

**PHOTOGRAPHY DEGREE ZERO**

ELLEN CAREY / MATRIX 153

OCTOBER 31, 2004-APRIL 24, 2005

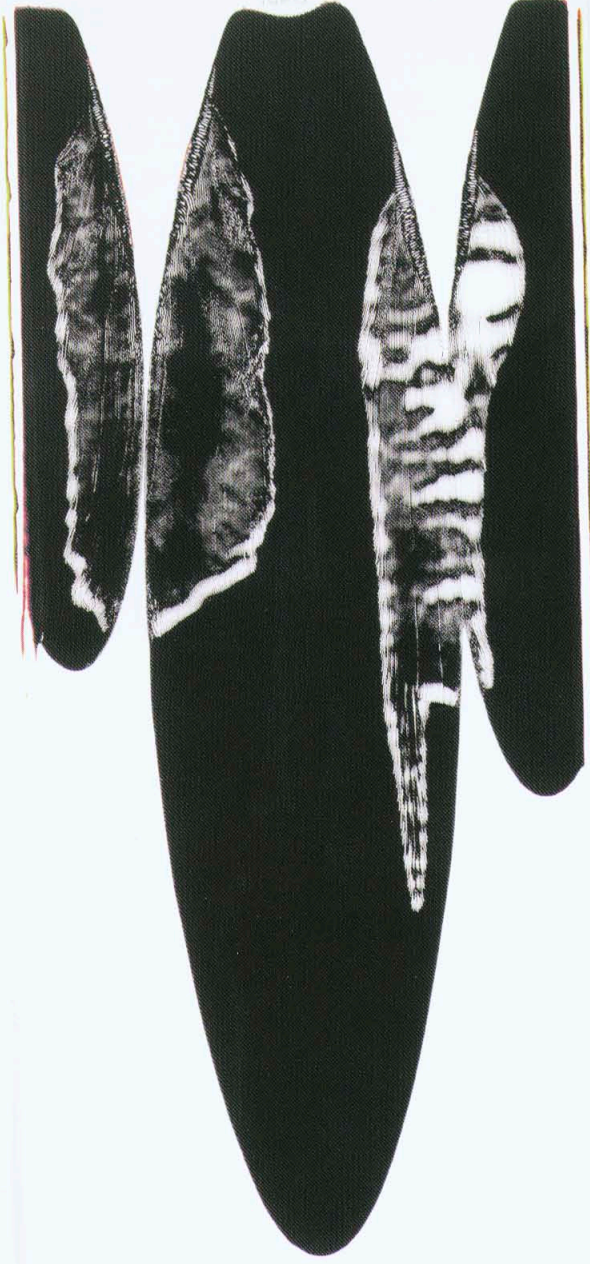
*As with minimalist painting,  
photography degree zero posits  
not the end of photography,  
but a new class of photographic  
objects, fully free of the  
responsibility and limitation  
of representing the world and  
the moment—free also, perhaps  
to enter into a new relationship  
with the spectator.*

- Lyle Rexer

There is no doubt that photography holds a significant place in the contemporary canon of fine art. However, the journey to this highly-sought position would not have been possible without the development of new techniques and materials which have influenced both the practice and perception of photography. The invention of the Polaroid process by Dr. Edwin H. Land in 1947 stands as a milestone in the history of photographic technology and the elevated status of photography as a fine art. Despite its primary purpose as a commercial and utilitarian tool for taking instant snapshots, Dr. Land recognized the aesthetic potential of his Polaroid camera. By enlisting photographers like Ansel Adams to test new products and films in the late 1940s, Land began a Polaroid tradition of engaging with and promoting camera artists.

The artistic possibilities of the Polaroid process were further expanded in 1977 with the extraordinary development of two large-scale cameras capable of taking pictures of unparalleled clarity and scale. Initially developed in cooperation with the Boston Museum of Fine Arts to accurately reproduce paintings and tapestries, both cameras have become legendary in the field of contemporary art for their ability to produce original prints measuring 20-by-24 inches and 40-by-80 inches. Large-format Polaroid photography is now synonymous with innovation and creativity, and has been used by Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, Lucas Samaras, Chuck Close, Dawoud Bey, and William Wegman. Among these notable practitioners, however, few have made such dramatic and pioneering advances as Ellen Carey.

