

# Point of Departure: Three Abstract Photographers

**Steven A. Heller**

Lyle Rexer's *The Edge of Vision* is a comprehensive analysis of abstraction in photography that establishes a chronological basis for how the medium has succeeded in providing a glimpse of the "unseen seen." As with most aspects of human advancement, every accomplishment and success has a precursor that can be identified as the inspiration—science, art, politics, education, religion all have beginnings that lead to the present and beyond.

**In some circumstances** these advances are considered heretical, subversive and outsider. But viewed from an alternate viewpoint these same visual solutions are noteworthy in their progression of a technology that affords repeatable accidents, access to the subconscious, and entry points for deeper conclusions to the ongoing question asked of the photographic image: "What is it?"

Perhaps no other art form has been plagued by that question seeking an answer; it is part of the equation created by light sensitizing silver. But abstraction in photography is not just a chemical playground in the darkroom or a conscious act of throwing a subject out of focus during a long exposure. Abstraction is a doorway into the rhetorical conversation of what lies beyond representation of the world. There is mystery and magic and illusion that asks the viewer to reconsider the ease with which one can answer the question: "What is it?" The more difficult it may be to answer the question, the more it is appreciated as an expression that may not have ever been previously entertained.

American postmodern artist and Beat Generation writer William Burroughs stated: "Visual art and writing don't exist on an aes-

thetic hierarchy that positions one above the other, because each is capable of things the other can't do at all. Sometimes one picture is equal to 30 pages of discourse, just as there are things images are completely incapable of communicating." And so "abstraction" functions seamlessly as a noun, verb and adjective in pursuit of abandoning reality in place of ideas and emotions.

For Amanda Means, making abstract photographs "is full of mind twists." For Ellen Carey it is a "newer reality that is humbling and soul crushing." Ion Zupcu describes a "bling-bling moment." Each of these contemporary photographers investigates abstraction along the boundaries of representational imagery and continues a long journey of visual history that has taken both evolutionary and giant leaps from the medium's 19th century pioneers.

### **Ion Zupcu**

Ion Zupcu works from his home in Hopewell Junction (a fitting name), located in upstate New York with his wife, Rodica. "My studio is a small room with two large windows; a perfect setup, as all my images are shot with natural light, where I wait for God's light to help me complete an image."



*March 6, 2004*



*March 8, 2004*



*March 2, 2006*

“I remember wishing that I could remove rocks, branches and trees from the landscape. That’s when I realized that I needed to stage my images.”  
*Ion Zupcu*

Zupcu’s fascination with architectural forms is shared with his daughter, with whom he has a very close relationship. Their passion for architecture and design has been the seed for much of his work. “We visit many architectural sites together and enjoy lengthy discussions about proportions, forces within a space, shape and outlines.”

Zupcu began his career in Romania as a commercial studio photographer, primarily concentrating on people and product. After a visit to the International Center for Photography, “I realized that I was seeing forests, water and cloudy skies in a similar way that Michael Kenna has explored. I remember wishing that I could remove rocks, branches and trees from the landscape. That’s when I realized that I needed to stage my images.”

Already inspired by modernists like Josef Sudek, Jan Groover and Paul Outerbridge, Zupcu began to integrate architectural pioneers like Mies Van Der Rohe into his vision. “That’s when my work turned a corner into a neat and clear process of minimalism.”

There is a rich history of photographers who have imagined the unimagined into a



*Ion Zupcu*

realm of objects that transform into other states of being. Alvin Langdon Coburn and Paul Strand, both working in the early decades of the 20th century, used the camera and objects together with light and shadow to create an abstraction of a modern ethic exemplified by the Industrial Revolution. And Lotte Jacobi’s “photogenic” work in the late 1940s is a delicious connection to Zupcu’s contemporary abstractions.

These paper constructions of Zupcu originate with the concept of abstraction as both a verb and a noun. The process demands a reductive reasoning of a three-dimensional object followed by manipulation into an illusion of space, light and shadow. The circular-egg shape of “March 6, 2004” takes turns morphing from an object with a core shadow along the lower left front edge but then winds around to the top in a mistaken linear darkness that holds the form into the tight compositional edges. It is the cast shadow of the form leading the eye out of the lower-right frame that anchors the abstraction and completes the “emptiness with something” the viewer can identify.

