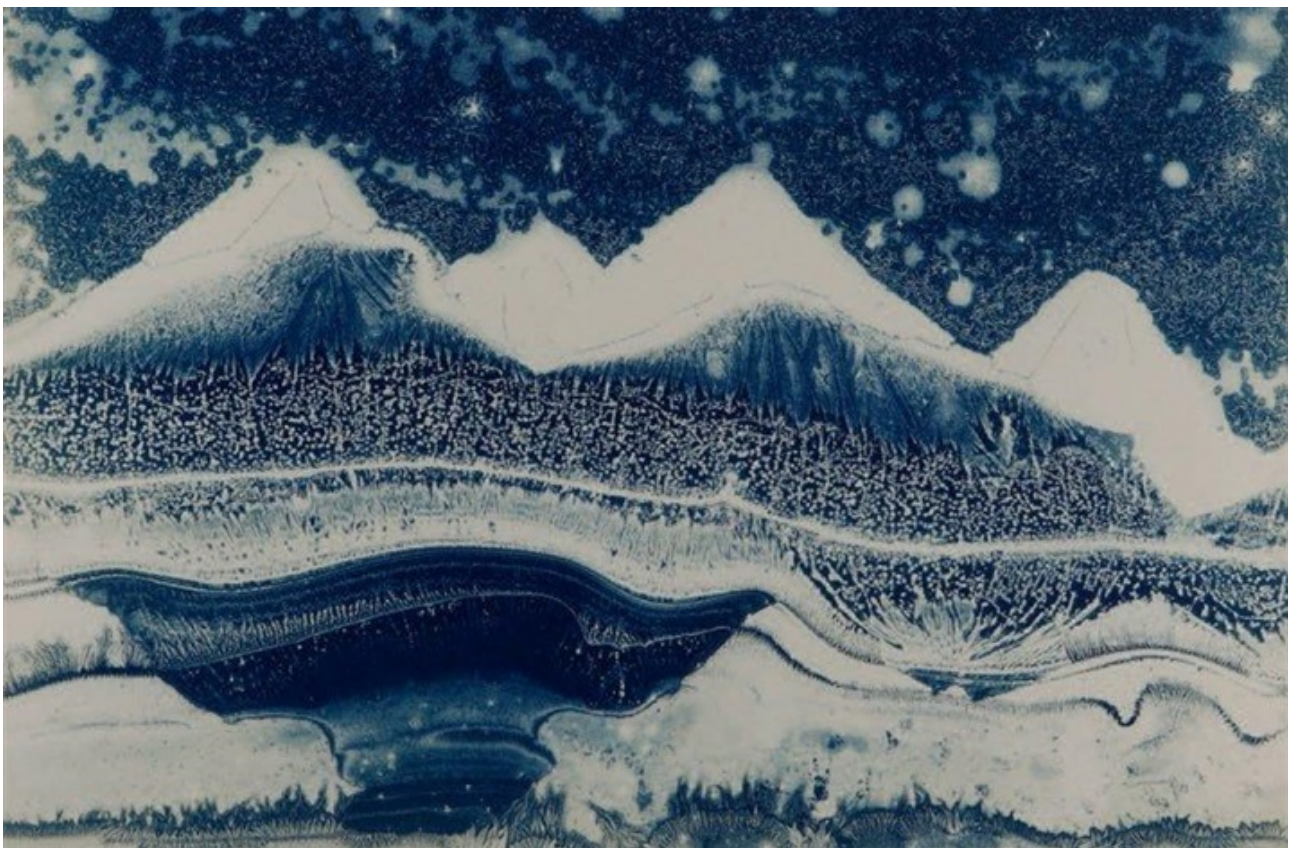
Port 17, Paysage 11,
Paysage Matériographique
1972–1975
Gelatin silver print - 18.7 x 30 cm
Artnet¹³



¹³ “Jean-Pierre Sudre,” *Jean-Pierre Sudre Auction Results - Jean-Pierre Sudre on artnet*, accessed May 26, 2017, <http://www.artnet.com/artists/jean-pierre-sudre/past-auction-results>.

Image 14

Port 17, Paysage 6,
Paysage Matériographique
1972–1975
Gelatin silver print - 19.7 x 30.2 cm
Artnet¹⁴



¹⁴ “Jean-Pierre Sudre,” *Jean-Pierre Sudre Auction Results - Jean-Pierre Sudre on artnet*, accessed May 26, 2017, <http://www.artnet.com/artists/jean-pierre-sudre/past-auction-results>.

