

# artillery

## FARRAH KARAPETIAN

by Annabel Osberg · February 26, 2020



Farrah Karapetian's current show, "The Photograph is Always Now," is a touching rumination on the loss of her father, who died of cancer last year. Furthering her ongoing exploration of photography's potential for semi-fictionally recasting bygones into the present, this body of work is perhaps her most personal yet. It is less about her father—who remains largely unidentified—than about the artist remembering watching him slip away. In pictures throughout the show, puddled and smeared photographic fluids evoke muddled grief, hospital tinctures and bodily excretions while serving as metaphors for the man and his memory dissolving. Two series of sequential photos, *The Gesture of Memory* (2019) and *Via Dolorosa* (2019), originated in his

hospital room, where she exposed photographic paper and later selectively developed it. Watery drips and disjunctive blotches offer glimpses of her father lying abed, being tended, expiring; and finally, family members comforting each other in the aftermath. Larger images are more speculative, such as *Big Dream* (2020), relating to a vision she had; anecdotal back-stories are catalogued on the gallery's website. The installation's layout and dim lighting emanating from a special chandelier titled *Organ* (2020) were intended to evoke a cathedral. Additional 3D components as in her last show, "Collective Memory," would have more fully immersed viewers in this imagined space; but the complexity of bereavement is palpable. In a trio of photos including *Fragment* (2020, pictured above) inside a room representing a reliquary, Karapetian presents herself as a ravaged, sundered statue: When a loved one dies, he brings part of you with him.

# artillery

## TOP TEN 2019 LA SHOWS

by Annabel Osberg · January 7, 2020

The LA art world has seen an exceptional year. Even as big-name artists and galleries prevail amid the booming market, previously unrecognized artists are being shown more widely than ever; and sociopolitical issues are driving much of the critical discourse. Of the many 2019 shows I visited, the following remain etched most sharply in my mind. (This list does not reflect any ranking order.)



Farrah Karapetian, *Collective Memory* at Von Lintel Gallery, installation view, courtesy of Von Lintel Gallery.

### **Farrah Karapetian, “Collective Memory”**

Von Lintel Gallery

Karapetian based this immersive installation on gallerist Tarrah von Lintel’s fond personal anecdotes about Club Shine, a transgender nightclub that closed in 2017. Frequent patrons’ memories took on intriguing new lives inside the gallery, which transported visitors to a mysterious realm asserting the presence of the transgender community. Awash in otherworldly red light, photograms and interactive sculptural elements evoked haunting dreams of nightlife past.

# Los Angeles Times

## Review: Remembering the trans Club Shine with one artist's ghostly, moving memory of a Van Nuys haven

By SHARON MIZOTA

FEB. 19, 2019

3 AM



Installation view of Farrah Karapetian's "Collective Memory," complete with stripper pole, at Von Lintel Gallery.

Farrah Karapetian's latest installation at Von Lintel Gallery is a commemoration of Club Shine, a night for trans women at the Oxwood Inn, a Van Nuys lesbian bar that closed in 2017.

Inspired by the remembrances of gallerist Tarrah von Lintel and her friends, Karapetian deploys her signature photographic negatives and photograms to create a ghostly replica of the space. The results are alternately cacophonous and moving.

Visitors are greeted by a wall transformed into a blackboard, inscribed all over with the trans-positive hashtag, "#WeWillNotBeErased." You are encouraged to add your own inscriptions, and the entire installation is interactive, designed both as a club and a darkroom.

Throughout the run of the exhibition, Karapetian will hold photogram sessions. (A photogram is a photograph made without a camera. Negatives, objects or people are placed against photo paper and exposed to light.) Visitors can dance, put on makeup or otherwise remember Club Shine.

The first room contains a glass pool table, a small replica of a bar and barstools and life-size photographic images of the Oxwood bathroom, tagged with all manner of graffiti. New messages have been added to these photomurals, re-creating the restroom's function as communication center and venue for self-expression.

To this environment, Karapetian has added text-based images, depicting poems in which all but key words have been redacted. In two works titled "We," she edits the 1959 Gwendolyn Brooks poem "The Pool Players" so that the only visible words are instances of the word "we." The works are moving affirmations of community in which erasure serves only to strengthen a message of solidarity.

The second room, framed behind red curtains, contains a stripper pole, another image of the bathroom and a photogram of seated legs, as if seen from under a table. Titled "Chasers," it represents the audience. The performer, a photogram of a nude woman, hangs on the other side of the pole.

The exhibition feels loose and freewheeling. Karapetian's photograms and negatives are unframed, dangling and curling off the walls. The images themselves are somewhat eerie, black and white like X-rays, and lighted at strange angles by red "safe" lights that turn the space into a darkroom. It's by no means a faithful replica but rather an evocation, hazy and incomplete, like memory itself. It's a fitting commemoration of what was once a haven for becoming oneself.

## Farrah Karapetian: Collective Memory at Von Lintel Gallery

By Shana Nys Dambrot

February 10, 2019

A Farrah Karapetian exhibition is almost always a meditation on place. It's not often as literal as an address; frequently the place in question is no longer in existence, or has undergone significant transformation, and has witnessed history. Karapetian is also interested in ways to document, in paradoxically fixed objects, the transitory movement of people in and through those places, and the mechanisms they might have used to define both the places and themselves. For example, her recent trip to Russia in which she collaborated with local creatives to engineer a quasi-theatrical movement exercise, which was staged as an occasion to make photograms, and from which architectural and lighting elements were culled as sculptural works for subsequent installation-based presentations. For *Collective Memory*, now on view at Von Lintel Gallery, Karapetian brings all of this to bear on a more specific narrative of place, one that is, in more ways than one, much closer to home.

Club Shine at the Oxwood Inn was L.A.'s last lesbian bar. It closed in 2017, but the community it attracted and nurtured lives on in many forms — the most recent of which is Karapetian's exhibition of sculptural, photo-based, immersive, interactive works, and the eponymous collective memory of those who were its denizens. Among those who miss the shabby chic of its mirrored walls, tiny bathroom, and feeling of welcome extended to the lesbian and trans women who came there to dance, drink, and make a community were Tarrah Von Lintel herself. As a gallerist Von Lintel has long been more interested in running her art business as a conversational, social exchange of ideas than as a strictly commercial undertaking. In *Collective Memory*, the legacy of Club Shine and the dream of the contemporary art salon merge in a liminal, participatory space whose soft red lighting not only sets up emotional and social cues — but is also a functional element in support of the photograms Karapetian has been making throughout the exhibition.

Among the sculptural works are a pool table (the cue ball says "We") and a stripper pole (which like Shine's is not fixed to the ceiling so gets a bit wobbly). The latter forms, as one might imagine, a lowkey stage set for a series of movement-based photographs to be made in concert with volunteer visitors. The red light facilitates both the machine and the desired behavior. Other works arrayed across the walls and floor make additional direct reference to Club Shine — graffitied bathroom walls, shards of disco glass, 'zine-style promotional materials, and a blackboard with two messages and a bowl of chalk:

add your name to the record, we will not be erased. In fact, the graffiti and the blackboard are not only charming and engaging opportunities for direct action, but they reveal the fundamental impulse behind writing your name on walls in the first place. No matter what it actually says, the message is “I was here,” or perhaps more to the point, “We were here.”

“This show is for everybody who remembers Club Shine,” Karapetian writes in the exhibition materials. “For the rest of us, it is a chance to inhabit the role of listening author, contending with memory, loss, fascination, transition, and love, through not only our own experience but that of others.” There are a lot of reasons for the Von Lintel community, the art world more broadly, and the world in general, to be contemplating identity, community, and change just now, some more existential and others rather esoteric. Perhaps it is best, as the show suggests, that we endeavor to do so together.

# ARTFORUM

## CRITICS' PICKS



### LOS ANGELES

Farrah Karapetian

VON LINTEL GALLERY

An unearthly red glow permeates the dim rooms of Farrah Karapetian's haunting exhibition "Collective Memory." Arranged with the impromptu panache of a dive bar, the installation seems as if it were part of a bizarre dream. On a chalkboard wall in the entryway, #WEWONTBEERASED is frenetically scrawled over and over in wobbly parallel lines. Here, the urgency of the hashtag for transgender solidarity is rendered materially.

Karapetian based this show on her friend and gallerist Tarrah von Lintel's fond personal anecdotes about Club Shine, a transgender nightclub at LA's last lesbian bar, the Oxwood Inn, which closed in 2017. The artist also envisaged salient elements recalled by Club Shine's frequent patrons. Memories of a dancing pole, a pool table, a cramped bathroom, and pictures on walls take on intriguing new lives within the installation. Painterly photograms, such as *Oxwood Inn*, 2018, which portrays spilled drinks and bar ephemera, complete the mysterious ambience, evoking specters of nightlife past.

Former Club Shine regulars have been invited to relive previous experiences at the Inn throughout the show's duration. On select evenings, the gallery operates as gathering place and a darkroom, where Karapetian captures the energy of attendees as they socialize, apply makeup, and dance. Customary rules of gallery visitation don't apply: Everyone may graffiti several large pieces of clear film printed with images, which have served as negatives for photograms. Refracted under the lens of Karapetian's reinterpretation of the club, the "reopening" of the shuttered nightspot highlights for a wider audience its former role in asserting the presence of the transgender community and, importantly, emphasizes the need for a less temporary venue.

— Annabel Osberg  
Jan/Feb 2019

# VoyageLA

MAY 21, 2018

## Art & Life with Farrah Karapetian



Today we'd like to introduce you to Farrah Karapetian.

### **Farrah, please kick things off for us by telling us about yourself and your journey so far.**

I was raised on the east side of Los Angeles, in Highland Park, lightly practicing my family's five faiths – Islam, Judaism, Protestantism, Orthodox Christianity, and Catholicism – as well as my parents' spiritual group, SUBUD. I think the cultural flexibility of my youth as well as my parents' natural inclination toward lifelong learning oriented me towards an early visual literacy and a sense that all cultural practices are constructs to be respected but also – simultaneously – observed, if not analyzed. At first, I thought I had to choose between the arts and letters as a means of such observation, but as I grew through my undergraduate fine art degree at Yale, my professional experience in San Francisco and New York, and my graduate fine art degree at UCLA, I realized that writing and making artwork could be two sides of the same coin: the former a process of thinking, and the latter a process of visceral, surprising translation of life experience. Art gets me out of my head. Since graduating from UCLA in 2008, I have been based in LA, but travel for projects so as to consistently disrupt my own understanding of the world through encounters with new mediums, narratives, and perspectives. My family has always been nomadic, and it hasn't stopped with me.

### **Can you give our readers some background on your art?**

Tarra von Lintel, my gallerist in Los Angeles, likes to say that I make photography physical. I do foreground the physicality of the photograph, in many ways, including working cameralessly with my subjects, making sculptural negatives, and regarding the photographic print as a unique object to be, at times, installed in three-dimensions. The endgame of that is to push the relationships between the ways a picture is made and observed. Photography is a deep wellspring of surprising and evolving formal language and depending upon the narrative that has catalyzed what I make, I am always attentive and responsive to that language. Questions drive that process: What is real? What is my relationship to the narratives I dwell on in my daily life? How do those narratives enter my consciousness – through what kind of media or memory? These questions keep me working in photography, which is uniquely positioned among mediums to consider fact vs. fiction and the dynamic between subjects, authors, and source material.

**What would you recommend to an artist new to the city, or to art, in terms of meeting and connecting with other artists and creatives?**

Exchange in art is very important, not just because we get lonely, but because the process can get solipsistic if you're not careful; it's always important to disrupt your own sense of yourself and what you think you're up to. When I want to share my thoughts beyond the hints I provide in my artwork, I write essays. Teaching also provides a sense of community and continuity, whether as a visiting artist or working consistently with a university. Travel on grants gets me out of America's news cycle and triggers my awareness of any defaults I may have as an artist and person from the States. But connection is really less organized than any of the above; you have to follow your nose. A good studio visit can be the best way to feel not alone – and by that, I mean reaching out to visit other people's studios, not necessarily always asking them to come to yours. There's a difference between neediness and curiosity, and if you're genuinely interested in how somebody else's work works, if they've got the time they will usually be up for an hour's chat. That kind of conversation doesn't have to be more than stimulating, but it can lead to other things; not every exhibition is organized by a commercial gallery or established institution. We're living in a time ripe for renegade collaboration.

**What's the best way for someone to check out your work and provide support?**

I am represented in Los Angeles by Tarrah Von Lintel, of Von Lintel Gallery, and in New York by James Danziger, of Danziger Gallery. In summer 2018, I am on a Fulbright in St. Petersburg, Russia, where a public project of my work will be exhibited. In fall 2018, my work will be exhibited at Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow and at Danziger Gallery in New York, and I will have a portfolio with the September issue of Aperture as well.

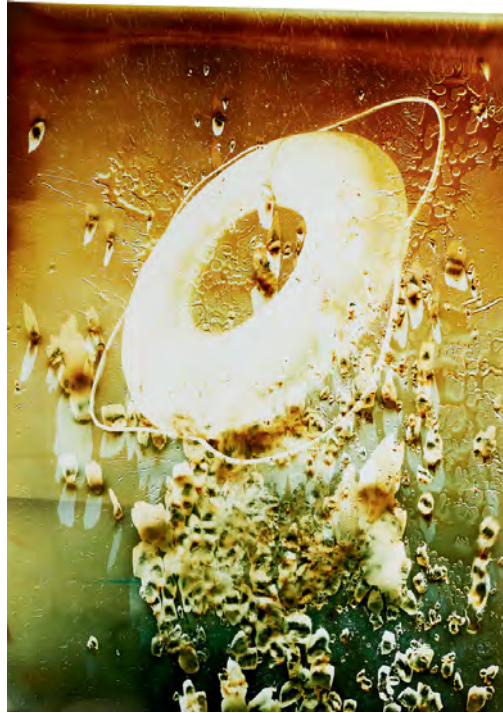


# Art in America

## REMATERIALIZING PHOTOGRAPHY

By [Leah Ollman](#)

May 26, 2017 10:35am



**As digital imaging flourishes, some artists find themselves drawn in a very different direction—toward physicality and unorthodox processes.**

HERE WE ARE, at the highest peak yet in photography's technological climb toward ease and efficiency. It takes barely the tap of a finger to make a picture, and only a few more to spread that image worldwide. Progress, according to photographic history's dominant narrative, means improvements in descriptive clarity, speed, affordability, accessibility, reproducibility, and dissemination. Thanks to digital technology, we've reached a new, undeniably exhilarating climax in that story—not, however, the medium's only story.

Change the lens, so to speak, and change the evolutionary tale. Read the history of photography in terms of its use as an instrument of social change, for instance, and we find ourselves at both acme and nadir: photography's circulatory reach gives every single image more potential power than ever, while the ubiquity and transience of the billions of images created suggests that each one (with extremely rare exception) matters hardly at all.

Another storyline has lately assumed greater relevance and a reinvigorated plot since the widespread adoption of digital processes: the history of photography regarded as neither mirror nor window but object. This tale, as old as the medium itself, reads as something of an adventure narrative, peopled with pioneers and renegades—think of Henry Holmes Smith, Robert Heinecken, and many more.

Now that digitization has rendered film extraneous, replaced chemistry with code, and paper with pixels on screens, what constitutes a photograph has been radically redefined and physical form is no longer a given. But reacting—whether implicitly or explicitly—to the medium’s new normal, a growing number of contemporary artists have devised rogue new definitions and processes of their own. They are rematerializing photography.

Driving the five artists discussed here—Christopher Colville, Klea McKenna, Matthew Brandt, Farrah Karapetian, and Chris McCaw—are impulses shared by at least a dozen others at present. Their values run against the efficiency sought by the photographic mainstream. They favor the messy, cumbersome, and slow. Many came upon their processes by accident, and all negotiate a balance between chance and control. Their methods are idiosyncratic and call attention to themselves, to physicality, duration, texture. Their results are one-of-a-kind, and often imperfect by conventional standards. All have foundations in analog processes (“photography the hard way”) and revere the alchemy of the darkroom, the sense of wonder that remains a primary association with the medium.

Resourceful and improvisational, these artists draw upon the past, adapting techniques from the medium’s earliest decades, but they are avowed impurists rather than apostles of anachronism. They belong very much to the present, to the post-medium, new-genres moment of blurred categorical boundaries. Their work is less a matter of image capture, which prevails in both traditional and digital photography, than of performative enactment and quasi-sculptural experimentation.

