

Fundamentals of Photography Print Viewing

This print viewing serves as a basic introduction to the medium of Photography. The artworks featured demonstrate a range of fundamental camera techniques, including variations in vantage point, framing, depth of field, and lighting. This print viewing also introduces viewers to different photographic genres, including portraiture and street photography.

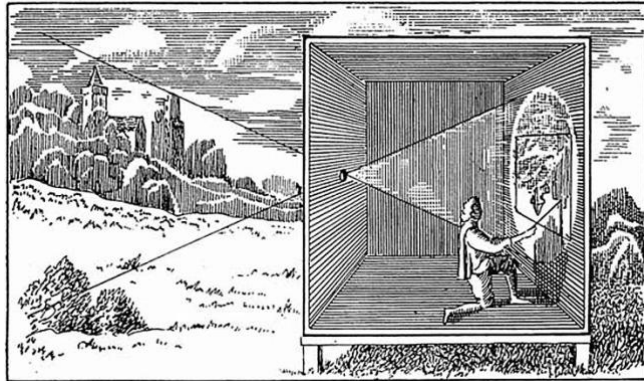


Kenneth Josephson, *New York State*, 1970

The MoCP education programs are supported by Columbia College Chicago, the MoCP Advisory Board, the Museum Council, individuals, and private and corporate foundations.

What is a Camera?

All cameras—whether digital or analog—are devices that record the optical phenomena of the camera obscura. Camera obscura, which literally means, "dark chamber" is a technique whereby light enters through a small hole, or aperture, and refracts to project what is outside onto the dark surface. The oldest known use of this technique can be dated back to 470 BC by a Chinese philosopher and has been used in a variety of contexts and practitioners, including astronomers and Renaissance era artists to accurately or realistically replicate perspective. You can create their own camera obscuras from anything, including a cereal box. Cameras are devices that record this camera obscura phenomena—either onto a physical material such as film or a digital file. In understanding how cameras work, we can see the foundational principle of photography as the method of drawing with light.



17th century illustration; for reference only; not in the MoCP collection

Abelardo Morell (Cuba, b. 1948)



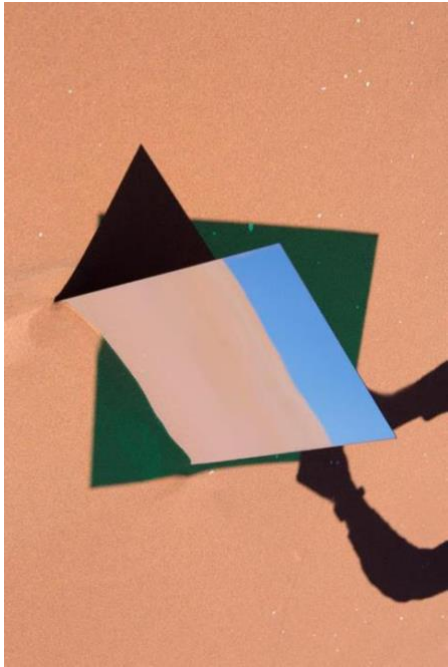
Camera Obscura Image of Houses Across the Street in Our Bedroom, 1991

In this image, Abelardo Morell employs the camera obscura technique to turn his own bedroom into a camera. By blocking out all the light except a tiny pinhole, what is outside of his house is projected onto the interior walls, and Morell takes a picture of the phenomenon using an 8x10 inch view camera. Thus, the resulting image is a picture of a picture, taken of a camera with a camera.

Questions for Looking:

- Where does your eye go first when you look at Morell's photograph?
- Consider this image in relation to Abbott's images from "[The Science Pictures](#)" portfolio. How are Morell and Abbott both challenging or celebrating photography's basic principles?

