Model Images

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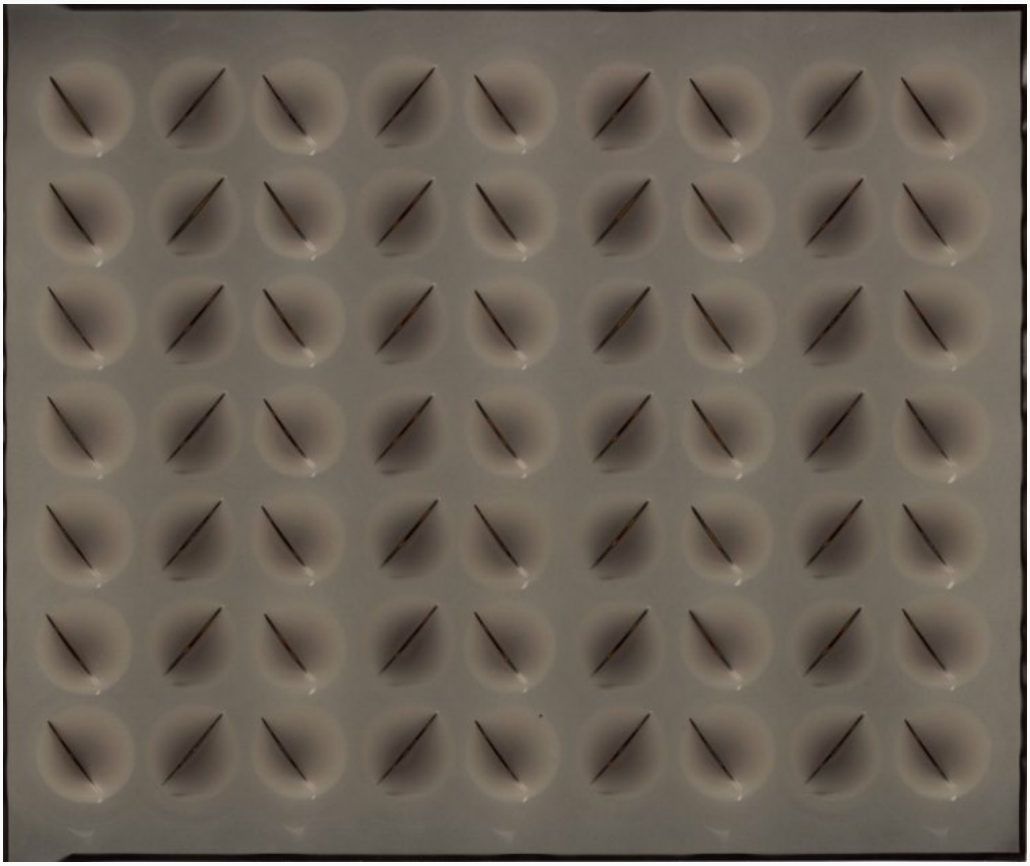
Dan Weiskopf



Chris McCaw, Poly-optic #22, 2013; gelatin silver paper negative, in the “Light, Paper, Process: Reinventing Photography” exhibition at the J. Paul Getty Museum.

What doesn’t exist can’t be photographed; the limits of photography are the limits of the visible world. However cleverly one crafts the shot, the camera always records just what is in front of it. No wonder that for most of its history, photography was the prototype of pictorial realism.

Now, though, we are drowning in pictures of our own mundane lives. Making more images of reality, no matter how artfully composed, can seem futile. A sign of this widespread disillusionment with realistic image-making is the recent surge of interest in abstract photography, as charted through such exhibitions as *The Edge of Vision* (Aperture, 2009), *The Limits of Photography* (MoCP, 2012), *Part Picture* (MOCCA, 2015), and *Light, Paper, Process* (Getty, 2015). These shows spin an alternate history of photography in which abstraction has always coexisted side-by-side with realism, figuration, and representation.

As an alternative to turning the lens directly on the world, many photographers now turn instead towards making images of ersatz worlds, deliberately constructed models that exist solely to stand before the camera as representatives of other places, processes, and things, or even of mere concepts and ideas. Model-based images are perhaps the closest that photographs can come to providing images of the nonexistent, and as such they deserve to be recognized as a distinctive genre of abstraction. They haunt the borderlands between photography and other mediums, and, increasingly, they stand as a bridge between traditional photography and purely digital imaging.

