



**ROBERT SULKIN**  
**PHOTOGRAPHS 1973-2019**

Published by the Eleanor D. Wilson Museum  
at Hollins University, Roanoke, Virginia.  
[hollins.edu/museum](http://hollins.edu/museum) • 540/362-6532

*Robert Sulkin: Photographs 1973-2019* is sponsored in part by a Cabell Fellowship, the city of Roanoke through the Roanoke Arts Commission, and the office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs, Hollins University.

Cover image: *Nobilis in Morte: King Mackerel Head*, 2000  
Design: Laura Jane Ramsburg



THE ELEANOR D. WILSON MUSEUM

**HOLLINS**  
UNIVERSITY

# **ROBERT SULKIN**

## **PHOTOGRAPHS 1973-2019**

January 16 - March 29, 2020

Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at Hollins University

The Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at Hollins University is pleased to present the exhibition *Robert Sulkin: Photographs 1973-2019*. A member of the Hollins University faculty since 1980, Robert Sulkin is an award-winning photographer whose work has been featured in regional and national exhibitions. Like many photographers working at the end of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Sulkin witnessed and experienced changes in technology that had profound effects on his work. Collectively his studio and/or photoshop-based fabrications comment on aspects of culture and track a progression of style and experimentation, some playful, some farcical, and some serious. While his work has been written about and reproduced in many exhibition catalogues and magazines, this is the first catalogue devoted exclusively to his work.

Robert Sulkin was a history graduate at UNC, Chapel Hill, and largely self-taught in photography before pursuing his M.A. and M.F.A. in art at the University of Iowa. Since then, Hollins has been at the center of Sulkin's career as an artist and professor. During his 39 year tenure, Sulkin expanded the photography program and taught a wide array of analog and digital photography courses, as well as special courses in alternative processes, pinhole, plastic-lens photography, and scanning. In a 2016 article in the British magazine *Black and White Photography*, Sulkin states: "The teaching and artwork are symbiotic, they feed on one another. I get excited when students do things that are good and that makes me want to go to my studio." The popularity of Sulkin's classes never waned, and he leaves a legacy of alumnae who appreciate and practice the art of photography.

The recipient of both the Herta Freitag Faculty Legacy Award and the Roberta A. Stewart Community Service Award, Sulkin was instrumental in bringing a distinguished list of photographic luminaries to Hollins, both to exhibit their work and as the Frances Niederer Artists-in-Residence. For 28 years, Sulkin's studio and darkroom were located in the old, somewhat dilapidated parsonage on campus, which may have influenced some of his works, especially his poignant series *Nobilis in Morte*.

Before the Eleanor D. Wilson Museum opened in 2004, Sulkin was involved in its planning and has served on the museum's advisory board. The museum is excited and honored to be presenting this retrospective, and we thank Bob for his generous support over the years. I also thank the museum staff for their roles in organizing this retrospective exhibition: Laura Jane Ramsburg, Assistant Director; Janet Carty, Preparator; and Kyra Schmidt, Visitor Services and Programs Coordinator. Many thanks are due as well to those that have offered financial support: the Roanoke Arts Commission and the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs at Hollins University.

Jenine Culligan, Director  
Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at Hollins University



*Hand Grid, 1979, 2019*

## Vision/Revision: The Photography of Robert Sulkin

by Genevieve Hendricks, Ph.D.

An exploration of Robert Sulkin's body of creatively conceived, complex, and carefully composed works reveals a world of surreal juxtapositions blending micro and macro, fact and fiction. His photographs provide fertile ground for the consideration of relationships in which the miniature becomes the gigantic, and constructions made of forgotten fragments attain the aura of treasured but lost memories. A survey of his work gives a point of entry into a universe of cosmic junk, discarded souvenirs, and the fossilized remains of fantastic beasts. These form an extensive cabinet of curiosities, a world which can be visited in waking dreams, both created and discovered through the camera's lens.



fig. 1: *July 4, Carrboro, NC*, 1976



fig. 2: *Speeding Car, Chapel Hill*, 1979

In the social landscapes Sulkin explored in the 1970s, one witnesses the emergence of themes that would continue to be developed over his artistic career. These include ruminations on space and the emptiness of space as witnessed in moments of public solitude or private reflection. This can be seen in *July 4, Carrboro, NC*, 1976 (fig. 1), which captures a distinct period of American history in a moment of stillness evoking the wider world beyond.

In subsequent studies he investigated the immediacy of drawing in visually observant works wherein he began to experiment with scale and playfulness, two areas which would continue to inform his work. In *Speeding Car, Chapel Hill* of 1979 (fig. 2) one witnesses a world in flux and decomposing as he explored the nature of photography, both conceptually and physically. In a certain sense, these images make temporality visible as the ephemerality of movement is captured.

In the 1980s, Sulkin's laboratory of research moved to his studio, where he began constructing structures for the purpose of



fig. 3: *Man Ray*, 1986

photographing them. This opened up a further world of discovery and play, containing universal references whose meanings are transformed through dreamlike juxtapositions. *Man Ray* from 1986 (fig. 3) slyly references the early 20th century photographer's 1921 photograph *The Gift*, replacing a vertical row of tacks glued onto the underside of a flatiron with loops of spaghetti. This ludic appropriation of one of the photographer's image of the Surrealist Object, wherein everyday items were rendered uncanny and baffling, reveals Sulkin's deep study of artistic sources, which are not limited to photography but can be seen in references to Giorgio de Chirico, Marc Chagall, Mark Rothko, and Francis Bacon, among others. One encounters new worlds within his tightly controlled environments which appeared to the artist once viewed through the camera, with film enabling the eye to see what it generally cannot.

These artistic allusions go hand in hand with the development of Sulkin's alter-ego as a mad scientist, rummaging through junkyard heaps in search of cast-off objects which when combined and staged give way to new worlds of meanings. When photographed, these grungy gadgets, the products of an ambitious mind, reveal worlds unto themselves, and open up possibilities of space travel and exploration. The photographs of composite objects, similar in shape and appearance to abandoned Mars rovers, that emerge in the series *Prototypes* (fig. 4), recall early Modernists' fascination with dysfunctional machines, as witnessed in the work of Paul Klee, Francis Picabia, and others. At the same time, they speak to the fiction of photography, as it is through the lens of the camera that the viewer is invited into the world of these constructed tableaux, to wonder at their veracity and/or purpose.

