

Syracuse University

SURFACE

Theses - ALL

May 2020

The Alchemy of an Indeterminate Visual Matrix: Perception within Light and Shadows

Brandy S. Boden
Syracuse University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/thesis>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Boden, Brandy S., "The Alchemy of an Indeterminate Visual Matrix: Perception within Light and Shadows" (2020). *Theses - ALL*. 386.
<https://surface.syr.edu/thesis/386>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses - ALL by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.

Abstract

The primary objective of this thesis paper is to articulate the concepts, context, methodology, and materials within my artistic practice. As a document this paper offers an overview of my past work as it progressed through to the work as developed for my thesis exhibition. My artistic practice has its roots in themes relating to the phenomenological aspects of photography, specifically emphasizing the psychological experience of light and shadows within visual perception.

While the foundation of my work is rooted in traditional lens-based photography, my materials and processes of producing work have expanded to incorporate camera-less alternative processes such as the cyanotype and photogram along with painting, collage, and various other print-based techniques. Once printed, images are cut and then assembled into various forms of installation-based work. Visual patterns extracted through the printing of imagery and through the physical process of piecing images together are various ways in which I present my interpretation and expression of ideas.

The Alchemy of an Indeterminate Visual Matrix:

Perception within Light and Shadows

by

Brandy S. Boden

B.A., Millersville University, 1997

M.S., State University of New York College at Cortland, 2007

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in *Studio Arts*

Syracuse University
May 2020

Copyright © Brandy S. Boden 2020

All Rights Reserved

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
THESIS	1
BIBLIOGRAPHY	14
VITA	15

I am bound by the mercy of the sun. Light is both an activator and a collaborator within the performance of light-responsive materials. Each physical action of creating a print is enacted in tandem with an alchemy of elements. By moving my image making away from a traditional perspective of photography that solely utilizes a camera, I discovered the camera-less techniques of alternative photography. This development in my artistic practice incorporated light sensitive chemistries such as the cyanotype and photogram along with various other photo-mechanical based printing. My choice was guided by interest in the psychological experience of light and shadows as relating to the phenomenological aspects of perception. The early stage of my work was primarily focused on exploring the visual aspects of perception by manipulating light as inherent in photography. I considered the interaction with light, such as through an analog



Image 1: Brandy Boden, Antlers, 2018, Cyanotype.

camera or with light sensitive materials, to be a direct aspect of experience that I sought to describe, understand and interpret in relationship to the senses.¹ Much of my research thus has

¹ "... phenomenology is given a much wider range, addressing the meaning things have in our experience, notably, the significance of objects, events, tools, the flow of time, the self, and others, as these things arise and are experienced in our 'life-world'". "...phenomenology develops a complex account of temporal awareness (within the stream of consciousness), spatial awareness (notably in perception), attention (distinguishing focal and marginal or 'horizontal' awareness), awareness of one's own experience (self-consciousness, in one sense), self-awareness (awareness-of-oneself), the self in different roles (as thinking, acting, etc.), embodied action (including kinesthetic awareness of one's movement), purpose or intention in action (more or less explicit), awareness of other persons (in empathy, intersubjectivity, collectivity), linguistic activity (involving meaning, communication, understanding others), social interaction (including collective action), and everyday activity in our surrounding life-world (in a particular culture)" <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/>.

been the observing, questioning, and consequent interpretation of how I perceive and know the world and life-space around me. As a matrix of sensorial information is simultaneously gathered, the layers and multidimensional aspects of experience are isolated, then transferred into printed imagery.

