THE Spiral of ARTIFICIALITY

Allan McCollum,
**Photo from T.V. with
Painting #10**, 1982-84.
Courtesy
John Weber Gallery

Allan McCollum,
Perpetual Photo #10,
1982-84.
Silver print, 10″ × 8″.
Courtesy
John Weber Gallery

THE **S**piral of ARTIFICIALITY

Cindy Bernard

Dianne Blell

Ellen Brooks

Nancy Burson

Ellen Carey

Barbara Kasten

Pascal Kern

Vera Lehndorff
& Holger Trülzsch

Allan McCollum

Mark Morrisroe

George Rousse

Dick Schlefer

David Seidner

Andres Serrano

Paul Laster

Renée Riccardo

Guest Curators

Hallwalls,
Buffalo, New York

The
Spiral
of
Artificiality

November 7 to
December 19, 1987

Forward

The Spiral of Artificiality is the fifth exhibition sponsored by Hallwalls' Visiting Curators Program. With generous support from the Museum Program of the National Endowment for the Arts, this program enables artists and independent curators to implement new exhibitions which critically examine significant aspects of contemporary art. This provides a much needed outlet for experimental curatorial projects while enhancing the diversity and quality of Hallwalls' Exhibitions Program.

I wish to thank curators Paul Laster and Renée Riccardo, and essayist Deborah Bershad for offering us an exhibition and catalogue of exceptional interest.

The Spiral of Artificiality expands our understanding of photography in its relationship to both history and current critical issues. In addition, I offer my gratitude to all of Hallwalls staff; with special thanks to Patrick Mills, Gallery Assistant, and Diane Wiedenbeck, Office Manager.

Catherine Howe
Exhibitions Program
Director
Hallwalls

Ellen Carey,
Untitled, 1987.
Polaroid print, 24 × 20″.
Collection International
Polaroid Corporation,
Cambridge, Mass.

A R T I F I C I A L I T Y

Photography, during the 150 years since its invention, has frequently been excluded from the sacred precincts of the arts. The aesthetic value of photography, according to some early critics, was located simply in its usefulness to the clearly demarcated and carefully guarded sphere of painting. Photography was to operate outside the limits of art, and yet act as a corrective to the creative process and critical reception of art. It would correct by increasing the public's familiarity with "the masterpieces of painting," and by providing artists with materials.[1]

The exclusion of photography from art depended in part on the fact that the photographic process was, in comparison with the arts of drawing or painting, a mechanical one, relying more on the eye than on the touch of the image maker. But it was as well the "realism" of the earliest products of photography that enabled criticism to define photography as a middle term between nature and culture. A cultural process, photography's products seemed so true to life that they were used as natural images, as a "means of study (of nature) in the arts of painting and design."[2] The literalness of the photograph guaranteed, in a manner paralleling sketches directly from nature, the artist's reliance on nature. For photography, like nature, had "only one style to employ in production."[3]
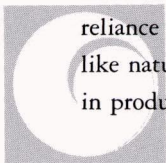
This concept of photography as a zero degree medium — a representation without style — has endured and shaped our own understanding of photography's aesthetic value. In his essay "The Photographic Message"[4] Roland Barthes drew an initial distinction between the photographic image and "the whole range of analogical reproductions of reality." These reproductions (drawing, painting, cinema, theatre) contain not only the analogical content itself, but a "supplementary message . . . what is commonly called the style of the reproduction." Thus the mimetic arts that Barthes refers to are dual, composed of two messages — the *denoted* message and a *connoted* or second-order message. This duality at the level of the message is what Barthes finds lacking in the photographic message.

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Of all the structures of information, the photograph appears as the only one that is exclusively constituted and occupied by a "denoted" message, a message which totally exhausts its mode of existence.[5]

Dianne Blell,
The Selling of Cupids,
1984.
Cibachrome print,
48¼ × 50¾".
Courtesy
Leo Castelli Gallery

Photography's lack of style, its neutrality as a medium, demands in Barthes' view the imposition of meaning through a variety of technical procedures. Photographic style is thus the result of a second-order operation upon the "unculture of a 'mechanical' art."[6]

Thus much of the current critical analysis of photography has resisted the notion of simply positioning this medium among those others utilized by artists.[7] The nineteenth century ideology of photography remains in force — photography is irreducible to art. Despite the manipulations and technical *tour de forces* to which photographs have often been subjected, the photograph has retained its status as "drawing by the sun"; the physical trace of an object upon the paper's surface. Generally received since its invention as a factual and natural image, the photograph has preserved the aura of the real.

