

1 *New Work #93*, from the series *New Work*  
© Jordan Tate.

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# The Perfect Playground

It's still life, but not as you know it... **Diane Smyth** reports on the resurgence of studio-based photography among a new generation keen to investigate the medium itself.

Last year's Deutsche Börse Photography Prize proved something of a watershed. Not one but three of the four artists shortlisted by The Photographers' Gallery jury presented a conceptual, formalist practice – one that has been long emerging, but which seems to have taken the art world by storm in the past two or three years. In the event the prize was won by documentarist Jim Goldberg, but the shortlist seemed to confirm the suspicions of critics arguing The Photographers' Gallery was interested only in “a narrow thread of photographic curation” (as Chris Steele-Perkins put it). One of the three even preferred to be known as a “conceptual artist” rather than a photographer.

And yet the three artists, Thomas Demand, Elad Lassry and Roe Ethridge, can be seen as indicative of a reviving interest in studio photography. In particular, it seems many young photographers are embracing still life – a genre much neglected over the past 20 years, despite the fact that the two other genres with similarly

long historical traditions, portraiture and landscape, have flourished.

This trend seemed confirmed when *Frieze* magazine ran a still life-photography special last year, including a feature titled *Depth of Focus* by Chris Wiley, which argued that a new generation have been “developing new approaches to photography” over the last five years. This followed the *Rencontres d'Arles* 2010 edition, which was skewed towards conceptualism, and an exhibition at Foam gallery in Amsterdam last autumn devoted to modern Dutch still lifes. “For a wide group of contemporary photographers, still life continues to inspire, but the concept has been modernised,” ran Foam's press notice.

## Beyond the lens

Why is still life back in vogue? The answer may have something to do with pragmatism. Lucas Blalock, one of the leading lights of this new wave, says he first got into studio photography because he wanted to make images every day,

2-3 *Untitled (Dirty Pun)* [left] and *Tenting* [right]  
© Lucas Blalock.

4 *Orphan Girl At The Cemetery* © Eileen Quinlan.



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and “the limited hours at my disposal, along with the more general constraints of living in NYC, moved that practice into my living room”. But Blalock, who is discussed at length in Wiley’s article, soon began to view working in-studio as a more proactive decision, and gradually it became an integral part of his practice.

His recent book *Towards A Warm Math*, published by Hassla, is mostly composed of studio-based still life shots disrupted by slow exposures, mirrors and deliberately heavy-handed Photoshop. “Instead of thinking about making pictures with a camera, I have come to think about making pictures with a camera, computer and studio,” says the 32-year-old, who is studying for his Master of Fine Arts at UCLA in Los Angeles but already attracting the American art elite. “This larger apparatus comes with a set of rules or moves that come from the historic uses of the various technologies involved. All three of these technologies were produced to exert greater control over a picture of the world, and were meant to support that picture while remaining ostensibly invisible. My work uses these off-stage techniques and brings them on-stage and into the picture.”

Blalock’s work is experimental and idiosyncratic, but he says he’s noticed other

young photographers working in the studio with similar concerns. “I think the idea about what it means to make pictures is really in flux,” he says. “I think the studio itself has come to function like a camera in contemporary practice – I mean that in some ways it is the aperture through which the photographer lets materials into the studio that constructs meaning, as much as the light entering the lens. I think the studio provides a model or scenario for looking that re-inscribes the camera’s function.”

#### Art and commerce

Eileen Quinlan, another American discussed in Wiley’s article, takes a similar approach. She worked in advertising for five years after her BA, then assisted a series of commercial and fashion photographers, gaining “some technical skills that were considered too cheesy or slick to be mobilised in the name of art”. When she won a place on the Columbia University MFA she decided to focus on studio photography and reclaim these commercial techniques, “using these tools rather than apologising for them”.