Over the past decade Carey has pushed Polaroid technology beyond the limits of usage that Dr. Land could have ever dreamed, developing a technique of camera-based abstraction that has come to define her career. Carey refers to her practice as "photography degree zero," a strategy so reductive that neither the process nor the ensuing images bear any resemblance to conventional photography. The phrase "photography degree



*Black Pull*  
*with Two Filigrees,*  
2003

zero" is derived from the title of Roland Barthes' book, *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), which offers a theoretical analysis of French literature of the early 1950s. Carey's adaptation of this title suggests a formal affinity between the minimalist style of writing Barthes describes, and her own photographic experiments created with the large-format Polaroid camera.

Carey's "degree zero" photography begins with the radical elimination of all subject matter from in front of the lens. She literally reduces the photograph's content to zero, leaving nothing but light for the lens to capture. Carey's most recent and celebrated experiments with large-format Polaroid technology and her degree zero approach are the "pulls," begun in 1996. Created with the Polaroid 20 X 24 camera (and more recently with the Polaroid 40 X 80 camera), "pulls" are produced by allowing the mechanisms of the instant camera itself to produce an image. The term, invented by Carey to describe her work, echoes the physical activity of pulling film through the camera's internal rollers.

The typical "pull" reads as a monochromatic lozenge, stretching the length of the glossy white receiving paper (positive) and the matte green photosensitive paper (negative). Rather than revealing a subject outside and beyond the lens, these attenuated ovals serve as a physical record of pure light, or absence of light, and the chemical development that occurs within the camera body. That process, called diffusion dye transfer, yields a one of a kind image that cannot be duplicated.

The five photographs on view in the first gallery of this exhibition illustrate several of the carefully choreographed variations Carey has developed using the Polaroid 20 X 24 camera. Each image is the result of exposing color-sensitive Polaroid film to a flash of pure light, or no light at all. The three elliptical veils of deeply saturated black dye evident in *Black Pull with Two Filigrees* (2003) are created by the absence of exposure. No object was photographed and no light reached the film. For many photographers this would be considered a careless mistake, equivalent to taking a snapshot with the lens cap on, and the resulting print would likely be discarded. However, for Ellen



*Purple*  
*Negative Pull, 2002*

Carey this is no accident, but pure alchemy at work. The glassy pools of unexposed Polaroid pigment mark the trace of that which is absent, light. Interrupting the flow of dyes as they are deposited on the white receiving paper creates the swooping conical shape, a signature feature of all the “pulls.”

Carey also blocked light from entering the camera lens to create *Purple Negative Pull* (2002). In this piece Carey mixed Polaroid color film with a developing fluid intended for black-and-white photography. As a result of this chemical crossover, the negative turns a deep shade of purple. This quintessential example of Carey’s innovative experiments with the Polaroid camera illustrates one of the most original aspects of the “pulls”—the elevated status of the negative. Unlike a conventional photographic negative, the opaque 20 X 24 negative cannot be used for reprinting purposes and is typically destroyed after the positive has completely developed. In Carey’s hands the negative achieves new significance, displayed and appreciated as a unique and precious art object in its own right.

*Black Pull with Two Filigrees* and *Purple Negative Pull* are precursors to Carey’s most ambitious and monumental body of work to date, the *Pulls XL* (2004). Shot in a single session in New York City using the Polaroid 40 X 80 camera (the largest instant camera in the world), the *Pulls XL* signal a new phase in the evolution of Carey’s work. Measuring more than twelve feet high and forty-four inches wide, the suite of seven extra-large positive “pulls” and their corresponding negatives rise like totems inside the gallery. Despite their scale and vulnerability, the pieces are tacked directly to the wall, emphasizing their physical presence.

By giving the negatives of these exposures the same status as the positives, Carey further asserts the material significance of the “pulls.” Though lacking the sheen and chromatic variation of the positives, the negatives possess a more subtle elegance, an almost organic quality that belies their mechanical production. In fact, like all the “pulls,” Carey’s new Polaroid 40 X 80 prints are indeed living surfaces that respond to temperature and moisture as they cure—

a process that will continue throughout the duration of the exhibition. This is particularly true of the negatives, whose velvety black and brown surfaces have already begun to shift since their creation in mid-July, gaining both tonal and textural variation as the excess dyes and silver salts oxidize. The effect is nothing short of painterly, endowing Carey's images with a surface sensuality uncommon to photography.

