



## Between Image and Abstraction: an Interview with Miranda Lichtenstein

July 1, 2021 / by Eugenie Shinkle

Based in New York, photographic artist Miranda Lichtenstein has spent almost two decades exploring the dialogue between image and abstraction. Although she studied under American documentary photographer Joel Sternfeld, Lichtenstein soon began pushing the boundaries of traditional photography, using varied techniques such as collage and abstraction to interrogate the material properties of the medium. Lichtenstein's new publication with Loose Joints, *Recorder*, draws together three bodies of work that began with a collaborative exhibition, and developed into an extended series of experimental images based in feedback loops of scanning, printing and rephotographing. Miranda and I spoke in March 2021.

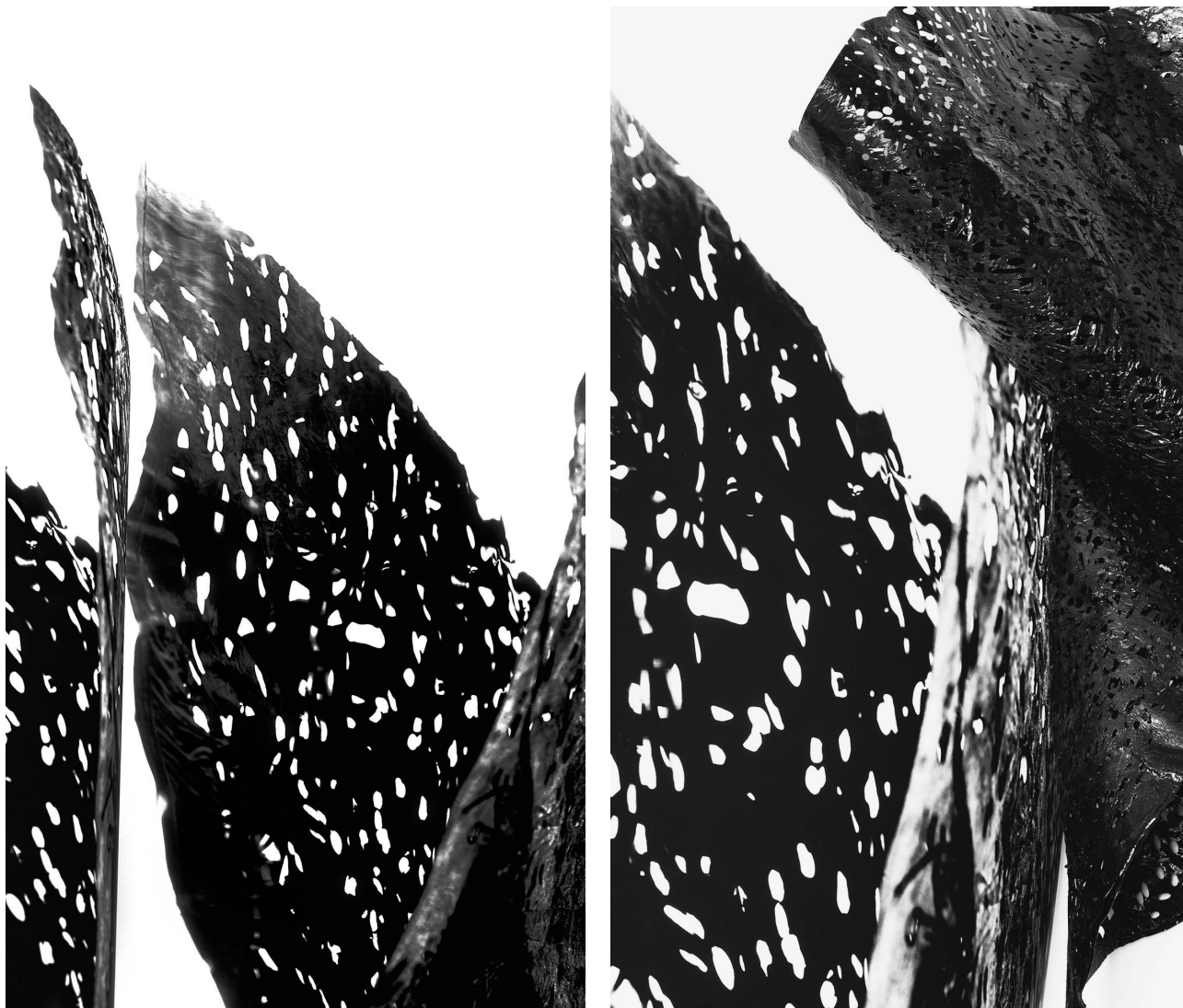
---

ES: Your collaborative exhibition with J Stoner Blackwell was a turning point in your practice. There are so many things going on in this work: there's a collaborative practice, a dialogue between production and reproduction, between images on the page and objects in the real world, and between the various technologies that were used to make the work. Can you tell me a bit about this exhibition, how this body of work began?