The Poetic Aspects of Light and Perception

The sun can be thought of as both my moderator and my only observer in this process of creating a print such as the cyanotype. Cyanotypes are similar to photograms in process, yet they produce a cyan-blue image often referred to as a blueprint. The two chemicals utilized in cyanotypes consist of ferric ammonium citrate and potassium ferricyanide, which when combined become light sensitive. Using the subdued lighting of my basement as a studio, forms of objects imprinted onto paper manifested in a corporeal form. Indexical in their nature, these objects or mementos remained as silhouettes and fragments representing and thus connecting my past into the present. The trace of objects I chose to use in my imagery were like imprinted remembrances that I carried along with me to the outside. I took along with me a large sheet of



Image 2: Brandy Boden, In the Hemlocks, 2018, Cyanotype.

cyanotype coated paper that was hidden under cardboard to prevent it from being exposed to the light until I placed it onto the ground. There I removed the cardboard and then positioned a shirt and a pair of pants onto the paper. Once exposed to the sun it took anywhere between 5-20 minutes for the image to develop as influenced by factors such as the strength and angle of the sun, the UV index, and the temperature. I watched the coated paper develop from a light green shade into a

deep blue. The areas that were exposed to the light turned dark blue while the unexposed areas stayed a light green. After washing the print, the light blue and green in the unexposed areas were washed away. I repeated this process, slowly shifting objects during their exposure to the light, thus creating shadow areas of light and dark. This shift in exposure within its silhouette became a visual montage with one idea replacing the other.

As I gathered more objects, I began to see my basement as an archive of old memories, box labels as markers of the past. Objects lying on the paper embodied a trace of shadows formed by the light. As the layers were printed, they worked such as layers of memory work. Removed, their context changes, as do memories change, creating new meanings and understandings. There are many contradictions within this process as it is both fragile and ephemeral, yet a fixed imprint where the shadows cannot exist without the light. Considering this as a framework for understanding, I next developed a subsequent series of images titled “John’s Locks”. A large component of this work was to photographically explore the psychological variations of light and shadows that leave imprints or marks representing the former physical presence of a person.



Image 3: Brandy Boden, John's Locks, 2019, Inkjet Print.

Following the Light, Finding the Shadows: John's Locks

Sitting deep in the frame above my closet door I found a small box covered in dust. This box appeared to have been hidden for decades. Within the box were perfectly preserved golden locks of hair. According to the writing within the box, it appeared to have belonged to a person named John that had just been given his first haircut. After I found this box of hair it took me many months to take the hair out of the box. I saw this to be something too precious and sacred to disturb as it must have been a cherished memento from a rite of passage in this person's life. Covered with a thick layer of dust, when I lifted the lid off the box, a record of my fingertips was made immediately. My first impulse was to document this hair photographically and as I worked, the directness and boldness of mid-afternoon light brought attention to the details of the hair. I moved it throughout the house documenting it as I placed it amongst a tray of mementos, on the bathroom floor or on the staircase. The rays of sun acted like a spotlight guiding me as if I were an explorer in a new space. Shadows created by the contrast with the light emphasized the color



Image 4: Brandy Boden, Stairwell, 2019, Inkjet Print.

and texture of the hair that seemed to be soaking up the warmth of the sun's light. I discovered this action to be transformative in both form and meaning. John's hair as it was represented within the photographic images seemed to extend beyond a body, it was mutated and took on another life. It led me to seek out other objects and marks left in the house. I was looking to find what I believed were other signs of life that existed before I occupied this house. Once found, the viewfinder of the camera framed and isolated objects while guiding my thinking like a map. I worked back and forth

between utilizing camera-less techniques and using a traditional lens-based camera. I searched through my house looking for more signs such as scratches on the door frames or brush strokes of paint on the walls. I was like a scientist, an anthropologist, or even like a detective while searching for clues to connect meaning to these marks.

Drawing upon patterns that form through the interplay of light and shadows, I expanded this work by incorporating the theory of visual indeterminacy. As a phenomenological



Image 5 & 6: Brandy Boden, Shadow for the Deer 1/2, 2019, Inkjet Prints.

experience of perception, visual indeterminacy occurs when the viewer is faced or confronted with visual stimuli that does not allow for immediate association or a connective relationship to something familiar. “Visual indeterminacy occurs when an image or a scene is structured in such a way as to defy immediate or easy recognition.”² I find myself utilizing materials, specifically utilizing photography, to challenge the viewer’s visual perception of “reality” by leaving gaps in