In her work she puts the tools centre stage rather than at the service of a product, creating what she’s called “product photography without the product”. One of her series is called

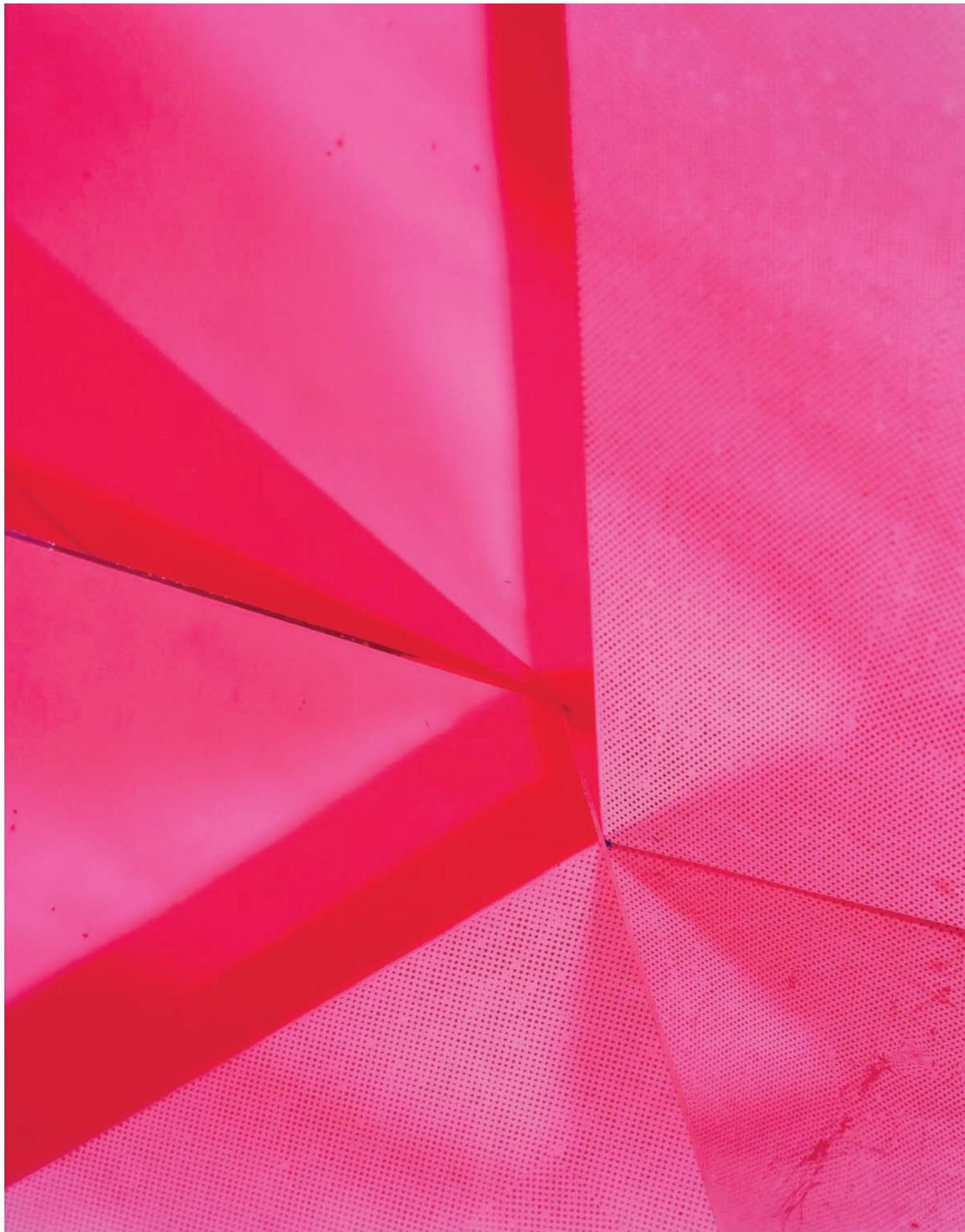
*Smoke and Mirrors*, for example, while another named each image after a different perfume brand. “I don’t think of my work as a critique of commercial hocus pocus,” she says, “but it does reflect my attempt to grapple with how commercial photography operates, how it cajoles and seduces.”

“I use a table-top setup, strobes, coloured gels, a large format camera, pieces of foam, fabric, and reflective surfaces to sculpt and bounce light, smoke to create atmosphere, different backdrops – much the same way product photographers worked in the days before Photoshop. I don’t so much choose colours as arrive at them through a process of chance. The four gels I limit myself to using [red, blue, green, and yellow] produce a lot of different colours, depending on their combinations and the intensity of the lights that pass through them.”

