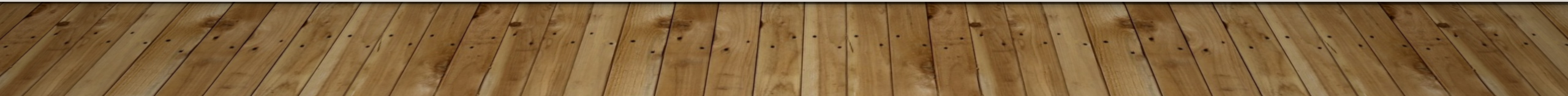


ABSTRACT PHOTOGRAPHY

***“ABSTRACTION ALLOWS MAN TO SEE WITH HIS MIND WHAT HE CANNOT SEE
PHYSICALLY WITH HIS EYES” — ARSHILE GORKY***

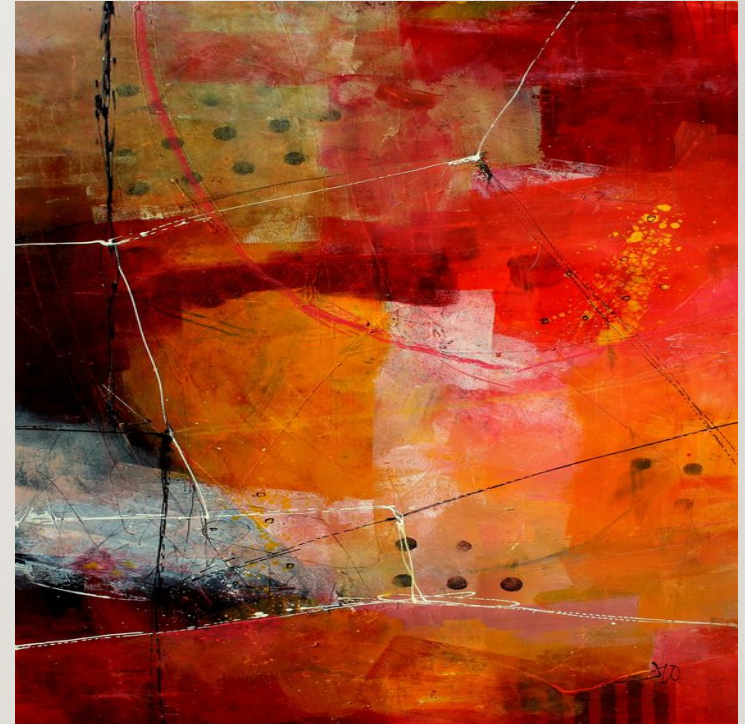
Glenn Bloodworth

September 2019



WHAT IS IT? WHY SHOULD I CARE?

- Interest in abstract art lies in ability to inspire our curiosity about the reaches of imagination, & in potential to create something unique.
- Challenge to appreciating or making abstract artwork has been questioning whether it is a legitimate art form - *“Is abstract art really ‘art’ at all?”*
 - *“Its only paint thrown onto a canvas!”*
 - *“\$2M for that junk - my dog [or at least my 6 year old child] could produce that!”*
 - *“What is it a picture of?”*



WHAT IS IT? WHY SHOULD I CARE?

- Some like it, others outright hate it, still others do not understand exactly what it is. Some struggle because they try to interpret shapes & colours in terms of identifying recognizable objects, rather than looking at how parts of image relate to each other & succeed or don't in creating special feeling in terms of visual design.
- Has been around for well over 100 years. Some even assert it started with cave paintings thousands of years ago. It has held its own against changing art movements, manifestos, & testimonials for centuries.
- Make the assumption in invite that you are at least curious about this perplexing art form; one that evades definition & easy artistic classification.



WHAT IS IT: TRADITION, MYTHS, & CONFUSION

- **Definition:** Strictly, word 'abstract' means to separate or withdraw something from something else. In visual art is applied to art based on object, figure or landscape, where forms have been simplified or schematised. Means pulling a depiction away, at least to a large degree, from literal, representation points. Some call this “non-representational art”.
 - Is also applied to art that uses forms, such as geometric shapes, which have no source in an external visual reality. Some artists of this 'pure' abstraction prefer terms such as “*concrete art*” or “*non-objective art*”. But in practice word 'abstract' is used across the board & the distinction between the two is not always obvious.
 - Abstract art is often seen as carrying a moral dimension; standing for virtues such as order, purity, simplicity & spirituality.
- **Highlights:**
 - **Initial signs** - Abstraction can be clearly traced from 19thC Impressionism, to Post-Impressionism, & to Cubism. All helped realize idea art could be non-representative.
 - **The movement** - Since early 1900s has formed a central stream of modern art. Modern abstract art born early 20th C when artists began to create simplified objects with little or no reference to the “real” world.
 - **The present** - In art world in many forms; two & three dimensional, vast or small, using many materials, in concert with representational art or completely abstract, & generally focused via visual qualities like color, form, & texture.