The imaginative leaps engendered by these stagings lead to visions of space exploration itself as witnessed in the *Homage to Holst* series (fig. 5), created from scans of black walnuts, resulting in images which appear to contain galaxies replete with explosive solar events and references to space travel. Continuing the exploratory motifs of rocket-ships witnessed in the *Prototypes* series, these allusive images nudge the edges of traditional photography, through their attention to contour and texture. Moreover, his continued experimentation with digital manipulation in both positive and negative planes, as well as other forms of experimentation open up different types of experiences. In

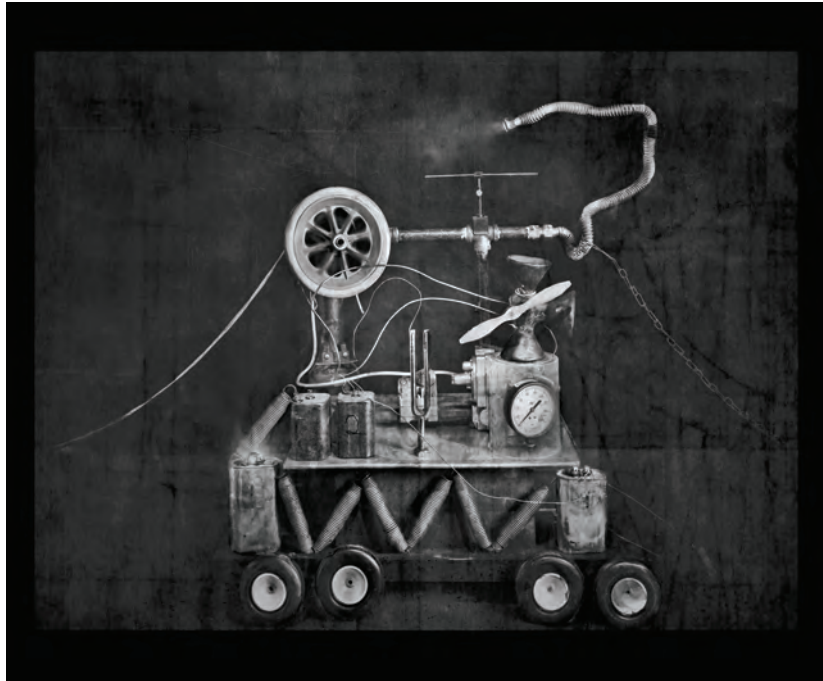


fig. 4



fig. 5

these creative voyages from micro to macro one finds universal references that are also intimate, as well as a continuation of the idea of the photograph as artifact, especially as witnessed through his reuse of lantern slides as framing devices, thus connecting these to the history of photography itself, and its perceived role as enabling the creation of artifacts of truth.

Deeply embedded in this history, and its at times fraught relationship to science, the series of images *Nobilis in Morte* and *Man and Beast* explore the tensions between the harsh realities of photography and the romanticism of genre (fig. 6). The “specimens” pictured here - trussed taxidermied birds, reptiles floating in jars of formaldehyde, or discarded assortments of bone - present a pseudoscientific recreation of a 19th century lab, replete with the beauty and history contained therein. The abandoned objects of scientific investigation are given new life in their constructed spaces, yet retain a sense of loss, and this recalls Susan Sontag’s assertion that “All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time’s relentless melt.”<sup>1</sup>

This nostalgic tone is furthered in the series of *Odes*, wherein Sulkin plays with memory and its distortion, while referencing science and myth. In *Ode to Aurras* (fig. 7), dedicated to the goddess of sound, two images of a cymbal-wielding member of a military band are placed as if upon a double altar, replete with offerings of fruit which diametrically mirror the arm position of the uniformed band member. The process of re-animating found images and figures builds upon an earlier series, *Circa 20th Century* (fig. 8) from the early 1990s. In this series, Sulkin drew on the imagery of popular culture, charting the territory of mass media, marketing and subliminal messages by projecting slides taken from television shows on to folded paper.

In his most recent body of work, *The Malfunction of Memory* (fig. 9), Sulkin continues to explore these themes in combinations of image and text,



Above: fig. 6: *Nobilis in Morte*:  
*Tuatara Lizard*, 2001

Opposite, upper: *Prototype 1*, 2011  
Opposite, lower: *Homage to Holst 9*, 2019

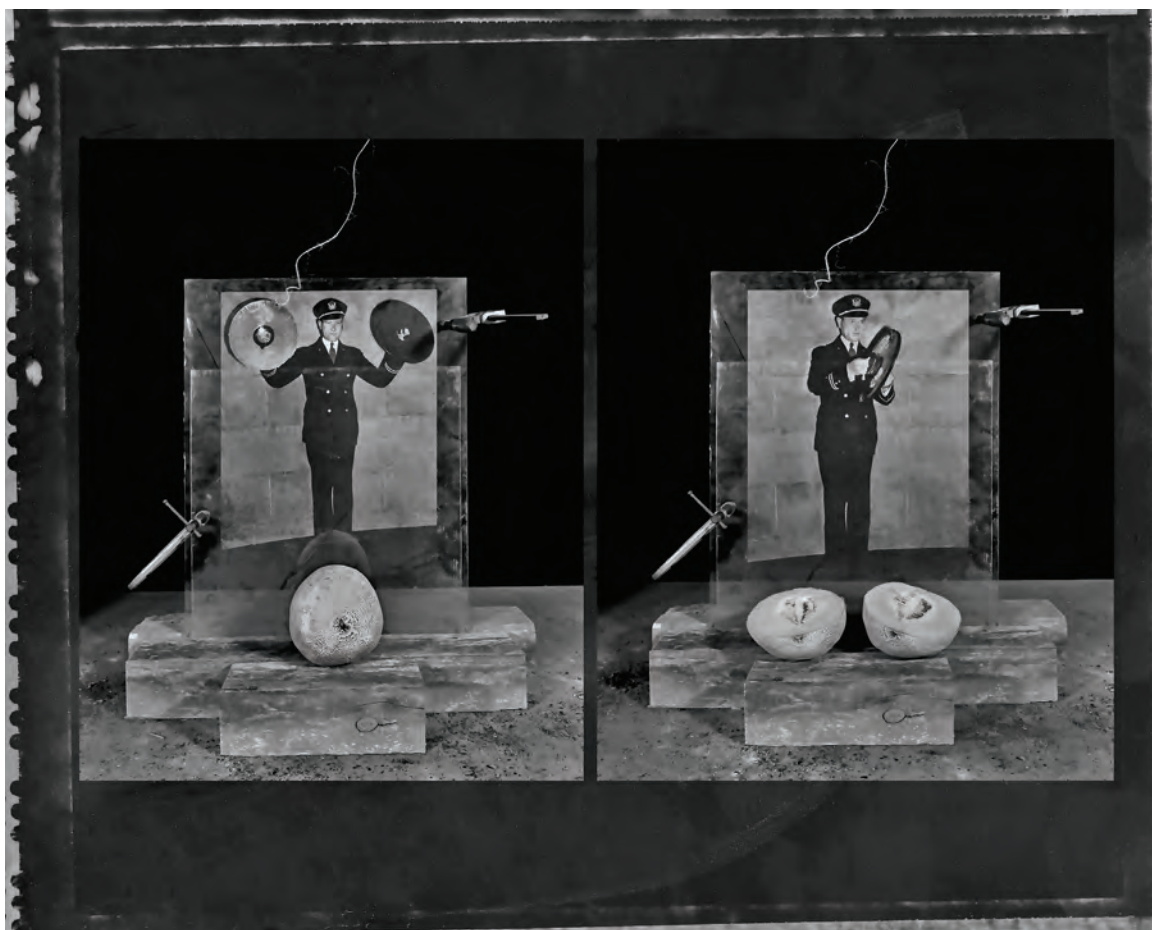


fig. 7: *Odd Odes: Ode to Aurras*, 2010

creating a type of distorted rearview mirror looking back at history. In these works, one enters into the creation of imagined narratives, propelling the viewer into the disembodied experience of suffering from memory's inability to separate primary experience from tv/multimedia. The constructed refractions of these shadows demonstrate Sulkin's continued project of finding life, beauty, and play in the mundane, the fantastic, and the forgotten.