Center for Creative Photography Collection

Image 15

Untitled

1979

Mordancage on gelatin silver print - 23.8 x 30.4 cm

Copyright: Center for Creative Photography



Image 16

Untitled

1979

Mordançage on gelatin silver print - 23.7 x 30.4 cm

Copyright: Center for Creative Photography



Image 17

Untitled

1979

Mordançage on gelatin silver print - 23.7 x 30.4 cm

Copyright: Center for Creative Photography



Image 18

Untitled

1979

Mordançage on gelatin silver print - 23.9 x 30.5 cm

Copyright: Center for Creative Photography



Image 19

Untitled

1979

Mordançage on gelatin silver print - 23.8 x 30.4 cm

Copyright: Center for Creative Photography



Image 20

Untitled

1979

Mordancage on gelatin silver print - 23.8 x 30.4 cm

Copyright: Center for Creative Photography



Image 21

Untitled

1979

Mordançage on gelatin silver print - 23.7 x 30.4 cm

Copyright: Center for Creative Photography



Image 22

Untitled

1979

Mordancage on gelatin silver print - 23.9 x 30.4 cm

Copyright: Center for Creative Photography



Image 23

Untitled

1979

Mordançage on gelatin silver print - 23.7 x 30.1 cm

Copyright: Center for Creative Photography



Image 24

Untitled

1979

Mordançage on gelatin silver print - 23.3 x 29.8 cm

Copyright: Center for Creative Photography



Denis Brihat

Images 25-34

Image 25

Arum et Puiprenelle (homage à J.P. Sudre)

1962

Gelatin silver print - 30 x 40 cm

Denis Brihat Website¹⁵



¹⁵ Denis Brihat, accessed May 27, 2017,
<http://www.denisbrihat.com/en/work/period-of-claparedes/grass-lichens/>

