

**SPECIAL EXHIBITION TAKES A NEW LOOK AT THE UNIQUE THEME OF OPTICAL
CONFUSION IN PHOTOGRAPHY, OCTOBER 7, 2008–JANUARY 4, 2009**

First Doubt: Optical Confusion in Modern Photography



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Many photographers have been intrigued by the baffling distortions – both subtle and disquieting – that can result when the camera “captures” the real world. ***First Doubt: Optical Confusion in Modern Photography*** explores this fascinating yet seldom discussed undercurrent in the medium’s history. The exhibition features approximately one hundred photographs taken by a diverse array of twentieth-century photographers, including Imogen Cunningham, Lee Friedlander, and Florence Henri and Brassai, drawn from the collection of Allan Chasanoff, B.A. 1961, as well as from the Gallery’s permanent collection. *First Doubt* challenges the common notion that a photograph is an easily understood representation of what stands before a camera’s lens. By employing unexpected juxtapositions, novel vantage points, and unusual patterns of light, shadow, and texture, the photographs on view destabilize the viewer’s eye, causing it to question what it is seeing.

During the medium’s infancy, many early photographers, expecting their cameras to offer clear and coherent views of the world, were often frustrated by how their images seemed to render the world unfamiliar and ambiguous. In the modern era, a range of image makers began to embrace these ambiguities as unique and valued attributes of camera vision. From the playful experiments of Bauhaus artists to the disquieting images of those working out of a Surrealist tradition, many of the photographs in *First Doubt* were made expressly to disorient or startle the viewer. In other photographs in the exhibition, the artists seem to have stumbled across scenes of confusion quite accidentally.

The exhibition, however, is not one focused on how photographs are made but rather on how they are perceived. As Joshua Chuang, Assistant Curator of Photographs and the organizer of this exhibition, explains, “Neither the strategies, intentions, and serendipity of the photographers nor how their pictures function to confuse remain as critical as the fact that they *do* confuse – if only for a moment.” In Karin Rosenthal’s *Belly Landscape* (1980), for example, dramatic shadows and the reflection of sunlight on water seem to form a picturesque desert landscape. A closer investigation of the photograph reveals the dunes to be a human body, upending the initial illusion of the picture. Chuang adds, “The pictures themselves



contain a paradox: they confuse because they hold still these particular incidents of confusion, yet it is this stillness that allows viewers the opportunity to resolve the optical problem.” Rosenthal’s image, along with the other photographs in the exhibition, urges the viewer to confront and decipher the confusions within the frame.

In the current digital era, ubiquitous image-editing software has made it easy to manipulate photographs so that they appear too good—or strange—to be true. Well before “Photoshop”

became a verb in our visual vocabulary, however, photographs such as those included in *First Doubt*

resisted the notion that the world could be satisfactorily seen and known through the lens. Collectively, these pictures remind us that the camera is at best an imperfect surrogate for human vision.

Publication

This exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue, *First Doubt: Optical Confusion in Modern Photography*, with essays by Allan Chasanoff, Joshua Chuang, and Steven W. Zucker, available in hardcover at the Gallery’s Bookstore.

Related Programming

A Master Class on *First Doubt: Optical Confusion in Photography* is offered by Joshua Chuang on Thursdays, October 30, and November 13 and 20, at 5:30 PM. To register for the Master Class series, please call 203.432.9525.

Free gallery talks on the exhibition take place on October 8, and 14, and November 11 and 18:

Wednesday, October 8, 12:20 PM: Focus On, “The Challenge of Confusion: The Allan Chasanoff Collection.” Joshua Chuang, Assistant Curator of Photographs

Tuesday, October 14, 4:00 PM: In More Depth, “The Troubled Eye: A Conversation.” Richard Benson, professor and former Dean, Yale School of Art; Allan Chasanoff, collector; and Joshua Chuang, Assistant Curator of Photographs

Tuesday, November 11, 4:00 PM: In More Depth, “Ambiguity and the Act of Unconscious Inference.” Steven W. Zucker, the David and Lucille Packard Professor of Computer Science and Biomedical Engineering, Yale University

Tuesday, November 18, 4:00 PM: In More Depth, “Using Confusion.” Philip Pisciotta, photographer and Lecturer, Yale School of Art

Special Event

Thursday, October 16, 5:30 PM: Lecture, “Magical Nominalism: Photography and the Reenchantment of the World.” Martin Jay, the Sidney Hellman Ehrman Professor of History, University of California, Berkeley

Exhibition Support

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Yale University Art Gallery

The Yale University Art Gallery, America’s oldest and one of its most important university art museums, was founded in 1832, when patriot-artist John Trumbull donated more than one hundred of his paintings to Yale College. Since then, the Gallery’s collections have grown to number more than 185,000 objects, spanning the globe and ranging in date from ancient times to the present day. The Gallery is noted for its important holdings of Greek and Roman art; early Italian paintings; later European art; American art; Asian art; African art; art of the ancient Americas; and Impressionist, modern, and contemporary works. The Gallery is currently embarking on the next phase of its expansion project, scheduled for completion in 2011, which includes the renovation of the Swartwout building and Street Hall, the two historic structures adjacent to the recently renovated Louis Kahn building.

Located at the corner of Chapel and York Streets in New Haven, Connecticut, the Gallery is open to the public free of charge: Tuesday–Saturday 10:00 pm–5:00 PM, Thursday until 8:00 PM (September–June); Sunday 1:00–6:00 PM. For additional information, the public may visit <http://artgallery.yale.edu>, or call 203.432.0600.

For additional press information, please contact Ana Davis, Associate Director of Public Information, at 203.432.0611, or ana.davis@yale.edu.

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