



First Doubt: Optical Confusion in Modern Photography Selections from the Allan Chasanoff Collection

Many photographers have been intrigued by the baffling distortions—both subtle and disquieting—that can result when the camera “captures” the real world. *First Doubt: Optical Confusion in Modern Photography* explores this fascinating yet seldom-discussed undercurrent in the medium’s history. The exhibition features approximately one hundred photographs taken by a diverse array of twentieth-century photographers, including Imogen Cunningham, Lee Friedlander, Florence Henri, and Brassai, drawn from the collection of Allan Chasanoff, B.A. 1961, as well as from the Gallery’s permanent collection. *First Doubt* challenges the common notion that a photograph is an easily understood representation of what stands before a camera’s lens. By employing unexpected juxtapositions, novel vantage points, and unusual patterns of light, shadow, and texture, the photographs on view destabilize the viewer’s eye, causing it to question what it is seeing.

During the medium’s infancy, many early photographers, expecting their cameras to offer clear and coherent views of the world, were often frustrated by how their images seemed to render the world unfamiliar and ambiguous. In the modern era, a range of image makers began to embrace these ambiguities as unique and valued attributes of camera vision. From the playful experiments of Bauhaus artists to the disquieting images of those working out of a Surrealist tradition, many of the photographs in *First Doubt* were made expressly to disorient or startle the viewer. In other photographs in the exhibition, the artists seem to have stumbled across scenes of confusion quite accidentally.

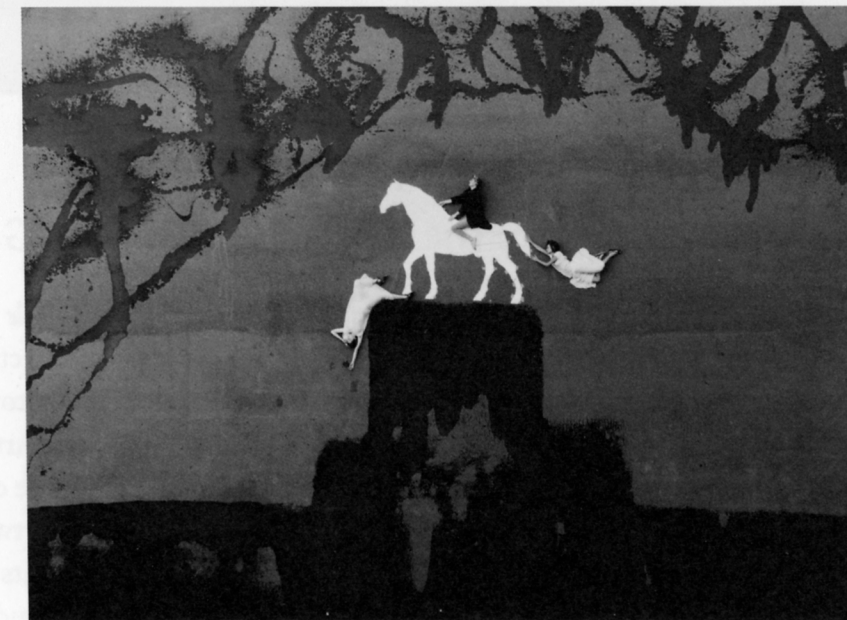
The exhibition, however, is not one focused on how photographs are made but rather on how they are perceived. As Joshua Chuang, Assistant Curator of Photographs and the organizer of this exhibition, explains, “Neither the strategies, intentions, and serendipity of the photographers nor how their pictures function to confuse remain as critical as the fact that they *do* confuse—if only for a moment.” In Karin Rosenthal’s *Belly Landscape* (1980), for example, dramatic shadows and the reflection of sunlight on water seem to form a picturesque desert landscape. A closer investigation of the photograph reveals the dunes to be a human body, upending the initial illusion of the picture. Chuang adds, “The pictures themselves contain a paradox: they confuse because they hold still these particular incidents of confusion, yet it is this stillness that allows viewers the opportunity to resolve the optical problem.” Rosenthal’s image, along with the other photographs in the exhibition, urges the viewer to confront and decipher the confusions within the frame.

In the current digital era, ubiquitous image-editing software has made it easy to manipulate photographs so that they appear too good—or strange—to be true. Well before “Photoshop” became a verb in our visual vocabulary, however, photographs such as those included in *First Doubt* resisted the notion that the world could be satisfactorily seen and known through the lens. Collectively, these pictures remind us that the camera is at best an imperfect surrogate for human vision.

Museumgoers are encouraged to visit the exhibition several times during its three-month installation. Individual works in the exhibition will periodically be shifted and reinstalled to create new juxtapositions among the photographs, allowing the viewer to experience them in a different way upon each visit.

Related Publication

This exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue, *First Doubt: Optical Confusion in Modern Photography*, with essays by Allan Chasanoff, Joshua Chuang, and Steven W. Zucker,



available in hardcover at the Gallery’s Bookstore.

Related Programming

Martin Jay, the Sidney Hellman Ehrman Professor of History at the University of California, Berkeley, presents the lecture, “Magical Nominalism: Photography and the Reenchantment of the World,” on Thursday, October 16, at 5:30 PM. Exhibition talks take place on Wednesday, October 8, at 12:20 PM and Tuesdays, October 14, and November 11 and 18, at 4:00 PM.

A Master Class on *First Doubt: Optical Confusion in Modern Photography* is offered by Joshua Chuang on Thursdays, October 30, and November 13 and 20, at 5:30 PM. To register for the Master Class series, please call 203.432.9525.

First Doubt: Optical Confusion in Modern Photography is on view October 7, 2008–January 4, 2009. Exhibition and accompanying publication organized by Joshua Chuang, Assistant Curator of Photographs, and made possible by an endowment created with a challenge grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Florence B. Selden Fund, with additional support provided by Mr. Allan K. Chasanoff, B.A. 1961.