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JOYCE IGNITES THE UNIVERSE:
A PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORY

by

Iris Gray

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of Master of

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COMMITTEE APPROVAL

To the Graduate Faculty:

The members of the committee appointed to examine the thesis of Iris Gray find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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For my children

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**JOYCE IGNITES THE UNIVERSE:
A PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORY**

Thesis Abstract—Idaho State University (2021)

As a photographer outside of a photography program, my MFA study is an exploration of the medium at a distance. The work has led me to the *photographic*: a set of qualities by which photography operates in ways unseen in photographs themselves. My post-media approach opens up the use of a variety of materials while never really requiring me to leave my home medium. Working in this way, I make visible photography’s peculiarities and blindnesses, in particular its claim as a transparent window to the real and to documentation. The culmination of my study is the construction of an installation artwork that includes photographs, but foregrounds what is absent in them: contextuality, physicality, and dormant memory. The installation, titled *Joyce Ignites the Universe*, acts as a quasi-historical interpretive exhibit presenting a counter-history of photography “written” by an unseen allegorical mother figure. The same figure allows me to situate myself as an artist— in history— and inheritor of a photographic practice.

Key Words: Photography, Post-media, Installation, History, Deconstruction

JOYCE IGNITES THE UNIVERSE

To travel is to give oneself over to commotion: to the unsettling that, as a result, affects one's being down to the bone, puts everything up for grabs, turns one's head and leaves no anticipation intact. After each commotion one has to be reborn and come back to consciousness. Nothing is more frightening, nothing more desirable.¹

-Jacques Derrida, in a letter to Catherine Malabou

One object left in the wake of my grandmother's death perplexed all who knew her in life: a photograph of herself, smiling and happily gesturing, with one hand raised, photoshopped onto a space nebula background. The photograph is captioned, "Joyce Ignites the Universe." None of her family or friends had seen it before or could say when it was made or how. Though she loved to take photographs, my grandmother is unlikely to have created it herself, as she, like many people in their eighties, had no familiarity with photo editing software. Did she attend a workshop at the senior center and tell no one? Was it a gift from a mysterious friend? Whatever its origin, my family took it to be a sign from beyond the grave and it became her memorial photograph. I relay this story not because my thesis work is about my grandmother or my relationship with her. No, my thesis work is a commentary on photography and its uncanny operations as the above story of her photograph is but one of many potential examples. Said another way, my work is a "photograph" of the medium of photography which makes necessary the spatial organization of an installation artwork. My grandmother's caption as the exhibition's title is not only appropriately enigmatic for a work on photography, through it I sign it as one marked by inheritance, albeit of the artistic variety.

I am a daughter of the American west. While the real location of my birth is Fort Lauderdale, Florida, I have no memory of the place. My home since has been among desert and

¹ Catherine Malabou and Jacques Derrida, *Counterpath: Traveling with Jacques Derrida*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 36.

mountain expanses. Landscape, as a visual trope, has been like the air around me, undetectable and a given. No wonder, then, when I returned to school for an undergraduate degree as a visual arts major after a long hiatus as a “stay at home” mom, I felt at home in darkroom photography. My photography professor and mentor is an inheritor of a photographic landscape tradition particular to the American west, of which Edward Weston and Ansel Adams are the most famous examples. A standard description of the tradition:

[landscape photographers] choose those areas beyond human habitation, extreme borderlands and national parks: pristine environments with as little evidence of human settlement as possible. In that sense they construct their own Arcadia...like the art photographer, they seek an ideal image in an ideal land.²

Ansel Adams, famous for his “technical virtuosity,” sought “to imbue the scene with a philosophical presence whose basis is, once again, the transcendental.”³ However much these types of photographs have a depth of field the human eye alone cannot detect, the viewer tends to be unconscious of the fact “Arcadia” is mediated. Instead, one sees pure landscape or simply formal qualities. Through this tradition, “Americans learned not to see what Adams cropped out, leaving the American landscape a checkerboard of scenic wonders and blank spots.”⁴

That said, I discovered working in a darkroom (among similar materials and processes as these men) the medium became ever more present— and perplexing— to me. I also very much enjoyed the work. This is due in part to the influence of my mentor, Ben Lustig, who, through his own thesis work and years working in both traditional and digital photography, practiced a reading of the medium and of landscape that demanded attention to its machinations. It is also

² Graham Clarke, *The Photograph* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997), 64-65.

³ Clarke, 65.

⁴ Rebecca Solnit, “Unsettling the West: Contemporary American Landscape Photography,” in *As Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender, and Art*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 101-2.

due to the fact I became intensely aware I was making physical objects (image 1). A physical photographic print opens up bewildering connections to a real subject at a particular moment in time by the simple fact it is made with one's hands. What was this thing I loved but also experienced as always lacking; a confusing document always sliding away from its own claims? The medium became less stable the closer I approached its origins.

When eventually I entered the MFA program with a portfolio full of gelatin silver and alternative process photographs, I was already thinking on the margins of photography. I wanted to pursue the MFA, but coincidentally, photography as a subject of study is not housed in the Art Department at Idaho State University. So began my post-photography work.⁵ In graduate school I leaned into materials and processes emphasizing tangibility. I looked to the “hands-on” media—ceramics, printmaking, fibers, bookmaking—while always incorporating visual signatures of photography's frozen temporality (image 2). While my post-media practice is informed by the immediacy of motherhood (the physicality of the daily washing and feeding of the world), motherhood has equally been an experience of intellectual pursuit. For, my many years at home were also spent devouring a range of books from history to poetry, novels to economic theory. In other words, both bodily and textual concerns have animated my frustration with photography as a stand-alone medium.

With this complex of inheritances, I am driven to installation work. Writer and historian Rebecca Solnit notes how, in recent decades, medium-conscious questions

have increasingly led away from photography as an adequate medium and from landscape as an adequate category toward installation, video, and conceptual work...there is a number of...installation artists that began as photographers. Installation itself insists

⁵ Milica Popovic, my painting and design professor at College of Southern Idaho, first introduced to me, in a personal way, this kind of relationship to media. I cannot let her go unmentioned as she also encouraged me to explore the margins of various media both by her work and by her teaching.

on a more bodily, diffuse experience, on the possibility of ongoing creation and transformation, on unframed and unresolved contextuality.⁶

My choice of framework for *Joyce Ignites the Universe*— a quasi-history exhibit— is appropriate for a commentary on photography’s unstable relationship to history (as documentation), to memory (as heirloom) and to art (as fine art object.) As a space, it is also a vehicle to address the body and context as described above. “Quasi-” is the sign of a particular relationship to the real found in the legacy of minimalism. The obviously fake history exhibit (the viewer is in on the game) lends a “minimal but radical distance between the world and the representation of the world...that [is] the necessary mark of every successful realism...a great deal of conventional realism, insisting on absolute...convergence, appears to be hyperbolic and decidedly unreal.”⁷ The little (minimal) bit of distance afforded by the “knowing fake” leaves room for real knowing.

