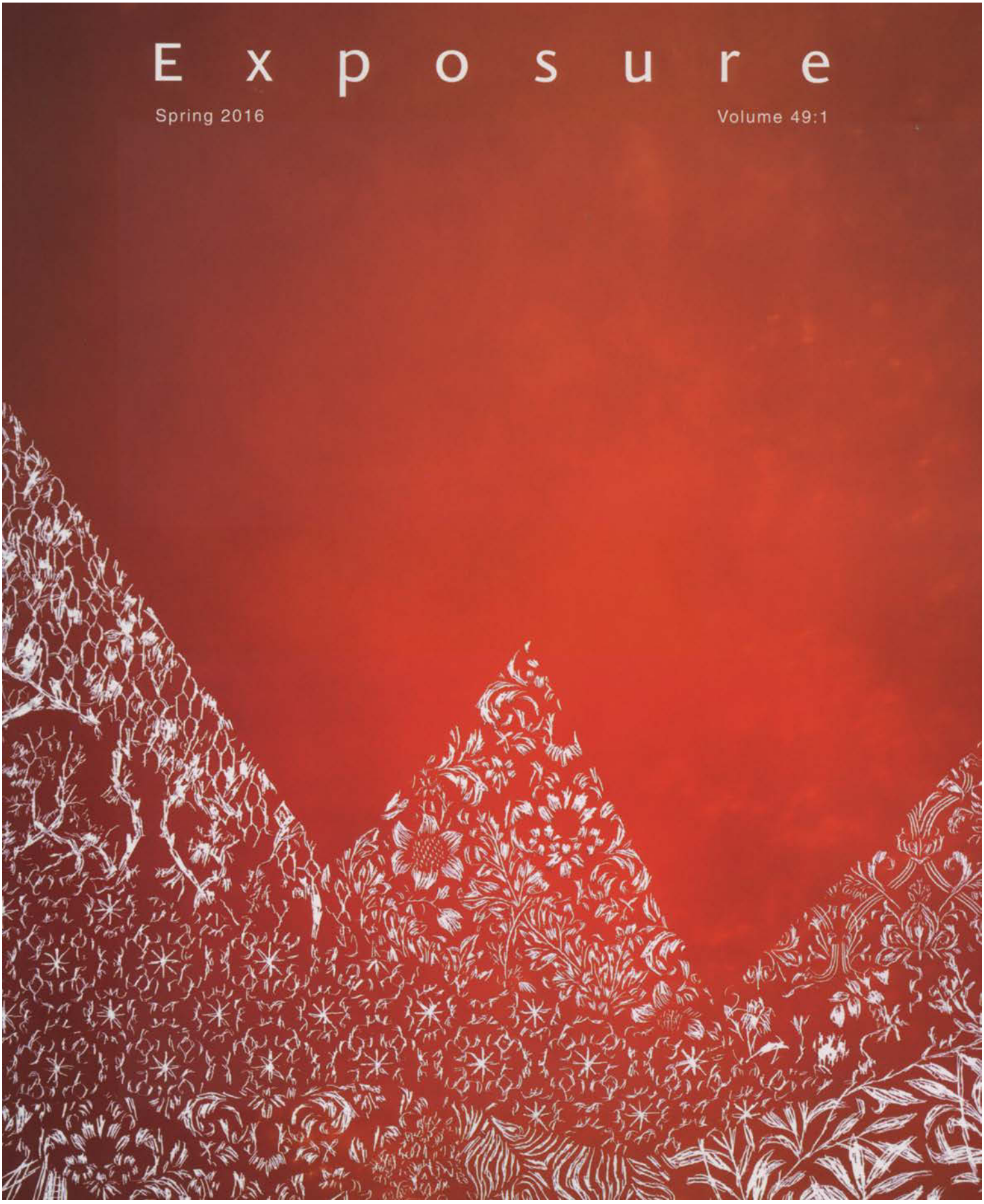
Exposure

Spring 2016

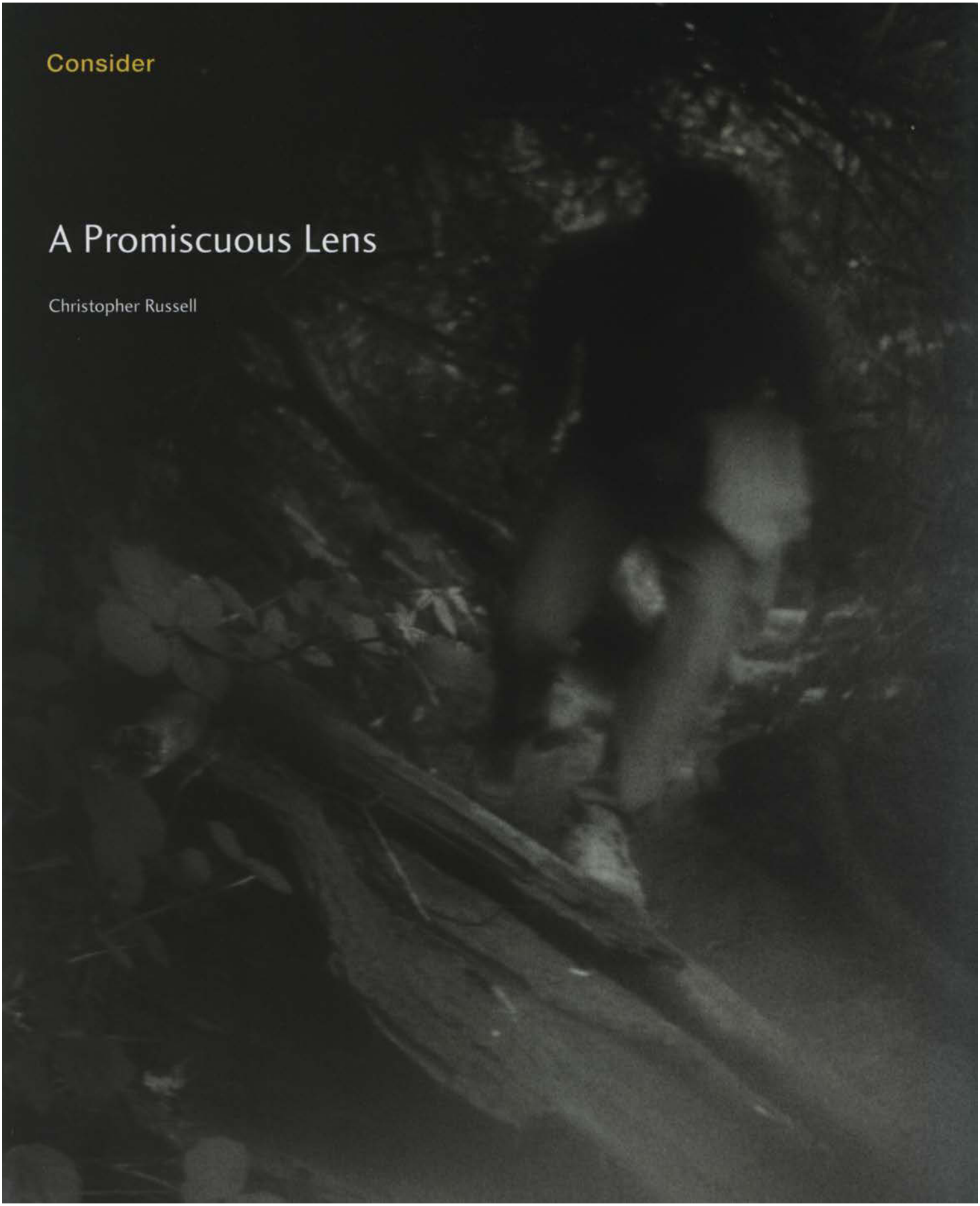
Volume 49:1

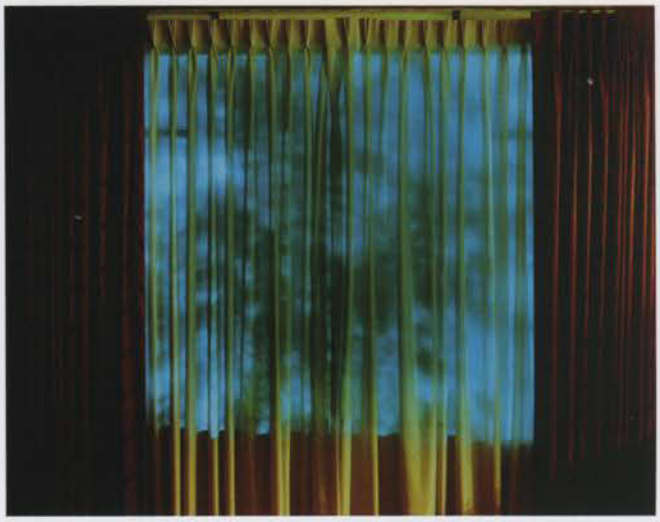


Consider

A Promiscuous Lens

Christopher Russell





The moment I became an artist, when I first saw the possibility of navigating a world outside of art school, was when Sally Mann stood at the podium and fumbled for my name, explaining that she was