The tension between painting and photography, between the fictive and the natural, still haunts us. And it is precisely this tension that the fifteen artists in "The Spiral of Artificiality" are determined to exploit. The gap between the verity of the photograph and painting's fictitiousness provides an ambiguous visual space within which these artists operate. For, while their photographs might be most succinctly described as simulations or mimicry of painting, the factural element is never relinquished.
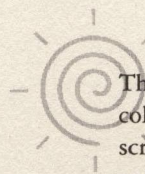
Through lighting, colored gels, mirrors, scrims, and pose, to list only a few of the methods employed, the "painterly" image is created and then photographed. Manipulation, in these images, occurs within an existing space which is then recorded by the camera. The fantasy of painting — encompassing the mythologies and artifacts of Western civilization — is enacted and subsequently registered through the documentary lens of the photographer.

Perhaps the clearest illustration of the staged re-presentation of representation are Dianne Blell's series of neo-classical Cibachromes, in which subjects and poses are lifted from little known academic painters. These carefully researched images are obsessively detailed reconstructions of paintings that were previously considered to be the detritus of our past, and have only recently been accorded a value in the revisionist histories of modern art as well as the marketplace.

Through the selection of models, costuming, the construction and lighting of sets, Blell suggests our return to "the glory that was Rome and the grandeur that was Greece," filtered through an achingly dainty neo-classicism. Yet the facticity of these works suggests more than an antiquarian's rapt hallucination. These carefully posed slim youths and gentle maidens evoke as well some unknown Hollywood costume drama of the 1950s and 1960s, the physicality of the models rupturing the romance of the past.

Although more technologically complex, Dick Schlefer's work, like Blell's, directly engages specific images in the history of art. Through recourse to an early cinematic special effect, the "Schufftan mirror process", Schlefer superimposes a projected image and a live model. While the effects of the Schufftan mirror process are similar to those of the "double exposure," through this technique Schlefer is able to closely control the relationship of the model and the painting. The resultant image is visible in the camera's viewfinder, adjusted, and then photographed.

Intended as a collaboration with the past, Schlefer's work is a poignant manipulation of portraiture, a genre redolent with prior associations. For it is a commonplace that the popularity of photography led to the decline of the once thriving business of portrait painting during the mid-nineteenth century. Schlefer's work is thus, in some sense, a return to the scene of a much discussed crime: painting's demise at the hands of photography. Yet Schlefer's works suggest that photography has still to resolve its relationship to painting. The photograph and the painting uneasily coalesce into an image which eludes resolution, continually shifting the focus from the face of the past to the face of the present. Photography appears, in these images, as a dislocation rather than an annihilation of the surface of painting.
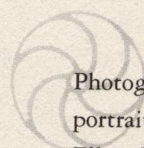
Photography's encounter with the genre of portraiture is relevant as well to the work of both Ellen Carey and David Seidner, both of whom explore the phenomenal perception of the human face. The two artists impede the viewer's visual access to the image, but with dramatically different results. While Carey partially occludes the face with psychedelic op art patterns, suggesting a metaphysical wholeness between the universe and the human form, Seidner reorganizes recognizable facial features into Cubistic structures, puzzling us with the problem of how to unify these fragments into a comprehensible whole. Thus both appropriate painting's stylistic variety in order to shape their own divergent personal visions.
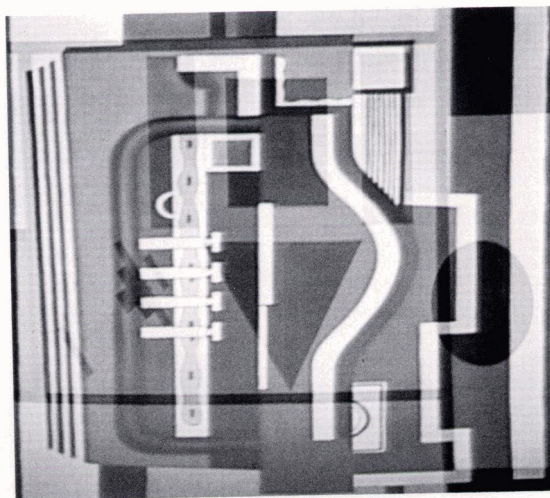
David Seidner,
Caroline Ellen, 1986.
Silver print, 20 × 16".
Courtesy
Bette Stoler Gallery

