

Blur

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Fig 1. George H. Seeley, *The Firefly*, 1911. Gum bichromate over platinum print 24.4 × 19.1 cm (9 5/8 × 7 1/2 in.). [The J. Paul Getty Museum](#), Los Angeles, 84.XM.163.1. Public domain.

A creature luminous and vexed, the firefly flits in melancholic briefness, brilliant yet burning out, its light's little lifespan mocked by the starry fixtures of the sky. The firefly's illumination is a chemical process, like the flash of a camera but without the photograph's sense of permanence and history. Instead, summer by summer, children chase

down these natural lanterns and collect them in mason jars, glass enclosures for viewing their darkening demise. Aquariums of lost energy.

George Seeley's soft focus doesn't let in too much light, either, intensifying the confusion between the firefly for which the image is named and the woman the image depicts—but depicts only barely, as if she's bathed in the golden residue of the firefly's fitful path. The woman shimmers at the edge of sight, just out of reach; the eye pursues her smudgy form like children after lightning bugs. *Once you have a jar of fireflies, don't keep them for longer than a day or two. Let them go, preferably at night because that's when they're most active and able to avoid predators. If you keep them for longer, the fireflies are likely to die.*^[1] To be caught is to disappear. To be seen is to be extinguished. But are there, Karen Redrobe wonders, “better forms of vanishing”?^[2] Does soft focus affect a kind of covering? Is it a filmy shroud, a secret-keeper?

Swathing her in the aura of a Symbolist “mystical moment”—which surfaces the ineffable, giving form to psychological or spiritual truths—Seeley, magic conjurer, makes the woman appear and disappear in the delicate, warm tones of gum platinum printing, itself a process of layering: platinum on paper, washed with gum arabic. For him, as for other photographers working in the style of pictorialism or “artistic” photography in the early twentieth century, photography was a subjective medium that could, and should, emulate painting and etching. By muting the photograph's clarity and detail through soft focus, filters and lens coatings, darkroom editing, and experimental printing, the pictorialists sought to reveal the indefinite and the intangible, and so to “unhinge the photograph and the body from the circumscription of the material, visible world.” “Making images ‘thick’ with atmosphere,” writes Shawn Michelle Smith, “the pictorialists unsettled the transparency of photographic evidence, drawing attention to the filters through which we view the photographed body, including the sharp filters of science.”^[3] The photograph became “a site of transfer and transportation, rather than a fixed point”—not a locus of scientific knowledge but a portal to “other times and places” and a means of evoking desires that are hidden, inexpressible (44, 45). Here/there, in/out. A body that moves in stillness: a body that is a constellating blur.

Seeley's portrait arrives—dances—at seeing's limits. Siegfried Kracauer once claimed that photography shows us “things normally unseen,” including “the transient,” “the small and the big,” and “the blind spots of the mind” that “habit and prejudice prevent us from noticing.”^[4] But in showing things normally unseen, photography also shows how much of normal seeing is *not* seeing: how visibility is ringed in invisibility, light in shadow. And so, Smith says, “photographers grasp at the invisible—at what is absent, past, ephemeral, eclipsed. Photographs reside at the brink of the visible world, drawing into awareness what lies beyond” (*At the Edge*, 14).

What lies beyond, what lies beneath this lined coat of haze and gum—there is an absence, something recessing from us, concealed in one of the blind spots that, we realize, stud the vistas of the seen. Something or someone enacting some better form of vanishing, perhaps: evading capture *in* capture, bidding us to use our eyes not to define, or to demarcate, but to dream. To let her flicker and fade, and to know how much else escapes our sight.



Fig 2. Lady Ottoline Morrell, *Cavorting by the Pool at Garsington*, ca. 1916. Gelatin silver prints 8.8 x 6.2 cm (3 7/16 x 2 7/16 in.) and 8.8 x 6.3 cm (3 7/16 x 2 7/16 in.). Gilman Collection, The Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation Gift, through Joyce and Robert Menschel. [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#), New York, 2005.100.970. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource/Scala, Florence.

The photographs are crudely made, or so they say, taken with a small Kodak or Rolleiflex camera that can't keep up with the exuberant momentum of the young women—Lady Ottoline Morrell's ten-year-old daughter Julian and her friends, cavorting by the pool at the Garsington estate near Oxford, England, in 1916. Photography by women has traditionally been associated with “slipshod” technique and a lack of “quality” or “sharpness,” terms that have been used to dismiss even photographers of great technical prowess and inventiveness.^[5] Yet Morrell's effects of blur both obscure and constitute—they constitute as they obscure. Vague in focus, stuttering about the girls' swinging legs and arms, the image allegorizes movement as it fails to depict it. It makes us feel the girls' trajectories across and beyond the image plane, to feel them as if we could see them. The friends are romping about, cutting loose, going places, and the camera can't stop them, doesn't want to stop them. Wants to go with them, to join in the dance.