<sup>1</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, Ltd. 1977: 15.

*Genevieve Hendricks is an Assistant Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art History at Hollins University.*



Upper: fig. 8: *Circa 20th Century: Depressed*, 1993  
 Lower: fig. 9: *Malfunction of Memory, Daddy, Mommy*, 2019



# Plates



Above: *Ann, Ocracoke Ferry*, 1973

Opposite, upper: *Dog Show, Raleigh, NC*, 1976

Opposite, lower: *Atlantic Beach, NC*, 1975





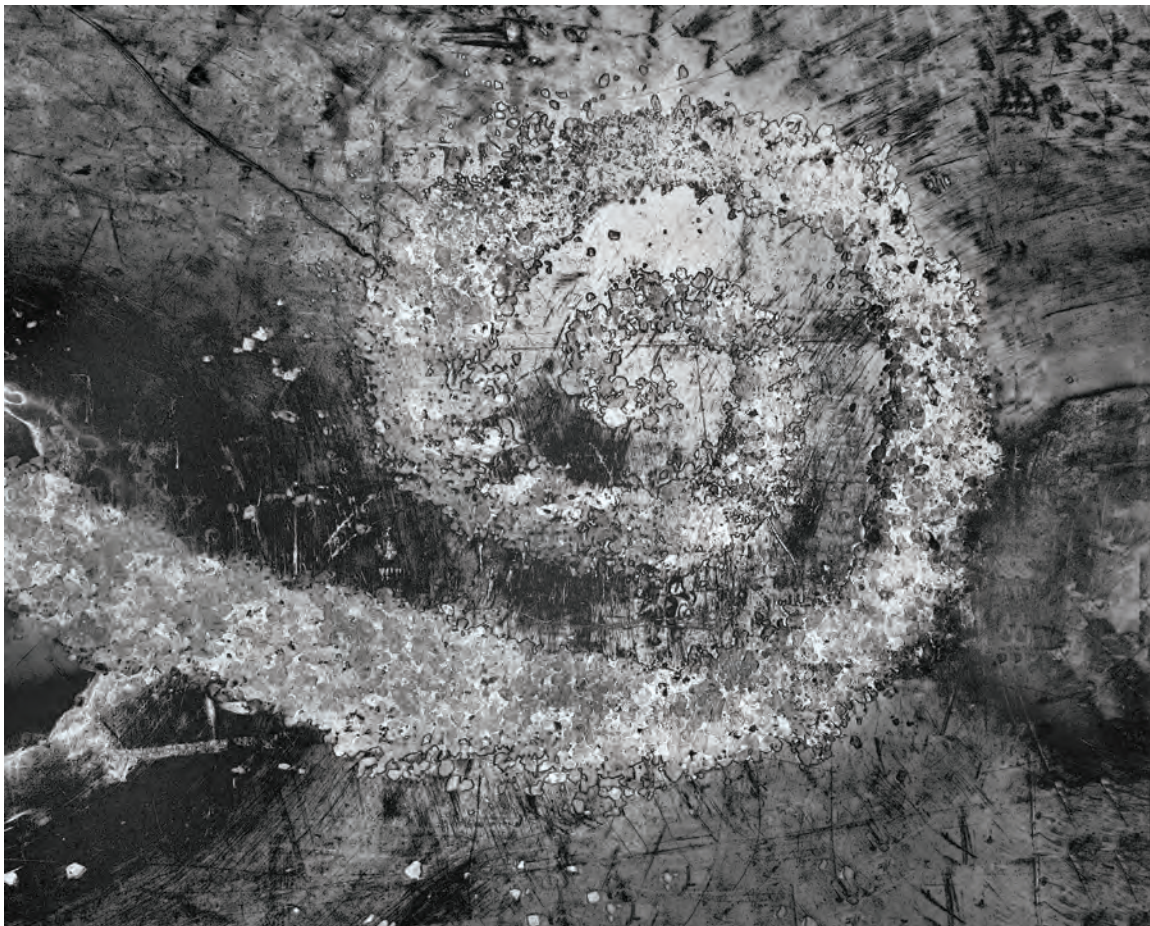
Upper: *Ladder*, 1982  
 Lower: *Homage to Outerbridge*, 1986  
 Opposite: *Shapes*, 1984, 2019