Dick Schlefer,
**Study for a Portrait of
Elaine Ruth Reidy,** 1986.
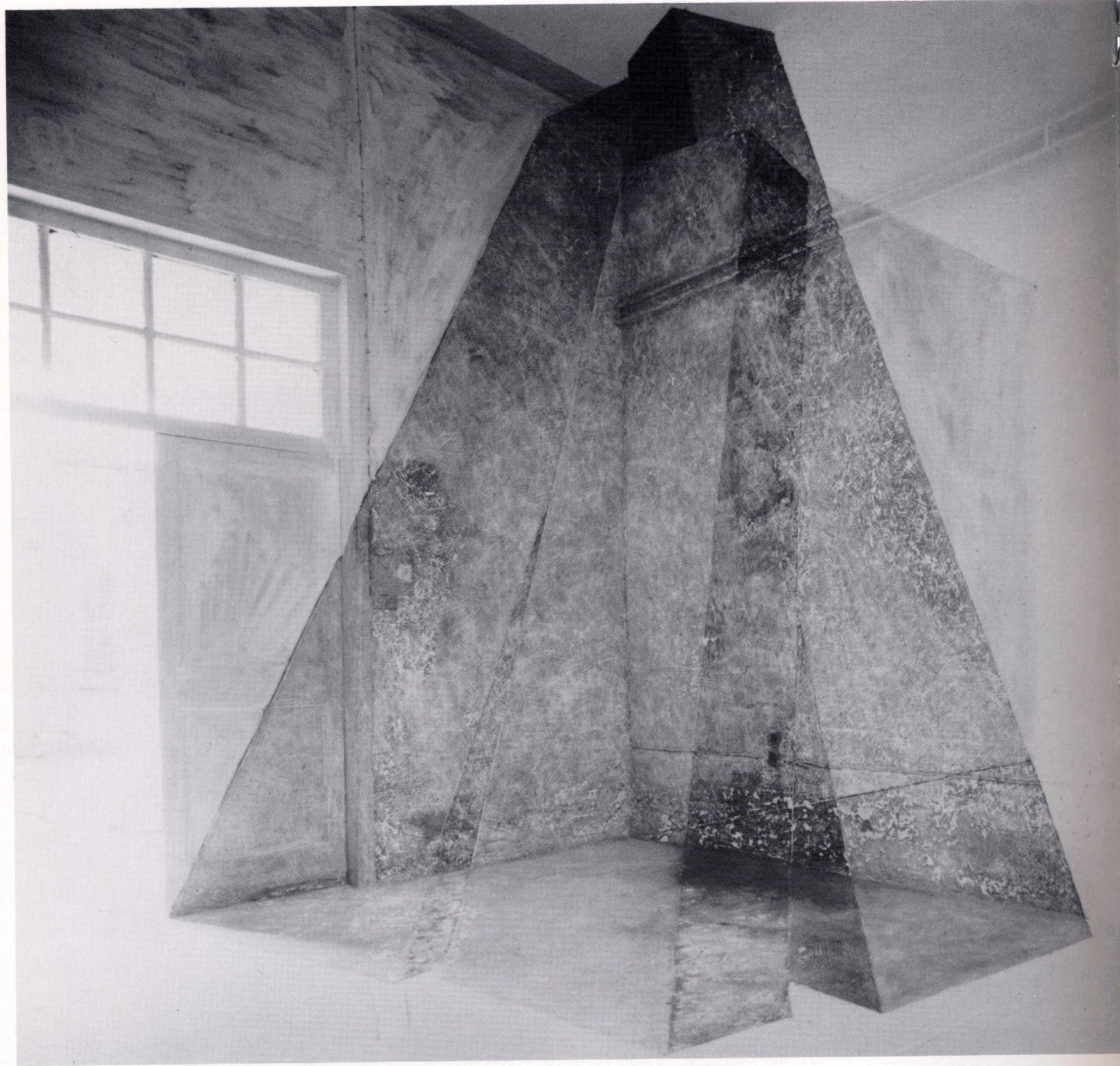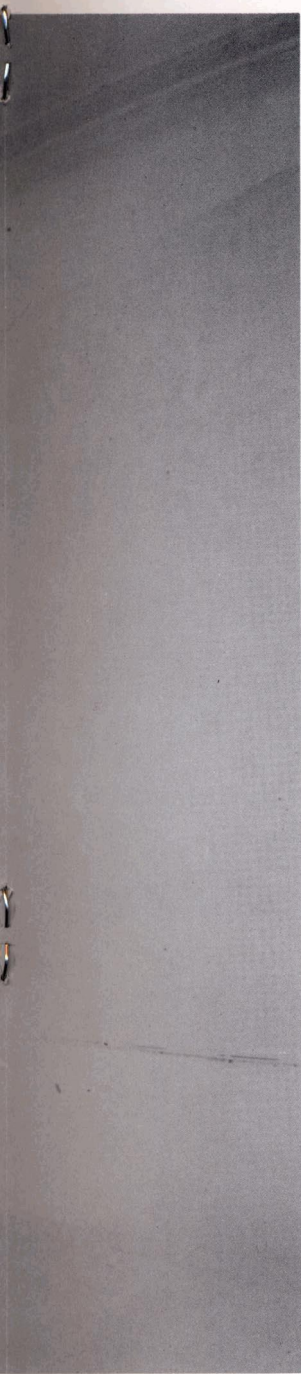Cibachrome print,
14 × 11".
© 1986 Dick Schlefer

