

Detail from *Flowers*

THE SILENT SIDE OF A SHIVER

Photographs by Francis Olschafskie

July 23–September 19, 2021

Curated by Breon Dunigan



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FRANCIS OLSCHAFSKIE



Detail from *Angel*

When I look at the photographs of Francis Olshafskie, I sense that I am joining a master archeologist on a dig into the world around us. He sifts and mines through our everyday world, making exciting discoveries and revealing what is hiding in plain sight.

The past is exposed through reflections of architecture and artifact, the living occupy the present and the cranes and backhoes give reference to buildings of the future. With all of these layers of history in the same frame, the viewer can easily conclude that there is some visual trick at play, some heavy editing happening in the “darkroom”. But what we are seeing is the result of a meticulous unearthing by a master photographer, the images are presented to the viewer as they were discovered by the artist. There are

no visual gimmicks or manipulations.

Through the years that I have been familiar with Olshafskie’s work, I have followed him on a journey exploring the science and technology of photography, the history of past photographers and the places that have informed and inspired artists and photographers. In all of his work, the breadth of his artistic genius is revealed slowly and deliberately, yet somehow, mysteriously, his dissection of his surroundings is never at the expense of beauty, which is the ultimate result of his excavation into the world around us.

I am privileged to know Francis and honored to be a part of this exhibition and his journey.
—Breon Dunigan, Curator



Detail from *Box Hat Man*

Francis W. Olschafskie makes his work in Cape Cod, Boston, New York City, London, Paris, Florence, and Rome. Olschafskie did his graduate work at the Media Laboratory at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and his undergraduate studies in Photography at Massachusetts College of Art. Francis lives in Boston and summers in Truro. He exhibits regularly at the Provincetown's Schoolhouse Gallery, where he is represented. In New York City, Mr. Olschafskie is represented by the Alan Klotz Gallery.

He has exhibited nationally and internationally, including the Museum of Modern Art, Paris; the Isentan Museum, Tokyo, the Greek Ministry of Culture, Athens, AIPAD NYC The Association of International Photography Art

Dealers, the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota, the Tisch School at NYU, New York, the Robert Hull Fleming Museum in Vermont, the Photographic Resource Center in Boston, the Fine Arts Work Center and Art Strand Gallery in Provincetown, MA.

Olschafskie has been a faculty member at New York University, the School of Visual Arts, in NYC, The International Center of Photography in NYC, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and Boston University where he has taught graduate and undergraduate courses in Photography, Art History and Digital Technology.

FRANCIS OLSCHAFSKIE



Detail from *Saint-Sulpice*

Wearing two hats can be surprisingly satisfying. I've been taking photos since I was a teenager. After graduate school I started building imaging technology, and online publishing systems.

Many artists have two lives. One where you do your art and the other doing something primarily to survive, especially in the early days of your career. This can be teaching, painting houses, carpentry, or—in my case—building digital technology and teaching. I've been lucky to travel paths that overlap.

I was trained as a traditional photographer. My undergraduate degree was at Massachusetts College of Art in Photography, where my studies focused on view cameras, black and white, chemistry-driven photography. The entire process was intriguing to me—not only out in the real world, but also in the darkroom.

My time as an undergraduate was inspiring in many ways. I spent time with Minor White, one of the great photographers of all.

Minor talked about how you made a photograph in a way that I hadn't heard before. He said you had to feel it and you had to engage with the subject matter, whatever it was. He would give exercises in which you would set up a view camera, and then go and lie down in the light in front of it and try to feel it. Minor was very hands-on like that. Studying with him was an intense experience.

Emmett Gowin was also teaching at the time, he gave thoughtful and unique insights on how to make a print. He had expanded this functional process of chemical development to make something extremely special as an object. Here, too, I was seeing a new level of



Detail from *Golden Birds*

craftsmanship and artistry being brought to the process of creating a picture.

