

# Light and Sight

A SHOW AT THE TATE MODERN EXPLORES THE HISTORY OF ABSTRACTION IN PHOTOGRAPHY. BY JOHN DOREMAN



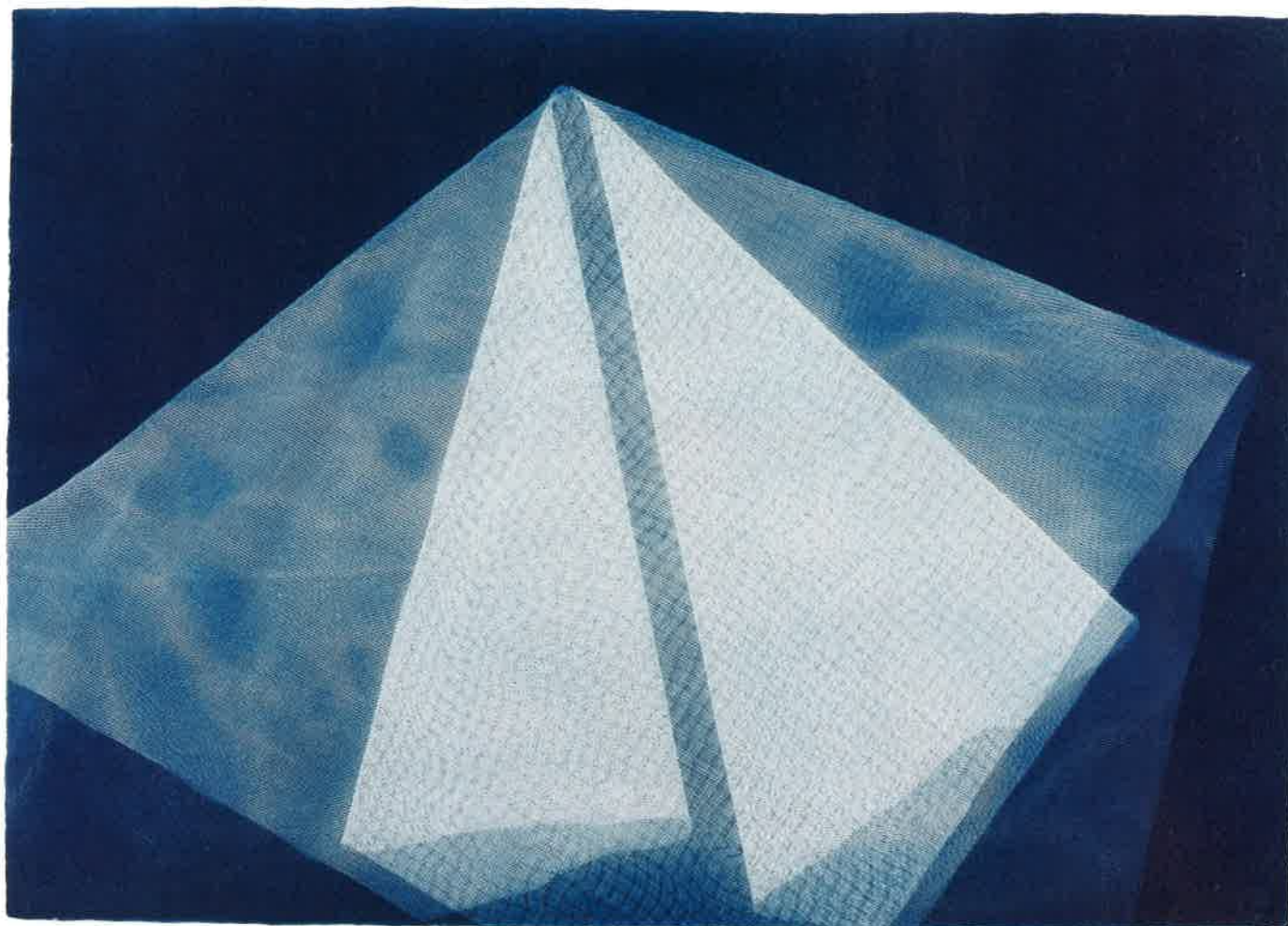
From left: Wassily Kandinsky, *Swinging*, 1925, oil paint on board, 705 x 502 mm.; Alvin Langdon Coburn, *Vortograph*, 1917, photograph, gelatin silver print on paper, 283 x 214 mm.