late for her talk because she was looking at my work, installed in the hallway downstairs from where she was speaking at the California College of Arts and Crafts in 1996. Future campus lore was unfolding before me, and all I could do was look down at my shoes in a confounding mix of pride and embarrassment. I stood to the side after her talk, until her assistant urged me to walk with Ms. Mann down to the gallery, stating that this would be my last chance to speak with the artist. Having it so tidily explained, I complied.

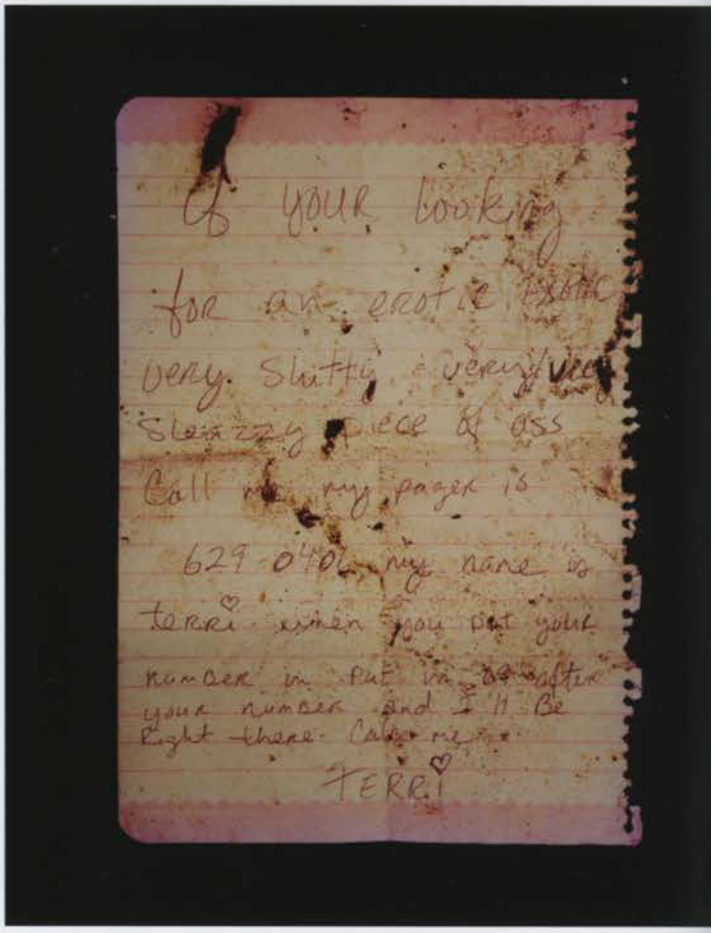
The images that caught Mann's attention were fuzzy, Pictorialist landscapes and images of anonymous park sex taken through a hole in my jacket pocket. The installation was a twenty-foot grid of 5 x 7 images that put the viewer into the space of the park,