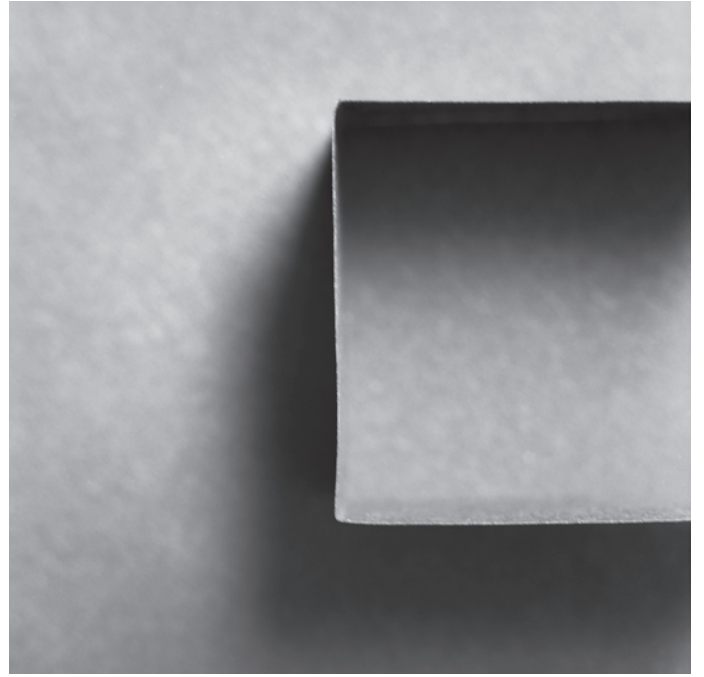
“March 8, 2004” reveals an extraordinary degree of mystery and magic with the astute simplicity of the compositional optical center. Soft edges of light and shadow are quietly compromised by the foreground focus on an almost imperceptible millimeter of paper-thickness form. The white background showcases the architecture of balance and symmetry, while the luminescence of natural light reminds the viewer of Michael Kenna’s ocean waves transfigured into luxurious folds of fabric amid motion blurred by time.

Zupcu takes the methodology a step further on “March 2, 2006,” as the pyramid no longer takes on an object of weight and substance, but rather is realized as negative space held together by softened edges barely touching the compositional edges. It is the apex of the triangle with its rich, deep-black shadow that truly cuts all ties with a spatial reality.

Rexer in *The Edge of Vision* describes this new way of seeing reality with remarkable simplicity: “It is possible to see the world yet not understand what you are seeing, then, having deciphered it, still not grasp its mean-



*Here Comes Andy*



*Square Separation*



*Unfinished Target*

"I seek to create a sort of perceptual reverie—the experience of an elevated sense of visual awareness of an object."

*Amanda Means*

ing (like a poem)—a profoundly unsettling experience."

As Zupcu meanders the abstract highway, he detours into territory of incomplete statements that require the viewer to participate if one is to realize any answer. "Here Comes Andy," "Square Separation" and "Unfinished Target"—grayscale departures from the white ambiguity of the "dated titled" forms—discover a more concrete architecture that is equally void of meaning, purpose or application. Gray backgrounds hold arcs, straight lines and semicircles into a mystical mirror that offers back no reflections as the viewer now peers down into the forms from a bird's eye vantage point.

#### **Amanda Means**

For nearly 50 years Amanda Means has been married to traditional black-and-white photographic techniques in capturing images and printing. For several years after moving to New York, Means printed for Robert Mapplethorpe, Berenice Abbott, Petah Coyne and Roni Horn; an impressive client list, to say the least. It was during these years that she began experimenting with "camera-less, alternative approaches" to her photography projects.



*Amanda Means*

"I began cutting, folding and crumpling paper, and then, in the darkroom, gave myself the freedom to let liquid chemicals drip, splash and flow over the photographic paper," she explains. A free-form visual expression began to formulate into a strategy for creating abstractions that "allowed the deepest, darkest tones to transition into the lightest, barely visible highlights." The technique was nothing short of darkroom magic.