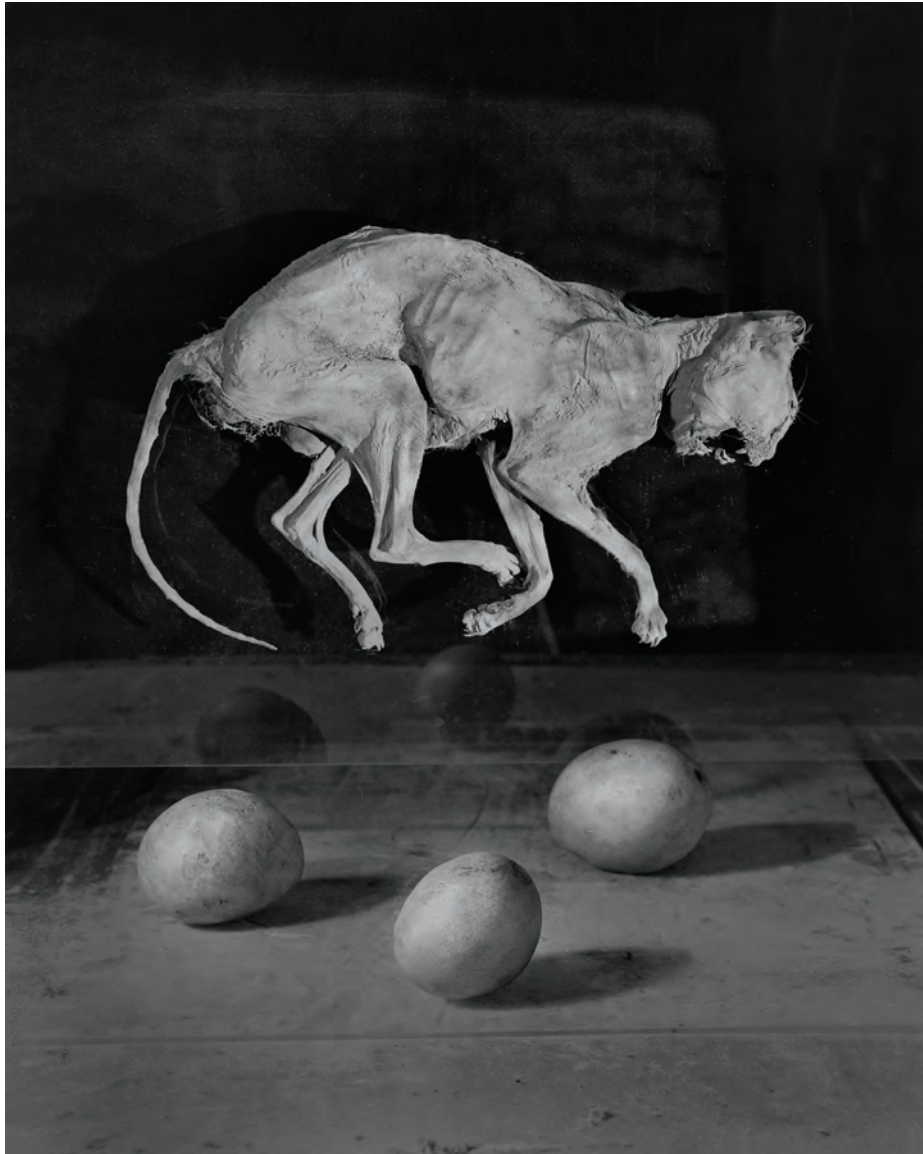




*Modern Methods: Rothko, 1986*



*Modern Methods: Smithson, 1986*



*Cat and Mangoes*, 1989



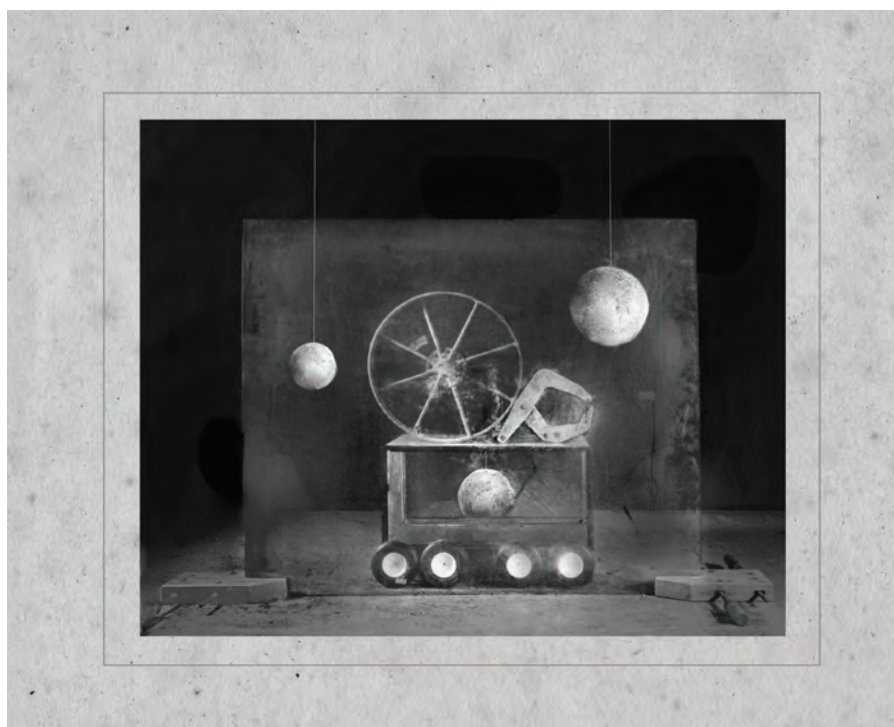
*Light Experiment, 1995*



*The Guardian*, 2001



*Construction with Flag, 2005*





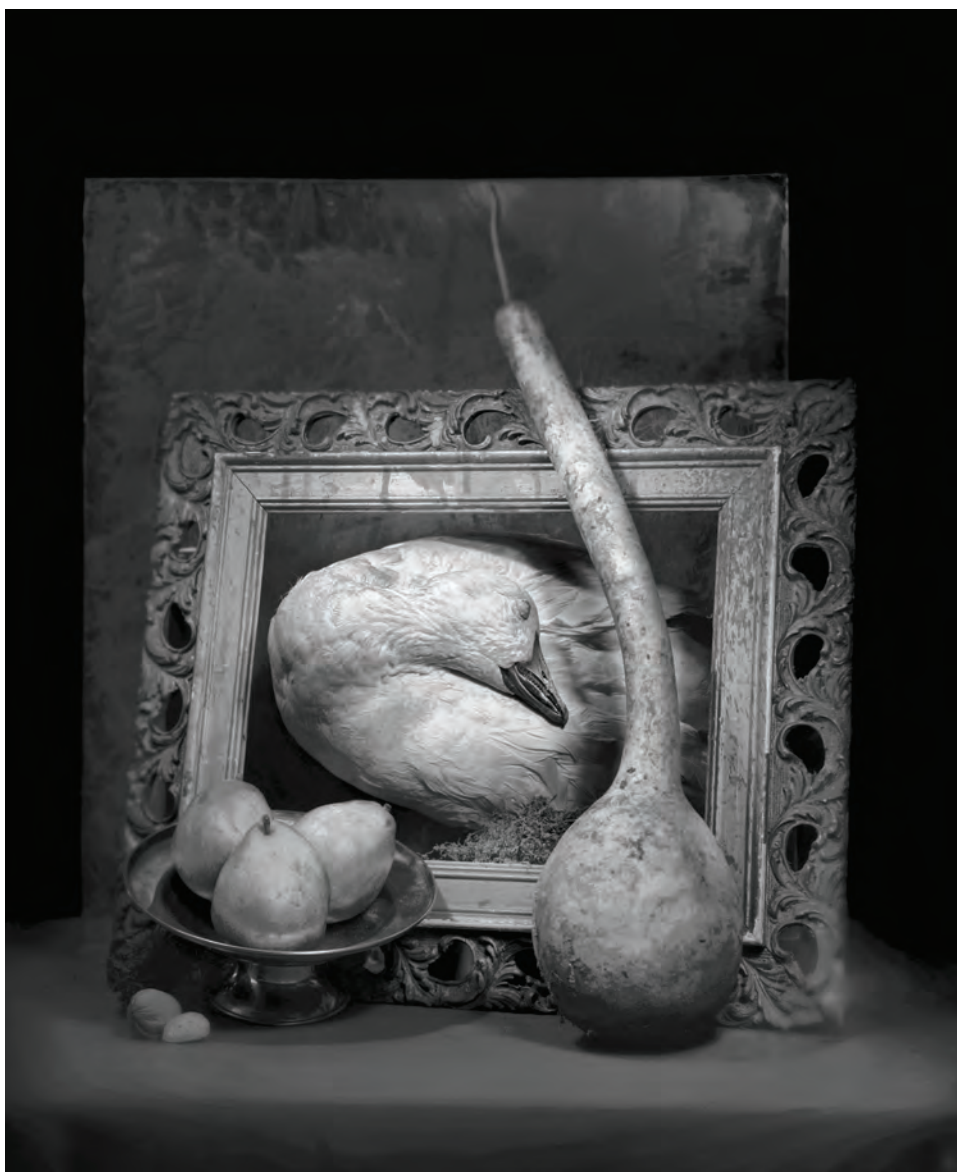
Above: *Protohouse*, 2013  
Opposite, upper: *Rocket*, 2012  
Opposite, lower: *Construction with Cart*, 2009