WHAT IS IT: TRADITION, MYTHS, & CONFUSION

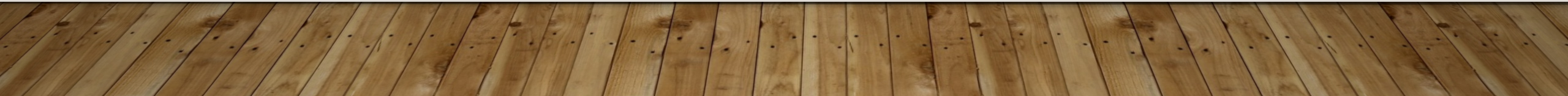
(CONT'D)

- While he had created paintings of floating, non-representational forms as early as 1912, Wassily Kandinsky's first full abstract watercolor: **Untitled**, 1913. Shed all references to any known forms, conventions of material representation, & all narrative allusions.
- He is often credited by historians as producing the first abstracts - artworks that fully abandon representational Western European painting tradition.
- His work brought abstraction to America during the Armory Show in 1913.



WHAT IS **ABSTRACT PHOTOGRAPHY**

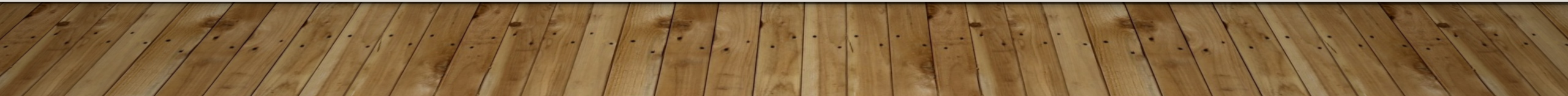
- Ambiguous term, without highly accepted definition. Like painting has also been termed 'non-objective'.
- Occupies sliding scale from broad representational work with abstractual elements, to wholly non-representation images.
- Involves wide variety of photographic materials, processes & equipment.
- Not always created via camera use; can involve manipulation of photosensitive materials like paper & cloth.



WHAT IS **ABSTRACT PHOTOGRAPHY** (CON'T)

Evolution of Abstract Photography:

- Has not been a 'movement' in sense of wide-spread photographic movements alia when photography evolved from its late 1800s 'Pictorialism' roots into 1900s "Modernism" or 'Straight Photography'.
- Primarily driven by pioneering explorations of individual photographer, intertwined with 'compositional' optics:
 - Paul Strand & Alfred Stieglitz's 'Pictorialism' with traditional methods of photographing real-life scenes & objects but in ways emphasizing their "*abstractual qualities*";
 - Others, like Christian Schad, Man Ray, & Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, made abstract "photograms" – contact prints created directly on paper without a camera or negative.



WHAT IS **ABSTRACT PHOTOGRAPHY** (CON'T)

Evolution of **Abstract Photography** (cont'd):

- Also propelled by rise of 'abstract art' in visual art world from early 20th C onwards, & its various associated genres – **Cubism**, **Vorticism**, & **Dada** movements, & later on by **Abstract Expressionism**, **Minimalism**, & **Conceptualism**.
- Early 'abstract photography' works, like Anna Atkins **Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions** (1843), were fascinating if inadvertent works of abstract art. Beautiful patterns later viewed with wonder by avant-garde artists as presaging their own experiments in abstract photography.

WHAT IS **ABSTRACT PHOTOGRAPHY** (CON'T)

- Straight Photography emergence early 1900s - idea of capturing subject with clarity that camera can achieve, utilizing unique merits of medium – sharp focus & close cropping – rather than defining photography style by referencing painting. At same time striking use of shadow, & of clear lines & shapes, facilitate photographic move towards abstraction.
- Paul Strand's **Wall Street** (1915) – crisp, direct treatment of recognizable subject & a formally prominent emphasis on interlocking shapes & lines.



WHAT IS **ABSTRACT PHOTOGRAPHY** (CON'T)

- 1st artist credited with intentional abstract photographs was Alvin Langdon Coburn's **Vortographs** (1916).
- Intricate patterns of light & line, & cascading tiers of crystalline shapes. Generated by kaleidoscopic contraption Coburn invented to refute idea photography, in its accurate capture of real-world scenes, was antithetical to abstraction. Camera lens attachment made of three mirrors, clamped together in triangle.