These artists reconfigure the irreducible ingredients of photography—light, time, and a photo-sensitive surface. These five are part of an efflorescence in the field that has prompted numerous museum and gallery exhibitions in the past few years. The last time objecthood in photography experienced such a surge was in the late ’60s and ’70s, in tandem with the rise of process-driven art in general. Artists hybridized their practices, merging photography with printmaking, book arts, textiles, and needlework. In 1970, the Museum of Modern Art in New York staged the pivotal exhibition “Photography into Sculpture,” featuring works by two dozen artists, including Heinecken (“the photograph . . . is not a *picture of* something, but is an *object about* something”), an innovator whose legacy endures.

Those rematerializing photography now are not adding on to the medium as we’ve known it, but instead building new variants of it from the ground up. They reconfigure the irreducible ingredients of photography—light, time, a photo-sensitive surface—to conceive their singular approaches, born equally of reverence and irreverence. However far their practices deviate from camera-based convention, their work remains inescapably photographic. It embodies, though, a different sort of authority than that traditionally assigned to the medium, and bears a different relationship to the real. Truth, in their work, comes in the form of palpable presence, a truth to materials. That other storyline, with photographers cast as honest, reliable narrators and their images as accurate transcriptions of the visible world, was never very convincing anyway, least of all now.

## **Farrah Karapetian**

The physicality of photography, as a process and experience, has been central to Farrah Karapetian's work since her undergraduate years at Yale, when she began to push back against the notion of the photograph as a "very clean" window on the world. Later, working with James Welling and Charles Ray at UCLA, where she earned her MFA, she started to engage with the real on a one-to-one scale, creating photograms that leave a trail of their own making, trading on the innate authority of the photograph but also challenging it. "First you learn the variables and grammar of the medium," Karapetian (b. 1978) says. "Then you can go all Gertrude Stein on it."

The rematerializers' methods restore value to slowness, tactility, and irregularity, qualities once native to photography. Her work typically originates in a personal narrative or news event, something to do with conflict, vulnerability, authority. She draws, casts, and assembles small sculptures, "generally poking at the narrative until it has elicited a set of terms that I can play with productively in the dark." She places these "sculptural negatives," on or in front of photographic paper, projecting colored light onto them using an enlarger. What registers in the final photograms is part direct silhouette, part shadow, a chronicle she positions somewhere between fiction and creative nonfiction, a record that operates in the realm of metaphor.

One early work was inspired by imaging technology used to detect the smuggling of illegal goods across the border from Mexico, and resembles full-size X-rays of a truck. In 2011, she re-enacted a demonstration that took place in Kyrgyzstan, basing the scene on a photograph from the *New York Times*. Recent images take their impetus from accounts of refugees crossing bodies of water to flee the lethal threat of political turmoil. Nonetheless, the work, she says, is never about its subject "as much as it is about my encounter with the medium through that subject."

Working in the dark, Karapetian moves around the constructed negatives and whatever actors might be engaged with them, exposing stills of the unscripted performance. Among the precedents for her process: Lotte Jacobi's abstract, rhythmic "Photogenics" of the 1950s, cameraless captures of materials moving above photographic paper. For one part of her "Stagecraft" series of 2014–15, Karapetian, based in LA, built a drum kit with materials that light could pass through. She conceived of the set as a line drawing, left the drum armatures without sides or skins, and cast cymbals in clear, ruby, and grape glass (the glass negative being her photo in-joke). Her gem-hued photograms of the instruments and their mimed performance marry schematic outline and soft translucency, lush shadow and aqueous refraction. They evoke both sound and silence, the presence of the body and its ghostly absence. In a move at once clarifying and complicating, Karapetian exhibited the sculptural negative along with the images it generated. She wanted to show that her pictures, faith-inducing indexes of the real, derive from a fabrication, an exercise in artifice.

# photograph

## FARRAH KARAPETIAN: BUILDING DWELLING THINKING AT VON LINTEL GALLERY

By Leah Ollman, 2018



Farrah Karapetian, *Change*, 2017. Courtesy the artist and Von Lintel Gallery

In the classic optical illusion known as the Necker cube, spatial orientation is unstable. The outlined cube can be read in two different ways, as if seen from slightly above or slightly below – or as oscillating between those mutually exclusive positions. Farrah Karapetian’s photograms have often evoked a similar ambiguity through the interplay of opaque and translucent forms, shadow and void. In her show at Von Lintel Gallery through December 23, Karapetian stages the Necker cube phenomenon itself, writ large.

She built three dozen skeletal rectangular blocks out of rebar to use as a “sculptural negative,” and repeatedly stacked and reconfigured them, exposing the arrangements to color-filtered light while on or in front of chromogenic paper. Her performative assembly and disassembly of the negative produced dynamically unsettled images. Sometimes the linear patterns glow clear and neat as neon tubing, and sometimes the lines stutter into dense lattices, cacophonous, intermittent scaffolding. The rebar’s ribbed surface gives the lines they generate on the page a little tooth, a bit of vibration.

The light within these images is radiant, viscous. Passages of lush amber, cyan, gold, and musky red flicker and soak, punctuated by brilliant white absences. A handful of the rebar blocks have a solid wall of smooth or wrinkled blue resin, widening the textural range of light cast upon the paper. Karapetian installed the rebar and resin modules in a thoughtful tumble in the gallery, among the photograms they generated. However self-evident the physical blocks on the ground, their corresponding traces on paper are gloriously elusive. Every image, no matter the size (one is eight feet high), is an interrupted fragment, subject to a multiplicity of readings – optical, metaphorical, even political.

Two photograms that don’t employ the rebar-block template inflect the meaning of the rest. “Distressed” presents the American flag hanging upside down, its stripes sagging and seeming to leach blood. The other piece, less visceral, but signaling urgent danger as well, is sharp and direct as a protest poster: “Build This Wall” it commands, pointing to a barrier between a church and the Capitol building, effectively church and state. Building Dwelling Thinking thus becomes a show that, beyond its vigorous beauty, provokes thought about a variety of truths and illusions.

July 25, 2016

# LACMA UN FRAMED

## LENS: Photography Council 2016 Acquisitions

By: Rebecca Morse, Associate Curator, Photography



Farrah Karapetian, *Nightwatch*, 2015, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by LENS: Photography Council, 2016, © Farrah Karapetian, courtesy of the artist and Von Lintel Gallery

One of my favorite activities as a curator is to visit artists in their studios. I always emerge buoyed by the experience and enriched by engaging with artists directly, whether the artist has been making work for 30 years or is still in graduate school. It has been my great pleasure to share this experience with a group of LACMA patrons through LENS: Photography Council. Every year, we visit the studios of five artists whose primary output is photography or time-based media.

LENS has just completed its third year, having visited artists Farrah Karapetian, Christopher Richmond, Kim Schoen, Mike Slack, and Melanie Willhide. With the dues provided by our council members, LACMA was able to acquire for its permanent collection work by each artist the group visited. Although each artist works in Los Angeles and three out of the five artists attended local schools, their outputs are quite different and it is this variety that affords a nuanced perspective of contemporary photography in Los Angeles.

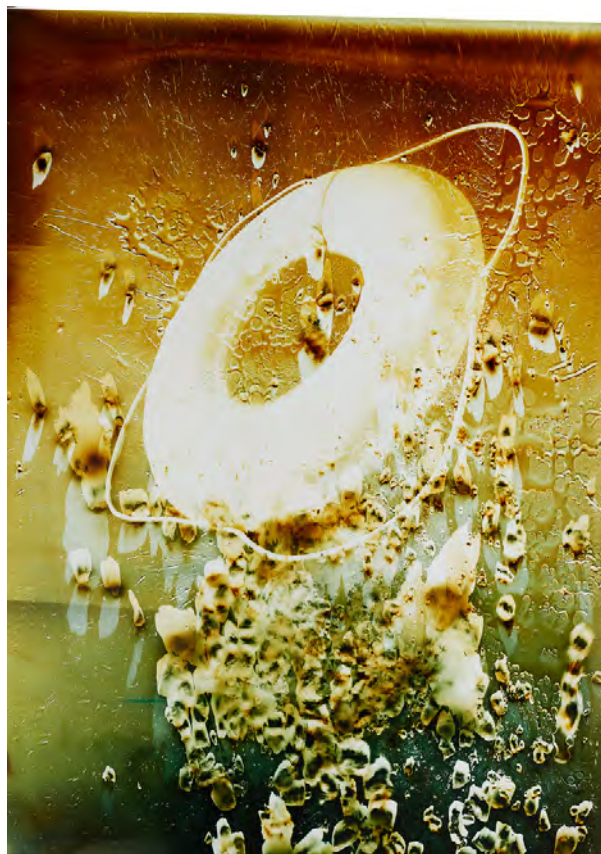
Farrah Karapetian's primary medium is photography, although she rarely uses a camera. For 10 years she has been making cameraless images that explore the physical potential of photography and the medium's relationship to three dimensionality. This formal investigation leads to extremely beautiful photograms that seek to connect with the viewer on a bodily level. Karapetian actively probes issues that affect us on a macro scale, such as war and surveillance, but always through the personal route of muscle memory and performance. The photograph acquired by LACMA, titled *Nightwatch* (2015), is from Karapetian's most recent body of work, motivated by global migrations patterns. Here she has expanded her vocabulary of dimensional "negatives" to include ice and water. The process, while tightly controlled, is open to chance as the solids melt and the water pools in the competing light of her

photographic enlargers, yielding rich, almost metallic colors that could easily be mistaken for burning fire rather than melting ice.

In September, LENS will begin its fourth season, in which we'll visit the studios of Marten Elder, CJ Heyliger, Siri Kaur, Hilja Keading, and A.L. Steiner. I hope you will join us!

# lensculture

## *Photograms by* **Farrah Karapetian**



Lifesaver, 2015. Chromogenic photogram, 56.25 x 40 inches (142.9 x 101.6 cm). Unique. © Courtesy of Farrah Karapetian and Von Lintel Gallery

New photograms and constructed negatives by Farrah Karapetian celebrate photographic prints as a physical art form. She doesn't use a camera, but instead relies on light-sensitive photo paper, chemicals, and objects, to bend or interrupt light on its way to the paper where they combine to create singular images that have no grain and look like luscious liquid color, three dimensional, and somewhat abstract visions while retaining an emotional connection to the real.

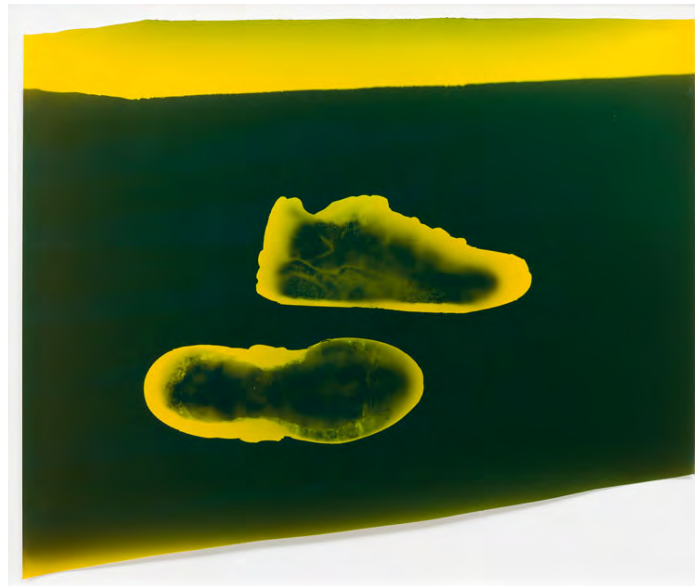
By naming the images, and by naming a series (in this case, "Relief"), she directs the power of language to infuse the images with the psychological freight of topics trending in the media and mass consciousness (refugees) while at the same time calling to mind the fundamental nature of sculptural art.

For example, an image made with a large piece of melting ice and diffused light can call to mind a life preserver of a

refugee tossed about in a churning sea of uncertainty. Or, the viewer could simply appreciate the abstract explosion of color, volume and form on its own — beauty in its own right.

— Jim Casper

# ARTILLERY



Farrah Karapetian, *Accessory to Protest: Sneakers*, 2011, Chromogenic photogram, 24 x 30"

## THE ANALOG REVOLUTION

### Shock of the Old

by Anise Stevens ·  
May 3, 2016

The first to grow up in an image-centric world where the mass-dissemination of images via film, print and television started to infiltrate American culture on scales never before seen, those of the Pictures Generation found themselves grappling with notions concerning authenticity and authorship. Immersed within a world where the affluence of representation was starting to reveal its impact upon the collective consciousness, many of these artists began looking to appropriation as a vehicle to analyze their relationships with popular culture and the mass media.

Of particular influence here were Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes, whose philosophical writings cultivated a shift in literary discourse. By encouraging the reader to divert his attention from the author's intent and instead impose his experience onto a text's meaning, they fostered a similar shift in art criticism. Many of the "Pictures" artists embraced this tenet by subverting the signifying functions that popular imagery imposed by appropriating recognizable and often iconographic images. In doing so, they didn't just elevate photography as an art form, but ultimately changed the way we look at pictures.

The same can be said about a number of contemporary photographers who are returning to the darkroom and revisiting analog technologies for their capacity to capture the mercurial effects that conspire when material properties interact. "In what could be described as a reaction to all things digital," says LA gallerist Thomas von Lintel, there's been "a steady proliferation of younger artists embracing older photographic processes, such as photograms, cyanotypes, gum prints or tin types, just to name a few." While the "Pictures" artists inspired a new discourse by undermining old notions about photography, artists today are doing the same by embracing the mistakes and chance happenings that are apt to result from the imprecise science upon which photography was founded.

The lineage of aesthetic influence here dates back to László Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray, who revived the camera-less photogram technique in the 1920s as a means for exploring the expressive properties of light. During the mid-19th century, the photogram process was revisited again by Floris Neusüss, whose camera-less Körperfotogramms captured life-size silhouettes of nude bodies exposed on photographic paper. Along with Pierre Cordier, who invented the chemigram technique in the 1950s, Neusüss cultivated a new regard for photography and its role as an artistic medium, which practitioners such as Robert Heinecken celebrated by incessantly testing the medium's limitless possibilities.

Heinecken, whose provocative camera-less works have likened him to Robert Rauschenberg due to his innovative mingling of painting, sculpture and printmaking with photography, established UCLA's photography department in 1964. At the time, the department's innovative and experimental approach to photography was groundbreaking and ultimately set a precedent. Among the many who have benefited from Heinecken's lead, and are placing their focus on the tangential nature of the photographic process, is James Welling. While his initial investigation with the materiality of photography associates him with the Pictures Generation, his move to Los Angeles in 1995 to head UCLA's photography department significantly shifted his relationship to the art form.

When Welling began experimenting with the photogram technique, he found that it fueled his ongoing obsession with light-sensitive materials. His series "Torsos," (2005–08), for example, features images of cut and crumpled window screenings that he placed on chromogenic paper before exposing to light. The material's capacity for light permeability incited Welling's decision to experiment further. And what he achieved was an evocative miscellany of rich textures, which lend a sculptural quality to the work and highlight the essence of his process.

Working within this same paradigm, Farrah Karapetian and Matthew Brandt also approach photography with an enthusiasm for experimentation. Both studied under Welling, and his influence is apparent throughout their bodies of work.

Karapetian bases much of her work in the physicality of her process. Her most recent series of photograms, "Relief" (2015), invokes the perilous plight of the refugee at sea, which she succinctly captured by illuminating the essence of the instant and its precarious nature by using less conventional materials as conduits for light, such as metal and plastic. Her experiments with ice, in particular, are largely responsible for lending an air of inadvertency to the series due to the transitory nature of this volatile element when placed on photosensitive at the time of exposure.

Brandt too, embraces the physical process of image making. His series "Lakes and Reservoirs" (2013–14) was a steppingstone in his exploration of image-making. By soaking colored photographs of lakes or reservoirs in the actual waters that each print represents, often for days and even weeks at a time, he didn't just expedite a better understanding about the process of natural erosion but has since continued to incorporate the spontaneity of natural phenomena into his photo-making.