*Circa 20th Century: Balancing Act, 1992*



*Circa 20th Century: Two Tangs to Go, 1992*



*Nobilis in Morte: Snow Goose, 1999*



*Nobilis in Morte: Bobwhite and Frog, 1999*



*Nobilis in Morte: Vanitas, 2000*



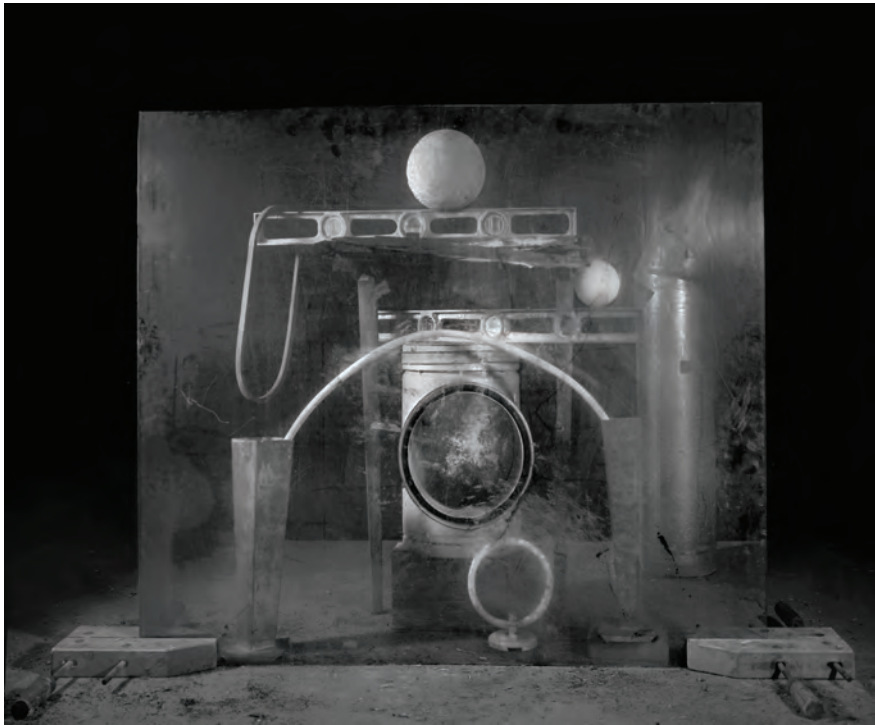
*Man and Beast: Fire Wheel, 2002*



Above: *Prototype 3*, 2011

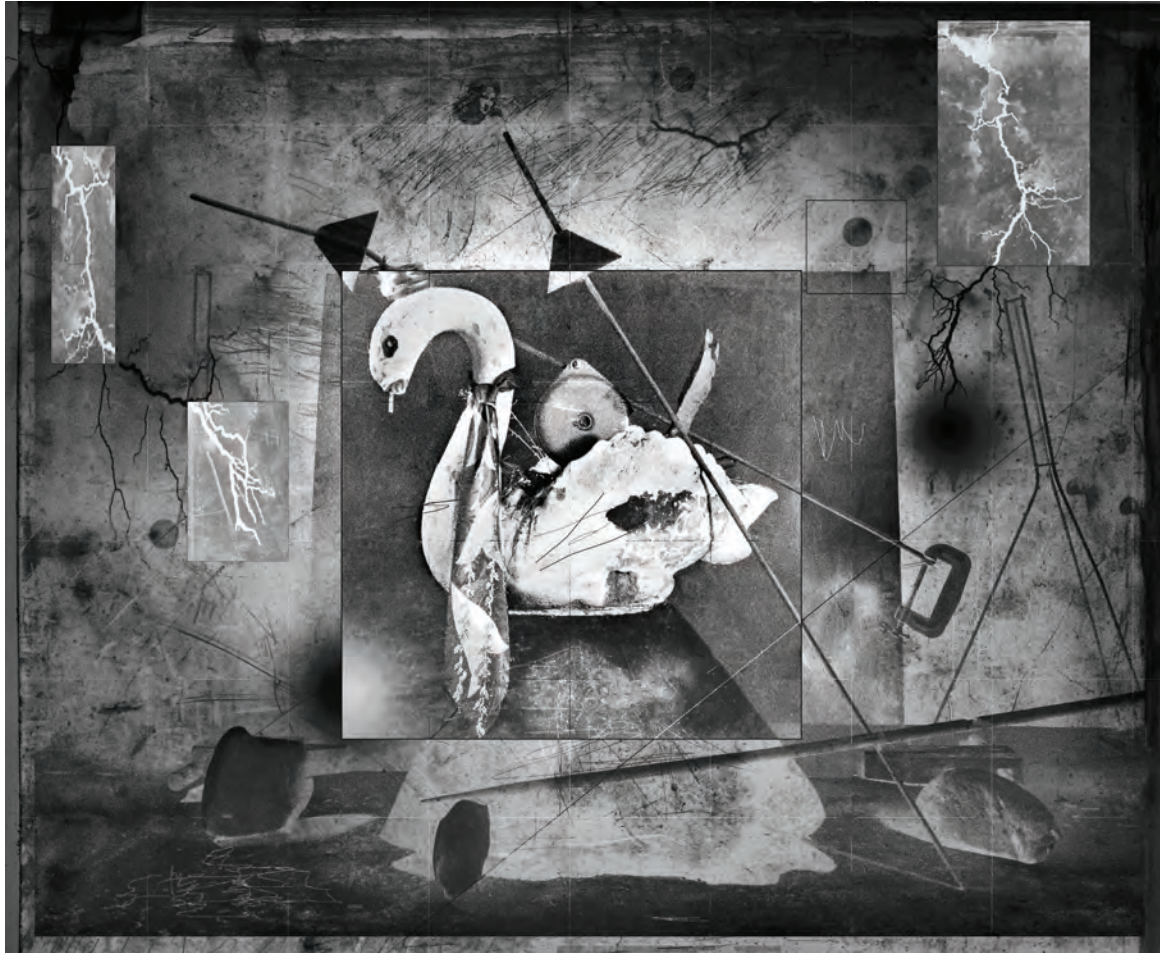
Opposite, upper: *Construction 13*, 2012