EVEN THOUGH it once threatened to make painting and drawing obsolete and put artists out of work, photography is, at the end of the day, just another art medium. Almost two centuries' worth of experimentation with using light to make images has demonstrated this beyond a shadow of a doubt. The greater the number of possibilities explored, the clearer it becomes that photography can express any intention, can serve any purpose that an artist may have in mind. So there is nothing inherently surprising or out of place about the notion of "abstract photography," despite photography's (basically ill-deserved) reputation as a literal transcriber of "reality." And in fact, since around 1910, when abstract art debuted, photographers, too, have been making non-representational

works, using a wide variety of techniques. A current exhibition at the Tate Modern in London, "Shape of Light: 100 Years of Photography and Abstract Art" (through October 14) chronicles this relatively little-known aspect of the history of the medium, juxtaposing photographs with paintings and sculpture to show the parallel development. Almost 300 works by 100 artists are on view, including several by contemporary artists that were made specifically to be included in the show.

The first abstract photographs emerged out of the transition from Pictorialism to modernism, and Alfred Stieglitz's Gallery 291 in New York, where photography was shown alongside modernist art from Europe and America, each with equal dignity, was one of the most important incubators. At this early stage, photographers



achieved abstraction mainly by manipulating the camera's point of view. For example, in 1909 the American photographer George Seeley, a member of the Pictorialist circle of F. Holland Day, made an image of a snowy field (*Winter Landscape*) that zooms in so that all one sees is a black shadow against a white background. Emmanuelle de l'Ecotais, one of the authors of the Tate exhibition's catalogue, credits *Winter Landscape* as "the first abstract photograph." In 1912 the American/English photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn, one of the stars of Pictorialism, made a picture of New York's Madison Square Park by taking his camera to a high window of a skyscraper and shooting directly downward. The result, the famous photo *The Octopus*, depicts the intersecting footpaths of the park (also under snow) as an abstracted

geometric pattern rather than as an element of an urban landscape. In revolutionary-era Russia, Alexander Rodchenko used innovative camera positioning as a major strategy in his campaign to revolutionize vision. Shooting from unaccustomed angles, he rendered both natural and industrial scenes abstractly rather than descriptively. Rodchenko wrote, "Painters conventionally rendered trees 'from the navel' for hundreds of years, and photographers followed them. If I photograph a tree from the bottom up like an industrial object, a chimney, it is a revolu-

From top: Barbara Kasten, *Photogenic Painting, Untitled 74/13*, 1974, photograph, salted paper print, 558 x 762 mm.; Joan Miró, *Painting*, 1927, tempera and oil paint on canvas, 972 x 1302 mm.







From top: Maya Rochat, *A Rock Is A River*, 2013, installation at Tate Modern; James Welling, *Untitled*, 1986, photograph, C-print on paper, 254 x 203 mm.