Opposite: *Christopher Russell,* Untitled, *1996/2013, archival pigment print on Canson Baryta, 7.5 x 5 inches on 8.5 x 11 inch paper, edition of 5. From the series* Landscape. *Courtesy Mark Moore Gallery, Culver City, David B. Smith Gallery, Denver, and the Berkeley Art Museum, Berkeley*

Left: *Christopher Russell,* Untitled, *1996/2013, archival pigment print on Canson Baryta, 7.5 x 5 inches on 8.5 x 11 inch paper, edition of 5. From the series* Landscape. *Courtesy Mark Moore Gallery, Culver City, and David B. Smith Gallery, Denver, and the Berkeley Art Museum, Berkeley*

Top: *Christopher Russell,* Untitled, *1998, RA print, 16 x 20 inches, edition of 5. From the series* Untitled. *Courtesy Mark Moore Gallery, Culver City, and David B. Smith Gallery, Denver*

Bottom: *Christopher Russell,* Untitled, *1998, RA print, 16 x 24 inches, edition of 5. From the series* Untitled. *Courtesy Mark Moore Gallery, Culver City, and David B. Smith Gallery, Denver*



echoing the psychological effect that accompanies the change of scenery. The line of trees screened out social mores and made the park into a space of fantasy, of hunting through empty landscapes, navigating suggestive stares, and ultimately finding boys at play.

My personal stake in these images came from being age 22 and venturing into the vibrant sexuality that seemed to define San Francisco. I was influenced then by exhibitions like Larry Rinder's *In a Different Light* at the Berkeley Art Museum (1995) and the catalogue for Catherine Lord's *Pervert* from the University of California, Irvine (1995). Notions of voyeurism were circulating throughout the photographic community, and they fueled my sense of the photographer as a preternatural figure dedicated to invisibility, or at least to masking his or her identity as a photographer, in order to best record the world as it unfolded around them.

After the Sally Mann episode and the attention that followed, the question of what I was as an artist became suddenly urgent. I felt a kinship with the documentary photographer as a subversive figure, straddling the line between insider and spectator, striving for invisibility: the moment the camera becomes so familiar that it effectively disappears.

I also gravitated to an idea that the next wave of postmodernism would involve the obliteration of artistic style, allowing artists complete freedom with each piece—an ideal I never achieved. The camera's indiscriminate eye seemed like the perfect vehicle for an aesthetically volatile approach to art-making. While our goals and perspectives were certainly different, Lee Friedlander's slippery persona became my early model for what a photographer might be. His use of text created a dialogue between conceptual art and traditional photography, his shadow self-portraits placed

him in the realm of ghosts, yet he maintained complete freedom of reinvention. Friedlander's work provided a refreshing break from the trench warfare of academia and careers spent defending narrow territories defined years before.

Promiscuity moved from the content of a single project to an aesthetic position: I didn't want to feel tied down. In my exuberance, I fancied myself a Frankenstein or a Moreau and began developing my own 35 mm color film for extreme color saturation and graininess. I mixed formats, so prints from 35 mm hung next to 4 x 5 proportions with square images in between. I learned the emotive possibilities of color and grain, how disconnected images come together as something larger, when to show the details of shadows and when to let it all fade to black; I figured out how to photograph my own apprehensions.

I pulled apart the lessons of photography and cobbled them into something of my own. I didn't have to decide between Sugimoto and Moriyama: each approach could be employed in a system where every image has both an autonomy and a function within a set.

I became fascinated with wandering through the city at night, pinpoints of light directing washes of blue or gold, sidewalk stains leading to decrepit stairwells, or images of cropped body parts with an uncertain role, conquest or victim. Poe's "Man of the Crowd" lived in my head alongside characters from Dennis Cooper's poetry, marking ominous lines of destruction and desire. I was attracted to the overlapping models of photographer and flâneur, capturing the still of the night, punctuated with foreboding.