As such, I use the history of photography, particularly its Victorian origins, more as a material than as a subject. Save for one mediated exception, old process photography is excluded. Instead, it should appear to the viewer the exhibition is wearing Victorian age photography as a *costume*. If *Joyce* is a Victorian, it is as though the exhibition time traveled from the present back to the origins of photography, with elements of the decades in between sticking to it. To form this fanciful idea successfully as a visual aesthetic, I situate nineteenth century inspired visual elements (floral patterning, wallpaper, and embroidery) within a minimalist frame. The move reduces clutter, but, more importantly, the gesture allows me to keep the focus on medium specific questions around photography and away from any real

⁶ Rebecca Solnit, “Unsettling the West: Contemporary American Landscape Photography,” 97-98.

⁷ Marc Botha, *A Theory of Minimalism* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 88.

Victorian. This aligns with the description in Marc Botha's *A Theory of Minimalism*, "Minimalists seek maximally stable and often impersonal techniques through which to produce their works...it is not that style becomes irrelevant, but rather that stylistic markers are displaced from the person of the artist to more impersonal processes."⁸

Entering the Compartment Gallery, the viewer will notice *Joyce Ignites the Universe* is divided by light. The left side of the space has ample lighting while the right is shrouded in semi-darkness (image 3). The "light room" side contains two interpretative sections: *What is a Photograph?*, a series of 5 cyanotype prints in white 16" x 20" minimalist frames, and *The Apparatus*, a series of digital photographs housed in small black boxes with apertures. These boxes hang on the wall (images 4 and 5). Turning toward the "dark room" side, in the center of the room, the eponymous *Joyce Ignites the Universe* is a large scaled-up version of *The Apparatus* boxes (image 6). On the surrounding walls is *Desert Mothers*, a series of desert landscape digital color prints, matted using floral vinyl black fabric, framed in 26" x 34" minimal black frames and individually lit. Each of the four sections of the installation have coinciding interpretative placards labeling the works and citing pseudo-primary source documentation.

What follows is a tour of *Joyce Ignites the Universe*. As a commentary on photography—a confounding medium of cohabiting paradoxes—this paper has two main sections: "Light Room" and "Dark Room." Each is divided again according to the works in the installation. "Light Room" describes a process of deconstructing photography as known through technique and representation toward what I refer to as the *photographic*, a set of qualities by which photography operates in ways unseen in photographs themselves. The works of *Joyce*, early

⁸ Botha, 79.

practitioners' language around photography, and thinkers Roland Barthes and Elissa Marder assist in the deconstructive process. "Dark Room" follows the "Light Room" by demonstrating the potential of working photographically, as it were, through a fresh look back at Victorian photographic play and through my process of constructing a photographic history through a collaborative photography project. The final section "Is She an Artist?" looks to the future through my formulation of an allegorical mother figure out of the oeuvre of deconstructive philosophy to embody for myself a continuing photographic art practice.

LIGHT ROOM

Home Sweet Home

*How can words measure misery, when the sun
Shines at its brightest over plague and ill?*⁹

-from *The Earthly Paradise* by William Morris

The first interpretive section of the exhibition encountered by the viewer poses the simple, yet fraught, question by its title, *What is a Photograph?*. The series of prints is made by a camera-less photographic process called cyanotype. By combining the chemicals ferric ammonium citrate and potassium ferricyanide, the pictures produced turn a Prussian blue. Cyanotype is one of the earliest photographic techniques; it is the parent of the blueprint and the featured process of the first book illustrated entirely with photography. Titled *British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions*, the book was published in 1843 under the initials "AA" by Anna Atkins, the first female photographer, some one hundred and twenty years before Ansel Adams began

⁹ Jeffrey Skoblow and William Morris, "The Earthly Paradise," in *Paradise Dislocated: Morris, Politics, Art* (Charlottesville, NC: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 155.

his photography practice. Atkins was clearly not interested in fame, but she was interested in botany and “filled with enthusiasm for this simple and inexpensive technique” for her research.¹⁰ By painting the light sensitive cyanotype solution onto paper, pressing an object onto it and exposing it in sunlight, the photographer can achieve the object’s photographic “imprint.” Atkins’ “photogenic drawings,” as they were called, are a careful study of her seaweed collection, each pictured specimen titled with its Latin name (image 7).

What is a Photograph? uses the same process and alludes to early discourses around the invention of photography. My process is slightly different from Atkins’, however. I re-materialized cyanotype, so to speak, to create a series of what appears to be cross-stitched signs for the home. I accomplished this by using a solar screen as a “negative” into which I cross-stitched a negation word (not, never, hoax). I then contact printed (like Atkins with her seaweed) the negative onto a cyanotype-coated cotton fabric fragment. After a development wash and a dry, I stitched a term resonant with photography’s historical definitions (art, science, real, happened, allegory) onto this “positive” (image 8 and 9).

The name itself—photography— as art historian Geoffrey Batchen points out, has a conflictual “dynamic” built in: “In one brilliant stroke of language, the naming of photography reproduces its ‘impossible’ identity.”¹¹ Derived from two Greek words, *phos*, light, and *graphie*, meaning writing, “it posits a paradoxical coalition of ‘light’ (sun, God, nature) and ‘writing’ (history, humankind, culture), an impossible binary opposition ‘fixed’ in uneasy conjunction only by the artifice of language.”¹² A play of opposites has always been present, and, in fact, *is*

¹⁰ Boris Friedewald, *Women Photographers from Julia Margaret Cameron to Cindy Sherman*, (New York: Prestel, 2014), 16.

¹¹ Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), ix.