² Huston, J. P., Nadal, M., Mora, T. F., Agnati, L. F., Cela, C. C. J., & Oxford University Press. (2019). *Art, aesthetics, and the brain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

information. Exploiting this tendency for our brains to want to make connections, I embrace and recognize a sense of openness in my work. As humans, our brains are hardwired to look for patterns and even when confronted with imagery that is hard to describe or difficult to determine our brains fill in the gaps and create connections. “When confronted with indeterminate visual input, the human brain automatically solves the perceptual dilemma by generating predictions about their content, based on familiar associations stored in memory.”³ This is especially emphasized with my consideration of the layout and format for my newest work. The limits to how and where the work can be expanded are only structured by the limits of the exhibition space itself. The conclusions that I reached have manifested in the work that I developed for my thesis exhibition.



Image 6: Brandy Boden, Indeterminate Visual Matrix, 2020, Assembled mixed media prints, detail.

Thesis Exhibition Work: Ebb-Flow and The Alchemy of An Indeterminate Visual Matrix

My most recent work has been informed by my interest in the fields of psychology, mental health, and neuroscience. As my work has expanded so have my ideas surrounding

³ Huston, J. P., Nadal, M., Mora, T. F., Agnati, L. F., Cela, C. C. J., & Oxford University Press. (2019). Art, aesthetics, and the brain. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

perception in that I no longer limit my thinking to only the visual aspects associated with a frame. My work made for the thesis exhibition illustrates how these concepts and new ideas have influenced my artistic practice. I am drawn to the space where scientific research intersects the poetic aspects of knowledge. It is an effort to find a place where narrative, alchemy, and poetic science overlap to meet within a visual matrix.⁴ Here threads of inquiry and personal philosophies guide me to further examine the interplay between perception, shadows, and light. I consider the words that author Alva Noë wrote in that “...perception is not something that happens to us, or in us, it is something we do.” Perception thus can be described as more of a



Image 7: Brandy Boden, Body Network, 2020, Inkjet Print.

participatory type of action, activity or thought process that engages the whole body not just the mind. Even various aspects of visual perception are not just functions limited to the brain but can also be considered to be enacted experiences or skillful activities of the body.⁵ I have discovered that it is a fairly modern idea to view the senses of perception separately or as distinct modalities

⁴ Poetic Science can be described as “... a form of science that, in its very art-fulness, can do justice to the ambiguity, complexity, and depth that characterizes lived experience.” Freeman, M. (2011). *Toward Poetic Science*. Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science. Vol. 45, pp. 389–396.

⁵ Alva Noë Ó. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. LXXVI No. 3, May 2008 International Phenomenological Society In *Perception: Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* University of California - Berkeley

thus I have been constructing and assembling images with an indeterminate openness.⁶ I visually extract patterns, then structure, organize, and reconnect them as a way to decipher new meanings for later interpretation. When I cut prints, cyanotypes, and photograms, this methodology that I have developed guides me to think of the imprint as having the same importance as the object itself. As I work with images that are my own, I use a personalized way of cutting and assembling. I work from both analog and digitally captured images along with a collection of my silver gelatin photographs, collagraphs, and other prints. Utilizing my own images allows for a more introspective personal process. The overall formation of an image and where it takes me is guided by the potential for perception, expectation, and their parts to lead to an accumulative experience.



Image 8: Brandy Boden, Indeterminate Visual Matrix, 2020, Mixed media assemblage, detail.

I embrace the contradiction of light and shadows alongside a fixed structure to a countered openness in this work. The fixed aspects rely upon the empirical aspects of knowledge that I gain from the cutting and assembling much like how I rely upon research that is scientifically based. These fixed aspects are also built from an assumptive knowledge gained through the acquisition of technical skills and information in making (like the chemical attributes of the cyanotype). The openness that I explore in my work is in the indeterminate aspects of this matrix that I build (also such as in the alchemical, mysterious aspects of the cyanotype). In this

⁶ Abram, D. (2017). *The spell of the sensuous: Perception and language in a more-than-human world*. New York NY: Pantheon Books.

there is also the affective uncertainty of the perceptual world, an unreliable data collection machine, where the empirical aspects of science are left behind for the poetic felt aspects of experience. The stimuli, as in sensorial form, are not perceived linearly nor processed in successive layers but rather in happenings that occur simultaneously. My challenge has then been to present both an openness along with the fixed, the layers and the linear, the latent image along with the overt, as also the light within the shadows.