Like Welling, Liz Deschenes has done much to advance photography's material potential. Since the early 1990s, she's consistently worked with the medium's fundamental components: paper, light and chemicals. Her photograms embody an ambience reflective of the atmosphere in which each is created. By exposing light-sensitive paper to either sun or moonlight, she creates variegated surfaces that reflect the unpredictability of atmospheric conditions, which are then compounded by the mutable impact of reactive chemicals. The results of her practice render mirror-like, monochromatic studies that don't simply reveal the variant conditions under which each of Deschenes' photograms are subjected, but their reflective quality invokes an immersive element that subtly urges viewers to ponder the nature of representation.

Walead Beshty has equally influenced the way we look at images today by calling attention to the conditions of his practice, which he leaves up to chance by choosing to work in complete darkness. The



only conscious interventions he does make in the production of his vibrant and lush photograms involve a few basic logistics. These concern the size and scope of his works. Otherwise, the bulk of Beshty's process involves an almost intuitive process of folding, crumpling and curling large sheets of photographic paper into various sections, which he then exposes to colored light sources while confined within an unlit darkroom.

Other practitioners whose exploratory approaches are helping to expand photography's lexicon are Marco Breuer, Eileen Quinlan, Mariah Robertson and Alison Rossiter. Along with an appreciation for the unpredictable and often erratic interactions that result from the application of analog technologies, each of these artists aren't only putting the physical nature of image-making at the forefront of their practice, they're asking us to once again re-evaluate the way we read pictures. Unlike digital photography, which now enables total quality-control throughout what has become a highly regulated image-making process, this return to photography's basic physics has brought with it a refreshing exuberance. Accidents and mistakes aren't simply recognized as failures, but instead as original, one-of-a-kind works whose aesthetic value is largely determined by uncompromising external forces.

## VON LINTEL GALLERY: FARRAH KARAPETIAN

by Anise Stevens  
February 3, 2016



Farrah Karapetian, *Lifesaver*, 2015 (detail). Image courtesy of the artist and Von Lintel Gallery.

For her second exhibition with Von Lintel Gallery, Farrah Karapetian has produced a thoughtful new series comprising 12 large-scale Chromogenic photograms. The show's title, "Relief," is a direct reference to the perilous flight of the refugee at sea while other allusions to the refugee's journey manifest in a variety of forms. Among them are a handful of white, negative shadows that include a life preserver and an unfurling ladder. Each stands stark against rich palettes that effortlessly blend saturated tones of rust, green and gold.

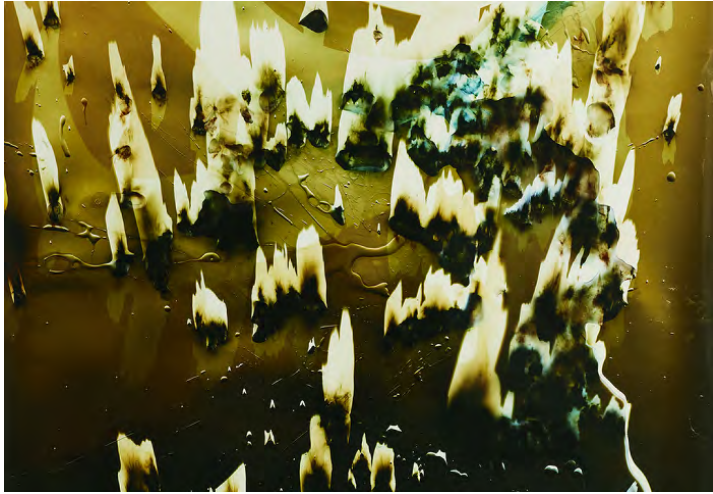
While the vibrant color schemes that occupy these new works are the result of Karapetian's careful selection of filters (one step in an entailed process involving its share of premeditation), her decision to use less conventional materials as conduits for light, such as metal and plastic, is what lends to this particular series' prevailing sense of inadvertency.

Most intriguing are the reactions Karapetian achieved from her experiments with ice. They are what call attention to the work's formal qualities and illuminate the physicality of the artist's process. What look like brewing bubbles in *Lifesaver* (all works 2015), flickering flames in *Bluffs*, and shards of glass in *Slippage* are in fact the spontaneous results of this volatile and transitory compound interacting with treated paper at the moment of exposure.

Considering all that could go wrong when working with such unpredictable materials, Karapetian's efforts glisten with an air of mystique. An innovative mingling of figurative art and abstraction, "Relief" is a compelling series, commendable most for its capacity in capturing the essence of the instant and its precarious nature, which like the refugee in search of asylum is ever and always subject to chance.

Thursday, January 21, 2016

# Los Angeles Times



## Critic's Choice A head-spinning journey to the edges of Farrah Karapetian's photographic world

By **DAVID PAGEL**

Farrah Karapetian makes photographs the old-fashioned way: placing objects on sheets of treated paper, shining lights on her simple studio setups and then fixing the images with chemicals.

The L.A. artist also improvises freely, splashing water onto the paper, letting bits of ice melt atop it and even transferring some digitally generated images to the otherwise blank sheets with which she begins.

The 12 new photograms in her exhibition “Relief” at Von Lintel Gallery are the messiest she has made. They’re also the most sensual, entrancing and fascinating. Giving visitors plenty to look at and even more to wonder about, they make a virtue of uncertainty.

At a time when so many photographs leave so little to the imagination, it’s satisfying to come across pictures that give you so much to chew on, mull over and ponder. Mysteriousness is Karapetian’s specialty.

Her Chromogenic photograms, some framed, others push-pinned to the wall, work on many levels. For hedonists, there are rich, supersaturated colors, glistening details that look super-realistic, metallic textures that are resplendent, puddly splashes that are happy accidents and abstract shapes that rival nature for its nuance.

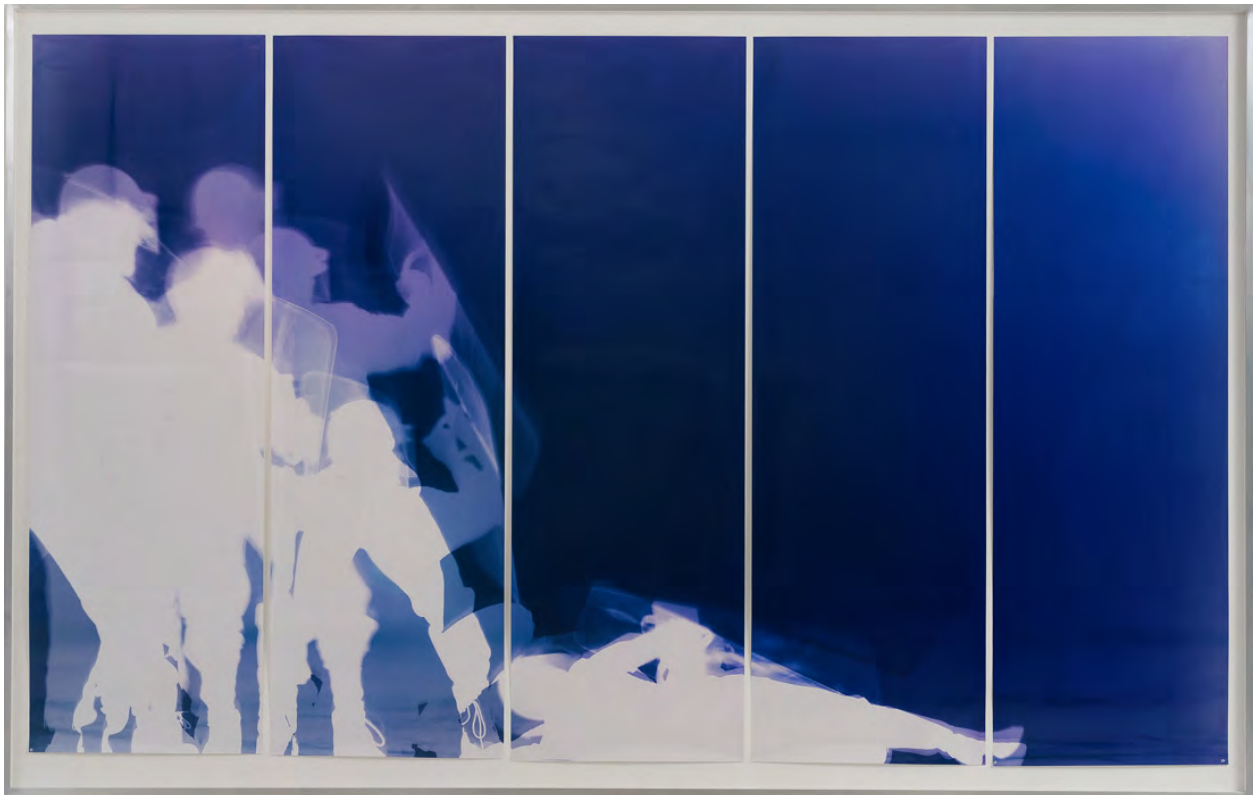
If you love process, Karapetian’s photograms serve up an encyclopedic survey of the various ways images — photographic and painterly — are made. Every step is visible in her works, which hide nothing because they are based on the conviction that transparency, not secrecy, serves art best. In the old days, that was called letting it all hang out.

Formalists and historians, scientists and mystics, people who like pictures and those drawn to abstraction, will find what they like in Karapetian’s shape-shifting works. That fluidity makes for one-of-a-kind prints that can never be seen the same way twice.

Von Lintel Gallery, 2685 S. La Cienega Blvd., Los Angeles, (310) 559-5700, through Feb. 27. Closed Sundays and Mondays. [www.vonlintel.com](http://www.vonlintel.com)

**Interview with Farrah Karapetian** by Ken Weingart on November 18, 2015

*Farrah Karapetian is a renowned Los Angeles based conceptual artist who creates stunning imagery through photograms or “cameraless” photography. She studied as an undergraduate at Yale University and received her MFA at UCLA. She just concluded an exhibition at Danziger Gallery in New York City and looks forward to her second exhibition at Von Lintel Gallery in Los Angeles in January 2016.*



*RIOT POLICE*

**When did you first think of becoming an artist?**

As a child, I was a good draftsman. I drew often and well, but I never felt as if I were learning, per se, in this or other subjects: one thing did not lead to another. I also read and wrote a lot, and entered college considering creative writing, religious studies, and Russian literature majors as much as the art major. Through my first year in taking a diversity of such classes, that feeling persisted of not really having found a practice that would gather its own steam. My father gave me a 35 mm camera for Christmas my sophomore year and I took my first photography course, and in this course, I first identified that feeling of learning from my own practice. I could see my thoughts unfold in the prints on the wall week after week: how I saw, how I moved, how that changed over time. One picture led to another; life led to the pictures; I had only to observe that unfolding and be responsible to it. I am still responsible to it.

**You are known for creating “cameraless” art. Does any of the work originate from a camera?**

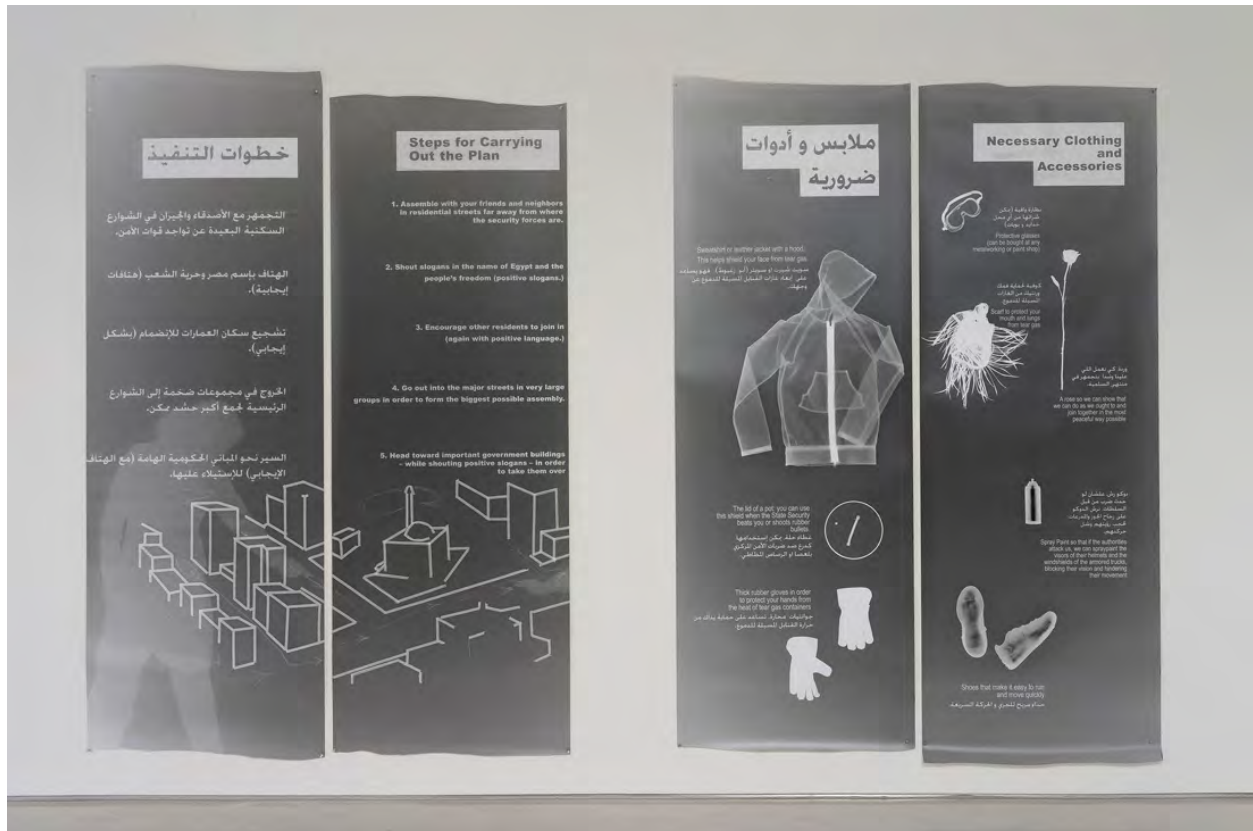
It’s true. The majority of my practice involves cameraless photographs – or “photograms” – and the making of sculptural negatives en route to their exposure. My sculptural negatives are three-dimensional objects the bodies of which operate according to the logic of light. I am not at all interested in the cameraless photograph as such, however; my practice is not driven by anachronism. I am interested in how images exist in the world, and a lot of my cameraless work examines existing photographs and reimagines the way that they circulate. Cameralessness makes that process of reimagining more physical and present and drawn out for me than do other photographic processes. In a sense, however, you could say that if I am influenced to make a cameraless photograph from a photograph I’ve seen circulating online, that cameraless photograph originates from a photograph taken with someone’s camera.



*STOWAWAY*

Because I am interested in received imagery, I do very very occasionally decide that a certain type of conventional photography will be more useful in articulating an idea than would be a cameraless photograph. For example, I appropriated the cultural function of the typical engagement photograph for my piece, *Ringtan*, 2007. At the time, I had broken off an engagement, and I had a tan around my absent engagement ring – a kind of photogram, I

suppose. I had myself photographed by an engagement photographer in the pose typical of a woman having her ring finger photographed, and the print that resulted was scaled to 7 x 5 inches – also typical of that kind of photography. In that case, then, what I was trying to communicate about memory and its inscription on the body was more specifically addressed by borrowing from norms of how photographs are taken than it would have been addressed by the physical process of making a photogram.



ACCESSORY TO PROTEST: FLYER PHOTOGRAPH, detail

### How did the idea of photograms come about, and what is the process? How laborious is it?

My experience of photographs in college and immediately afterwards was that any one print I made was a unique object, and that as such it had as much plasticity as did any painting, sculpture, or artifact of process. Making a photograph could entail decisive choices regarding palette, scale, additive and subtractive processes, and more – both within the picture plane and with respect to the print as object. The process of printing the thing could and should have an effect on the result as much as the process of creating the negative. I was sure of all of these things but not satisfied with the difference between the event of exposing a negative with a camera and exposing a piece of photosensitive paper in the darkroom.



*RUIN 1*

I made my first photogram by mistake after my one and only editorial assignment: a trip to Kosovo to photograph the politics of architecture. I returned to New York from that trip and, printing the images of burned villages, grew frustrated with the difference between the two sites of exposure and slammed a fan down on the enlarging table, mistakenly tripping the enlarger's light. When something comes between the photosensitive paper and a light, its silhouette is burned into the paper: this happened, then, by mistake, at that time, and recorded of course my current state of mind as much as it recorded the silhouette of the fan on the paper. I liked that conflation of the time and space of exposure, and decided that that's how I would work from then on, so I stopped using cameras.