¹² Batchen, 101.

photography. The inventors themselves— for there were many—found themselves caught in the conundrum as they attempted to put a description to their process. Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre: ““In conclusion, the DAGUERREOTYPE is not merely an instrument which serves to draw Nature; on the contrary it is a chemical and physical process which gives her the power to reproduce herself.””¹³ The connection to the real, particularly over time, even tends to obliterate the artistry of the photographer. As Elissa Marder notes:

Because photography...can only assert the real and necessary existence of its (prior) material referent, it resembles biological reproduction more than it does artistic representation...photography becomes a maternal medium that magically reconnects the body of the viewing subject to the body of the referent by an umbilical cord.¹⁴

To this day, “Not/art” “Not/science” “Not/real” “Never/happened” and “Hoax/allegory” are apt (not) descriptors for the medium. Not at all a digital photography process, the signs of *What is a Photograph?* nevertheless have a pixelated appearance by use of the negative’s screen grid and the positive’s cross-stitch embroidery technique. The prints, then, are at once a camera-less, pixelated, old process photography, a needlework, and a written discourse. What is a photograph, indeed (image 10).

While I use text in the artwork in *What is a Photograph?*, as an exhibit, each section also has a companion contextual interpretive sign incorporating a letter fragment as though its supporting document. As historical documentation, the letter is a companion to the photograph, mobilized to give voice to the mute images of photography. The letter, as differentiated from scholarly or professional writing, makes visible affect and is suited to uncertainty or paradox simply because it is an assumed dialogue. The letter’s utility does not end there:

From a feminist perspective on the history of educated women— including female

¹³ Batchen, 66.

¹⁴ Elissa Marder, *The Mother in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Psychoanalysis, Photography, Deconstruction* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2012), 156.

artists...The ambiguous status of a genre written in the margins (partly personal and partly public) allowed these women to outsmart their exclusion and repression, to overcome the clipping of their wings and the censoring of their voices.¹⁵

I still find it to be true female artists find freedom in the margins, but it is also true the letter format goes further still to deconstruct, on its own, unexamined long dominant ideologies, which is more to Michal Ben-Naftali's point: "the very use of the genre implies a critique of the sterile spatialization of philosophical time. The relations between inside and out turn out to be complex, their boundaries brittle."¹⁶

How Peculiar

*...there remains something beyond the testimony of the photographer's art, something that cannot be silenced, that fills you with an unruly desire to know what her name was, the woman who was alive there, who even now is still real and will never consent to be wholly absorbed in "art."*¹⁷

-Walter Benjamin, from *Little History of Photography*

While writing can be compared to photography in an analogous way—an activity with lag, displaced from its subject, with an after-life of its own—I am interested in a specific form known as *photographic writing*. This sort of writing refers to the unconscious reading and writing act that occurs in the mind as a result of an encounter with a photograph. Roland Barthes' book, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* is the exemplar of photographic writing. While the notable origin of critical terms like "studium" and "punctum," the book's after-life tends to open up far more questions than answers on "reading" photography. As is well known,

¹⁵ Mikhal Ben-Naftali, *Chronicle of Separation: on Deconstruction's Disillusioned Love*, trans. Mirjam Hadar (New York, NY: Fordham Univ. Press, 2015), 31.

¹⁶ Ben-Naftali, 50.

¹⁷ Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography" in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, edited by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 276.

his quest to know the essence of photography leads Barthes to find it in a photograph of his mother as a child. For one example of his photographic writing, notice how he writes on a photograph of himself as a child, in his mother's arms: "whereas, contemplating a photograph in which she is hugging me, a child, against her, I can waken in myself the ruffled softness of her crêpe de Chine and the perfume of her rice powder."¹⁸ Barthes writes how the photograph produces an unseeable "image" in his mind, i.e., the feel of her clothes and her scent and he can only speak to that encounter by *writing* it, that is, by a gesture outside of the image itself. This "thought-image," if you will, is unseen as it is produced in the mind. *Joyce Ignites the Universe* is interested in this curious function of photography that reproduces memory through "unconscious photographic capacities within the psyche" animating "latent inscriptions of the lost life."¹⁹

By Barthes' account, he found both the essence of photography and the "unique being" of his mother, in one object, in the photograph of his mother as a child, in the so-called "Winter Garden Photograph."²⁰ I initially read this as an uncanny expression of grief for the mother through photography. However, after a second (and third) reading, I could not shake a thought-image of my own. How peculiar to be the bearer of both mechanisms! In other words, I read this passage as a mother (having a "maternal body") and as a photographer (the same body carrying a camera). And it came to me as a burden: the sense that both of these are apparatuses operating automatically, reproducing, as it were, without me. For the "maternal body" in *Camera Lucida* can't help but sign a Freudian configuration of the mother as location of long-lost home. The

¹⁸ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, translated by Richard Howard. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981) 65.

¹⁹ Marder, *The Mother in the Age*, 181.

²⁰ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 67-71.

concept tends to make her an image and into an object of desire. It is true Barthes claims otherwise in his account of the discovery of the photograph: “I discovered her *as into herself*” (Barthes’ emphasis.)²¹ But she also appears to him as “Sovereign Good of childhood, of the mother, of the mother-as-child” and even eternal.²² While one may consider it desirable to be such a startling object of mourning, desire, and transfiguration, her *person* remains displaced in the account. However, I will not hold Barthes to account too much for depersonalizing his mother, for, as will be shown, within the text the same concept deconstructs itself.

The Apparatus series in the “Light Room” of *Joyce* is a materialization of my “bearer of both mechanisms” thought-image formed through my reading of *Camera Lucida*. Four black boxes with 3” apertures hang on the wall. The shape and aperture suggest “box camera” but it is a representation of the psychic space, the location of photographic writing (a camera-less camera, if you will). They are a type of shadow box, making the idea of space actual. The recorded imagery in the photographs double the idea with the appearance of camera referents. In other words, *The Apparatus* invites the viewer to look through apertures *at* apertures leaving what is finally seen by them unseen to underscore the photographic space itself (images 11 and 12). In the imagery of each photograph, a cropped “maternal body” dressed in 20th century period specific clothing carries the period’s specific camera. The photographs float in these shadow boxes, lending them a sense of presence. These boxes and the large box, *Joyce*’s “camera obscura,” also visually rhyme with Charles Clifford’s *Alhambra*, an 1854 photograph reproduced in *Camera Lucida* (image 13).

Captioned by Barthes, “I want to live there,” it is a landscape image, as he describes, “an

²¹ Barthes, 71.