On one of my daily walks, I found the journal of a young runaway that detailed losing her virginity, written minutes after the event. This specific find inspired a more archeological approach; I wandered the city, collecting handwritten pages from the gutter. I was a street photographer, but eschewing in situ recording, I brought my subjects into the studio and lit them against a black background and photographed them. I captured the drama of the breakups, pledges of love, a threat of suicide, and lots of dick doodles. I created raw psychological portraits of subjects who were anonymous, even to me.

At the turn of the millennium I moved to Los Angeles, a city famous for its lack of walking culture. Feeling tied to the studio, I became

Opposite, left: *Christopher Russell,* Our Love, *2000, RA print, 20 x 16 inches, edition of 5. From the series* Always. *Courtesy Mark Moore Gallery, Culver City, and David B. Smith Gallery, Denver*

Opposite, right: *Christopher Russell,* If Your Looking, *2000, RA print, 20 x 16 inches, edition of 5. From the series* Always. *Courtesy Mark Moore Gallery, Culver City, and David B. Smith Gallery, Denver*

Top: *Christopher Russell,* Finding Faye, *2003, inkjet print on paper hardbound with flocked covers, 10 3/4 x 10 3/4 inches, 66 pages, edition of 10. From the series* Finding Faye. *Courtesy Mark Moore Gallery, Culver City, and David B. Smith Gallery, Denver*

Bottom: *Christopher Russell,* Finding Faye, *2003, inkjet print on paper hardbound with flocked covers, 10 3/4 x 10 3/4 inches, 66 pages, edition of 10. From the series* Finding Faye. *Courtesy Mark Moore Gallery, Culver City, and David B. Smith Gallery, Denver*

Left: *Christopher Russell,* Untitled, *2009, archival pigment print scratched with a razor, 80 x 24 inches, unique print. From the series* Budget Decadence. *Courtesy the Hammer Museum, Mark Moore Gallery, Culver City, and David B. Smith Gallery, Denver. Photograph by Brian Forrest*

Right: *Christopher Russell,* Budget Decadence (installation view), *2009, archival pigment prints, razor scratches, butcher knife hacking, dirt, glitter, and semen, 5 photographs, each 24 x 36 inches, unique prints. From the series* Budget Decadence. *Courtesy the Hammer Museum, Mark Moore Gallery, Culver City, and David B. Smith Gallery, Denver. Photograph by Brian Forrest*

Opposite: *Christopher Russell,* Untitled, *2011, archival pigment print scratched with a razor, 2 panels, each 36 x 24 inches, unique print. From the series* Runaway. *Courtesy the Brooklyn Museum, Mark Moore Gallery, Culver City, and David B. Smith Gallery, Denver*

interested in the beleaguered truth claim of film photography, a topic that was gaining traction with the increasing accessibility of pixel-level manipulation. To this end, I fabricated documents detailing a search for Faye Dunaway. Rather than glamor, I was drawn to the strength and emotional depth she brought to her portrayals of otherwise damaged characters. I practiced her signature, painted her image, sprayed graffiti messages for her, cut her name into my arm, and photographed her house at different times of day and night: each of these, a discrete conceptual approach to finding Faye. These collected fetishes were photographed and presented as a book of documentary photographs that drew from, yet undermined, the authority of the photographic archive. The images are true yet false. In the manner of silver halide, the shapes and tones are depicted accurately enough, while their meaning shifts against a web of narrative associations.

I also wrote a fictional story to give depth to the collection of photographs. The text explored the psychology of the obsessional character, reaching for celebrity through the fog of his delusion. The text became a book of its own, and the two pieces are never shown together. I gave depth to this character's childhood and explained the safety he felt in Faye Dunaway's image, the unrelenting desire to return the sense of belonging that she had given him. I used the idea of photography as a stylistic limitation, writing highly descriptive, fragmentary pieces that abutted to create a malleable narrative flow. I was not exposing film, yet I behaved according to established rules of photography. The stories I pieced together from fragmented segments became a literary style, gleaned from visiting exhibitions of street photography. The use of the archive became a device to throw the reliability of the documentary narrative into question.

The street photographer's obsession with the found moment even evolved into a distribution model for books.