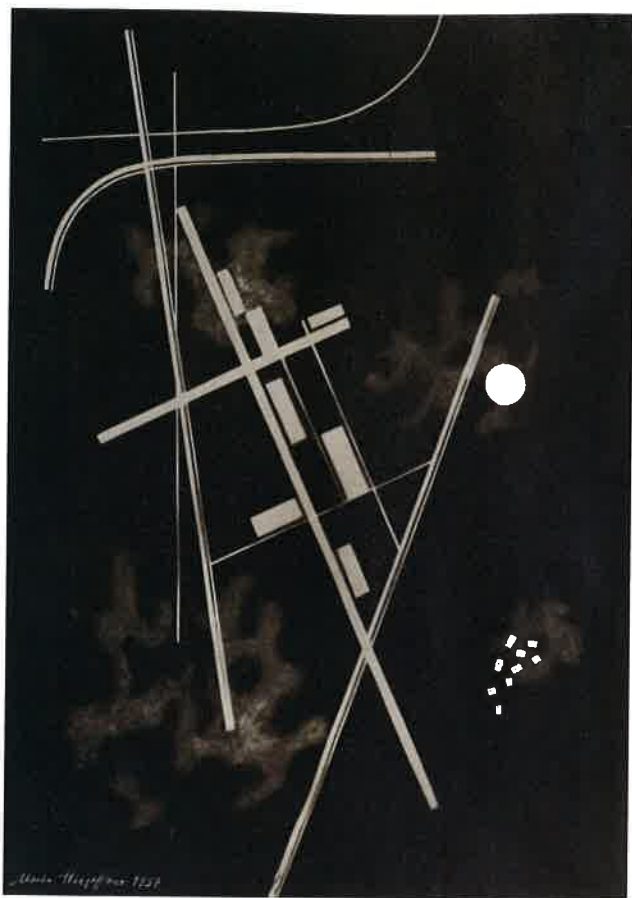
tion in the eyes of conformists and old lovers of landscape."

Another path to abstraction involved manipulating the image itself. In 1916, Coburn invented the Vortoscope, a gadget made of mirrors that fit over a camera's lens to break the image up into kaleidoscopic fragments and reassemble them in a new way. The resulting "vortographs" were photographic equivalents of Cubist paintings, a type of abstraction that takes representation as a springboard from which to launch into an alternate visual reality. Not surprisingly, these experiments were conducted under the influence of Vorticism, an English avant-garde literary movement of which the American-born writer Ezra Pound was a major proponent. Pound actually worked with Coburn on the creation of a series of vortographs. Another approach was taken by Pierre Dubreuil, a little-known amateur photographer in France. In 1911 he took an image of a railroad car and layered the negative over an over again during the printing process to create a print from which

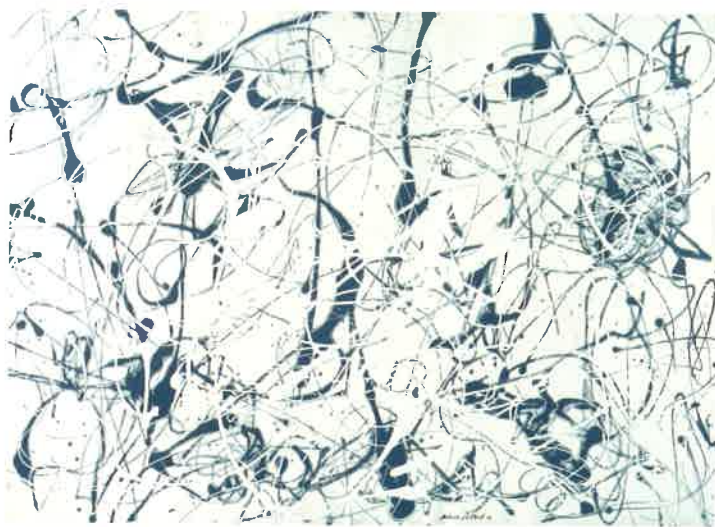
nearly all traces of literal representation are removed. The result he aptly titled *Interpretation Picasso: The Railway*. In 1930s Shanghai, Luo Bonian cut photographic prints into pieces, rearranged the fragments, and then photographed the results to achieve an abstract, geometric result.