*ACCESSORY TO PROTEST: RED HOODIE*



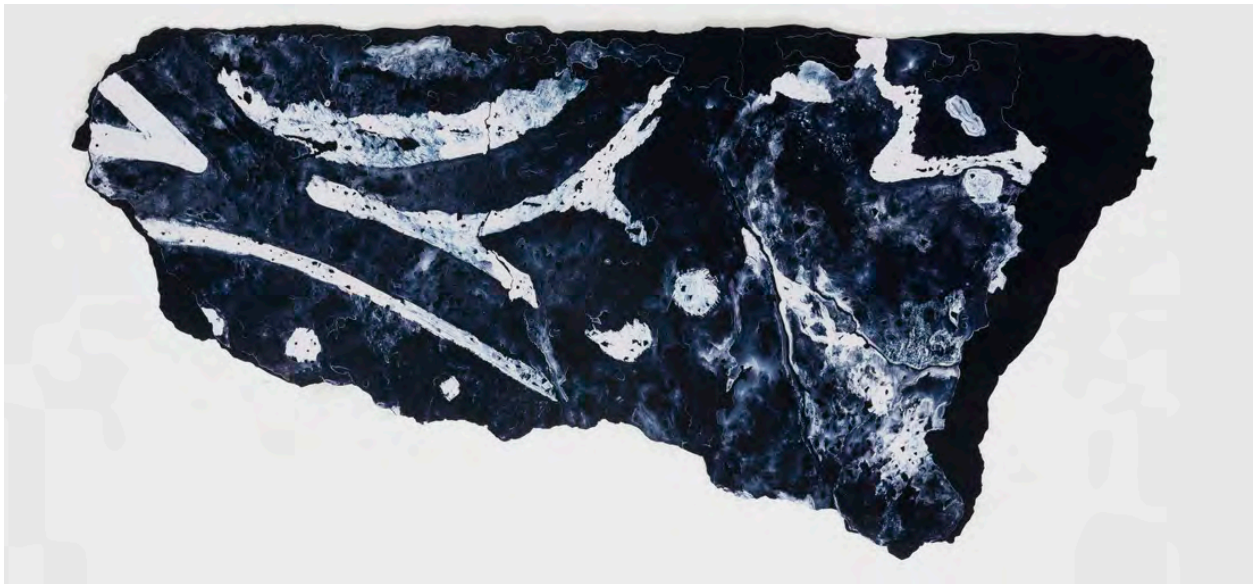
A photogram can then be the least laborious of processes, in terms of its necessitating only an intervention between the paper and the light at the time of exposure. The way I work, though, it can be very laborious, because I began to construct negatives and direct scenarios that would be staged in the darkroom. This was helpful for me in general as well, because I wanted to have parts of my process that would entail structured thinking and planning and parts of my process that would entail an openness to chance. The exposure of the photograms became the latter, and the construction of the negatives became the former.



*GOT TO THE MYSTIC*

**Your print sizes are fairly large. How do you decide how big to go? What is the usual edition?**

They are not large as a rule, per se. A photogram generally records the shadow of a thing at one-to-one scale or larger, so if I set up a scenario involving a life-size person or people, or an object that is, at life-size, fairly large, then the print of that thing in its totality will be at least as large as the thing itself. I do occasionally photogram small things or parts of larger things, and in these cases, the prints are more modestly scaled. I do, however, have as a goal that a picture relate to my own body or the body of a viewer at a scale that is recognizable and credible as far as how we experience the thing pictured when it is real. Photography as it is conventionally practiced has no relationship to scale as an abstract concept: prints are usually small if the photographer believes the image should be intimately related to its viewers or large if the photographer believes that monumentality is an issue for the work. I wanted my work to have scale built more logically into the prints' physical existence, and photograms, with their one-to-one baseline, solved that problem, initially. By now they have become more complicated for me, because I have begun to use shadows of objects at scales larger than life, but I rarely force the scale of a shadow into smaller relief than is conventional to the object pictured. There are no editions of any photograms, because photograms are unique and irreplicable objects. There are no editions of any sculptural negatives, either, although for example I made three resin casts of the sets of weapons used by the veterans in my Muscle Memory series, because there were three veterans available to hold the weapons. Each of those casts is slightly different from the other, though, because difference is implicit in the nature of any object. No two things are ever the same, existentially. The edition is a fallacy created by market forces, and I don't find it interesting at this time.



*SOUVENIR*

**You work mostly without people in your concepts. How did this preference come about?**

I do not, actually, work without people. Almost all of my projects begin because of an interaction with a person and involve the deployment of people in the darkroom at some point. While I am working towards or away from a figurative piece, however, I spend a lot of time with the objects associated with any given scenario, and I free myself of the boundaries of the origin story of the project by over-familiarizing myself with the objects until they become rife with as much abstract potential as narrative.



*CYMBALSCAPE 1*

**How do you come up with your ideas and themes? Is there a dominant idea or favorite concept you like to explore?**

I am always following the thread of my life and practice. Although the bodies of work may appear distinct to other people, they are truly all linked for me in terms of the development of an abstract language over time. You can follow that particular thread – how I use light, three-dimensionality, performance, and the space of a room or page. You can follow the thread of my psychological relationship to issues of memory, authority, and surrender. You can follow the thread of questions I ask with respect to ontologies of sculpture and photography. You can follow my engagement with mass media and how I reconfigure its messages inside of the language of my practice. You can follow these as a series of questions and answers, calls and responses that evolves over time.



*YIELD*

Or... you can do what most people do and say that each body of work is distinct and has only to do with the portrayal of a distinct subject: war, protest, surveillance, music, etc. This may seem to be the easier default strategy of a viewer, but it is actually the most difficult way to try to make sense of my work over time. As a 21st century citizen, I – as do you – engage with any number of politics on a daily basis: those local to my feelings and body, those local to my family, my tastes, my city, my nation-state, those local to my travels, those local to my experience of global news. Global politics enter my life – as they enter yours – via the internet and radio, but also via personal experience and associations. I encountered “war” as a subject because I was teaching a course in photography and one of my students was a veteran of the US Special Forces and came to me with a memory he wanted to reenact for me. I was also at that time offered the opportunity to work in a space that had a very particular entryway, and so we designed our project around the idea of him and his teammates reenacting the muscle memory of stacking the door of the gallery as they might have stacked and breached the door of a target overseas. I encountered “protest” as a subject because I was likewise personally and abstractly motivated: I was thinking about Greco-Roman relief sculpture and the way it occupies architectural pediments and at the same time the mother of my boyfriend’s daughter was handling one of the architects of the Egyptian revolution and passed onto me a pamphlet instructing Egypt’s citizens in the art of unrest. A body of work, then, is something of a fallacy insofar as it exists in a train of thought and process and life experience, and is not distinct from the bodies of work that come before it except insofar as each new subject instigates new strategies for representation and abstract terms.



*COMBAT NEGATIVES*

**For your series, *Absence and Ruin*, what were you trying to say?**

This is not a series, per se; it is a running theme throughout my work. I have noticed over time that a lot of what I focus on is the negative space around an event: its aftermath, its inversion, its artifacts. Photography and sculptural casting lend themselves naturally to these ideas, both metaphorically and literally.

When organizing a website or any kind of portfolio or book, one is forced to sort. The sort is in itself infinitely rearrangeable. Some bodies of work seem to begin and end during distinct time periods and be nameable, such as the work around surveillance or war. Others result in distinct pieces, but recur over time. This is actually more the way a sculptor might work than a photographer; photography conventionally emerges for the public in bodies, and sculpture does so with less frequency. I do now turn an idea around and around more frequently than I used to, and this results in identifiable bodies of work more frequently than my practice used to, but I am also totally comfortable recognizing that sometimes I make a piece and it just is what it is, unlinked to the work I am making in immediate concert with it otherwise in the studio. Usually, it is linked to work I have made before and will make later, because I am the one making all of it, and I have particular psychological threads as a person and as an artist.



*STACKING YOUR DOOR (installation shot)*

The work I put into the category of “Absence & Ruin” on the website has relationships to all the other series, in other words. The piece, *Ruin I*, and the installation, *Rock, Paper, Scissors*, both bore the work you see elsewhere on the website called “Slips.” The piece you see in “Absence & Ruin” called “The Kitchen and Its Negative” bore pretty much all of the work I’ve ever made since then, because it was the first time I had made a sculptural

negative, the first time I had actualized the difference between pictorial and architectural space, and the first time I had conflated a personal narrative and a political one quite so concisely. (I made that piece after breaking off an engagement with a fiancé and also after a trip to Hiroshima to look at shadows burnt into buildings after the bomb.) The piece, *Souvenir*, is a trace of a fragment of the Berlin Wall and of the graffiti on that fragment, and shows the marks of frustration citizens make on public spaces. This of course is related to the work in the category of “Social Control.”



*THE KITCHEN & ITS NEGATIVE (NEGATIVE: installation shot)*

**In, Stagecraft – Soundscape, you explore musical instruments. Is music a great passion, and was this series created with the photogram process?**

No, I don't generally listen to music. I began to look at music first because I was considering going to Afghanistan to work on a music video with a group of young people who were rapping and playing heavy metal despite the disapproval of the Taliban. I was impressed by their need to express themselves despite their circumstances, as I am usually impressed by individual will and its dominance over authority, but I didn't end up going to visit them. At that time, my father was practicing his drums in my studio because noise doesn't matter in my house as it does in his. My father gave up his professional career in drumming before I was born, and so the drums represent to him a kind of loss; they also, at the same time, represent a real source of relief, and they always have for him, even when I was growing up. My father had also recently been diagnosed with cancer, and I wanted not only to begin to understand music as a field, but also my father as a person with a passion. His drum kit is

very specific to his body, as are most drum kits specific to the body of their musician; in this, it is already a kind of sculpture, but what art does is observe that and exaggerate it. So I remade his drum kit as a sculptural negative: the drums and stands existing only as skeletal armature and the cymbals cast in glass. This has a literal function insofar as it translates photographically into volumes and lines, but it hopefully also has a metaphorical function insofar as it removes the musical functionality of the drum kit and turns the object into something of a surrogate for the body of a person I will at some point lose. I then, yes, used this negative and the bodies of my father and others and the objects of some other related musical instruments to make photograms.



*IN THE WAKE OF SOUND, IN THE BREAK OF SOUND*



**In Social Control, you explore guns, war, and violence. What inspired you for this series? Did you hire models to pose with the rifles and shields?**

Again, this is not a series, per se. "Social Control" is a category that my website employs to suggest that the work I made with veterans' memories (Muscle Memory), with the document distributed at the time of Egypt's revolution (Accessory to Protest), and the problem of the Z-Backscatter scan deployed at international borders (Surveillance) might fruitfully be compared. In the case of Muscle Memory, the piece was inspired by and reenacted by veterans of the US Armed Forces. I had asked them which objects they would need in order to best remember how to hold their position, and they said these particular weapons, so I remade their weapons in clear resin. In the case of the Stowaway piece in the Surveillance series, I asked the man who worked on my building, Juan, to be in the photograph of the illegal immigrant inside of the U-Haul truck. In the case of Accessory to Protest, most of the work is object oriented, but the large black and white piece, "Flyer Photograph", involved the body of one of the architects of the Egyptian Revolution, Ahmed Maher. To make this piece, I remade as sculptural negatives in cast resin all of the objects the pamphlet said would be necessary for civilians to stage a revolt. To make "Riot Police", also part of Accessory to Protest, I asked my friends to study a photograph I had seen in the news of riot police being stoned by protesters in Kyrgyzstan. I gave them riot shields and helmets I had ordered off of the internet and told them to play-fight for a minute or two to rough up the Plexiglas. Once they were done, they reenacted the scene from the photograph. I suppose that would be the closest to a hired model situation of any of these three bodies of work, because my friends are very much not riot police themselves. The orientation of each of these figurative works, though, in any of these series, is such that I am not claiming a direct relationship to the event itself – war, immigration, or protest – but that I am claiming a direct relationship to viewership of the document – the picture of the protest circulated on the internet, the pamphlet circulated before the revolution – and that I want to engage more deeply than the internet affords in what that viewership can be.

**You received your BA from Yale, and MFA in fine art at UCLA. Who did you study with and what was the lasting affect on your work?**

I studied photography at Yale, and my BA is in Fine Art. My teachers there in photography were Lois Conner, Tod Papageorge, and Gregory Crewdson. My thesis committee at UCLA consisted of James Welling, Charles Ray, Mary Kelly, and Lari Pittman. Yale gave me a firm foundation in photography's conventions and history and a sense of its poetic potential and the boundaries one might test with further fluency. UCLA gave me a studio and therefore the space to test those boundaries against three-dimensionality. Charles Ray was a wonderful influence with respect to issues of scale. Mary and Lari were wonderful influences with respect to the social implications of any one of my gestures. James and Catherine Opie were wonderful readers of photography and James in particular has remained someone I engage with outside of the context of the institution.



*ROCK PAPER SCISSORS*

**How did the relationship with the prestigious Danziger and Von Lintel galleries come about?**

Well, these things are difficult to put one's finger on. I do remember that the first review I ever published was about a Marco Breuer show at Von Lintel when the gallery was based in New York. (I write sometimes, when I want to sort something I'm thinking about out otherwise than in the studio.) Thomas (Von Lintel) doesn't remember that, though, and I don't think I talked to him then. He contacted me on Facebook years later after my Accessory to Protest show, I think, and had heard of the work in part because of the

Artforum review, in part because a curator at the Getty had mentioned him to me, and also I think because of other mentions. We began working together informally when he was moving to Los Angeles and I helped put together his first exhibition here. He took some of my work to a fair; it did well; he offered me a show; and everything has worked out between us quite nicely. Similarly, James Danziger had heard of my work through a variety of channels and talked to Thomas about it at a fair. He then came to my studio and proposed a show. Really most relationships in life and in art come about similarly: people come into one's life and one tests out dynamics and sticks with those that feel good and work out well.



*WINGS and THREE MUSES (installation shot)*

**Elton John has bought some of your art. Did you meet him and how did that transpire?**

No, I haven't met him. That sale occurred at LEADAPRON, the gallery to which Diane Rosenstein had brought my Accessory to Protest work, and was the result of Jonathan Brown's communication with Elton John's curator.



*RIOT POLICE and SMOKE BOMB (installation shot)*

**You have won many awards and fellowships. How important are they, and which ones stood out the most for you?**

Each award is of course very important for many reasons. Some are simply recognitions of engagement, which is of course an honor and a pleasure to receive in return for services rendered; others involved small sums of money that really were helpful at the time, as encouragement and as literal funding towards getting something done. Others enabled deeper engagement over longer periods of time because of the amount of funding provided, such as the Artswriters grant from the Warhol | Creative Capital Foundation, the Artistic Innovation grant from the Center for Cultural Innovation, or the Mid-career Artist Fellowship from the California Community Foundation. As one proves that one follows through with one's funded projects, one is more likely to be awarded greater sums of money, because one demonstrates repeatedly that one can handle and derive consequence from the funding. I mean, I hope that's the case and that my work continues to receive support in terms of faith and funds from grant-making institutions. I suppose over time these are a record of the growing consequence of what one continues to contribute to culture, and that they should be taken seriously in that regard as bars to which one sets one's sights. What do I owe to culture when culture places its faith in what I do? I take these gestures as seriously as do I take moments of institutional acquisition: if the work is in larger and larger conversation with others' accomplishments, how much more can I articulate its contribution?



*THE KITCHEN & ITS NEGATIVE (installation shot: the Kitchen)*

**When you do residencies, what does that involve, do you enjoy it?**

Residencies can be very disruptive, and so I do them selectively – at times in my life when I need to get away from my resources and take in new information from new communities and places. One sets up one’s studio so that one has everything one needs – from a pickup truck to scaffolding – and so to leave that comfort zone can be very awkward and sometimes expensive. I usually plan to fall apart while traveling at least once, and then to rebuild before I return. I remember being at MacDowell and having lunch delivered to me and feeling very taken care of, which was lovely; at universities I have visited, I have come in contact with wonderful new conversations and perspectives on the place of art in the academy rather than in the market. These experiences can and should be refreshing. I also travel for influence outside of the residency structure. What I usually have to remember is that new work may not be generated while away to the extent that it is generated upon return.



