

black and white and filled with light

**using unusual methods,
photographer amanda means
captures the essence—and simple
majesty—of her [non-human]
portrait subjects in riveting detail**

Like a philosopher who makes a habit of contemplating the metaphysical, the very nature of reality and being, Amanda Means has long made the essence of the subjects of her indelible images—see them once; remember them forever—the subject of her photographs and other works.

by edward m. gómez

“I grew up on a farm in upstate New York, near the border with Canada,”



“I grew up feeling very close to nature and I was interested in plants and the shapes, colors and textures of living things.”

On the previous pages, photographs of leaves, including: *Eastern Redbud (Leaf 13)*, 1991; *Prayer Plant*, 1990; *Ginkgo Biloba*, 1991; *Hazel Alder*, 1990; *Ostrich Fern 1*, 2005; *Silver Nerve Plant*, 1990. This page, left, top to bottom: Abstract-shape, black-paper collages from the artist’s notebooks of the 1970s. Below: Means, in her studio in Beacon, New York, examining her photos of New York City from the late 1970s, in which she explored her interest in shapes created by shadows in an urban environment. Opposite page: Means in the office section of her studio, with one of her recent photographs (from her *Asuka* series) made with flashlight beams aimed, in the darkroom, at photo-sensitive paper.



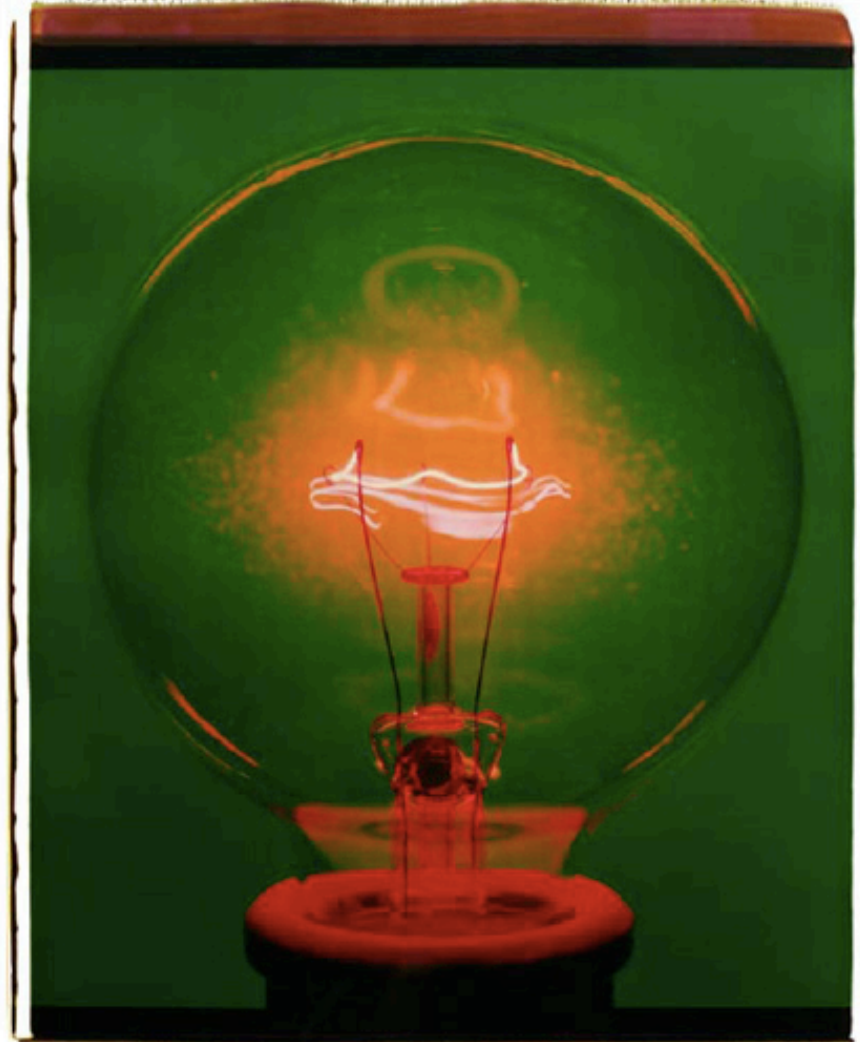
the artist says, adding: “My family owned and operated apple, peach and cherry orchards on the south shore of Lare Ontario. We lived in a stone farmhouse that had been built in the 1800s, so I grew up feeling very close to nature and I was interested in plants and the shapes, colors and textures of living things.”