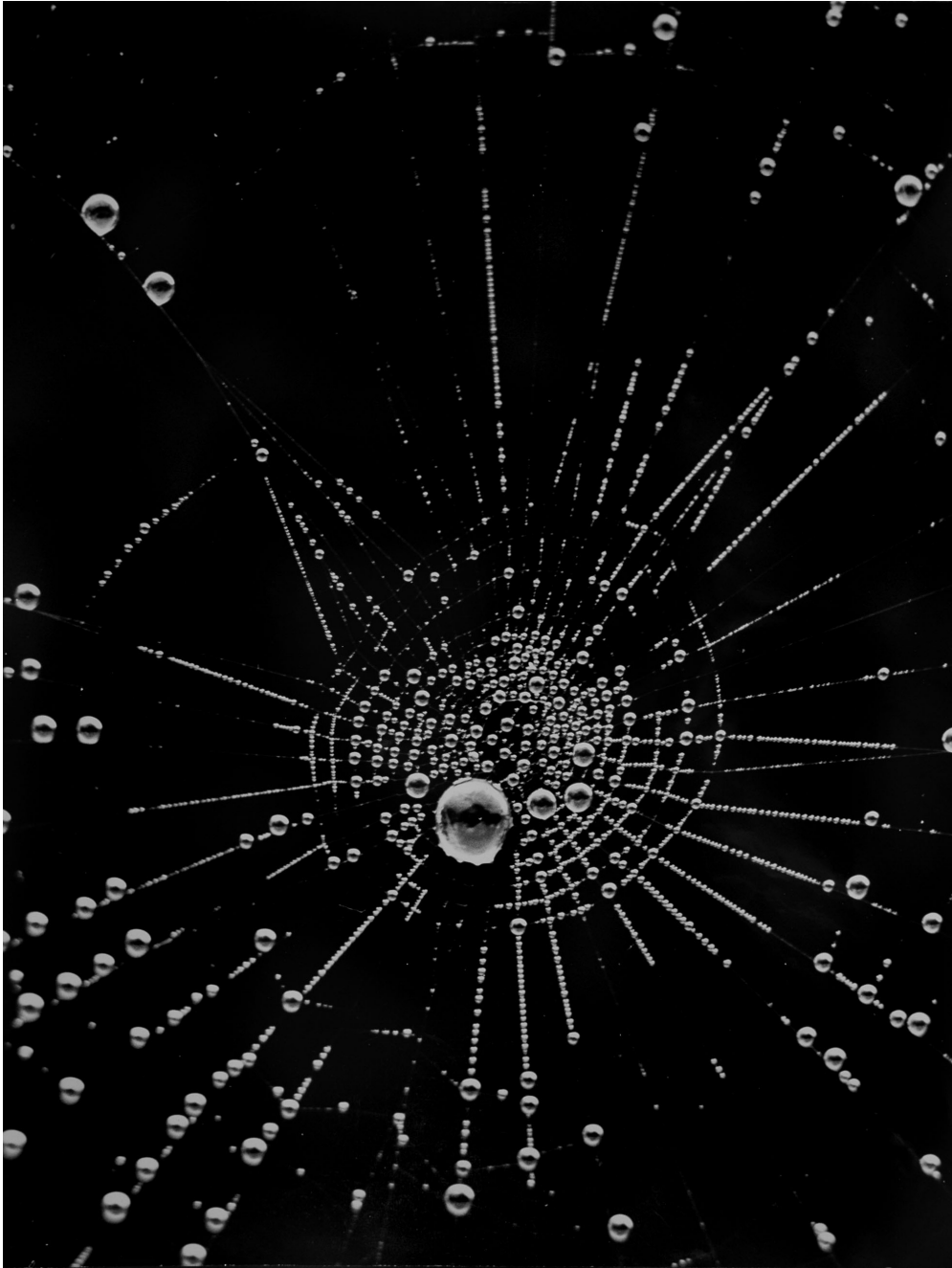
Image 26

Rosée sur une toile d'araignée

1962

Gelatin silver print - 30 x 40 cm

Denis Brihat Website¹⁶



¹⁶ Denis Brihat, accessed May 27, 2017,
<http://www.denisbrihat.com/en/work/period-of-claparedes/miscellaneous/>

Image 27

Craquelure sur une peinture

1962

Gelatin silver print - 40 x 50 cm

Denis Brihat Website¹⁷



¹⁷ Denis Brihat, accessed May 27, 2017,
<http://www.denisbrihat.com/en/work/period-of-claparedes/miscellaneous/>

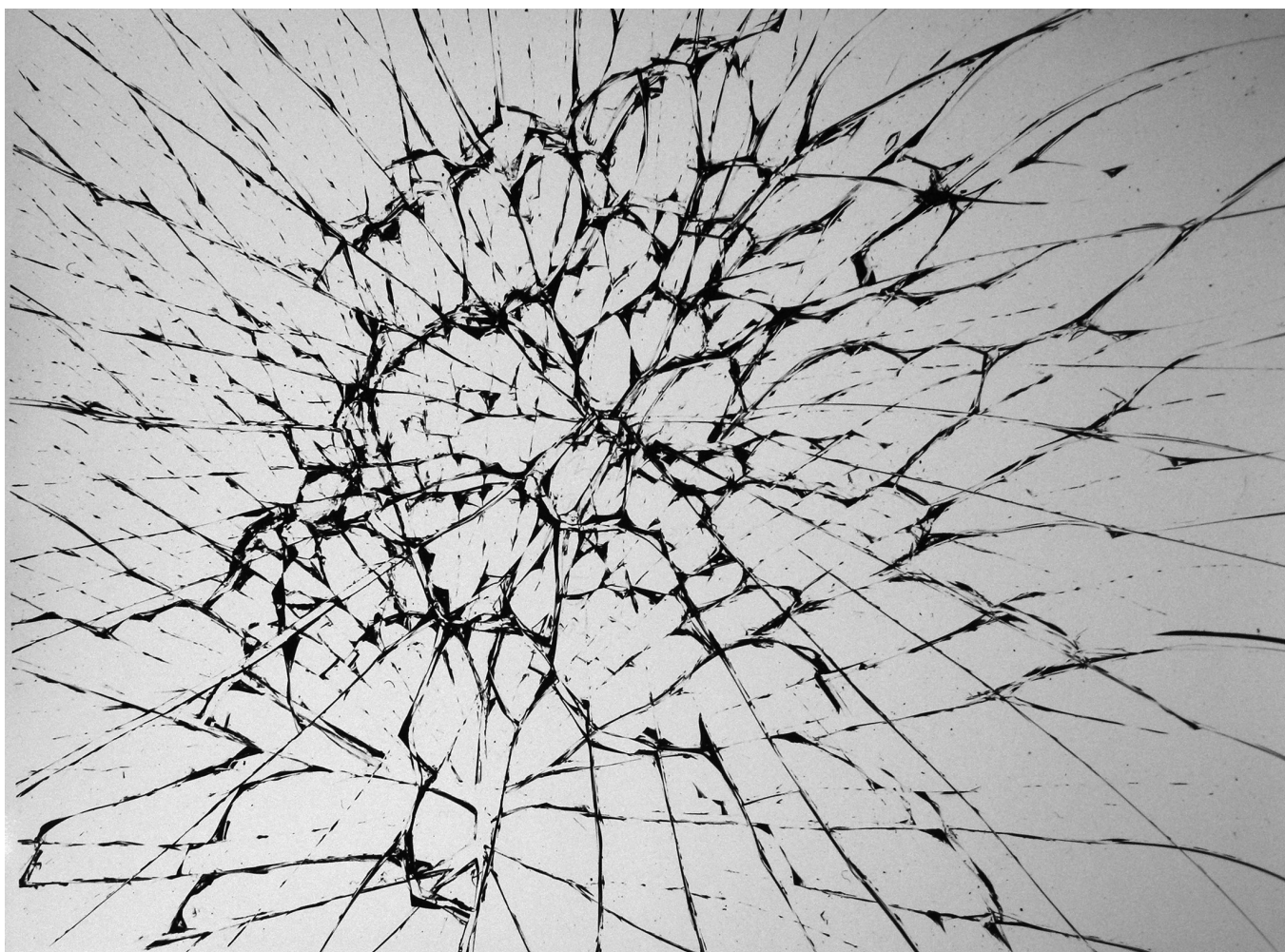
Image 28

Vitre Casée par une fesse

1963

Gelatin silver print - 50 x 60 cm

Denis Brihat Website¹⁸



¹⁸ Denis Brihat, accessed May 27, 2017,
<http://www.denisbrihat.com/en/work/period-of-claparedes/miscellaneous/>

