**Color Photography**

This print viewing encourages the consideration of color in photography and how factors such as time of day, light source, and color palette creates mood and impacts the design of a photograph and perception of a subject.

*Birthe Piontek, Entrance, 2008*
In her *If Nostalgia Were Colored Brown* series (2013), Nakeya Brown considers the role that hair plays in relation to societal expectations of race and gender. Her still life pictures portray beauty products—such as curlers, domed hair dryers, headwraps, and relaxing creams—alongside vintage album covers and against candy-colored pastel backdrops. The images contemplate the political implications of natural hair while calling into question the dominant white standards of beauty in defining contemporary femininity.

**Questions for Looking:**
- When do you think these photographs were made? Why?
- Consider the objects present in each image. Why did the artist choose to portray these objects? Do you think the objects have symbolic meaning? Why or why not?
- Only one human figure is present in this triptych. Can each image be considered a portrait? Are all pictures of people portraits? What is required of an image to constitute it as a portrait? Why?
- What do you think the artist was trying to communicate through this work? Why?
Adam Ekberg's photographs capture brief moments of lyrical beauty in everyday objects and the artist's understated, ephemeral interventions in his surroundings. His work offers a muted suggestion of a mystical presence around us, whether glimpsed in floating smoke rings or iridescent soap bubbles resting delicately on the grass. In his Aberration series, Ekberg photographs a forest's leafy canopy while aiming his camera toward the sun. As the light streams through the foliage, it refracts through his camera's lens, yielding perfect concentric circles of translucent color in his photographs. The center of each image is a bright white glow, surrounded by thin rings of yellow and red, and beyond them wider bands of green and blue. This phenomenon is a phantom presence rather than a physical one, existing only within Ekberg's camera.

These vivid aberrations among the trees are enigmatic and candidly beautiful, yet their clean geometry and consistent form, photograph after photograph, give them a scientific quality as well. In this regard the Aberration series is both an extended optical experiment and a contemporary re-conception of "spirit photography," the late-nineteenth century practice of making spectral images to portray the supernatural. On one hand, Ekberg uses photography self-reflexively: his photographs center on the medium's relationship with light, and his images underscore the camera's tendency to aestheticize what it depicts. On the other, Ekberg's work is more than a technical or theoretical exercise: these pictures continue his exploration of how the camera may be used to create a feeling of magic and mystery with minimal means.

Questions for looking:
- How do you think this photographer captured this image? Would your naked eye see this in the same way as the camera does? Why or why not?
- What is the mood or feeling of the image? How is that expressed?

DEEPER READING: SPIRIT PHOTOGRAPHY

Dating back to the late 19th century, many people have tried using cameras to capture images of ghosts or spiritual presences. William H. Mumler was the first to claim photography's ability to capture the dead but was found to be doctoring negatives to falsely impose ephemeral bodies into pictures. Many others followed Mumler in attempt to create spirit photography, each also labeled as fraudulent. Contemporary examples of believing photographs to have a special ability to capture spiritual presences is the idea of "orbs" being the presence of a ghost. These white spots are commonly caused by light refracting in the lens off dust or moisture.

Image credit: William H Mumler, Picture of the ghost of Abraham Lincoln with Mary Lincoln, c. 1872
William Eggleston (American, b. 1939)

Since the mid 1960’s, William Eggleston’s photographs have popularized the use of color photography within a fine art context. In 1973, he began using dye transfer printing, providing the color saturation found in his most iconic works. Taking a neutral and democratic stance towards his seemingly banal subjects—ranging from interiors of freezers to one exposed lightbulb on an otherwise bare ceiling—Eggleston has an uncanny ability to create interesting narratives through careful compositions, color, and lighting choices. Since the early 1980’s, he has photographed the sets of various films such as John Huston’s Annie (1982), David Byrne’s True Stories (1986), and Gus van Sant’s Easter (1999), as well as the grounds of both the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles and Paramount Picture’s studio lot in Hollywood. His work has influenced countless photographers, as well as musician David Byrne, filmmakers David Lynch, and Joel and Ethan Coen.

Questions for looking:

- Considering scale, where does your eye go first when looking at this photograph? Why?
- Consider each object visible within the frame. What do we know about this place? How has the artist shaped our understanding—or lack thereof—of the location?

