

PHOTOGRAPHIC ABSTRACTIONS:  
AN EXPERIMENT OF ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM IN PHOTOGRAPHY

by

Marcia Brito

PERFORMANCE IN LIEU OF THESIS IN SUPPORT OF GRADUATE RESEARCH  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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**ABSTRACT**

“Photographic Abstractions” are large scale abstract photographs on canvas that offer the viewer a vibrant world of color. The purpose of this research is to experiment with the use of the digital photographic camera as a tool to produce Non-Objective Art, therefore creating photographs that do not have the traditional primary use of a photo, such as documentation, but rather images that abstract reality.

Movement is applied to the photographic equipment with the intention of manipulating the optics of the camera to abstract the light, color and form of subjects. The bright and colorful images aim to create joy and to provide an escape, even if only momentary, from the daily challenges we all encounter. The emotion of joy is necessary

to balance out the negativity, violence, and injustice in the world. Seeking joy is an act of resistance in our challenging times.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	INTRODUCTION	1
II.	CONCEPT	3
III.	SOURCES OF INSPIRATION AND INFLUENCE	21
IV.	MEDIA/MATERIALS AND PROCESSES	29
V.	CONCLUSION	42
VI.	THESIS ART WORK	44
VII.	WORKS CITED	68
VIII.	EXHIBITION AND PUBLICATION	71

## I. INTRODUCTION

This body of work consists of “Photographic Abstractions” that examine light, gesture and color of three-dimensional objects onto two-dimensional surfaces.



Figure 1. *Photographic Abstraction no.7 (2018)*

The intention of the artwork is to communicate feelings of joy and hopefully provide an escape from the negative aspects of reality. The energy, color, joy that emanates from the images aspire to counteract the challenges of contemporary life, like an antidote to transform the discontent of the mind into happiness.

The works are created by applying gestural movements to the photographic equipment with the intention of using the medium as a vehicle to produce non-objective art. The motion applied to the apparatus completely abstracts the subjects in such a way that it transcends photography into nonrepresentational art, similar to abstract expressionist paintings.

Inspired by the social, political and cultural challenges of contemporary society, these works are created as an outlet to help ease stress, allowing the mind to relax and get lost in the colors, forms and textures.

The research illustrates how it benefitted from investigating the works of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Wassily Kandinsky, Jackson Pollock and other authors and artists cited throughout the text.

## II. CONCEPT

The main concept of this experiment is to manipulate the digital camera's ability to capture light, color and form of subjects, transforming images into non-objective works resembling abstract expressionist paintings. The resulting artwork exude vibrant colors with the goal of radiating playful feelings of joy to the viewer.



Figure 2. *Photographic Abstraction no.8* (2018)

Instead of recording an image or imitating reality, which is characteristic of Representational Art, the “Photographic Abstractions” provide an alternative non-objective world to escape the "mundane".

What makes this work unique is its position between Abstract Art and Non-Objective Art. The simple explanation of the difference between abstract and non-objective art “lies in the subject matter chosen. If the artist begins with a subject from reality (and abstracts it), the artwork is considered to be abstract. If the artist is creating with no reference to reality, then the work is considered to be non-objective.” (Fussell,

par. 2). “Photographic Abstractions” incorporate both these aspects of art as the process starts by abstracting reality, which references Abstract Art, and the resulting images reference Non-Objective Art, as they have no connection to the real world. Ultimately, the “Photographic Abstractions” strive to produce non-objective images that resemble abstract expressionist paintings instead of photographs.

Abstract Expressionism, the American art movement developed after World War II placing New York City in the center of the western art world, still shows the influences of that era in art today. This art movement evolved from the general discontent with the state of humanity in the post war world. Currently, to a different degree, similar disgruntlement is still present in society as domestic and foreign wars are still plaguing nations and many challenging struggles still occur within different social classes, political parties, ideologies, and religion.

As a response to the outer and inner struggles of the self, many artists of the Abstract Expressionism movement refused the traditional values of art, such as Realism, and searched to convey something more intuitive or spiritual, in order to express, cope, and even transcend the challenging world. In *Response to the Reverend Thomas F. Mathews*, painter Barnett Newman wrote that "we felt the moral crisis of a world in shambles, a world destroyed by a great depression and a fierce World War, and it was impossible at that time to paint the kind of paintings that we were doing—flowers, reclining nudes, and people playing the cello." (Newman, 1969)

This MFA research project was born from a similar desire to rise above the contemporary challenges of our times and go beyond the limits of reality to hopefully experience joy through the “Photographic Abstractions.”

Non-objective art often attempts to visualize the spiritual and recurrently carries a moral dimension. It stands for virtues like purity and simplicity (Tate, 2019). One of the pioneers in non-objectivity, painter Wassily Kandinsky, believed that this type of art is the ideal visual mode to express the inner necessity of the artist and to convey universal human emotions and ideas. Similar to Kandinsky’s works, this research uses non-representational language to speak directly to the soul of the viewer, with the intention of generating joy.

The artwork seeks to balance negativity by producing a positive effect on the viewer, much like what Henri Matisse sought in *Notes of a Painter*:

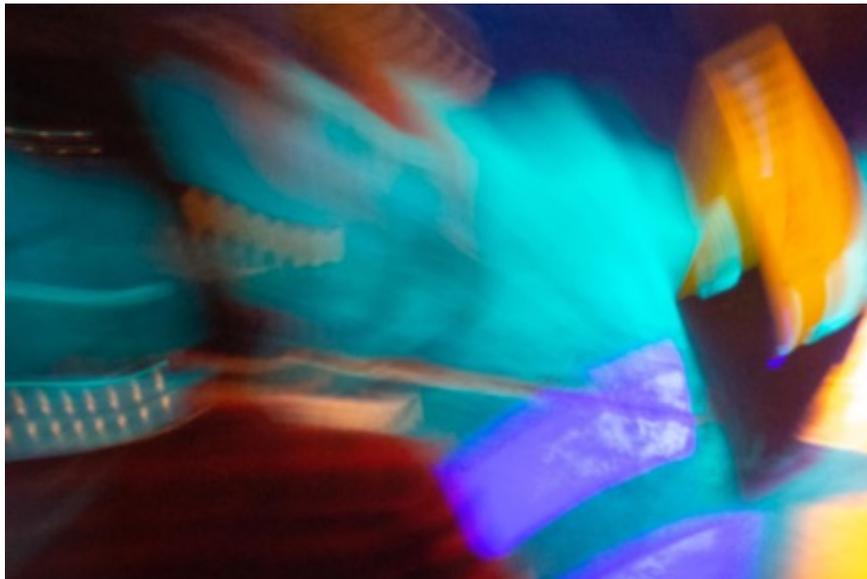
What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art which could be for every mental worker, for the businessman as well as the man of letters, for example, a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue. (Matisse, 1908)

Likewise, the “Photographic Abstractions” hope to offer a relaxing armchair for the mind with a few moments of joy and escape from the stresses of modern life. Some may perceive the retreat from reality promoted by these images as fleeting and Kandinsky describes this allusion beautifully in *On the Spiritual in Art*:

When you let your eye stray over a palette covered with colours, two main results are produced: I. The first is a purely physical effect when the eye itself is enchanted by beauty and the multiple delight of colour. The observer is pleased. He experiences a pleasure similar to that enjoyed by an epicure in tasting a

delicacy. The eye is stimulated as the tongue is titillated by a spicy dish. Or it is refreshed and soothed as a finger touching ice. (Kandinsky, 1946)

For others, like Larry Wilson, visiting artist at Jacksonville University Summer Residency 2018, during his review of the “Photographic Abstractions” in exhibit at the Alexander Brest Museum, referred to the work as “not short-lived” and as having a “delightful depth,” specifically when reviewing *Photographic Abstraction no.1*. Wilson demonstrated surprise to learn that it was not a painting and stated “you have extrapolated the photographic medium so far from a photograph that they no longer resemble photos.”