Opposite, lower: *Construction 14*, 2012





*Odd Odes: Ode to Sisyphus, 2015*



*Odd Odes: Ode to Leda, 2012-2018*



*Homage to Holst 19, 2019*

## A LOGIC OF TRANSMUTATION

Homage to Robert Sulkin

If someone should think to look up at night,  
    light spray, black sky, lights in motion,  
If someone should denominate those restless lights stars,  
If someone should separate from them all those unwinking,  
If someone should name those stolid stars planets,  
If someone should name the five of them for local gods,

    Κρονος

    Ζεύς

    Άρης

    Αφροδίτη

    Έρμής

If someone should colonize the sky, rename the planets,  
    Mercurius, Venus, Terra, Mars, Jupiter, Saturnius,  
    declare those roaming planets terracentric,  
    singing as they turn a silver music,  
    crystal system elegant to eye and ear,

If someone should declare them circumsolar,  
    music of the spheres silenced by science,  
    noiseless and meaningless as the grave,

If someone should unveil two farther planets,

    Uranus

    Neptune

If someone should inscribe all seven in a zodiac,  
    sailor's delight, nightly gyring,  
    daily doings, astrological astrolabe,

If someone should again define those planets,

    Mercury, Winged Messenger,

    Venus, Bringer of Peace,

    Mars, Bringer of War,

    Jupiter, Bringer of Jollity,

    Saturn, Bringer of Old Age,

    Uranus, Magician,

    Neptune, Mystic,

If someone should read them as textus receptus,  
recompose that text into a music, resound the silent void,  
Mars, Venus, Mercury, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune,  
with strings, hammers, keys and pedals, two pianos,  
If someone in cacophony of unceasing war, coda upon coda upon coda,  
should harmonize the heavens, seek sense in nonsense,  
meaning in madness, should arrange and rearrange *The Planets*,  
vast orchestra, brass, strings, percussion, woodwinds,  
2 flutes, 2 piccolos, 1 bass flute, 2 oboes, 1 cor anglaise, 1 bass oboe,  
2 harps, 1 organ, 1 hidden chorus, 1 baton,  
If someone should listen closely to that music,  
martial thunder, charwomen adance, iced aging, ceaseless song,  
in decades of war and rumors of war, wars and more rumors of war,  
If someone should be seized with wonder at such progression, spill of light, stars, planets,  
gods, goddesses, scorpions, scales, belts and bears, lines and bars, sonorities,

Then

Someone should surely,  
a sack of black walnuts, scatter of scanned pepperoni slices,  
in homage to Gustav Holst, persevering composer, his music,  
transpose his astronomical orrery once more to silent sky,  
music only of the eye, planets in place, in aether, vacuum, or dark matter,  
solar system, Milky Way, nebulae, densities, galaxies, universes, κόσμος,  
simulation, fabrication, hallucination, spatiotemporal ripple, *l'absurdité*,  
unmoved mover, mind of God, the All in All, transfiguration

R. H. W. Dillard  
10/11/2019



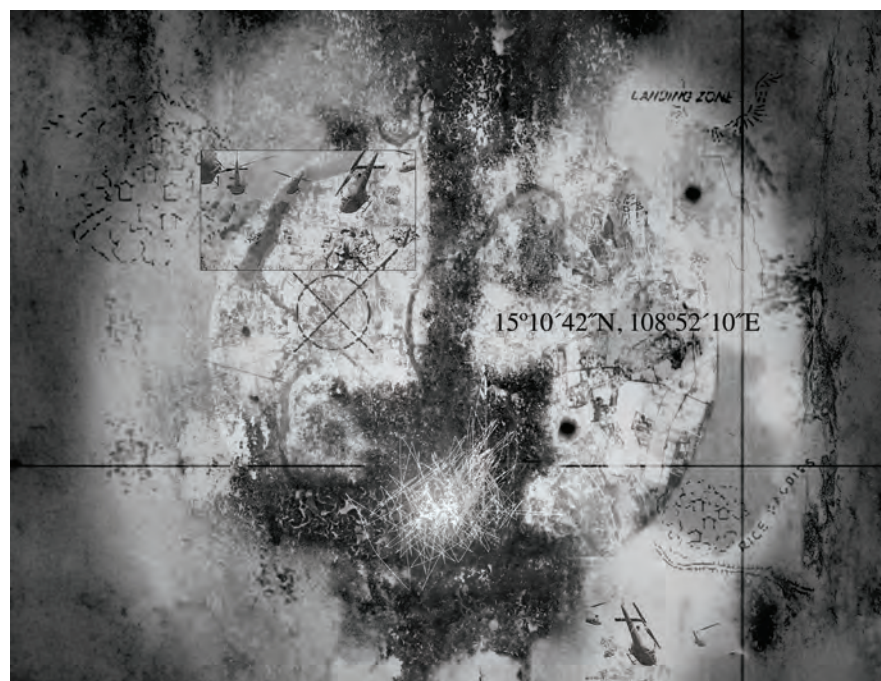
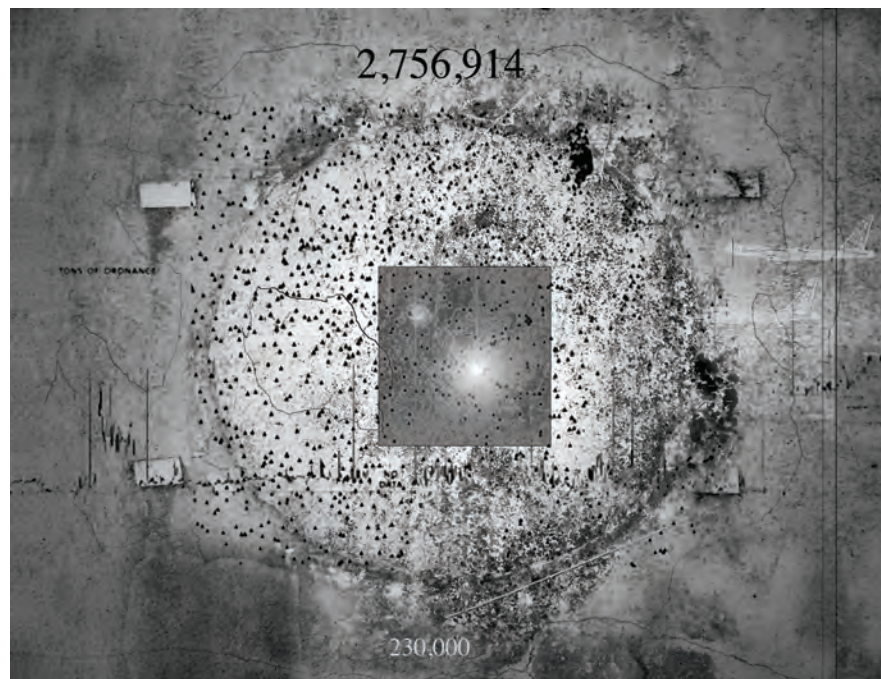
*Homage to Holst 13, 2012-2019*