DEEPER READING: COLOR PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE ART WORLD

Photographers have been using various color processes for more than a century. Color film went on the market in the mid-1930s, but it was only in the 1970s that color photography came to be accepted as an art form. Photographers such as William Eggleston, Joel Meyerowitz, Stephen Shore, Joel Sternfeld, and Larry Babis were part of a rising generation who embraced color and overturned the longstanding notion that it was a lowbrow medium. Up to that point color was strongly associated with advertising and photojournalism, and the myth persisted that only black and white photographs achieved the qualities of art. Color photography's apparent coming of age in the 1970s is partly a matter of being christened by influential museum curators like John Szarkowski, who organized a pivotal exhibition of Eggleston's color photographs at the Museum of Modern Art in 1976. The creative work of these early color photographers played a major role in paving the way for the later predominance of color photographs in museums and galleries.
Doug Fogelson (American, b. 1970)

Doug Fogelson uses photography to raise critical questions about humankind’s relationship with the natural world. For his series Creative Destruction (2015-2016), he takes solitary walks through wilderness preserves and landscapes tangled with plant life, taking photographs on film that he later bathes in corrosive chemicals. The process draws vivid colors and crystallized patterns out of the emulsion and also deteriorates large areas of the negatives. Serene compositions become inky remnants that reflect both the complex beauty of our living planet and the environmental degradation caused by human industry. Fogelson scans the results in high resolution and enlarges them as digital prints. Ultimately, the photographs overlay the richness and spiritual depth that can be found in the natural world with the wondrous yet often destructive effects of human synthesis, making the two inseparable.

In another series, Potpourri (2012), Fogelson focuses on the cultivation of commercially sold flowers and their role in contemporary culture, producing images that are lush, vibrant, and colorful. Fogelson questions why, in an effort to appreciate the beauty of nature, there is an industry that mass-produces, cuts, and distributes flowers in such an unsustainable way. Each composition is created and altered by hand in the color darkroom, using experimental techniques with bleach and floral “pressings” on large format film. The resulting works are complex and layered, calling attention to the notion of using the often-exotic blooms decoratively and as gifts amid an environment in crisis.

Questions for looking:
• What can you tell about how this image was made?
• What do you notice about the color in these images? How does it function? Is the overall color warm or cool? Saturated or de-saturated?
• Although we are looking at imagery of nature, are these colors you find in nature? What other objects do you associate these types of colors with?
**Hyers + Mebane** (William Mebane, American, b. 1972; Martin Hyers, American, b. 1964)

New York-based collaborative, William Hyers and William Mebane use photography to interrogate contemporary material culture and the sentimentalities people can attach to certain objects. The duo’s sparse, people-less views underscore the singularity of the items that they capture, while also questioning how these items are symptomatic or even emblematic of a greater context.

In their extensive body of work, *Empire* (2006), Hyers and Mebane create a collection of photographs taken on road trips through the American South and West. Their images focus on the interiors of homes and workplaces, using the objects found therein as poetic indicators of not only their occupants’ dreams and circumstances, but also of the United States as a whole. In order to gain access to locations of interest, the artists explain to the property owners that they are photographically collecting objects for a time capsule. The result is a visual investigation of twenty-one states at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In its entirety, *Empire* encompasses 9,000 photographs, with each edit varying to describe a unique perspective of American life and values.

**Questions for looking:**
- Are there clues that might tell you when or where this picture was made? Describe.
- Do these objects or places seem familiar or strange to you? Explain.
- What choices are the artists making with color, cropping, and lighting to convey the mood?
- Considering that the artists are trying to convey American life and values, why might they choose to not include people in their photographs? How would the inclusion of people change the work?
Barbara Karant (American)

Primarily a commercial photographer, Barbara Karant has been photographing architecture for over 25 years. Her 820 Ebony/Jet series documents the historic building that once housed the landmark African-American owned Johnson Publishing Company. Slated to undergo reconstruction, the former JPC building at 820 South Michigan Avenue in Chicago has been emptied of its contents. Karant’s photographs capture the remaining textures, colors, and residual structures and remnants of the workspace in operation there for 40 years, from the architectural design of John Moutoussamy to Arthur Elrod’s bold interiors. The absence of personal artifacts does not hinder the unique expression of the space, reflective of the vital occupancy of a company and culture that shaped it over the decades. Karant’s documentary photographs comprise a narrative of that history.