ML: It started when J asked if I would photograph their work as it was re-purposed in a fashion show. Their series of painting objects called "Neveruses" are comprised of recovered plastic bags and colored fibers such as wool yarn, silk thread, and patterned cloth. J describes them as neither useful nor redundant, though both are implied. I never photographed the fashion

COPY  
COPY  
COPY  
COPY

but when I went to the studio, I had the impulse to pick up my camera to photograph the material I saw there. The work was everywhere! It was all over the floor, in the kitchen, every wall. I likened the space of the studio at the time to a giant tableau. I asked if I come back and photograph their work. We had been friends for years, but that was the beginning of a two-year dialogue. I began bringing their work to my studio to photograph it in the same manner that I had shot previous still lifes, working with reflection and a destabilizing depth of field.



I also wanted to produce a decidedly collaborative piece, so we scanned the objects, in order to create a more direct reproduction. I made prints from these scans at various dimensions, enlarging the surface and detail so that when I combined the images and laid them on the ground they looked like an oversized carpet. At first I had them on the wall, but when I was cutting them out on the floor – and this is often how I work, I discover something, accidentally, by doing it – I recognized that there was a logic to the images, which were created using light passing over them while lying flat, for them to be viewed from above.

There is a complicated though often overlooked history of photography's relationship to sculpture, specifically that of artists photographing other artist's works. I was thinking about



COPY  
COPY  
COPY  
COPY

ay's photograph *Dust Breeding*, a long exposure of dust gathered on Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* Glass in his New York apartment as being fundamental to this – it's an instance in which photographic representation divorces itself from the parameters of the work it depicts and Duchamp was solicitous of this work. Come to think of it, the title could also refer to one work breeding another.

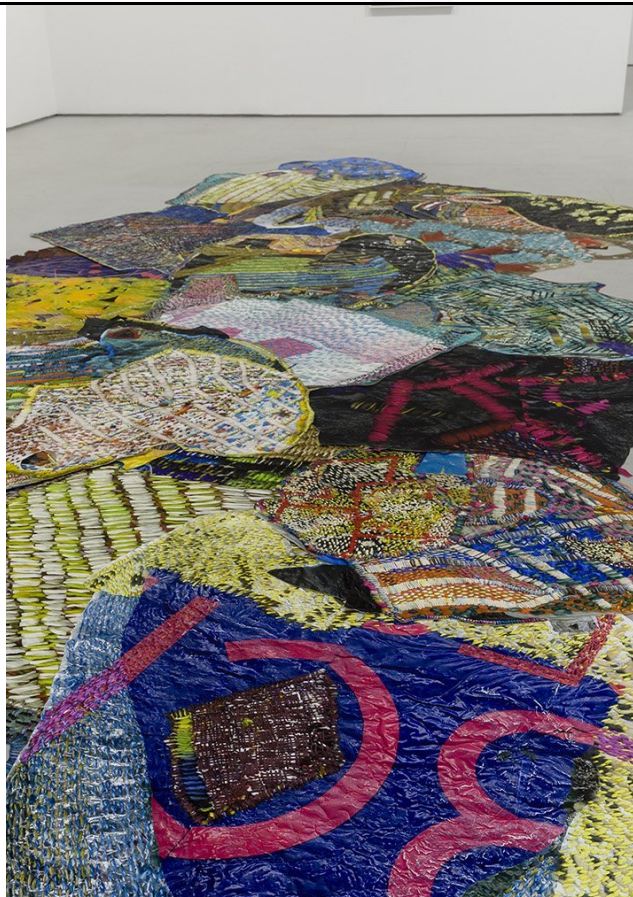
---

ES: It's hard, in the photographs of the installation, to get a sense of exactly what you're looking at.

ML: What you're seeing are ink jet prints made from scans of the surface of the embellished plastic bags. The shapes are faithful to the original objects, because I cut each image out following its irregular borders. They're fairly illusionistic. People would look at the work and think they were seeing a woven tapestry. I'm not invested in the trickery; what I am interested in is how the scanner functions, and malfunctions, as a copying device. It's the twenty-first century version of a facsimile – it makes mistakes and has glitches akin to a Xerox machine. It raises the question: at what point does an artwork become a copy, a subject, or an object?