Image 29

Racine, aux Claparèdes

1964

Gelatin silver print - 30 x 40 cm

Denis Brihat Website¹⁹



¹⁹ Denis Brihat, accessed May 27, 2017,
<http://www.denisbrihat.com/en/work/period-of-claparedes/grass-lichens/>

Image 30

Coquelicot et escargots

1966

Gelatin silver print with gold toning - 40 x 40 cm

Denis Brihat Website²⁰



²⁰ Denis Brihat, accessed May 27, 2017,
<http://www.denisbrihat.com/en/work/nature/poppies/>

Image 31

Salade

1972

Toned gelatin silver print - 40 x 50 cm

*I Grandi Fotografi Denis Brihat*²¹



²¹ *I Grandi Fotografi Denis Brihat*, ed. Gianni Rizzoni (Milan: Gruppo Editoriale Fabbri, 1983).

Image 32

William Pear

1972-1975

Toned Gelatin silver print - 30 x 40 cm

*I Grandi Fotografi Denis Brihat*²²



²² *I Grandi Fotografi Denis Brihat*, ed. Gianni Rizzoni (Milan: Gruppo Editoriale Fabbri, 1983).

Image 33
Oignon germé
2003
Gold toned gelatin silver print - 40 x 50 cm
Denis Brihat Website²³



²³ Denis Brihat, accessed May 27, 2017,
<http://www.denisbrihat.com/en/work/nature/onions/>

Image 34

Tulipe noire

1980

Toned gelatin silver print - 40 x 50 cm

Denis Brihat Website²⁴



²⁴ Denis Brihat, accessed May 27, 2017,
<http://www.denisbrihat.com/en/work/nature/tulips/>