Questions for looking:
- What role does color play in your understanding of the time and place of the subject?
- Consider the artist’s vantage point. What choices has she made that impact your perception of this building?
Lisa Lindvay (American, b. 1983)

Dinner     Nick in his Old Room, 2007

Lisa Lindvay’s ongoing series offers a highly personal look into the daily lives of her family members as they grapple with the effects of her mother’s mental illness. Though we never actually see Lindvay’s mother, her influence is felt by her family and the spaces they inhabit. Photographed over the past several years, the disheveled appearances of her father, sister, and two brothers is mirrored in the unkempt and chaotic appearance of their home. These scenes—including empty two-liter soda bottles bursting out from underneath a bare bed bunk frame and her father and two brothers looking despairingly at their fast-food meal of fries and hamburgers—show a literal deterioration of their home life while also serving as a metaphor for her mother’s declining health.

Questions for looking:
• What colors initially stand out to you the most about these images? Why?
• What might be the photographer’s relationship to the subject? How do you see that?
Birthe Piontek’s series, *The Idea of North* (2008), originated from her ten-week artists’ residency in the former Gold mining town Dawson City in Yukon Territory, an isolated place in the wilderness of northern Canada. The project takes its title from pianist Glenn Gould’s famous radio show from 1967 for which he recorded the voices of five individuals describing their experiences of Northern Canada. Piontek, like Gould, is attempting to capture the essence of a place through the individuals who live there, to leave an impression, to reflect its intricacy, and to discover where the reality of the place brushes up against archetype and expectation.

Portraiture is the foundation of Piontek’s work. All her subjects are shot alone, resulting in images that automatically convey a sense of isolation and sometimes loneliness, even oddity. She is frank about having been inspired by David Lynch, specifically his television series *Twin Peaks*. Like Lynch, Piontek demonstrates an aesthetic preference for portraying people in dramatic light and endowing each composition with a sense of eerie foreboding. Her subjects appear well-worn, their expressions contemplative. Their clothing and makeup are sometimes bizarre or ill-fitting. There is often a palpable sense of idiosyncrasy. As a cast of characters, they represent a broad range of ages, occupations, and situations, but set within Piontek’s aesthetic some similarities emerge: they appear more eccentric than mainstream, more strong than weak, more at peace than troubled.

In describing the series, the artist says, “The work is about the North, the idea we have of the North, but in the end it is about a place we seek most of our lives. It is a place we carry inside, and if we’re lucky enough, find in ourselves. It’s the place where you feel the sense of belonging, freedom, quietness, and happiness, or simply just have the feeling of being content. The North attracts a lot of people who are actively looking for this feeling, and a lot of them seem to find it here.”

**Questions for looking:**
- What is the mood of these pictures? What makes you say that?
- How do these two photographs function together and separately? Do they tell the same story? How or how not?
Viviane Sassen (Dutch, b. 1972)

Viviane Sassen is a world-renowned fashion photographer who has gained increased recognition for her distinct artistic voice and her fluid approach to her practice as she routinely alternates between personal, editorial, and commercial works. For her ongoing personal project, UMBRA, she returns to Kenya—where she lived during the first few years of her childhood—to consider the idea of the shadow, which features prominently in her commercial practice. Sassen uses reflective surfaces, opaque shading and vivid color, to create imagery of both people and objects, often referring to the history of abstract painting and artists like Kasimir Malevich and Mark Rothko.

Questions for looking:
• How was this photograph created? Were digital technologies used? How has she used light and shadow?
• Instead of using the camera to record reality, Sassen is interested in the act of looking itself and visual perception. How do Sassen’s choices with camera angle and framing distort the reality of her setting?
• What role does color play in this image? How does the appearance of color found in nature compare to the appearance of manufactured color?
• Consider the image (right) by Kazimir Malevich, who is a source of inspiration for Sassen. Is it important for artists to reference or build upon the work of artists who precede them? Why or why not?
Glossary of Terms

Framing or Composition: How one composes an image in the camera’s viewfinder. Framing can also refer to how an image is finished for final presentation.

Point of View (or Vantage Point): Point of view is where a photographer stands in relation to the subject he or she is photographing. It can also refer to the photographer’s view or opinion of that subject.

Scale: The relative size of an element within a composition. Scale can also refer to the size of the finished work.