

Liz Nielsen

Force Fields



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— Text by Liz Sales

Through the work of Anna Atkins, many of us are familiar with the term 'photogram'—a camera-less photograph made by placing objects onto light-sensitive material to create a negative shadow image. Atkins, arguably the first female photographer and undoubtedly the first person to publish a photobook, began releasing fascicles of *Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions* in 1843. Each page of each volume in this landmark edition was uniquely made by placing dried algae directly onto cyan paper then exposing it to sunlight to yield elegant white botanical outlines against a rich Prussian Blue backdrop. Atkins' scientific rigour and formal mastery are intrinsically linked to the photogram and all camera-less photographers are, to some measure, a part of her legacy.

Liz Nielsen is a Brooklyn-based artist who creates camera-less photographs in a colour darkroom, using handmade negatives. She uses an enlarger, as well as natural and found light sources—such as flashlights, bicycle lights, lasers and cell phones—to create distinct prints which feel like landscapes distilled into abstract shapes and luminous colours.

Like traditional colour darkroom printing, Nielsen must work in complete darkness because colour photo-paper is sensitive to the entire spectrum of light. This environment allows for rigorous light-based experiments in order to create highly specific colours. Nielsen explains, 'What really draws me into a photograph is light. So I have

always been interested in working with light itself. I can get richer colors in the darkroom than I can digitally. I think this is because there is a depth to photo-paper, while a digital image just sits on the surface of an inkjet print or a screen.' The artist's understanding of the visible colour spectrum is palpable in her prints which make colour feel like a tangible object.

Nielsen builds her own contact negatives of abstract shapes, cut from colour transparencies. These are then assembled and reassembled into different configurations printing multiple exposures onto a single sheet of photo-paper. Each exposure has a different negative configuration and colour balance—created by mixing different ratios of yellow, magenta and cyan light. The artist expands, 'I feel I have reached a point in this process where I am building more complex harmonies of color. At first, I could only make one color in the darkroom, or mix two colors to create a third. As I experimented, I learned to

mix three or four colors without getting white or black. This is like playing C, D, and G on the guitar and then learning to play 4 fingered bar chords.'

Like pioneering nineteenth-century photographers who experimented in creating new forms of image making, Nielsen's experimental work is highly meticulous and procedural. Each piece is totally unique. The artist explains, 'I think uniqueness is important in contemporary art. There is such a multiplicity of imagery because of digital technology, any given person has 25,000 photographs on their phone. I like building something that takes time, and exists as just itself.'

While the irreproducibility of and technical rigour of her practice are reminiscent of nineteenth-century photographers like Atkins, the formal qualities of Nielsen's work evokes twentieth-century movements like Abstract Expressionism and Colour Field Painting. This may be due to her affection for negative space. When visualizing her compositions, she will often begin with representational shapes, pluck out the negative space around them, then layer these new shapes on top of each other in order to create abstractions. Her luminous colours in these recontextualized spaces have a hypnotic effect, as if culled from physical space and folded in on themselves, a transcendence through abstraction.

All images from the series *Four Fields* © Liz Nielsen, courtesy of the artist, Next Level Gallery (Paris) and Danager Gallery (New York)