Nancy Burson,
Untitled #6, 1986.
(Mondrian, Leger, Malevich)
Computer generated
cibachrome print
10½ × 11⅜".
Courtesy
Holly Solomon Gallery.

George Rousse,
Untitled (Rome), 1986.
Cibachrome mounted on
aluminum, 75 × 87″.
Courtesy
Farideh Cadot Gallery

George Rousse also investigates the fields of painting, sculpture and photography. In abandoned and decaying sites, the objects in Rousse's photographs suggest the work of some now forgotten sculptor, their poetic mystery augmented by the fact that these sculptures are merely illusions — images painted on the walls, ceilings and floors of derelict buildings which acquire three dimensionality when viewed from one particular vantage point. Rousse's sites and the images painted in these interiors are never directly available to the spectator; the large sculptural forms floating before us are only visible due to the intervention of the camera lens. Thus, while Kern's work erodes the facticity of photographic space through the ambiguous interjection of painting, Rousse suggests that photography can completely restructure our knowledge of the world, making the virtual visible.

Like Kern and Rousse, Barbara Kasten's photographs cross the borders of several different media. Her lucious color images owe much to earlier Bauhaus photographers. However, the white and grey geometric forms that Kasten assembles and photographs are "painted" with colored gels placed over lights. In order to enhance her control over the intensity of color, each light is turned on and off in a predetermined and timed sequence, exposing each color individually and sequentially.
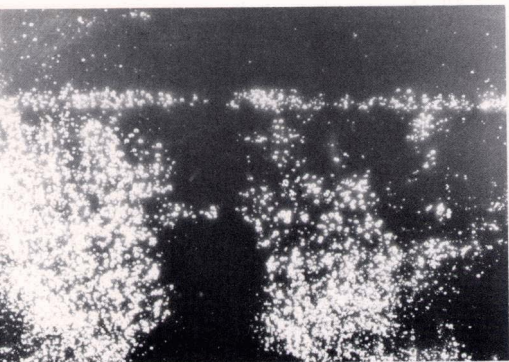
Barbara Kasten,
Metaphase 4, 1986.
Polaroid print, 24 × 20".
Courtesy
John Weber Gallery

Vera Lehndorff &
Holger Trülzsch,
Turquoise III, Prato, 1986.
Polaroid Polacolor print,
81¼ × 41½".
Courtesy
Bette Stoler Gallery.