Means' description of the process is in itself a narrative of experimentation in pursuit of abstraction. After very delicately scoring gelatin silver photographic paper and folding it into the shape of a fan, she exposes it in different directions at an angle to the enlarging light before placing the paper into the developer. "Then I slowly pull the paper out of the tray allowing the chemistry to flow, creating a myriad of different effects depending upon how the paper is scored, folded, exposed and ultimately manipulated in the tray."

Means is engaged in alchemical improvisation, and is passionate about this "mix of controlled and spontaneous" imagery. Of particular importance has been a sharp awareness of how positive and negative spaces interact in the composition. "Both are equally important in a picture and should be paid attention to equally."

She created a seemingly simple but complex exercise to refine this central supposition by walking around the city with a sketch pad and training her vision on the "beautiful shapes that originated as negative space between things." The quick brush drawings using black tempera and newsprint inspired not only an attachment to the flat paper surface, but more importantly, led to a deep understanding of the significance of negative space. "I seek to create a sort of perceptual reverie—the experience of an elevated sense of visual awareness of an object."

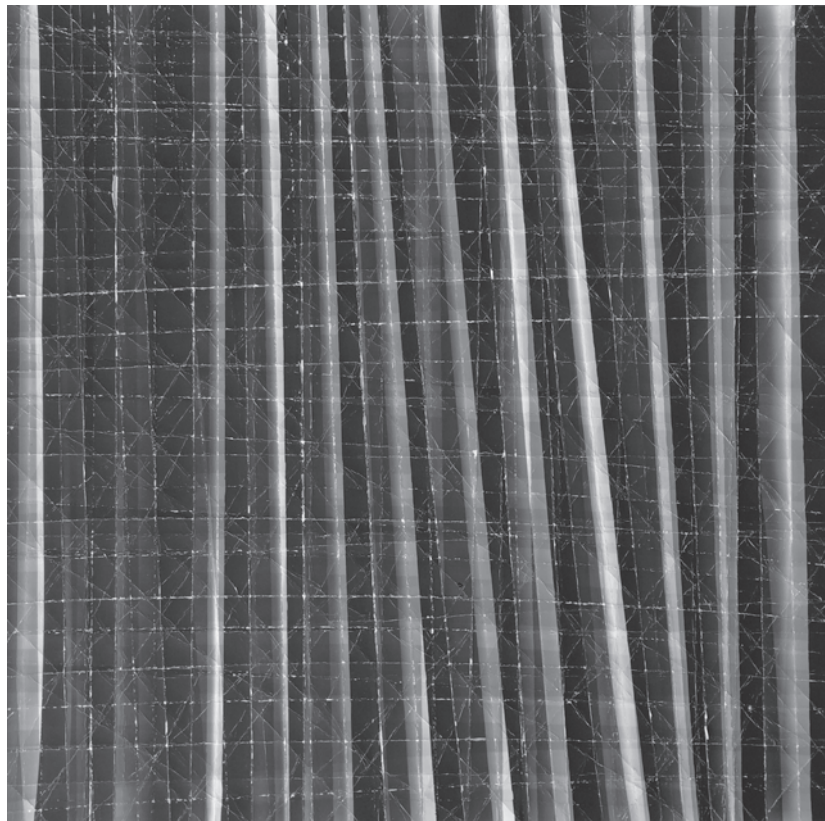
"Folded, Scored and Crushed 53" is a Rorschach test of graphic lines that have been violated by the transforming effects of chemicals and light. Though the near-perfectly spaced horizontal lines give the viewer a direction, the drips and running vertical defects of the chemistry bring the composi-



*Folded, Scored and Crushed 53, 2015*



*Abstraction 6, 2005*



*Folded and Crushed 44, 2017*

tion into a startling discovery of positive and negative impressions. "Fan Abstraction 107" offers a counterpoint to an equally persuasive interpretation of what is foreground, background, mid-ground and, just as impactful, where the space is located if not simply on a one-dimensional plane.

"Abstraction 6, 2005" is a departure from Means' "ah-hah" darkroom moments. Here is an infinity of arcs and curves that blend into highlights and shadows to create a swirl of musical notes across the composition. There is no top or bottom to the composition, as it may be rotated in any direction and still achieve the identical abstract movement. The comparison with a musical score is apt: If somehow translated to music, these might evoke the tonal abstractions of a György Ligety or Pierre Boulez.