Viviane Sassen (Amsterdam, b. 1972)



Axiom GB02, from the *Umbra* series, 2014

Inspired by abstract painters, Vivian Sassen uses reflective surfaces, opaque shading, and vivid color to create imagery of both people and objects, often referring to the history of painting and artists like Kasimir Malevich and Mark Rothko. To make this image, Sassen placed a mirror in the sand to capture the crisp blue of the sky and rough texture of the desert in a sharp line. She then held a sheet of colored plexiglass over the object, strategically photographing the colorful abstraction while giving away her hand as the composer in the shadows. Throughout the history of art, photography has been compared to painting and challenged as a lesser form of art due to its mechanical nature. Here, Sassen reminds us of the infinite possibilities of image-making by camera with her whimsical use of line, shape, color, and texture.

Questions for Looking:

- How does the artist use color to navigate your eye through the image? Which colors pull your attention first? How does each color feel to you?
- Why might the artist choose photography as a medium to create abstract, non-representational images? How would this piece read differently if it were a painting?

Aaron Siskind (American, b. 1903 - 1991)



Pleasures and Terrors of Levitation
#56, 1956



Pleasures and Terrors of Levitation
#81, 1956

Also inspired by painters, Aaron Siskind began creating abstract and metaphoric works in the early 1940s as he cultivated friendships with painters such as Franz Kline, Barnett Newman, Adolph Gottlieb, and Mark Rothko. During the 1950s, his primary subjects were urban facades, graffiti, isolated figures, and the stone walls of Martha's Vineyard. Graphic in form, the subjects of each of these series resemble script, reflecting Siskind's interest in musical scores and poetry. His famous *The Pleasures and Terrors of Levitation* series (c. 1952-1965), seen here, depicts the dark shapes of divers suspended mid-leap against a blank white sky. Shot with a hand-held twin-lens reflex camera at the edge of Lake Michigan in Chicago, the balance and conflict suggested by the series' title is evident in the athlete's sublime contortions.

Questions for Looking:

- What can you tell about how the artist made this image? What do you notice about how the artist used techniques such as lighting, time of day, framing, composition, motion, and timing?
- What moods or feelings are evoked in this work? How do you think the artist achieved this effect?
- What do you think the artist was interested in showing or communicating when he made this work? Why?

Barbara Probst (Germany, b. 1964)



Exposure #42: N.Y.C. Broome & Crosby Streets, 06.09.06, 7:12 p.m., 2006

Barbara Probst's *Exposures* are sets of photographs that depict the same subject from various angles at precisely the same instant. Probst makes the photographs using radio controls, synchronized cable releases, and sometimes multiple photographers. Despite the proximity of the cameras and the simultaneity of their exposures, the resulting images are extremely diverse in style, atmosphere, and content, concretely demonstrating that photographs are highly selective interpretations of reality. Her use of photography to emphasize the schism between reality and artifice exhibits recognition of the fact that, although photography does possess evidentiary value, it is incapable of delivering unambiguous meaning.

Questions for Looking:

- What clues is Probst placing in the images to help the viewer understand that the photographs were all made in the same instant?
- Where do you think these pictures taken? What do you think is happening beyond the edges of the frame?
- Why might the artist choose to photograph both in black and white and color?
- Compare these images as "street photography" with [Yasuhiro Ishimoto's](#) images. Do you see any formal relations that the two sets of work share?

Barbara Probst Inspired Activity

Working in a group, create a scene to photograph from multiple perspectives. Consider choices in color, vantage point, and composition. Set a timer or shout out a countdown so that everyone makes their photograph of the scene at the exact same moment. Take turns to rotate between acting as the model and the photographer so everyone has a chance to play both roles. While



looking at the varied photographs, discuss the role of perspective, and how it influences how we both make and see photographs.



Kenneth Josephson (United States, 1932)



Chicago, 1961

Kenneth Josephson creates images that play with the very notion of photography. Josephson is considered one of the first conceptual photographers, stating: “The *idea* is most important. . . . I 'make,' not take, photographs.”¹ He stages simple interventions in the scenes he photographed, including the use of photographs within photographs. Josephson is also known for highlighting real but fleeting phenomena—such shadows that fall through elevated train tracks that form pockets of sun acting as spotlights on the figures on the street below—that challenge our visual perceptions and our understanding of photographic truth.