Andres Serrano,
Yellow River, 1987.
Cibachrome print,
40 × 60".
Courtesy Stux Gallery

Among this group are Vera Lehndorff (known in the 1960s as the model Veruschka) and Holger Trülzsch, whose collaborative work, as other writers have noted, is visually similar to prior surrealistic uses of double exposure. In this series of images Lehndorff's nude body is camouflaged through the application of greasepaint, so that she blends into her surroundings. This particular body, once an icon of high fashion, is in these photographs a barely recognizable human form. Radically dematerialized, rendered inert through the illusion of paint, the work of these two articles literalizes the fetishism of fashion, pushing the objectification of the female body beyond accepted limits. Still, what most strongly distinguishes these images from earlier Surrealist imagery is performance, the actual enactment of the unreal that occurs during Lehndorff and Trülzsch's sessions. These works do not suggest a state of surreality which exists parallel to reality, but often remains untapped. Instead, they record the temporary but actual existence of a moment of surreality, a verifiable and calculated disruption of the everyday.

Despite the abstract quality of Andres Serrano's imagery, his photographs also emerge from a Surrealist thematics. Although these large-scale works suggest color field paintings, his subjects have developed from a series of images that graphically dealt with religious themes, exploring the relationship between deviant sexuality and religion. Serrano's materials are highly symbolic — blood, milk, and urine. This use of actual body fluids in creating art can be understood as an ironic allusion to the by now overworked analogy between the twentieth century artist and the child. The trope of "freshness of vision" this connection usually produces is here elided in favor of a more brutal reading — the infantile fascination with excrement continued into adulthood.

Nevertheless, disgust and shame are evoked and surpassed in Serrano's abstractions, which through their aesthetic appeal sublimate our own morbid fascination with the materiality of the body. In this sense Serrano's photographs one-up painting. For while painting may provide us with images that suggest a primal experience of the body, Serrano's photographs document that experience.

The work of both Ellen Brooks and Mark Morrisoe recalls the soft focus look of pictorialism, Morrisoe's photographs in particular evoking the romantic nostalgia of early photography. Brooks' extremely grainy images — at first glance a landscape series in the tradition of late Monet — a photographed through a scrim. These impressionistic photographs are, however, on further examination, closeups of bonsai trees, playfully parodying landscape painting through photography's ability to monumentalize the miniature.

Like Brooks, Cindy Bernard uses the photographic closeup to comment on painting. Bernard's black and white images of fabric patterns from dresses, suits and remnants recall the abstract imagery of 1940s and 1950s painting. Yet Bernard's work is not simply imitative. In selecting fabric patterns as her subject matter, Bernard alludes to the modern breakdown in categorical distinctions between art and mass culture. Painting becomes fashion, which then, through the intervention of the photographer, again takes its place on the gallery wall.

Of all the artists in "The Spiral of Artificiality," Allan McCollum deals most directly with the theoretical implications of the relationship between painting and photography. Derived from paintings that appear in the backgrounds of dramatic scenes on television, McCollum's "Perpetual Photographs" reduce the specificity of individual paintings, levelling content to create generic objects, signals rather than signs. The erasure of content in this series of photographs narrowly defines the relation drawn between the painting and its copy: the imitation of painting here encompasses its social and psychoanalytic functions as an index of status and power. Painting, transformed through the technology of photography, is distilled in this work to its essential operations as fetish and commodity.