WHAT IS **ABSTRACT PHOTOGRAPHY** (CON'T)

- Concept evolves – Paul Strand credited with the 1st intentional American photographic abstraction, his **Abstraction: Twin Lakes, Connecticut** (1916).
- Porch shadows & tipped-over tables are not intrinsically modern. But Strand's picture of them is; for it does not depend upon recognizable imagery for its effect. Rather focuses on precise relations of forms within the frame.



WHAT IS ABSTRACT PHOTOGRAPHY (CON'T)

- Further evolution – Alfred Stieglitz 1922-1934 cloud image series **Songs in the Sky**; consciously alluding to music & synesthetic credo of painter Wassily Kandinsky's abstracts **Composition VII** (1913). Retitles series **Equivalents**.
- Art historian Sarah Greenough described them as *“photographs of shapes that have ceded their identity, in which Stieglitz obliterated all references to reality normally found in a photograph.”*



WHAT IS **ABSTRACT PHOTOGRAPHY** (CON'T)

- Stieglitz's & Strand's works influence next generation of modern photographers, especially in 1940s – like Henry Holmes Smith, Minor White, Frederick Sommer, & Aaron Siskind. Begin to create abstract work using landscapes & found objects; while continuing representational imagery the photographs have a formal effect increasingly disconnected from representational source.
- Minor White's **Sound of One Hand** (1957), fully disconnects from source.



WHAT IS **ABSTRACT PHOTOGRAPHY** (CON'T)

- Abstract photography also evident in evolution of aerial photography. 'Documentary' style photos from mid 1850s 'hot-air' balloons, to William Garnett focus on artistic possibilities in 1950s imagery of housing lots & machine-harvest fields, demonstrate abstract patterning. Produced views not normally seen until recently. Now has wider currency in commercial & popular art (c.f., E. Burtynsky's work).
- Getty Museum: Garnett's "*photographs resemble abstract expression painting ... as landscapes, they do not have the conventional grounding of a horizon line. All reveal astonishing patterns not normally seen from the ground.*"



WHERE ARE WE TODAY?

Pure 'Abstract':

- Not based on a picture of something. Does not attempt to be an external reality.
- More a focus on emotion.
- Seeks to achieve its effect using shapes, forms, colours, &/or textures.
- Example: Wolfgang Tillmans, 1st non-English artist to win Turner Prize, 2000. Abstractions are studies in color, as seen in the almost magenta liquid lines of **Urgency XXII** (2006).



Wolfgang Tillmans, **Urgency XXII**, 2006, Ink-jet print, 94 × 141 ¾",
Collection - Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

WHERE ARE WE TODAY? (CONT'D)

Ambiguous Abstraction: Images refer to something - initial capture of something as base subject then 'altered' to obscure the reference point.

- **In Praise of Shadows** Hiroshi Sugimoto had camera slowly capture burning light over several hours. Result is mysterious series of shots – one does not know they are of candles unless told. Reflecting on domestication of fire & illuminating night with flames, marking our ascendancy over other species, on summer nights he opened a window letting in the night breeze, then lighting a candle he opened his camera lens. After several hours of wavering in breeze, the candle burned out. The candle's life varied on any given night – short, intensely burning nights & long, constantly glowing nights. Each different, yet equally captivating in their afterglow.



WHERE ARE WE TODAY? (CONT'D)

Ambiguous Abstraction (cont'd):

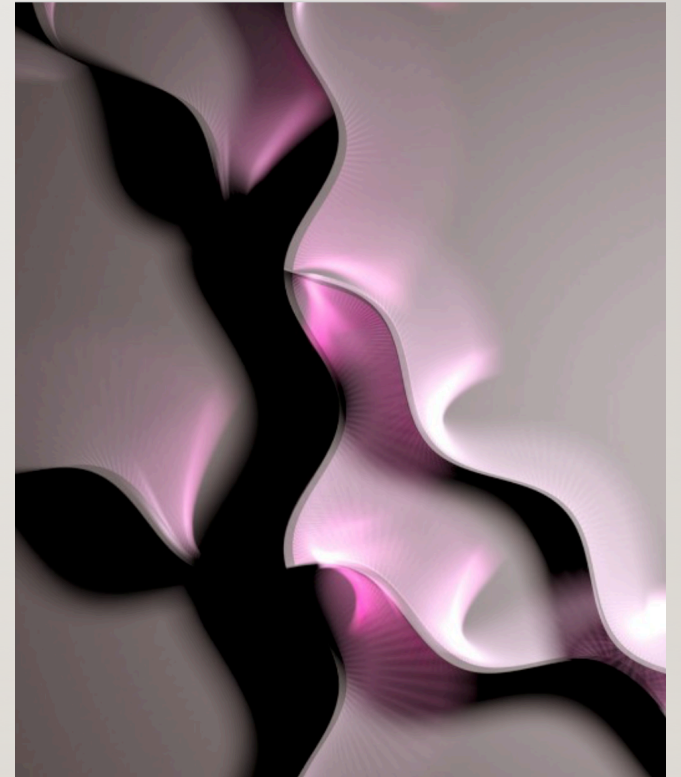
- Subject can also be so manipulated as to be no longer a photo of anything. Not an abstraction at the point of taking the image, but becomes abstract at artist's intention via the act of heavy manipulation. E.g. Minor White's "***Empty Head***".



