Griffin, Tim, “Anthony Pearson,” *Solarizations,* Minneapolis: Midway Contemporary Art, 2009

# *ESSAY BY TIM GRIFFIN*

The narrative arc of Anthony Pearson’s practice is deceptively simple in its beginnings: As a graduate student in photography at the University of California Los Angeles during the late 1990s, he took to the city suburbs with his camera and, inspired by the example of Aaron Siskind, embraced a reductive approach to his medium. Indeed, while teasing out instances of abstraction in this decidedly familiar environment, Pearson sought to eliminate cultural references from his photographs altogether—whether by dwelling on the setting’s landscapes in dark silhouette, or on its intricately detailed material surfaces whose contours, given Pearson’s perspectiveless compositions, would never resolve themselves before the eye into any recognizable form. In this regard, the young artist could be said to have been following very closely Siskind’s most famous axiom: “We see in terms of our education. We look at the world and see what we have learned to believe is there,” he advises. “But, as photographers, we must learn to relax our beliefs.”[1] Yet it is precisely here that Pearson’s story takes an unexpected turn. For anyone following Siskind’s example so closely would inevitably grasp that even the act of generating otherworldly images using the manmade materials of this one is ultimately an academic exercise. Even *abstraction* is by now a cultural convention, something infinitely decipherable and repeatable, and therefore susceptible to the charge—more often made in postmodern circles about figurative images—that every photograph we could possibly take has somehow already been made. But rather than make pictures about pictures, like so many other photographers before him (both figurative and abstract), Pearson subsequently turned his camera upward and began to photograph the sky. One can almost hear the student saying to himself, *There’s nowhere to go from here but…*

On the one hand, of course, such a move was merely a logical next step in Pearson’s process of reduction. Having rented a five-hundred-millimeter lens, he pointed it toward the sun and photographed the resulting flares with the specific aim of producing a radically minimal abstraction. Yet the true significance of this maneuver became clear only through its accidental consequences: The light filtering through the lens was so magnified as to burn a tiny opening in the curtain of the camera, rendering nothing so much as a literal *punctum* within the photographic mechanism itself; it was, to borrow Roland Barthes’s definition of the term as it pertains to the experience of looking at a photographic image, a “sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice.”[2] And Pearson’s activities would come to revolve around this cavity. Digitally scanning the negatives from these different shots of the sky, he isolated the minuscule flaw located in each one and enlarged it, before pushing the ensuing image through a battery of technical operations, stretching its definition in terms of both color contrast and saturation. Concentric rings of jagged lines formed around the luminescent blemish as the image’s solid black ground became uneven, no longer able to convey the original quality of gradated light. Each picture, in other words, gradually began to fall apart.

It is at this point, perhaps, that Barthes’s formulation finds something other than a literal manifestation in Pearson’s work and assumes instead a more psychological gravity. The *punctum*, according to the French theorist, is that detail of a picture that reaches out and startles us, though it lies beyond any kind of studied form or disciplinary field of cultural knowledge; as such, it has an ambiguous relationship to memory and origin, requiring a subtly paradoxical reciprocity with the viewer. “Whether or not it is triggered,” he says, “it is an addition: it is what I add to the photograph and *what is nonetheless already there.*”[3] (To wit: A necklace caught on film might lead one to remember a person from one’s own past; an incongruous gesture by an individual in the picture might lead one to speculate on his or her life. Either way, there arises, he says, the sense of a “subtle beyond—as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see.”)[4] Pearson’s procedures would initially seem to resonate strongly with such reciprocity. After all, when the photographer manipulates his scanned negatives, causing distortion and pixilation through different digital operations, he is, in the

2 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography,* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc., 1981), 27.

3 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 55.

4 Ibid., 59.

most basic sense, grappling with the conditions of memory. The aesthetic event of luminous sphere and circles in his “flares”—as he calls these works when printed—arises through imperfection; but this is just to say that the phenomenon reveals itself when information contained within the original image is made to exceed its platform. In other words, the event becomes apparent only when data becomes too complex for interpretation by a given rendering program, or falls beyond its boundaries—or, to speak from the converse perspective of a viewer, when one begins to see the contours of what is being lost. And here the *punctum* finds a poetic addendum in the language of digital imagery, since the technical nomenclature given to such systemic flaws is similarly paradoxical: *artifacts*, a word implying that the deterioration of an image gives rise to some relic from history. Indeed, the term suggests that it is the very loss of memory—the absence of information from an image—that gives us some impression of the past, or contains it, or allows for our projection of it. (The process is actually described with the gerund, *artifacting*.) This formulation represents a kind of inversion of Barthes’s logic and might, in fact, arise in any move from the analog to digital in photography. If Barthes speaks of a “subtle beyond” prompted by any picture—a kind of “blindness” that he says doubles our perception of any photographic image—he is describing the audience’s activity of remembering: The photograph makes us sense something missing, and we will fill that gap for ourselves through memory. In Pearson’s images, on the other hand, there is no such “remembering” to be done. What’s missing in the image is already there, in plain view, implanted and diagrammed in the picture in advance of any viewer. The “beyond” is overtly within the image; the addition is already made in the subtraction. Against any horizon line for vision, Pearson’s work summons art historian Douglas Crimp’s conundrum in his original essay for the 1977 exhibition “Pictures,” when he writes of photography and desire by simply turning to the dictionary definition: “Memory is what I forget with.”[5]