²² Barthes, 71.

old house, a shadowy porch...this old photograph touches me.”²³ Throughout *Camera Lucida* Barthes proceeds by, as Elissa Marder describes it, “instead of writing *about* the image, he writes *on* it, inscribing it with diverse kinds of written texts, thereby transcribing the visual components of the image into a new composite form of writing.”²⁴ I quote at length the passage in question so that the reader may see the entirety of the moving parts of Barthes’ “composite” writing:

This longing to inhabit, if I observe it clearly in myself, is neither oneiric (I do not dream of some extravagant site) nor empirical (I do not intend to buy a house according to the views of a real estate agency); it is fantasmatic, deriving from a kind of second sight which seems to bear me forward to a utopian time, or to carry me back to somewhere in myself: a double movement which Baudelaire celebrated in *Invitation au voyage* and *La Vie antérieure*. Looking at these landscapes or predilection, it is as if I *were certain* of having been there or of going there. Now Freud says of the maternal body that “there is no other place of which one can say with so much certainty that one has already been there.” Such then would be the essence of the landscape (chosen by desire): *Heimlich*, awakening in me the Mother (and never the disturbing Mother).²⁵

Barthes’ writing is what Marder calls “a new quasi-photographic lexical reproduction” all its own containing several elements: the “original”, the caption, the titles of two poems, and reference to the Freudian concept of the maternal body as original home.²⁶ Barthes describes what is happening *to him* as “fantasmatic”; he sees it happening to himself. Marder digs deeper into this passage in *Camera Lucida* (or perhaps it could be said that Barthes deconstructs himself) to open up questions about this Freudian concept and about “utopian time.” This passage and Marder’s analysis have multiple relevancies to my work. The first is, at least for the fact that, if one is to make material of a mother figure, a Freudian shadow is sure to follow. The second is the connection to landscape and home but not as it initially appears. This leads to a third connection, the potential to make material of “utopian time.”

²³ Barthes, 38-39.

²⁴ Marder, *Mother in the Age*, 167.

²⁵ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 40.

²⁶ Marder, *Mother in the Age*, 167.

Barthes' reference to the Freudian concept of the maternal as primal home could go unnoticed and simply accepted: "there is no other place of which one can say with so much certainty." But accepting Marder's invitation to look into Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* for the context of these words and to "read them back through Barthes' discussion of landscape photography and its relation to 'fantasmatic image,' both texts" do, in fact, "begin to look even stranger."²⁷ Freud asserts that the feeling of having been in a place before, not in waking life, but only when the feeling occurs *in a dream* is proof of something very real in lived life: one's physical birthplace, that is, the mother's body. As Marder points out, "Freud seems to suggest that when...*déjà vu* occurs in dreams...it does not function like a dream image at all, but more like some kind of psychic 'photograph'" of the real, lived birth event.²⁸

If this connection between landscape and maternal body— asserted in Freudian discourse as empirical but entirely displaced from anything actually "present" — is instead rooted in a *dreamed déjà vu*, then the connection is not certain at all. The occurrence is "utopic," happens nowhere; it is encountered in a dream. Freud's concept, then, is on a level with Barthes' own "fantasmatic" longing. By situating the two within the same "thought-image" the writing on the *Alhambra* photograph unravels to reveal the possibilities of what Marder calls a photographic history, and what Barthes calls "utopian time." In other words, while Barthes does reproduce the "uncanny" Freudian concept of the mother as primal home in his writing, he also manages to make space for alternate possibilities *as a result of its inclusion*. As another "photograph" in his

²⁷ Marder, 169. Freud: 'In some dreams of landscapes and other localities emphasis is laid in the dream itself on a convinced feeling of having been there once before. (Occurrences of *déjà vu* in dreams have a special meaning.) These places are invariably the genitals of the dreamer's mother; there is indeed no other place about which one can assert with such conviction that one has been there once before.'

²⁸ Marder, 170.

photographic composition, Barthes makes visible the fact that the knowledge is produced utopically rather than empirically. In this way, inclusion loosens the grip of its certainty and the inevitability of a quasi-deification and desirous connection to the mother. Surprisingly, then, this text is the origin of a sort of freedom: both *from* this Freudian “truth” haunting Barthes text and in the potential of having a sort of agency in photographic writing, specifically as it relates to history. Presumably there is the possibility of other evidentiary “no places.” What could be seen and unseen in them? As Marder argues, “the critical power at work in ‘involuntary remembering’ does not lie in the capability to document known past events but rather in its capacity to create new temporalities that unfold from dormant histories.”²⁹

Joyce Ignites the Universe is an exercise in the real “creative potentials” of writing just such a photographic history. The exhibition, then, as a visual “composite writing” incorporates photographs, captioned writings, and proximity to the “real” maternal body as an absent presence, all of which, as a whole, act as a materialized *déjà vu* of an unremembered history of photography. I hasten to point out this is not an erasure of history or a denial of reality. Instead, it is that minimal distancing from the real, the “knowing fake.” Different from fantasy, to imagine alternately, in utopic time, is to make reality *more* conscious of itself. It is a practice of erasure of erasure. Or put another way, remembering the unremembered.

DARK ROOM

Camera Obscura

[...] *Be wise: not easily forgiven*
Are those who, setting wide the doors that bar

²⁹ Marder, 172.

*The secret bridal chamber of the heart,
Let in the day [...]*³⁰

-Alfred Tennyson, quoted in *Annals of My Glass House* by Julia Margaret
Cameron

Peering back in time to the beginnings of photography, one finds in the early experimentation of its practitioners something quite familiar to our contextual understanding of photographic truth today. Hippolyte Bayard's *Le Noyé* (Self-portrait as a drowned man), 1840, is a case in point. In his extreme displeasure at being unrecognized by the Académie des Sciences as an inventor of fixed photography, Bayard responded by mailing the academy a letter and two self-portrait photographs made with his camera obscura (image 14). On the back of one photograph, he writes:

'The corpse which you see here is that of M. Bayard, inventor of the process that you have just seen, or the marvellous results of which you are soon going to see. To my knowledge, this ingenious and indefatigable researcher has been working for about three years to perfect his invention.

The Academy, the King and all those who have seen his pictures, that he himself found imperfect, have admired them as you do at this moment. This has brought him much honour but has not yielded him a single farthing. The government, having given too much to M. Daguerre, said it could do nothing for M. Bayard and the unhappy man drowned himself. Oh! The fickleness of human affairs! Artists, scholars, journalists were occupied with him for a long time, but here he has been at the morgue for several days, and no-one has recognized or claimed him. Ladies and Gentlemen, you'd better pass along for fear of offending your sense of smell, for as you can observe, the face and hands of the gentlemen are beginning to decay.'³¹

Via a combination of text, image, and the participation of the viewer (handling the print in order to read the text) Bayard melodramatically presents photographic "documentation" of his own suicide of despair. The discoloration of his face and hands (probably sunburned areas, as he was an avid gardener, and the image is black and white) provides additional proof of his bodily

³⁰ Julia Margaret Cameron, "'Annals of My Glass House,'" in *Annals of My Glass House: Photographs by Julia Margaret Cameron* (Claremont, CA: Ruth Chandler Williamson Gallery, Scripps College in association with University of Washington Press, 1996), 11.

