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### Institutional Subscriptions

*Exposure* (ISSN 0098-8863) is published twice yearly. Domestic institutional subscription rate is \$35 annually; outside the USA, \$50 annually. Subscription to *Exposure* is a benefit of SPE membership.

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The Journal of the

society for  
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# Exposure

Fall 2016

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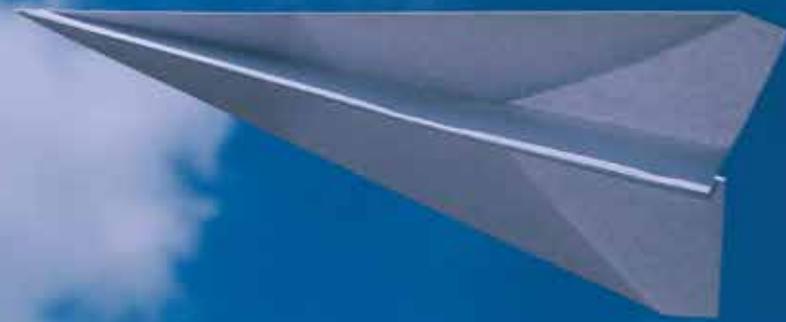
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## The Omnipresence of Adam Ekberg

Jamie M. Allen

Light is the means by which we visually experience the world around us. A field of flowers basking in bright sunlight may provide feelings of warmth and happiness, while a frozen lake portrays the chill and quiet of winter. A lack of light may prevent us from walking into an unfamiliar room, while the flashing neon of Las Vegas beckons us to its doors. The wavering radiance of a fire, the dim illumination of a flashlight, and the gentle glow of a candle all evoke specific feelings and physical properties. Light has a dual nature as physical thing and sensual experience, but it is a key element: without it, we could not visually experience the world around us. Light becomes the element that, through subtle manipulation, can turn an everyday space into a dreamlike and fantastical stage. Adam Ekberg's surreal photographic worlds are anchored by his masterful manipulation of light as both agent and metaphor.

*Figure 1. Adam Ekberg, Paper Airplane, 2014, archival pigment print, various dimensions. Courtesy of the artist and ClampArt, New York*



Figure 2. Adam Ekberg, *Untitled*, 2016, archival pigment print, various dimensions. Courtesy of the artist and ClampArt, New York

By nature, photography is the record of light. It either affects photographic film and paper through photochemical processes, or it is recorded onto a digital sensor through the miracles of modern technology. The photographic eye simulates the very nature of seeing, as light enters through a lens/pupil and is recorded/processed on something sensitive to its energy. Considering this, photography is about an individual's ability to selectively record and control the action of light, directed within a frame of the photographer's choosing, but always in the attempt to record the world as they want their viewers to experience it.

Photographically speaking, light can work on the photographic plane in many ways. Light can direct our sense of space, building up the dimensions of the physical world as William Henry Fox Talbot did during the earliest stages of photography. Light can create a mood and set the stage that interprets a space as Brassai so undeniably accomplished in his series *Paris by Night*. Light can stop motion in the act of scientific observation as it did in the hands of Harold E. Edgerton. Light can record a singular pristine shape, such as a cloud in Alfred Stieglitz's *Equivalent*s series. Light can exaggerate the climate of a space as seen in the *Desert Cantos* works by Richard Misrach.