COPY  
COPY  
COPY  
COPY



Above: J Stoner Blackwell with 'Neveruses'; Below: Installation of *Welcome Water* at Elizabeth Dee Gallery, New York, 2015

ES: The installation piece that you created with these scans – *Welcome Water* – has a real dimensionality to it. When I first saw the installation shots, I thought that you had piled up actual textiles so that it had a contour like a little hill. But it sits flat on the floor?

ML: Yes, it's flat on the floor, although the prints are piled on top of one another. Parts of it are denser than others, maybe four prints are overlapping here, and two there...

ES: Does it have a preordained layout, or is it adapted every time?

ML: No, not at all. In fact, I went back to the gallery a couple of times and moved it around! It was a liberating project, not only because the collaboration was a blurring of authorship, but the piece was also so unfixed. The obvious analogy, environmentally, is to flotsam in the sea. Like the slippery intentions of J's hybrid objects, I wanted the flotsam to move, so I never stitched the photos together.



COPY  
COPY  
COPY  
COPY

interested in how the scanner functions, and malfunctions, as a copying device. It's the twenty-first century version of a facsimile machine. It makes mistakes and has glitches akin to a Xerox machine. It asks the question: at what point does an artwork become a copy,

---

## a subject, or an object?

ES: The pieces on the wall are made from the remainders – the white outlines that were left over when you cut out the scans of the bag works. In the gallery, they were created by pinning individual outline sections to the wall to create these sort of low-relief paper sculptures. These then became the basis of the work in the book. But the photographs of these pieces in the book are very deceptive – these strange, diaphanous things that look like veils that have been burned through in the middle.

ML: I ended up calling these works '*Grounds*', but at first I was referring to them as remainders, because as you said, they were made from leftover paper from the cut-out prints. The gaps and spaces that I created when I pinned them to the wall – that physical space between the collage and the wall – is necessary to give the work dimensionality. The photographs in the book are deceptive because they are anything but flat when you see them in person. This was intentional of course, because they have an entirely different function in the book. The one thing the original and the reproduction has in common is that you can see through the paper we used in the book, the same way you can see through the hole at the centre of the collage



[\[https://c4journal.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Grounds-Study-in-](https://c4journal.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Grounds-Study-in-)



[\[https://c4journal.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Ground-13\\_MoCA-](https://c4journal.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Ground-13_MoCA-)

[resized-lightenedES.jpg\]](#)[Tucson-EScrop.jpg\]](#)[ES' installed on gallery wall](#)

ES: What are these traces that look like burn marks?

ML: That is where the scanner bed didn't perfectly fit on top of the bag. It's a mistake, an aberration, a light leak. It was this discovery that pushed me to start working with these images. I was intrigued that a light leak would leave a trace on the paper that literally looked like a burn. I was thinking about the functionality of light, the mechanism of it, that it's burning a mark onto the image, if you will.

ES: Tell me about the colour cast in these images of the *Grounds*. As they appear on the wall, the *Grounds* are obviously monochrome. But in the book, the first few have this blue cast to them, these hints of tonality that are very subtle. Then as we move into the book, you get much more obviously tinted ones. What are you doing to create these colour casts?

ML: When I started printing images specifically to make the *Grounds*, I would raise the levels sometimes, so that the greys would be deeper, or the blue tone would be bluer. It also had to do with the quality of the light, and the paper that I laid over the bag when I scanned it. So these purplish tones, that's a product of bringing out the tone in the file before I print it.

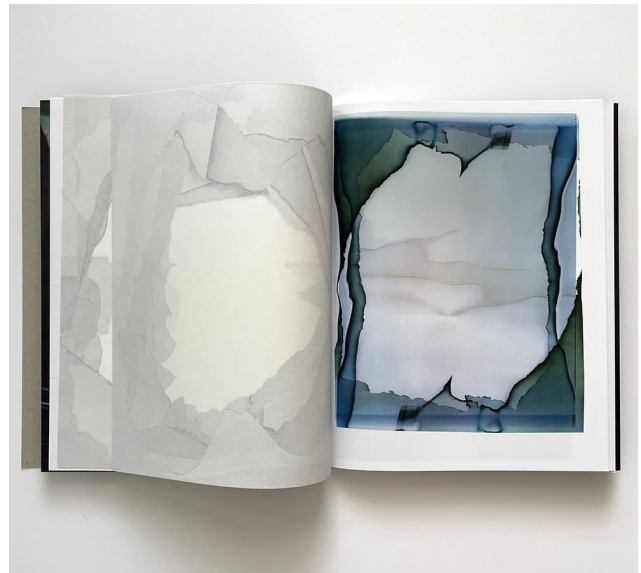
ES: The physical pieces were layered on the wall, but I'm curious how these reproductions have been created for the book. Have they been created on a scanner?

