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A LESSON

CARL CHI

As a photographer, scholar, educator, and critic, Carl Chiarenza's influence on photography cannot be overstated. A graduate of Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) in 1957, where he studied with Minor White and Ralph Hattersley, Chiarenza taught art and art history for more than 35 years at Boston University and the University of Rochester, where he is now an artist-in-residence. His artwork is in the collections of the country's major encyclopedic museums as well as photography-focused institutions, and his solo shows number more than seventy. His monograph, "Aaron Siskind: Pleasures and Terrors," (1982) is still considered the authority on Siskind, who was the topic of Chiarenza's dissertation for his PhD from Harvard in 1973. Committed to abstraction since the late 1950s, Chiarenza's photography is probably best known for his images of manmade collages photographed in his studio. His largely black and white photographs of foil, cardboard, and paper can evoke landscapes, stylized figures, or even nothing at all - leaving the interpretation up to the viewer. His work has been praised by A.D. Coleman for providing the observer with "a lesson in seeing; not just in how this photographer sees himself, but how we all see."

Focus: Describe your current process of creating photographs.

Carl Chiarenza: I pretty much go to the studio and play around until something begins to happen. It took me a few years after I first started working with this material to realize I should use a Polaroid MP4 copy stand and camera. Before, I'd put the collages on the wall or upright, but now they lay flat on the board of the stand. I play with about half a dozen lights that I move around; and I expose the film after changing the lights and the collage until I see a configuration that works. So, the

image is, in effect, made by a continuous back and forth manipulation of collage and lighting in combination with my work with light in the darkroom. Sometimes, things go pretty quickly and I get one or two good negatives in a day. Other times, it might take me two to three weeks to get something. I could work all day, have 16 negatives, and decide that none are usable. It's just a matter of continuous experimentation. It's rare that I go into the studio with a preconceived notion of what I want. I don't have an idea that I can articulate - it's a little like music in that way. But one theme that comes and goes is the landscape or the garden. But it's really the pictorial idea of a landscape that my photos refer to. When we think "landscape," we think "picture." Even when we lose ourselves in nature, we are essentially using our visual sense to impose a picture on what we see. We make mental pictures of our feelings - feelings we attribute to nature. Well, it's those feelings that motivate my pictures that some viewers relate to "landscape."

Focus: What are your collages made of, and how did you start working with them as subject matter?

CC: Basically, I've been saving pieces of foil, paper, and other detritus since 1979. The collages are all pretty small; the average size is about 4 x 5 inches. I don't adhere the materials together, so after the session, the collage no longer exists. The materials go back into the bins. The collages themselves are not very interesting. And they happen to be made of items with colors that don't work well together. I however "see" these materials in black and white.

Focus: What motivated you to begin making collages?

CC: I started making collages in 1979 because that's when Polaroid developed its 20" x 24"

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