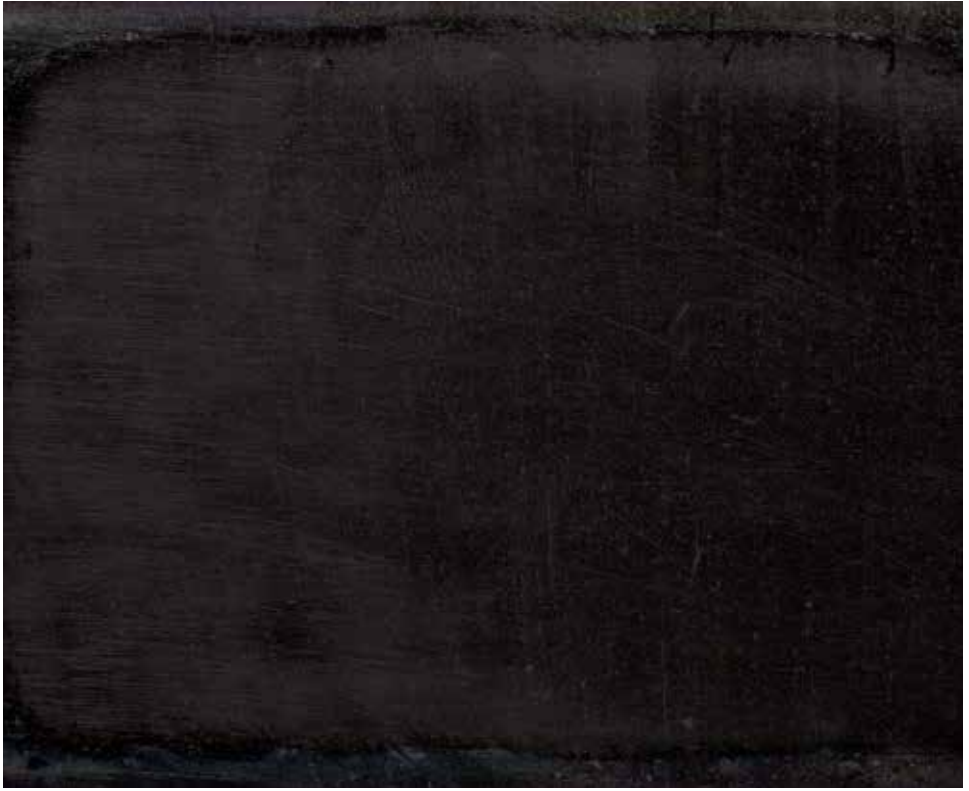
All of this prompted my interest in expanding what I was doing in the darkroom. Not with multiple images, but with combinations of photograms and negative images together.

I began to use the chemical process to expand on that idea of creating an image. This is relevant because this pursuit, focusing not just on how the picture is taken but on how it's shaped by the process of production, lent itself to digital photography. I was lucky enough to go to graduate school at MIT Media Lab, where it was possible to learn about digital imaging technology in its earliest days. I was quite fortunate to have the opportunity to have access to the expertise and equipment needed at such a formative stage of this field.

Even though I was quite interested in manipulating photography in the darkroom, I really wasn't interested in merging images together, which is often a focus of traditional darkroom creativity. And when I moved into digital photography, my interests remained the same—"the single image"—although now my pictures don't look like a single image. I wanted people to look at my pictures and question what they're looking at. This above paragraph goes from present to past tense... lets talk it through

Consequently during the transition into digital photography, I tried to make it not look digital. I wanted it to look like a photograph. This ran contrary to the trend when digital photography and computer graphics became very popular, because the aesthetic was focused around the pixel.

FRANCIS OLSCHAFSKIE



Detail from *View of Daguerre's first Daguerreotype*

People often asked, “Why aren’t your pictures pixelated? And why not mix images together?”

Even though the process was available to me, I tried hard to avoid using it, working to conceal the digital roots of these images. I wasn’t interested in showing off the computer as a tool. The goal of my work was to show photography as the tool—the image the goal, the computer was just part of the process.

That approach led to my current approach to making pictures. I make pictures, which are referred to as single images, through lens photography, which are not multiple exposures or multiple images together. It is what exists in the world as it is: that’s what interests me.

One particular picture which I took in 2010 is important to me, because it’s a picture of the

first daguerreotype—one of the earliest technologies for capturing images with a photochemical process, invented by Louis Daguerre in 1839.

Not everybody could easily see the images on daguerreotypes when they first came out. Even today, if you look at them in a particular type of light, you can’t see anything. It’s just a mirrored surface. But in this case, the image had actually faded over the years (see *View of Daguerre's first Daguerreotype*).

This image resonated with me, for it related to what I had been working on and toward. It had all this color in it from the chemistry, and that was the focus of my explorations in the darkroom. But the daguerreotype also shows all the scratches, Daguerre’s fingerprints, his mark of making. It is not just an image of something; it’s



Detail from *Darwin's Hat*

a living object through which you can go back in time and see the maker. You rarely get that in photography. You see this kind of personal mark in painting, and you see it in sculpture—but you don't see it very often in photography. And that's what made me really interested in making a picture like this. But in the end my fascination with Daguerre led me to the "mirrored surface".

When viewers look at the Darwin portrait, most don't see the person, even though it's a portrait of Charles Darwin, one of the most famous faces from the 19th century (see *Darwin's Hat*).

