

ROBERT BUELTEMAN | Artist Statement

As Joseph Campbell once wrote, I believe the purpose of art is “to break windows through the walls of culture to visit eternity.”

When faced with the seemingly impossible task of expressing one’s relationship with the infinite, it is sometimes necessary to move outside the known to inquire more deeply into the mystery itself. My energetic photograms were created as an interpretation and celebration of that most divine mystery: the nature and design of life.

In March of 1999 I became aware that the tools and traditions of my medium had become limitations inhibiting my quest for self-expression. While many artists have turned to technology to provide additional tools in the belief that more options equates to greater freedom of expression, I have turned towards simplicity, mindful craftsmanship, and the direct manipulation of photographic materials as a means to that end.

Using neither camera, nor lens nor digital appliances, my technique has more in common with Chinese ink brush painting and improvisational jazz than with the traditions of photography. Like every brush stroke or note played, each application of light cannot be rehearsed, and once laid down, cannot be undone. For me, the arduous process of imaging is a spiritual practice, similar to my experience photographing the landscape surrounding my beloved home on the California coast.

Borne of two hands, one head and one heart, the work succeeds when I reach a point where my conscious intention falls away and is replaced by a sense of being a conduit for the serendipitous dance I’ve imagined between subject and spirit. This creates a perilous condition that throws me into a world that is unfamiliar and fraught with risk, yet seems to be a place where the remarkable happens.

I am chasing something I cannot possibly define, anticipate or manage into existence. In surrendering to this practice, I see glimpses of my work, my world and myself as a part of a larger whole, connected through this art.

Buelteman's actual process of imaging begins with the introduction of high frequency, high voltage electricity into an exposure matrix. Then, a variety of light sources including xenon-strobe, tungsten and fiber optic light are used to "paint" the subject by hand, so the light is scattered through the diffusion screens, through the subject, and onto the film where the exposure is recorded. Buelteman developed this method of imaging in 1999, but its component parts have long and well-known histories.