*Figure 3. Photographic Abstraction no.1 (Summer, 2018)*

These works are a subjective view of everyday reality, achieved by manipulating a digital camera and lens, a process explained further under section IV Media Materials and Processes. While it is up to the viewer to get lost into the shapes, colors and textures playfully presented through fragmented subjects, the hope is for the imagery effect on the mood or psyche to be lasting.

Kandinsky sought to convey profound spirituality and the depth of human emotion through a universal visual language of nonrepresentational forms and colors that transcended cultural and physical boundaries:

All these (art) forms, when truly artistic, fulfill their purpose and ... become food for the spirit... where the observer becomes conscious of a responsive vibration within his soul.... The ... sentiment of a painting can intensify the observer's sentimental mood and purify it. In any event, such works of art safeguard the soul from coarsening its frequency, and keep it at a certain height, much as a tuning fork pitches the strings of a musical instrument. (Kandinsky, 1946)

“Photographic Abstractions” developed from an akin desire to transcend a range of side effects from society including political corruption, social injustice, greed or just sheer materialism as Kandinsky elaborates; “this nightmare of materialism, which has turned the life of the universe into an evil, useless game, has not yet past. The awakening soul, while trying to free itself, is still under its domination” (Kandinsky, 1946). The images aspire to offer the viewer a detachment from societal pressures and constraints like those of which Kandinsky spoke.

In *Analyses of the Old Masters*, Johannes Itten elaborated on a parallel between experiencing art and experiencing the spiritual and stated that “the act of experience is a spiritual capacity of the soul. With respect to the more crudely material phenomena, it is the physical senses that generate experience, whereas with respect to the subtler and more spiritual phenomena, it is the spiritual senses which do so.” (Itten, 1921)

This body of work was born out of a desire to further develop the photographic medium as an instrument to create the kind of art that is devoid of recognizable content

through movement. In so doing, the resulting images are more easily susceptible to intuition and spiritual inspiration. The impulses for the creation of the work are similar to the developments present in modern art; the shift from figural, natural, objective imagery of immortalizing a place, time, person to the partial or complete abstraction of subject. A partial abstraction of subject is also called a “blur.” When the subject is completely abstracted or one hundred per cent blurred to the point that it no longer has a connection to reality, it is called non-objective.

The “Photographic Abstractions” are inherently modern. Movement and gesture are intrinsic ingredients in this work. Not only is gesture an important aspect of modern art but also it has been an essential technique in the development of numerous modern art styles. In *Modernist Painting*, Clement Greenberg discussed the self-critical tendencies of modern art as something positive which further develops each medium; “the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence” (Greenberg, 1961). In this Abstract Expressionist experiment, photography is used, in a sense, in a critical way towards the medium, as it defies photographic rules, and consequently becomes painterly. The use of motion with the photographic equipment opposes traditional techniques, as it undermines the primary documentary function of a photograph, and in this case achieves imagery that resembles abstract expressionist paintings.

Abstract Expressionism was developed by American painters Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Willem de Kooning among others in the 1940s and 1950s. “It is often

characterized by gestural brush-strokes or mark-making, and the impression of spontaneity” (Tate, 2019). Some of these artists were called action painters and were led by Pollock and de Kooning. Action painting, also referred to as gestural abstraction, means to paint spontaneously by dribbling, splashing or smearing paint onto the canvas, rather than carefully applying it with the brush. “The resulting work often emphasized the physical act of painting itself as an essential aspect of the finished work or concern of its artist” (Foster, 2016). Using photography instead of painting as a medium, “Photographic Abstractions” are created by emphasizing the physical act of photographing as a fundamental characteristic of the finished artwork, therefore taking them beyond representation.

Harold Rosenberg, in *The American Action Painters*, discusses the value of going beyond representation for an artist:

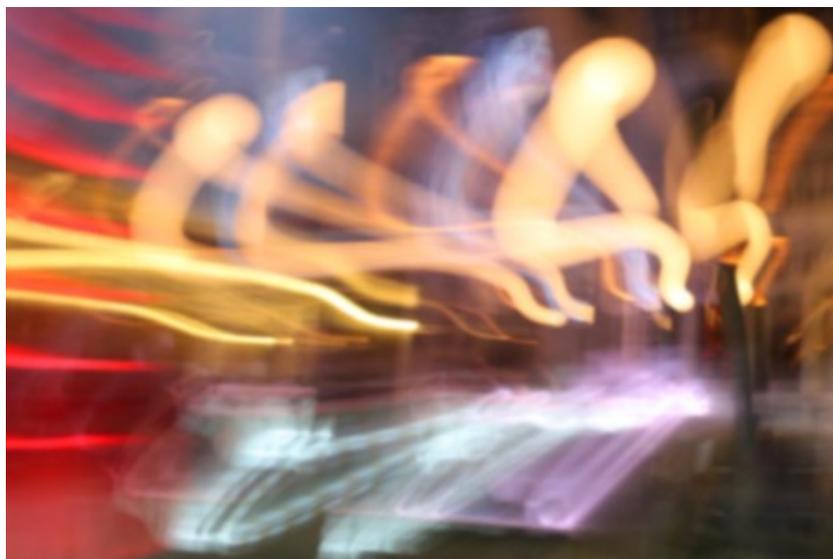
“A new kind of work emerges when a shift in perception occurs and the artist starts seeing the surface of the canvas not so much as a support for a picture or representation of a preconceived idea, but rather as an arena within which an “act of painting” takes place. This shift in interest applies as much to drawing as it does to painting. The question is not about the medium one chooses but the motive for going beyond the mere representation of an object.” (Rosenberg, 1952)

This shift in interest also applies to photography as exemplified in this portfolio. “Photographic Abstractions” enable the extrapolation of the photographic medium so far from a photograph to the point that there is seemingly no longer a connection to photography. The photographs completely depart from reality in the depiction of imagery in art. As in total abstraction, they bear no trace of reference to anything recognizable in the world making them non-objective.

In article *William Klein*, Klein states that “the rules of photography didn't interest me. There were things you could do with a camera that you couldn't do with any other medium...I thought it would be good to show what's possible, to say that this is as valid of a way of using the camera as conventional approaches.” (“William Klein”). This quote resonates with the concept of this MFA research; specifically, the ignoring of photography rules to produce something new. Klein is an American artist and photographer, famous for “his unconventional style of abstract photography depicting city scenes.” (“William Klein”)

“Photographic Abstractions” is a means to study motion, form, color, light and optics, and it is also a new vehicle for self-expression. But more specifically, the work is the result of manipulating the digital camera’s ability to capture light, especially colorful light.

**Motion:**



*Figure 4. Photographic Abstraction no.6 (Summer, 2018)*

The artist's hand is, chiefly, in charge of producing the motion during the image capture. The importance of the artist hand and gesture in this research is as relevant as the gestural abstraction was to the Abstract Expressionist artists; the hand is an extension of the mind.

In creating "Photographic Abstractions," much like the way Jackson Pollock used hand and arm movements in his drip techniques for paintings, the artist's mind and hand movements are applied to the camera as a primary tool. In this study, the camera is used in a similar manner as the brush was used in Pollock's paintings. An interesting and exciting aspect of this concept is that the final result of the artwork created may not be known until after the work is produced.