Ellen Brooks, **Trees,** 1986.
Cibachrome prints (4) and
painted glass, 44 × 136".
Courtesy
Annina Nosei Gallery.
Photo credit: Jon Kline

Mark Morrisroe,
Light and Shadow, 1986.
C-print, 20 × 16″.
Courtesy Pat Hearn Gallery

In the most successful images in this exhibition, photography's encounter with painting deliberately undercuts the traditional reception of the artwork. For although these photographs are freqently seductive, their naturalism affects our reading of them, eluding the facile decoding of content and the standard pleasures of form and color. The artists in "The Spiral of Artificiality" insist on photography as a transcription of reality which they have — if only temporarily — forced to conform to their own vision. Rubbing fiction up against the fact of photography, these elaborate juxtapositions unhinge received ideas, demanding that we re-think the relationship between the copy and the original, the photograph and the painting, and the false and the true.

Deborah Bershad
New York City

Notes

1. Henri Delaborde, "La Photographie et la Gravure," *Revue des Deux Mondes,* 1 April 1856, page 623, and Phillipe Burty, "The Exhibition of The Societe Francaise at the Palais des Champs-Elysees," Gazette des Beaux-Arts, 15 May 1859 (Reprinted, translated from the French in *The Art of All Nations: 1850-1873.* Elizabeth Gilmore Holt, editor, New York: Anchor Books, 1981, page 258).

2. MM. Mayer and Louis Pierson, *La Photographie,* Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1862, pages 4-6.

3. Delaborde, op.cit., page 627.

4. Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message," *Image-Music-Text,* translated by Stephen Heath, New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.

5. Ibid., page 18.

6. Ibid., page 31.

7. See, for example, Barthes' *Camera Lucida,* translated by Richard Howard, New York; Hill and Wang, 1981, in which the distinction between photography and other media is elaborated via the concept of "that-has-been."

Cindy Bernard,
Untitled (remnant), 1986.
Black and white
photograph, wood frame
painted black, rag mat, plexi,
14 × 12".
Photo credit:
© Douglas M. Parker 1987

Works In The Exhibition

Height precedes width. Unless otherwise indicated, all works are courtesy of the artist.

CINDY BERNARD
Lives and Works in Los Angeles

Untitled (dress), 1986
Black and white photograph, wood frame painted black, rag mat, and plexi
12 × 14"

Untitled (shirt), 1986
Black and white photograph, wood frame painted black, rag mat, and plexi
14 × 12"

Untitled (dress), 1986
Black and white photograph, wood frame painted black, rag mat, and plexi
14 × 12"

Untitled (remnant), 1986
Black and white photograph, wood frame painted black, rag mat, and plexi
14 × 12"

Untitled (shirt), 1986
Black and white photograph, wood frame painted black, rag mat, and plexi
12 × 14"

DIANNE BLELL
Lives and Works in New York City

The Selling of Cupids, 1984
Cibachrome print
48¼ × 50¾"
Courtesy Leo Castelli Gallery, New York

The Origin of Drawing, 1984
Cibachrome print
47 × 61"
Courtesy Leo Castelli Gallery, New York

Beauty, 1985
Cibachrome print
47½ × 63½"
Courtesy Leo Castelli Gallery, New York

ELLEN BROOKS
Lives and Works in New York City

Trees, 1986
Cibachrome prints (4) and painted glass
44 × 136"
Courtesy Annina Nosei Gallery, New York

NANCY BURSON
Lives and Works in New York City

Untitled #6, 1986
Computer generated cibachrome print
10½ × 11⅜"
Courtesy Holly Solomon Gallery, New York

Untitled #19, 1986
Computer generated cibachrome print
23½ × 26¾"
Courtesy Holly Solomon Gallery, New York

Untitled #47, 1986
Computer generated cibachrome print
27¼ × 28¾"
Courtesy Holly Solomon Gallery, New York

Untitled #30, 1986
Computer generated cibachrome print
29⅝ × 30⅝"
Courtesy Holly Solomon Gallery, New York

Untitled #32, 1986
Computer generated cibachrome print
23⅜ × 25½"
Courtesy Holly Solomon Gallery, New York

ELLEN CAREY
Lives and Works in New York City

Untitled, 1987
Polaroid print
24 × 20"

Untitled, 1987
Polaroid print
24 × 20"
Private Collection, New York

Untitled, 1987
Polaroid print
24 × 20"
Collection International Polaroid Corporation, Cambridge, Mass.