Laura Letinsky, *Untitled #49*, from the series Hardly More Than Ever, 2002. © Laura Letinsky

Models may be made of physical materials such as paper, glass, plaster, acrylic, or metal, but often they are entirely virtual. While these images are sometimes called “constructed photographs,” this term has a far wider sphere of application. Any studio-made image that centers on an arrangement of props and objects is in a sense constructed, while not all of these arrangements are models in the narrow sense intended here. Still-lifes like Laura Letinsky’s ravishing scenes of consumption are meticulously constructed, but not models. The definitive trait of models is that they are intermediaries that point to something outside of themselves. Models are fundamentally stand-ins or representations, and model-based photographs are images that trade on these representational qualities.

It’s useful in situating model-based photography to consider how models work in scientific practice. Scientific models of global climate or the insides of stars resemble their real-world targets, but only partially: they selectively omit information in order to simplify and idealize the actual systems that they stand for. Simplification sands off the rough edges of reality, while idealization reshapes it into a more easily handled form. Further, not all models are directly derived or copied from the world. Some are *de novo* creations that exist purely or primarily in the laboratory, studio, or within computer simulations. Models serve to depict the world, and also as tools to explore and experiment with it, but sometimes the goal is just to delve into and understand the artificial world of the model itself.

All of these characteristics surface in model-based photography. Thomas Demand’s work can be seen as exemplary of the form. The outlines of the German artist’s practice are well-known: working primarily from mass-media images such as pictures of the Oval Office or the home of Boston Marathon bomber Tamerlan Tsarnaev, he builds exacting physical scale replicas of the depopulated spaces and scenes depicted therein, with most of the surfaces rendered in cardboard and cut paper. Once these handmade paper sculptures are photographed, they are usually destroyed, although recently some have been preserved for exhibition.

Demand’s images wear their artefactual nature openly. As critics such as Michael Fried have noted, the fact that their every aspect is an intentional product makes them, in a sense, anti-photographic, negations of the medium’s openness to the found or accidental quality of the world. There is no pretense here to capturing an independently existing reality; these spaces exist solely to be photographed. Their content derives from real, inhabited

environments, but they are drained of details, smooth as if they had never been touched. While Demand often depicts humanly built spaces, he strips them of any marks of having contained life. Every page is blank, every surface is without fingerprints or smudges.

Thomas Demand, *Presidency I*, 2008; C-Print/Diasec, 310 by 223 cm. © Thomas Demand VG Bild Kunst, Bonn.

It isn't just the fact that Demand often draws on forensic materials such as crime scenes that makes these rooms seem so uninviting. Even the light can seem off, somehow dead, presumably because it is being reflected from such uniform materials. Demand's worlds resemble the cosmos one can sometimes glimpse in Stanley Kubrick's films, in which humans seem jarringly out of place against their white, spartan spacefaring technology (*2001*), or are dwarfed and ultimately swallowed by unnatural architecture like that of the Overlook Hotel (*The Shining*). But it's a mistake to think of these scenes in theatrical terms, as being akin to stage sets. A stage implies the possibility of an actor, and Demand's photographs are entirely hermetic.

Demand's creations are abstract models in the precise sense of the term: being duplicates of photographed locales, they exist as representations of those places (or their mass-media copies), but their studied omission of detail accounts for their peculiar phenomenological qualities. In this, they realize the driving theme in much of his work, which is that the circulation of images creates its own separate order of reality; this in turn aligns with his longstanding indifference to the fate of his constructs after they are documented.

While Demand is interested in the ontology of mass photography itself, James Casebere's practice centers on personal and social concerns. His early autobiographical images of domestic life (*Fork in the Refrigerator*, 1975) are comic, their guileless clumsiness reflecting his desire to leave the work's seams visible. Until recently, all of his images had been black-and-white, which Casebere has associated with the phantasmal nature of memory, but which at the same time is another device of abstraction.

James Casebere, *Dorm Room,* 2003.