“Of course, I do choose which iterations to print and which to hang, and I choose these particular colours because they exist somewhere between being pleasing and offputting. They are almost too much. I seek this limit because I can’t bring myself to make a pretty thing, and I hope these colours make people think actively about how the colour is operating on them and manipulating them. That’s why I’ll present the



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same image in multiple colours - [I'm interested in] what is an individual viewer drawn to or repelled by and why? And what associations do the different colours raise?"

Coincidentally, commercial still life photography is also having a moment, with forward-thinking brands and magazines commissioning work that's slick, but remains cutting edge. Dutch photographers Scheltens & Abbenes have been hired by companies including Cos, Uniqlo and Alexander van Slobbe to create graphic and daringly undescriptive product shots for their ad campaigns, for example, while *Fantastic Man* and *The Gentlewoman* have commissioned them to shoot near-abstract editorial stories. And some of these photographers pass between commercial and fine art worlds with ease.

Ingmar Swalve, another artist from The Netherlands, who was featured in the *Still/Life* exhibition at Foam gallery in Amsterdam last autumn, has shot avant-garde abstracts for clients such as *Wallpaper\** magazine and Vitra. Even so, he says there's a limit to how far most commercial organisations will go, and saves his

more experimental still lifes for his personal projects. With these, like Blalock and Quinlan, he's interested in disrupting the viewer's perception, and using techniques that make them question what they're looking at.

"The last [personal] series I did was a collaboration with stylist Mik Zandijk," he says. "We both work in commercial photography and wonder sometimes what we are making. Why is a beautifully designed product more likely to be photographed than a plastic cup? Why does there have to be perfection in this kind of photography? How can totally normal things become exceptional when being photographed? We try to question that in our own work and like to search for things we cannot use in the commercial field. People are used to photography nowadays, so you have to take it a step further to really get people looking and maybe thinking about what they are seeing. That's why we like to play with ordinary subjects, search for an imperfection or try to create something that is a little 'off', either in styling or photography. Photography can be challenging to look at; there should be space to wonder what you're seeing as

a viewer. It's fine when it can be easily consumed in the commercial field, but there's much more to look at."

For Blalock this dividing line between art and commerce is key, because while he also uses the techniques of commercial still lifes, he's not interested in showing off objects as products. "Elad Lassry and Roe Ethridge [two of the key artists associated with the new concern for the more formalist aspects of photography, both of whom were shortlisted for last year's Deutsche Börse] are interested in the commercial image and the way a picture can migrate across those boundaries," he says. "I love pictures by both of them, but feel like in my own work I am trying to develop relationships to the objects that frustrate their reading as commodities and in turn pull them into another sense of economy. But while I am not interested in making commercial pictures, I am interested in borrowing tools from commercial production and using them for my own ends. If photography has a dominant or major language I would say it is commerce. My practice is invested in using that major language to minor ends."



5 (From left to right) #1, #4, #9 and #7, from the *Sun Set Series* © Fleur van Dodewaard.



### Towards abstraction

Canadian artist Jessica Eaton, who showed work alongside Blalock at last year's Contact Festival in Toronto, has taken this approach one step further with a series called *Cubes for Albers and LeWitt*, which uses simple, rectangular gels and multiple exposures to explore the tri-colour process. Recording tones and shades rather than objects, let alone products, it is in a sense a record of pure technique.

"I started working with the tri-colour process in 2004 or so, having found it in an old Kodak photography manual," she says. "I was often frustrated by the extreme primaries and secondaries the process achieved in more simple practice, while knowing intellectually that the additive colour theory it employs was capable of producing all of the recordable tones when in registration. I was interested in the process and wanted to find a way to have more control over it. The choice to use a cube was to simplify things – as the title suggests, both [artists Joseph] Albers and [Sol] LeWitt pointed me to the cube as the form for its neutrality. They used the cube as a platform to project other ideas or phenomena."

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In fact, Eaton says she has never thought of her work in terms of still lifes, or even objects. On the contrary, she enjoys recording things she has never seen, "using colour I only imagine". Pictorial and abstract, her work prioritises the medium of photography and its ability to make images over its apparently indexical relationship with reality; in fact, she says she doesn't even know "what indexical is supposed to mean".