Morrell's blur isn't a mere flaw, an amateur's accident, but instead a styling of aliveness, giving us life in its continuity and ongoingness. It shows that time flies: that what we conceive as the photographic instant is measured in endlessly reducible increments and that all still photography “is inhabited by duration.”^[6] The traces on the surface of the image also mark its dwelling in duration; fingers extend the event of the photograph as they pass over the object and leave their prints. They're guests, like us, at an after party that never seems to end. As with blur, these are formal imperfections that signify more than an absence of skill or care. Or if not more, otherwise, for blur might be understood either as too little focus or too much movement—too little or too much detail. Keith Allen: “blurred experiences provide too much, inconsistent, information about objects' spatial boundaries, by representing them as simultaneously located at multiple locations.”^[7] A blurred field is an “over-represented” one, the body spilling over in space just as the photograph exceeds its moment. It is a site of visual abundance rather than, or as well as, lack.

Unfixed in time and space, bursting their borders, Julian and the others exhibit an uninhibited ease in their nakedness that is at odds with the social mores of their (our) time. Reflecting the emancipated attitudes of Morrell and her circle of writers, artists, and aristocrats, their pubescent bodies also seem to shimmy out of stable, unified ideals of girlhood and womanhood as they hover at the margins of adolescence. Carol Mavor: “The meaning of *it*, adolescence, is as wavery as the body that *it* inhabits.”^[8]

These girl-women resist erasure: over-represented, they are diffusely here and there and over there as well. If this improvised dance is a performance, it's one that seeks no audience, or no audience but those it already includes. And it includes the photographer, whose activity is part of the pleasure of this unspectacular display; a naked Morrell appears among the group in one of the other images made that same day. So the girl at the center looks laughingly at the camera, flaunting her visibility and her elusiveness at once—as part of this togetherness, wavery but self-contained, enclosed like the private estate in which they play.

(In the secluded corners of the gardens, in the shadows of the grand Elizabethan manor, in the blur beyond the blur, in the parentheses of the text: see the other figures more completely hidden, those who never appear at all. They do not frolic with abandon; they may not claim naked invisibility with a grin. It's not only those who aren't allowed inside these well-kept grounds—it's those who keep the grounds, are keeping them, whose labor is obscured and constituted in this seemingly naturalistic scene. This is an improvisation with many rehearsals. This is a party that didn't plan itself.)



Fig 3. Francesca Woodman, *House #3*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976. Gelatin silver print 16.1 x 16.3 cm (6 5/16 x 6 7/16 in.). Gift of the Heather and Tony Podesta Collection. [National Gallery of Art](#), Washington, 2011.144.18. © Estate of Francesca Woodman/Charles Woodman/Art Resource/Scala, Florence.

I look for her in the rich, textural greys; find a single, slipped foot and seek its appendages, reversing the relation of body to limb (the body as the leg's limb, its extremity); follow, by the upward sweep of my eyes, her vanishing in stages; feel, uncomfortably, like my gaze may be its cause. Moving arms and torso wiped, swiped, by the camera's slow shutter speed, her face is smoothed to the wall, hair to the windowsill. Her leg looks now like the last thing to go or the body's forgotten remainder, left behind among the debris of an abandoned house.

For Francesca Woodman, giving oneself to the wall is also "giving oneself to the paper," in Rosalind Krauss's phrase, as if one flat plane is flush with another. "Everything that one photographs is in fact 'flattened to fit' paper, and thus under, within, permeating, every paper support, there is a body. And this body may be in extremus, may be in pain."^[9] Woodman's disappearance chronicles her appearance as image, which may be painful, an entrapment and an effacement: in a double movement of revelation and concealment, materialization and dematerialization, the

self is engulfed in space, losing its boundaries as it is absorbed into its environment.[10] Buried in the walls like a beautiful dead woman in a **gothic tale** by Edgar Allan Poe, or like the crouching figure trapped in the yellow wallpaper of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's **domestic horror story**, she is a lonely ghost, her plaintive cries just audible in the busy flats of a long exposure.

