

Lynn Stern

*Toward The Invisible: Lynn Stern's Abstract Photographs*

October 10 - November 9, 2019.

Opening Reception: October 10th, 6 - 8 PM.

Lynn Stern's abstract photographs are the grand climax of the tradition of abstract photography which officially began with Anna Atkins's publication of *Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions* in 1843. There is a remarkable affinity between Atkins' luminous images of dried algae, photograms made by placing dried algae on cyanotype paper—they become white shadows, dematerialized forms, ghostly presences, angelic enigmas suspended in the blue sky of the cyanotype paper—and Stern's luminous images of anemones in her *Unveiling* series, 40 gelatin silver prints made in 1985. Beginning her career with studies of *Nudes* and *Hands*, both 1978—the exhibition is a retrospective, focusing on exemplary works drawn from most of her series—Stern comes into her aesthetic own with *Interior Light*, 23 gelatin silver prints made between 1978-1984. As she says, she uses “the architectural planes and forms” of “the interior space” as “the vehicles by which the light is made palpable,” just as the skull is used to make light palpable in the many series devoted to them, beginning with the 12 gelatin silver prints of *Skulls*, 1991. In the 31 split-toned negative gelatin silver prints of the *Animus* series, 1995-1998—I note the substance of the prints to emphasize Stern's mastery of her medium—Stern's photographs become explicitly psychological in import, as she acknowledges. They are “like dreams,” as she says, indeed, nightmares, from which she finds it hard to awaken, as her ongoing, obsessive use of the skull suggests. In *Animus* they are fraught with “hostility and sexual tension,” as she writes, more broadly aggression and libido, their conflict unresolved, and with that making the photographs excruciatingly dramatic. I suggest that the interplay of the light and dark in them is emblematic of the interplay of the death and life instincts in them. It seems no accident that Stern takes to the skull—the death head—since, as Freud held, aggression is an expression of the death instinct.

She uses her face as a death mask in one series, and, however much she wants “to make it less literal,” as she says, distorting it to abstract effect, the skull remains unavoidably emblematic of death. The 17 gelatin silver prints of *(W)holes*, 1994-2008 use “the same elements as *Animus*,” as Stern writes, and however “totally different” the effect may be, the “Freudian connotations,” as she calls them, are now “intentional,” that is, she is now conscious of her sexual and aggressive instincts, and no longer entirely their victim, as she feels she is in the *Animus* series. I think this is because she subliminally acknowledges and accepts her psychic bisexuality, as the “circular or ovoid form of the eye sockets,” a container symbolizing the vagina and her female side, and the “phallic black columns” symbolizing the powerful erect penis and her masculine side. Psychic bisexuality is universal, just as the skull is a universal symbol of death, but I suggest that in her unconscious it is her baby, the baby she nurtures with her artful eye, and as such the womb of her art.

In addition to the many object photographs—the skull photographs—there are a number of explicitly non-objective, even “conceptual” photographs, particularly the 12 gelatin silver prints of the *Whiteness* series, 1987, which use “the same U-shaped form throughout,” and the 20 archival inkjet pigment prints of *Ghost Circles*, 2004-2007, in which

the circle acquires Platonic import, pure geometric form transcending impure sense experience, as Plato argues in his myth of the divided line. Sensuously intimate, the skull photographs are expressive masterpieces—masterpieces of figurative expressionism, I suggest—while the geometrical photographs, however sensuously nuanced by shadow their forms, are masterpieces of pure abstraction. The skull continues to appear in Stern's oeuvre, but it loses its intimidating morbidity, even as it remains full of animal passion, as Stern's use of animal skulls suggests, and conflict, as her use of the upper part of one animal skull and the lower part of another suggests.

No longer a *momenti mori* in the 20 archival inkjet pigment prints of the *Full Circle* series, 2001-2009, it symbolizes "oneness and harmony—acceptance of life's 'full circle'," as Stern writes. But the circle does not always symbolize "oneness and unity"—overcoming of conflict, subduing of raw passion by sublime form—but sometimes "seems instead to threaten emptiness—the black hole of an endless abyss," as Stern said it does in the 20 archival inkjet pigment prints of the *Beyond Bones* series, 2005-2008. Thus again the conflict—now an oscillation—between irreconcilable emotions, between the psychic poles, between the expressive extremes. *Full Circle* and *Beyond Bones* face in opposite emotional directions, a full circle emblematic of the bounty of life, an empty circle emblematic of hopeless depression, the sickness unto death, as Kierkegaard called it.

Stern's art is as autobiographical as the confessions of St. Augustine and Rousseau, and more existentially pointed and emotionally poignant, for her abstract photographs make the creative best of death—creatively transform it into an object of enduring aesthetic interest. That is one insightful way of accepting it without denying the anxiety it arouses—a free-floating anxiety that informs the phantom lover that is the skull of her dreams. Her aesthetic triumph over death is also a spiritual triumph over it. As her quotations from St. John of the Cross's *Dark Night of the Soul* and Wassily Kandinsky's *On the Spiritual in Art* indicate, Stern is a mystic, that is, her art is spiritual: aesthetic mastery of death is also spiritual mastery of death—coming to terms with its inevitability. Her art is more concerned with the soul or psyche than the material body, which is why it is necessarily abstract, for abstract art uses material reality—for example, Stern's skull—to express immaterial feelings, whether by giving it metamorphizing form, as Stern does, or abolishing it, as her geometrical abstractions do.

It has been said that abstract photography came into its own with the X-Ray, discovered in 1895, which revealed what was ordinarily invisible. While many abstract photographers modelled their photographs on Cubist and Futurist paintings, Stern's abstract photographs have more in common with the photograms of Man Ray—who used a soft feminine *Lampshade* in 1920, in which light and shadow are at odds even as they intermix in the center of the image, where they harden into a phallic column, while remaining full of twists and turns (like Stern's skull and cloth scrim)—and László Moholy-Nagy, who famously said that "the most astonishing possibilities remain to be discovered in the raw material of the photograph." Their photograms are in a class of their own, for in them the raw material of the photograph and the raw material of the object photographed are one and the same—inseparable, indistinguishable. The same paradoxical thing occurs in Stern's photographs: the raw material of the hard skull and the soft scrim become the raw material of the photograph, making them the most aesthetically ingenious and expressively subtle photographs of our time.

Donald Kuspit