After earning an undergraduate degree from Cornell University, Means earned a master’s degree through a program offered by the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester. Founded by the photographer and curator Nathan Lyons in 1969, that pioneering media-studies center offers courses in art theory and criticism, conventional and digital photography, bookbinding and other visual-arts techniques. Today, it administers its MFA program



in conjunction with the State University of New York at Brockport, near Rochester. (When Means studied at VSW decades ago, SUNY Buffalo served as the still-young art school’s academic partner.)

In the late 1970s, Means moved to New York. It was, she recalls, a period of big changes in her life, not only on account of the culture-shock jolt of her move from the rural setting of her childhood to the densely populated, concrete jungle of Manhattan, but also because her family had lost ownership of its



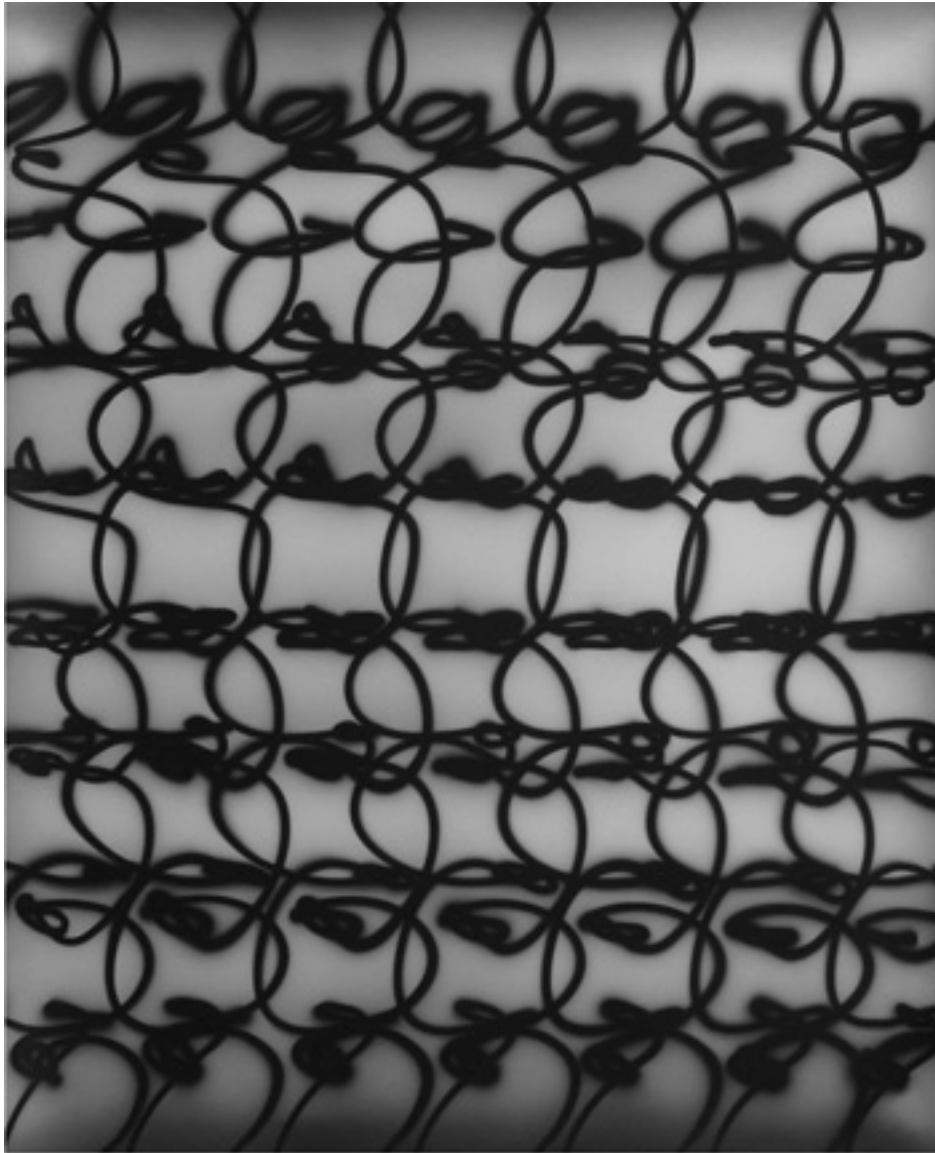
Above: Color photographs made with a large-format Polaroid camera. Left to right: *Light Bulb 008BYo*, 2007; *Light Bulb 004POi*, 2007; *Light Bulb 007GOa*, 2007.