³¹ Batchen, *Burning with Desire*, 167-171.

decay. *Le Noyé* (in all of its contextual pieces) intentionally plays with photography's relationship to a real referent and to objective documentation. He writes outside of the photograph on the photograph, as if from beyond the grave and as though he were somehow doubled. All of this, incidentally, is sent via letter, adding another layer of context and temporal and spatial play. While no doubt obvious to all an act, it is for that reason Bayard manages, as Geoffrey Batchen describes it, "to produce a single work...explicitly all about the practice and implications of photographic representation."³²

Julia Margaret Cameron is just one more example of a Victorian era practitioner who interacted with the medium in contextual ways. *Mary Hillier as Madonna with Two Children* is another play in allegory using costuming and models (image 15). She also scratched into the emulsion coating on the negative, marking it, contextually, by adding a halo to further the idea.³³ Cameron's work, generally, is noted for her soft-focus technique, which, in contrast to sharp focus, tends to refer the viewer back to the medium, even if just to wonder about the skill of the photographer.

I was surprised to find these antics in Victorian period photography. Not because they are strange but because they seemed *familiar*. The photographers' awareness of photography's operations and their openness to theatrical means of highlighting them resonates with the medial and contextual concerns of post-modern photographers. The content is, of course, different, but the similarities in approach are uncanny. Cindy Sherman's work, for example, could be situated next to *Le Noyé* or *Mary Hillier as Madonna*. Sherman, incidentally, has interacted with photography in this way for decades. For one example, she uses costuming and her own body as

³² Batchen, 171.

³³ Julia Margaret Cameron and Joanne Lukitsh, *Julia Margaret Cameron: Photographs* (London, UK: Phaidon, 2001), 20.

material in her *Murder Mystery* series (image 16). Sherman does not consider the work to be self-portraits at all; her body is a “canvas” used to create narrative work that also occurs in a no-place, i.e., *as though* on a film noir movie set.³⁴

To feel at home in the Victorian period is, well, uncanny. The body and the camera, as it turns out, is an inheritance with long precedent. Agency, evidently, comes from awareness. This space of theatricality, of using the body and camera to tell of a “utopia” inverts my “bearer of both mechanisms” thought-image to become, instead, an inheritance with potential. Even if reality remains as it is, I make a little space to dream alternately like Bayard, Sherman, and Cameron do.

Camera obscura means “dark room” and is a place of productivity for the photographer. A dark “chamber” is also necessary to capture any image at all; protection from exposure is as important to photography as the exposure itself. *Joyce Ignites the Universe*’s camera obscura is a scaled-up version of the shadow boxes of *The Apparatus* series. While the design of the containers of both *The Apparatus* and *Joyce*’s camera obscura is my brainchild, I happily commissioned the building portion of the work to Kate Schorzman-Wilson, who, through her excellent carpentry skills, brought their shape to life. The obscura measures about five and a half feet tall, four feet wide, and three and half feet deep (image 17).

Centered in the darkened side of the gallery, it is both a large black box and a little room. The aperture allows the viewer, if they stoop down, to peer into the container. The interior is illuminated with a red light, akin to darkroom safe lighting. The back interior wall of the obscura is covered in hand screen-printed wallpaper. The floral, gold and black stripe design references the association between decorative wallpaper and the Victorian period and, of course, the interior

³⁴ Friedewald, *Women Photographers*, 194-5.

of a home. As the viewer's eye scans the space, they will notice red dirt containing rocks and brush on the floor and up against the wallpapered base of the back wall. In a very literal way, then, the *obscura* captures the missing physicality of landscape by containing actual dirt. Taken as a whole, the *obscura* is an amalgamation of outside and in. However, the viewer cannot enter and when looking through the aperture, the scene tends to flatten back into an image (image 18).

Desert Mothers

*...the impossible, sometimes, by chance, becomes possible: as a utopia.*³⁵

-Jacques Derrida, on Barthes' *Camera Lucida*

What photographic history does *Joyce* contain? Her story came to me as an idea after an encounter with a photograph, or rather, two photographs, while on a trip to New Orleans for a book arts conference in January of 2020. I had a free day to explore the city and spent a morning wandering the famous French Quarter. Two streets over from Bourbon Street, among the historic Spanish-style buildings housing haunted tours, Mardi Gras trinkets, and round-the-clock bars, was an unassuming doorway with a sign that read "A Gallery for Fine Photography." Naturally I went in, curious. Written on a chalkboard just inside the entrance was a list of photographers whose work was a part of their collection. While I was impressed by names like Edward Weston and Sebastião Salgado, I was astonished to find one in particular among them: Julia Margaret Cameron.

Immediately I asked about her. The manager of the gallery demurred, asking me if I was a photographer, and then directed me to prints hanging on the wall he thought were similar to Cameron's in style. What he failed to understand, perhaps, is that my interest in Cameron is as a

³⁵ Marder, *Mother in the Age*, 173.

figure of photography more than in the style or imagery of her photographs. Of course, it is also possible I did not appear to be a well-heeled collector. At any rate, after an hour of conversation (and a tour of the entire gallery) I must have proved my knowledge and commitment to photography. He went behind the counter, opened a drawer, and pulled out an archival box to show me the two “original” Cameron prints. I probably cannot now identify which of her many photographs it was I saw in that moment, in person, versus those I have seen at other times, in books. I do, however, remember being overcome by the peculiar chance event to encounter Cameron there, hidden away, but found in my New Orleans wandering. The next day, as I drove home from the airport, I dreamily wondered: what if Julia Margaret Cameron— as she is in my mind, a playful and towering figure of Victorian era photography— been dropped into the desert of the American west? The question struck me as endlessly intriguing, unmooring and recombining what I knew to be the history of photography. The idea for *Desert Mothers* was born.

My desert mother figures are a counterpoint of sorts to the desert fathers of traditional western landscape photography. The central question of *Desert Mothers* is, what if? What if the modernist landscape tradition of control and purity had not become a dominant discourse in photography? What if, instead, there had been a continuity from its uncanny Victorian origins and practitioners rather than an erasure of them? What if there is an unseen legacy of mother-photographers? The series emphasizes the hiddenness of these mothers by framing each as an anonymous “siting” in a minimalist desert landscape and “found” at different times of day and in different decades. The content suggests these mothers have always been there, albeit as displaced in the environment. The content of their photographs remains a mystery.

