Lynn Stern's Photo-Abstractions by Donald Kuspit

The first photograph was abstract, however inadvertently. It was made by Joseph Niépce in 1826 or 1827. Here is Douwe Draaisma's description of it: "The exposure time was a full eight hours. In this way an 'impossible' image was created: the opposite walls have both caught the sunlight. The afternoon sun erased the morning shadows."(1) Photography was "héliographie" for Niépce, for it depended on the sun, which rose and set, began and ended in darkness. The photograph is a blur of light and shadow, sometimes intermingling, sometimes separate. The walls have lost their solidity; they are reduced to silhouettes. The image is, to all effect, abstract: "objective necessity" has been dispensed with, throwing us suddenly into the zone of "subjective necessity," to use Kandinsky's seminal terms.

This accidental fading and finally disappearance and obliteration of some incidental objective appearance, this evaporation of clarity into dimness—this loss of something that we know to be empirically the case, an ordinary matter of fact that we have perceived with clear eyes many times, something that is usually clear and distinct and separate from and impersonally given to us—and the simultaneous generation of a subjective appearance, a peculiarly personal, intimate presence, accidentally framed by the opposing walls—a sense of something subjective hesitantly emerging from the depths, disrupting the white surface with its blackness, both equally blank yet pregnant with ineffable, unspecifiable, unnamable yet peculiarly memorable import, as though we are looking into a grave where the remains of reality fester, making its disembodied traces oddly mournful—is the direct result of the limitations of Niépce's dated technology.

The first photograph was the result of a failed attempt to record the view of the courtyard of his family estate of Le Gras in Saint-Loup-de-Varennes with a camera obscura. "The low intensity of light and the blurred lens forced Niépce to use extremely long exposure times. He did not succeed in getting enough contrast into his exposures."(2) In other words, the first photograph was a failure as a representation of reality-- but a success as an abstraction. Niépce's unexpectedly "sensational," extraordinary, aesthetically daring, bizarrely subtle and bold photograph was the unwitting beginning of abstract photography. It made the inherent abstraction of the photographic image—its formal underpinning in the changing, dynamic relationship of light and dark, sometimes the former, sometimes the latter dominant, but always equilibrated, sometimes eccentrically, sometimes harmoniously, suggesting that their spaces are paradoxically interchangeable—self-evident, although no one thought so at the time. Niépce unwittingly demonstrated that, from the beginning, photography was a new mode of imaginative art not simply a mechanical way of illustrating reality. It was not just about the

"scenery," but about organizing light and dark. Niépce's first photograph is a wonderful example of the dialectical imagination in unconscious action—of the innate self-contradictoriness of everything, the doubleness that inheres in everything, the conflict signaled by Niépce's opposing walls.

Even Daguerre, who worked with Niépce until his death in 1833—they "entered into a legally sealed agreement and exchanged their data"—and was a "scenery painter with a predilection for illusionistic effects," could not escape abstraction. The city view was his specialty, but even his photograph of the Paris boulevard de Temple (1838) turned out to be abstract. As Draaisma writes, "Like Niépce's exposure with the two walls both in the sun, this daguerreotype contains almost surreal detail. Daguerre pointed his camera at a busy Paris boulevard along which carriages were driving up and down and people were strolling. But in the exposure the boulevard is eerily empty: everything in motion was moving too quickly to leave any traces on the light-sensitive copper plate. Only the man who paused for a few minutes to have his shoes shined was captured. Those who moved remained unseen." Draaisma adds: "Arguments arose later about the question of whether photographs could 'lie.' The first works of Niépce and Daguerre show that such a question is rather naïve: photographs have 'lied' from the very beginning."(3) But they always told the abstract truth—the truth of light and darkness, dialectically inseparable however differently felt. The opaque black areas of their photographs are trapdoors into the unconscious, while the white areas create the illusion that we are fully conscious of our surroundings and ourselves.

Lynn Stern's Veiled Still Lives and Ghosts are all but pure abstractions: there is indeed the ghost of an object behind the veil. Sometimes it seems dramatically present—even more so than the objects in Morandi's still life paintings, which turn objects into insecurely pure forms. At other times it is completely hidden but felt, if only in the rippling of the veils, the drapery that covers the object—sometimes a skull, suggesting that her works are *memento mori*—with its strange glory. Stern pushes towards total abstraction, and realizes it in many of the works, for the surface of the veils seem to become the picture plane. They are in motion, sometimes rhythmic, more often arrhythmic, but always conspicuously flat, however tonally modulated the flatness.

Stern is not interested in creating scenic illusions, as Niépce and Daguerre were—although in her early photographs she turns areas in Central Park into abstract illusions, treating space as though it was an independent entity, and sometimes treating flowers as pure forms—but in the esoteric truth of the unconscious. Like the best abstract paintings, her abstract photographs are "mystical," that is, afford a numinous experience. They are liminal, that is, exist on the threshold between the seen and the unseen, even the scene and the "obscene," for the objects behind her veils are obscene by reason of being dead. What we see in a photograph

suggests what we don't see, the world beyond the photograph, and we never see the death lurking in it, the death that is always obscenely implicit in the scene, inherent in every object—a still life is always a dead life. Stern shows it to be the abstract truth of life, as Holbein does in the obscenely abstract anamorphic image of the skull tucked into the worldly scene of *The Ambassadors*, 1546. But Stern makes the nothingness latent in it manifest, dwelling on that nothingness—the dark emptiness, casting its shadow on the light, infiltrating the light, subverting it--with morbid fascination. She is drawn into the darkness even as she desperately holds on to the light. Stern's photo-abstraction holds its own against abstract painting, and is often more insidiously sublime.

Her surreal veils have an uncanny resemblance to the reflections in Pierre Dubreuil's *Pair of Spectacles*, ca. 1928-33, and an oblique relationship to the surfaces in Jarmir Funke's *Abstract Photograph*, 1929-29 and Edward Steichen's *Time-space Continuum*, ca. 1920. Her photographs have a direct relationship with Christian Schad's *Schadographs*, Man Ray's *Rayographs*, and Lazlo Moholy-Nagy's *Photograms*, and perhaps above all to Alfred Stieglitz's *Equivalents* (all their "experimental" photographs were made between the world wars), for his clouds seem like a prelude to her veils, which are more conclusively, cunningly, and conspicuously abstract. Her refined, unnerving photographs are the historically inevitable grand climax of more than a century of experimental photography.

Notes

(1)Douwe Draaisma, *Metaphors of Memory* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 112

(2)Ibid., 111

(3)Ibid., 114