Pierre Cordier

Images 35-45

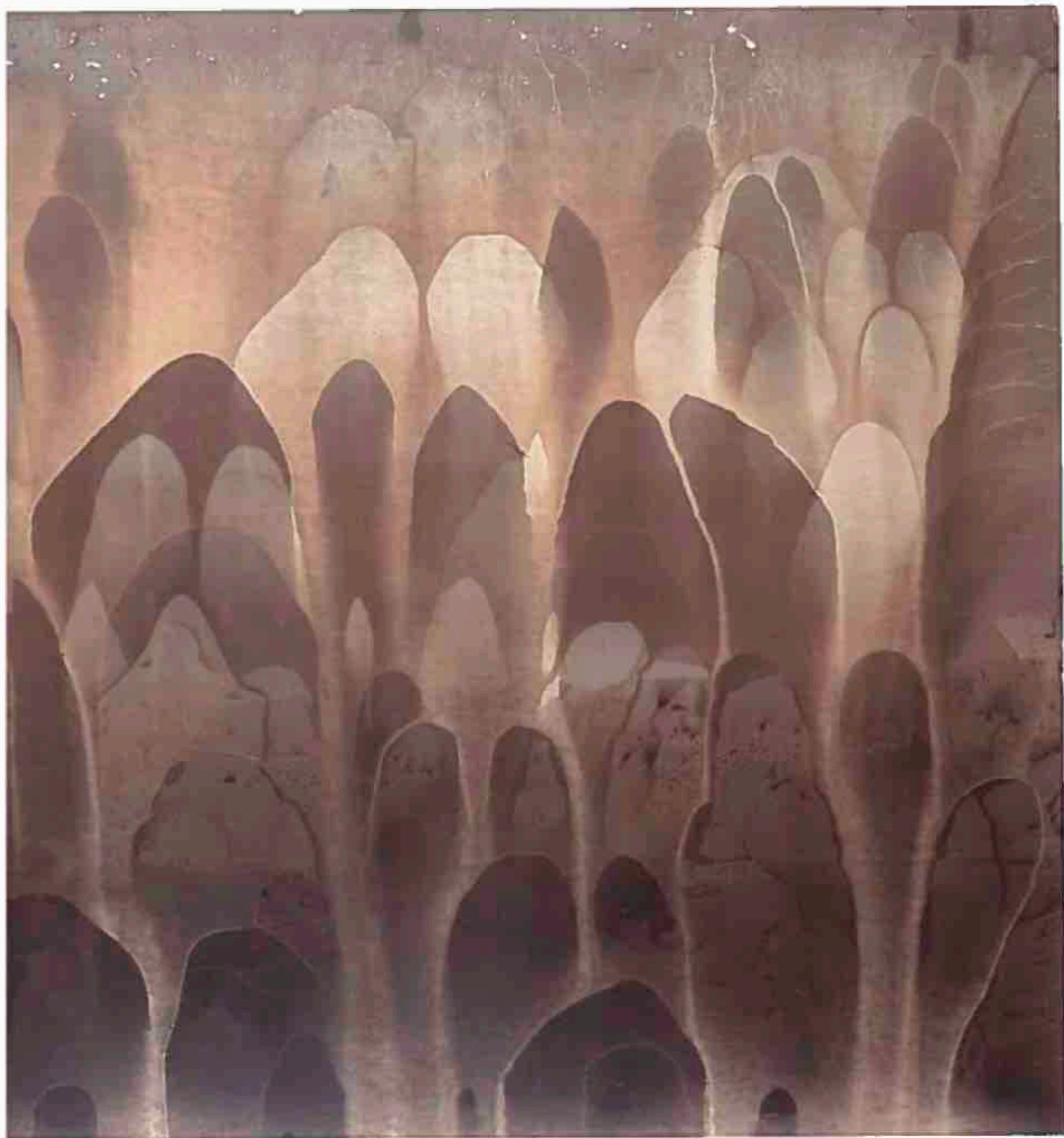
Image 35

Chimigramme 8/2/61 I

1961

Gelatin silver print - 50 x 60 cm

*Pierre Cordier Le Chimigramme = The Chemigram*²⁵



²⁵ Pierre Cordier, *Pierre Cordier Le Chimigramme = The Chemigram* (Bruxelles: Éd. Racine, 2007).

