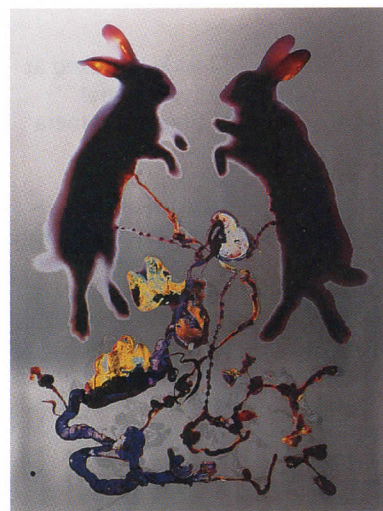


Opposite:
"Untitled, 1992."
This page,
clockwise from
top: "Invocation,
1992";
"Love, 1992";
"Untitled, 1992."



M A S T E R C L A S S



© ADAM FUSS 1992 (4)



no muss, no Fuss

For Adam Fuss, photograms are the ultimate form of printmaking. But you have to **get your hands dirty.**

Adam Fuss has finally found the largest piece of acid-free paper in creation, a full 80 inches wide. That's wide enough to arrange a full-grown human skeleton across—something he plans to do to make what might be the world's biggest image in a variation of Van Dyke brown, an alternative printing process he has rediscovered. Fuss is toying with the chemistry required to sensitize such a large sheet. And he's still searching for the skeletons he'll need for his gigantic photogram—an image of a mass grave to be exposed by sunlight on his Manhattan

rooftop. (His studio isn't big enough.)

Fuss's extraordinary work is anything but grotesque, though. Its physical beauty—a quality for which collectors seem to have a newfound appreciation—has helped make him one of today's most successful fine-art photographers. Fuss has achieved that status mainly with his radical approach to one of photography's oldest techniques, the photogram: an image made by placing objects in direct contact with photographic paper.

Photograms are ordinarily a darkroom exercise for beginning photographers, who then move on to making pictures with a

camera. Fuss took the opposite path. "I started out shooting with a 35mm SLR, but I was using it the wrong way—doing anything I could to mess up the clean, clear image it was supposed to create," he says. "So I switched to a cardboard pinhole camera." Fuss actually discovered the photogram not by studying its erstwhile masters—photographers such as Man Ray and László Moholy-Nagy—but by the sort of technical accident that delights photographers. "One time I forgot to uncover the pinhole for the exposure, and there was a light leak in the camera," he explains. "The light raked across the film and made



Bottom left: Fuss's 1993 Polaroid positive self-portrait. Opposite: "Untitled, 1992."

a photogram of the dust inside. I looked at it and thought, 'That's really beautiful.'"
Fuss's epiphany: He didn't need a camera at all to make his kind of photographs.

Fuss's studio is not the usual neat-as-a-pin, hardware-heavy photographer's abode. It is mostly occupied by oversized flat trays and big sinks. A beat-up plastic tube for processing his 40x60 Ilfochrome paper sits in one corner. Handling big sheets of paper is, in fact, Fuss's main technical problem. "The process itself is absolutely simple," he says. "It's just photographic paper, an object, and light."

Not quite that simple. For some of his most intriguing images—the silhouette of a baby in a field of yellow-orange ripples, for example—

Fuss immerses the object in shallow water. (Ilfochrome paper turned the baby dark rather than the usual light because it reverses tones.) The pattern of the water's ripples is frozen because instead of exposing the paper to a continuous light source, Fuss uses a photographic flash unit, often gelled to add color and held at an angle to give objects a more dimensional appearance. Sometimes the water itself is Fuss's subject, the photogram a study in pure ripples. Or the light may become content, as it is in his images of concentric colored circles created by swinging a gelled flashlight over the paper. Even the object Fuss chooses for a photogram's "subject" may interact directly with the paper. When Fuss bought whole rabbit carcasses to eviscerate for a series of images called "Love," he

found that the intestines caused a chemical reaction in the paper—creating multicolored artifacts where they lay in contact with it. "Anyone can do this stuff," Fuss insists. "My pictures aren't about technique."

While the uniqueness of each image might lead a savvy gallery owner to charge a premium, for the photographer it's part and parcel of artistic creation. "Think of the baby moving in the water," offers Fuss, whose handsome new book, *Adam Fuss* (Arena Editions/D.A.P.), includes that image and many less familiar ones. "The gesture and patterns are about one random moment." Yet a photogram is about both time and substance. "I like very much that the thing itself—the child—was on that piece of paper," says Fuss. "There's something magical about that directness." —RUSSELL HART



Fuss on art and craft



© MARIANA COOK 1998

ON PRINTMAKING For me, so much of photography is in the printing itself. Since I'm not using a camera, I can't just take a picture and print it, like most photographers. The image doesn't exist until the print is made. And there's not just one way to make the print. It's a continuing series of refinements—finding the right light, the right angle, the right density, the right chemistry. Because of that process, I understand my work better. Printmaking gives me the space and time to find out what I want to say.

ON MAN RAY Man Ray's photograms aren't that interesting to me. I don't like the contemporary cultural objects that he worked with—the guns and wineglasses and typography. Go back to the 19th century, though—to Fox Talbot's contact prints of botanical specimens, for example—and you find photograms with a beautiful ghostly quality. That quality was partly the product of imperfect technology, and the pictures are much more authentic experiments in that sense. To me, those 19th-century photograms are filled with absolute beauty.

ON BEAUTY When I made the image of rabbits and their viscera, I wasn't trying to make a pretty picture. I was trying to make a picture that had both a certain quality of line and a symbolic meaning—both abstract and figurative. I think photography allows a more meaningful marriage of the two forms than other art media.

© ADAM FUSS 1993/COURTESY ROBERT MILLER GALLERY, NEW YORK