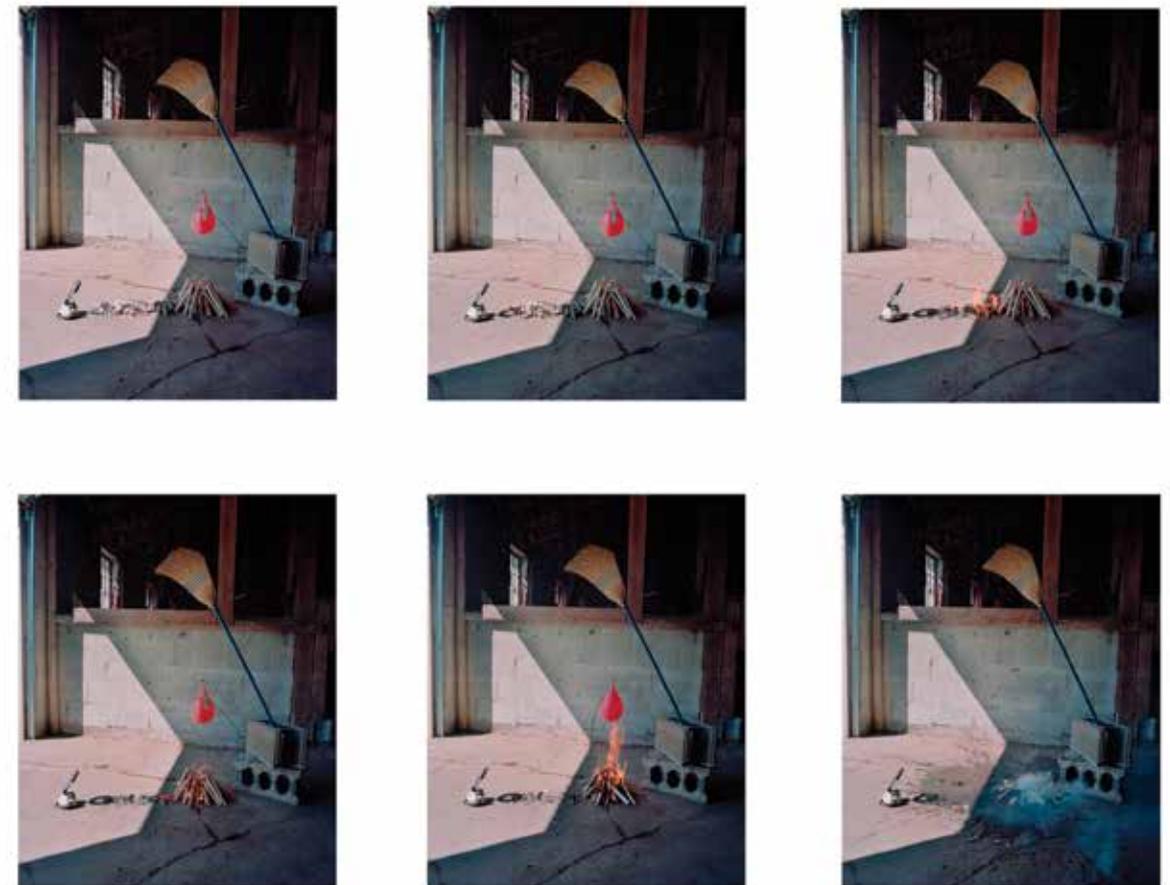


Figure 3. Adam Ekberg, *Closed System*, 2015, archival pigment print, various dimensions. Courtesy of the artist and ClampArt, New York

Adam Ekberg's photographs use light in all of these ways, as is revealed with a careful reading of his recent book *The Life of Small Things* (Waltz Books, 2015). As the most vital element in Ekberg's photographic language, light is employed as a material agent to show a mysterious and playful world where everyday objects take on life, and Ekberg's own omnipresence is a constant reminder of our ability to take action in the fleeting world around us.

In *Paper Airplane*, 2014 (Figure 1), Ekberg captures a handmade toy mid-flight as the sunlight defines each fold. For a brief moment,

we are in suspended disbelief, as if it is perfectly ordinary for that object to be floating among the clouds. Yet the presence of someone just outside our view becomes apparent, and we are forced to contemplate how this image came into being: idea, plan, experimentation, countless flights of this and similar planes, luck, and then, the decisive moment captured.

In one of his most recent images, Ekberg hurries a frozen lake into spring by literally fanning the flames of a fire (Figure 2). The fan's action is palpable as it blows the blaze, compressing it to



Figure 4. Adam Ekberg, *Dominoes*, 2015, archival pigment print, various dimensions. Courtesy of the artist and ClampArt, New York

the ground and illuminating the dusting of snow. The orange glow of the fire is in direct conversation with the horizon, where the sun sits out of sight, foreshadowing the eventual fate of the fire. Then again, the entire scenario is improbable, even absurd. A fan on a snowy lake in the middle of nowhere attached to a source of electricity?