In *Analyses of the Old Masters*, Johannes Itten elaborates on the relationship between movement and form, light, and color:

Movement gives birth to form. Form gives birth to movement. Every point, every line, every surface, every body, every shadow, every ray of light and every colour are forms that are born of movement and which themselves generate movement. Grief and joy, hate and love, distaste and fondness, these are all forms of psyche and born of movement. (Itten, 1921)

It is precisely the movement applied to the camera and lens that gives life to the forms, colors, textures and all the formal art elements of the "Photographic Abstractions." The technique used in this work emphasizes the physical act of photographing and this act is as an essential feature of the finished work, much like Pollock and Willem de Kooning did with the painting medium.

The works achieve authentic identity through gesture performed with the photographic camera, completely distorting the physical world and evoking feelings, ideas and moods. The bright colors of the imagery are the result of this physicality. This process is reminiscent of the gestural abstraction of Pollock and de Kooning. Spontaneity and expression of personal emotion were key ingredients in their work. They showed no constraint in the liberties they took in technique and execution of the artwork, breaking the aesthetic rules of their time.

**Form:**



*Figure 5. Photographic Abstraction no.16 (Summer, 2018)*

Itten continues his exploration of form and movement as attributes of being alive: "to perceive form is to be moved, and to be moved is to give form. Even the slightest stirring of feeling is a form which irradiates movement. All living things reveal themselves to us by means of movement. Everything is marked by movement, and nothing is dead. For otherwise it could not exist at all" (Itten, 1921).

Movement can show us evidence of action and of life. Capturing movement in photography can present new perspectives on subjects that might otherwise be still. They can reveal to a viewer perspectives perhaps only possible to the subconscious, if at all. The viewer may delight in the non-objective forms while contemplating the source and form of the original subject.

In *The Theory and Organization of the Bauhaus*, Walter Gropius (1883-1969) discusses form, color and light within the Bauhaus curriculum under *Instruction in form problems*:

Forms and colors gain meaning only as they are related to our inner selves. Used separately or in relation to one another they are a means of expressing different emotions and movements: they have no importance of their own. Red, for instance, invoke in us other emotions than does blue or yellow; round forms speak differently to us than do pointed or jagged forms. The elements which constitute the 'grammar' of creation are its rules of rhythm, of proportion, of light values and full or empty space. Vocabulary and grammar can be learned, but the most important factor of all, the organic life of the created work, originates in the creative powers of the individual. (Gropius, 1938)

Just as each individual may view and interpret a work of art through the prism of their own experiences, the creative process of the artist is driven from their internal viewpoints. The use of color, shape and form are ways in which artists express themselves, and these are fundamental tools. For example, an image showing soft, rounded forms might convey a smooth or pleasant mood, while forms that are stiff or abrupt can have a less pleasant meaning. While there are basic building blocks in art production such as composition and spacing, the heart of creativity lies in our ability to express our inner selves through the shapes and colors we employ. The "Photographic

Abstractions” offer combinations of several bright colors and flowing forms as an expression of such joy.

**Color:**



*Figure 6. Photographic Abstraction no.17 (Summer, 2018)*

The presentation of colors in the “Photographic Abstractions” is one of the most exciting aspects of this work. The viewer can take a few moments to see the effects of color and movement even if they cannot recognize the original image. The appearance of bent or bleeding lights and the seeping of colors across the canvas shown would not be visible to the viewer with the naked eye in real time and this is one of the unique possibilities they present.

When considering color, perhaps a good explanation on why it’s a crucial element is offered by Lazlo Moholy-Nagy in *Painting, Photography, Film* (1925):

It is an elementary biological necessity for human beings to absorb colour, to extract colour. We must assume that there are conditions of colour relationships

and tensions, light values, forms, positions, directions which are common to all men and determined by our physiological mechanisms. E.g., complementary colours, the ways in which colours can be arranged centrally and eccentrically, centrifugally and centripetally, values of brightness and darkness- black and white content- the warmth and coldness of colours, their advancing and receding movements, the lightness and weight of colours. (Moholy-Nagy, 1925)

Our lives are enriched and enhanced by our interactions with color. Our ability to recognize or perceive depth and distance, shape and direction are aided by our understanding of color. Of course, there are people who can function in society despite the disability of color-blindness, though these people must learn ways to compensate for their condition. But color provides us with much more than spatial or directional assistance. We benefit from the beauty of color all around us. This beauty can be natural in forms such as a perfect sunset or the crisp autumn leaves; or it might be man-made beauty in art or architecture. Although the interpretation of color may be subjective, the use of color and the relationships or impacts of colors together are real for the individual.

Humans are generally attracted to colors and hearing Judy Chicago discuss color during her Artist Talk at Art Basel Miami Beach 2018 was reassuring. She referred to the movement seen in images as being caused by the change in color within the artwork. (Chicago, 2018)

In *Point and Line to Plane*, Kandinsky stated that “The artist must train not only his eye but also his soul. Color is a means of exerting direct influence on the soul” (Kandinsky, 1926).

## Light:



*Figure 7. Photographic Abstraction no.18 (Summer, 2018)*

Experimenting with different lighting conditions has been an important part of this creative process. There are several factors related to light that impact the development of this work. Available light, whether natural or artificial, time of day and location are among the variables that can influence the art production. Well-lit venues such as museums or concert venues are often excellent sources of image subjects. Alternatively, night-time photo shoots on or near bodies of water can generate numerous light and color reflections in an image.

In *From Pigment to Light*, Ruth Iskin elaborated on Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's art and theories on light as a new medium. Iskin emphasized Moholy-Nagy's proclamation that "we have now reached the stage when it should be possible to discard brush and pigment and to 'paint' by means of light itself." (Iskin, 2004).

The “Photographic Abstractions” are a perfect example of this statement. The work was created by means of light; by capturing light in motion, i.e., moving the lens and camera body while pressing the shutter. Photography is the art of capturing light and Moholy-Nagy wrote that “the photographer is a manipulator of light; photography is manipulation of light.” (Iskin, 2004). Moholy-Nagy also wrote about the role light plays in photography and the scientific evolution in optics which brings into focus what is not legible to the human eye. Pepper Stetler, in his review of Moholy-Nagy’s work, stated that:

...these telescopic enlargements reveal imagery inaccessible to the human eye. Light is obviously fundamental to photography, part of the word itself. However, light appears entirely different in a photograph than it does to the naked eye. Photography's representation of light thus exhibits the distinction of photographic vision from the perception of "real time" and "real space.” (Stetler, 98)

While it’s true that photographic equipment enables us to capture light in ways not recognizable to the human eye, we can also use photography to manipulate seemingly ordinary scenes into abstract or non-objective creations. The resulting images produced may not have any relation to the original subject captured.

### **Optics:**

It is through the advancement of science and optics that humanity has gained access to even more abstraction. The cosmos, for example, have become are a series of abstract images to the human eye through the advanced optics of telescopes.



*Figure 8. Photographic Abstraction no.19 (Summer, 2018)*

In *Painting, Photography and Film*, Moholy-Nagy stated that the eyes are not a reliable source of perception and that photography is necessary to complement human visual ability. He argues that the human body, especially the eyes, is not well suited for pure, objective vision. Instead, people see something, process it and relate what they've seen based on prior experiences. Moholy-Nagy calls this a "conceptual image" as described below:

The photographic camera reproduces the purely optical image and therefore shows the optically true distortions, deformations, foreshortenings, etc., whereas the eye together with our intellectual experience, supplements perceived optical phenomena by means of association and formally and spatially creates a conceptual image. (Moholy-Nagy, 1925)

This is particularly true when considering the limits of human vision. At any given moment, our eyes may be distracted by light or motion; or we may not be able to observe clearly in limited light. The technology used to create photography gives us the benefits of speed and precision. While it is still up to our brains to interpret and associate

what we see in a photograph, the medium itself allows us to capture far more than we could with the naked eye.