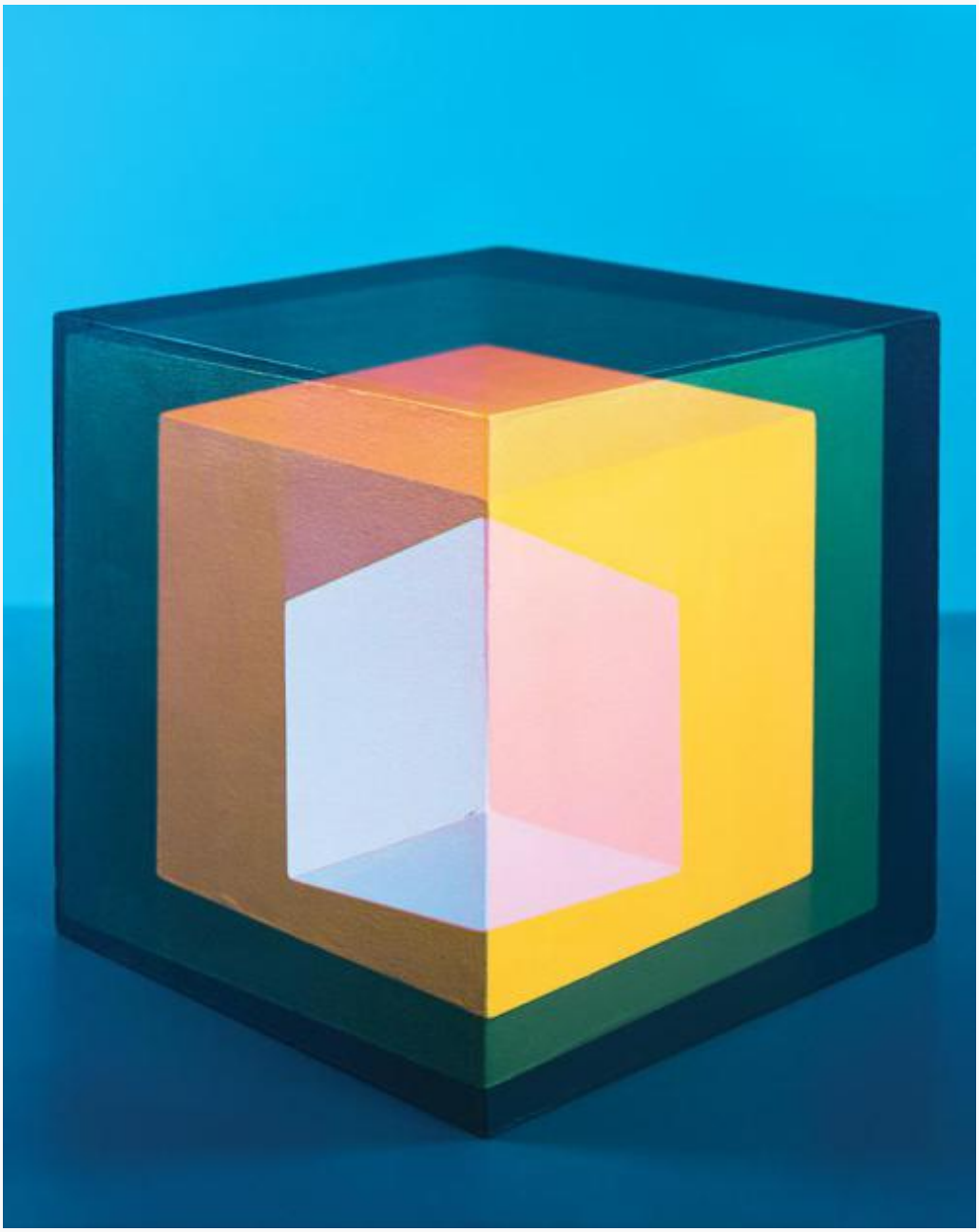
Casebere's later work has taken on grimmer tones, notably in his series of prison images and other institutional settings (*Dorm Room*, 2003). His model prisons, such as *Sing Sing* (1993) are stark white structures moodily illuminated against a background of pure black void, their interiors lit in *noir*ish shades (*Prison Cell with Skylight*, 1993). They convey both an implacable solidity and a haunting spiritual barrenness. As with some of Demand's work, they feel deeply inhospitable, and the difficulty of imaginatively entering into these images mirrors the seeming impossibility of ordinary human existence inside of the real-world spaces that they derive from. The resistance we feel as we try to project ourselves into the depicted space stems not from its abstract nature, but from what lies behind it, namely the hardness of the reality it points to: spaces that exist only as unforgiving containers for people's lives.