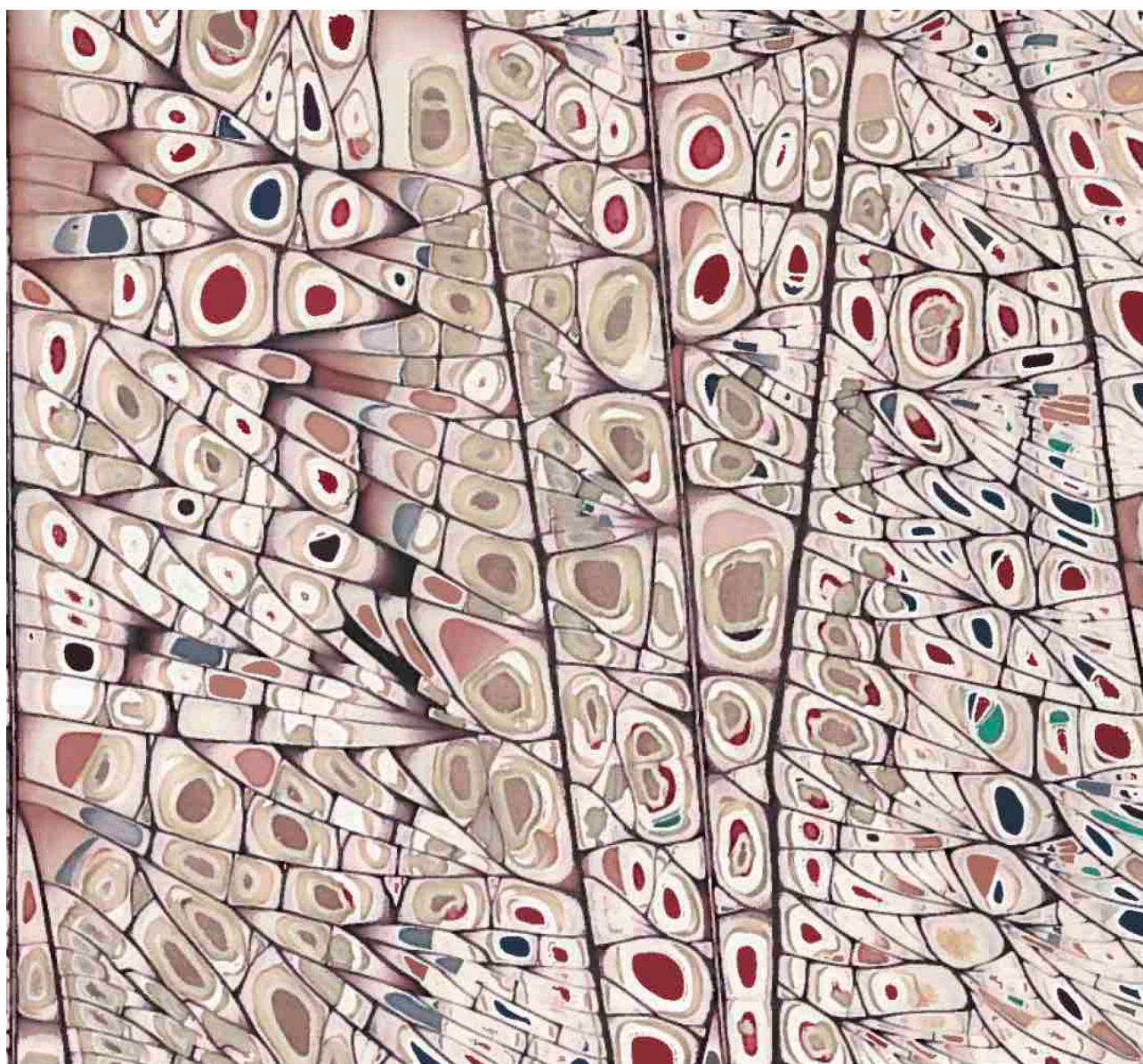
Image 36

Chimigramme 1/5/70 III - detail

1970

Gelatin silver print - 59 x 43.2 cm

*Pierre Cordier Le Chimigramme = The Chemigram*²⁶



²⁶ Pierre Cordier, *Pierre Cordier Le Chimigramme = The Chemigram* (Bruxelles: Éd. Racine, 2007).

Image 37

Photo-Chimigramme 29/1/76

Hommage à Nonyme 1972 - detail
1976

Gelatin silver print - 50 x 60 cm

*Pierre Cordier Le Chimigramme = The Chemigram*²⁷



²⁷ Pierre Cordier, *Pierre Cordier Le Chimigramme = The Chemigram* (Bruxelles: Éd. Racine, 2007).

Image 38

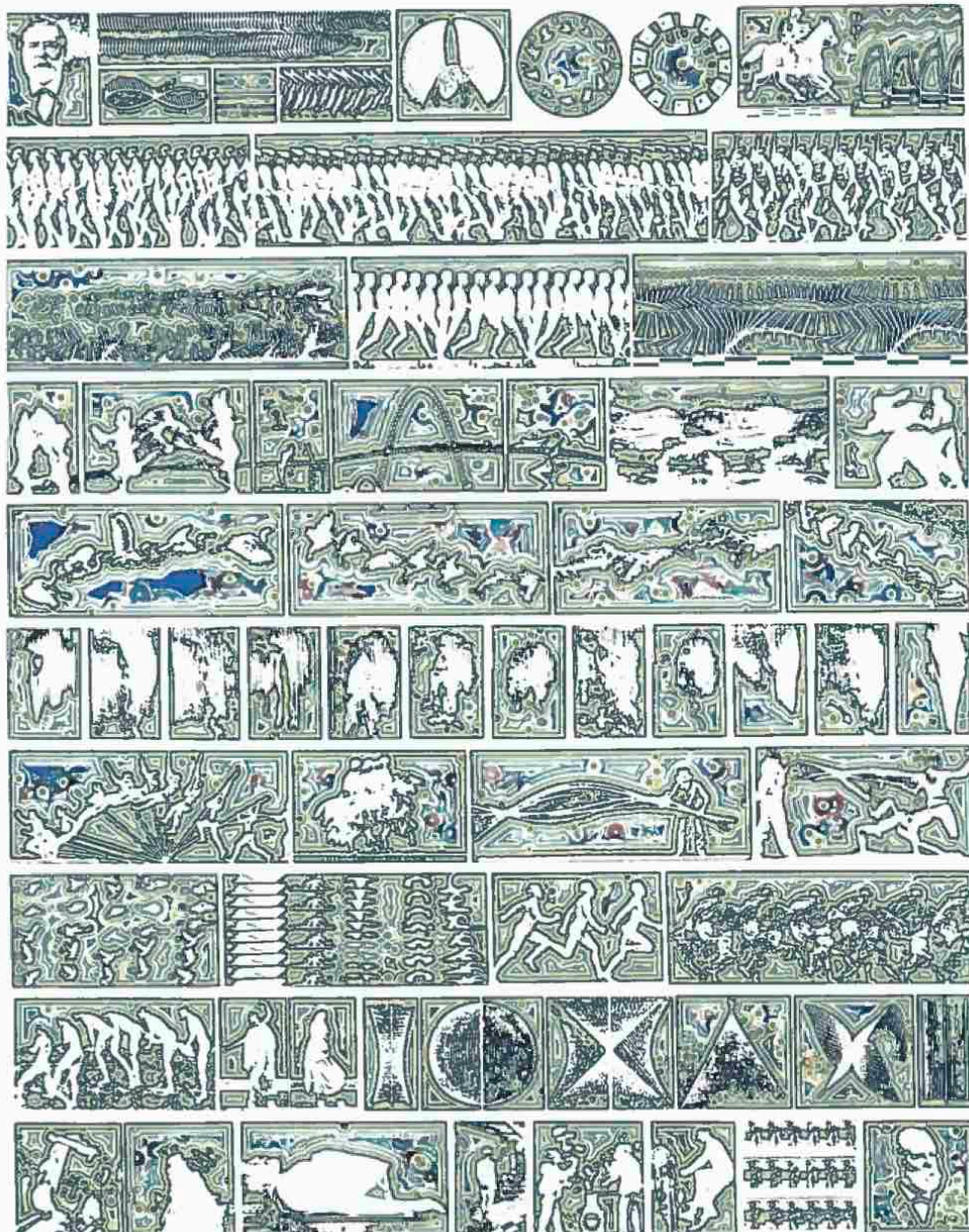
Photo-Chimigramme 9/3/79

Hommage à Marey 1975

1979

Gelatin silver print - 60.3 x 50.8 cm

*Pierre Cordier Le Chimigramme = The Chemigram*²⁸



²⁸ Pierre Cordier, *Pierre Cordier Le Chimigramme = The Chemigram* (Bruxelles: Éd. Racine, 2007).