*ACCESSORY TO PROTEST: FLYER PHOTOGRAPH (installation shot)*

**What are your long term goals and ambitions? Do you plan on teaching one day, and if so what and where?**

I want to be happy. That's not what you mean, though. I would like to see my work understood well without the confines of the photographic field and outside the confines of the cameraless photographic field. I want to understand the ways in which what I do is in conversation with what others do, in many fields, even outside of art, let alone photography. I want a fiction writer or a creative non-fiction writer to analyze my work at some point, rather than an art critic. I want a choreographer to speak to me about the performative aspects of what I do. I want a political scientist to talk to me about the ways in which what I do aligns with or departs from what he or she does. Shows in new geographic regions are one way to address that conversation to new audiences. Shows that bring together multiple bodies of work are another way to re-sort one's work according to fuller significances.



*STOWAWAY (installation shot)*

Teaching is another way to understand that conversation as being consequential, and I do enjoy teaching for that reason. Artmaking can be a very solitary experience, and it is nice to have the community of a university setting in which to relay ideas. It is also refreshing to speak with younger artists; such conversations usually create new neural pathways through old arguments one has constructed for oneself around art practice and art history and art markets. It's useful and its fun. I haven't yet found the university setting into which I think my presence would best be used, but I love visiting universities in the meantime. I know that I'm most useful when teaching in an interdisciplinary context, because although I love and come from photography it is not all that I think about. I prefer universities to art schools because I think it useful to have multiple subjects at the disposal of students and faculty rather than isolating either part of the community within the conversation of art practice. I like the feeling of mentorship that comes from the studio visit dynamic with graduate students, and I appreciate the feeling of novelty that comes from introducing basic practices and core questions of representation to undergraduates. I prefer the potential to cultivate pedagogues that would come from being full time faculty to the peripheral situation of the adjunct.



*WINGS*

I think in the end that art has always been my way of engaging with the world; visual analysis comes instinctively to me and I spent a lot of my childhood drawing in museums and from books of reproductions. To be a part of how another child grows up configuring the world and organizing their thinking around how that world can be seen and stretched... that's I suppose one way to understand a long term goal, and one way to be happy in one corner of one's life.



Photo: Ken Weingart



# Beyond *Muscle Memory*: An Interview with Farrah Karapetian

BY THE GEORGIA REVIEW ON NOVEMBER 4, 2015 · IN INTERVIEWS



Artist **Farrah Karapetian's** oeuvre intensely engages the art of photogramming as she locates emotional weight in the physical making of her often politically rooted subject material. In the case of *Muscle Memory*, featured in [our Fall 2015 issue](#), Karapetian's focus, as indicated, is the muscle memory of U.S. Armed Forces veterans and their relationships to their weapons. With clear resin, the artist created three casts each of the veterans' typical sidearm (P226 Sig Sauer) and rifle (H&K416), produced multiple photograms from those, and then orchestrated the veterans into military postures, where they would remain stock-still with their prop weapons while 1:1 scale images were rendered behind them. In this interview, Lamar Dodd School of Art Galleries Director **Katie Geha**—who worked with Karapetian during her recent artist-in-residence stint at the Dodd—engages Karapetian in an in-depth discussion of the physical and philosophical practices that go into making her photograms.

**Katie Geha:** How do you choose the objects that you work with?

**Farrah Karapetian:** I don't, or at least if I choose to work with an object, the identity and nature of that object are choices inherited primarily from the people or places that move me.

In the case of the body of work I call *Accessory to Protest*, the eight objects I worked with were listed on page four of a flyer distributed in Egypt before the protests that ostensibly brought down Hosni Mubarak in 2013. They were described as the accessories one might need in order to perform the act of protest, among them a “sweatshirt or leather jacket with a hood” that “helps shield your face from tear gas” and “spray paint so that if the authorities attack us, we can spray paint the visors of their helmets and the windshields of the armored trucks, blocking their vision and hindering their movement.” I was fascinated with this list and this document in general, which seemed like already a false artifact of the Arab Spring even as protests continued. How can one really instruct a populace in the art of civil disobedience, even with a checklist of accessories?

I remade the document itself as a photogram at life size so that it might be experienced more phenomenologically, text and all. A potent part of that process was remaking the objects—banal, every one of them—as clear sculptures to be used as negatives that would conduct light and therefore translate volume onto the photographic picture plane. Remaking the objects as negatives is a mimetic act and a first step of intentional encounter with the subject. It is also the first photographic act, insofar as the objects are remade according to the logic of light and truth.

Photography is of course understood to be the province of truth, even when staged: what was staged was, in the end, actually there at some time. I disagree, though, that truth is the endgame of the photograph or that a photograph should be understood as so tightly tied to its referent. If a product of my process is a photogram of a sneaker, that photogram was made by placing a clear resin cast of a sneaker onto photographic paper and exposing that sneaker; that clear resin sneaker is a cast of a real American sneaker; that real sneaker is a guess at the kind of sneaker that is drawn on the flyer; that depiction on the flyer is a mass-produced print; the drawing in the mass-produced print was presumably made by a person; that drawing was motivated by the idea of a real sneaker—or even an actual one; and presumably, somewhere down that rabbit hole, an organizer of Egyptian protests did indeed wear a sneaker and find it helpful. So where in that sequence of representations is my photogram? Very far from the referent, and that distance refigures the notion of truth.

For each body of work I make, the sculptural negatives I use come from a similar place of election because of how they pertain to the body of the subject that interests me, whether it is the H&K 416 (rifle) and P226 Sig Sauer (sidearm) of the veterans I worked with in 2013 for my *Muscle Memory* project, or my father's drum set, which I remade in skeletal steel and glass in 2015. These objects are all already like sculptures: elected and pastiched by their users to suit them, triggers for those users' own muscle memories, and now triggers as well for me.

**KG:** So you chose these objects as indices of the person or persons who used them, but you seem to very much be invested in the process of re-presentation. You could just as easily photograph the sneaker, but instead you remake the sneaker (in effect creating a sculpture) to then create a photogram, which inherently displays the process of making. You often choose to depict a variety of banal objects that are clearly *objects* in the photogram, yet there is also a sense of transcendence in the photograms you produce—or, at the very least, a sense of transformation. The result of this remaking does not seem to be another banal thing. How do the process and banality relate to one another, or do they? How important is transcendence?

**FK:** I can promise process; I can't promise transformation and transcendence, although they are what I am looking for in the work and what I hope you experience as a viewer. When I say that, I think I'm using the word "transcendence" in light of Kant rather than of some spiritual or romantic philosophy: maybe an artwork can play a role in the way we encounter and constitute objects; maybe it can help us see them as objects at all. It is difficult to see things and people and spaces and events when we interact with them every day, especially because of the multiplicity of stages upon which our politics play out. As 21st century citizens, we encounter the politics of self, family, workplace, city, nation-state, and globe every day, sometimes before we even leave the house. This is especially true because the documentary photograph, which used to be reserved for specific sites of viewership, comes at us through multiple devices that are always on our person. The influx can render each of us immune to complexity, gravity, and certainly any kind of sustained relationship to the subject.

So, what I do with a subject needs to surprise me; I need to have a chance to interact with it and let it evolve. Photographing a sneaker would be acquisitive, rather than participatory. In essence, I rejected documentary photography a long time ago, not

because I don't like it, but because it purports to be so truthful and is always not. I remember a photograph of my mother that I made as an undergraduate that everyone in my class, including my professor, Gregory Crewdson, loved. She was sitting at a restaurant near an open window. She is overweight, and I caught a moment at which her face communicated despondence. Outside the window, a young, thin couple walked by arm in arm. The narrative constructed for my classmates of loneliness and jealousy was utterly untrue of my mother's actual condition, but true within the network of juxtapositions inside the photograph. I hated that. There are a million ways, as an artist, that I could have tried to address my resistance to that problem. I developed a process that is a-factual but that strives to be responsible to the logic of its source material.

I follow the lead of that source material, trying to adhere to its form, its scale, its posture, its positioning, and its palette, because each of these contributes to how the source material actually purports to function in the real world. This has translated not only into issues of scale and into the process of casting itself, which is quite photographic, but into the way I display my sculptural negatives in the gallery by oftentimes borrowing from the display conventions appropriate to the original source object. I showed the resin guns for *Muscle Memory* in a vitrine not unlike those I had just seen at the Detroit Institute of Fine Arts' armory, and I bought real cymbal and drum stands, and a real kick pedal, for my drum set. I think I even left the bar codes on the latter. The point of showing those negatives alongside the photograms is essentially a) to make the viewers more literate, to enable them to look back and forth from the picture to the thing and consider the processes through which the photograms were made, and b) to reinsert the objects into the world and test them against our instincts for reality. Do you want to play the drum set, even though it has no skins and even though its cymbals are made of glass? The objects have come out of a protracted period of alteration, but have also remained at their core what they are. I try not to influence them as much as to pay attention to them, and I trust such attention to them influences me as I let go of the objects' identity and begin to improvise and riff with their shapes and shadows on paper.

It's not always just with respect to objects that this happens, of course, unless images and memories are objects. For a few years leading up to the work I did on *Accessory to Protest*, I was working mainly from mediatic imagery. I would see a picture in the

news and think, “I can do that. Photography can do that.” What I mean is that what was depicted in the news photograph could actually be reenacted by photographic processes, because of the way paper and light behave. So, for example, when a freeway in Northern California slid off its armature in 2007 because of a fire, I saw pictorial space sliding through real space, much as a large piece of photographic paper slides out of its chemical bath. I remade that scenario in a piece called *Freeway Collapse*. I had been thinking a lot about the difference between real space and depicted space, and this was a chance to test that boundary. I made work for the next few years with this difference in mind, which meant that a lot of what I made involved both an architectural structure and a picture, oftentimes combined so as to be comparable.

This process made me think about ways that pictures are actually part of the real landscape, and I began thinking about relief sculpture, such as exists in ancient Greek and Roman architecture. What kinds of images did they find important enough to put on public buildings, and how did the subjects of those relief sculptures become so naturally integrated into the shape of the architectural frames? When I saw an image of riot police in Kyrgyzstan being stoned by protesters in 2010, I thought, “Wow, their bodies are forming the kind of triangle that might have been on an ancient pediment.” I ordered riot shields and helmets off the Internet and asked friends to come and reenact the scenario. In this case and in that of the *Freeway Collapse*, then, I wasn’t making sculptural negatives, per se, nor focusing on an object; rather, I was focusing on my original encounter with a picture that then bore my elaborate process and became a new kind of photograph.

The endgame in each case is to know the thing better than I did before by getting into and then past the thing.

**KG:** It strikes me in particular that there is a kind of circular movement through an idea or an image or an impression, that often the start point is a photograph and the end point is a photogram (or a photogram placed in relationship to a sculptural negative or other object), and that there is certainly a photographic thread linking the movement. You often mention a “subject”: maybe I’m just confused, but what do you consider to *be* the subject? Real and depicted space? How figures might reconstitute images from memory or the historical record? Photography itself?

**FK:** Yes, there is definitely a circulation from a conventional notion of the photographic to another such notion, reimagined and remixed. What begins with an image—found online, in print, or in the memory of a person or institutional memory of a site—ends with an image or an image-object that is an artifact of artistic process rather than of political process. This doesn't disavow any potential politics of the final product, but I think, just to be honest, once I've started working with a subject it becomes, for me, more about how to make the work than about an integrity to the original source. In 2009, I made a photogram based on a Z-Backscatter scan of a U-Haul with an illegal immigrant inside. At international borders, at least in America, at the time, these scanners were used to check for contraband and could indeed see inside an entire vehicle as they now see inside our bodies at airports. I made this photogram in response to the relationship between the photogram and the X-ray, and having made it doesn't make me an authority on illegal immigration. Having made that work does, though, give me a familiarity with the image, allow me to spend time with that image and its components as I rework it with my hands and eyes, and then rework it with other people—fabricators, models. I told the model to just face me and look at me—not pretend really to be inside the truck; I wanted his address to be at the viewer of the final picture, and I wanted him to seem alone and awkward in that van, rather than as if he were engaged in some provocative narrative of escape. He and I and any helpers spend far more time reimagining the original source image than we would have had it remained a fleeting news item we saw as temporary consumers of information.

One of the challenging aspects of the proliferation of images online is that our concern for any one image tends to be fairly fleeting; I'm not talking about a sense of guilt or liberal responsibility, but about *any* kind of concern. We may pore over the Instagram accounts of people we want to stalk out of passion, but we spend time with a very large number of images rather than treasuring any one. My work allows me to get inside a part of one and wiggle around until I have a foothold and can go somewhere else with it.

My work also resists reproducibility, on purpose: a photogram is a unique (uneditioned), highly detailed print, and the scale of each one is pre-determined. Re-translating a photogram into a jpeg results in a loss of the potential of a viewer to experience scale along with the many other choices I have made. This resistance to

reproducibility stands in pointed contrast to the nature of Instagram and jpegs in general. For instance, I was recently in Cuba, and this guy wanted to thank me with a gift toward the end of my stay there. He offered me a photograph of his baby. It was one of maybe five or six wallet size shots in a small plastic album with clear sleeves of the sort I might have used to collect prints in as a child to remember a birthday party or a class trip. These were clearly the only prints he had, and I refused the gift. Now, had he emailed me a jpeg, I would have felt no such concern for accepting it as a token of his friendship. The value differential there is interesting.

**KG:** Yes, it is . . . but I wonder if the photo held that much value to him, or if you were projecting because the photograph was a singular physical object rather than an image made up of data that proliferates widely. Or maybe because the man felt the value of the photo, and that was palpable to you, it was that much more important for you to accept it. I'm not suggesting you were wrong to refuse it, only to suggest that value can be really subjective or at the very least significantly based in the relative uniqueness of an object. (For instance, a painting sells for a whole lot more than a videotape.)

Anyway, again: what is the subject? You keep mentioning it but it still seems too vague to me.

**FK:** Struggle.

**KG:** Ha! Good answer. Recently I was on a trip and I stumbled upon a free screening of the first *Jurassic Park* movie. What I didn't know then but I now understand. . . . it is a beautiful movie! And now I've been spending the better part of the night looking for a screenshot of the dinosaur lit by data from a computer. The image really struck me for an obvious reason: the "then" as imagined in the replica of the dinosaur already feels antiquated in comparison to the "now" of data—the film came

out in 1993—and yet somehow the image is still prescient.



Is this what you mean by taking “struggle” as your subject? Is it the struggle to reimagine events? To invite live subjects, say for instance the veterans in *Muscle Memory*, to reenact a very real moment in their recent past?

**FK:** No, I don’t mean that. I was joking, in a way, and trying to encapsulate the last eighteen years of work as if it could possibly have one subject, and if it does, it is certainly not “war”, nor “protest” nor “abstraction” nor “figuration.” It is not the veteran or his gun or the photogram or me making the photogram. Subject is a medium as much as mediums are mediums. A person can become a subject around which one turns one’s feelings, and around which one turns one’s politics, and around which one develops new techniques and formal languages. The figurative work I make tends to come from the place of having identified a particular person whose struggle with a memory or a loss is evocative to me of my own feelings, even if I have never experienced what they have before. I usually leave the person behind during the process, while I work on negatives and smaller, more abstract prints. Even so, I am still turning their experience around as a metaphor for my own. I am still not saying, “I had a hard day,” or “I am so mad about authority figures in my life!”; instead, I am saying, “This yield sign is literally going to yield, sculpturally,” or “These riot cops are going to be stoned to surrender by the force of the people rising against them,” and meanwhile, I am also working on formal issues like, what if the sculptural apparatus supporting the photograph performed what the photograph is supposed to say (i.e. the yield sign literally, physically yields). So my subject is struggle because I struggle, daily, as a person, and so do you, and my subject is struggle because the process behind realizing anything can be a struggle, and also because events of both myopic and global scales always come to some kind of a head



and are sometimes worth representing as such. Some artists take the opposite tack and try to represent the distance of contemporary life by making ironic work or work that reflects the distance; I want to smack distance and divested irony in the face and tell them to get out of my neighborhood. That's what I mean by struggle. It's who I am and how I am.