Ebb-Flow

Expanding towards a more experiential methodology within photographic imagery has allowed me as an artist to draw out and connect thematic relationships. The work titled “Ebb-



Image 9: Brandy Boden, Ebb-Flow, 2020, Mixed Media Collage.

Flow” was presented as part of my MFA Thesis Exhibition in NYC. It was an installation of 15-20 photographic images of a hand, legs and feet connected together resembling a river flowing and undulating down to the ground. Once selected and then printed, I examined each image visually following the organic path of lines that appeared to be like the ebb and flow of water in a river. Just as a river is the result of natural forces exerted against it, changing over time, the human body too has a parallel experience.

Lines separating the spaces between light and dark was where I chose to remove the image from the matrix by cutting the paper. Each image or piece was layered over one another, then coated in resin to add transparency and to emphasize the layers. Initially, I leaned towards a more logical or scientific description

of the concept behind this work. I was associating it with the neurobiological aspects of brain cognition, yet I now think more of the somatic and sensorial parts of this world as the way to know and experience this work.

The Alchemy of An Indeterminate Visual Matrix

As I collect my old images, prints, and various materials, there is a simultaneous exploration in painting, printmaking, and various photographic processes that feed my work. In this methodology that I have developed, I am cutting images, separating, or extracting subjects from their matrix. This is where the image is freed to enter a new assemblage of space, thus, the image is transformed. I seek to create connections in a new physical form as I sort and stack these materials in piles along with separating, arranging, and rearranging. Aspects cut out are literally removed from their frame. Following the natural contours and shapes of the white spaces on the paper, I cut some prints into circles, while others I cut into the irregular shapes. I often decide to cut shapes following the outline of the edges of impressions or the shadows. Some images or prints I sequence, some I assemble together, and then coat in wax. The roughness to the wax is unexpected and when combined with the paper it is slightly awkward to work with. The wax behaves oddly in the way that the layers try to resist each other unless fused together. Some images are of abstracted shapes and materials, surface explorations of material and texture, while others are from various images of bodies, trees, and or other natural spaces. I thought about the way the grays of the print reminded me of orbs of matter floating and then reconnecting.

If I print the same image in multiples, each new printed version of the same image is then cut in a different manner. Sometimes, I follow the contours of a hand or the jawline of a face as the cut or “negative” space of the image are in between visible and invisible information. They

are like new networks being imagined and added, visually connected and reconnecting. These interactions are intersections, gathering points or anchors. The familiar images are then reconstructed into unexpected combinations, creating opportunity for patterns to develop like the rerouting of neural pathways in the brain. I see these spaces as similar to an overlap of neural



Image 10: Brandy Boden, Indeterminate Visual Matrix, 2020, Mixed Media Assemblage, detail.

networks, intersecting and combining. My images chosen are connected most often in reference to the physical form of a person's body, specifically of someone I am familiar with or even that of my own body. A leg or hand appears, enlarged with lines distorted, grotesque and unreal looking. It makes me question the perception of my own body in this space. The details are overly exaggerated just as often our perceptive senses can be hyper-aware of an experience. Various forms of a hand are shown belonging to me, my mother, and my daughter. I think of how a hand can gesture, create connection and also be a symbol of

strength and resilience. I play with both the soft and hard edges of the prints such as when the edges of the paper are cut to emphasize the shape of the hand's palm. Parts are taken apart to then be put back together. There is almost a narrative aspect to this work, yet it is not linear but rather an unsettled sequence of events. Physically connecting the light and dark areas of a print or photograph, such as details in the lines, shape, and color are what I am drawn to within this imagery. It is layered upon the skills that I have acquired through my artistic practice. The openness that I embrace is the part in which I choose to install my images on the wall and floor rather than mounting and framing a print. I see a transformation within these shadows that is

both celestial and terrestrial, like matter collecting and forming shape. The work can be at once temporal and ephemeral yet also fixed and connected. I install and build the work on a wall.