Above: *Elegy for Berlin*, 2014

Opposite, upper: *Elegy for Cambodia*, 2012

Opposite, lower: *Elegy for My Lai*, 2013-2019





*Landscape Inventions: Cape, 2015*

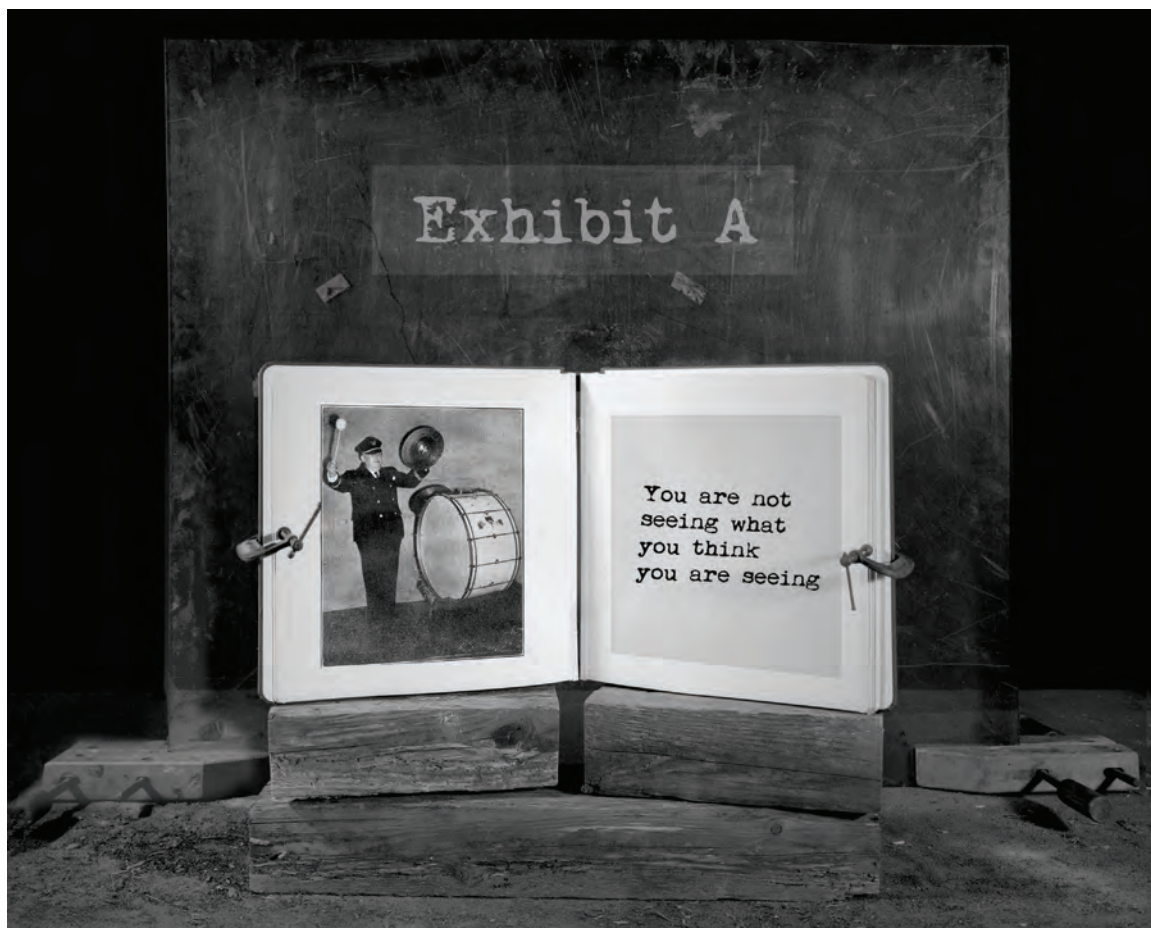


*Landscape Inventions: Beach, Washington State, 2019*



They say that Mercury  
isn't so good over fish.