Questions for Looking and Discussion:

- Discuss the term “conceptual photography.” Why might artists choose to work in this way?
- Why might Josephson choose to include his own body in some of his images, as we see in *New York State*? What could he be saying about his role as the photographer?
- Consider the layers in Josephson’s works. What do you think the artist is saying about photography in including an image within an image?



Activity: Photograph a Photograph

Select a photograph you already have at home. It can be an image family, a photograph you have made previously, or even an advertisement or image from a fashion magazine. Arrange your photograph within a composition consisting of at least one other element. Consider how Kenneth Josephson and [Alayna Pernell](#) do this, and how the setting and original photograph interact visually. Before making a new image, consider how each visual element within the frame adds to the narrative of the first image. Does the original photograph change in this new context? Are there contrasts in color, lighting, or perspective that give the assemblage interesting layers?

What texture does the new composition have? Share your new images with classmates and discuss your choices in staging the work.

¹ “Kenneth Josephson.” MCA. Accessed January 18, 2023. <https://mcachicago.org/Publications/Websites/Kenneth-Josephson>.

Alayna Pernell (United States, b. 1996)



Alayna Pernell, *With Care to Ms. Maudelle Bass Weston*, 2020

Alayna Pernell also works with making photographs of pre-existing photographs. Pernell created the series *Our Mothers' Gardens* (2020) after months of researching images of Black women in private and institutional photographic collections. Pernell excavates, re-photographs, recaptions, and recontextualizes the works she finds, adding her own body to the images in various ways. In this image, she cradles her hands over a photograph she found in a museum collection made by Edward Weston in 1939 of the dancer Maudell Bass Weston (no relation). In the image, the dancer is photographed nude and on her knees. Pernell's hands seem to guard the figure in the image, extending a gesture of care to the person who otherwise may have had little-to no control over how their image circulates in the world. Yet, Pernell endeavors to do more than offer protection; in choosing an image from an archive where the subject is meeting our gaze, she asks us to consider our own responsibilities in the acts of photographing, collecting, and viewing.

Questions for looking:

- How would you describe the body language and facial expression in this image? What they communicate to you?
- How does the experience of looking at this photograph make you feel?
- Do you consider this piece to be a portrait made by Alayna Pernell, Edward Weston, or both? Can the act of appropriation be an act of creation?

Yasuhiro Ishimoto (Japanese-American, 1921-2012)



Untitled, from Chicago, Chicago, 1958-1961



Chicago, Ishimoto, Yasuhiro, 1962; printed 1983



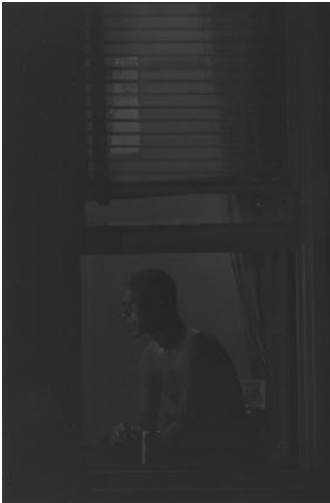
Untitled, from "Chicago, Chicago". Ishimoto, Yasuhiro, 1958-1961

Yasuhiro Ishimoto's portrait of a city, *Chicago, Chicago*, (published as a book in 1969) is a rich study of time and place in which the artist uses environmental details and perspective to question or comment on individuals and their relationships to society at large. His images are greatly informed by his background. Ishimoto was born in San Francisco in 1921. When he was three-years-old, his family moved back to Japan where he lived until he returned to the US in 1939 to study architecture at Northwestern University. Yet, with the onset of World War II intense racism towards people of Japanese descent in the US after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Ishimoto was held at the Amachi Japanese Internment Camp in Colorado from 1942-1944. It was during this time that he took up photography, prompting him to return to Chicago and study photography at the Institute of Design in 1948. While at the ID, Ishimoto photographed extensively on the streets of Chicago, often documenting scenes that showed the inequality and tension between citizens in a very segregated city.

