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On Our Shelves

FABIOLA MENCHELLI

BY STEPHANIE SNYDER

... You can't see far in total darkness Wolfgang Ambros

All I think about is Fabiola Menchelli alone in the dark, folding.

In Menchelli's most recent photograms, light ruptures darkness with crystalline thrust and fades into softness with uncanny perfection. Menchelli forms the geometries of color through progressions of movements that are alternately fast and slow, timed and untimed. Light must be controlled, but in the darkness, time succumbs to Menchelli's curiosity and desire for experimentation and connection. "Working with color photography in complete darkness, requires a reorientation of the body. The other senses compensate for the absence of vision—creating a new sense of deep concentration. Touch and sound become crucial for understanding space, and allow photography to create itself by hand. The multiplicity of variables creates images that I can never predict."

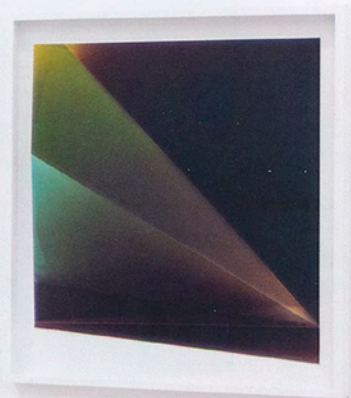
These durational objects—and they are objects, as Menchelli never flattens the aftermath of their manipulation—begin with strictly timed color studies. Her studio walls are covered in rows and rows of test strips chronicling the incremental color progressions of light projected through a number of standard cinematic color gels.



we are not supposed to be seen, 2022



Fabiola Menchelli, *I carry all the names I'm given*
Installation view, Arroniz, Mexico City, February 2022
Curated by Laura Orozco





Left and my other left, 2022



The time-consuming rigor of the process is deeply satisfying to Menchelli, and it allows for a more personal consideration of photography's origins, not to mention various color theories, such as Goethe's 1810 *Theory of Colors*. Goethe's early experiments with prismatic light are well known; but less known are his experiments with darkness. Goethe created an experiment in which he passed darkness, not light, through a prism, noting the particular spectrums that appeared on the other side. What Goethe discovered was that darkness emitted a spectrum composed of what we would today describe as cyan, magenta and yellow, with intermediate colors of red and blue. Through this simple experiment Goethe discovered the corresponding colors that once combined with black, would remain, to this day, the material standard for printing color—CMYK.

The astonishing subtlety of Menchelli's chromaticism emerges through many simultaneous color impressions—interpolations of precisely devised color complements: "Working with light sensitive paper in the darkroom, the color materializes the physical experience of the paper. The folds become a memory game. It's a game of opposites. To make red I need a green filter. Too much light will erase what was recorded. Thinking about the composition in physical terms, through its folds. Flip the paper and calculate the time each color blend needs. The folds become three dimensional, taking space. The orientation or disorientation of the body, left and the other left, the dyslexic auto construction of the work, is a celebration of the refusal to be fixed, to be named, and instead carry all the names."

In 2015, Menchelli conducted a residency at Casa Wabi—a Tadao Ando-designed residential compound for artists, situated near Puerto Escondido. For Menchelli, the observatory on the compound's grounds became a space for contemplating the interaction of light and materiality. Curator Asha Bukojemsky explains: "Over the course of 28 days, Menchelli photographed the shifting light that slipped into the observatory's imposing, concrete structure. Capturing the rhythmic, cyclical shifts of the sun across multiple exposures, she began to

transpose the physical dimensionality of the architecture into immeasurable space." Imagine Menchelli pressing the building's strange, extruding forms with light-sensitive paper ... or rather, translating the shifting appearances of solid illuminated concrete into the tectonic folds of colored paper. Menchelli herself identifies the connection between light and matter, sight and touch: "To work with light as substance is to come to terms with its matter. The uncertainty in the process of making these camera-less photographs is what has freed them from the prejudice of my subconscious intentionality. The process moves through learning and unlearning; experimenting and failing—over and over. This unraveling expands beyond the visual world, to something more subtle, also more palpable."



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to witness the falling sky, 2022



Crumbling is not an instant, 2022