From the beginning of her career, Ellen Carey's photographs have been inextricably linked to painting and drawing. Although she long since abandoned the practice of overlaying her images with pigment<sup>1</sup>, the works on view in MATRIX 153 share equal (if not more) affinity with abstract painting of the 1950s and 1960s than with any photographic legacy. Indeed, looking at these works it is easy to imagine Carey as a neo-modernist painter, the likes of Morris Louis or Ellsworth Kelly, creating color field and geometric abstractions. Therein lies the complexity and inherent contradiction of Carey's work. While bound to the early photographic experiments of William Henry Fox Talbot<sup>2</sup>, the "pulls" are equally indebted to the tenets of Abstract Expressionism and Surrealism in their reliance upon accident and chance. And like Minimalist painting, Carey's process is central to the meaning of her works—they harbor no underlying message, no truth apart from their material existence in the world.

While the consideration of Carey's reductive photography in the context of modern painting may seem paradoxical, the historical association between photography and painting provides a fascinating counterpoint by which to appreciate the "pulls," and their incongruous identity as photographs that resemble paintings. In fact, the movement known as Photo-Secession, which strove to affirm photography as a fine art at the turn of the twentieth century, was predicated on the manipulation of images to achieve painterly effects.<sup>3</sup> Since then, photography has sustained a combative relationship with painting, jockeying for artistic autonomy in the eyes of critics and the public.



*PULL XL, 2004*

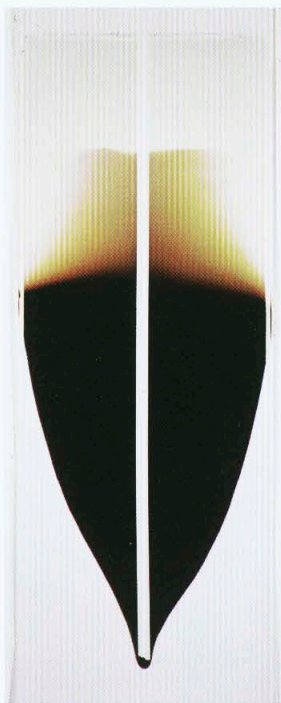


Now, nearly a century since Paul Strand championed the use of “straight” or unmanipulated photographic methods in order to achieve the true aesthetic nature of the medium, Ellen Carey has staged her own reprisal of “straight photography,” stripping the medium down to its essentials—emulsion, paper, and light. In doing so, however, Carey has unwittingly discovered a process that once again blurs the boundaries between photography and painting. The result is what photography scholar Lyle Rexer calls “a new class of photographic objects,”<sup>14</sup> which herald the potential of minimal photography as a site of perceptual and experiential directness. Liberated from the cultural and historical expectation that a photograph will narrate, describe, or document the world around us, the “pulls” occupy a neutral environment where they are free to be viewed, not read; free to be experienced, not interpreted; and free to transform how we think about photography.

*Joanna Marsh*  
*Acting Curator*  
*of Contemporary Art*

*PULL XL, 2004*





*Black Pull with Flare and  
White Line, 2003*

## **ELLEN CAREY**

Born in New York City  
Lives and works in Hartford and New York, N.Y.

### **EDUCATION**

M.F.A. State University of New York  
at Buffalo, Buffalo, NY, 1978

B.F.A. Kansas City Art Institute,  
Kansas City, MO, 1976

Art Students' League, New York, NY, 1970

### **SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS, 1995-2004**

#### **2003**

*Photography Degree Zero*, Katrina Traywick  
Gallery, Berkeley, CA

*Photography Degree Zero 1996-2003*, Beacon  
Camera Club, Beacon, NY

#### **2002**

*Push Pin Photograms*, Nina Freudenheim  
Gallery, Buffalo, NY

*Mourning Wall/Birthday Portrait*,  
Museum of Contemporary Photography,  
Columbia College, Chicago, IL

*Self Portrait @ 48*, Connecticut

Commission on the Arts, Hartford, CT

*Photography Degree Zero*, New Britain  
Museum of American Art, New Britain, CT

#### **2001**

*Mourning Wall*, Pamela Auchincloss Projects,  
New York, NY

#### **2000**

*Mourning Wall/Family Portrait/Birthday Portrait*  
An Installation, Real Art Ways, Hartford, CT  
*Pulls*, Beacon Camera Club, Beacon, NY