On another note, with respect to the idea of dinosaurs . . . sometimes I think nothing would actually happen if we didn't imagine it wrong in the first place. I mean "imagining wrong" with respect to the disparity between what we imagine we will accomplish and what it turns out we've accomplished. This came up for me regarding your comment about the dinosaur's face lit by the data of a computer screen. You mentioned a mix-up between "then" and "now" insofar as "now" can actually feel antiquated and "then" can feel prescient if slightly off. In one sense, what we make or use now is always less advanced than what we imagined then, because of course it exists now, so what's next? Before, it was always imminent—in fact imminence was its essential condition. We imagine overreaching, and then once we've reached, even if we achieve what we thought we would, it is missing the "over" part of the "reach," because it has been realized, and so we must imagine a new "next."

(Another aspect of this is that fiction often precedes reality; in fact, during the filming of the '90s *Jurassic Park*, I think archaeologists discovered the remains of a real dinosaur that the filmmakers had invented—the Utahraptor, which in the movie is basically a really tall velociraptor. That's just a funny and extreme example, though.)

Part of the way this manifests in representation is that there's nothing really interesting about a future too far ahead of us to relate to our current needs; aliens aren't interesting unless they require our resources, even, and they are never sympathetic characters unless they live among us like ET because they, unlike people who seem very much like us but may have slightly better tools, have an entirely different system of resources that we can't imagine ourselves into. Aliens and dinosaurs aside, what I was relating that to is the very lived experience we all have of advancing to a next level of practice basically because we're too silly to imagine we're not already there anyway, in some fashion. For example, overreaching is as natural a part of growth as is a child triumphing over a boulder just to turn around a month later and realize it's a little rock.

Abstraction—and the question of my subject—actually relates to this idea of the alien as well. You know, you can have an Ellsworth Kelly that is very much derivative of the shapes and colors of a pack of Marlboro Reds or you can have a completely non-objective painting, and both are about painting—the latter more ruthlessly so.

Photography's relationship to abstraction is usually understood as being more on the side of the human character in the futuristic sci-fi film: it is close enough to reality that we search for our experience in it. That's why people always ask what a photograph is of, or why people always ask me what my exact relationship to my subjects is: even though I work with photograms, they still assume a one-to-one correspondence of a real world to the happenings of the picture plane.

When I started taking pictures as an undergrad, I used what was around me—my friends, and then elements of the landscape—to begin to understand what it was to make a picture photographically. What it was to me was (a.) a fascinating monitor of the way I saw, over time; and (b.) a way to bypass the problem of depiction en route to abstract *umph*. I had always drawn well, and I hadn't known how to get over the hump of drawing well in order to actually find out what I was interested in, what subjects I would live with, how I would live with them, how the way I would live with them might change over time, and the significance of how I chose to live with them. Art, like writing, is not significant because of what it depicts; it is significant because of how it depicts. The "how" is the content of the work; not the "what." When one is a child, learning to draw realistically, the focus seems very much on the "what"; it took photography to get me past that.

The way that changed was actually that I found I wasn't making portraits of people or places; the subjects weren't precisely interchangeable or disposable, but they were useful to me in ways that weren't essential to who or what they were. The more I realized that, the more I narrowed down the ways they were useful, which was abstractly: in terms of lines, gestures, color, scale, and then more largely, poetic narratives, perception, and the nature of being, the nature of looking itself. I found, though, that no one could read a photograph in those terms because photographs were too alien to people's training. By way of contrast, think of the way that even if you were not trained in painting, you can still read the way a painter pushed his or her brush by looking at the painting. The painter did something—an action verb—that a viewer understands because any viewer has pushed a pen around a paper, and

the viewer's hands implicitly grasp as parallel such choices with paint. These kinds of moves in photography—changing structures and conventions within the medium—are more opaque. It is just as possible when making a photograph to take its grammar or tools and use them otherwise than how they are conventionally used, but this happens so succinctly that the average—even often the very informed—viewer can't read how it's done. It is alien, and not in a sympathetic way.

By the time I eliminated cameras from my practice, my pictures had begun to look nothing but formal. There was no subject other than photography or myself, my own way of looking. This wasn't satisfying either, because I was not trying to create a solipsistic world; if the significance of an artwork is in how it translates its subject to the world, in what kind of proposal that then makes about human encounter, I was being exclusive. When I began to photogram, I allowed the subject to appear again as itself, because finally I had a medium through which I thought people could follow traces of my process as clues. You can see pins photogrammed where the work was pinned to the wall during its exposure, which is a clue as to the one-to-one scale of the rest of the image. You can see scuffs where objects have literally abraded the paper during exposure; you can also see whites where they touched the paper, blocking all light, as opposed to other areas, which have color in a variety of shades depending upon, again, the physical relationship of the object to the paper. So finally, the work didn't feel alien anymore to me; the final product related very much to my concerns, both immediate and those that evolve over the long-term of a project or within my practice in general—yes, the bodies and stories of people, places, and things around me, which can be the subject of the work—but the work didn't end there as would a documentary photograph. It related also to the way I handled and processed those bodies and stories over time in my studio, and it related very immediately to the gestures I and they made in the darkroom at the moment of exposure, as well as the gestures the light and paper made generously in return.

So you can say my subject is photography; you can say my subject is process; you can say my subject is any one of the things my pictures has depicted. But all of those potential subjects are too easily dismissed; we understand what we mean by them already—even “process.” When I said my subject was struggle, I really meant it to apply to all of those things: yes, the things my pictures depict are usually people,

places, or things that have gone through struggle and faced the question of surrender. (This applies to ice melting as much as riot cops being attacked.) Yes, artmaking or photography as a practice and my process in particular can parallel those processes of struggle. Yes, my life—and yours and everybody’s—is a constant push and pull of inaccurate longings for what we might do and what we actually do.

I suppose then that the real subject of the work is the position it takes, largely, on the act of beholding as 21st century citizens. How do we put pressure on the fissures of contemporary representation and contemporary life—its distancing mechanisms, its tendency to oversaturate? My answer is not mimetic and it is not dispassionate. I do not distance and I do not oversaturate, simply to communicate those conditions. Instead, I use the body as my guide, rendering the photograph physical, present, and unique.

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*Farrah Karapetian was born in Marin, California, in 1978. She received a BA from Yale and an MFA from the University of California Los Angeles. Recent exhibitions include the Von Lintel Gallery in Los Angeles, the Danziger Gallery in New York City, the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena, the UCR/California Museum of Photography in Riverside, and the Orange County Museum of Art. She lives and works in Los Angeles.*

*Katie Geha is the Director of the Dodd Galleries at the Lamar Dodd School of Art.*

TATE <sup>E</sup>T.C.

# Out of the Light

# Into the Shadows

by Jonathan Griffin

*Excerpt:*

The indexical thrill of the photogram lends itself, albeit impractically, to portraiture. The New Zealander Len Lye, known for his abstract films and kinetic sculptures, made a number of photograms in the 1930s and 1940s, when he was living in London. He persuaded notable subjects including Georgia O’Keeffe, Joan Miró and Le Corbusier to lie on the ground and press the sides of their faces to a sheet of photographic paper, sometimes augmented by decorative elements. The contemporary artist Farrah Karapetian also orchestrates photograms with human figures, although in her tableaux – featuring soldiers or riot police, for instance, and inevitably 1:1 scale – the contrivance of the drama is revealed in the painstaking methods that produced it, which include not only stock-still models but also handmade props.



Saturday, February 14, 2015

# Los Angeles Times

Review Beautiful, conceptually ticklish photograms by Farrah Karapetian

By **LEAH OLLMAN**



Farrah Karapetian's luscious, provocative work at Von Lintel marries two traditions in photography — that of the staged picture and of the image made without a camera.

Both have been around since the medium's earliest years, and both remain vital, thanks, in part, to a wave of contemporary practitioners who have broken down photography into its most basic components and reconfigured it anew according to their own particular sensibilities, freely adding, subtracting, tweaking and torquing along the way.

Now is an invigorating moment for the medium, and Karapetian's work shows us why.

Her images speak in questions, equally addressing eye and mind. Photograms in saturated emerald, aqua and gold on matte or metallic paper, they elicit an immediate how? and what? They are as physically beautiful as they are conceptually ticklish.

Karapetian's overt subject is the musical instrument in performance, but her attention is most acutely fixed on photography's multiplicitous relationship to the real. Her images are at once impressions and traces, inventions and records.

The most arresting depict a drum kit (sometimes being played, sometimes not), the armatures coming across as white silhouettes, the cymbals as gauzy disks. The actual set used in making the pictures is here too, a fabrication that Karapetian refers to as a "sculptural negative." The cymbals are cast in clear, ruby and grape glass, the drums mere metal frameworks with neither sides nor skins. Light projected up through the pieces onto the wall delivers rich shadows and refractions, the cymbals generating dappled and veined orbs suggesting astronomical bodies or jellyfish.

Projected onto photosensitive paper, those same forms yield bright, schematic outlines and soft translucencies.

The earliest photograms, made by placing objects directly onto light-sensitive paper, were largely used to document botanical and other specimens. Their power and value derived from the direct physical correspondence between subject and image. More personal, interpretive takes on the process were pioneered by Christian Schad, Man Ray and others between the world wars, and artists like Floris Neusüss and Adam Fuss have more recently adopted and expanded it further.

Karapetian, who is based in L.A. and has been making photograms for more than a decade, engages with both the evidentiary and evocative strands of the tradition.

She also plays seriously with self-reflexivity: These images are performances of performances, visual stagings, enactments. However contrived, they bear the photographic pedigree of veracity, vexed as it is.

And — they are gorgeous. There are some compositionally static pieces, in which craft alone prevails, but even in the least interesting images there are passages of exquisite mystery. In those weird, liquid ripples and diaphanous blurs, time and space seem to reveal something of their true, elusive nature.

What?

How?

Von Lintel Gallery, 2685 S. La Cienega Blvd., L.A. (310) 559-5700, through Feb. 28. Closed Sundays and Mondays.  
[www.vonlintel.com](http://www.vonlintel.com)

In *Riot Police* (2011), she created a tableau in which several silhouetted figures clad in riot gear stand clustered at the left side of a deep purple field, divided into five vertical panels, while a protester lies stretched out at their feet, resolving the almost triangular, classical configuration. It's a startling scene, its formal asymmetry enunciating the stark asymmetry of power it depicts. In fact, the actors playing the riot police were art world friends, but garbed with helmets and translucent shields, they are sharply convincing. An ensuing work depicts protesters in Egypt, set amid texts from a government pamphlet.

More recently, Karapetian has begun to employ real people's memories in her practice. After describing her interest in muscle memory and physical communication in a class, one of her students, a veteran, approached her to describe his actions in Iraq. The resulting project used a group of actual US army vets, gripping translucent guns made of resin, to reenact a method of breaching an entry called "stacking up on doors." Silhouetted against a field of acrid orange, Karapetian's veterans were deployed around the doorway of LA Louver Gallery, as part of their 2013 "Rogue Wave" show. The same year, Karapetian created another semi-site-specific work—a ruins made of block-like photograms of ice—for OCMA's California-Pacific Triennial, and a public artwork in Flint, Michigan, relating to that city's blue collar workforce.

Notably, for all their loaded content, Karapetian's works do not declare any specific political POV, so much as they present formalized narratives, turning what would normally be portrayed in documentary terms to a fictive reenactment. She explains: "The photograph is conventionally understood as the document of an event; but what happens when the photograph is the event itself? This is something I think about when I'm staging a reenactment in the dark; it's something I think about when I install a photograph sculpturally, so that the viewer has a life-size experience of an object, a place, or an event. It's all focused on re-humanizing the photograph, making it manual, hands-on, experiential, and surprising."

Like a photojournalist, Karapetian seems drawn to troubled places, taking the experience she gleans back to her studio; this winter, she will be traveling to Kabul to create a music video for an Afghan youth rock band. The interest in music coincides with the new body of work she will be showing in January, at Von Lintel Gallery, in Los Angeles. In this case, the muscle memory and performance reenactment were provided by her father, who used to be a drummer. As per her elaborate shadow process, Karapetian created a faux drum set in eerie silhouette, with translucent cymbals, and had her father practice drumming with it at her LA studio. On the walls, a large photogram of her father playing drums shares space with images of female musicians, instruments, and a red flowing curtain. As yet, the final make-up of the show, titled "Stagecraft," remains to be determined. "I've made a lot of work that I'm not going to end up using. I started thinking about stagecraft and spotlights..."she muses. "What interested me most... was really the vulnerability and drive of creative practice."

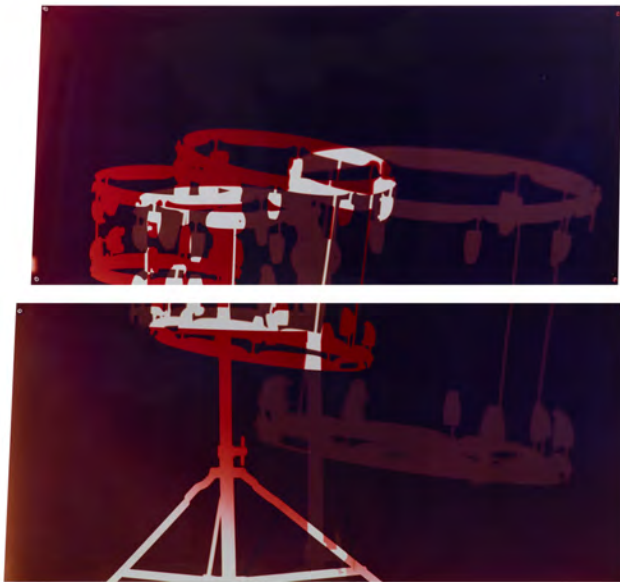
Farrah Karapetian's new solo show, titled "Stagecraft," can be seen at the Von Lintel Gallery, in Los Angeles. From January 17 – February 28, 2015 [www.vonlintel.com](http://www.vonlintel.com)

Thursday, January 29, 2015

## artnet® news

### Must-See Art Guide: Los Angeles

by Alissa Darsa



Following on the heels of the popular and high-profile LA Art Show and Photo LA, Art Los Angeles Contemporary kicks off its sixth edition today at the Barker Hangar in Santa Monica. Though relatively new compared to its highly publicized counterparts, the contemporary art fair still draws crowds, and the city's many museums, galleries, and other cultural institutions rise to meet them with a number of exciting shows taking place throughout the month.

Opening this weekend at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, "Islamic Art Now: Contemporary Art of the Middle East" showcases the museum's collection of Middle Eastern contemporary art—the largest such collection in the United States—delivering works by renowned artists such as [Shirin](#)

[Neshat](#), [Lalla Essaydi](#), [Mona Hatoum](#), and [Hassan Hajjaj](#). For an added photo fix, don't miss works by [Thomas Demand](#) at Matthew Marks Gallery. The show features a selection of large-scale images, all on view for the first time. For the more experimentally inclined, there is [Farrah Karapetian's](#) "Stagecraft," on view at the Von Lintel Gallery. Through her work, Karapetian explores the abstract potential of photography, using photograms to create 'constructed negatives' that act more like sculptures than photographs.

For a change of pace, stop by David Kordansky Gallery, where works by renowned provocateur [Tom of Finland](#) are spotlighted. The show features the artist's early drawings, gouaches, and inked storyboards, some of which have never been shown, tracing the evolution of his earliest erotic works, which laid the foundation for his signature gay iconography.

With LA determined to secure its place among the art world heavy hitters, the city steps up to offer an extensive selection of shows sure to please even the most discerning art world aficionado.

Exhibition: "[Farrah Karapetian: Stagecraft](#)"

When: January 17–February 28, 2015

Where: [Von Lintel Gallery](#), 2685 S. La Cienega Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA





"GOT TO THE MYSTIC," 2014, CHROMOGENIC PHOTOGRAM, METALLIC, 97" x 82"  
PHOTO: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND VON LINTEL GALLERY

Farrah Karapetian knows how to orchestrate a memorable image. With its bold theatrical façade, and formally reductive lexicon, her work is shadow play of considerable nuance and complexity, engaging rigorously with issues such as space, scale, surface, narrative, and performance. Yet perhaps the work's most striking aspect is its timeliness: using photograms—a medium that was pioneered nearly a century ago by Man Ray—Karapetian has created a practice that is distinctly, often startlingly, of the moment. Subjects of her pieces have included illegal immigrants, civil protesters, riot police, and US army veterans.