ML: No, they were photographed for the book. The space between the layers of the paper and the flatbed scanner created a different kind of depth, and I wanted the flat surface of the prints represented in the book because the vellum paper we used has a palimpsest quality, which bookends the rest of the work. When they are pinned to the wall, the prints I am layering are not always the exact same size, so I'm building it as I install. Once they are lit in the gallery, the space around the hole in the centre can cast a shadow around the edges which gives the work greater depth.



COPY  
COPY  
COPY  
COPY

---



ES: So that transformation to something that lives on a page is a really profound one, filled with all of this deception. In the book, it's quite difficult to work out exactly what it is that you're looking at, and how it's been created.

ML: Do you find that frustrating?

COPY  
COPY  
COPY  
COPY

ES: No, definitely not! I don't know if others might, but I personally love the mystery of it. I love the fact that there is this interchange between technologies, between processes that are very tactile and involved with the material, and full of imperfections – and then scans, which are quite clinical in the kind of information they record, but which have their own kind of mistakes and glitches. As works in the gallery, they have a completely different identity than they do in the book. That complexity, and the idea that the book is something totally different, is really interesting to me.

---

ML: It's very typical of the way I work, where I start with one thing, and it morphs into another thing, and then I get an idea and build upon it.

ES: Tell me about the black and white images in the book.

ML: They are photographs of black plastic deli bags, which were ubiquitous in NYC, punctured with holes created by a laser cutter. They were also part of J's *Neveruses* series. I was making these pictures at the same time that I was making the *Grounds*, so there are correspondences: between positive and negative space, their ambiguous dimensionality, and the recycling of materials which appear simultaneously fleeting and disposable, as well as monolithic in their permanence and recurrence.

ES: The book also contains another set of images, from a subsequent stage of the work.

ML: After I showed *Welcome Water*, the floor piece made from the scans, and produced the *Grounds*, which were made by layering the left over paper from *Welcome Water*, I began photographing the recycled paper I used to make the *Grounds*, and I thought, 'Well, I'm working with this process of layering the prints physically, with the cut-outs, why don't I see if I can actually create these layers on a single page using different versions of the same image?' I wanted to work with the same material, but to create a different iteration. I started playing with





, and hue, and composition, to alter them slightly and I'd make ten or twenty files of the picture, or different portions of it.

ES: So you're not building up these layers in Photoshop?

---

ML: Not at all. This is all done in the printer. I only use Photoshop to create different files of the same image, but I never create the layering on screen. It's a chance operation – often it's mis-registered, and I don't always know where the ink is going to stick, and where it's not. I have now got a sense of what happens with certain colours overlaying, but things change all the time. That's the magic of it for me. When I run it through the printer again, I don't entirely know how it's going to look. The image itself is built up with layers of ink, it's an additive process.

ES: So the print becomes a sort of low-relief sculpture made of ink.

ML: Absolutely. It's determined by the substrate, and the way that the paper absorbs the ink or binds to it. Like many other artists, I am using the machine against its own logic. So that's where all these glitches and accidents and contingencies lie, because I don't know what I'm going to get.

**I don't know how conscious or unconscious it is, but so much of my work is a response to the flattening and superficiality of the way we see images when we see them on a screen. There's no longer an experience of the haptic, it's getting less and less frequent.**

ES: I'm very interested in the interplay between what happens on the screen, what you're able to do there, and at what point you feel 'No, actually this needs to take place in real life.'

ML: People have asked me 'Why don't you map it out on the screen first, you could then see what the layers would look like?', and I think, no, I couldn't because it's not about how the layers look on the screen. It's about how the layers look on the surface of the paper when they are built with ink.

ES: The further you go into the book, the denser the images seem to get. They remind me of paintings, there's an incredible energy, they feel really gestural. I can see where the temptation is to just keep pushing and seeing at what point you need to stop, at what point you reach this kind of end game, where you feel like you've taken it as far as you can.

ML: I began pushing it further and layering it more and more, so that the image really breaks down. I took a turn, at a certain point, where any interest in a certain faithfulness to the original, or reference to the material itself, was less interesting to me, than what I could do with the



COPY  
COPY  
COPY  
COPY

layers and tones, and the ink. It really became an entirely different image/object from started with.

---

ES: I love the sense of confusion that develops: What are your eyes doing with this? Are they seeking depth, the way that we're used to doing with photographs? Or are they being confronted with something that's entirely superficial, literally, living on the surface of the paper?