Untitled, 1987
Polaroid print
24 × 20"
Collection Scott Osman, Paris

Untitled, 1987
Polaroid print
24 × 20"
Collection Willis Hartshorn, Brooklyn

BARBARA KASTEN
Lives and Works in New York City

Construct 35, 1986
Polaroid print
24 × 20"
Courtesy John Weber Gallery, New York

Dyptych II, 1984
Polaroid prints (2)
24 × 20" ea.
Courtesy John Weber Gallery, New York

PASCAL KERN
Lives and Works in New York City

Colored Fiction, 1984
Cibachrome print
26 × 34"
Courtesy Zabriskie Gallery, New York

Colored Fiction, 1983
Cibachrome print
48 × 30½"
Courtesy Zabriskie Gallery, New York

VERA LEHNDORFF & HOLGER TRÜLZSCH
Live and Work in Munich and Paris

379. Konigliche, Liegend, Prato, 1985
Polaroid Polacolor print
41¼ × 71¼"
Courtesy Bette Stoler Gallery, New York

Turquoise II, Prato, 1985
Polaroid Polacolor print
81¼ × 41½"
Courtesy Bette Stoler Gallery, New York

Turquoise III, Prato, 1985
Polaroid, Polacolor print
81¼ × 41½"
Courtesy Bette Stoler Gallery, New York

ALLAN McCOLLUM
Lives and Works in New York City

(5) Perpetual Photos, 1984
Silver gelatin prints
Dimensions vary
Courtesy John Weber Gallery, New York

MARK MORRISROE
Lives and Works in New York City

Untitled, 1986
C-print
11 × 18"
Courtesy Pat Hearn Gallery, New York

Marge, 1986
C-print
20 × 16"
Courtesy Pat Hearn Gallery, New York

The Sky, 1986
C-print
20 × 16"
Courtesy Pat Hearn Gallery, New York

Lynelle Contemplates the Owl, 1986
C-print
16 × 20"
Courtesy Pat Hearn Gallery, New York

Light and Shadow, 1986
C-print
20 × 16"
Courtesy Pat Hearn Gallery, New York

GEORGE ROUSSE
Lives and Works in Paris

Untitled (Rome), 1986
Cibachrome mounted on aluminum
75 × 87"
Courtesy Farideh Cadot Gallery, New York

Untitled (Rome), 1986
Cibachrome mounted on aluminum
73 × 85"
Courtesy Farideh Cadot Gallery, New York

DICK SCHLEFER
Lives and Works in New York City

(6) Studies for a Portrait of Elaine Ruth Reidy, 1986
Cibachrome prints
14 × 11" each

DAVID SEIDNER
Lives and Works in Paris

Francine Howell, 1987
Cibachrome print
20 × 16"
Courtesy Bette Stoler Gallery, New York

Adele Lutz, 1986
Silver print
20 × 16"
Courtesy Bette Stoler Gallery, New York

Martha, 1987
Cibachrome print
20 × 16"
Courtesy Bette Stoler Gallery, New York

Caroline Ellen, 1986
Silver print
20 × 16"
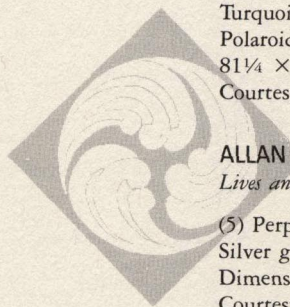Courtesy Bette Stoler Gallery, New York

Eugenie Vincent, 1986
Cibachrome print
20 × 16"
Courtesy Bette Stoler Gallery, New York

ANDRES SERRANO
Lives and Works in New York City

Blood, 1987
Cibachrome print
30 × 40"
Courtesy Stux Gallery, New York

Yellow River, 1987
Cibachrome print
40 × 60"
Courtesy Stux Gallery, New York

Blood Stream, 1987
Cibachrome print
30 × 40"
Courtesy Stux Gallery, New York