

## HANNAH WHITAKER

**Text by Aimee Walleston**  
**Photography by Adrian Gaut**

Photographer Hannah Whitaker's conceptual practice turns aesthetic answers back into perceptual questions. Her color photographs take familiar objects and invite readers to remap their own ways of seeing, mostly by means of contrast and coincidence. Her recent show, which opened at New York's Kumukumu Gallery in February, is a meditation on the idea of "blackness." The diverse images within the show play with the theoretical premise of the tone of black to ends that are both evident and metaphoric. An image depicting a swatch of fabric adorned with shimmering black sequins (onto which a beetle has been placed) allows the viewer to contemplate how shine and light, particularly when refracted from a consistently black surface, somehow evoke a feeling—almost a belief—of whiteness without ever being essentially white. One can almost imagine this image rendered as a painting, with the glimmering reflection of the light found on the sequins approximated by shiny white oil paint. Other images seem to evoke equally painterly thoughts: a photograph of two jellyfish locked in a silky, tendril embrace hearkens almost equally toward both Impressionism and classic underwater photography, the shapes of the animals like elegant, gestural brushstrokes made on a canvas of turquoise seawater. Whitaker, who grew up outside of Washington, D.C., originally majored in biology as an undergraduate at Yale before switching to fine art. After spending time in Paris, she came back to the States to attend the International Center of Photography-Bard MFA program in New York City. Intriguingly, the artist says she found her photography practice evolving when she gave up the notion of trying to produce a body of photographs in the form of a "project." Yale—particularly in the late '90s and early '00s—was known for producing a group of photographers, Katy Grannan and Justine Kurland among them, who rose to prominence under a particular stylistic umbrella. Many of these artists became known for their eerie recalibrations of figurative photography. The images they produced seemed very much a part of an extensive, conceptually-honed project—if not a lifetime body of work. Their photographs, in look and content, were (and are, for the photographers still working in this system) rigorously thought-out and often included highly constructed situations, and they were driven by the premise of a project-based initiative, a form which falls very much in line with the history of photography writ large. The idea that single photographs must come tied up together prettily in the form of a project, devoid of autonomy, is nothing new—it has its roots in Life magazine-style photo essays, among other things. But a nascent group of art photographers—Whitaker and the New York-based Michele Abeles among them, with a godfather in the form of Roe Ethridge—now seems to be questioning the ubiquity of this practice in new and interesting

ways. We have always accepted the idea of a one-off sculpture or painting. Why has photography, with a few notable exceptions—like Irving Penn, though his images did always adhere to a strict formal and stylistic agenda—been so slow to recognize the single image? While Whitaker's compositions may be treading new ground in this direction, she is also extremely interested in creating images that play against each other as what she calls a "nonverbal language." A previous series of images created by Whitaker explored, as she puts it, things that were "scientifically explicable but experientially inexplicable"—including images of sword swallows and fire eaters. Her newer works have an even more intangible conceptual bent and further examine the artist's interest in creating "meaning out of juxtapositions." This interest has guided her, in one instance, to place a fourpaneled photograph of the moon (culled ingeniously from a print resource and lit to emulate the moon's phases) in line with another four-panel image of a professional hula-hooper in various stages of hooping. Canny, imaginative, and leaning into a new way of regarding images, Whitaker is endeavoring toward an exciting place within the nebulous structure of contemporary art photography. Within her work, one finds images at their most nakedly plausible. And it is perhaps within that place of simplicity that the most progressive questions can arise.



From left: Untitled, 2009; Blue Cane, 2008. Courtesy the artist and © Gallery NINE



HANNAH WHITAKER

Photographer Hannah Whitaker's elemental, highly considered works elevate the art of the single image. It's not a revolution in photography as much as a turning point

Text by Anne Wallace  
Photography by Joshua Gault

Photographer Hannah Whitaker's conceptual practice turns aesthetic answers back into perceptual questions. Her color photographs take familiar objects and invite readers to remap their own ways of seeing, mostly by means of contrast and coincidence. Her recent show, which opened at New York's Kolumikum Gallery in February, is a meditation on the idea of "blackness." The diverse images within the show play with the theoretical promise of the tone of black to ends that are both evocative and metaphorical. An image depicting a swatch of fabric adorned with shimmering black sequins onto which a beetle has been placed, particularly when refracted from a consistently black surface, somehow evokes a feeling—almost a tidal—of whiteness without ever being essentially white. One can almost imagine this image rendered as a painting, with the glimmering reflection of the light found on the sequins approximated by shiny white oil paint. Other images seem to evoke equally painterly thoughts: a photograph of two jellyfish bobbed in a silky, tamed embrace hearkens almost equally toward both Impressionism and classic underwater photography, the shapes of the animals like elegant, gestural brushstrokes made on a canvas of turquoise seawater.

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late '80s and early '90s—was known for producing a group of photographers, Kaye D'Amico and Justice Rutland among them, who rose to prominence under a particular stylistic umbrella. Many of these artists became known for their eerie recalibrations of figurative photography. The images they produced seemed very much a part of an obsessive, conceptually limited project—it not a lifetime body of work. Their photographs, in look and content, were land graze, for the photographers still working in this system rigorously thought-out and often included highly constructed situations, and they were driven by the premise of a project-based initiative, a form which falls very much in line with the history of photography went large. The idea that single photographs must come tied up together, gruffly in the form of a project, devoid of autonomy, is nothing new—it has its roots in Life magazine-style photo essays, among other things. But a nascent group of art photographers—Whitaker and the New York-based Michelle Abeles among them, with a godfather in the form of Rose Elinor—now seems to be questioning the ubiquity of this practice in new and interesting ways. We have always accepted the idea of a one-off sculpture or painting. Why has photography, with a few notable exceptions—like Irving Penn, though his images did always adhere to a strict formal and stylistic agenda—been so slow to recognize the single image? While Whitaker's compositions may be treading new ground in this direction, she is also extremely interested in creating images that play against each other as what she calls a "nonverbal language." A process series of images created by Whitaker explored, as she puts it, things that were "scientifically explicable but experientially ungraspable"—including images of geord wallowers and fire eaters. Her newer works have an even more intangible conceptual bent and further examine the artist's interest in creating "meaning out of juxtapositions." This interest has guided her, in one instance, to place a four-paneled photograph of the moon (collected ingeniously from a print resource and fit to emulate the moon's phases) in line with another four-panel image of a professional hula hooper in various stages of looping. Carry, imaginative, and leaning into a new way of regarding images, Whitaker is endeavoring toward an exciting place within the nebulous structure of contemporary art photography. Within her work, one finds images at their most nakedly plausible. And it is perhaps within that place of simplicity that the most progressive questions can arise.

From left: Paper Moon (Full), 2009  
Paper Moon (Waxing Gibbous), 2009  
Paper Moon (First Quarter), 2009  
Paper Moon (Waning Crescent), 2009  
Right: Paper Moon (Total Eclipse), 2009

