

## What the flame of a candle looks like after the candle is blown out

Cameraless photographic processes have been a recurrent feature of Kim Coleman's art practice. Between 2008 and 2013 she made a series of photograms titled *Unique*, which utilised the standardised repetitive form of the set square to produce a diverse succession of prints, with variations of colour dependent on the quality of light, exposure time and other productive manipulations.<sup>1</sup> Art and architectural historian Sibyl Moholy-Nagy notes that at the core of the photogram process is the creation of 'elemental optical relationships'.<sup>2</sup> In the *Unique* series Coleman plays with the elemental aspect of the photogram, which might lead toward essentialism, to instead assert the subjectivity of the medium.

— and she tried to imagine what the flame of a candle looks like after the candle is blown out, for she could not remember ever having seen such a thing.<sup>3</sup>

Moholy-Nagy included these words as an epigraph in her book on the work of her husband, artist and designer, László Moholy-Nagy. It is a quotation from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, subtly updated, with the effect that greater space is allowed for the reader's imaginative projections.<sup>4</sup> She asks the reader to envisage something that has not been part of our prior experience, and the initial impossibility of the proposition twists in our imagination into a challenge: to summon a world yet unseen.

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<sup>1</sup> The *Unique* logo was designed by Paula Williams and Brian Yates, Coleman's aunt and uncle.

<sup>2</sup> Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, *Moholy-Nagy: Experiment in Totality* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1955) p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> Op. cit. p. v

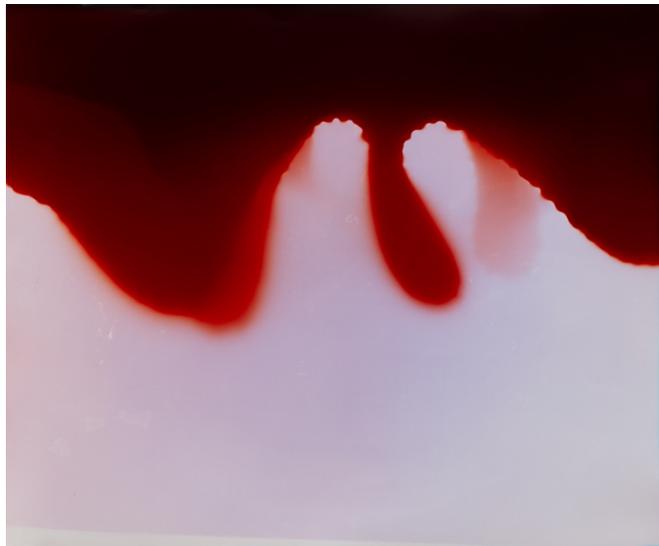
<sup>4</sup> In Carroll's book it is 'And she tried to fancy what the flame of a candle looks like [...]' See Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1867) p. 11. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy instead uses a long dash and a lower-case 'a' to start the sentence and substitutes 'imagine' for 'fancy'.

While teaching at the Bauhaus, László Moholy-Nagy used the school's darkrooms to experiment with the photogram process: trying out ways of creating images with different objects and allowing the sensitised paper to document various manipulations of light and form.

For her series *Light Bleeds: The Bauhaus* (2019), Coleman began her research with a table lamp designed by Marianne Brandt in 1928 (a student of László Moholy-Nagy at the Bauhaus who succeeded him as head of the metal workshop). Coleman has stated that the fact that women were prevented from enrolling on the architecture course at the Bauhaus led her to reflect upon the way in which the objects they were permitted to design, such as textiles and lighting, nevertheless had the capacity to affect architectural spaces.

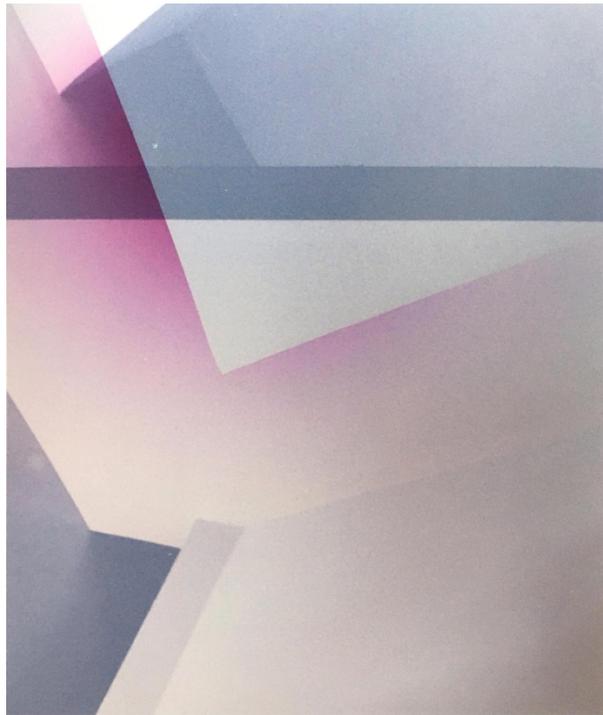
Exceeding the bounded space of the single photographic workroom, Coleman takes the entire Bauhaus building as her darkroom. Her large-scale series of colour photograms are the result of furtive nocturnal performances and record and transform aspects of the architecture and interiors via the particular conditions of light there during her visit. The intensely saturated areas of the images are those where the most light fell, producing deep magenta or glowing orange valleys on the paper. In other images from the series, the ridge of a curtain produces waveforms, polyps, in red and pink.

*Light Bleeds: The Bauhaus - large curtains (t), 2019*



These images transform the ordinarily visible structures to reveal an erotics of light: a superabundance of colour tonality caught on paper that approaches human dimensions. This light bleeds. Another set of images from the series remake the Bauhaus stairwell, designed by Walter Gropius. These images use photographic and photogram techniques in layers, creating a new architecture like a blueprint: a world yet unseen.

