

ART OF ILLUSION

PHOTOGRAPHY & PERCEPTUAL PLAY



“Seeing is believing” is a phrase that’s familiar to many. But just how true is it? The works featured in this exhibition challenge us to consider whether photographs accurately convey visual truths or merely present illusions created by the photographer. The artists represented here use a range of technical and conceptual approaches, from fabricating surprising subjects for their cameras to manipulating the camera’s controls to play with space, scale, light and perspective. Through these and other techniques, their works invite us to contemplate the many ways that photography shapes and challenges our perceptions.

EXHIBITION CONTENTS

This exhibition contains approximately 50 photographs dating from the early 1970s to the present. All but one of them were made without digital editing software.

The 30 photographers whose work is featured in the exhibition represent many nationalities: American, Australian, Brazilian, Chilean, Dutch, English, French, German, Israeli, Japanese, and Swiss. They employ a variety of techniques and stylistic approaches in their photographs.

Exhibition works include scenes of nature, semi-abstract compositions, and still life images, all made in ways that challenge our perceptions.

GOOD TO KNOW

The exhibition is on view in the museum’s photography galleries.

Most photographs in the exhibition measure at least 8 x 10 inches, making it possible for 2-3 students to examine a single image at one time.

Due to evolving public health factors, group visits to the exhibition may not be available. If you are interested in bringing students to see *Art of Illusion* in person, please check nelson-atkins.org/tours for the latest information on group visits.

This guide can also support the exploration of exhibition works in a classroom or virtual environment. All the photographs included in the exhibition can be viewed online at: art.nelson-atkins.org/mycollections/6258/art-of-illusion.

This guide features a small selection of works from the exhibition, along with discussion prompts and activities. **Inquiring Eye** questions focus on the visual qualities of photographic images and the choices a photographer makes. **Playing with Perception** activities are photography challenges designed to stretch students’ creativity and artistic thinking skills.

BEFORE YOUR VISIT

Brush up on the science behind vision, perception, and optical illusions. Recommended resources:

How Your Eyes Make Sense of the World

National Geographic Decoder
2018

youtu.be/hsh2kPdGazo

Science Snacks: Optical Illusions

Exploratorium
2021

exploratorium.edu/snacks/subject/optical-illusions

Consider the complex nature of photographs. Are they windows on reality, constructed illusions, or both?

As a group, discuss how “real” the following types of photographs are:

- Advertisements in fashion magazines
- Instagram posts
- Photos accompanying newspaper stories
- Family portraits
- Artistic photographs shown in a museum

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

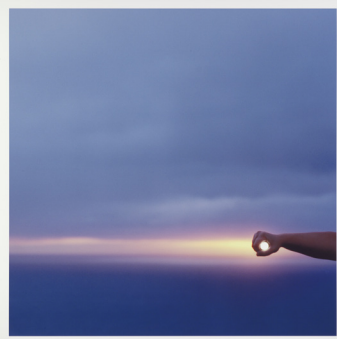


FOCUS WORKS: Lilly McElroy (American, born 1980), *I Control the Sun #16*, 2016 and *I Control the Sun #18*, 2016. Inkjet print.

Inquiring Eye:

In each of these photographs, Lilly McElroy relies on perspective—the brain’s understanding of distance resulting from the relative size of objects—to create the illusion that her hand is holding the sun. Compare these two photographs, which belong to a larger series of similar images (viewable at lillymcelroy.com):

- What are the differences between the two photographs? What stays the same from one image to the next?
- Which do you think creates a more convincing illusion? Why?
- Why do you think McElroy chose to show only her arm in each photograph? How might your impression or understanding of them differ if she had decided to include more of herself?



Playing with Perception:

See if you can take a photograph that uses perspective to show an interaction between yourself and nature that can’t be true but looks like it might be.



FOCUS WORK: John Pfahl (American, 1939 – 2020), *Australian Pines, Fort DeSoto, Florida*, 1977; printed 2016. Inkjet print.

Inquiring Eye:

Photographers observe the world around them to find compelling scenes to capture with their cameras. They can also intervene in their environment to create an image that fits their vision. Before reading additional information about this photograph, consider:

- Which aspects of this image do you think the photographer had control over?

Which aspects were determined by the environment of the scene?

Read the label that accompanies this work. Were you surprised to learn how the photographer created the image?

Playing with Perception:

Following the example of artist John Pfahl, find a way to make changes within a physical environment that allow you to produce an interesting photograph.