ML: I don't know how conscious or unconscious it is, but so much of my work is a response to the flattening and superficiality of the way we see images when we see them on a screen. There's no longer an experience of the haptic, it's getting less and less frequent. I remember years ago when my art dealer started sending out jpegs to prospective buyers. I thought 'Really? People will buy something just from a jpeg? They have to see the surface, they have to see it to scale, they have to get a sense of the paper and the framing ...' I was so naïve! These are concerns that many artists have, at least of my generation. But that's just gone. So in some ways this may be a response, using the machine against itself to think about the space and depth and surface of an object. I'm not necessarily interested in confounding people, but I like





ns where you're not totally sure what you're looking at. I want to see how far I can push  
face of an image.

ES: The decisions that you're making are very much like the decisions that a painter  
would make when working on a composition.

---

ML: Yes, they are. Before. when people would say 'Oh, your photographs are so painterly,' that was a description that I never wanted to be affiliated with. But it's more accurate with these works – many of the decisions I'm making are aligned, or at least adjacent, to painting decisions. I will put a print on the wall, and think 'Okay, I need to open up some space there', and I'll look at another file of that image, and say 'Okay, let's print that section on top...'

ES: How do you know when to stop?

ML: That's a good question. I think it's when I recognise that the ink is the material that's finally forming the image, when it doesn't look like a digitally composed work. There are a lot of artists who use Photoshop and digital manipulation to form an image; the gesture is recognizable. I've chosen to do something different, in that the gesture is not embedded in the software, it's embedded in the layers of the ink, and what happens with depth and space and colour and opacity, is determined by how the inks are interacting.

ES: So the act of photographing itself is not really an important part of the equation or the process any more.

ML: It hasn't been. Recently, things are shifting a little bit, but for this body of work, apart from the black-and-white still lives, I've really just been using the scanner and the printer to make everything.



ES: I wanted to end by asking you about the political dimensions of this work. There's obviously a particular ecological sensibility that shapes the project from the start, but that's not what the work is about, as such.

ML: No, not at all. I'm interested in what I can do here with form and process, and with an economy of means, because that lends itself to a politics that I'm invested in and thinking about. The plastic bags could be more obvious in these terms, but that's not the only subject.

ES: I've always struggled with a desire to make work that doesn't necessarily have an obvious political narrative, but that is motivated by a politics – by a stance on the world, and on the way that technology mediates our relationship to it. Is that something you've ever struggled with? Have you ever had a kind of guilt that your work isn't more directly engaged with politics?

ML: No. Maybe that sounds indulgent. I fundraise, and I go to marches, and I argue for what I believe in, but that's a different kind of labour. I have very strong beliefs, and that's going to make its way into the work, but I'm not interested in my work illustrating these beliefs. Even just to be an artist, and to push back and try to make meaning in other ways, is a type of political



**COPY**  
**COPY**  
**COPY**  
**COPY**

I think also because typically, overtly political art is not what I gravitate towards. If I'm to look at something, I want to be seduced by it, I want to think about how it was made, what it's doing spatially, physically, how it reflects on technology and its boundless impact, so on colour and material and reproduction. This said, the work we've been discussing is perhaps the most overtly political work I've made, so maybe there is a struggle after all!

---

**Miranda Lichtenstein** [<https://mirandalichtenstein.com/>]

**Loose Joints 2021** [<https://loosejoints.biz/products/miranda-lichtenstein>]



**All Rights Reserved: Text © Eugenie Shinkle; Images © Miranda Lichtenstein/Loose Joints; book spreads © Eugenie Shinkle**

**Tags:** [collaboration](#), [collage](#), [Eugenie Shinkle](#), [experimental photography](#), [J Stoner Blackwell](#), [Miranda Lichtenstein](#), [scanner](#), [still life](#)

**Share this entry**



**You might also like**

<a href="#">Cristiano Volk – Mélaina Cholé</a>	<a href="#">Vincent Delbrouck – Dzogchen</a>	<a href="#">Maria Ahmed – Heaven Speed The Chameleon</a>	<a href="#">Shinya Arimoto – Tokyo Debugger</a>	<a href="#">Ground, wood, water and rocks: Ron Jude’s 12 Hz</a>	<a href="#">The Universe Speaking Back – an Interview with Tyrone Williams</a>	<a href="#">Enver Hirsch &amp; Philipp Meuser – Behelfsheim</a>	<a href="#">The Archive of Bernard Taylor</a>
--	--	--	---	---	--	---	---



Copyright C4 Journal 2020