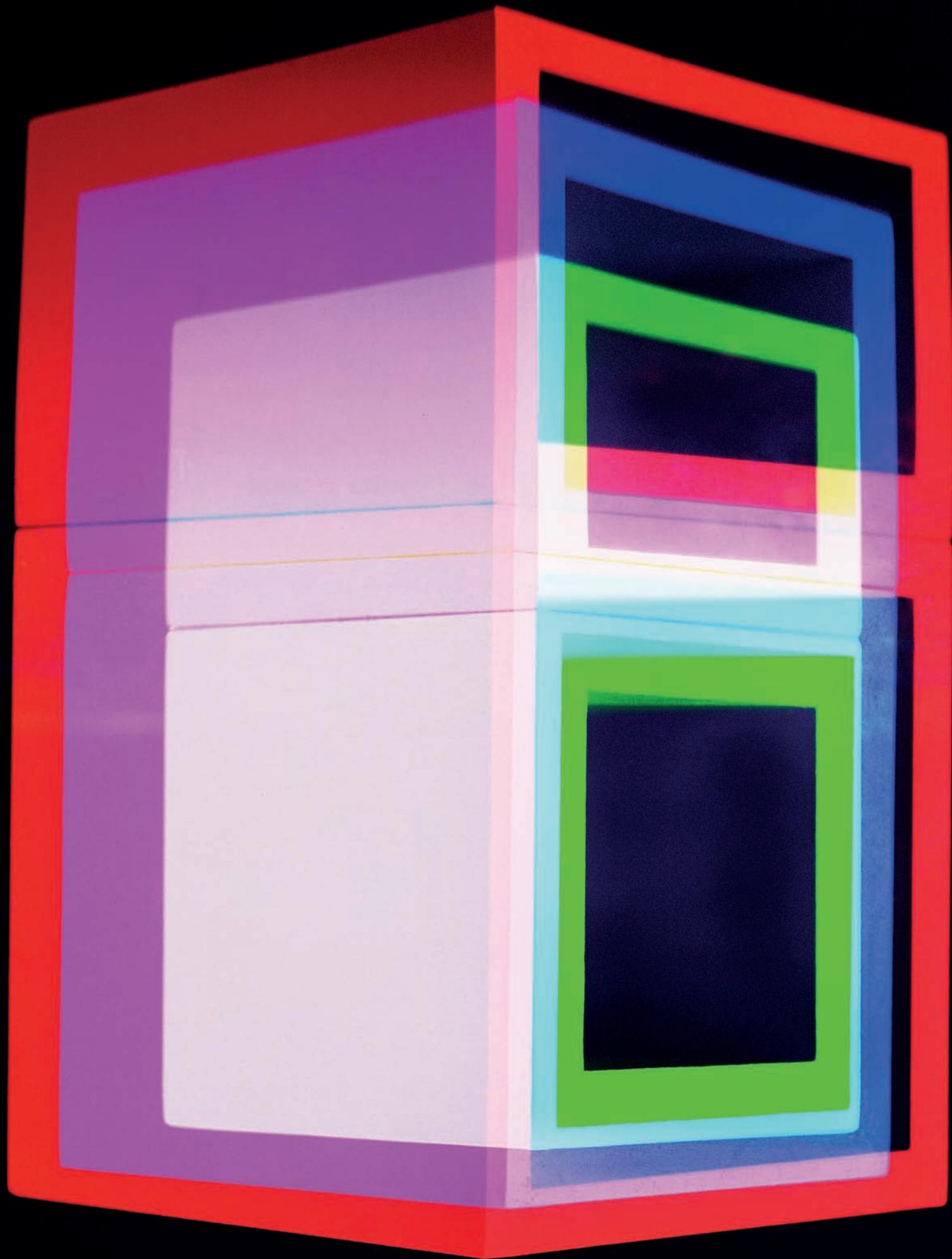
"It is like no matter what I do, at least I did something that says that analogue photography can be something else – that it doesn't have to be intrinsically bound to the visible world," says the 35-year-old. "It is full of possibility."

Fleur van Dodewaard, another Dutchwoman featured in Foam's *Still/Life* show, takes a similar approach with her *Sun Set Series*. The set of 13 images uses a mirror, a table, and reflected colours, and is shot with the sleek minimalism of much contemporary product photography, but it doesn't aim to make the objects interesting in their own right. It instead uses them to reference the still life genre and as elements in an interesting image – and thereby question the nature of photography and perception.