I continued writing short fictions, which were bound into anonymous volumes, absent of title, author, or publisher information. They were printed and bound in my studio, sometimes with cheap newsprint, other times with quality paper and full-color images. I started leaving my books in random locations around the city, trying to create instances of fascination for an unknown and anonymous audience, to return something for all of the pictures I had "taken." I was not using a camera, but I was a photographer, responding to issues of photography.

My next major step was to write a lengthy narrative as a part of a large-scale photography exhibition. Five years after the exhibition, in 2011, this project was published as the novel-length artist book *Sniper*. I used a deeply descriptive literary style and arranged fragments of stories into a larger, amorphous narrative. The intended effect was a novel that read like a photographic exhibition, a web of associations with gaps and inconsistencies that give only an impression of the totality. The Baltimore Snipers, who shot random citizens in the months after the 9/11 attacks, inspired the work, though it is not biographical. I wanted to explain the intense relationship of paired spree killers as a love story involving absolute trust and mutual need, rendered delusional by repression. It was a fantasy world of tangled accounts, bookended by familial life at the beginning of the text and state control at the end, which rejected a traditional narrative arc.

The specific allusions I wanted from my photographs weren't coming across as I hoped they would. I decided that I needed a gesture that had a roughness and immediacy that could impose its own

associations onto the photograph. I began to use a blade to scratch drawings into the surface of my prints. I was only able to make this radical change to my work after trading my tabletop RA-4 processor for a large format inkjet printer. The time spent parsing points of color and maintaining chemistry gave the pristine sheen of the photograph an inviolable presence. The craft of photography made me fearful of exploring the medium's expressionist possibilities. The convenience of digital printing gave me a freedom that I never had squeezing the air from bottles of chemistry. The digital process allowed me to consider what a photograph might look like hacked with a butcher knife, unconcerned about the time it would take to replace the image if my experiment failed.

The ostensibly destructive gesture of scratching the image is a nod to the Romantic, peeling away the light recorded by the camera and replacing it with a bright white emanating from within. It pairs the immediacy of the hand with the immediacy of the camera, placing the found moment and the artist's response on an equal footing.

Budget Decadence followed as a solo exhibition at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles in 2009. The back wall of the gallery was covered with a text-based wallpaper replicating William Morris's *Trellis* pattern, created by coloring individual letters. One had to be within a foot or so of the wallpaper to read the lettering, so the viewer could easily move between the text and its gestalt. The wallpaper/background was a chapter-long establishing scene, describing the blighted suburban space inhabited by the characters of the remaining four chapters, which were printed as books and stationed around the gallery.

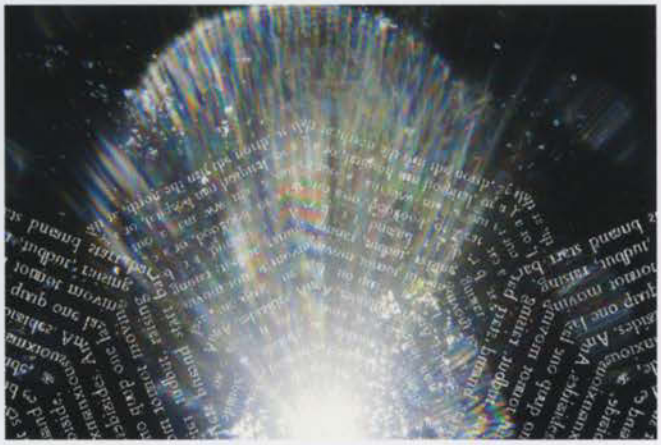
In the installation, there were four decrepit chairs to sit on while reading or engaging with the images on the walls. There was neither

a narrative arc nor a definite conclusion, just personalities haunting the space. The text looks to J. K. Huysmans's *À Rebours*; however, it treats the object attachments of a lower social class with the same ceremony as the finest examples of cultural production.