When the idea occurred to me, I knew the mothers needed to be multiple. I knew I

needed a collaborator. In several years of attending an annual desert landscape photography workshop led by my mentor and hosted by the College of Southern Idaho, I formed close bonds with other photographers. One in particular, Katie Powell, and I have much in common, being mothers and photographers who relish the opportunity to immerse ourselves in the desert and focus exclusively on what we love to do: make images. When I began making plans for *Desert Mothers*, I thought of Katie as the perfect collaborator. She immediately embraced the concept and her role. The COVID-19 pandemic cancelled the annual workshop, but we shifted our plans and instead went south as a small, informal group of six. Able to maintain distance from surrounding communities by primitive camping and pre-trip meal planning, we kept largely to ourselves for the five-day trip. It proved to be an extremely supportive working environment for *Desert Mothers*. Katie and I gained another model in Natalie Colson and benefitted from the moral and material support of the three men on the trip: my mentor, Ben Lustig, Brian Johnson, and Polo Aguayo. With only tents and vehicles for shelter, costuming (period specific dresses, shoes, props and hair styling) in the rustic conditions of the southwest desert, was, undeniably, a challenge. Among the six of us, Katie and I had the support to complete the shooting for the project while also enjoying a swim in the San Juan River, delicious dinners made over the camp stove, and the spectacular desert night sky. If there is an earthly utopia, it was then, among the “crew” and in the making of *Desert Mothers* (images 19 and 20).

Desert Mothers at first appears to re-represent the well-worn association between landscape and the female body (image 21). To return to Ansel Adams’s work, Rebecca Solnit suggests his “high contrast black-and-white images seemed to render permanent... a kind of epiphany of first sight, in which the beauty of the whole is uncompromised by any details or

subsequent events, flirtation frozen as eternal love.”³⁶ Of course, the depiction of landscape as a conquest of the virginal preceded Adams by many decades. “Early written accounts puzzle over what to make of the Western lands where little flora or even soil muffles geological extravaganzas, but the new medium [photography] and newly discovered landscape seem made for each other”³⁷ (image 22).

In *Desert Mothers* I can acknowledge my inheritance (troubled as it is) and offer critique by *including*, in an artificial way, the representational trope in order to make it visible rather than transparent. I depict, necessarily, the “beautiful” and “remote.” The mothers upset the trope, however, simply by their presence as active mother-photographers. For, if a presence can call into question a false “madonna-whore” dichotomy in landscape or in female depiction, it is a “real” working (or thinking, as it were) mother. The photographer-mothers presence upsets a related problem of the same representational style: the erasure of history. Not only are specific histories erased in traditional landscape photography but history in general. In other words, the erasure of *happening*. In “haute nature photography no eventfulness mars the yielding landscape...history would sully [it].”³⁸ Pure landscape, then, as pictured by the style, tends toward the ahistorical, as though it were a place outside of time. “The...images require the denial of the pervasive Native American presence throughout the continent and insist instead on the kind of vacuous space that can be ‘discovered.’”³⁹ While the *Mothers*’ “utopian time” is a no-where, a never happened, and not real, it is not *out* of time. *Desert Mothers* turns from the ahistorical (pure, singular, originary, out of time) to the *transhistorical* (multiple and originless,

³⁶ Rebecca Solnit, “Uplift and Separate: The Aesthetics of Nature Calendars,” in *As Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender, and Art*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 201.

³⁷ Solnit, “Unsettling the West,” 91.

³⁸ Solnit, “Uplift and Separate,” 202.

³⁹ Solnit, 202.

across and marked by time) (image 23).

Desert Mothers is a kindred spirit of Bayard's *Le Noyé*, albeit as its negative. Of course, the respective apparatuses used to make both works are about as far apart, technologically speaking, as can be. Bayard's camera obscura needed 18 minutes of exposure time while the digital camera needs a fraction of a second. And yet both employ the use of costuming (or nakedness-as-costume, in Bayard's case) and the artists' own bodies as subjects. *Le Noyé* is presented as still-life evidence of the photographer's own death, *Desert Mothers* is documented evidence of a living tradition of photographic mothers through sittings of themselves in the field. The *Mothers* are multiple and appear to haunt scenes across decades (image 24). While the subject of Bayard's *Le Noyé* dies from unrecognition, *Desert Mothers* live inside unrecognition. In fact, they are only found unidentified and not at home. I suggest that if *Le Noyé* is, as Batchen argues, "explicitly all about the practice and implications of photographic representation" *Desert Mothers* pictures the practice and implications of photographic writing, specifically a photographic history. To paraphrase Walter Benjamin, opposite ends of photography's history touch.⁴⁰

Desert Mothers' corresponding letter document suggests there are photographers predating photography; the source, in fact, dates from the Renaissance. *Joyce* re-contextualizes writer Laura Cereta to demonstrate her photographic prowess. One of a pair of dialogic letters, her "A topography and a defense of Epicurus" is written as a re-boot of Petrarch's letter on his ascent of Mt. Ventoux. Both the parent letter and Cereta's allegorize intellectual pursuit—the "pleasure of the mind"—by describing the summiting of a mountain peak. But, however much Cereta appears to explicitly reinforce Petrarch's ideas about a Christianized Epicurean

⁴⁰ Benjamin, "Little History of Photography", 276.

philosophy, a counterpoint is at work throughout the letter in the markedly different description of the journey. “Topography” makes philosophy sensuous, implying (while denying) the pleasure found in the senses. The letter is addressed to a Deodata di Leno (likely a pseudo addressee) and Cereta certainly takes her time to “wallow in pleasure” as she relays “our delight in Epicurus.”⁴¹ Her departure from Petrarch is in multiple ways. For, as

Petrarch’s moment of ecstasy comes only when he reaches the highest point of the climb — alone...Cereta delights in sounds and tastes during every phase of the walk in the company of friends...at the very summit...she does not stop to contemplate the vistas and meditate on her life...instead she and her friends begin to play; they lob rocks down into the valley from a precipice.⁴²

Cereta, then, appears as *Desert Mothers*’ precedent. While the letter appears conflicted, her explication of the “pleasure of the mind” through such a lengthy and sensually descriptive route tends to deconstruct the separation of philosophical and material experience. If to read Cereta’s “Topography” is to make “sense” of a sterile philosophy, *Desert Mothers* uses fragments of the letter as a quasi-primary source document in the same way to fill, contextually, a similar lack in landscape photography. For, one can only experience the imaged place in a photograph abstractly, the tangible experience of the land is inaccessible. Photographic writing is made necessary. While traditional western landscape photography embraces this as a feature of representation (real bodies and the real outside are a dirty business), *Desert Mothers* is after it, to critique.