Perhaps *Closed System*, 2015 (Figure 3), offers a clue to unpacking this mystery. Clearly this Rube Goldberg-inspired machine required vision and forethought, but there is more to the image than just a contraption that uses the power of the sun to ignite and extinguish a fire. The framing of the view emphasizes where the action begins on the left, and the shadows are parallel to the broom, which creates

an arrow pointing to where the final action will take place. Yet, not unlike the *Animal Locomotion* photography of Eadweard Muybridge, there are inconsistencies in the scene, as the stick holding the balloon jumps from the right to the left side of the frame in the fifth image. Thus, it becomes apparent that these six images are a compilation of attempts that make up the final photographic reiteration of the experiment. Ekberg's role as creator becomes clear.

This photographically constructed scene is not unlike a row of dominoes (Figure 4), where the directionality of the light is carefully controlled, creating a string of domino-shadow-domino that forms a constant ribbon on the craggy mud. They are



Figure 5. Adam Ekberg, *A Lawn Chair Exploding*, 2013, archival pigment print, various dimensions. Courtesy of the artist and ClampArt, New York

performers that tumble into, across, and out of our line of vision, curiously suspended in action for eternity. Or the lawn chair caught mid-explosion (Figure 5), which just moments before sat quietly in the farm field, awaiting its fate. In these images, Ekberg, not unlike Doctor Frankenstein, gives life to lifeless objects that would typically have little sway over our emotions. By making the unlikely possible, he draws our attention to the fleeting nature of any moment, but with an undeniable, deadpan sense of humor as he shows us the most implausible occasion that could follow.

Yet there is also a somber and art historical tone in Ekberg's work. The image *Candle, Skull and Laser*, 2014 (Figure 6), combines typical

elements of vanitas paintings, a seventeenth-century Dutch genre that conveyed messages about human mortality. The photographer turns the conventional imagery on its side, as a sheep skull replaces the traditional human one and a red laser cuts through the darkness of the scene. The candle is an ephemeral and natural form of light, whose time is limited. The laser, however, is manmade and thus a symbol of endurance. The scene becomes a balance between the fleeting nature of the individual and the longevity of the human race.

In all of his photography, Ekberg has a particular ability to capture the physical and sensual natures of light, as seen, for example, in *Arrangement #1*, 2009 (Figure 7). We don't know how this



Figure 6. Adam Ekberg, *Candle, Skull and Laser*, 2014, archival pigment print, various dimensions. Courtesy of the artist and ClampArt, New York



Figure 7. Adam Ekberg, *Arrangement #1*, 2009, archival pigment print, various dimensions. Courtesy of the artist and ClampArt, New York

arrangement came into being, how long it will last, or if one element will win out over another. The flashlights illuminate the room and activate the space, but what happens if one battery dies first? Their unblinking luminance supplies physical evidence of the fact that they are not the only things present in the room, as lifeless chairs are turned into ominous shadows and decay becomes evident all around. Yet it is also their light that generates a sense of eerie abandonment, as there is a presence missing from view. Where is the individual who set up the scene, carefully placing the chairs, precisely pointing the beams, setting up the camera, directing the view? Their light circles us back to Ekberg, who has

created this scene, leading us down this path and purposefully removing his own physical presence from it. In this way, Ekberg as omnipresent creator is both present in and absent from the scene.

Perhaps no image brings together all of these elements (chance, animation, absurdity, humor, impermanence, presence, absence, and light) better than *An Aerosol Container in an Abandoned Peach Orchard*, 2012 (Figure 8). Here Ekberg gives life to an otherwise ordinary object. Through his actions, the can becomes dangerous and unguarded, a mechanism working against a dry landscape. There is the impression that within seconds the whole place could

be ablaze, overpowering the natural light that gently glows and fades at the horizon. Ekberg uses the physicality of the flame to entice us into the image, giving the smallest element the greatest power. Thankfully, we know that this scene was a creation of his mind and actions and that this small thing has not taken life, running rampant in an attempt to burn down the orchard.

Adam Ekberg's worlds are spaces of fact and fiction, where his photographic sense of light draws us in and leads us through his tales. From the moment that he envisions each scenario to his use of ordinary objects, Ekberg is always directing the viewer to his

presence just outside the frame and the fleetingness of the world around. With humor, he impels us to appreciate the small moments of joy that populate our everyday lives, perhaps urging us to take action on our own whims and fantasies.