During the past decade, Pearson has steadily produced these “flares,” using the same five negatives as a theme for his variations. While conjuring a kind of suspended time within his continuing practice, these works—produced in extreme vertical and horizontal prints and typically displayed in sets ranging from two to five pieces—also provide, according to Pearson, breaks, or pauses,

5 Douglas Crimp, *Pictures*, exh. cat. (New York: Artists Space, 1977), 10.

within his larger installations of photography and sculpture. Given their dark complexion, however, it is difficult not to see them as a kind of “negative” counterpart for the “positive” of these other pictures and objects, which are apt to feature sumptuous hues or shining bronze. And, in fact, when seen in such tandem, the flares clearly not only provide a kind of template for these other works (much as photographic negatives do for printed images) but also prompt an awareness of perpetual play within Pearson’s oeuvre between positive and negative—a play that mimics and describes the procedures of photography and, shadowing the paradoxes of memory as well, of subjective experience.

In counterpoint with Pearson’s flares are his most familiar endeavor today: a continuing series of abstract prints, each of which begins with the artist’s using India ink, acrylic paint, and spray paint on a small sheet of reflective aluminum foil to fashion a composition after a different mode of abstraction from throughout the twentieth century. Some instances vaguely conjure the intricate matrices of pattern and decoration artists like Joyce Kozloff; others the severe gesturalism of Franz Klein; and still others the thin vertical slashes of Lucio Fontana. None of the renderings is a strict appropriation (the artist actually says they are all “disaffected”), and one might reasonably think that their impact on viewers would be similar to that of photographs for Barthes—prompting, that is, each individual viewer to sift through his or her own mental archives in search of semblances.[6] Pearson’s next procedures, however, undermine any such analysis by itself. Affixing the sheets of foil to a wall in the alley behind his Los Angeles studio, he adds still more fields and striations of color before photographing the compositions in natural light. These shots provide Pearson with negatives that he subsequently solarizes, again pushing the images’ tonality and contrasts, altering the information of the images, isolating certain of their aspects, forcing them, this time, through specific filters of chemical and light. The results are often seductive, but only while also provocatively ambiguous: Looking at the finished work, one has the sense of information having been detached from the image plane. Ranges of the spectrum seem missing even while implied by the subtle shades on view; one is continually subject to visual slips, unsure of depth or coloration in the pictures, unable to pin down any depicted object or distinguish ground from its mediation. (Positive and negative seem not only reversed through



6 Author’s interview with the artist, April 9, 2009. Both this quote and the description of Pearson’s process more generally are indebted to the artist’s generosity in conversation.

solarization but also embedded within each other, indistinct in their properties.)[7] A good example for comparison here is James Welling, with whom Pearson also studied: If the elder artist designed and photographed small sets to generate the “effects of the real”—demonstrating how lighting, scale, and camera can prompt a sense of veracity in audiences, who would project scenes into the resulting pictures—here Pearson generates the “effects” of abstraction, both in terms of history and phenomenology.

As if to amplify questions around the latter, the artist frequently pairs these photographic prints with a sculpture—roughly of similar scale and typically of bronze—whose making is also steeped in the logic of photographic processes, moving from positive to negative and back again. To begin, Pearson often pours plaster into a mold and makes a cast, which then provides the basis for a second mold that serves as the “negative” for the final work. Some of these pieces are obviously poured, harboring biomorphic folds along their sides; others are more hard-edged, apparently chiseled by the artist at some point in the process into Precisionist form; and still others are attenuated in shape, with hollow cores delineated by thin lengths of metal. Here again—as if functioning in parallel with the pictures’ historical semblances—there seems a doubling effect, with glittering objects echoing the aluminum foil of the prints. Indeed, one might mistake that ground as belonging to the sculptural surface, with the pairing fostering the sense that object and image are inextricably bound—making of the sculpture a kind of false trace. The only true connection they have, in fact, is perspectival, since the sculpture is typically placed by Pearson a few inches in front of the photograph, establishing a physical matrix defined by degrees of separation: the distance of viewer to object; of object to image; of camera lens to painted surface.

And this sequence, it might be said, only echoes the procedures that produced sculpture and picture alike. In this way, the actual scene begins to retreat before the eye and body, enfolded as it is within the sequence of steps designed to produce it, or, in any picture by itself, to retrieve it. (In the play of positive and negative, for instance, the object in the camera’s eye is, in effect, pushed away.) Coming more into view in real space is the dynamic of perceiving form—the abstraction of perception itself as an exchange between subject and object, each



7 As Pearson describes the images when they no longer openly signal their solarization: “They begin to look like plates in an old book—one of those cheap, old catalogues where they never used to publish the paintings in color, but would just do them in black and white.” Author’s interview with the artist, April 9, 2009.

one making an impression upon the other. “The photographs and sculptures in arrangement,” as Pearson says, “become confused.”[8] And so one becomes increasingly aware of the abstraction’s presence among the figures of life, even as, of course, the very scale and ambiguity of these works also makes all these operations seem possibly the figment of one’s imagination.

8 Author’s interview with the artist, April 9, 2009.