⁴¹ Laura Cereta and Diana Robin. “A Topography and Defense of Epicurus,” in *Collected Letters of a Renaissance Feminist (The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe)*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 115-7.

⁴² Robin, *Collected Letters*, 116.

IS SHE AN ARTIST?

*...the question concerning 'after Derrida' is surely a relevant one, with and without quotation marks. Is it possible to 'relevantize' deconstruction and move ahead confidently, so to speak, toward the next station in the Spirit's exhausting yet hopeful voyage?*⁴³

-Michal Ben-Naftali

If I have been a photographer-in-exile in graduate school, my principal advisor, Dr. Jonathan Fardy, has been my Virgil, providing guidance and handing me texts along the way. For just one example, in my first semester he introduced me to Jacques Derrida, the “father of deconstruction.” My encounter with Derrida proved to be significant to situate for myself an artistic identity and a way of working. In fact, the name *Joyce* is an exhibition specific name (and a sort of psychic placeholder) for an allegorical figure I manufactured from the oeuvre of deconstructive philosophy. She emerged in my mind as a figure after viewing Amy Ziering's *Derrida: A Documentary*. Ziering and her crew follow Derrida around in his everyday life for two weeks, a premise that explores Derrida's own preoccupation with the image of the philosopher. One question posed in the film particularly amuses him: “If you had a choice, what philosopher would have been your mother?” This short two-and-a-half-minute section proved to be the raw material I had been seeking to formulate an art practice. Derrida's answer:

It's impossible for me to have any philosopher as a mother, that's the problem...the figure...is, for me, always a masculine figure. This is one of the reasons I undertook the deconstruction of philosophy...which since its inception, has always been linked to a paternal figure...the philosopher that would be my mother would be a post-deconstructive philosopher, that is, myself or my son...my granddaughter, for example. An inheritor. A woman philosopher who would reaffirm the deconstruction. And

⁴³ Ben-Naftali, *Chronicle of Separation*, xx.

consequently, would be a woman who thinks. Not a philosopher...A thinking mother—it's what I both love and try to give birth to.⁴⁴

My first reaction was one of incredulity at his assertion that the philosopher must be masculine. My second thought: this “Thinking Mother” has enormous potential. *How* Derrida answers this question is an example of the way deconstructive thinking unmoors and recombines language—in this case, *thinking* and *mother*. Both words each pull their own individual complex of associations into a hybridizing coupling—an “othering” combination—that together open new associative and imaginative possibilities. What, then, I wondered, could be the work of a Thinking Mother? As an heir of deconstruction, Thinking Mother has already received the associative thinking of the philosophy, reconstructing the material to make something new and her own. Jean Luc Nancy aptly described deconstruction as a “philosophy in the making.”⁴⁵ Could Thinking Mother be—as a continual re-arranger of received materials—an artist? But she is more than that, she is space. An allegorical figure is open to interpretation. Her action as a type of included exclusion gives the figure a diverse potentiality. And maybe she has already always been there: I can trace a legacy of Thinking Mothers, some of which are included in this paper and long pre-date Derrida, like Laura Cereta (she was never an actual mother.)⁴⁶

The Thinking Mother is also photographic. Deconstruction's connection to photography is not accidental: “Derrida's practice is not interested in resolving...oppositional logic. His neologisms...do not privilege one of the two opposing options...Neither simply culture nor

⁴⁴ Amy Ziering and Dick Kirby, *Derrida: The Documentary*. Zeitgeist Films, 2002, video, 1:05:00-1:07:23, https://www.amazon.com/Derrida-Kirby-Dick-Ziering-Hoffman/dp/B088JY349M/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=Derrida+the+documentary&qid=1614483734&sr=8-1.

⁴⁵ Safaa Fathy, *D'ailleurs, Derrida (USA: Derrida's Elsewhere)*. First Run/Icarus Films, 1999, video, 23:36-24:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JMQDUrQ6ctM&t=1447s>.

⁴⁶ Robin, *Collected Letters*, 5. Cereta's husband died from a variant of the plague eighteen months after their marriage.

nature, yet encompassing both, photography embodies precisely the bewildering spatial and temporal play that Derrida reproduces throughout his work.”⁴⁷ Thinking Mother is, indeed, after “spatial and temporal play” and is an embodiment of several paradoxes of the photographic: passivity and activity, seen and unseen, absence and presence, distance and proximity. Barthes’ photographic writing on *Alhambra*, incidentally, is not far from the way Derrida produces his not-philosopher Thinking Mother. By asserting (what could be called presence-ing) an unconscious certainty, i.e., “my mother could never be a philosopher,” the notion is not only deconstructed but also becomes potential for a new figure altogether. *Joyce*’s camera obscura, as a space of making, is my allegorical materialization of the allegorical Thinking Mother. She is the space made by deconstruction; specifically, a space of photographic writing in which she has the freedom to dream alternate histories (image 25). As Elissa Marder writes on Derrida’s writing on Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*, “it is only when photography relinquishes its dominant referential powers and loosens its grasp on documentation, information, cognition, and consciousness and returns to its ‘first language’ as ‘mark’ or as writing that it opens itself up ‘utopically’ to its impossible possibilities.”⁴⁸ If I am a daughter of the west, I am also a daughter of deconstruction. A Thinking Mother.

During my time in the MFA program, I have had the distinct pleasure to interrogate the medium I call home. While I call my post-media work a “distancing” from photography, I might use a better descriptor. Using instead another Derridian word: it is my “*retrait*” of photography. The composite word suggests interrogative space (retreat) and the concept of photographic

⁴⁷ Batchen, *Burning with Desire*, 180.

⁴⁸ Marder, *Mother in the Age*, 174.

writing (retrace) and encapsulates the objective of *Joyce Ignites the Universe*.⁴⁹ While I may have left photography as I once knew it, I have gained a post-photographic practice laden with potential.

⁴⁹ Malabou and Derrida, *Counterpath*, 127. Derrida's "strange gesture or disturbing posture: the *retrait* (re/withdraw[al])" is in writing his relation to the work of Martin Heidegger. Malabou calls it a "*portmanteau word*" that sets him "off on an incredible voyage of reading in the form of the task he also sets himself."

IMAGES



Image 1: *Two Monoliths*, 2018, Iris Gray.



Image 2: *Shirt Books, series of 3*, 2019, Iris Gray.



Image 3: *Joyce Ignites the Universe: A Photographic History*, Installation, 2021, Iris Gray.