farm, and her father had died. Those events profoundly moved the young artist, provoking a mix of emotions that inevitably blended with the sensations and stimulation that came with her move to energetic New York.

In the city, Means brought her keen eye for the defining shapes and details of the natural world to her exploration of the human-con-

structed, urban environment. Already deeply interested in abstract art's examination—and celebration—of pure form and in its frequent palette of stripped-down, basic black and white, Means filled notebooks with her own studies of abstract shapes cut out of black paper.

Echoing those form-finding experiments, her



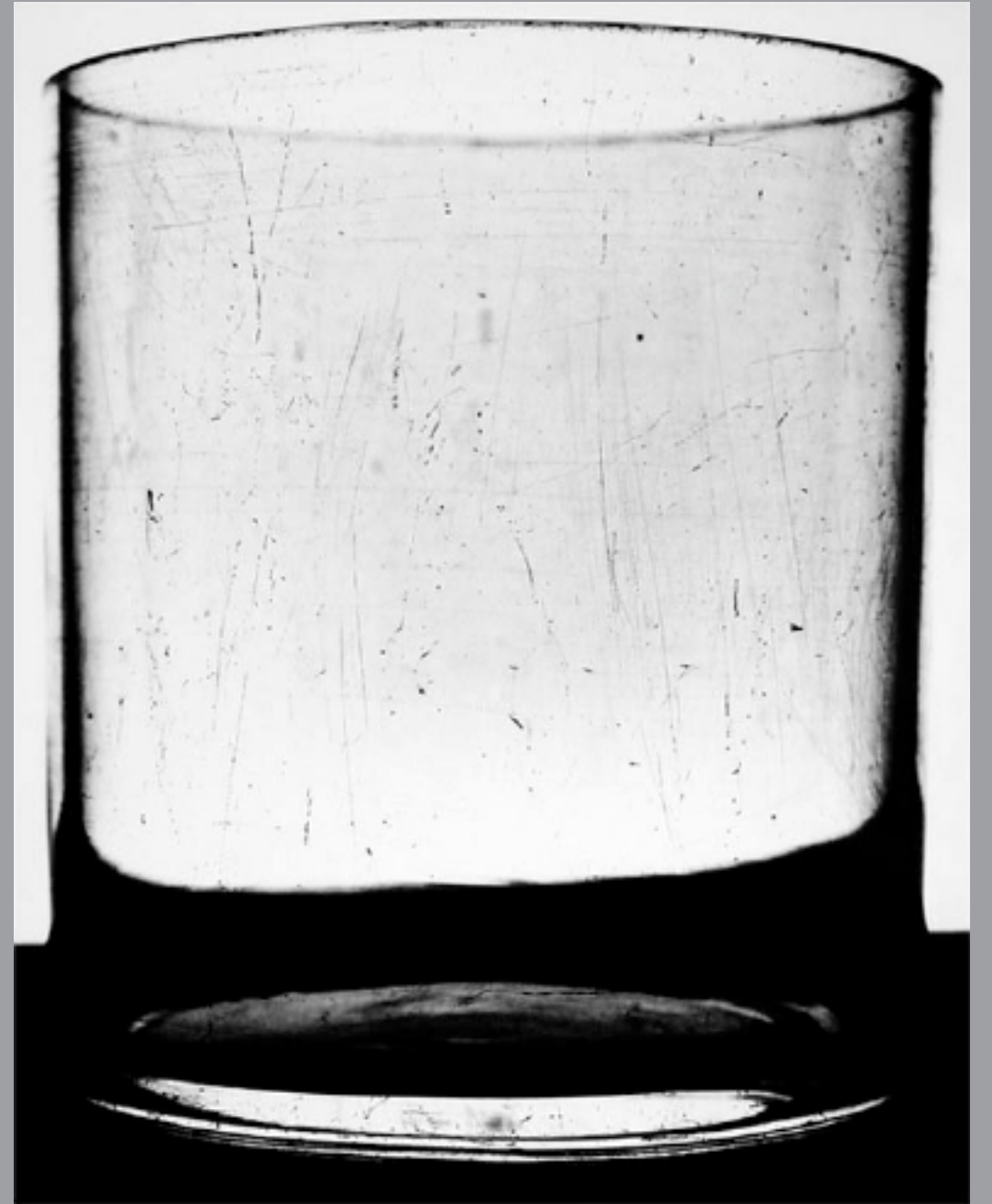
**means has long been interested
in the expressive character
of abstract art**