Pieces are held together with various materials such as pins, tape, wax or resin. As the imagery is



Image 11: Brandy Boden, Indeterminate Visual Matrix, 2020, Mixed Media Assemblage, detail.

assembled, I see patterns emerge like large shadows connecting and growing. These pieces of images are no longer separate, they are interconnected like a puzzle reassembled. Merging, then growing in its shape, my work can no longer exist in a frame as the edges are now expanding. I think about the final structure and its composition as if it were pieces of a body forming, merging, developing, and contracting.

This working methodology is unlike any other method I have used before. The details are there, but I am not fixated on them. It's a liberating process as these installations formed on site challenge me to respond to my situation and environment in a manner that I feel parallels how we as humans shift and respond to and perceive new experiences. I reject the precision of the process I once held in such high value. I accept an indeterminate outcome when the work will be installed. Displayed, it is my intention that it will be in dialogue with the space of the gallery.

The installation will be activated by changing light and the movement of the viewer. The

information to observe will exist in both the macro and micro of large and small details. As it defies immediate recognition, my hope is that the work will question the perception of the viewer requiring them to move their bodies within the exhibition space viewing it from various angles or new perspectives.

While the majority of my work still operates within the visual aspects of perception, new images constructed in these sculptural-like installations have challenged my preconceptions for an image, especially within a photograph. Creating this work has also allowed me to expand my expectations for the form in which imagery can be presented. My practice is now a hybrid of materials and processes in which I leave behind the preciousness of the framed photograph. I am no longer interested in the same structure, rather I prefer the openness that exists as a construction of information and knowledge built and applied from learned techniques. I now see myself as more of a *maker* rather than a *taker* of images. I place my work within the contemporary body of photographers who have explored the directness and responsiveness of working with other processes, materials, and techniques. While I am still connected to the language of the photograph, I want to question the expectations and the deliverability of the medium. As I think about how to direct my future work, I would like to continue to stretch out of the lens and to expand beyond the frame.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abram, D. (2017). *The spell of the sensuous: Perception and language in a more-than-human world*. New York NY: Pantheon Books.
- Ackerman, D. (2000). *A natural history of the senses*. London: Phoenix.
- Bor, D. (2012). *The ravenous brain: How the new science of consciousness explains our insatiable search for meaning*. New York: Basic Books.
- Casati, R. & Cavanagh, P. (2019). *The visual world of shadows*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Cotton, C. (2015). *Photography is magic*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Cotton, C. (2004). *The photograph as contemporary art*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Freeman, M. (2011). *Toward Poetic Science*. Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science. 45, pp. 389–396.
- Huston, J. P., Nadal, M., Mora, T. F., Agnati, L. F., Cela, C. C. J., & Oxford University Press. (2019). *Art, aesthetics, and the brain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Margaret, I. (2017). *Photography, Trace, and Trauma*. University of Chicago Press.
- Modrak, R. & Anthes, B. (2011). *Reframing photography: Theory and practice*. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Pendergrast, M. (2004). *Mirror Mirror: A History of the Human Love Affair with Reflection*. New York: Basic Books.
- Smith, S. M. & Sliwinski, S. (2017). *Photography and the optical unconscious*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Van, K. B. A. (2015). *The body keeps the score: Mind, brain and body in the transformation of trauma*. London: Penguin Books.

VITA

NAME OF AUTHOR: Brandy Sue Boden

PLACE OF BIRTH: State College, Pennsylvania

DATE OF BIRTH: September 5, 1975

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

Rochester Institute of Technology

State University of New York at Cortland

Millersville University of Pennsylvania

DEGREES AWARDED:

Master of Science in Recreation, Parks and Leisure Studies, 2007, State University of New York at Cortland, NY

Bachelor of Arts in Cultural Anthropology, 1997, Millersville University, PA

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Instructional Associate, Syracuse University, 2018-2020

Adjunct Lecturer, State University of New York at Cortland, 2008-Present

Adjunct Lecturer, Tompkins Cortland Community College, 2008-Present