Image 39

Chimigramme 16/1/81 IV

Hommage à Stieglitz

1981

Gelatin silver print - 35.5 x 30.5 cm

*Pierre Cordier Le Chimigramme = The Chemigram*²⁹



²⁹ Pierre Cordier, *Pierre Cordier Le Chimigramme = The Chemigram* (Bruxelles: Éd. Racine, 2007).

Center for Creative Photography Collection

Image 40

Photo-Chemigram March 1, 1979

Hexagram

1979

Chromogenic print - 60 x 50 cm

Copyright: Center for Creative Photography

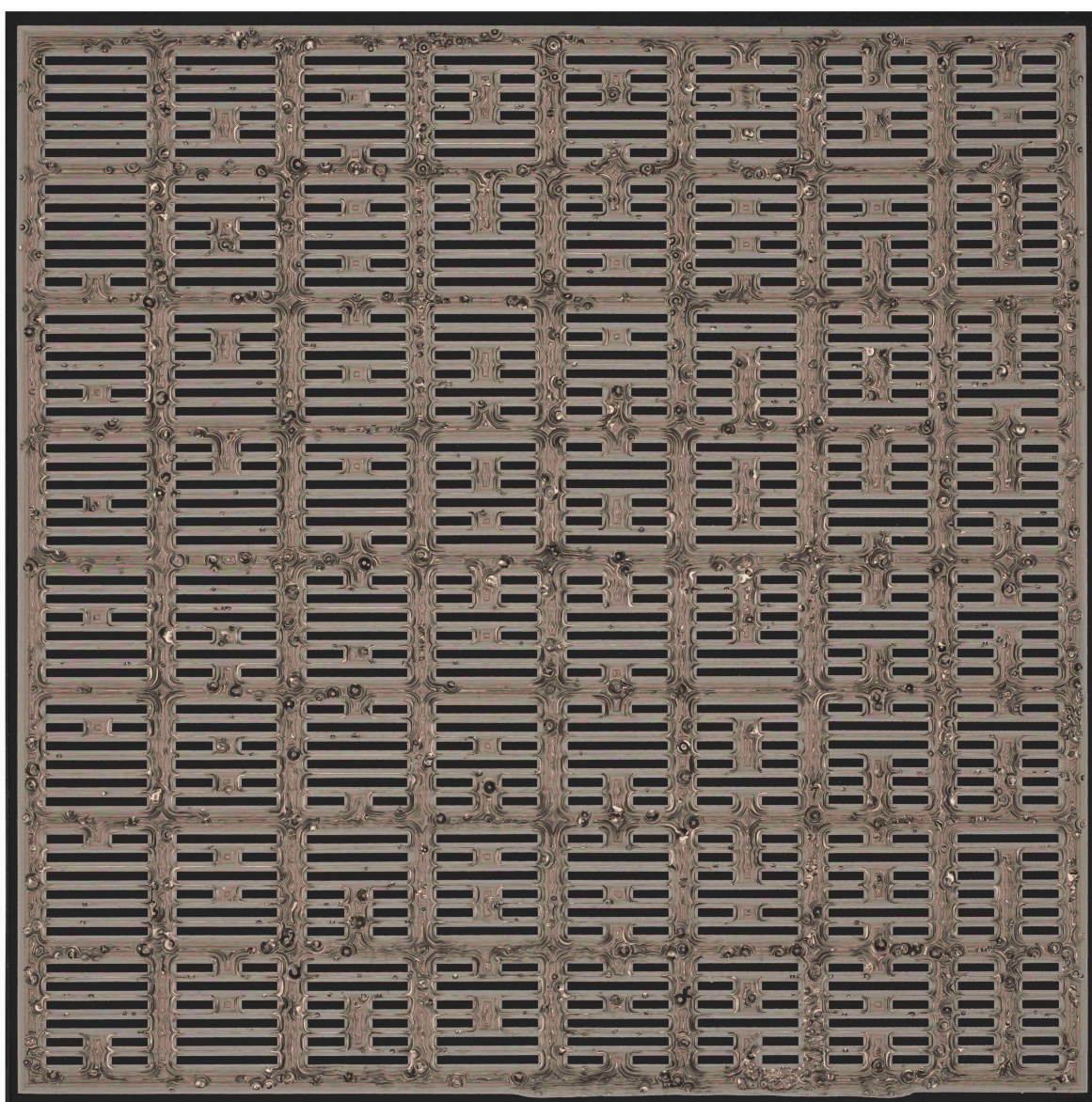


Image 41

Chemigram September 21, 1972

1972

Gelatin silver print - 26 x 36 cm

Copyright: Center for Creative Photography