#### **1999**

*Photogenic Drawings*, Paesaggio Gallery,  
West Hartford, CT

*Photography Degree Zero*, Loughborough  
University School of Art and Design,  
Leicestershire, England

#### **1998**

*Pulls*, Ricco Maresca Gallery, New York, NY

#### **1997**

*Ellen Carey: Family Portrait/Birthday Portrait*,  
Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art,  
Cleveland, OH

#### **1996**

*Photography Degree Zero*, Ricco Maresca  
Gallery, New York, NY

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1995-2004

2004

*Mirror Mirror: Self Portrait, Self Image*,  
William Benton Museum of Art, University  
of Connecticut, Storrs, CT

2003

*Primary Colours*, City Gallery,  
Leicester, England  
*Light Index Amanda Means, Ellen Carey  
and Erika Blumenfeld*, Visual Studies  
Workshop, Rochester, NY

2002

*American Visions: Highlights from the  
Photography Collection*, The Whitney Museum  
of American Art, New York, NY (book)  
*Photography's Antiquarian Avant-Garde*, Sarah  
Morthland Gallery, New York, NY (book)

2001

*What's New*, The Whitney Museum  
of American Art, New York, NY  
*Eccentric Photography*,  
Islip Museum, East Islip, NY

2000

*American Perspectives: Photographs from  
the Polaroid Collection*, Tokyo Metropolitan  
Museum of Photography, Tokyo, Japan  
*This is Not a Photograph*, circulated by  
Independent Curators, Inc. (ICI) and  
Pamela Auchincloss Art Projects, NYC  
(tour/catalogue)

1999

*Female*, Wessel + O'Connor, New York, NY  
*Here's Looking At You*, Wadsworth Atheneum,  
Hartford, CT

1999

*Innovation/Imagination: 50 Years of Polaroid  
Photography 1947-1997*, Ansel Adams Center,  
San Francisco, CA, traveling (book)  
*Photography's multiple roles*, The Museum  
of Contemporary Photography, Chicago, IL  
(book)

1997

*Eye of the Beholder*, The Avon Collection,  
International Center for Photography,  
New York, NY  
*The Big Picture Show*, Albright-Knox  
Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY  
*Diverse Visions\photographic perspectives*,  
The Pittsburgh Center for the Arts,  
Pittsburgh, PA

1995

*Moholy Nagy and Present Company*,  
The Chicago Art Institute, Chicago, IL  
*Content and Discontent in Today's  
Photography*, curated by Andy Grundberg,  
circulated by ICI, Bruce Museum,  
Greenwich, CT (brochure)

## SELECTED ARTICLES AND REVIEWS

1995-2004

2003

Rosoff, Patricia. "Monumental Memento  
Mori -Artists collaborate on memorial to those  
who died Sept. 11, 2001," *Hartford Advocate*,  
March 13-19.  
Baker, Kenneth. "Ellen Carey in Berkeley,"  
*San Francisco Chronicle*, January 18.

2002

Sturges, Steve. "New Britain Museum of  
American Art/New Britain - Ellen Carey:  
Photography Degree Zero," *Art New England*,  
December/January.  
Rossoff, Patricia. "High Tech Magic -  
Ellen Carey turns Photography Inside Out,"  
*Hartford Advocate*, October 31.

2001

Pollack, Barbara. "Mourning Wall, National  
Reviews," *Artnews*, February.  
Rexer, Lyle. "Ellen Carey at Real Art Ways,"  
*Art in America*, June.  
Schwabsky, Barry. "Ellen Carey: Mourning  
Wall," *Art On Paper*, March/April.

2000

McNally, Owen. "Good Mourning,"  
*Hartford Courant*, October 8.  
Miller-Keller, Andrea. "Whitney Biennial  
Curators Interview," *ARTFORUM*, March.  
Zimmer, William. "A Family Album With No  
Pictures," *New York Times* (CT), December 10.

1999

Damsker, Matt. "Abstraction through the lens,"  
*Hartford Courant*, September 9.  
Rosoff, Patricia. "Playing with the Light,"  
*Hartford Advocate*, September 9.  
Helfand, Glen. "Marco Breuer, Ellen Carey,"  
*San Francisco Bay Guardian*, March 10.

