

Photography Year Zero Where Art and Technology Meet

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Abstraction in photography and lens-based art presents a contradiction in terms; minimalism, meanwhile, presents a further oxymoron. Well developed in the twentieth century in other areas of the art world—abstract expressionism, conceptual art—abstraction and minimalism in lens-based art are only now emerging, even as the second decade of the twenty-first century begins to draw to a close. It is, then, in the early stages of modern and contemporary art, with their roots in photography, that my work has a context.

Abstraction and minimalism are largely American movements, and the tenets of their legacy can be found in my art practice. It is another American creation, Polaroid's 20 x 24-inch format, that provides a link between these breakthroughs in visual thinking and my discovery in 1996 of the "Pull," an abstract and minimal image that is both Polaroid instant technology and experimental in terms of process. A "Pull" is created by physically pulling the positive/negative film through the 20 x 24-inch camera, and by directly manipulating the color pods inside. This process, in addition to producing rectangular blocks of color (the exposures), introduces a new form: the black, parabolic loop that defines my umbrella project *Photography Degree Zero* (1996–2016).

I am very much an American artist, one that has benefited from all the cultural, social, and political advances of the twentieth century. The great invention that is Polaroid—the game changer in photography and science, technology and art—offers me a chance to combine innovation with imagination, echoing Polaroid's tag line "See what develops."

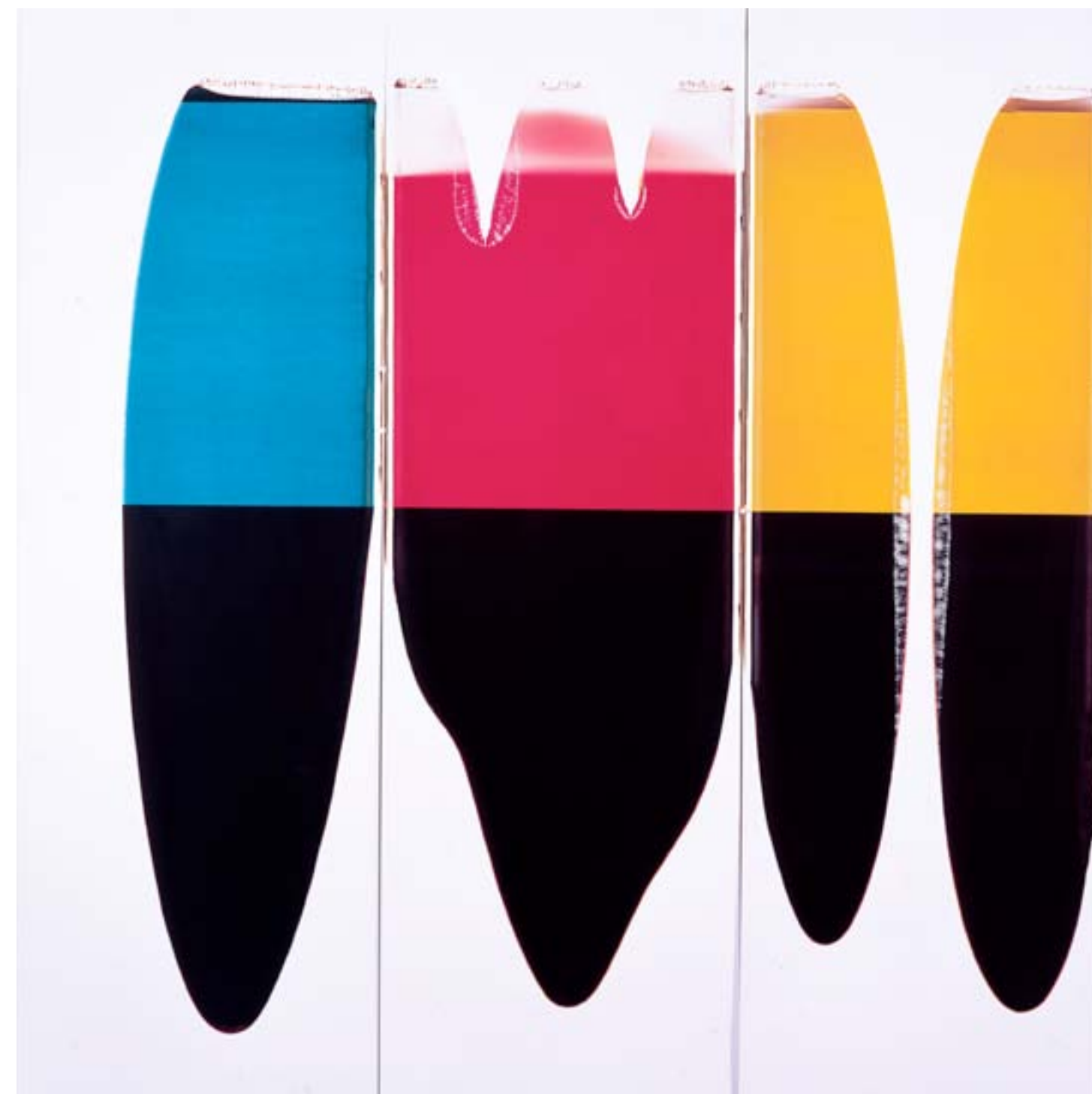
Questions frequently asked about my work include "How was this picture made?"; this is often followed by "What is this a picture of?" The first question addresses photography as process. The photographic object often involves an intersection of process and invention, as does the practice of photography itself. In traditional

photography, both the process and the invention are "transparent," mere means to an end. In my work, the process becomes the subject; it is no longer "hidden." The second question addresses the conundrum of a photographic image without a picture or "sign" for the viewer to read. Both questions challenge our cultural and historically prescribed expectations for photography to narrate and document, all the while revealing no trace of its own origins.

The "zero" in my practice has multiple meanings. My discovery of the "Pull," followed in 1997 by the "Rollback"—created by rolling up a *Pull* and feeding it back through the camera for one or more exposures—formed the foundation of my Polaroid practice: the project *Photography Degree Zero*. I am the originator of this phrase, its senior user. It refers to *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), a book by Roland Barthes that offers a critical discourse on the departure from a descriptive narrative in French avant-garde literature.

In a related fashion, my work represents the absence of the visual "sign" mentioned above, as found in landscapes, portraits, and still lifes. Instead, my work consists of an image made without a subject, without any reference to a place, person, or object. There is no referent. Often, the image is made without light—another "zero" or absence—while the phrase "Photography Degree Zero" names my exhibitions.

My lens-based, experimental artwork purposely challenges Western culture's historical development of the light-sensitive photograph as a simulacrum of a narratable object. I aim to free the picture from the tyranny of photography's historical imperative to record and reveal "things." *Photography Degree Zero* revisits and reflects on photography's origins, not by replaying its history, but by bearing witness to a primal, visceral, physical, and visual encounter with the photographic process.



Ellen Carey *Pulls (CMY)*, 1997