Image 4: *Joyce Ignites the Universe*, (Detail 1, “Light Room”) 2021, Iris Gray.



Image 5: *Joyce Ignites the Universe*, (Detail 2, “Light Room”), 2021, Iris Gray.



Image 6: *Joyce Ignites the Universe*, (Detail 3, “Dark Room”), 2021, Iris Gray.



Image 7: *Cystoseira granulata*, 1843, Anna Atkins.



Image 8: *What is a Photograph?*, 2021, Iris Gray.



Image 9: *What is a Photograph?*, (process image, “negative” screen), 2020, Iris Gray.



Image 10: *What is a Photograph?*, (Detail 1, “Hoax/Allegory”), 2021, Iris Gray.



Image 11: *The Apparatus*, (Detail 1, “Kodak Pony 828 Camera”), 2021, Iris Gray, Katie Powell, and Kate Schorzman-Wilson.



Image 12: *The Apparatus*, (Detail 2, “Kodak No. 0”), 2021, Iris Gray, Katie Powell, and Kate Schorzman-Wilson.



Image 15: *Mary Hillier as Madonna with Two Children*, 1864, Julia Margaret Cameron.



Image 16: *Untitled (The Actress Daydreaming)*, 1976, Cindy Sherman.



Image 17: *Joyce Ignites the Universe: camera obscura*, 2021, Iris Gray and Kate Schorzman-Wilson.



Image 18: *Joyce Ignites the Universe: camera obscura*, Detail 1, 2021, Iris Gray and Kate Schorzman-Wilson.



Image 6: Process image, making of “Desert Mothers,” 2020, Ben Lustig.



Image 20: Process image, making of “Desert Mothers,” 2020, Ben Lustig.



Image 21: *Desert Mothers*, Detail 1, "1955," 2020, Iris Gray and Katie Powell.

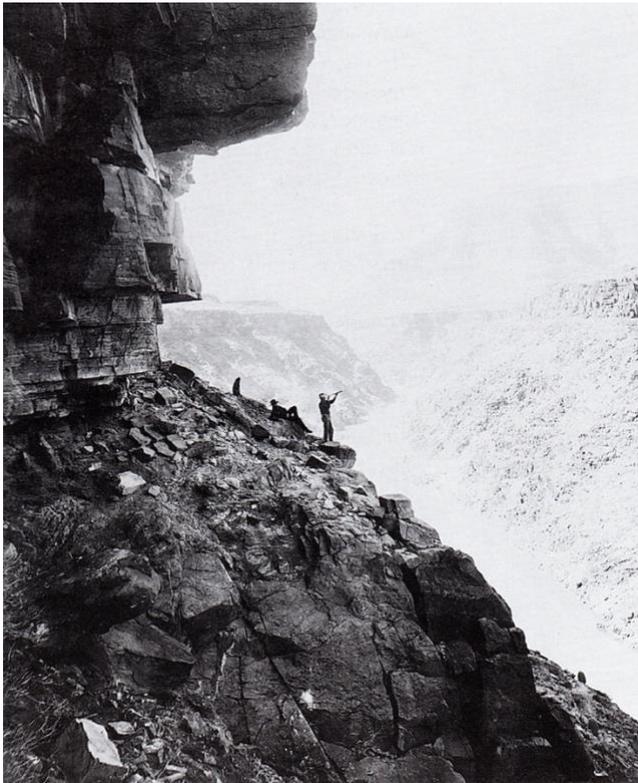


Image 22: *Grand Canyon of the Colorado*, 1883, William Henry Jackson.



Image 23: *Desert Mothers, Detail 2, "1946,"* 2020. Iris Gray and Katie Powell.

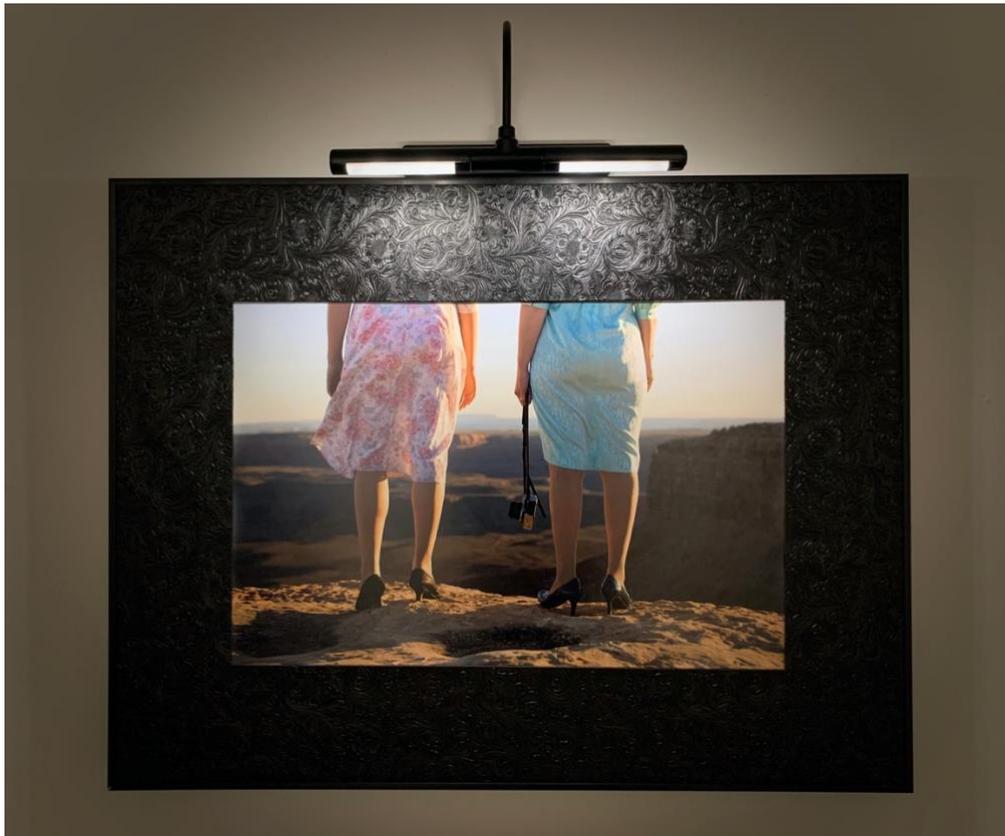


Image 24: *Joyce Ignites the Universe, Desert Mothers, Detail, "1987,"* 2021. Iris Gray and Katie Powell.



Image 25: *Joyce Ignites the Universe: camera obscura*, 2021, Iris Gray.

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