Means identifies this series as *Penlight Abstractions*. The backstory for the images is

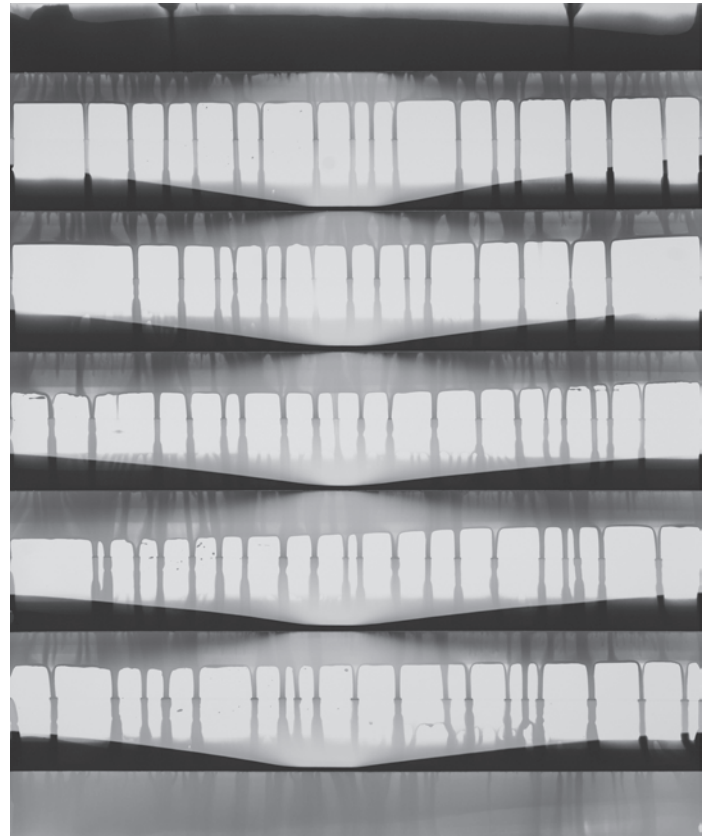
most remarkable. Says Means, "I was raised playing the piano, reading the ten-line grand staff of musical notation. I move the penlights directly on the paper's surface as a transformation of sound energy to visual energy through my body.

"I'm very fortunate in that I've always seemed to have a large treasure trove of ideas waiting to be tried. Ordinarily one leads easily to another. Most of my ideas arise out of an endless sense of curiosity: I wonder what would happen if I did this, or that."

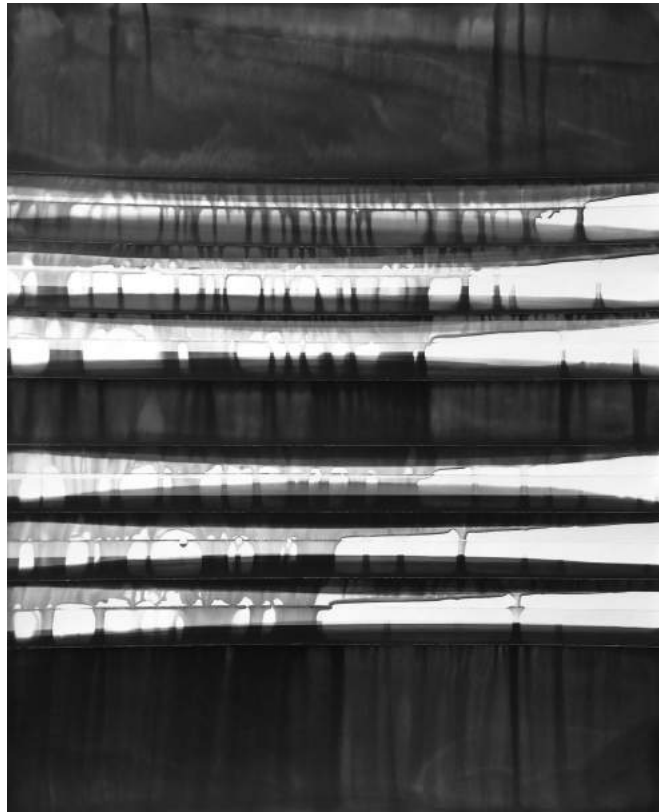
That curiosity has led to consistently fertile results over her decades-long engagement with the medium. It speaks to the originality of Means' vision that one finds it difficult to discern influences upon her work, direct or otherwise. Her imagery seems to have sprung sui generis from the depths of her visual and conceptual imagination.