Questions for Looking:

- How might Ishimoto's studies in architecture and design inform his photographs?
- What in the images indicate the time period of these photographs?
- Where is the source of light for each picture? Where is Ishimoto setting up his camera?
- How does your eye travel through the images? How would you describe his choices in perspective?

Roy DeCarava (United States, 1919-2009)



Man in Window, 1978



Dancers, 1956

Working in the same time period, Roy DeCarava photographed daily life in Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance. His intentional use of dark shadows serves many conceptual and formal purposes. Formally, the dark tones can cause the viewer to slow down and see what is present in the image, as the eyes adjust to the darkness as if entering a room with limited light. Conceptually, the work is a commentary on life as a person of color in mid-century America. Up until the 1990s, film emulsion and light meters were calibrated using “Shirley Cards” that were based on light skin tones, making it difficult to see features of people of color in photographs unless several adjustments were made in the camera or darkroom. Instead of enhancing his levels in the darkroom to brighten his subjects, DeCarava instead lowered the levels to exaggerate and celebrate Blackness.

Questions for Looking:

- Compare the pictures with Ishimoto’s made at a similar time. How are they alike or different?
- What details do you notice in the image upon closer look that you did not notice upon initially seeing it? What details do you notice after spending more time with the image? What do these details offer to the narrative?
- Consider the tonality of the image (the range of blacks and whites). What effect does tonality have on the overall mood of images?

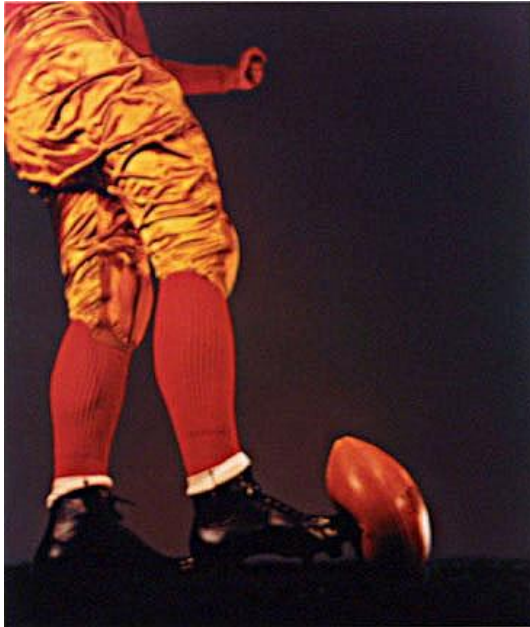
Deeper Reading: The Shirley Card

The Shirley Card was created by Kodak and used between the 1940s and 1990s to calibrate skin tone and light levels in film labs during processing. In 1987, in response to complaints from wood and chocolate manufacturers who could not accurately picture their products, Kodak released its Gold Max 100 film, which had more ability to recognize darker tones. The film was later marketed to Black Americans in the 1990s and new, multi-racial Shirley Cards were released. Yet, the problem of some technologies only recognizing white skin persists. As recent as 2009, one brand of web cameras could not detect people of color.



Kodak Shirley Card, 1976

Harold Edgerton (United States, 1903-1990)



Left to right: *Football Kick*, 1938, printed 1984; images from Harold Edgerton's [journals](#); for reference only; not in the MoCP collection; image courtesy of the Edgerton Digital Collections (EDC) project; © 2010 MIT. Courtesy of MIT Museum.