"Other than the traditional still life, the objects in my work don't carry meaning or function in themselves," she says. "They are materials, shapes and colours. Simultaneously, they embody an idea.... My working process often starts with a question in relation to the medium, and hopefully ends with a good image. But this questioning is not a goal in itself; it serves as a tool. It is rather a metaphor for questioning the world instead, which deals with the issue of how we look at things, and enables me to use the medium that normally records the world as it is to create imaginary perspectives."

### Crossing genres

The work of Iranian-born artist Shirana Shahbazi, winner of the Citibank Photography Prize in 2002, is also concerned with photographic representation too, and her most recent book *Then Again*, published by Steidl, includes abstract still life images that have been identified with pictorialism. Urs Stahel, who curated her exhibition at Fotomuseum Winterthur last autumn, has interpreted her work in terms of a move towards pure imagemaking, writing in



6 From the series *Cubes for Albers and LeWitt*  
© Jessica Eaton.

7 From the series *Spill* © Ingmar Swalue,  
created with the stylist Mik Zandijk.



the introduction to *Then Again* that “the focus is now on pure pictoriality” and “a free, celebratory pictoriality; for a delight in colour and form in structure, in rhythms, dynamics and movement; a delight in pictures, their visual impact and their more self-effacing utopias”.

Shahbazi doesn't see it this way. “I did discuss this a lot with Urs, because I actually do not agree,” she says. “I would never make a separation between beauty and content, meaning that my work is definitely not just trying to be pretty. I put the abstract images in relation to non-abstract images, the images question and influence each other.... You can go both ways, back and forth, see something real, lose your path, get back, see a deeper space in the abstract images, see a flatter image in a landscape, put them into relation. [It's about] looking at pictures, and asking yourself questions.”

The Zurich-based artist points out that she has never exhibited her still life photographs by themselves, always mixing them up with portraits and landscapes, to encourage her viewers to question their perceptions and the medium they are looking at.

Many of her contemporaries work in this way too – Lassry, Ethridge and Blalock all use a variety of genres. So too do Andrey Bogush, the 25-year-old Russian artist whose work was exhibited at the Hyères International Festival of Fashion and Photography last year, and who was selected for Foam magazine's Talent Issue; Jordan Tate, runner-up in *Aperture's* 2010 Portfolio Prize, and Bryan Dooley, an MA student at London's Royal College of Art, who recently exhibited with Blalock, Eaton and Scheltens &

Abbenes in Amsterdam. “I see a range of genres as a way to create a rhythm between images, causing the viewer to reverberate between perceived fact and fiction,” says Dooley.

“I see many young photographers working with seemingly disparate images and I think the trend is at once a rejection of previous photographic methodologies, yet still deeply rooted in the photographic tradition of series,” adds Tate. “I view each of my pieces as a sentence in a broader dialogue about the form, function, and implications of the photograph. Many of the artists I see working in this manner tend to be addressing similar ideas, and I see their work as a method in which to understand the paradigmatic shift that photography underwent as digital input reached a critical mass.”

### Digital paradigm

For Tate, digital imaging is key to understanding contemporary photography, and as well as combining still lifes with other photographic genres, he mixes it with computer-generated 3D, screen grabs and animated “marching ant” clipping paths. Digital techniques and processes have fundamentally altered the ways in which we are able to deal with images, he argues, and “it is this expanded ground in which I attempt to situate my work, as a dialogue about how we approach photographs, what it means to be a photographer, and how we can reconcile the two”.

Bogush argues something similar, and has included Photoshop graphics in his *Color Picker* series. “These images of colour pickers function as a very direct reference to Photoshop as well as to digital photography in general,” he says. “My

works focus on how the image was done and how the viewer would be decoding it.”

Hans Gremmen and Jaap Scheeren's *Fake Flowers in Full Colour* also uses still life to investigate digital imaging. The pair photographed a bouquet of fake flowers, then digitally separated the image into cyan, magenta, yellow and black; they then painted four further bunches of fake flowers to match the separations. Next they photographed each set of flowers, used those four files to print the images – adding colours one at a time in an attempt to put the colours back together. The final image is slightly off on all but one stem (“because we weren't good at flower-arranging” laughs Scheeren), but the end result wasn't really the point – the project was more about the process, and about becoming more aware of digital processing.