Abstraction could also be achieved by removing the lens from the process entirely, allowing light to act directly on the sensitive material, whether film or plate. This method is usually termed the photogram, although some practitioners, with overly bold claims to originality, named the results after themselves—Christian Schad's schadographs and Man Ray's rayographs. Schad, a Weimar-era German artist better known for his cruelly precise portraits, collected bits of trash and objets trouvés and scattered them across the photographic plate; the ensuing images were abstract in the sense that decontextualized collages, like the "Merz" paintings of Kurt Schwitters, were abstract. Man Ray did similar work, adding a Surrealist dimension by



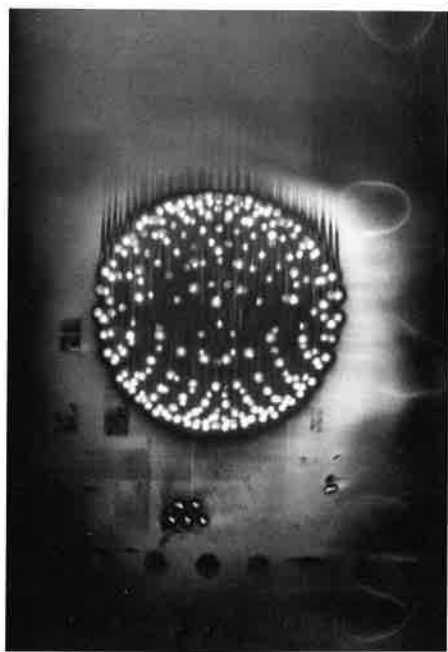


Clockwise from top left: Marta Hoepffner, *Homage to de Falla*, 1937, photograph, gelatin silver print on paper, 387 x 278 mm.; Maya Rochat, *A Rock Is A River (META RIVER)*, 2017; Jackson Pollock, *Number 23*, 1948, enamel on gesso on paper, 575 x 784 mm.; Man Ray, *Unconcerned Photograph*, 1959.





From top: Otto Steinert, *Luminogram II*, 1952, photograph, gelatin silver print on paper, 302 x 401 mm.; Antony Cairns, *LDN5\_051*, 2017.