*Adam Ekberg received his M.F.A. from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He has recently had solo exhibitions at ClampArt, New York; De Soto Gallery, Los Angeles; Thomas Robertello Gallery, Chicago; Platform Gallery, Seattle; and Fotografiska, Stockholm, Sweden. His work is in the collections of the Museum of Contemporary Photography,*

## Claudia Smigrod: Paper Light

Kaitlin Booher

Abstract, luminous, and deceptively complex, no two of the fifty works in Claudia Smigrod's series *Paper Light* are identical. Featuring orbs within a dark firmament, each photogram is differentiated by solarized spots of gold or flashes of white. Some are seemingly illuminated from within, as if one has placed the photograph over a flashlight, allowing the light to shine through and reveal the fibers of paper. Others show circles that have been eclipsed and occluded by layers of chemical interactions, like distant celestial bodies or the light visible on the retina after closing one's eyes.

Although titling the series with the phrase "paper light" conjures notions about the elements of earth and fire, Smigrod offers viewers no titles to allude to potential image content. Instead, she simply numbers the images to differentiate them. Randomly assigned, the numbers lend a scientific tone to the series that carries over to both her process and the resulting work. A paper light, of course, could also signal some kind of lantern. Reflective and incandescent, but ultimately flammable, paper can only become light in its destruction. This sense of contingency is embedded in the project, as well as the dual meaning of the word "light." Light has the heavy responsibility of rendering all things visible, but it also connotes a sense of buoyancy, weightlessness, and grace.

One of the most basic geometric shapes, the circles within Smigrod's frames depict a completeness and resolution. Like the spherical forms that appear in the modernist abstractions of László Moholy-Nagy or the stop-action renderings of rubber balls in mid-air produced by Berenice Abbott, the graphic appearance of a lightened circle upon a dark field has both an aesthetic appeal and a sort of scientific authority. *Untitled #3* shows an orb mottled with spots of white and gray, surrounded by a halo or darkened

limb. The diagonal lines that move across its surface give it a sense of not only volume but also motion, making it appear to spin like a mass in orbit. Its edges are not crisp and clearly defined against the black space, but grooved and jagged, in a constant state of developing and dissolving.

The harmonious balance of the circular forms within the frame extends to the composition and scale of each vertical 11 x 14-inch silver gelatin print. While the sizes of the orbs vary, they are in careful proportion to the darkened fields around them. With its broad diameter, the orb in *Untitled #2* shows clearly the details across its surface, whereas the diminished size and blur of the orb in *Untitled #9* could suggest that it is at a great distance. Similarly, the location of the circle within the frame is of great importance. Not centered within the rectangle but hovering in the upper register, the placement calls to mind the experience of looking up at the full moon or at a streetlamp far above one's head.

The serial nature of *Paper Light* implies repetition and experimentation with exactitude, underscoring the conceptual aims of the project. The repetition suggests that Smigrod is making a typology of some similar object, and indeed the works are intended to function as a cohesive unit. Beyond the variations of the size and scale of the circles, color and texture help to create rhythm without duplication from image to image. In this sense, the photograms are like antonyms, defining one another by their differences. An additional disc at the center of *Untitled #6* is like a bead of water on the surface of a leaf, magnifying and distorting the patterns beneath it, while the dark black center of *Untitled #14* is perhaps its inverse. The contrasting effects of ethereal weightlessness, scabbed textures, mass, and density are entirely Smigrod's construction. Like a scientist in the laboratory or a



Figure 8. Adam Ekberg, *An Aerosol Container in an Abandoned Peach Orchard*, 2012, archival pigment print, various dimensions. Courtesy of the artist and ClampArt, New York

Chicago, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, among others. Ekberg is the recipient of SPE's 2015 Imagemaker Award, a Tanne Foundation Award, and multiple civic grants in Chicago. His monograph *The Life of Small Things* was recently published by Waltz Books.

**Jamie M. Allen** is associate curator in the Department of Photography at the George Eastman Museum. She has curated exhibitions such as *A History of Photography* (2015), *In the Garden* (2015), *Astro-Visions* (2013), *Between the States: Photographs of the American Civil War* (2011), *Portrait* (2010), and *The Photograph Collection: An Introduction* (2008). Her exhibition *Photography and America's National Parks* opened in June 2016 at the George Eastman Museum and coincided with the release of her book *Picturing America's National Parks* (Aperture, 2016). Allen holds an M.A. in photographic preservation and collections management from Ryerson University in coordination with the George Eastman Museum, as well as a B.A. in art history and a B.F.A. in photography from the University of Arizona, Tucson.