Moholy-Nagy appeared to express excitement over the future potential of photography for art creation, not simply for documentation but also for color composition (Moholy-Nagy, 1925). He also seemed optimistic of the future creative capabilities of the photographic medium.

But when we have enumerated these uses, we are still far from having exhausted the possibilities in the field. We are only beginning to exploit them; for - although photography is already over a hundred years old - it is only in recent years that the course of development has allowed us to see beyond the specific instance and recognize the creative consequences. Our vision has only lately developed sufficiently to grasp these connections. (Moholy-Nagy, 1925)

The “Photographic Abstractions” are similar in concept to works of Moholy-Nagy, as he also used photography as a means of creation rather than just a mechanical process of recording. He thought of photography as the basis of perception in the modern world (Moholy-Nagy, 1925) and he was right as nowadays, even in remote areas, numerous people carry a cell phone with a camera.

In *The Paintings of Moholy-Nagy: The Shape of Things to Come*, Joyce Tsai stated that “Moholy is one of the earliest instigators of a radical redefinition of art as a conceptual act rather than a handcrafted object” (Tsai, 2015). The Bauhaus school, founded by Moholy-Nagy among others, had a utopian belief in the visual arts as a transformative tool capable of changing the world and providing freedom from nature’s

limitations and the harshness of human behavior. Moholy-Nagy's optimistic confidence in the future of art remains as inspirational today. (Tsai, 2015)

The "Photographic Abstractions" were created to free the artist from the limits of reality, providing an opportunity for escape and self-reflection through non-objective imagery. Following Moholy-Nagy's notion of being far from exhausting possibilities in the field, this work attempts to stretch the creative limits of the photographic medium by experimenting within the areas of form, color, and light and by purposely applying motion where traditional photographic practice calls for stillness.

### III. SOURCES OF INSPIRATION AND INFLUENCE

The main source of inspiration and influence is a deep desire to escape the negative aspects of reality through the total abstraction of reality; through the joyful realization of colors, shapes, and textures playfully presented in the fragmented subjects of the “Photographic Abstractions.” The social, political and cultural challenges of our society is the motivation to create an outlet, via non-objective art, to help ease stress by offering images that allow the mind to relax and get lost in the motion, forms, and colors of the works.

The artwork resonates with the non-objective art and concepts of modern painters such as Wassily Kandinsky. In addition to being an Abstract Expressionist Painter of Russian and French descent, Kandinsky was an established art theorist. He was born in Moscow on December 16th, 1866 and died in Paris on December 13th, 1944, at 77. In his younger years, besides being a successful student, he was fascinated with psychology and color symbolism, which later benefitted his painting career and colorful expressionist artwork. (“Wassily Kandinsky Biography”)

The research interest in psychology led to investigations by contemporary scholar, photographer and Rider University psychology professor John Suler. Internationally known for his expertise in recent developments in the fields of psychology, Doctor Suler has extensively published on matters related to creativity and photographic psychology. In his article *Photographic Psychology: Image and Psyche*, he analyses abstract photography, its effect on people and how people experience it. Suler elaborates on abstract photography as something one immerses themselves into:

The visceral sensations, moods, and primeval ideas aroused by the image. They don't 'think' about the image per se, but rather use intuition to sense its meaning and impact. Some people even say it departs from true meaning, existence, and reality itself. It stands apart from the concrete whole with its purpose instead depending on conceptual meaning and intrinsic form. (Suler, 2013)

Suler suggests that a good abstract photograph draws people in to figure out what the image is about. "Even if people are told what an abstract photograph is, they often still enjoy the challenge of trying to wrap their minds around the bigger picture from which it was abstracted." (Suler, 2013)

Non-objective art was first developed in the early 1900's, roughly in the time between the two world wars, when artists were truly discontent with the state of political, social and religious affairs. During that time, Kandinsky declared that art could save the world and considered himself a prophet with the intention to bring peace on earth through art. (Kandinsky, 1946)

War is still a reality today in many levels, abroad and nationally. In addition to these troubling circumstances, our contemporary life of the early twenty-first century is filled with fast paced technology bombarding us with ever increasing amounts of information. The excessive influx of technology and information has proven to be challenging to negotiate and has made it difficult to discern what is true. Amidst the challenges of contemporary life, these works are born as a healing mechanism to escape the burdens of reality and aspire to connect the audience with emotions of joy.

Kandinsky elaborated that "When religion, science, and morals are shaken and when the outer supports threaten to fall, man turns his gaze from the external to the deeper essence within him" (Kandinsky, 1946). Non-objective art is often used for this inner exploration of the self. It is relevant because it completely liberates artists from

objective reality, allowing for unlimited experimentation with pure form which affords the creator the ultimate freedom.

“Photographic Abstractions” allow a connection with the inner self and emotions purely through the perception of shapes and colors, and this is the spiritual aspect of this artwork. The audience is not being directed to view a certain recognizable subject. Therefore, the ambiguity of the images allow intuition to come through. When photography is used as an instrument to create non-objective art, it facilitates the expression of inner self and intuitive emotions.

Kandinsky's *On The Spiritual In Art* was the starting point of this research, as it encompasses aspects of the work's concepts. In this book, Kandinsky analyzed color theory and abstraction of form as a spiritual expression. He believed that non-objectivity “offered the possibility for profound, transcendental expression and that copying from nature only interfered with this process.” (Griffin, 2013)

One of the driving motivations for Kandinsky was to create art capable of communicating a universal sense of spirituality. For that purpose, he developed a pictorial language with minimum reference to the real world. “He sought to convey profound spirituality and the depth of human emotion through a universal visual language of abstract forms and colors that transcended cultural and physical boundaries.” (Griffin, 2013). An example of this type of art can be seen in works like *Composition Number 7* from 1913. This painting “was an early example of his synthesis of spiritual, emotional, and non-referential form through complex patterns and brilliant colors.” (Griffin, 2013)



Figure 9. *Composition Number 7*. Wassily Kandinsky (1913)

In *Composition Number 7*, Kandinsky's rejection of pictorial representation is evident by his use of swirling colors and shapes. By painting different colors and symbols spiraling around each other, he “eliminated traditional references to depth and laid bare the different abstracted glyphs in order to communicate deeper themes and emotions common to all cultures and viewers.” (Griffin, 2013)

Kandinsky has been the most influential artist within this research and that makes sense since he was one of the pioneers of Non-objective art and “set the stage for much of the expressive modern art produced in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.” (Griffin, 2013). It can be easily added to this statement that Kandinsky is still a point of reference for non-objective art in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and this research demonstrates that.

“Kandinsky's work, both artistic and theoretical, played a large role in the philosophic foundation for later modern movements, in particular Abstract Expressionism and its variants like Color Field Painting.” (Griffin, 2013). Mark Rothko is a good example of this influence as “Kandinsky's analysis of the sensorial properties of color was immensely influential on...Rothko, who emphasized the interrelationships of hues for their emotive potential.” (Griffin, 2013)

Rothko was born in Russia on September 25, 1903 and emigrated to the United States with his family while still a child. In 1968, he was diagnosed with heart problems and suffered from depression. He took his own life in his studio on February 25, 1970. (“Mark Rothko Biography”)

The Getty Museum lists Rothko as “as one of the primary artists of Abstract Expressionism and color field painting.” (Getty, 2004) His use of “broad, simplified areas of color (rather than gestural splashes and drips of paint) caused his style to be categorized as Color field Painting. He painted in thin, layered washes of color that seemed to glow from within.” (“Mark Rothko Biography”) and “Certain critics have referred to (his) works as landscapes of the mind...(his) images (are) swept bare of all but the most fundamental color and form, and if they are meant to represent anything, they represent a voyage into the unknown.” (markrothko.org, 1999-2014)

It is interesting to highlight the similarities between the color scheme of some “Photographic Abstractions” and some of Rothko’s Color Field paintings as illustrated below.