As a photographer who works sculpturally, without a camera, Karapetian has created a truly interdisciplinary practice. Talk to her about her work, and the topic veers from mark making to ancient Greek pediments and pottery. "Part of what's fun about the photogram is that it divorces the image or the characters from the context, and relief sculpture does that," she notes. "So does the amphora—the black and orange pottery that's just a field of black, and the characters on it. Obviously, there's more going on in the atmosphere of a photogram, but it's certainly divorced from its original context and therefore divorced from the documentary. To me, that's a big part of what the color fields do—they suggest reenactment, they suggest fabrication."

Born in LA, Karapetian studied photography as an undergrad at Yale, but found her herself instinctively rebelling against the aesthetic that emphasized the purity of the photographic image: "A perfect print, that was not handled physically, and didn't exhibit its physical nature." From 2006 to 2008 she attended grad school at UCLA, where her teachers included James Welling, Catherine Opie, and Charles Ray. "I got to UCLA, and they give you this big space, so you're able to think three-dimensionally, and so all my thoughts about photographs being objects suddenly became realizable," she recalls. "And I could look at shadows, the way they went on the floor."

She discovered photograms by chance, after a trip to Kosovo, when she banged her hand in frustration on a photo enlarger, and a light went off.

Her first large-scale work was made in 2008 and 2009; titled *Stowaway*, it depicts a U-Haul with a man—presumably an illegal immigrant—standing inside, amid rows of soda bottles. The piece was inspired by reading online that agents at US border crossings used X-rays on trucks to scan for illegal cargo. To create the piece, Karapetian built a transparent mock-up of a truck, added plywood shelves, hired a worker to be her model, then drove to the desert to find a collection of 200 Mexican Coke bottles, finally setting up the scene in front of vertical strips of photosensitive paper. As with all her work, the shoot is just the culmination of an elaborate process of research and preparation that then resolves in a flash (and a rush to get it to a processor to be developed). "The first time a person engages with me in this process, they always laugh," the artist laughs. "They're like, 'That was it!'"

In *Riot Police* (2011), she created a tableau in which several silhouetted figures clad in riot gear stand clustered at the left side of a deep purple field, divided into five vertical panels, while a protester lies stretched out at their feet, resolving the almost triangular, classical configuration. It's a startling scene, its formal asymmetry enunciating the stark asymmetry of power it depicts. In fact, the actors playing the riot police were art world friends, but garbed with helmets and translucent shields, they are sharply convincing. An ensuing work depicts protesters in Egypt, set amid texts from a government pamphlet.

More recently, Karapetian has begun to employ real people's memories in her practice. After describing her interest in muscle memory and physical communication in a class, one of her students, a veteran, approached her to describe his actions in Iraq. The resulting project used a group of actual US army vets, gripping translucent guns made of resin, to reenact a method of breaching an entry called "stacking up on doors." Silhouetted against a field of acrid orange, Karapetian's veterans were deployed around the doorway of LA Louver Gallery, as part of their 2013 "Rogue Wave" show. The same year, Karapetian created another semi-site-specific work—a ruins made of block-like photograms of ice—for OCMA's California-Pacific Triennial, and a public artwork in Flint, Michigan, relating to that city's blue collar workforce.

Notably, for all their loaded content, Karapetian's works do not declare any specific political POV, so much as they present formalized narratives, turning what would normally be portrayed in documentary terms to a fictive reenactment. She explains: "The photograph is conventionally understood as the document of an event; but what happens when the photograph is the event itself? This is something I think about when I'm staging a reenactment in the dark; it's something I think about when I install a photograph sculpturally, so that the viewer has a life-size experience of an object, a place, or an event. It's all focused on re-humanizing the photograph, making it manual, hands-on, experiential, and surprising."

Like a photojournalist, Karapetian seems drawn to troubled places, taking the experience she gleans back to her studio; this winter, she will be traveling to Kabul to create a music video for an Afghan youth rock band. The interest in music coincides with the new body of work she will be showing in January, at Von Lintel Gallery, in Los Angeles. In this case, the muscle memory and performance reenactment were provided by her father, who used to be a drummer. As per her elaborate shadow process, Karapetian created a faux drum set in eerie silhouette, with translucent cymbals, and had her father practice drumming with it at her LA studio. On the walls, a large photogram of her father playing drums shares space with images of female musicians, instruments, and a red flowing curtain. As yet, the final make-up of the show, titled "Stagecraft," remains to be determined. "I've made a lot of work that I'm not going to end up using. I started thinking about stagecraft and spotlights..." she muses. "What interested me most... was really the vulnerability and drive of creative practice."

—GEORGE MELROD

Week 2014, May 31- June 6

# TAR

CHARACTERS

*Begone and present.*

*In the solid-state-nowness.*

Interview by: Luca Lisci to Artist Farrah Karapetian



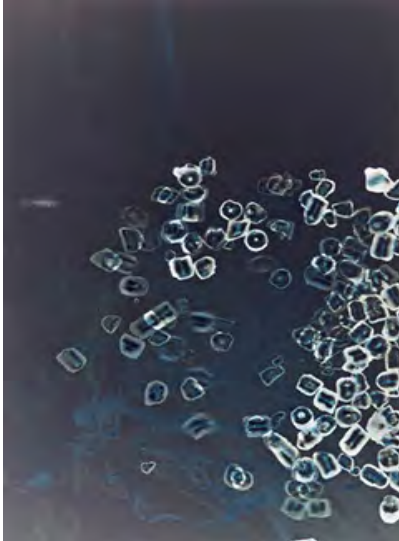
Farrah Karapetian – Prone Position, 2013  
Chromogenic photogram from performance  
101.6 x 243.8 cm – Unique  
Image courtesy of the artist and Von Lintel Gallery

*Farrah's chromes are object of immanence. The world is your methaphor, and you are totally caught up in it.*

*LL Your 'visuals' are so present but yet so ethereal... really fascinating... In some of your most iconic works, objects are really put in a documentary mood. Can we talk of 'scientific'?*

*FK People have used the word "forensics" with respect to my work: the objects imply their association with an event larger than themselves, even if their identities are very banal. One might try to piece together a narrative – fictional, documentary, personal, or scientific – to associate with any one of them, but that narrative is as much linked to personal association as it is to larger events of*

cultural significance. One writer called the work more of a metaphor than a record, and I appreciated that, because I don't think in a literal way.



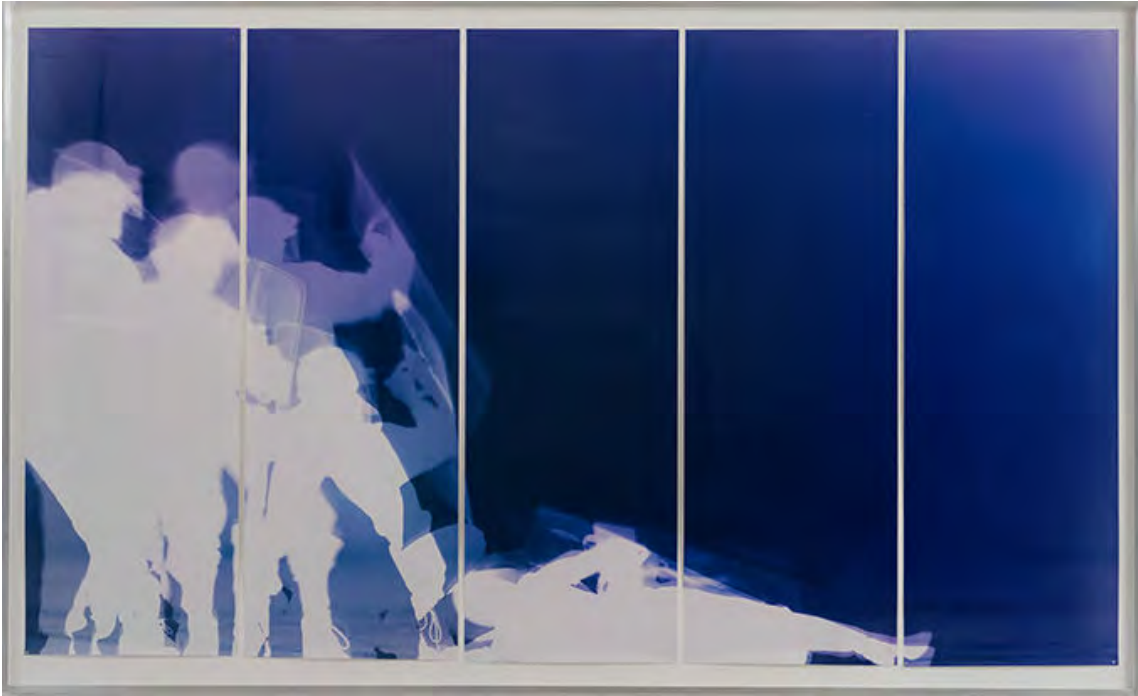
Farrah Karapetian – Untitled (Slip #48), 2014  
Chromogenic photogram from ice  
76.2 x 50.8 cm – Unique

**LL** What's the link between the 'performance' and your chromes?

**FK** I began using the word "performance" with respect to my work because I was looking for a way to translate the "presence" of the experience of making a photogram into the language of contemporary art. When I say "presence", I mean to say that everything that ends up on the photogram happens in the darkroom and everything that happens in the darkroom ends up on the photogram: that paper holds evidence of the entire event.

Certainly, when I invite people into the darkroom to reenact a memory in front of a piece of photosensitive paper, they are "performing", and each resulting image is an artifact of their performance more than it is an artifact of the original event that they remember. I consider even photograms that result from my own solo experimentation to be artifacts of performance. When I go into the darkroom with a certain set of objects – which I call "negatives" – and a certain set of formal parameters – such as the dimensions of a piece of paper or a particular color palette I'd like to achieve – I then have to be flexible to the improvisational nature of color printing. Color printing is done entirely in the dark and so one uses one's hands a lot to feel physically what one is drawing out with one's tools. What happens next can't be taken back...

I suppose this is the nature of all photographic work: something happens in front of a lens and is surprising, hopefully. One wouldn't call documentary work performative, though, because it doesn't rely on enactment, reenactment, or the intentional staging of circumstances that will lead to happenstance.



Farrah Karapetian – Riot Police, 2013  
Chromogenic photograph from performance  
101.6 x 243.8 cm – Unique  
Image courtesy of the artist and Von Lintel Gallery

*LL Many of your titles are grouped into dominant threads.. Veterans, Protest, Surveillance, Public, Ruins, Street.. Have those threads something in common?*

*FK These threads are themes I have pulled out after the fact of fabrication for purposes of organization. In truth, each body of work emerges from a personal encounter in the experience of which I can imagine a formal and emotional challenge.*

*As examples of the circumstances of such an encounter: the work I made with veterans emerged from the muscle memory of a veteran of the US Special Forces and the work around protest emerged from my encounter with a pamphlet distributed before the fall of Mubarak, which was given me by my boyfriend's daughter's mother. The work with surveillance emerged from having been told that my photograms looked like X-Rays and then realizing that I could indeed prefabricate what I was seeing online in terms of X-Rays on the scale of the international border. Some of the work has emerged in response to the particular architecture or significance of a space in which I was given to exhibit. So they are all just challenges I choose to meet.*

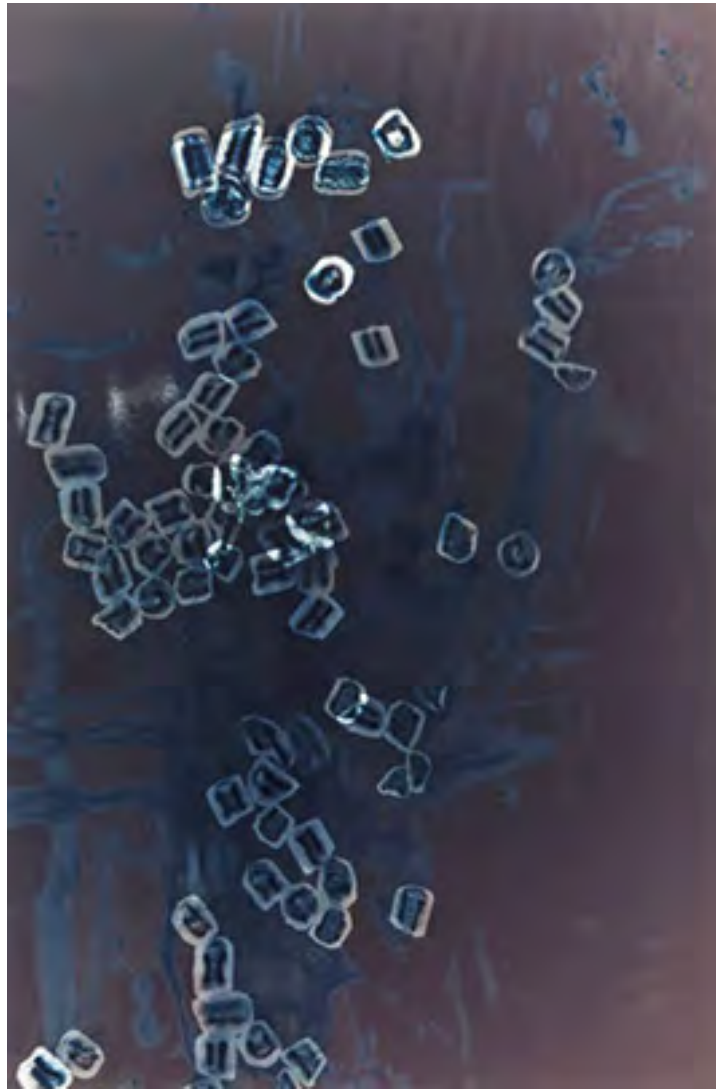
*Emotionally, the thread throughout every project – abstract, still life, or human – can seem to be one of tragedy or conflict, and maybe I am indeed oriented towards the tragicomic... Really, the thread for me, though, is about human vulnerability, human effort, and a surrender to chance. We prepare, as humans and as artists, for every eventuality, but circumstances intervene: all of the work is about*

*what happens just before or after such a moment of fateful intervention as much as it is about the fateful intervention that occurs in the darkroom upon exposure.*

*Formally, the thread throughout every project is an interest in the parameters of photographic imagery: how can I use its existing parameters against themselves? How can I stretch formal convention productively, both for the medium and in the service of emotional and metaphorical investigation as well? Each project links to the next in terms of formal and personal questions; I have to remain observant of my process at all times, even while deeply engaged in it.*



Farrah Karapetian – Untitled (Slip #47), 2014  
Chromogenic photograph from ice  
76.2 x 50.8 cm – Unique



Farrah Karapetian – Untitled (Slip #56), 2014  
Chromogenic photogram from ice  
76.2 x 50.8 cm – Unique

*LL Can you tell me something about the production process of your chromogenic prints? In the making is there involved any peculiar process?*

*FK I think the difference between a conventional production process and mine is in the plasticity of which I assume the medium capable.*

*I come into a printing session with a particular color palette in mind that has nothing literally to do with the situation I am going to depict, and I experiment with the light and exposure until I can*

*approximate that palette. My subjects, then, are divorced from a real documentary context and exist on a field of color not unlike the was of reds or blacks on an ancient Greek vase on top of which caper the silhouettes of heroes.*

*The route to that color differs every time; I once had an assistant make me an encyclopedia of color – writing down the enlarger’s filter packs for each color in a rather elaborate spectrum – but the circumstances of printing – temperature, batch of paper, type of room, type of subject – always change the way that filter pack affects the color on the page, so the encyclopedia is useless.*

*Photography is not an exact science, contrary to conventional belief; it is not only not a truth-teller, it is not a precise instrument. It is as plastic as is painting or sculpture, especially when approached through analog means.*

*I also use a lot of its tenets metaphorically, as in my persistent use of the term “negative”, despite the fact that I don’t use a camera or film. I build sculptures negatives out of clear materials like resin, ice, or glass, and because these props function to filter light, I imagine them as negatives.*

*I also use a lot of movement and multiple exposure in what I do, always seeking to relay the nature of whatever it is I’m working with, and often that nature includes a function or grace associated with its passage through time or space.*

*And in general each project presents a new challenge that alters the process: how to photogram smoke, how to deal with slippery ice, how to handle illusionistic space... If there are no new challenges, there are no reasons to go on with it all.*

**“Emotionally, the thread throughout every project – abstract, still life, or human – can seem to be one of tragedy or conflict, and maybe I am indeed oriented towards the tragicomic..”**

**FARRAH KARAPETIAN**

**LL** *What are you working on right now?*

**FK** *I am working with a new material – glass – and a new context – music. It was instigated when I heard about a school in Kabul, Afghanistan where teenagers are learning to play heavy metal. It expanded as I began to explore my father and brother’s relationship to music. When I develop a project like this, there are a lot of new experiments that have to happen before the final products: I will spend time making “negatives” out of glass, I will spend time making experimental prints exploring the abstract potential of the materials and the associative potential of the objects; I will spend time researching the subject and context of music on many levels (music videos, staging, censorship, the act of giving something up), and I will coordinate both projects here at home in Los*

*Angeles and in Afghanistan. I think the work will have a few different contexts in which it's shown: one probably in January 2015 at Von Lintel Gallery in Los Angeles and another in a more public context (for a different incarnation of the project, i.e. music festivals.)*



Farrah Karapetian – Untitled (Slip #47), 2014  
Chromogenic photogram from ice  
76.2 x 50.8 cm – Unique





*LL Let's play words- to-words, ok?*

*My first word:*

**FUTURE**

*...which is yours?*

*FK Nope:*

**NOW!**

*LL Well, bright and clear... the word:*

**PAST**

*FK*

**STORIES**

*LL They say stories are based over*

**CONFLICT...**

*FK*

**AVOIDANCE**

*LL How wise of you!*

...PERSON?

