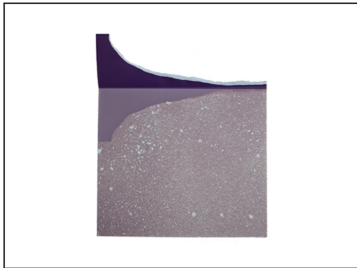


In Conversation with Curtis Mann



I first met [Curtis Mann](#) when he arrived with a small backpack at my San Francisco apartment to spend five nights on an inflatable mattress in my living room. He was there to give a lecture on his work at California College of the Arts, where I was a graduate student, and to surf as much as possible while on the west coast. I immediately liked him. He was open about his experiences and curious about mine. We spoke at length about our evolving art practices, and the anxiety and excitement that comes with pushing our careers forward. At present, Curtis has a show at [Kavi Gupta Gallery](#) in Berlin entitled *making oneself, making oneself*, which runs through November 6. Curtis and his wife, the artist [Brooke Berger](#), live and work in Chicago, where they both teach photography at Columbia College.

Carmen Winant: Let's begin at the beginning. Will you talk a little bit about your background in photography, and how you arrived at such a technically unique approach?

Curtis Mann: I was originally a mechanical engineer. At my engineering school in Ohio, we did a lot of testing and manufacturing materials, mostly metals. That was the basis for learning. So when I arrived at photography, my instinct was to deconstruct the material, to take apart and reconfigure it, to understand photographs as physical matter. The process comes very much from trial and error: I was figuring out how to manipulate and remove surfaces through sanding, tearing, burning, and eventually, bleaching. In fact, when I finally tried a little Clorox bleach from under my kitchen sink, I was amazed at how fast it worked. As soon as you splash a little of the chemical on photography paper, the layers of emulsion start to melt away before your eyes. Six years later I'm still using bleach as a destructive and creative tool.

Carmen: You were in the Whitney Biennial in 2010 — you were also 29 years old and just out of school. What was that experience like, and more importantly, how did that kind of recognition affect your career in ways that you expected or didn't expect? In what ways, if any, can that kind of recognition be limiting to a young artist?

Curtis: Being in the Biennial was an incredible experience, but it did come earlier than I would have expected. Mostly, it jumpstarted a few things in my career. Of course, simply appearing in that exhibition doesn't "convince" everyone, but did it allow me an extra ten minutes with the critics, gallerists, curators, even other artists, that I had been wanting to talk to. I had already been in communication with Kavi [Gupta], but after the Biennial we began showing together. So it sped things up. But you're right in that it establishes certain expectations. It's a big stage to be put on as a young artist, and in some ways I don't know if I was ready. As you mentioned, I was just out of school, and my work was still evolving. That body of work I showed wasn't complete even in itself. So, it can be tricky to negotiate what I wanted to make from what other people expected and wanted me to make, how to establish and manage a career trajectory that makes sense. I am still catching up to that. But you can't plan the timing of these things, and you certainly can't say no to the Whitney.



Carmen: Where do you situate yourself within the realm of political art? With the exception of this current show – which we will discuss later – you are known for working with found imagery from Flickr that depicts landscapes and people from Palestine, Kenya, Lebanon, Israel, etc., which are then strategically doctored in bleach to burn away traces of the surface. In July of this last year, one of your images was featured on the cover of the *New York Times Magazine* in relation to a story on civil unrest and violent conflict in Yemen. How do you understand the influence of current affairs – namely, violent conflicts abroad – to affect your thinking and practice?

Curtis: I never intended to be a political artist. I was drawn to those conflicts because of own my gap of understanding what they depicted, which seemed to mimic photography's own gap in understanding...how an image purports to convey a circumstance foreign to us, and ultimately fails in doing so. During the time I first started making that work in 2005 and 2006, there was a barrage of images from the conflicts in Beirut and Lebanon in the media. I grappled with the photographs – how much I didn't understand about the violence – the logistics but also the lived experiences. In fact, the more images I saw, the less I understood. I didn't want to make a statement per se, I just wanted to find a method that would exaggerate that problem, and my own fascination with it. Of course, I couldn't escape the political elements of the work, nor did I want to; there is a real pivotal urgency in these images. But I never had a "side" or a personal or religious dogma in my approach.