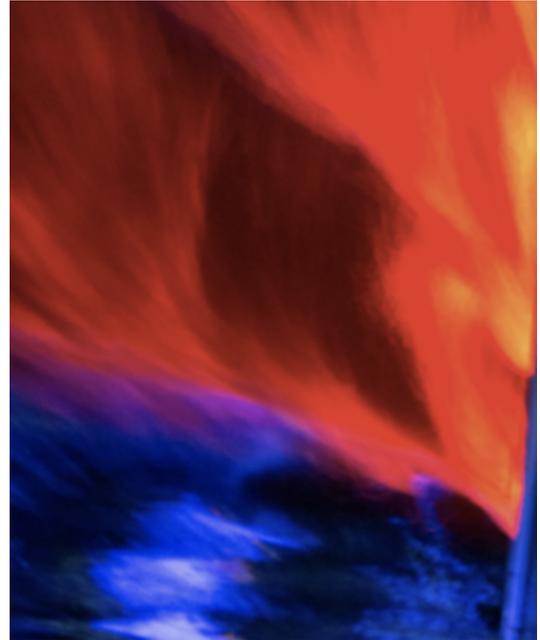


Figure 10. *No.207* Mark Rothko (1961)      Figure 11. *Photographic Abstraction no.207*

Barnett Newman, a contemporary of Rothko, besides being a Color field painter, was also a respected art critic among his peers. This research is mostly interested in his reviews and analysis of other artists. It is noteworthy that Newman “disliked the evocation of death and the macabre in Rothko's work (and stated) Why should I look at his death image?...I am involved in life, in the joy of the spirit." (Gershman, 2009). Newman’s desire for joy is the point of congruence with this research.

When examining both works below, it is apparent that in Rothko's painting *No.9* there is very little movement compared to all the gesture present in the *Photographic Abstraction no.9*. The stillness in Rothko's work is what Newman refers to as death.



Figure 12. *No.9* Mark Rothko (1954)



Figure 13. *Photographic Abstraction no.9*

This comparison of Rothko's image to death is in agreement with Johannes Itten's previous citation from *Analyses of the Old Masters*, regarding movement as proof of life. While there is a lot of movement in one work, which can be interpreted as evoking the joy of life, the lack of motion in the other may arouse a somber mood.

Newman and Rothko, among others, "founded the Subjects of the Artist School as a means for exploring and promulgating ideas about the inspiration, subjects, attitudes, and possibilities of abstract expressionism." (NGA, "Barnett Newman").

Newman was born in New York and lived from January 29, 1905 to July 4 1970. His parents were Jewish immigrants from Russian Poland who came to N.Y. five years before his birth. For Newman, art was an “act of self-creation and a declaration of political, intellectual, and individual freedom.” (MoMA, “Barnett Newman”)

Each of the artists cited above used color and light to communicate emotions. While their motivations may have differed, it is interesting to note how these artists from various backgrounds used these tools for self-expression.

The “Photographic Abstractions” aim to deliver the viewer with a momentary escape from reality. The hope is to communicate feelings of joy and offer a mental break from the mundane with bright and colorful images. People need joy to balance out all the negativity, violence and injustice in the world. Seeking joy is an act of resistance in our conflicting times. The work aims to provide an intellectual escape of joy.

#### **IV. MEDIA/MATERIALS AND PROCESSES**

The creation process for the “Photographic Abstractions” starts by searching for locations that provide ideal lighting opportunities for this kind of abstraction. It has been possible to narrow down the photoshoot locations through extensive research and trial and error of location scouting. Live concert venues, science museums, well-lit bridges over water at night, boats and locations with colorful and neon lights have provided ideal illumination and color situations for the gestural exploration of the medium. These places offer excellent light design opportunity for this kind of photoshoot. Preference is given to subjects that offer sophisticated lighting design and ample color palette, as well as subjects on or near bodies of water, as the reflection of color and light on the water often adds a new dimension to the abstracted subject.

##### **The images are produced by using two techniques:**

1 – Lens Manipulation, which means manipulating the camera lens, as in zooming in and out from the subject while pressing the shutter.

2 - Camera Gestural Movement, which means making gestural movements with the camera, similar to what the Abstract Expressionists started doing last century with their paint brushes.

These two techniques were used to explore and highlight the role of speed, color, and light in the process of abstraction with the camera.

## **Abstraction = Blur**

Abstraction in these photographs may also be referred to as a blur. There are several kinds of blurs and ways to achieve blurred images. Images can vary from partially blurred, which is termed Abstract Photography and still retain some of their objective nature, to fully blurred, when they present no trace of reality and are working towards Non-objective. This research focus on the latter, on the complete abstraction of images that strive toward the non-objective.

Blurring explores what happens when creatives push the boundaries of traditional media through experimentation, use innovative, experimental, and risk-taking methodologies in their professional practices.

The most popular techniques used to produce the totally blurred or fully abstracted subjects are: the use of a slow shutter speed while moving the camera, zooming the lens in and out while pressing the shutter, or keeping the camera still while photographing moving light sources. Out of these three, this research only uses the zooming of lens during the image capture and adds to it gestural movements to the camera body at the same time that the lens is being zoomed in and out. This procedure is performed to intentionally cause the complete abstraction or blur of subjects.

In traditional documentary photography, the camera's aperture and shutter speed are fundamental for the capture of reality. The manual mode of the camera is usually recommended so that the photographer is in full control of both these features. Since the objective of this experiment is not to document the subject but rather to distort it to its fullest, until no trace of reality is visible, the camera is set to auto mode in low light situations so that its settings will be sabotaged by motion. The strategy of this

experimental research is to disrupt the camera's ability to document the subject in order to fully extract it from reality.

This work intentionally breaks traditional photographic rules by applying motion to camera body and lens while pressing the shutter in these low light situations. The camera and lens were primarily built to be used in a still position and the tripod was created to aid the camera with this motionlessness need for optimal documentary capture in low light. However, throughout history, many photographers have experimented with their equipment, using it in ways other than what it was originally meant for. This research is yet another investigation of the effects movement has in photography.

Even though a digital photographic camera is used to create this work, it is not about photography perse. It is more about non-representational art, and about using the camera as an art tool to produce non-objective art. Much like the way the abstract expressionist painters used the brush to produce abstract and non-objective paintings. They were breaking all the art rules of their time to produce new kinds of art with the main interest of conveying an idea, feeling or mood, instead of conforming to the traditional rules of art.

### **Print process**

The printing process was extensive. The print choice came from examining numerous samples from several printing companies to verify quality of prints, the availability of sizes, and the options for canvas. The industrial size printer with the capability of 40 x 60 inch was essential. The digital files of the "Photographic Abstractions" were uploaded to the printing company's website, printed on very fine and

luminous canvas and shipped to the Alexander Brest Museum for the MFA thesis exhibit, *In The Works*, the first showing of this portfolio.

### **Print size**

The size of the works was chosen for its impact with the audience at a certain viewing distance and were intended to be seen at close range so that viewers feel engulfed by them. The size 60 x 40 inch was chosen with the purpose of engulfing the audience within a ten foot viewing distance with the colors, forms and movement.

### **Print material**

Stretched canvas, gallery wrapped 1.5-inch-deep, was the final choice for printing material, as an alternative to the traditional paper photographs with glass frames. Canvas is a great substitute for the weight and breakability of glass. Also, it adds texture to the photographs and makes the work read even more like paintings. This material codes the reading of the work as paintings.