Above, two images from the artist's new *Asuka* series of "drawings" made with flashlight beams aimed at photo-sensitive paper. Left: *Abstraction 15*, 2005. Right: *Abstraction 6*, 2005

black-and-white photographs of everyday urban scenes of the late 1970s captured the play of sharp-edged shadows on streets, sidewalks and the sides of buildings, as well as the jazzy sense of choreographed chaos that characterized the movement of people and traffic in New York. "For me, the atmosphere in the city was something new and different," Means remembers. "When I look back at the photos I made at that time, I see that they also managed to capture the moods of the city that I was noticing; sometimes they were full of energy and sometimes they were unexpectedly calm and quiet."

If that stillness caught the young artist's attention, it might also be said that Means has long brought a sense of meditative focus to the way she has observed, thought about and represented her subject matter in monochromatic ink drawings on paper and in a diverse range of photographic images. The meticulousness with which she executes her photographs, the works for which she has become best-known, reflects this sensibility. It's a way of looking at and capturing images of the world that is at once scientific and artistic.

In the 1980s, working at a photo-processing laboratory in Manhattan, Means became expertly skilled at printing photographs—so much so that, when the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe saw some images she had printed on display in a gallery exhibition, he tracked her down and hired her to print his increasingly popular—and increasingly notorious—black-and-white photos, many of which he produced in series.



Left: *Water Glass 2*, 2004
Right: *Water Glass 10*, 2004. In focusing on various everyday objects as the subjects of her photographs, in effect Means has created portraits of these otherwise mundane items.

Since that time, Means has created several different photo portfolios of her own. Among their subjects, whose forms are sometimes simple and sometimes, as her eye-opening images reveal, remarkably complex: leaves, flowers, light bulbs and water glasses. Means has shot some of her subjects straight on, like iconic monuments, allowing them to fill each photo's frame.

To shoot a wide variety of leaves and plants that she gathers herself, she uses no photographic negatives at all. Instead, she simply places a dried leaf or a three-dimensional, flowering plant on its stem on her photo enlarger in her darkroom and projects its image onto a large sheet of photo-sensitive paper. Technically, Means's positive objects used as negatives produce negative photographic images whose fine, white details—the deli-

means's photos may be seen as revealing portraits of ordinary objects

Below: Means examines prints of some of her photographs of light bulbs. Right: The artist looks through a portfolio of her photographs of flowers, which were made in the darkroom, on a photo enlarger, without the use of conventional film negatives.



cate veins of a leaf, the voluptuous volumes of fluffy flowers—stand out dramatically against velvety-black backgrounds.

Means observes: "It's amazing how much each photograph reveals. It's not just the shape of a flower or a leaf but also the complex structure of a plant's architecture and maybe even something about its soul." In effect, Means's tightly cropped, straight-on photographic images of often overlooked

objects are sensitive portraits of her chosen subjects. More recently, using flashlights whose beams she shines on photo-sensitive paper in the darkroom to create lively, dynamic abstractions, Means literally has been "drawing" with light itself. "I'm still experimenting with this technique and I'm excited about where it may lead," she says. Bold and distinctive, these new works are the latest addition to this inventive artist's still-evolving collection of emblematic images. **f**