FOCUS WORK: Zeke Berman (American, born 1951), *Still Life with Peace Sign and Clockface*, 1979. Gelatin silver print.

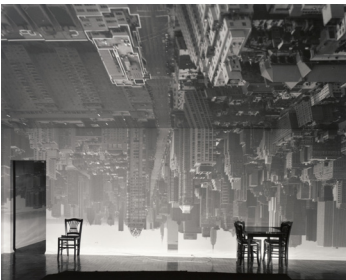
Inquiring Eye:

In this photograph, the precise arrangement of everyday objects and the placement of the camera result in the flattening of three-dimensional space.

- Look closely at the image. How does Zeke Berman create the appearance of shapes that aren't physically present in the scene?
- Berman has said his photographs are about finding “an intersection between sculpture, photography and drawing.” Do you see that idea reflected in this work?

Playing with Perception:

Take a photograph that uses everyday objects to create an illusion.



FOCUS WORK: Abelardo Morell (American, born Cuba, 1948), *Camera Obscura Image of Manhattan View Looking South in a Large Room*, 1996. Gelatin silver print.

Inquiring Eye:

To create this photograph, Abelardo Morell turned an ordinary room into a camera obscura—a device that allows light to pass through an aperture and project an image.

- What is the overall mood or impression that you get from this photograph?
What about the image creates that sensation?
- Images created with a camera obscura appear upside down, but they can be turned upright using a mirror or prism.

How does Morell's decision to leave the projection inverted affect the photograph?

Playing with Perception:

Learn more about Morell's technique by visiting abelardomorell.net/camera-obscura. Then, try setting up your own camera obscura. How might you use it to create an image that blurs the line between indoors and outdoors?



FOCUS WORK: Liat Elbling (Israeli, born 1980), *Getting Lost*, 2015. Inkjet print.

Inquiring Eye:

Liat Elbling's photographs depict deceptively realistic architectural spaces. In actuality, she makes them by building models of imaginary rooms and adjusting the light to suggest depth.

- What do you notice about the use of light, shadow, and depth in this photograph?
- In what ways is this a photograph of a “real” thing?
In what ways is it a photograph of something that's not real?

Playing with Perception:

Elbling has said, “My photographic practice does not originate in things that exist in the world.” Create a photograph that, on some level, depicts something that does not exist in reality.

AFTER YOUR VISIT:

Have students tackle the **Playing with Perception** photography challenges, and then invite them to share the resulting bodies of work with the class. What similarities and differences are evident in how students approached each challenge?

Revisit your previous group discussion about the relationship between photography and the “real” world. Have anyone's views changed since seeing the exhibition? If so, how?

IMAGE CREDITS

Arno Rafael Minkkinen (American, born Finland, 1940), *Halfway up Mt. Mitchell, Burnsville, North Carolina*, 2013. Inkjet print, 22 15/16 × 17 3/8 inches (58.26 × 44.13 cm). Gift of the Hall Family Foundation, 2016.75.194.

Lilly McElroy (American, born 1979), *I Control the Sun #16*, 2015. Inkjet print, 17 1/8 × 17 3/16 inches (43.5 × 43.66 cm). Gift of the Hall Family Foundation, 2020.5.3.

Lilly McElroy (American, born 1979), *I Control the Sun #18*, 2016. Inkjet print, 17 1/16 × 17 1/16 inches (43.34 × 43.34 cm). Gift of the Hall Family Foundation, 2020.5.4.

John Pfahl (American, 1939 - 2020), *Australian Pines, Fort DeSoto, Florida*, 1977; printed 2016. Inkjet print, 14 13/16 × 19 inches (37.62 × 48.26 cm). Gift of the Hall Family Foundation, 2016.75.235.

Zeke Berman (American, born 1951), *Still Life with Peace Sign and Clockface*, 1979. Gelatin silver print, 15 × 18 15/16 inches (38.1 × 48.1 cm). Gift of Hallmark Cards, Inc., 2005.27.3025.

Abelardo Morell (American, born Cuba, born 1948), *Camera Obscura Image of Manhattan View Looking South in Large Room*, 1996. Gelatin silver print, 18 × 22 1/2 inches (45.72 × 57.15 cm). Gift of Hallmark Cards, Inc., 2005.27.4060.

Liat Elbling (Israeli, born 1980), *Getting Lost*, 2015. Inkjet print, 14 1/2 × 11 3/4 inches (36.83 × 29.85 cm). Gift of the Hall Family Foundation, 2017.68.22.