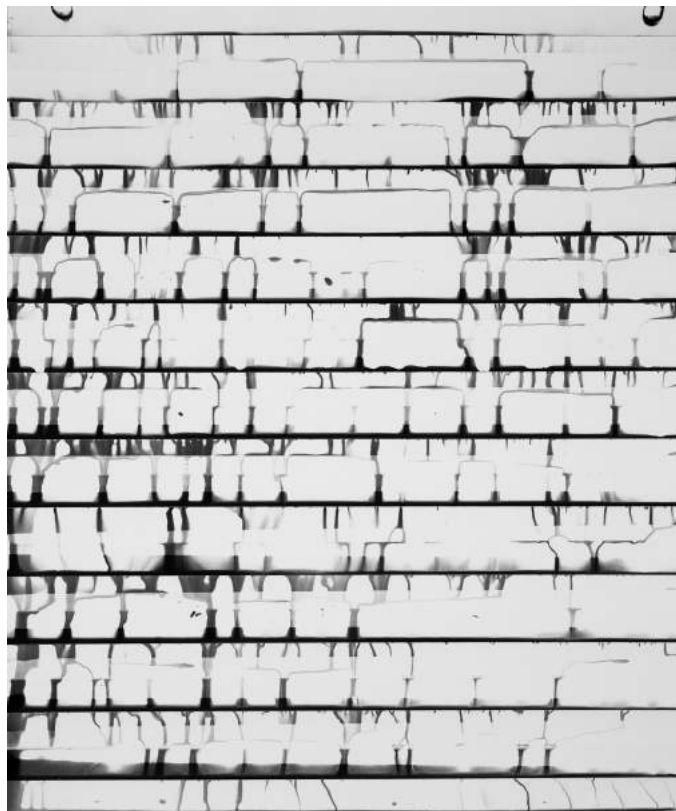
*Fan Abstraction 73, 2014*



*Fan Abstraction 80, 2014*



*Fan Abstraction 107, 2014*



*Fan Abstraction 100, 2014*



"All my abstract images include what I call the four Cs: concept, context, content and citation."

*Ellen Carey*

### **Ellen Carey**

Carey's projects usually "begin with one or more questions" that she readily admits are self-imposed obstacles. They are "points of departure that become humbling experiences filled with compelling challenges." Understanding images such as these is a matter that parallels the development of letters, words, sentences and phrases that emerge to become a comprehensive and understandable "language."

Photographs, perhaps more than any other visual media, document memories and history in a thousandth of a second as if by fortunate accident or patiently appear as Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment" understood on compositional and lighting levels simultaneously. It can be deliberated, conceptualized and visualized long before the shutter is released, and Carey seizes this aspect.

Carey's freshman year of undergraduate work (1971) at Kansas City Art Institute focused on printmaking, painting and drawing, but early on she recognized that her strengths orbited around the ability to construct compositions photographically. "I was immediately intrigued and obsessed with



*Ellen Carey*

everything about the magic that happens in the darkroom and the immediacy of the tools that captured light," she says. So it was with confidence and little hesitation that Carey embarked on different cameras, genres and subjects as the tools for discovering answers to the visual questions.

"The artist's struggle comes in many forms until one picture changes everything," Carey says. For her, that one picture was a photograph taken in 1972 from a rooftop of a small white dog across the street. "I pointed to it with my right hand, pressed the button with my left [and] looked up, only to be disappointed that the dog was gone." But when she developed the film there was that small white dog on a "single frame that changed my life."

Following Carey's early explorations into abstraction is a series of self-portraits that have historical references to Man Ray's Rayograms. Darkroom processes layer additional meaning and interpretations to the face and figure. They are notable images that make transparent the evolution of the artist in process. Swirls of Jackson Pollock-like chemistry transform the traditional portrait into an emotional canvas, echoing through this work that serves as a lightning rod for Carey's future darkroom and Polaroid experiments. The free-form expressive smears highlight her physical actions, and solarization brings body parts into a choreography of foreground and background elements. It's a fascinating performance with a multitude of references to contemporaries like Robert Mapplethorpe and Cindy Sherman.

