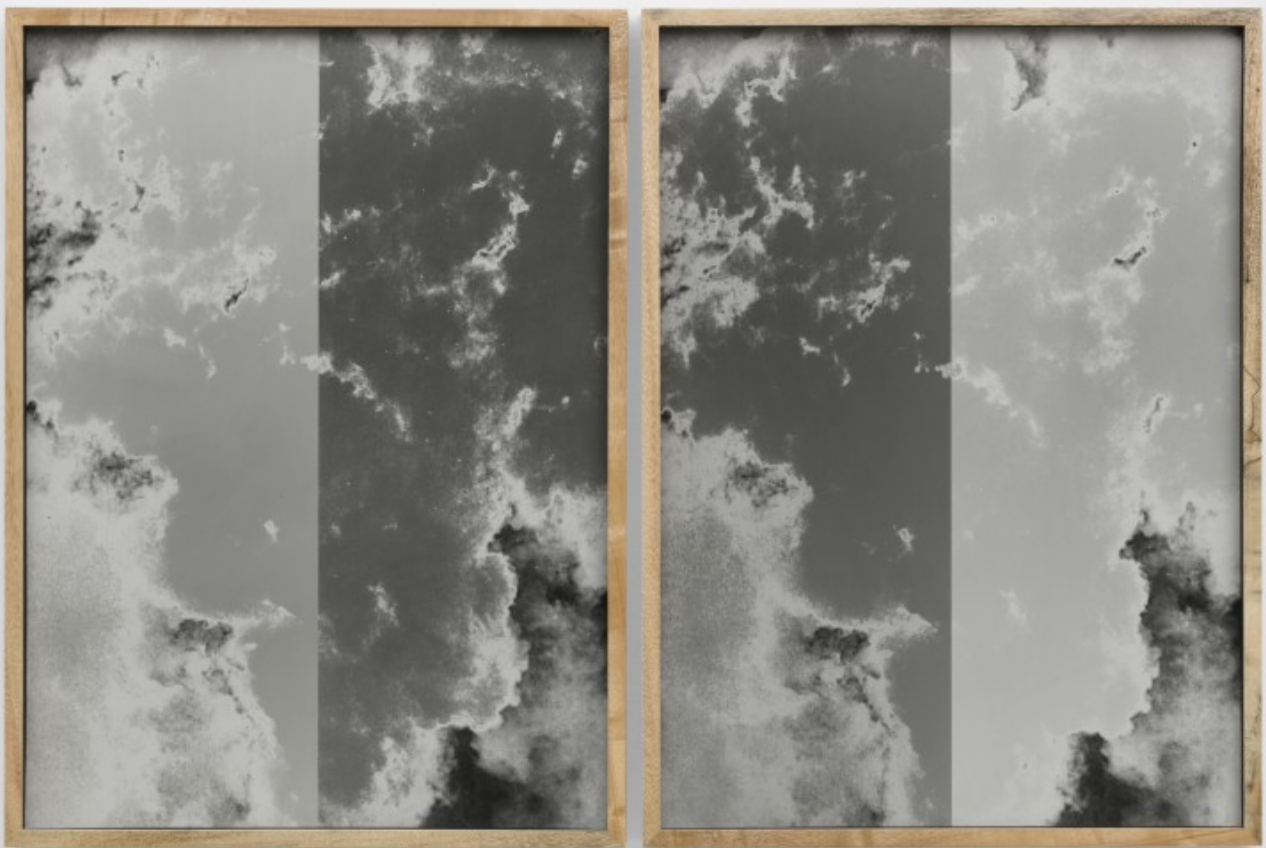


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ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

Review: Think of it as photography, reinvented. Why Lisa Oppenheim's art entrances



Lisa Oppenheim, photograph of "Nitrate Film Vault Test, Belsville Maryland Fire Pattern (1949/2019) (Version I)," 2020. Tiled silver gelatin photographs exposed to firelight. (Jeff McLane/Tanya Bonakdar Gallery)