*FK*

...OF INTEREST!

*LL My word:*

TRIP.

*FK*

When?-Where?-Do-I-  
have-to-make-a-  
proposal?

# Los Angeles Times

CRITIC'S CHOICE

## Review: Black as everything and nothing at Diane Rosenstein

By Leah Ollman

*January 31, 2013 3:00 p.m.*

"The Black Mirror," an unusually fine group show, inaugurates Diane Rosenstein's handsome new Hollywood space. A taut and provocative visual essay, the show gathers 40 works by 21 mostly contemporary artists, including James Welling, who co-curated with Rosenstein.

Process is key here, and few of the paintings, sculptures, drawings and photographs are conventionally made. In Farrah Karapetian's "Ruin 1: The Stones in the Wall," cut-out photograms of ice -- physical traces of a substance translucent and transient -- are collaged to suggest the building blocks of a dense and durable wall.

In Teresita Fernandez's wall-mounted panel of solid graphite, as in Matthew Brandt's use of wood from George Bush Park in Houston to render both a charcoal square and create the paper it rests upon, material and image fuse into unified power objects.

A few classic works (a painted wood assemblage by Louise Nevelson, a fiberglass and resin plank by John McCracken) give the show historical ballast. They, and others by Barnaby Furnas, Marco Breuer, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Nancy Rubins and more explore black's enduring potency to evoke both totality and nothingness, the expansive night sky and the void, revelation and concealment.

Photographic works that record change over time and are generated by some sort of performative or conceptual action constitute a particularly rich thread running through the show.

Phil Chang's three unfixed prints read as wistful denials, concise poems of absence. In John Sisley's "Ice Grid" pictures, a sly sense of humor pairs with terrific sensuality. Four prints from the series chronicle the transformation of 48 cubes neatly aligned on a dark surface into lush, liquid patterns -- a motion study of sorts, a tongue-in-cheek yet beautiful meditation on progression and change.

Diane Rosenstein Fine Art, 831 N. Highland, (323) 397-9225, through March 9. Closed Sunday and Monday. [www.dianeroseinstein.com](http://www.dianeroseinstein.com)

February 29, 2012

### Haiku Reviews: Paper Hearts And Harpsichords

*HuffPost Arts' Haiku Reviews is a monthly feature where invited critics review exhibitions and performances in short form.*



**James Lee Byars** brought a fey ineffability to the avant garde of the late '60s and '70s, a Zen texture to the verbal focus of early conceptualism and a sexy solution to the conceptualists' conflicted relationship with the object: make it with paper. He made plenty of large, obdurate stuff, but Byars' soul was in feather-light ephemera, seemingly cut from gold leaf or silk, and inscribed or imprinted with distilled phrases and gnomic declarations. The show ranged from printed books to (un)folded sheets to envelopes, all "perfect" (a favorite Byars trope) in their almost windborne wit. Framed or pinned to the wall, they seemed, appropriately, more a collection of butterflies than of artworks.

**Farrah Karapetian** does almost the opposite with the nominally paper medium of photography, printing heavy, luminous photogram images on unframed paper, giving them a painterly, indeed almost sculptural, presence. The subjects presented here were based on the list of "necessary clothing and accessories" protestors in Egypt were advised to bring with them to the protracted demonstrations in Tahrir Square - abstracted emblems, then, of hopeful energy. (Leadapron, 8445 Melrose Pl., LA; closed. [www.leadapron.net](http://www.leadapron.net))

- Peter Frank

pot-lid shield; and a can of spray paint with which to thwart police by obscuring their vision through visors and windshields.

LA-based artist Farrah Karapetian adopted this document as the basis for "Accessory to Protest," a series of photograms and objects (all 2011) through which she continues her exploration of the shared concerns of photography and sculpture. Entering the exhibition space of Lead Apron, a rare-books store and gallery, visitors were confronted first with the photogram *Accessory to Protest 4 (Red Hoodie)*. At about four by two-and-a-half feet, the work features a ghostlike and seemingly incandescent hoodie floating against a burnt-umber background, the garment's zipper a gleaming streak. Karapetian's placement of this work seemed meant to implicate the viewer in the pamphlet's provocations to action, as displayed on a clothes hanger nearby was *Negative: Hoodie*, the very object—what she termed a "constructed negative"—the artist had crafted out of diaphanous organza in order to make the image. In all, eight unique photograms depicted as many "accessories," each life-size and aglow in vivid cadmium red and yellow hues evocative of X-rays and burns. Joining these prints were two additional constructed negatives, *Negative: Spray Can* and *Negative: Sneakers*, cast in transparent resin and effervescent with bubbles of captured air. Save for the print featuring a scarf, *Accessory to Protest 7 (Yellow Scarf)*, which appeared as a jellyfish-like mass of tentacles, almost all the photogrammed objects were readily legible. They were also doubly exposed, indexing a temporal gap that implied both motion and the

Farrah Karapetian, *Accessory to Protest 4 (Red Hoodie)*, 2011, chromogenic photogram, 47 x 30".



## Farrah Karapetian

### LEAD APRON

Early on in the protests that prompted President Hosni Mubarak's resignation and the end of a nearly six-decade-long secular dictatorship in Egypt, an illustrated tactical brochure was leaked online and translated into English for Western readers. The pamphlet, titled "How to Protest Intelligently," assumed the voice of the Egyptian people and listed demands and goals alongside instructions on how to carry out acts of civil disobedience as effectively and safely as possible. Among these, a diagram of "necessary clothing and accessories" demonstrated the ways in which everyday items could be strategically deployed to outfit a makeshift, nonviolent people's army: comfortable sneakers to run in; a hoodie, goggles, and scarf to protect the upper body, face, eyes, and mouth; thick gloves for handling hot tear-gas canisters; a

that happens when the camera is abandoned. "Accessory" here alludes, of course, not only to the objects, but to the abettors of revolution as well: the protester, primarily, and secondly, the imagemaker, who transmits the protester's actions to the eyes of the world. This second role has been instrumental in the domino effect of recent popular uprisings, from the Arab Spring to the American Fall. In re-creating the Egyptian pamphlet's protest accessories on her way to picturing them, Karapetian explicitly recodes photography, turning an act of reproduction into one of production, transforming the indexical "that-has-been" of the medium into the proleptic "this will be." And yet photography has not been entirely instrumentalized here; ultimately, the works' beauty (and, in some cases, preciousness) tempers that possibility.

—Natilee Harren

# ARTFORUM



Farrah Karapetian, *Riot Police*, 2011, five chromogenic photograms, overall 8 x 13'.

500 WORDS

04.09.12

## Farrah Karapetian

*Farrah Karapetian is an artist who works with cameraless photography and sculpture. She lives and works in Los Angeles where her solo show "Representation3" opens on April 14 at Roberts & Tilton, and her ongoing project, Student Body Politic, will be shown at the Vincent Price Art Museum from May 22 through August 17. Here, Karapetian discusses her photogram process and the nature of the photographic signifier in her reenactments of pictures of current events.*

**I STOPPED USING CAMERAS IN 2002.** Up to that point, I made pictures that emphasized the formal qualities of the photographic print through abstraction. I then went to Kosovo to photograph a story that my friend was writing for *Metropolis* on the politics of architecture within the city. When I came back, I spent hours in the darkroom trying to be faithful to the landscape of burned villages and UNMIK troops. I got really frustrated and slammed a small fan down on the enlarger table, accidentally hitting the button that turned on the light. That was my first photogram: a rocky cliff blocked by the shadow of a fan.

When I started graduate school at UCLA a few years later, the real space of my studio led me to consider how a photograph actually occupies space: the shadows I had been using to make imagery were in fact falling against walls and floors. I began to see pictorial space in sculptural space, sometimes recognizing this phenomenon in pictures from the news: a section of highway falls and the flat plane of asphalt with its painted stripes seems to be a picture dripping off of its frame, shadows burnt into walls in Hiroshima, bodies of illegal immigrants register on Z-Backscatter scans of trucks crossing the border.

I admire strong documentary photography, but I also want to critique it: does it really communicate what it was like to be under fire or in a hurricane? I began to try to recreate these scenarios, but without the conventional attitude towards the photograph's role in history—that it is documentary, accurate, or evidence-oriented.

Many of the pictures I've worked with this year have been images of protest. I've long been attracted to the marks people make on architecture to express their concerns, in part because the marks I make through photogramming express mine. I now use sculpturally or digitally constructed elements to achieve pictorial and architectural effects that go beyond what found objects or light alone can do. My photograms are planned and constructed up until the moment of exposure, at which point chance intervenes. The resulting image is more of a provocative metaphor than a sober document.

What you see in the gallery is incredibly different from the thing I saw in the newspaper. I am remaking a picture of a child's bedroom that was destroyed in a tornado. In the end, my picture of the destroyed bedroom is stripped of all personal affective associations. It is a structure, with some pictorial detail, and the structure itself suggests vulnerability. I would never pretend to have been through a tornado, but I have moved my family through foreclosure, helped a friend's family climb through their garage to take the floorboards and furniture from their foreclosure, helped partners and friends through times of houselessness, and been nomadic myself. When I was a child, my family would get realtors' lists and visit houses we knew we couldn't afford, projecting ourselves into rooms and lives we wouldn't have. How much can I abstract an image, how much can I leave out, in order for viewers to have their own associations? I am betting on baggage, even as I'm eliminating it.

— *As told to Megan Heuer*

# *Muscle Memory: Portfolio*

## *Georgia Review*

INTRODUCTION by managing editor JENNY GROPP

In 1839—the same year Louis Daguerre introduced the photographic process that bears his name—William Henry Fox Talbot invented “photogenic drawing.” With a sheet of glass, Talbot pressed botanical objects directly onto the surfaces of paper rendered photosensitive by salt and silver nitrate solution, and then exposed the compositions to sunlight. The resulting silhouettes on the papers were the first of what became known more broadly as “photograms.”

Though photogramming emerged at the same time as photography, and though it is sometimes called “camera-less photography,” comparing the two art forms too closely can obscure the singular value of the photogram. Photography’s initial remarkability was its capacity for vivid mimesis, while photogramming’s was its capability to produce a 1:1 negative record of its subject. From the get-go, then, the photogram was pitted as an art of what a photograph is *not*, both in process and in final product.

Contemporary artist Farrah Karapetian, whose photogram portfolio *Muscle Memory* follows, has meticulously worked those notions of juxtaposition and negation through her entire artistic practice. During her recent residency at UGA’s Lamar Dodd School of Art, Karapetian began her craft lecture with a quote from Robert Frost: “I am not a nature poet.” As Frost considered his poetry to be more complex than the endgame of its most apparent theme, so Karapetian considers her photogram creations. Encountering an image singly, you might at first mistake it for an opaque analog of documentary photography, and that may be the point—consider the portfolio’s title image, for example, with its silhouettes of armed soldiers in stacked formation. Here, and in other images from *Muscle Memory*, Karapetian’s work seems deliberately to invite such an assumption so that it can be overturned as the viewer discovers the intricacies of process that go into making her photograms.

“I rejected documentary photography a long time ago,” says Karapetian, “not because I don’t like it, but because it purports to be so truthful and is always not.”\* Instead of staking claims of truth in a final product, Karapetian’s photograms present truths as mediated through rites of experience. Using an external image as a starting point—found online, in print, or in a person’s memory, for example—she eventually arrives at another “image or an image-object that is an artifact of artistic process rather than of political process.”

In this way, Karapetian locates emotional weight in the physical making of her often politically rooted subject material, and, in the case of *Muscle Memory*, in the participation of her invited human subjects—U.S. Armed Forces veterans. Her focus, as indicated, is the veterans’ muscle memory and their relationships to their weapons. With clear resin, the artist created three casts each of the veterans’ typical sidearm (P226 Sig Sauer) and rifle (H&K416), produced multiple photograms from those, and then orchestrated the



veterans into military postures, where they would remain stock-still with their prop weapons while 1:1 scale images were rendered behind them. Karapetian calls the clear casts she makes for her various projects—with materials ranging from resin to organza—“sculptural negatives,” which conduct light onto the photographic picture plane. “For each body of work I make, the sculptural negatives I use come from a similar place of election because of how they pertain to the subject that interests me [ . . . ] These objects are all already like sculptures: elected and pastiched by their users to suit them, triggers for those users’ own muscle memories, and now triggers as well for me.”

Even in a case where the artist does not construct a three-dimensional negative—the headsets used to produce *Combat Gear: Talking Heads*, for instance, are authentic—she finds that reworking an object and its scenario, first by herself and then sometimes with other people, creates a salient space for reflection: “We all spend far more time reimagining the original source image than we would have had it remained a fleeting news item we saw as temporary consumers of information.”

The above illuminates why Karapetian saturates the photograms in *Muscle Memory* in hues that clash with those more typical to military settings. By defamiliarizing representations of combat in this and other ways, she generates for viewers enough interference to disrupt and call attention to our era’s deeply entrenched response of permitting the constant newsfeed of documentary to slide by us as political ephemera.

Farrah Karapetian was born in Marin, California, in 1978. She received a BA from Yale and an MFA from the University of California Los Angeles. Recent exhibitions include the Von Lintel Gallery in Los Angeles, the Danziger Gallery in New York City, the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena, the UCR/California Museum of Photography in Riverside, and the Orange County Museum of Art. She lives and works in Los Angeles.

# Los Angeles Times ARTS

## Farrah Karapetian at Sandroni Rey

October 9, 2009

Farrah Karapetian works inventively with photography's elemental ingredients — light and time. In her show at Sandroni Rey, the recent UCLA MFA presents striking, memorable work, alongside efforts that haven't quite gelled.

A DVD projection visualizing the artist as human sundial, for instance, starts with a nice concept but realizes it in a slight and tedious way. Another video, viewed through an actual car door mounted on the wall, feels under-conceived and overproduced.



The centerpiece, in terms of scale and interest, is "Stowaway," a stunning six-panel photogram that spans 20 feet in width.

Photograms are physical traces, made by placing an object directly on sensitized paper and exposing it to light; his one, depicting a soda truck with a passenger amid the cargo, is necessarily life-size, a

ghost image in translucent graphite tones. Karapetian has constructed the scene more like a metaphor than a record, absenting the driver and setting individual bottles in rows on shelves rather than in cases. The man stands among them in gleaming white silhouette, an emblem of displacement.

Karapetian's fascination with surveillance and the hidden comes across as well in a series of photograms of signs, notices that the premises are being videotaped or patrolled. She double- or triple-exposes the prints so that each sign overlaps itself in a disorienting stutter or, in the case of "Caution," spelling a darkly poetic epigram.

Two signs warning drivers of people crossing the freeway on foot — horrifically absurd responses to illegal immigration to begin with — overlap to suggest the word "cautionaut," an apt description of one who travels through dangerous space.

Sandroni Rey, 2762 S. La Cienega Blvd., (310) 280-0111, through Oct. 24. Closed Sundays and Mondays. [www.sandronirey.com](http://www.sandronirey.com)

--Leah Ollman

*Above: Stowaway Photo credit: Courtesy of Sandroni Rey gallery*