WHERE ARE WE TODAY? (CONT'D)

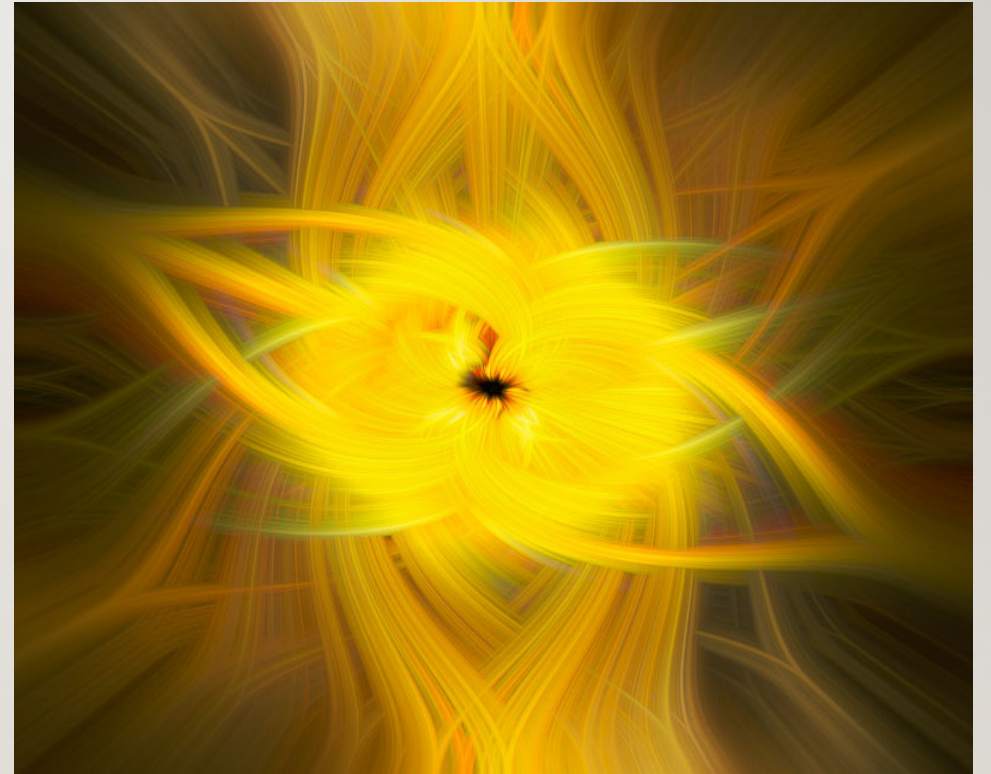
Ambiguous Abstraction (cont'd): The Photogram

- Continues tradition of one of the key advances of abstract photography – realization cameras are not required to make photographs.
- Contemporary photographers such as Thomas Ruff's monumental digital photograms, Floris Neusüss's photograms with organic lifeforms placed in contact with photosensitive sheet (at times using lightning for exposure process,) & Marco Breuer who scratches & abrades the surface of his photograms.
- Thomas Ruff, **r.phg.II**, (2014), c-print, 94^{1/2} x 72^{13/16}".



CONCLUSION

- Important trend in contemporary photography continues to push medium boundaries, while admittedly very taxing art expression. Does not rely on easily identifiable objects or scenes & does not necessarily try to be 'beautiful'. Rather attempts to convey a challenging message by means of symbolism & suggestion.
- There are as many 'good' vs 'poorly executed' works as in other art forms. "*Couple of clicks on software filter buttons does not make good Abstract Photography*" [CAPA Judging Manual, 2017].
- While so-called '*rules of composition*', etc. may not be all that relevant in Abstract Photography, most believe the work should at least reflect regard for principles of visual design.



G. Bloodworth, **In The Beginning**, 2009