

Ellen Carey

Pull with Line & Half Circle

Polaroid 20 X 24 Color Positive and Negative Prints

Polaroid and instant technology meets photography and process in the innovative discovery of the ***Pull*** in 1996 by Ellen Carey (b. USA 1952). These experimental artworks fit under her umbrella concept and artistic practice ***Photography Degree Zero***. She freely explores the less-is-more tenets of Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism and Conceptual Art, often with little or “zero” exposure. Her ***Pulls***, followed by her ***Rollbacks***, are historically unprecedented in both photography and art. They introduce the parabola (or hyperbola), a new form to the medium — a conical loop — a different form of document, now iconic; it is a Carey signature.

Pull with Line & Half Circle was an individual artwork made in response to the multiple losses of human life, a *memento mori* for Ellen Carey’s project titled ***To Paris with Love***. Briefly stated, her proposal saw a site-specific installation of 130 Polaroid negatives representing the deaths in the Paris attacks; plus 12 killed in the Charlie Hebdo shootings, 4 of the Jewish hostages in the supermarket. The large negative is reminiscent of the dark void at an open burial site, where a person’s body is laid to rest, underscored by Polaroid’s surface of a matte patina. The upper-half echoes the shape of a headstone, its physical surface sees irregular patterns — lichen-like — the chemical drips symbol of — tears — drop down the vertical coffin-like form, reminding one of a wooden casket or the totemic, ancient sarcophagi. The horizontal line denotes the end of exposure in a traditional Polaroid 20 X 24 rectangle; here in Carey’s Polaroid positive, it is reminiscent of a figure at waist level, its resemblance to a monk’s robe and waist cord in color and shape uncanny.

The empty rectangle of the ***Pull with Line & Half Circle*** stands for the absence of the individual. In photography, a traditional portrait includes the person’s head and shoulder, which this large format Polaroid 20 X 24 camera (circa 1980s) was originally built to do. Here, it is gone. Carey adds to this in scale, introducing the elongated full body as picture “sign” and symbol, it represents a visceral and visual presence of an absence, suggesting a ghost figure in an empty shell of the photographic frame. The half circle on top of the minimal and abstract composition glows an off-white, like a nimbus or halo; the circle of life cut short, signifying the abrupt end to a person’s life. This duality between life/positive and death/negative is represented in the Polaroid negative-to-positive process, an instant, peel-apart method seen in ***Pull with Line & Half Circle***; Carey is the only Polaroid artist (www.20X24Studio.com) to keep the negative(s).

Both of the elongated shapes are reminiscent of the rectangular linen cloth of — ***The Shroud of Turin*** — Carey’s uses a transparent tone and a fleshy palette in her Polaroid glossy positive; the muted, thinly veiled hues contrast the dramatic and minimal negative; it is dark and solid, depicted as an earthy, non-reflective mass. The wound-like marks on both sides of ***Pull with Line & Half Circle*** capture the forms and feelings of a painful loss of a loved one, especially shocking in the case of an instant, unexpected death. The sharp and jagged edges speak visual volumes to the individual, an unknown portrait of an existential experience, looming large in its loud silence.

Pliny the Elder, in his Natural History (ca. 77 – 79 CE), relates the myth of art’s origin in a fable about the daughter of Butades, a Greek potter from Corinth. She drew the outlined profile of her lover’s shadow as it was projected on the wall by a lamp, just before he left for battle, and which her father made into a sculptural relief. Thus, before the real shadow departs with its owner it offers the young woman an image with which to represent her beloved — that which she fixes on the wall for all time. According to art historian, Victor I. Stoichita, in his remarkable book, A Short History of the Shadow (1997), the hidden meaning of this myth involves the transcendence of death. What this story tells us is that love and loss are universal themes, in life and in art,

visually located in the shadow. This theme interests Carey and is found in her previous artworks such as the gigantic, monumental gridded *Mourning Wall* (2000) of 100 Polaroid grey negatives; *Self-Portrait @ 48* documents her own losses over the years, her silhouette a silvery grey of 50 negatives; and the minimal, monochrome series of seven Polaroid positives and their negatives in *Family Portrait* (1996 & 1998), which Carey calls “grief work”; it parallels her breakthrough and discovery known as a *Pull* and begins *Photography Degree Zero*, her Polaroid practice.

Paper photography began with the negative image discovered by the British inventor William Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1877). Briefly stated, he placed an object, such as a leaf or piece of lace, on light-sensitive paper, and exposed it to the sun. What was left behind were light’s tracings of the object, its first face, or *prima facie*, a ghostly outline and silhouetted form on a dark ground, its “shadow.” The photographic object was first named a *photogenic drawing*, then *photogram* (1834), the term still used today. The negative paper image was later contact-printed to make its opposite, the positive (1840). Thus, the negative-to-positive duality, from its origins at the dawn of the medium, is the foundation for all photography, a powerful metaphor and unique object, picture-sign and visual symbol. The vintage phrase *drawing with light* — from the Greek and French roots, respectively: *phos* for light and *graphe* for drawing — adds further meaning.

The negative/positive axis inherent in photography reveals content within context: material and process result in a visual picture. Light is photography’s indexical. Evidence of this striking and dramatic co-existence is seen in the work of the other great 19th-century inventor of photography, the Frenchman Louis-Jacques Mandé Daguerre (1787-1851), with his mirror-like daguerreotypes, largely used for portraiture and rendered in crisp, hyper-real detail. Both of these inventions would be prescient of Polaroid’s instant technology that was introduced by the American, Edwin H. Land (1909-1991); his inventions with cameras/films *the* game changer of the 20th century.

Pull with Line & Half Circle represents and pays homage as a *memento mori* to a city well-known for its centuries of creative inspiration throughout our global culture — Paris, in: film (the derivation of Carey’s proposal title), art and photography, fashion and design, poetry and literature, architecture and philosophy, culinary arts and music, and that pinnacle of human experience, love, which unites our humanity. This is photography’s indexical — light — its gift to Paris, City of Light.

Ellen Carey’s *Photography Degree Zero* concepts and images begin with light — its presence, absence or half-life — and acknowledge it as *the* primary agent in all photography, being both *indexical* and *prima facie*. Light informs all of her work, often in tandem with universal themes such as joy and mourning. It underscores these states with bright color, shadow image, or the physical positive and/or negative print as metaphor, a different interpretation of ‘camera vision’ and its ‘picture signs’ as seen in the traditional portrait, for example, in photography. *Pull with Line & Half Circle* removes the outward signifiers of a person’s face and body, replacing them with a universal “picture sign”, a new portrait of a new order, that of the conundrum of life’s inevitable demise as wholly human, noted in the book *No Voice is Ever Wholly Lost* by Louise J. Kaplan, author and psychoanalyst (1929-2012).

Living in a post-9/11 world (the artist was in Washington D.C. that fateful day), Ellen Carey offers us a visual lament on the dichotomy between life and death, between those dramatic changes that take place in the blink of an eye, compelling in the context of global terrorism and the urban mass shootings. Her *Pull with Line & Half Circle* asks us to remember and mourn for all those lives, who are loved and now lost.