The first thing I did when I started was to find a large group of personal images for sale on Ebay. They were of a tour group, Christian Americans I think, traveling through the holy sites in the Middle East, in Egypt and Jordan and so forth. I began working with those images, using processes of erasure to coalesce and complicate the surface, and in some sense, the event, or my understanding of it. As I began to obscure – to literally burn away the images to a point of abstraction – I found that the results mirrored both my own lack of understanding in the foreign conflicts, and my frustration with photograph's ability to translate them. As I progressed with the work, I began to get my images off of Flickr, as the site allowed me access to images of events happening almost in real time.

Carmen: Your answer reminds me of Sontag's stance in *On Photography*, in which she criticized photographs for providing "a semblance of knowledge" rather than the thing itself, a point she continues to argue for persuasively *Regarding the Pain of Others*. This seems to sum up your frustration, or aggression toward the artifact itself. Still, I wonder: if you are chiefly interested in the gap in experience that photography provides, why not work from other material, family photographs for example?

Curtis: It's funny that you mention that. Before I even used images of foreign conflicts, I started this exploration by using my own family photographs for two or three years...mostly birthday parties, school pictures and my own snapshots. It was the same premise: I was tearing and destroying them, and attempting to recreate their narratives. The gap in understanding still functioned, but I had a different relationship to it. I couldn't break free from a certain distracting nostalgia, to get their underlying meaning to change and shift the way I wanted. When I came across the imagery of the tour group on Ebay, it was foreign to me in every sense: I felt zero familiarity with people, events or places in the pictures. I once read that Vik Muniz said something like, "If you get stuck, do the opposite thing," and I took that to heart.



Carmen: Speaking of opposites, your new show *making oneself, making oneself*, which is up now at Kavi Gupta's Berlin gallery, takes a decisively less political, more formal approach. Your sustaining interest in transforming and manipulating the photography's paper's surface is still evident, but there is no background in the images other than even color. In some cases you even bend, rip, and crease the paper yourself. What influenced this shift in framework, and how do you see the two methods diverging from one another or evolving together?

Curtis: Certain questions and struggles had been bubbling beneath the surface of the work for some time. I was struggling with how to transform the medium, and I needed to just finally strip away all narrative content and work with the paper as physical material. I was always interested in minimalist abstraction, and in fact, I had become more curious with the nuances of the erased sections of my previous work than the content left behind. Those areas began to read to me like landscapes, or as having a painterly quality. Similar to how I had switched from my family photographs to images the Middle East years ago, I wanted to step to the opposite end of the same spectrum, to see what could do to the paper if it was already empty. That curiosity – where could my medium take me, and how I could show something effectively imageless – was the driving force.

Carmen: They do strike me as quite painterly, or even like drawings. I know you live in Chicago, but did you get a chance to see the Richard Serra retrospective of drawings at the Metropolitan Museum, or the Malevich exhibition at Gagosian's Madison Avenue gallery, both up this spring? There is a reminiscent quality in your new work that reminds me of the minimalist, additive sensibility of both. Do you regard your work in relation to these other mediums or artists?

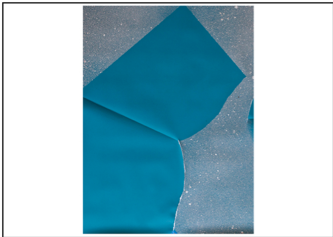
Curtis: I do think a lot about drawing and painting in regard to making my work, and even sculpture. For instance, Richard Tuttle has been a big influence on this newer project. I went to Columbia College, which is a straight photography school, so maybe it's partially a reaction to being in that environment. I have been using non-photographic strategies for some time: my previous work required detailed painting on of varnish, as to protect certain areas from bleach. And I imagine a painter might, I plan out "sketches" using folded xeroxed sheets of paper. I think of the rips like line drawings...maybe drawing for someone who can't draw. And the works are unique objects, not editions.

Carmen: Even the process of "erasing" from your previous work – that strikes me as distinctly non-photographic, more a task of the pencil or palette knife. And the foregrounding of the paper itself as subject in your newer work calls attention to the material in a way that photography generally avoids.

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Curtis: Yes there is something about the way this new work reveals itself – reveals its own making – that I was after, and that is non-photographic. Hence, the show's title. I saw a Wolfgang Tillmans show in Pittsburgh in 2008 in which he ripped and folded the paper, and that was really influential on my thinking. Tillmans removed the precious quality of the paper's surface, and then made it precious all over again in a new way by hanging it on the museum wall. The rules of photography, people can forget, are quite literally bendable.



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