

Karen Zalamea

Spectres of Desire

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We are tokens of cellular recall laddered through spines
and follicles, spectres of desire and variation

Laisha Rosnau

In this most recent body of work, Karen Zalamea does not so much take photographs as she abets a fugitive assembly of light and form. She is one of a number of artists pursuing a self-conscious inquiry into the material and mechanical conditions of photography at a time of its rapid digital transformation. Her practice concerns itself with analogue processes, with the methodical, unhurried techniques of large-format photography, and with the photograph as object.

Following Zalamea's earlier investigations, the *Light & Variation* series might be understood simultaneously as an exploration of perception and of the means of exploring that perception. In the controlled setting of her studio, the artist assembles a variety of materials—all associated with the reflections, refraction, or amplification of light—into formal arrangements for the camera's eye. In these arrangements, light source, lens, and object conjoin to produce rich fields of prismatic pattern, colour, and the optical hum of *moiré*. The resulting photographs are without reference to a pre-existing image world: as artifacts of photographic events, performed by and for the camera, they are not "abstractions" but rather concretions of the pictorial possibilities within photography. To borrow the words of artist and thinker Walead Beshty, these photographs are "not reformations of some original object or phenomena, but are the phenomena they themselves describe."

Since analogue photography is, quite literally, the luminous trace of what was in front of the camera at the moment the photograph was made, the argument goes that it confirms its referent's reality, just as a thumbprint confirms the reality of the body that formed it. In this highly seductive line of thinking, the photograph is inevitably "haunted" by its referent, and is thus a marker of absence. Zalamea's works offer a quiet refutation of this logic, and return our attention to the matter of the photograph itself. As records of a fleeting material interaction, more concerned with means than with meanings, performing rather than informing, they are assertions of presence, not absence. Even the chromatic aberrations that surface in several of the photographs—that deep cerulean blue indicating the limits of the camera's technical capabilities have been reached—become equal actants in a perceptual demonstration.

The above-quoted lines of Laisha Rosnau's poem, from which this exhibition's title is drawn, suggest a haptic marking of time and space, an assertion of heuristic knowing through a confederation of discrete, but deeply connected elements. Karen Zalamea's photographic process enacts a similar set of assertions, through slow and considered contact with the medium's most basic, and yet seemingly ineffable elements.

Kimberly Phillips

Works Cited

Walead Beshty, "On the Conditions of Production of the Multi-Sided Pictures Works 2006-2009)," in Lyle Rexer, *The Edge of Vision: The Rise of Abstraction in Photography* (New York: Aperture, 2009), 282-285.
Gottfried Jäger, Rolf H. Krauss, Beate Reese, *Concrete Photography / Kronkrete Fotografie* (Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 2005).
Laisha Rosnau, "Migratory Paths," *Pluck* (Gibsons: Nightwood Editions, 2014).

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