“The techniques we use every day are given techniques, which are hardly questioned,” says Scheeren. “During these technical processes many decisions are made by the computer in a split second. We wanted to use digital techniques without the digital process, to get a grip again on the processes that surround us. People nowadays grow up in the digital world, it's something they take for granted.”

Blalock's images, with their deliberately gauche Photoshop interventions, do something similar – but like Scheeren, Bogus and Tate, he feels digital technology has impacted on more than just the surface. His work is “engaged in understanding and remodeling what it means to make a photograph”, he says, after the digital revolution. “There has been so much made of the material transition going on right now with



8 Images from the series *Fake Flowers in Full Colour*.  
The plate showing the 'black' flowers is not reproduced here.) Images © Hans Gremmen and Jaap Scheeren.

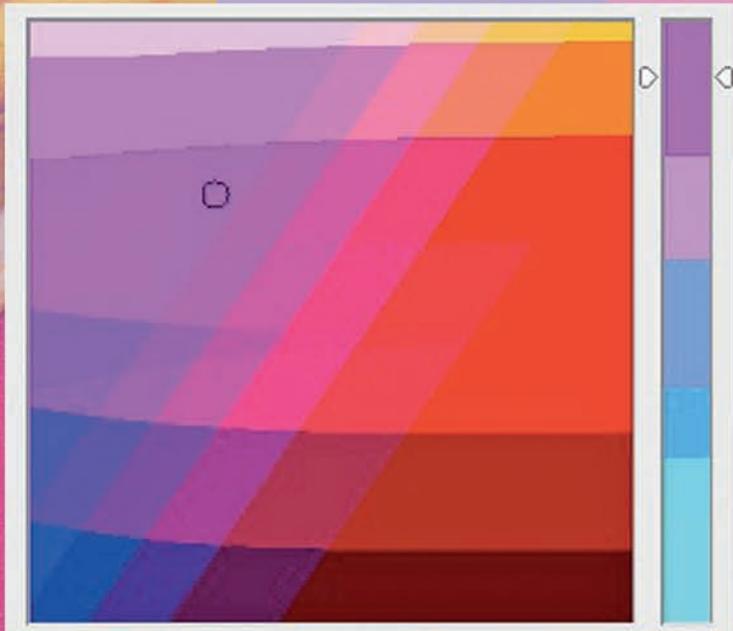
9 *Komposition-04-2011* from the book *Then Again*, published by Steidle. Image © Shirana Shahbazi.