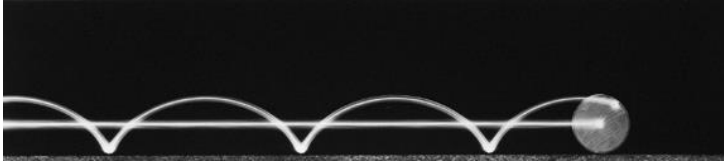


In 1931 Harold Edgerton invented a stroboscopic light that had wide applications in industry as well as the potential to revolutionize photography. This first highly powerful, extremely fast, and reusable flash not only opened new territory for scientific examination, but established a new art form, a new documentary mode, and a new kind of journalism. Edgerton became the first person to illuminate nighttime landscapes and darkened interiors, and his technology could freeze the quickest of actions. *Football Kick* is one of the first color photographs made with the use of a strobe. In his journals, Edgerton wrote about this image: "the ball is inflated to the normal playing pressure. . . . Measurements show that the boot penetrates at least half the diameter of the ball. At the top of the ball, note the dust suspended in mid-air as the rapidly accelerated ball leaves."

Questions for Looking:

- What is photography's relationship to motion? How do you see motion in this image?
- How "truthful" were images before the invention of technologies such as the stroboscope?
- How else do you think the invention of the stroboscope and technologies that captured motion changed the discourse and practice of photography?

Berenice Abbott (United States, 1908-1993)



Left to right: *Cycloid*, from *The Science Pictures* portfolio, 1958-1961; printed 1982; *Barclay Street Station, New York*, 1930; printed 1979

Primarily known for her systematic and richly detailed photographs of New York architecture, Berenice Abbott's series, *Changing New York*, (1935-1939), resolved to create an all-encompassing body of work documenting the city's many sides. The project, funded by the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project, culminated into an abstracted, often graphic, representation of a city on the brink of revolutionary change. Abbott is less-recognized for her photograph of scientific subjects for *Life* and *Science Illustrated* magazines as well as school physics textbooks. In this body of work, Abbot uses the camera to demonstrate complicated scientific principles. Whether photographing buildings or her clusters of soap bubbles, Abbott believed that the photographer's responsibility is to represent truth and the realities of life. For *Cycloid*, she attaches two lights to a rolling ball: one on the edge and one in the center. While rolling the ball across a tabletop, she holds the exposure on her camera, logging the movement of the ball and light to depict basic principles of physics. Both bodies of work demonstrate Abbott's interest in using the camera and light as tools to depict reality.

Questions for Looking:

- Consider a famous quote by Abbott where she states: "Photography doesn't teach you to express your emotions; it teaches you how to see." Compare and contrast this approach to Kenneth Josephson's more interpretive approach. Do you think it is possible to make a truly objective or truthful image? Why or why not?
- Compare and contrast Abbott's two photographs from her bodies of work: Does one series of work represent truth more than the other?

Matthew Finley (United States, 1972)



Untitled #,1 from the *Laying Flowers at your Feet* series, 2016-2019

For his *Laying Flowers at your Feet* series (2016-2019) Matthew Finley layers 12 x 12-inch wet plate collodion tintypes and ambrotypes together to create three-dimensional photographic objects. In mixing glass and aluminum photographic plates, Finley creates dreamlike and mystical quality that speaks to romance and longing.

Questions for Looking:

- What sort of narrative or concept do you see in this photograph?
- How would you describe the mood of this piece? How is this mood achieved through texture, tonality, and composition?
- What role do the shadows play in this photograph?
- What do you think the title of the series means?
- Why might the artist choose to use historical processes instead ones that are more readily available now?

Glossary of Terms:

Vantage Point: This refers to where the photographer stands in relation to his or her subject. It can also refer to the photographer's view or opinion of that subject.

Depth of field: This refers to the distance the camera has from the subject. Depending on your aperture setting, or f-stop setting, objects in the foreground or background appear as either sharp or out of focus. Lower f-stop numbers result in a short—or shallow—depth of field, and larger number results in a longer—or deeper—depth of field.

Contrast and tonality: How dark or light the details of the image appear.

Framing or composition: How one composes an image in the camera's viewfinder. The organization of elements within the image.