1998

Huntington, Richard. "Review, Deceptively  
intellectual, A surprising mind-body connec-  
tion," *The Buffalo News/Friday*, October 9.  
Huntington, Richard. "Noteworthy,"  
*The Buffalo News/Friday*, September 25.  
Schwabsky, Barry. "Ellen Carey (Review),"  
*ARTFORUM*, November.

1997

Thomas, Mary. "Photography Exposed to New  
Processes," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, June 21.  
Huntington, Richard. "At the Albright-Knox,  
photos on a large scale," *Buffalo News*,  
April 10.

1995

Aletti, Vince. "Voice Choice, Ellen Carey,"  
*Village Voice*, November 26.  
Chambers, Karen. "Ellen Carey,"  
*Review* (New York, NY), December 1.  
McNally, Owen. "The Art of Acquisition,"  
*Hartford Courant*, January 21.

## 1995

Dorsey, John. "Capturing the Abstract in Photographs," *The Sun* (Baltimore, MD).

Raynor, Vivien. "Photographers Putting Their Eggs in Technology's Basket," *New York Times*.

Read, Michael. "Phenomena, See," *The Friends of Photography* (San Francisco, CA).

## WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

*Black Pull with Flare/Flare Rollback*, 2001

Polaroid 20 X 24 Color Positive  
Unique dye diffusion transfer print  
80 x 22 inches  
Collection of Linda Cheverton Wick and Walter Wick

*Purple Negative Pull*, 2002

Polaroid 20 X 24 Color Negative  
Unique dye diffusion transfer print  
70 x 22 inches  
Collection of Robinson and Nancy Grover

*Black Pull with Two Filigrees*, 2003

Polaroid 20 X 24 Color Positive  
Unique dye diffusion transfer print  
80 x 22 inches

*Black Pull with Flare and White Line*, 2003

Polaroid 20 X 24 Color Positive  
Unique dye diffusion transfer print  
108 x 22 inches

*Blue Negative Pull with Lines*, 2003

Polaroid 20 X 24 Color Negative  
Unique dye diffusion transfer print  
80 x 22 inches

*PULLS XL*, 2004

Fourteen Polaroid 40 X 80 Color Positives and Negatives  
Unique dye diffusion transfer prints  
Height dimensions vary from 113 inches to 132 inches, all widths are 44 inches

All artworks collection of the artist unless otherwise noted. Courtesy of Jayne H. Baum (New York, NY), Nina Freudenheim Fine Art (Buffalo, NY), Paesaggio Gallery (West Hartford, CT), and Katrina Traywick (Berkeley, CA).

## MATRIX LECTURE

**Thursday**  
**November 4, 2004**  
**6:00 p.m.**

Ellen Carey will give an informal lecture on her work in the Hartford Courant Room at the Wadsworth Atheneum titled "The Short History of the Pulls in Photography"

## GALLERY TALK

**Friday,**  
**January 14, 2005**  
**Noon**

"Blurring the Boundaries: Photography as Painting in the Work of Ellen Carey"  
Joanna Marsh, Acting Curator of Contemporary Art

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Made possible in part by the members of the Contemporary Coalition: Mickey and Janice Cartin, Howard and Sandra Fromson, Robinson and Nancy Grover, Carol and Sol LeWitt, Jeffrey and Marcia Marsted, The Ritter Foundation, The Helen M. Saunders Charitable Foundation, Philip and Robin Schonberger, Walter Wick and Linda Cheverton Wick.

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## FOOT NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Between 1978 and 1984 Carey combined the realism of photography with the evocative power of paint and collage to create dynamic self-portraits and abstractions. Willis Hartshorn, *Ellen Carey: Survey 1978-1986* (New York: International Center of Photography, 1986)

<sup>2</sup> Credited as one of the inventors of photography, William Henry Fox Talbot began experimenting with light-sensitive chemistry in 1834. In 1839, Talbot announced his invention of photogenic drawing (or photograms) two weeks after the daguerreotype process was unveiled in France.

<sup>3</sup> The Photo-Secession movement, led by Alfred Stieglitz in the early 1900s, is widely regarded as the beginning of modern art photography. Consisting of a group of avant-garde photographers, the Photo-Secession adopted an aesthetic called Pictorialism, which employed labor-intensive, handmade processes to create photographs that could claim the same level of artistic invention and autonomy as painting.

<sup>4</sup> Lyle Rexer, *Photography's Antiquarian Avant-Garde: The New Wave in Old Processes* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002), p.27