### **Images**

The artwork is a marriage of the expression of the mind, heart, and soul with the technology of digital photography, bridging the more scientific aspects of photography with the gesture and vibrant color of Abstract Expressionism. Images vary in color and shape depending on the subject, location, time of day and lighting situation. The following set of images display an extensive color palette. These photographs are particularly colorful because they were taken in locations with very sophisticated lighting

design. For example, at live concert venues where the lighting is usually well produced and managed by a professional lighting designer, whose job is to make the stage as attractive as possible with numerous and colorful lights.

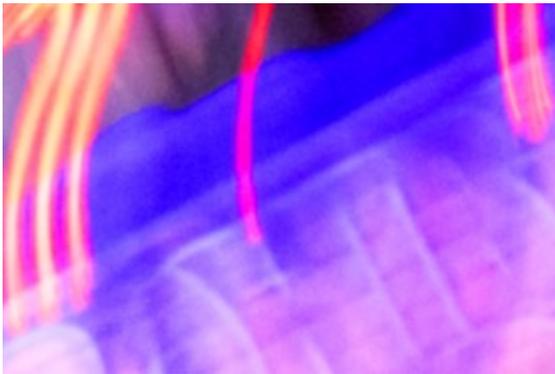


Figure 15. *Photographic Abstraction no.4*      Figure 16. *Photographic Abstraction no.2*

Figures 15 and 16 were created at a live music concert in Saint Augustine, FL.

The next set of images were also created indoors at night at the same live music venue in Saint Augustine, FL. However, since these images were captured on a different night with a different band and light designer, they present different color tone and texture. The lighting at this location was ideal for this concept. There was a light designer whose sole job was to provide great lighting composition on the stage. The stage lights were dispersed beyond the stage into the whole space providing excellent subjects for the camera. Everywhere the camera was pointed, there was a great lighting opportunity to abstract the image.



Figure 17. *Photographic Abstraction no.11*    Figure 18. *Photographic Abstraction no.12*

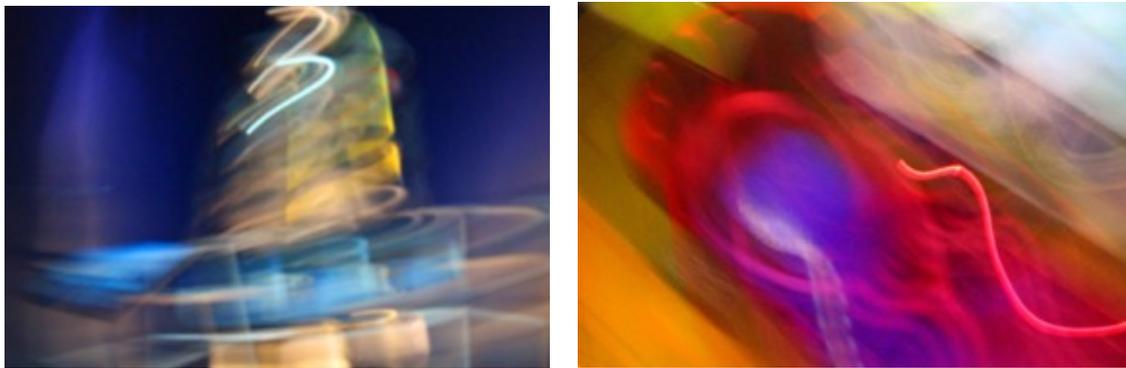
These next images were created at a location filled with colorful neon lights:



Figure 19. *Photographic Abstraction no.13*.    Figure 20. *Photographic Abstraction no.14*

Museums with exhibits that are well lit with colorful lights including neon lights, are also excellent location choices for the creation of imagery with a wide color range.

Figures 21 and 22 were created at the Museum of Science & History (MOSH) in Jacksonville, FL.



*Figure 21. Photographic Abstraction no.5    Figure 22. Photographic Abstraction no.3*

Other locations with a more limited color palette result in images less colorful but still with very striking visual qualities. The next set of photographic abstractions was produced outdoors, at night from a power boat moving north on the Saint Johns River in Jacksonville, FL. This boat had lights running along its hull, reflecting different colors of light onto the river water, which at that time looked black. While the boat moved at a good speed, it was possible to abstract the images with minimal manipulation of lens or camera. When the boat lights shone only one-color tone, the images created presented a restricted color palette. However, When the boat lights shone two or more colors, the images captured were more vivid. When the boat stopped, both techniques of lens manipulation and gestural camera movements were used in order to fully abstract the images.

The following images were created depending on which color of light the boat was shining on the river water at each moment of capture.



Figure 23. *Photographic Abstraction no.22*

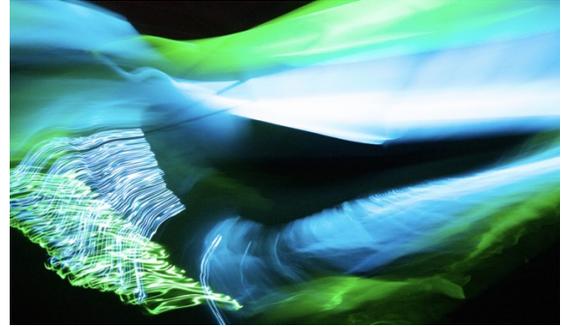


Figure 24. *Photographic Abstraction no.21*



Figure 25. *Photographic Abstraction no.20*

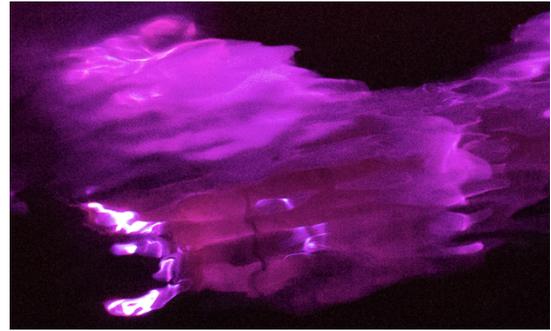


Figure 26. *Photographic Abstraction no.19*

## **Process**

A Canon single lens reflex digital camera was used for this particular portfolio. Any camera can be used to create images of this kind. The artist creates the images not the tool. The apparatus is best when it suits the creator well. The camera in this experiment is the same as a brush or chisel are for a painter or sculptor. The camera choice is personal, and, in this case, preference was given to the lightest camera available in the market at the time, 2017, in order to minimize the physical strain on the body due

to heavy equipment. The final optimum personal choice of camera was Canon SL1, which was actually not in production anymore and had to be special ordered.

The same weight concerns were taken into consideration when choosing the lens. The EFS 18-55mm lens is one of the smaller lenses by Canon, which facilitates all the necessary lens manipulation for the creation of “Photographic Abstractions.” There was experimentation with larger lenses, but they proved to be too awkward and heavy for this project. This particular lens has a built-in image stabilizer, and it was set on the off position because of the research goal to abstract the subject instead of documenting it.



Figure 27. Canon SL1 camera mounted with the EFS 18-55mm lens.