Against the back wall, five identical photographs that had been individually manipulated were hung in a vertical line. The ability of photography to precisely reproduce an image, in this case one of an empty room with sunshine pouring in through a small, central window, allowed me to create a sense of how the same space might be perceived by different characters in the narrative, to create a sense of an altered viewpoint or difference in perception. In one image, a wallpaper pattern was scratched into the walls with an ornate rug scratched into the floor. In another piece, the bottom of the frame was filled with a mound of dirt and glitter, giving the floor a postapocalyptic sparkle. In another, the photograph was repeatedly splashed with semen. The notion of aesthetic promiscuity intersected with my interest in narrative, providing a project-by-project flexibility to manipulate words and images for mutual reinforcement. My most recent projects have had the common element of a large book of drawings, scaled to make the viewer feel small, stressing the importance of the written word within the exhibition. The text is drawn, as opposed to written, with a fountain pen, and most pages are illuminated.

The first of these books, *Runaway,* begins with tales of monsters leading to stories of personal agency and coming of age. The book culminates in a wasteland where myths of personal freedom conflate with fictions depicting the last man on earth. The drawings in the exhibition include chunky swaths of repeating patterns and sinking ships, the barest remains of Romantic wonderment piercing the mechanically reproduced image. The photographs played several roles, converted to patterns that became an infinite backdrop, or hiding behind silver paint misted on the backside of the framing glass.

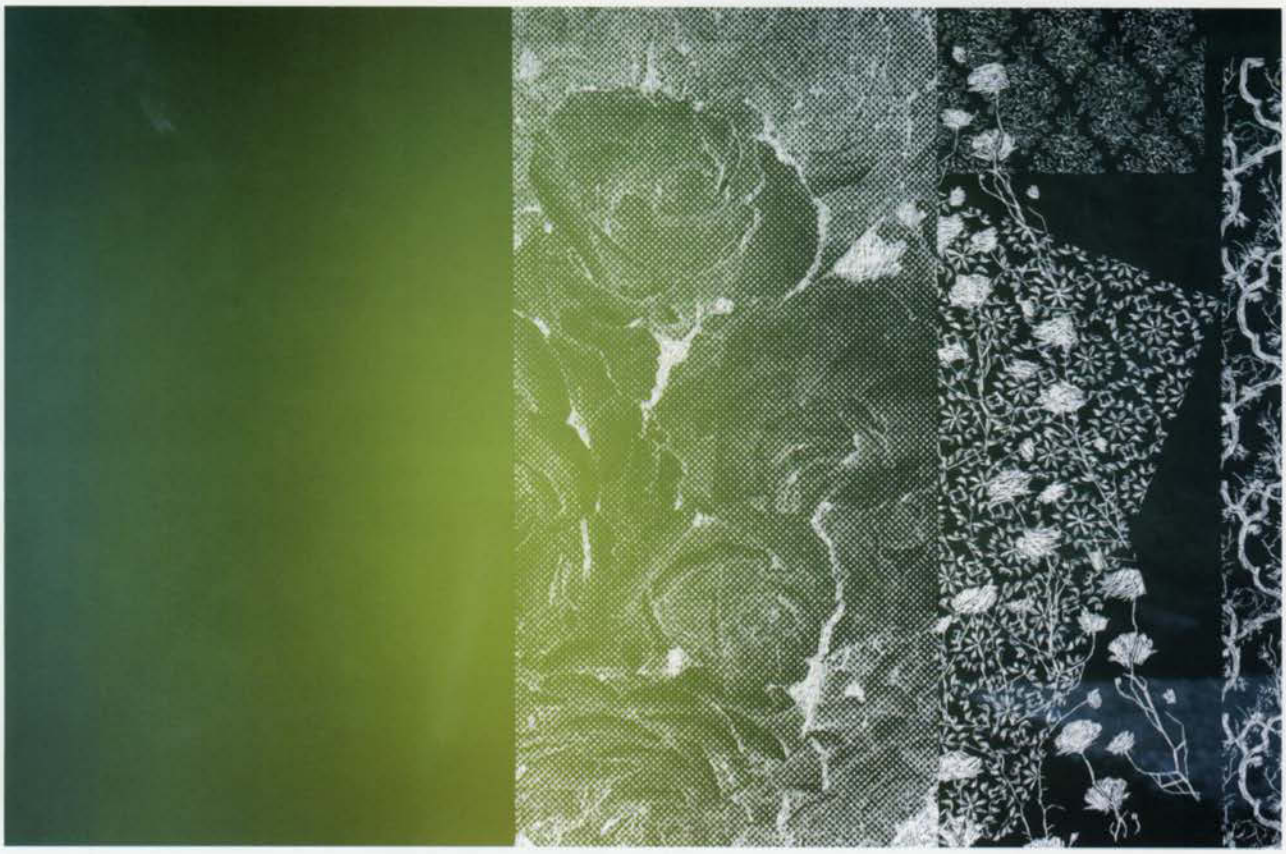
Dissonance, Coincidence and Errant Gradations of Light is a circuitous collection of fictional narrative fragments that begins with Nicéphore Niépce accidentally summoning a golem while inventing the first photographic process. Surprise issues with film and negatives are posited as artifacts of the golem pushing from the background of the photographic medium. The text then moves through the intertwined lives of the mystic H. P. Blavatsky and a similar-looking woman, Mary Conley, depicted in a mug shot