But the wall might be a hiding place, a space of refuge, instead of a devouring tomb. The woman might actively press herself into the wall, rather than being sucked into it. She might even belong to the wall—not merging with it but emerging from it, a skittish creature dipping her toe into the room. Wary of predators, wearing abstraction as protection. As her body “spills out of its corporeal boundaries and melts into the decayed walls”—or melts out of them—Woodman “challenges the totality, unity, and integrity of the subject.” She presents, as Jui-Ch'i Liu says, “a body of becoming,” multiple and porous, made of many selves and permeable with the world.[11] Late icon of Surrealism, she appears and disappears by the aesthetic principle of the *informe*, the formless, which works to “undo formal categories, to deny that each thing has its ‘proper’ form, to imagine meaning as gone shapeless.”[12] Gone shapeless, gone loose and leaky, she is wallflower, wallwoman, wallblur, cultivating formlessness in contiguity with her surroundings—as the dust coats the boards like fine hairs and the paint curls up in ringlets.

She was concerned, Woodman once said, “with making something soft wiggle and snake around a hard architectural outline.”[13] The something that is a woman's body moves like worm or reptile against the wall's firmness and solidity. Yet softness and hardness, the curved and the straight, are shared properties in this haunted house, unformed and agglutinate. If the foot looks like it emerges from the wall, notes Katharine Conley, it is “as though the house itself were alive.”[14] Woodman receives a deathly inanimacy from the house, but she also gives to it a vital animacy; if she's a ghost, the house seethes with life.

In other photographs made by Woodman in her short career, before her death by suicide at the age of twenty-two, she figures herself as an angel mediating between life and death, materiality and abstraction. The angel makes “departures and returns from a world elsewhere,” Peggy Phelan says, and in this Woodman's photographs rehearse “a future in which she will be something other,” something gone (shapeless).[15] There's no doubt that the poignancy and menace of Woodman's work is intensified by the fact of her death, which seems to be, and in an awful true sense is, the end of her drive toward both “self-creation and self-cessation” (989). Her self-portraits are cajoling ghosts, bidding us to see them, demanding their due.

Disappearance is no mere metaphor here, and death not something to be romanticized. And yet, and yet: the brilliant square of light at the window is a lure, drawing my eyes to it as it grasps the woman by her hair and shoulder, lifting her skyward and away, beyond the containment of the frame she builds about herself. And her blurred arm, endlessly in motion: it is as elegant as a wing.



Fig 4. Ana Mendieta, Untitled (*Siluetas* series), Mexico, 1976. Courtesy of Galerie Lelong & Co. © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC. Licensed by the Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, and the Design and Artists Copyright Society (DACS), London 2022.

And then: gone. No, not gone: going. Sand scooped in thick cold handfuls from a beach in southern Mexico, at La Ventosa, *the windy one*, to dredge a silhouette, a shape that describes (will describe) an absence. No, not going: going and going, absences piling up, or piling down, recessing to a negative mass. The shape that describes (will describe) an absence slides (will slide) into the coast's unfirm line, slipping grain-by-grain into the blue-grey water and swimming away. A mermaid in miniscule pieces, whose disappearance is the photograph's past as well as its future—its depiction of what is as what was, its imagination of what will be—she is further dispersed by the photograph, a thing that displaces and distributes the self. I wonder if all photographic portraits are a kind of erosion, an exposure to the elements.

Not merely recorded by the camera, Ana Mendieta's vanishing act is constituted by it. An imprint made with the body, a signature, her *silueta* is an index of the body's presence as it turns to absence—like the photograph that is now its only trace.^[16] The picture plane is angled to hide the horizon and flatten silhouette to sand, so figure loses, or finds, ground; ground loses, or finds, figure. An exposure to the elements. A weathering in contact with the world. Eroded, exposed, the *siluetas*'s palpable sense of loss reflects the circumstances of the artist's life—her experience as an exile from her native Cuba, from where she was relocated as a child to the United States—and is compounded by the circumstances of her early death, tragic and, many believe, violent. In her aftermath, Mendieta's *siluetas*, which she conceived as self-portraits, resemble unmarked graves. They are memorials to her and, in their abstraction, to others dead or missing or caged along the borders and borderlands of nations, walls architected onto sea or into land. I'm invited to see bodies where there are none: to be haunted by ghosts, those *apparitions* that make things appear. Haunting is “an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known,” Avery Gordon suggests. Ghosts show up to show us that “what's been concealed is very much alive and present,” continuing to interfere in the world we live in.^[17] They bear witness to what this world has cost (will cost)—the bodies, lives, it weathers in its making.