*Danger, Danger - Mercury, 2015*



*Exhibit A, 2013*

# Illustrated Checklist of Images

## 1973-2019



*Hand Grid, 1979,  
2019*

### Social Landscape



*Ann, Ocracoke Ferry,  
1973*



*Dog Show, Raleigh,  
NC, 1976*



*July 4, Carrboro,  
NC, 1976*



*Atlantic Beach, NC,  
1975*



*Jesus Saves, Winston-  
Salem, NC, 1976*



*Canturbury, 1975*



*Englishman, 1975*



*State Fair, Raleigh,  
NC, 1976*



*State Fair 2, Raleigh,  
NC, 1976*



*Slide, 2014*

### Early Stills



*Ladder, 1982*



*Fresnel Glass, 1984*



*Triangle and Cone,  
1985*



*Simple Construction,  
1985*



*Homage to  
Outerbridge, 1986*



*Shapes, 1984, 2019*

### Modern Methods



*Gottlieb, 1986*



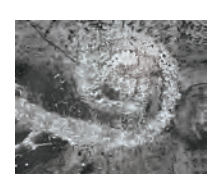
*Man Ray, 1986*



*Duchamp, 1986*



*Rothko, 1986*



*Smithson, 1986*

## Circa 20th Century



*Nuclear Family, 1992*



*Subliminal Message, 1992*



*Balancing Act, 1992*



*Two Tangs to Go, 1992*



*Hello, Hello, 1992*



*Gender Specific, Heterosexuals, Pop Goes the Culture, Shifty, 1992-2019*



*Nipper, 1992*



*Blam, 1993*



*Depressed, 1993*



*Disaster, 1992*

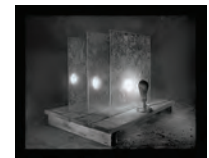


*Time, 1992-2019*



*Antidote, 1992*

## Constructions & Experiments



*Light Experiment, 1995*



*Experiment 10, 2008*



*Rocket, 2012*



*Construction with Cart, 2009*



*Interference, 2011*



*Patent Pending 3, 2009*



*Patent Pending 1,*  
2009



*Patent Pending 2,*  
2010



*Protohouse,* 2013



*Composition 222,*  
2012



*Composition 337,*  
2012



*Shadow Maker,*  
2009



*Construction 13,*  
2012



*Construction 14,*  
2012

## Biological Stills



*Cat and Mangoes,*  
1989



*Skull, Bird,* 2000



*Bobcat,* 2000



*The Guardian,* 2001



*Chicken, Bone,* 2002



*Bee, Bird, Butterfly,*  
2001



*Turtle Wave,* 2000



*Deer Skull,* 2009



*Construction with  
Flag,* 2005



*Construction with  
Skull,* 2006



*Mutations from Paper  
Negatives,* 2006

## Nobilis in Morte, Man and Beast



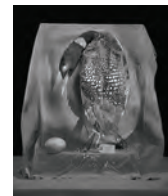
*Owl with Melons,*  
1999



*Owls,* 1999



*Snow Goose,* 1999



*Loon with Mango,*  
1999



*Bobwhite and Frog,*  
1999



*Nobilis in Morte,*  
1999



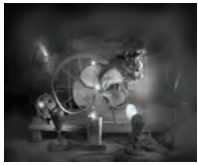
*King Mackerel Head,*  
2000



*Vanitas,* 2000



*Tuatarra Lizard,*  
2001



*Man and Beast, Cat,*  
2002



*Man and Beast,*  
*Wheel,* 2002



*Fire Wheel,* 2002

## Prototypes



*Prototype 1,* 2011



*Prototype 2,* 2011



*Prototype 3,* 2011

## Odd Odes



*Ode to Sisyphus,*  
2015



*Ode to Gravity,*  
2011



*Ode to Medusa,*  
2012



*Ode to Leda,* 2012-  
2018

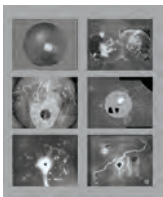


*Ode to Copernicus,*  
2012



*Ode to Auroras,* 2010

## Space Drawings, Homage to Holst



*Space Drawings,*  
2013-2019



*Homage to Holst,*  
*Plate 3,* 2012-2019



*Homage to Holst 9,*  
2012



*Homage to Holst 13,*  
2012-2019



*Homage to Holst 8,*  
2012-2019



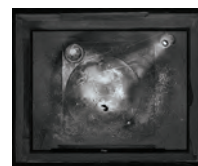
*Homage to Holst 16,*  
2019



*Homage to Holst 19,*  
2019



*Homage to Holst 11,*  
2012-2019

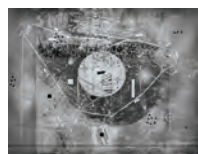


*Homage to Holst,*  
*Fake, 2019*

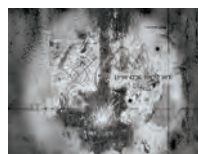
## Elegies



*Elegy for Cambodia,*  
2012



*Elegy for Berlin,*  
2014



*Elegy for My Lai,*  
2013-2019



*Elegy for Dresden,*  
2013



*Elegy for Auschwitz,*  
2012-2019

## Landscape Inventions



*Shadow?, 1982-2019*



*Frames, Cape*  
*Hatteras, 1983-2019*



*Shadow, Joshua Tree,*  
2018



*Cape, 2015*



*Beach, Washington*  
*State, 2019*



*Painted Desert, 2019*



*Starry Day, Joshua*  
*Tree, 2019*



## Image & Text



*Exhibit A, 2013*



*Danger, Danger -*  
*DDT, 2015*



*Danger, Danger -*  
*Dioxins, 2015*



*Danger, Danger -*  
*Mercury, 2015*



*Danger, Danger -*  
*Plutonium, 2015*



*Malfunction of*  
*Memory, Jane and*  
*Meredith, 2019*



*Malfunction of  
Memory, Work, Play,*  
2019



*Malfunction of  
Memory, Daddy,  
Mommy,* 2019



*Malfunction of  
Memory, Easter,*  
2019



*Malfunction of  
Memory, Bowser,  
Chaplain,* 2019



*Malfunction of  
Memory, Cousins,*  
2019



*A Tale of Woe,* 2018



*Final Exam,* 2019

## Musings



*Homage to  
McLuhan,* 2015



*Into the Future,*  
2015



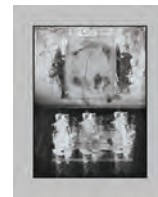
*Photo Sketch 32,*  
2019



*Challenge,* 2019



*Create,* 2017



*Create 2,* 2017

# ROBERT SULKIN

Robert Sulkin's work was the subject of the traveling exhibition *Robert Sulkin: Photographs 1985-1995*, sponsored by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. In 2016, a feature story titled "The Experimental Professor" appeared in *Black and White Photography Magazine*, Vol. 197.

Sulkin's curriculum vita lists participation in some 200 solo, group, and juried exhibitions. In recent years, he has had exhibitions at Virginia Tech, the Arts Club of Washington, the Peninsula Fine Arts Center, and the William King Museum. In 2014, a portfolio and interview appeared in the national journal *Local: A Quarterly of People and Places*.

In 2009, Sulkin was the recipient of a Professional Fellowship from the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. His work has been exhibited at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts; Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art; the Light Factory; the Chrysler Museum; college galleries throughout Virginia; the New Orleans Museum of Art; and 516 Arts, Albuquerque, NM, among others.

In addition, Sulkin has received many awards in juried exhibitions throughout the country. Highlights include Best in Show in Photospiva, Joplin, MO in 2008 and at the Academy of Fine Arts National Juried Photography Exhibition, Lynchburg, VA in 2013; second-place awards in the Academy of Fine Arts National Juried Photography Exhibition in both 2011 and 2012 and Photospiva in 2013; and on four occasions Sulkin has been one of five selected to receive the Qualex Award at the Photographic Image Biennial at the Wellington B. Gray Gallery, East Carolina University.

Of his work, Sulkin states, "Broadly, my photography deals with the futility of the individual attempting to cope in a technology driven world spinning out of control."

Robert Sulkin lives in Roanoke, VA and is Professor Emeritus at Hollins University, where he taught photography from 1980 to 2019. He holds a B.A. in History from UNC Chapel Hill and an M.A. and M.F.A. in Art from the University of Iowa.

Photo of Robert Sulkin by Kyra Schmidt.

Back cover image: *Odd Odes: Ode to Copernicus*, 2012

All works courtesy of the artist.

## Acknowledgements

I extend my deep gratitude to Jenine Culligan, Director of the Eleanor D. Wilson Museum, and to museum staff members Laura Jane Ramsburg, Janet Carty and Kyra Schmidt for their invaluable assistance and skill in designing this catalog and preparing the exhibition. I also give a heartfelt thank you to R. H. W. Dillard and Genevieve Hendricks for their creative and insightful written contributions; and to the Cabell Foundation, Office of the Vice President of Academic Affairs, and the Roanoke Arts Commission for their financial support. Further gratitude is extended to my studio art colleagues who made my career at Hollins an every-day pleasure, to Jan Baltzell for 13 years of wonderful support and art viewing, and to my sons, Adam and Nathan, for their patience and inspiring creativity.