Opposite: *Christopher Russell,* Ghost Ship Wreck, *2011, archival pigment print scratched with a razor, 40 x 60 inches, unique print. From the series* Runaway. *Courtesy the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, Mark Moore Gallery, Culver City, and David B. Smith Gallery, Denver*

Top: *Christopher Russell,* Explosion #27, *2013, archival pigment print scratched with a razor, 22 x 32 inches, unique print. From the series* GRFALWKV. *Courtesy Mark Moore Gallery, Culver City, and David B. Smith Gallery, Denver*

Bottom: *Christopher Russell,* Aftermath #20, *2013, archival pigment print scratched with a razor, aerosol paint, scratched Plexiglas, 14 x 18 inches, unique print. From the series* GRFALWKV. *Courtesy Mark Moore Gallery, Culver City, and David B. Smith Gallery, Denver*



illustrating Alan Sekula's *The Body and the Archive*. The images surrounding this text were made with the worst quality lens I could find, plastic optics with a Canon mount. I shot directly into the sun, through foliage, exploiting refraction and lens flair for their creative possibilities; the white blasts became photographs of the end of the world. Some images were folded so glare shifts unpredictably as the viewer moves around the image, keeping explosive blasts active over the surface of the print. Other pieces have been scratched with silhouettes of forlorn animals wandering a wasteland of fractured patterns. I've come to rely on repeating patterns in my work. I see them as the daily affirmations of décor, chosen reminders of values and aspirations, enveloping while bleeding into infinity. I used these patterns as rubble to present coded cultural sensibilities as a Deleuzian cacophony.

I recently left Los Angeles for Portland, Oregon. I found myself in a place that has a large and established photographic community with which I have virtually nothing in common. So I find myself an outsider again, wandering among trees, throwing sheer, colored veils over my camera lens, wresting nature from tradition, grateful above all that I've kept my options open.

Christopher Russell *lives in Portland, Oregon. He had a solo exhibition at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, in 2009 and has been included in group shows at LACMA and The Norton Museum, among others. Russell produced the "destroy-to-enjoy" 'zine* Bedwetter, *and his work is included in numerous public collections in the US, Europe, and Asia. He has published a number of books, including* Sniper, *a novel-length artist book, and the cult photography book* Landscape, *featured in* The Photobook: A History, *Vol. 3. He currently exhibits with Mark Moore Gallery in Los Angeles, David B. Smith Gallery in Denver, and Upfor in Portland.*

Above: *Christopher Russell,* The Falls XVI, *2015, archival pigment print scratched with a razor, 24 x 36 inches, unique print. From the series* The Falls. *Courtesy Mark Moore Gallery, Culver City, and David B. Smith Gallery, Denver*

Opposite: *Christopher Russell,* The Falls XVIII, *2015, archival pigment print scratched with a razor, 54 x 36 inches, unique print. From the series* The Falls. *Courtesy Mark Moore Gallery, Culver City, and David B. Smith Gallery, Denver*