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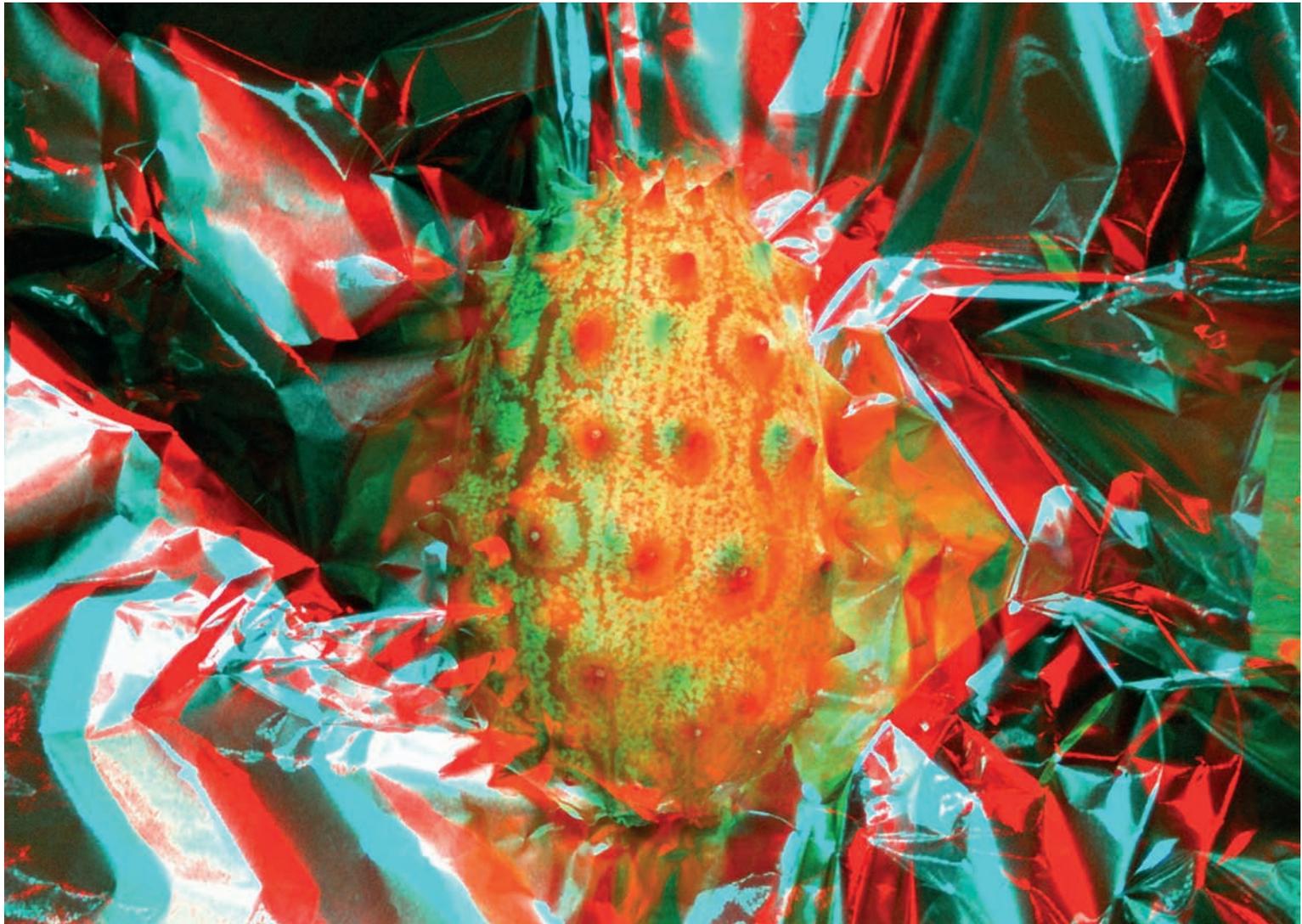




10 From the series *Color Pickers* © Andrey Bogush.

11 *New Work #38*, from the series *New Work*  
© Jordan Tate.

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digital, and, in turn, there is a lot of talk about the loss of the indexical aspect, but the history of photography is already rife with aberrations from this viewpoint,” he told Sam Falls in an interview published by *Humble Arts* in 2010.

“To me the real point of interest is one of scale. I feel that the film picture is based on a model easily associated with the photographer and with the eye, so that its scale is human and seemingly dependent on the individual’s looking. I feel that digital has interrupted this metaphor by aligning the picture not so much with the eye but with the technology. We come to a juncture where the picture is a bit of information that relates abstractly much more to the web or the archive than it does to the person.”

To Blalock, this change has an effect whether the photographer is using digital techniques or not (and, in fact, he shoots on film and then scans his images). Similarly, Eaton says *Cubes for Albers and LeWitt* is informed by digital imaging, despite being shot on film. “Even with my analogue work I really consider everything at this point to be a hybrid,” she says. “The way

I am able to think of a photograph, regardless of how I make it, is informed by digitisation. I am conceptual digital by simply being alive right now. Photography is inherently connected to technology, so if the technology changes drastically, so will photography. Photography has had a revolution via its technical dependence – digitisation has reframed the entire medium, and all aspects of it, not just still life.”

#### Experimental mode

This implies a new generation of photographers is interested in the medium because it has changed – but, as Eaton points out, digital imaging has reframed the entire spectrum of photography, not just still life or studio work. So why is still life so hot right now? Perhaps it’s down to practicalities – Blalock and Eaton refer to their studios as laboratories, and still life, with its static elements and controlled conditions, allows for the kind of experimental engagement with the medium that they’re interested in. But perhaps it’s also still life’s historical link with painting, and its to-and-fro relationship between

object and representation, that make it an ideal starting point from which to question any media.

“Still life is the perfect way to experiment,” says Colette Olof, curator of *Foam’s Still/Life* exhibition. “In the 17th century it was the best way of experimenting, since important issues such as religion and politics weren’t used to experiment with. Young artists are looking for new ways to express themselves, and with the studio and still life they can try many different possibilities. For artists interested in crossover media, it is the perfect playground to look for new aesthetics and expressions.” *BJP*

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