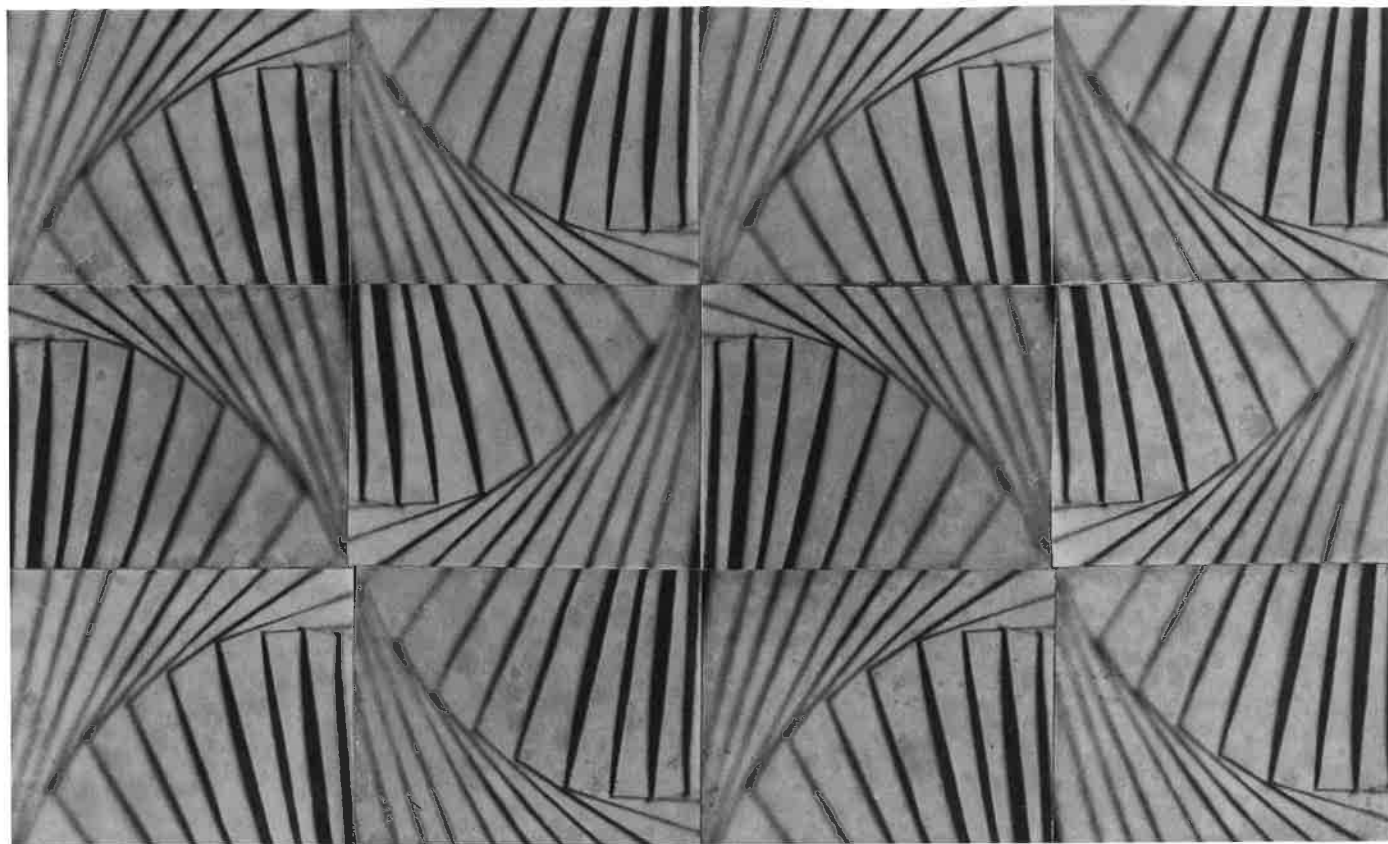


titling his works with poetic phrases that teased the brains of his viewers. One photograph in the Tate show, Marta Hoepffner's *Homage to Kandinsky* (1937), uses the hybrid of photography, collage, and assemblage to create a composition that looks like a black and white version of one of the Russian master's "non-objective" paintings from 20-odd years earlier.

After World War II, some abstract photographers seemed to seek order even as abstract painters such as Jackson Pollock embraced expressionistic wildness. The American photographer Aaron Siskind, who began making abstract images in the late 1940s, wrote in the 1960s that his intention was that each photograph be "an altogether new object ... whose basic condition is order


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... unlike the world of events and actions whose permanent condition is change and disorder." In this he echoed the long-forgotten Dubreuil, who decades earlier had stated that "chance is the enemy of the photographer." Other photographers, such as Otto Steinert and Arthur Siegel, used lens-

less techniques to "paint with light" in ways that suggest Pollock's drippings.

From the '60s on, the major trend in abstract photography is toward material innovation. Photographers such as Barbara Kasten, Jay DeFeo, John Divola, and James Welling blur the categories of photography, painting, printmaking, and sculpture. No longer just about form, light, and shadow, abstract photography bursts into color, aided by an increasingly diverse raft of techniques. The contemporary Japanese photographer Daisuke Yokota (who created several works expressly for the Tate show) exemplifies this kind of experimentation, which leaves traditional photography far behind. He develops, prints, re-shoots, burns, and layers, over and over again, so that the final result, a swirling congeries of colors, constitutes a sort of hyper-photogram. 

Clockwise from top: Luo Bonian, *Untitled*, 1930s; Edward Ruscha, *Gilmore Drive-In Theater - 6201 W. Third St.*, 1967, printed 2013, photograph, gelatin silver prints on paper, 356 x 279 mm.; Pierre Dubreuil, *Interpretation Picasso: The Railway*, circa 1911, photograph, gelatin silver print on paper, 238 x 194 mm.