Light Bleeds: The Bauhaus - stairwell, 2019



Coleman's photograms are containers. They contain the temporality of their making, the touch of the maker, and the hidden light of a place and a moment in time.

In her influential 1988 essay *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, science-fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin offered us a new way of telling stories about ourselves, and about the world. In contrast to the prevailing heroic narratives, Le Guin proposes that the proper shape of a story 'might be that of a sack, a bag',<sup>5</sup> capable of holding and carrying meaning. Finding or constructing a vessel is, for Le Guin, the elementary creative act, perhaps 'a leaf, a gourd, a shell, a net, a bag, a sling, a sack, a bottle, a pot, a box, a container', but also a 'recipient',<sup>6</sup> foregrounding the bodies that hold, carry, and tell.

In *The Body Says Yes, The Body Says No (Mum)* (2021), Coleman finds such a vessel.<sup>7</sup> The rippling form of the vase, within which three forms are suspended, rendered in blood-red tones, suggests the body. The image both plays with, and departs from, the aesthetics associated with medical imaging techniques. For gestating bodies – or sick bodies – these images abound. We are shown parts of ourselves in a way that must be translated, interpreted. These images claim to tell us more about ourselves than we can intuitively know. They might be a comfort or a terror in different circumstances. How do we reconcile the body as felt with the body as imaged? In this work Coleman produces a new image, with its own distinct balance and rhythm. This image holds – an intense labour.

<sup>5</sup> Ursula Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (London: Ignota, 2019), p. 34.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>7</sup> The vases used to create the photograms in this pair of photograms were both purchased from second-hand shops.

By contrast, *The Body Says Yes, The Body Says No* (Carra-rah) (2021) moves; its skeletal structure shaking side to side. A refusal? Most certainly. The peculiar power of the photogram technique is its agency, its potential to present us with a world transformed. Familiar objects are remade. As a methodology it has much to teach us.

*The Body Says Yes, The Body Says No (Carra-rah), 2021*



In the series *After Paule Vézelay* (2020) Coleman foregrounds the haptic in a play of biomorphic forms made using glass sex-toys. As photograms, the sense of contact is doubled, with the technological contours assuming somatic status. Coleman has spoken about the figuration of bodily pleasure unmoored from the ordinarily limited relationship structures that society condones.

*After Paule Vézelay, 2020*



With works from the series *Entrance* (2020) viscous liquids (lubricant) spill out from glass containers. These glasses are bodies: they have lips, red hearts. They leak. Some of them are broken.

What they contain – or fail to contain – emerges unhurriedly. A photographic exposure is often valued for its brevity, its ability to capture the accelerating cultures of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The slow-moving liquids in the *Entrance* series challenge this tempo. The spilling fluids appear variously speculative, hard-edged, ruminative, turbulent, dilute, alloyed. They model for us the way in which new worlds can be born.

*Entrance (Red Hearts), 2020*



Lisa Baraitser has spoken about the alternative temporalities of care – waiting, staying, delaying, enduring, persisting, repeating, maintaining, preserving, remaining – as ‘dull or abdicate temporalities’, when time ‘appears to refuse to or can’t flow’.<sup>8</sup> As such they inherently resist the capitalist predilection toward rupture and change. What happens when we embrace these slower temporalities?

For Cynthia Dewi Oka, it is precisely in these moments of suspension that we pay attention to bodies: our own and those of others. Oka describes how the ‘commitment to the survival and thriving of other bodies’ implicit in forms of care is a truly radical act in the contemporary context, a resistance to the economic and political forces that ‘unmoor us from each other’.<sup>9</sup> If the dominant systems of governance do not serve the body – all bodies – then we must rethink them.

<sup>8</sup> Lisa Baraitser in conversation with Ruth Beale in ‘Episode 4: Suspended Time’, *True Currency: About Feminist Economics* (2020) <[https://www.gasworks.org.uk/2020/07/21/Episode\\_4\\_-\\_Transcript\\_in\\_English.pdf](https://www.gasworks.org.uk/2020/07/21/Episode_4_-_Transcript_in_English.pdf)> [accessed 2/9/22]

<sup>9</sup> Cynthia Dewi Oka, ‘Mothering as Revolutionary Praxis’ in Alexis Pauline Gumbs, China Martens, Mai’a Williams, *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016) p. 52.

The more I consider Coleman’s photogram practice, the more I see new worlds emerging. The collaboration with milliner Noel Stewart, *Of the Shadow* (2014) – in which leather to be made into hats was treated with light-sensitive emulsion and made to carry the imprint of a sunbathing body – provokes an uncanny sense that another world perhaps already exists in proportion to our own: eerily glimpsed in shadow form behind that which we inhabit. Similarly, the circular tables from Coleman’s installation *Winter Sun* (2014), like phases of the moon, bear traces of another temporality, of a connectivity that persists.



Images from *Light Bleeds* (2016-18) co-authored by Coleman and AK Knol and from *Light Bleeds: London College of Fashion* (2019)<sup>10</sup> contain a political opacity. In our world illumination is anchored to materiality. Solid things, things considered of value are lit. Walking through a city at night makes this clear. Coleman’s images contain a reversal of the space we ordinarily occupy. Instead of ‘stuff’ we get space: a place to put new things. How shall we use it?

Le Guin conceived new worlds where the dominant political and social imaginary was failing. How can we bring forth new ways of being in the world, never having seen such a thing? What does a flame look like, after the candle is blown out? Kim Coleman’s practice dwells on these questions.

— Inga Fraser, September 2022

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<sup>10</sup> Caitlin Tomlinson was co-producer on the latter series, in addition to the series *Light Bleeds: The Bauhaus* (2019).