It is recommended to focus on the desired subject and take the first shot to establish the original subject for personal reference, in case there is a wish in the future to remember which subject was shot before it was abstracted. However, this step is not required for creation of these images. Figures 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33 demonstrate this

optional step. The Space Science Gallery at MOSH was the original subject of the *Photographic Abstraction no.24*:



Figure 28. Original subject - Space Science Gallery at MOSH

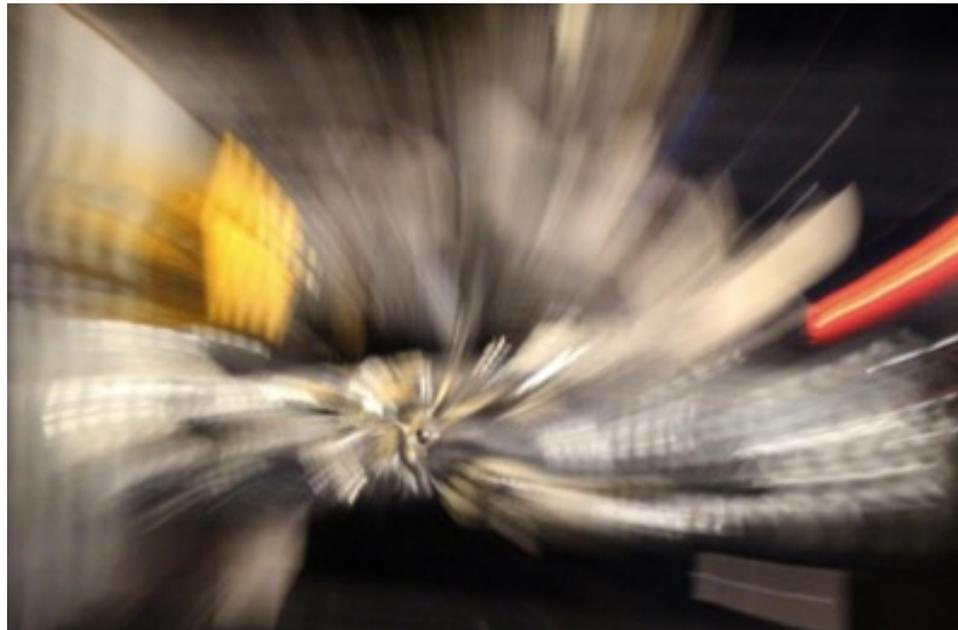


Figure 29. *Photographic Abstraction no.24*



Figure 30. Original subject – Diver at MOSH

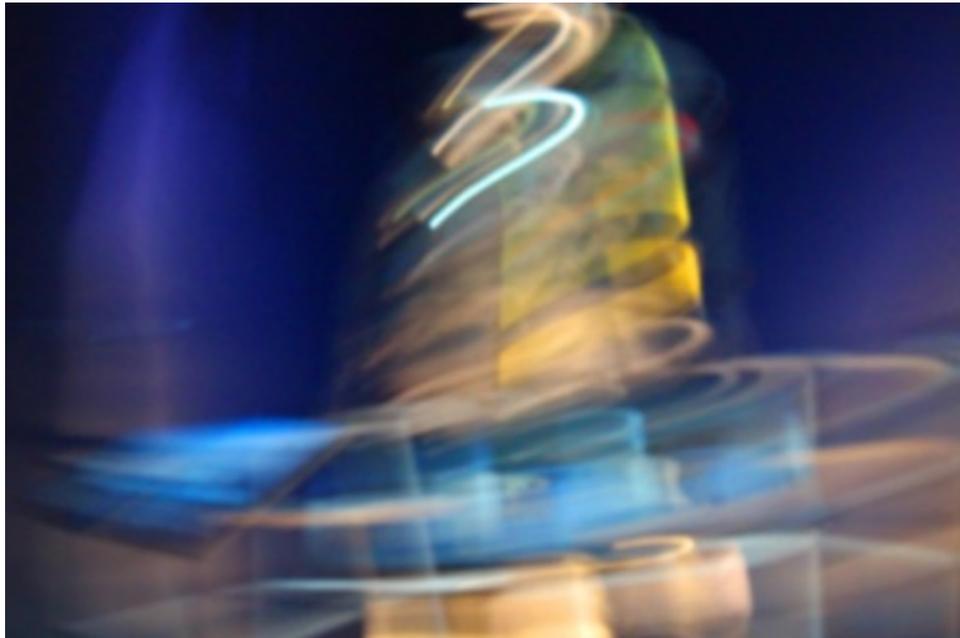


Figure 31. *Photographic Abstraction no.5*

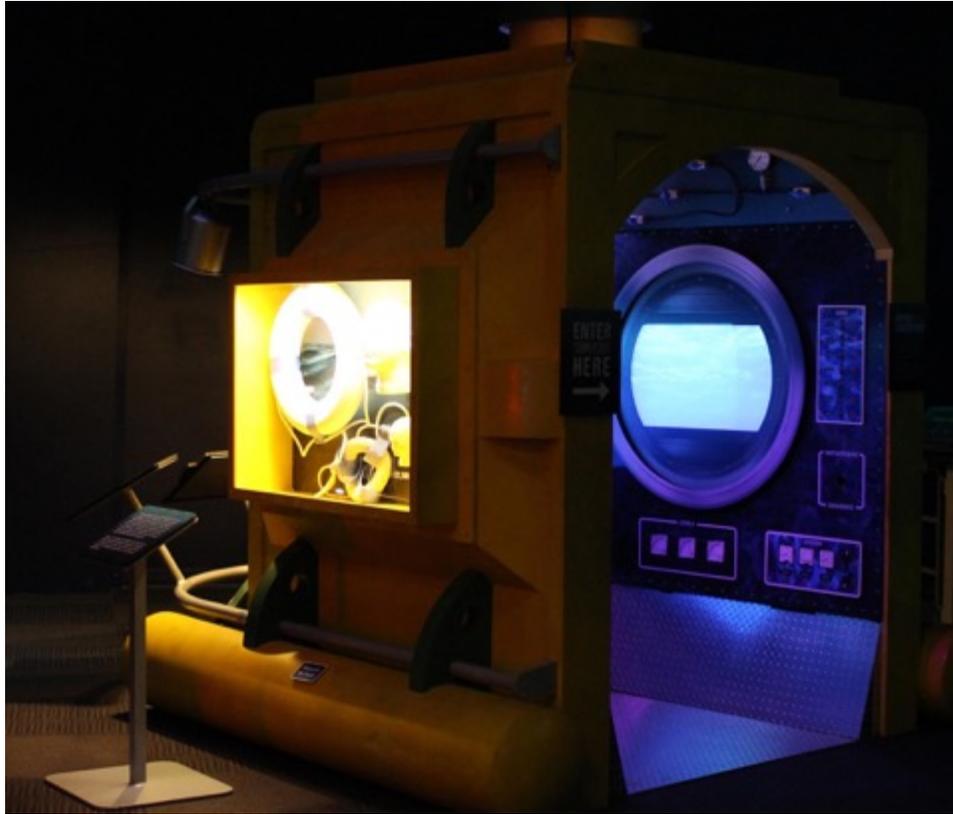


Figure 32. Original subject – Submarine at MOSH



Figure 33. *Photographic Abstraction no.3*

Even though this document is not a scientific thesis, it is inspired by numerous junctions that science and art share. The production of the work followed some of the scientific process of research, i.e., observation, trial and error, to discover the new and advance a field of expertise. While observing the outcomes of photoshoots, the research explored and discovered new techniques to create photographs. The techniques of manipulating the lens, zooming in and out of subject while pressing the shutter, and gestural movements with the camera, referencing the gesture of Abstract Expressionism, were used synchronically.

The process explored the use of the photographic equipment in alternative ways, applying motion to lens and body of the camera and giving preference to subjects with bright and colorful lights. The artwork is a marriage of the expression of the mind, heart, and soul with the technology of digital photography, bridging the more scientific aspects of photography with the gesture and vibrant color of Abstract Expressionism.

## V. CONCLUSION

The aspiration of being more than a mere spectator, contributing to the making of art through extensive research, practice and the ingenuity of expression, and to further develop the photographic medium as an instrument to create the kind of art that is devoid of recognizable content and therefore more easily susceptible to spiritual inspiration are some of the reasons for the “Photographic Abstractions” to exist.