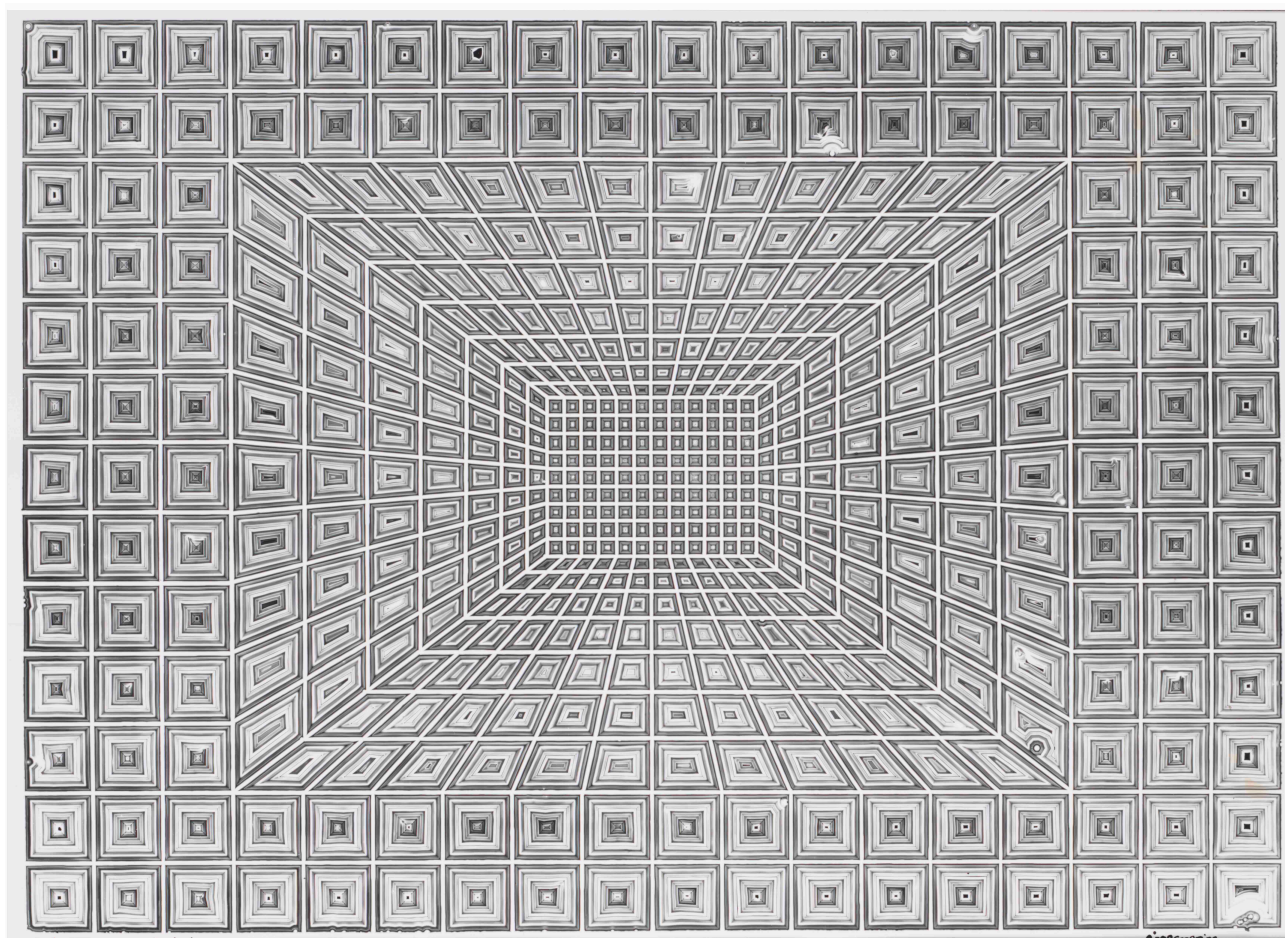


Image 42

Auto-Chemigram July 25, 1982 II

1982

Gelatin silver print - 29.9 x 50.8 cm

Copyright: Center for Creative Photography



Image 43

Auto-Chemigram July 25, 1982 IV
1982

Gelatin silver print - 40.4 x 50.4 cm

Copyright: Center for Creative Photography



Image 44

Auto-Chemigram July 25, 1982 XIII

1982

Gelatin silver print - 25.3 x 20.3 cm

Copyright: Center for Creative Photography



Image 45

Auto-Chemigram July 25, 1982 XV

1982

Gelatin silver print - 24.6 x 20.2 cm

Copyright: Center for Creative Photography