Commercial assignments interspersed with ongoing experimentation with black-and-white film followed into 1988, with nothing to show for the effort until an image with "no picture sign, no traces of picture making, no reference to anything out there" surfaced. Not dissimilar to Man Ray's "Dust Breeding"—a long exposure of a dust-covered pane of glass that has been tagged as the signpost for Surrealism, abstraction and various other "isms"—for Carey, it was a studio experience with a Mamiya 645 camera and a piece of textured plexiglass that changed everything. "I pointed the camera loaded with Tri-X film at the surface of the plexi graduated with hard lights. In the darkroom I



*Self-portrait 3, 1978*



*Self-portrait 39, 1978*

reticulated the film process by moving from boiling temperature to an ice cube bath. It was a breakthrough image that answered my own question, 'How can I empty the frame?'"

"Lens, 1994" is about as close as a composition can come to nothingness visualized. Situated just north of the optical center of the composition is a black sphere surrounded by a grey circle. It is the language of emptiness occupied by something that has no specific reference except perhaps the unlimited expression of light and form encased in a rectangular frame.

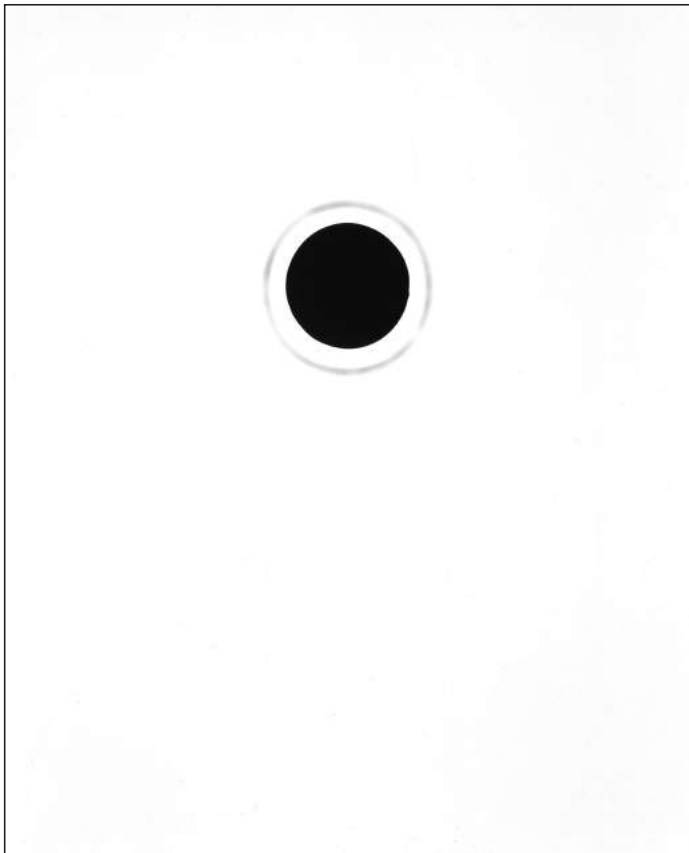
And if "Lens" is about nothing, then "Circles of Confusion, 1994" is about lots of nothing. Dots of black sit atop the white background, creating a haphazard maze of activity denoting a dramatic suspension of all things representational. "Interestingly enough, though, there is plenty to see," Carey asserts. "All of my abstract images

include what I call the four Cs: concept, context, content and citation."