For me, this image shows how you can make a picture and have people see it in a totally different way than the way I see it. It's an optical illusion. Even when I point Darwin out to

people, they still can't see him. But that's okay with me; I like that idea. I believe photographs can be like a novel. I want people to think of this as an object that has a life, something that they can revisit over and over again. And that is what my pictures are about.

Wearing two hats still complicates things a little, especially when people ask, "What do you do, Francis?" My responses keep the two parts of my life separate.

But, I also was looking for some sort of person who represented the way of life that I had chosen. Not a mentor necessarily, but someone whose experience proved that I could do two things fully and with passion. For me, this person was Charles Lutwidge Dodgson most known as Lewis Carroll.

FRANCIS OLSCHAFSKIE



Detail from *Alice*, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (Lewis Carroll)



Detail from *Niépce, View from the Window at Le Gras, at Dusk* (L) *Daguerre, View from the Window at Chateau at Dusk* (R)

Carroll was a great and profoundly serious photographer. He was a complicated individual and his reputation has widely swung over the years, depending upon the lens through which it's viewed.

Carroll was many things: a mathematician, a clergyman, a photographer who photographed every important person in England during the Victorian era. And of course, he was a poet and a writer. A key theme in his writing, something that I recognized, was the theme of not belonging. I believe it's quite prominent in Carroll's narratives, certainly in his most famous one. I was intrigued by Lewis Carroll as an individual, and so while I was at Oxford, I researched his career, because he had been at Oxford as well. As it turns out, I found his photographic kit.

I also found pictures of Alice. My version of Alice Liddell, by Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, is an image which was the beginning of my current work.

It really struck me that if I looked at a piece that was behind glass, it seems as though Alice floated there, as Carroll took Alice to a stone wall in the garden and he photographed her against a very dark background.

As a result, I realized that when I was looking at the glass, I was seeing Alice sort of float there, but I also was seeing what was behind me reflected in the dark background surrounding her (see *Alice, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (Lewis Carroll)*).

I wanted to make pictures that had a relationship to the world of photography and technology in a way that allowed the photograph to be not only in front of me, but to be through me, and also be behind me. This, to me, is immersive photography.

When I talk about technology, I talk about it in the same way. It is in front of us, it is through us, and it is behind us. And it has evolved for me into a form of something divine.

It defines freedom. Every part of the history of the world advances technology, and advances people's knowledge, and it advances people's freedom along the way.

Niépce, Daguerre, and Talbot were the inventors of photography. Their innovations helped create the field that led to modern photography. Seeing the world as they did was particularly appealing to me, because they had the vision to see something different, and were the first to look at the world through a lens, as I do. I went on a pilgrimage

I visited the house where Niépce made the first photographic image. The thing about Niépce was that he was such a pioneer that he only made one exposure, only one photograph. I found and stood on the exact same spot where he took this picture (see *Niépce, View from the Window at Le Gras, at Dusk*).

Likewise, I took a picture from the top window of Daguerre's château in Bry Sur Marne (see *Daguerre, View from the Window at Chateau at Dusk*).

Daguerre was a struggling artist until he invented photography. But as soon as he invented photography, he became a rock star. Louis VI awarded him a stipend for the rest of his life, as long as he would make the photographic process publicly available, which he did—he gave it to the people of France.

And there was Henry Fox Talbot in England, whose invention was the negative positive system (see *Talbot View of Window at Dusk*).

I went to all these places, and I photographed all three windows "at Dusk" where the photographers had done their earliest work.

All of this was leading into the current stage of my work, and is the basis for my show. Each picture is a single image through a camera.

No multiple exposures or merging images together, no tricks. These pictures were not made quickly. I would go to these places for days, weeks sometimes, and I would watch how the light changed, and I would watch how the people changed. A great deal of careful planning went into each picture.

Each of these images, when I finally made them, was crafted very deliberately.

I see them in a particular way, a particular time of day, and particular type of light. And I would go back, and I'd go back, and I'd go back.

People often ask me, "Why are you making pictures in Europe?" It allows me to go into a bubble. It allows me to break out of the everyday life that I live here. But there is also a technical reason as well. And that is the streets are small, and they're narrow. So I am standing in front of my huge piece of glass.