No, not going and going: going and going as a way of not going, of *staying*. “It is the straining of life in the face of various modes of loss that constitutes the work's strange intensity,” writes José Esteban Muñoz of the *siluetas*. “This is to say that through violence, the straining and making precarious of life, a vitalism emerges and lingers after the official ontological closure of life itself.”^[18] Lingering at the border, life after life, the *siluetas* also imagine exile as a home after home—a painful state, yet one to be grasped rather than overcome. Mendieta's ambiguous position between nations, Jane Blocker notes, “is almost always judged to be a failure, an inability to complete the full circuit and return ‘home.’”^[19] But by identifying with the earth rather than with one country or another, as she does by impressing her silhouette on Mexico's shifting shores, Mendieta is able “to sustain rather than assuage exile” (78). Exile becomes a nowhere she can occupy, a border for living, a threshold not for crossing but for inhabiting—giving the lie to (blurring) the lines of territory, the fictions of belonging and not belonging, citizens and foreigners.

“The skin of the earth is seamless,” declares the philosopher Gloria Anzaldúa. “The sea cannot be fenced, *el mar* does not stop at borders.”^[20] At La Ventosa, *the windy one*, Mendieta tosses red tempera into her dissolving ditch. Tempera—Italian via the late Latin *distemperare*, to mix thoroughly—is a dry powdered pigment that's combined with a binding agent, like egg yolk or plant gum, to make a paint. Brighter and more granular than the

blood that covers Mendieta's face in some of her other works, the powder mingles first with the sand, and then the seeping shoals, the red particles a map of the resistless tide. The powder merges (will merge) with the water, as if Mendieta is handing her art to the sea, asking the water to complete the emulsion. She's painting with the Gulf that separates and joins her to Cuba, her lost home; the Gulf is painting with her. Yet the water forms this abstract painting only by unforming it. It swallows up the body's red residue. It disintegrates along with the border.

Lost at sea, body and border seem to me less like slashes or dashes, *here/there*, *in/out*, than like ellipses, marks that drift, defer, disperse, spreading beyond this shifting patch of sand, beyond the fence of the instant. Gone . . . No, going . . . No, staying . . .

Notes

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- [1] This is adapted from Ben Pfeiffer, "How to Catch Fireflies," *Firefly Conservation and Research*.
- [2] Karen Redrobe (Beckman), *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film, and Feminism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 70.
- [3] Shawn Michelle Smith, *At the Edge of Sight: Photography and the Unseen* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 44, 45.
- [4] Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 46–59.
- [5] See Michel Oren's discussion of the treatment of Imogen Cunningham and other women associated with Group *f/64* in the 1930s and 1940s in "On the Impurity of Group *f/64* Photography," *History of Photography* 15.2 (1991): 119–27.
- [6] Jennifer Good, "The Impossible Photograph: Blur and Domestic Violence," *Photography and Culture* 12.4 (2019): 415–27, 417.
- [7] Keith Allen, "Blur," *Philosophical Studies* 162.2 (2013): 257–73, 257.
- [8] Carol Mavor, *Becoming: The Photographs of Clementina, Viscountess Hawarden* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), xxix. Emphasis in original.
- [9] Rosalind E. Krauss, "Francesca Woodman: Problem Sets," in *Bachelors* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 161–78, 166.
- [10] On this dynamic in Woodman's work, see Margaret Sundell, "Vanishing Point: The Photography of Francesca Woodman," in *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of, and from the Feminine*, ed. Catherine De Zegher (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 434–39.
- [11] Jui-Ch'i Liu, "Francesca Woodman's Self-Images: Transforming Bodies in the Space of Femininity," *Woman's Art Journal* 25.1 (2004): 26–31, 28–29.

- [12] Rosalind Krauss, "Corpus Delecti," in Jane Livingston and Rosalind Krauss, *L'Amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985), 64.
- [13] Francesca Woodman cited in Peter Davison, "Girl, Seeming to Disappear," *The Atlantic Monthly* (May 2000): 108–11, 110.
- [14] Katharine Conley, *Surrealist Ghostliness* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 156.
- [15] Peggy Phelan, "Francesca Woodman's Photography: Death and the Image One More Time," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 27.4 (2002): 979–1004, 990.
- [16] This follows Ellen Tepfer, "The Presence of Absence: Beyond the 'Great Goddess' in Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas* Series," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 12.2 (2002): 235–50, 242–43.
- [17] Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xvi.
- [18] José Esteban Muñoz, "Vitalism's After-burn: The Sense of Ana Mendieta," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 21.2 (2011): 191–98, 192.
- [19] Jane Blocker, *Where Is Ana Mendieta? Identity, Performativity, and Exile* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 77.
- [20] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters/ Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 3.