By LEAH OLLMAN

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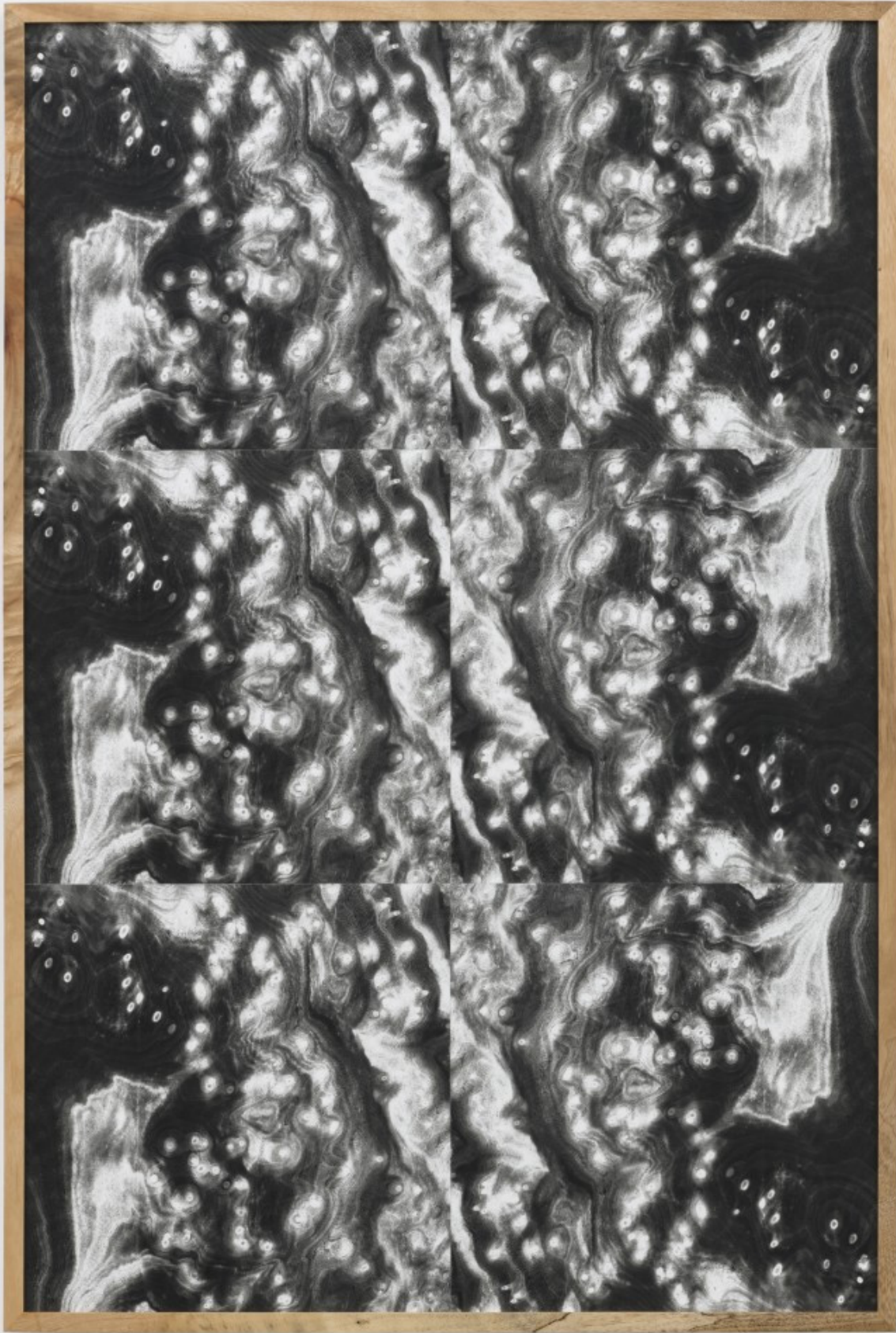
"The mirror with a memory" is how Oliver Wendell Holmes described photography in 1859, when the medium was still relatively new.

Flash forward more than a century and a half to Lisa Oppenheim's entrancing and challenging show at Tanya Bonakdar Gallery in L.A. The New York artist has long been fascinated with the representational capacity and limitations of photography — what exactly that mirror reflects and how incompletely it does the job of remembering. She approaches the material history of photography as both scholar and maker, exploring physical properties of the medium in terms of cultural consequence as well as visual potential.

In the Bonakdar show "The Eternal Substitute," Oppenheim muses on celluloid, a cheap, early plastic. In 1889, Kodak introduced celluloid roll film, a major advance in the ease, portability and standardization of photographic practice, and the technological catalyst enabling the rise of motion pictures. The material's flammability ultimately made it impractical to use and dangerous to store.

This history underlies everything on view, but Oppenheim's work is far from didactic. It stirs through the senses. Her "Landscape Portraits," for instance, are ravishing, the latest in a series of photograms made by placing thin sheets of wood veneer on photo-sensitive paper. The images that result read as luminous stars and swirling galaxies, bright cosmic mysteries swimming in a charcoal sea. Oppenheim frames the prints in inverted pairs, presenting a Rorschach of possibilities. The wood Oppenheim uses for these versions? Camphor, from which celluloid is derived. The frames too.

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Lisa Oppenheim, "Landscape Portraits (Camphor) (Version III)," 2020. Black and white silver gelatin photographs in Camphor frame, 32-1/2 inches by 21-7/8 inches by 1-3/8 inches (Jeff McLane/Tanya Bonakdar Gallery)

Celluloid's transparency and photography's mirror-like reflectivity are evoked in the works filling the gallery's large central space. The silver-toned photograms are pure materiality, chemistry and optics. Their entrancing surfaces, some slightly streaked, some faintly mottled, invoke silver, gold, pewter. They granulate whatever they reflect, like mirrors with hazy memories.

Oppenheim juxtaposes two such photograms per frame and then hangs the framed pairs singly or as sets of two or three. The different dimensions of the works refer to the aspect ratios of still photographs and silent motion picture film.



Lisa Oppenheim, "4:3:2 (Version III)," 2020. Tiled silver gelatin photograms. 30-3/8 inches by 120-3/8 inches by 1-1/2 inches (Jeff McLane/Tanya Bonakdar Gallery)

The narrative arc of Oppenheim's show mimics the story of celluloid itself, which ends in destructive fire. For the new entries in her Smoke series, she uses details from an archival photograph of a film vault aflame. The gorgeous billows are repeated and altered, their tonal reversals achieved through solarization by firelight.

Time seems to spiral in Oppenheim's work. Her return to the origins and fundamentals of photography becomes its own starting point, as she re-examines and reinvents the medium. Her process-driven, conceptually oriented sensibility, rooted in the art of the '60s, turns out to be just the thing to contend with the digitally dominant present.



Lisa Oppenheim's show "The Eternal Substitute" is on view at Tanya Bonakdar Gallery in Los Angeles through March 21. (Jeff McLane/Tanya Bonakdar Gallery)

Lisa Oppenheim

Where: Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, 1010 N.
Highland Ave., L.A.

When: Tuesdays-Saturdays, through March 21

Info: (323) 380-7172,
www.tanyabonakdargallery.com

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