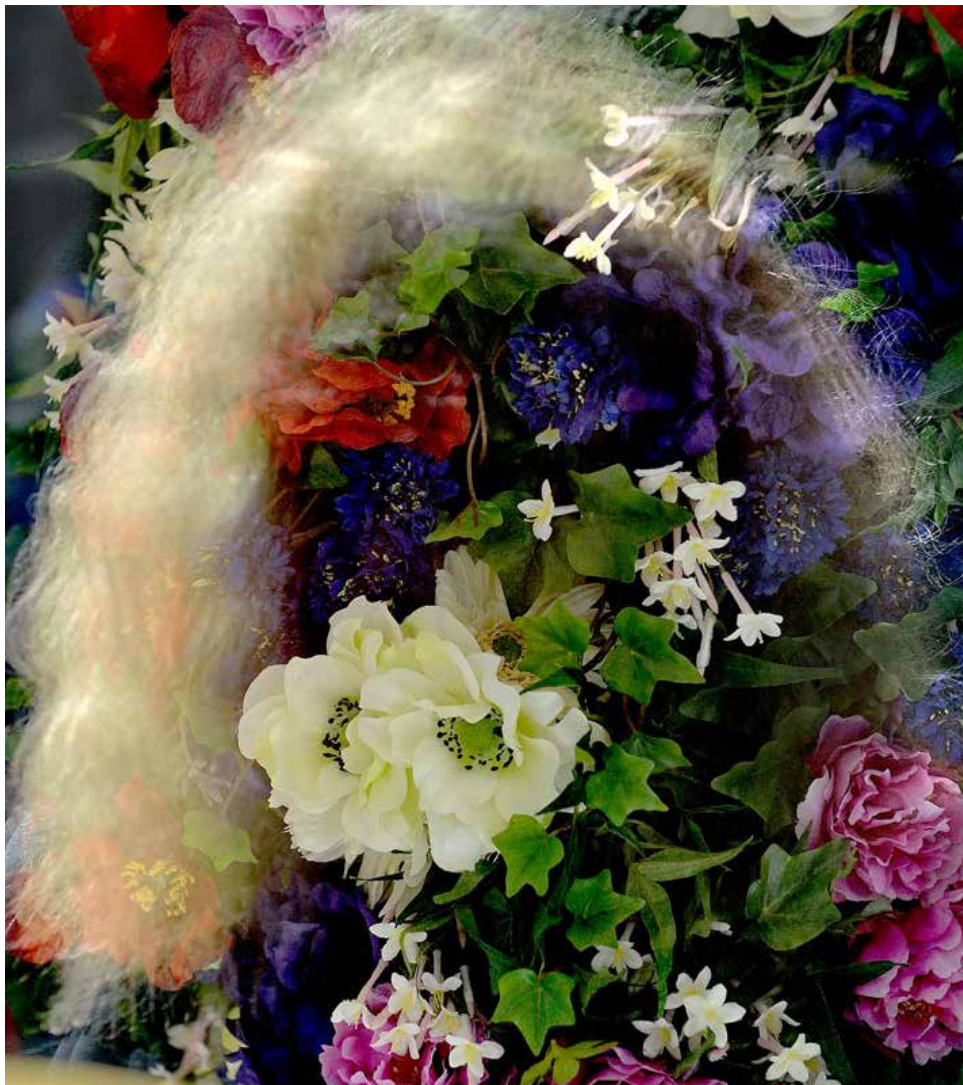
Like a homing pigeon, I will return to a location to try to get a picture that makes sense and has meaning to it, that has a relationship to the world.

Some people describe my work by saying, "Oh, it's about the 'decisive moment.'" It's not. If you know what the aesthetic is of the decisive moment, it's not anything like that.

People also call my work abstract, though it's not. If you want to use the vernacular of fine art, if you want to talk about the decisive moment and abstraction, then you have to realize that these terms don't apply to what I'm doing. There's nothing about that in my work. My work is not like that. It is about something else: it is "Hyper Realism."

My work represents the intersection of my two lives. And I couldn't be more fortunate.
—Francis Olschafskie

FRANCIS OLSCHAFSKIE



Detail from *Anna in Paris*

Alice, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson
(Lewis Carroll)—Oxford, England, 2008
Photograph
24" x 20"

Angel—London, England, 2018
Photograph
40" x 60"

Anna in Paris—Paris, France, 2014
Photograph
40" x 60"

Box Hat Man—Florence, Italy, 2016
Photograph
40" x 60"

*Daguerre, View from the Window at Chateau
at Dusk*—Bry Sur Marne, France, 2011
Photograph
15" x 23"

Darwin's Hat—London, England, 2010
Photograph
15" x 23"



Detail from *Home*

Elephant—London, England, 2018

Photograph

40" x 60"

Flowers—London, England, 2018

Photograph

40" x 60"

Golden Birds—London, England, 2019

Photograph

40" x 60"

Hands—Rome, Italy, 2016

Photograph

40" x 60"