Where Demand and Casebere's works derive straightforwardly from real places, buildings, and landscapes, Barbara Kasten's photographs are born wholly within the studio. Starting with her early series *Construct* (1979-86) and *Metaphase* (1986), she has created large-scale sculptures that use carefully illuminated acrylic, mirrors, aluminum, and fiberglass as tools for exploring space and geometry, not as they exist independently but as they are encountered perceptually. Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of her photographs is their perspectivally disorienting and ambiguous quality: it can be hard to discern the true relations between objects, and to distinguish things from their shadows and reflections. These spaces, which have the feeling of radically disassembled architecture, present purified phenomenological records of our interactions with a stripped-down version of the world.

Barbara Kasten, *Metaphase 7*, 1986; Polaroid, 24 by 20 in.

Kasten's images both lure and unsettle the gaze. As objects are broken down into elementary but largely unnamable forms and colors shift over into abnormal ranges of blue, pink, and yellow not drawn from natural objects, visual experience itself becomes harder to articulate. The camera provides her with a way of drawing attention to these fleeting aspects of vision, as well as producing new objects that can exist on their own. The recent *Studio Construct* series (2007-ongoing) strips away even the solid materials and electric colors of her 1980s work, leaving only clear planes, white light, and shadow, as close as the camera can come to portraying the experience of seeing matterless forms.

Model-based photography blends and crosses mediums, most obviously sculpture, architecture, and painting, but also, notably in Kasten's work, the traditions of Bauhaus textiles. Montreal photographer Jessica Eaton belongs to a younger generation, but her work harkens back to these Bauhaus origins, particularly in the series *cfaal*, an acronym of "Cubes for Albers and LeWitt." Her images, created using a dauntingly complex process, can look deceptively simple, appearing to be nothing more than centered shots of luminous nested colored cubes. Each picture, though, is a multiple exposure of a set of cubes painted in different shades of gray, shot through red-green-blue color separation filters. By varying the luminosity of the cube and the exposure time, Eaton exploits the additive properties of colored light to produce a brilliant range of hues.



Jessica Eaton, *cfaal 260*, 2012. Courtesy the artist/Clint Roenisch/Higher Pictures, New York/M+B, Los Angeles
Gallery Image

In Eaton's work, the camera, when turned on a model object, captures phenomena that emerge out of everyday interactions between perceiver and world. Not only are her objects themselves gray, no colored light corresponding to what appears in the final image is used in the process. The result is an intrinsically colorless world that lights up only under our gaze. Each exposure of a new cube contributes to part of the final image, but they are so entangled by the process that the contribution of any one can't be isolated and separated out of the finished photograph. Her final images present us with an impossible object, one that no physical construction could match: its pitted corners and grainy surfaces undeniably material, its insides blazing with illusory chromatic structures.

Model-based photographs can have a distinctly digital appearance. But models themselves can be made of anything, including massive data structures, so these similarities are anything but superficial. Matthew Gamber has made several photographic images that demonstrate how traditional physical models are continuous with computational models. In *Stanford Bunny (x2)* (2012) and *Utah Teapot* (2013), the titular objects seem to emerge seamlessly from a uniform color field of blue or gray. The effect is eerie, and reminiscent of the *ganzfeld*

hallucinations produced in psychophysical experiments; they appear to be conjured up by the brain's own restless inability to cope with structureless input.

Matthew Gamber, *Utah Teapot*, 2013; laser engraving on glass.

Both, though, depict iconic objects within the history of digital imaging. The Utah teapot derives from a real Melitta teapot sketched and hand-coded in 1975, although the rendered version is somewhat squatter than the physical original, which now resides in the Computer History Museum. Since the code was freely disseminated, rendered teapots have become a standard testing and reference object in computer graphics applications. The Stanford bunny was similarly derived from a terra cotta original that was 3D scanned in 1994.

As datasets, the teapot and bunny models potentially exist everywhere, and wherever they do, they carry some referential trace of their original objects. In depicting them, however, Gamber's images are at least as much about the models themselves and their peculiar status as in-between objects, both tethered to their origins and leading their own autonomous existences. Their easy replicability makes them the opposite of Demand's vanished paper sculptures, which don't outlast their own images.

A much larger genealogy of model images could be written, tracing their roots back to photographers such as Moholy-Nagy and Carel Balth (especially his series *Light Photo Works,* 1976-78), or forward to contemporary artists such as Sara VanDerBeek or Eileen Quinlan, as well as others exploring model worlds created purely out of code. The form's intermediality makes it shifty and elusive when handled with the categories of standard photo-histories. Pictures of models stand at the limits of photography, poised between showing their visible face to the camera and permitting glimpses of invisible forms beyond.

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