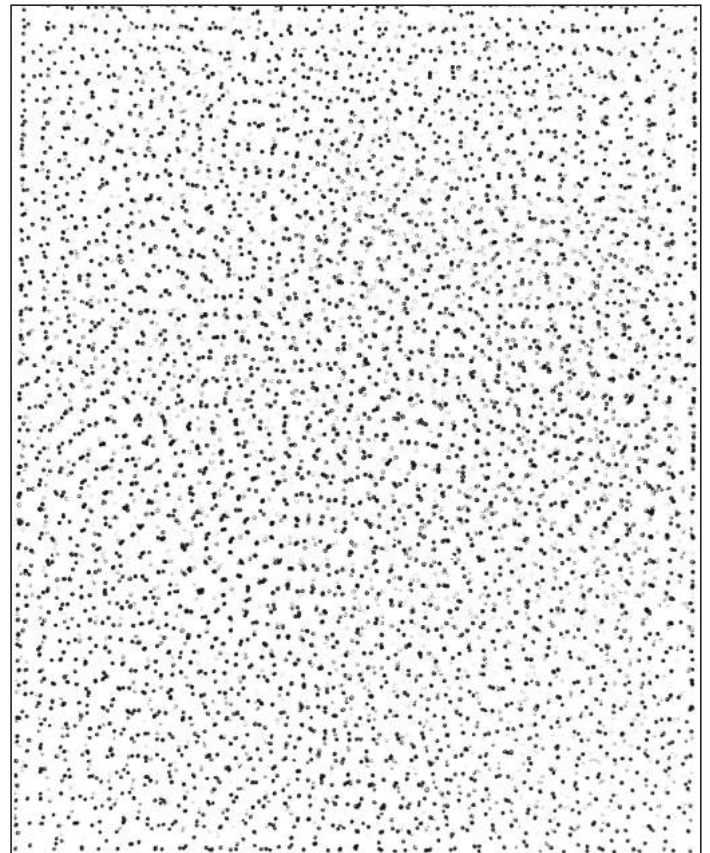
"Photogenic Drawing 1" and "Cross 2" (both completed in 1999) reveal a fluid landscape of light and shadow. Where one is characterized by a nebulous and spontaneous emotion, the other is slightly more defined and permanent. They resemble a married couple who for all surface explanations don't seem particularly well suited for each other because of their apparent differences; yet the marriage endures a lifetime.

#### **Addendum**

*To learn more about these photographers, please visit their websites: [ionzupcu.com](http://ionzupcu.com), [amandameans.com](http://amandameans.com) and [ellencareyphotography.com](http://ellencareyphotography.com).*



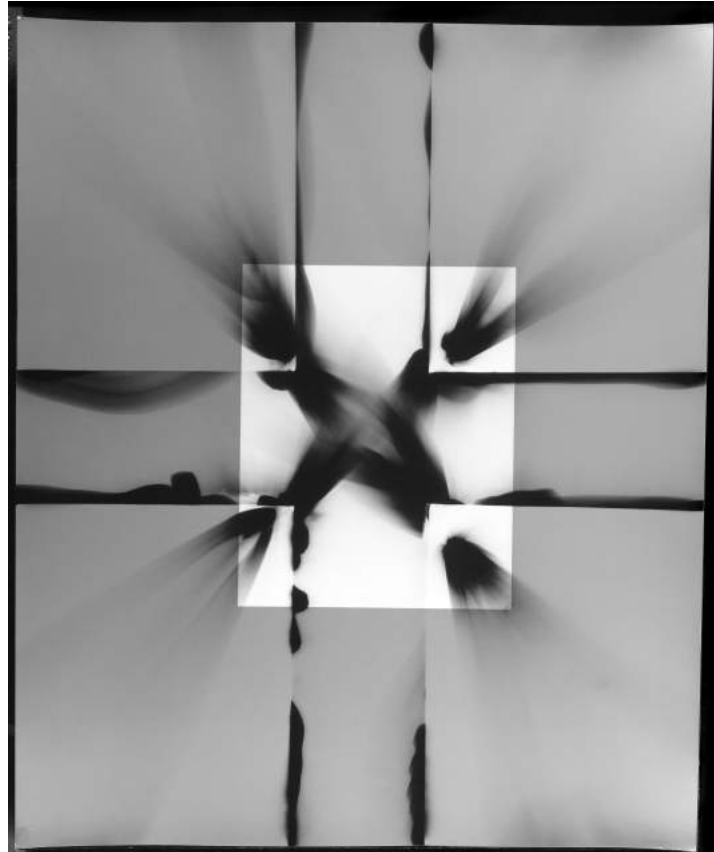
*Lens, 1994*



*Circles of Confusion, 1994*



*Photogenic Drawing 1, 1999*



*Cross 2, 1999*