Home—Boston, Massachusetts, 2014

Photograph

40" x 60"

Ladder—London, England, 2018

Photograph

15" x 23"

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Detail from *Nude in Window*

Monet's Garden at Dusk—Giverny, France, 2007

Photograph

15" x 23"

MIT Umbrella—Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2014

Photograph

40" x 60"

Niépce, View from the Window at Le Gras, at

Dusk—Saint-Loup-de-Varennes, France, 2004

Photograph

15" x 23"

Nude in Window—London, England, 2014

Photograph

40" x 60"

Pershing Square—New York City, 2016

Photograph

40" x 60"

Photographic Kit, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson

(Lewis Carroll)—Oxford, England, 2007

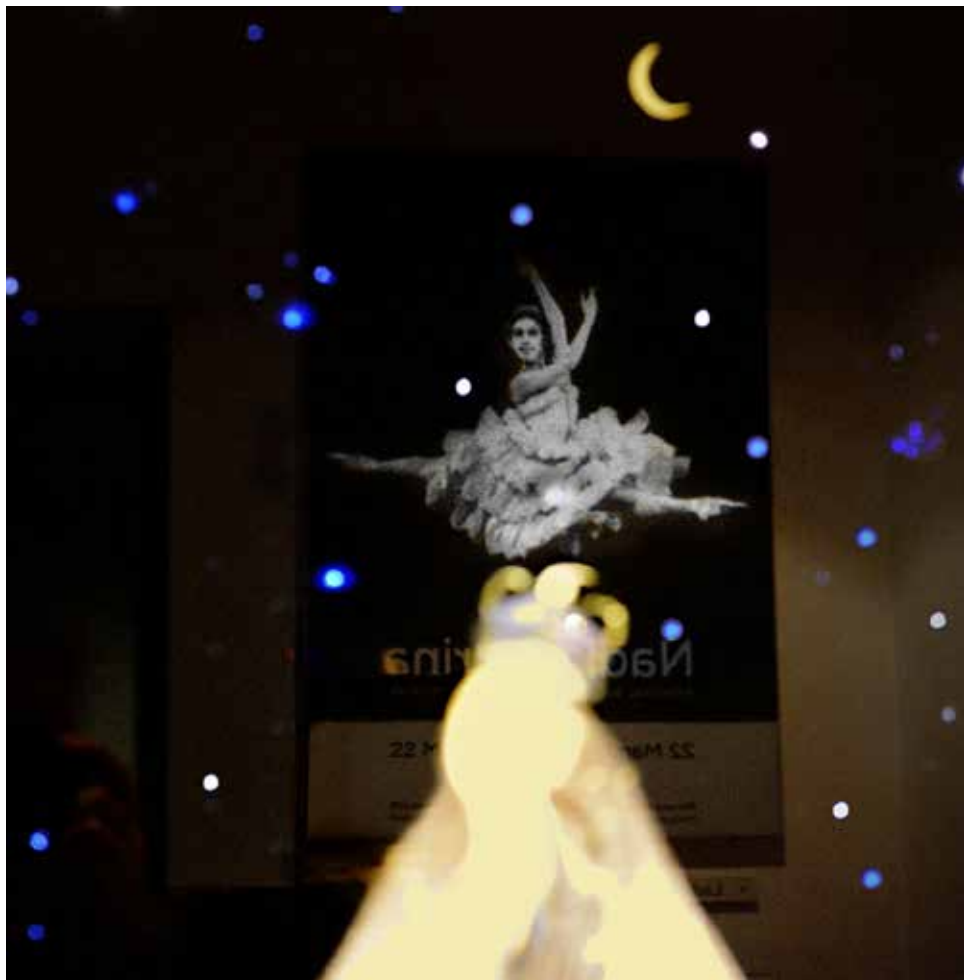
Photograph

23" x 15"

Pitzhanger—London, England, 2019

Photograph

40" x 60"



Detail from *Royal Ballet Opera House*

Red Dress—London, England, 2019

Photograph

40" x 60"

Royal Ballet Opera House—London, England, 2013

Photograph

15" x 23"

Saint-Sulpice—Paris, France, 2019

Photograph

40" x 60"

String—London, England, 2014

Photograph

15" x 23"

Tattoo Arm—Rome, Italy, 2016

Photograph

15" x 23"

Talbot View of Window at Dusk—Leacock Abby, Wiltshire, England, 2004

Photograph

15" x 23"

Thames Tunnel Dome—London, England, 2018

Photograph

40" x 60"

View of Daguerre's first Daguerreotype, 2008

Photograph

15" x 23"

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