After years of working with and learning the traditional “rules” of photography, the acquired knowledge inspired the confidence to begin breaking those rules and to move beyond narrative or figural subjects towards abstraction and non-representational imagery. Moholy-Nagy, in *Painting, Photography, Film* wrote about the ability of a photograph to be more than a record of life or a mere medium of representation. Instead, a photograph can be a turn to pure vision without the interference of the mind:

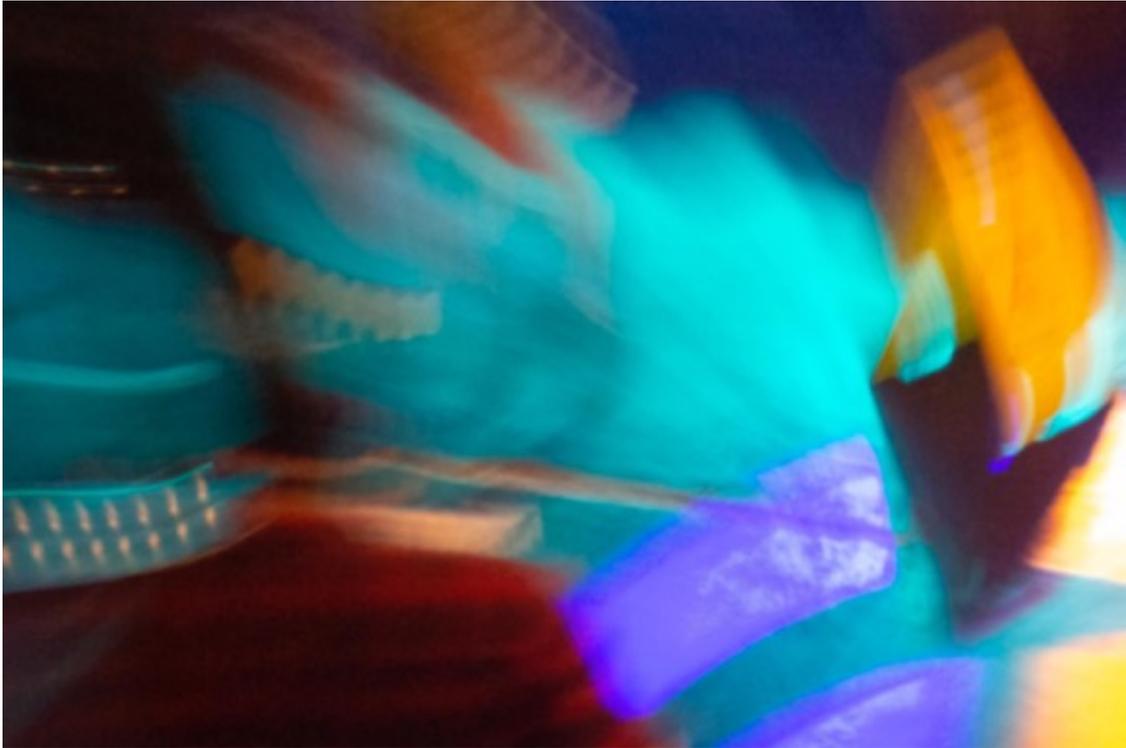
The camera has offered us amazing possibilities, which we are only just beginning to exploit. The visual image has been expanded and even the modern lens is no longer tied to the narrow limits of our eye; no manual means of representation (pencil, brush, etc.) is capable of arresting fragments of the world seen like this. (Moholy-Nagy, 1925)

Reinforcing this idea is Stetler’s review of Moholy-Nagy’s work affirming that “beyond its reproduction of a subject, a photograph is a perceptual model that induces particular sensations, stimuli, and responses. Moholy-Nagy defines photography as a productive medium, one that expands the world of the visible and leads to a transformation of human perception.” (Stetler, 2008)

Jose Ortega y Gasset, in *The Dehumanization of Art*, refers to realistic art as “only partial works of art” and as “not art but an extract from life” and “in art repetition is nothing” (Gasset, 1948/1968). Gasset found similarities in the numerous styles of modern art to include tendencies towards the abstraction of the subject and stated that “art has no right to exist if, content to reproduce reality, it uselessly duplicates it. Its mission is to conjure up imaginary worlds. That can be done only if the artist repudiates reality...” (Gasset, 1948/1968)

The attempt to absolutely define an artform is nearly unfeasible and perfectly described by Harold Rosenberg in *The American Action Painters*, when he compares such attempt to a game in which it is impossible to reach the goal from the starting point, as one “can only close in on it by picking up each time from where the last play landed.” (Rosenberg, 1952). In this manner the “Photographic Abstractions” continue as a live research in progress, which will keep evolving beyond this document as new abstractions are created and new exhibits are built from the inner necessity to escape reality, by abstracting it, in order to cope with the challenges it presents.

**VI. THESIS ART WORK**



*Photographic Abstraction no.1*

60 x 40 inch photograph on canvas

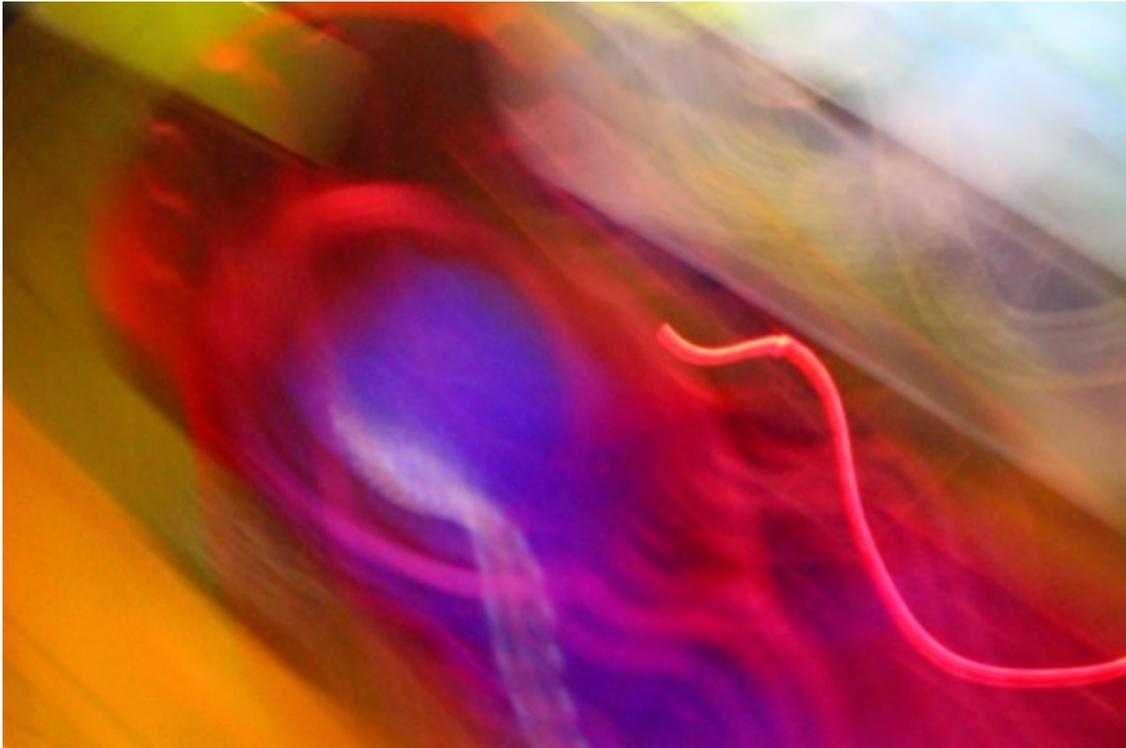
2018



*Photographic Abstraction no.2*

60 x 40 inch photograph on canvas

2018



*Photographic Abstraction no.3*

60 x 40 inch photograph on canvas

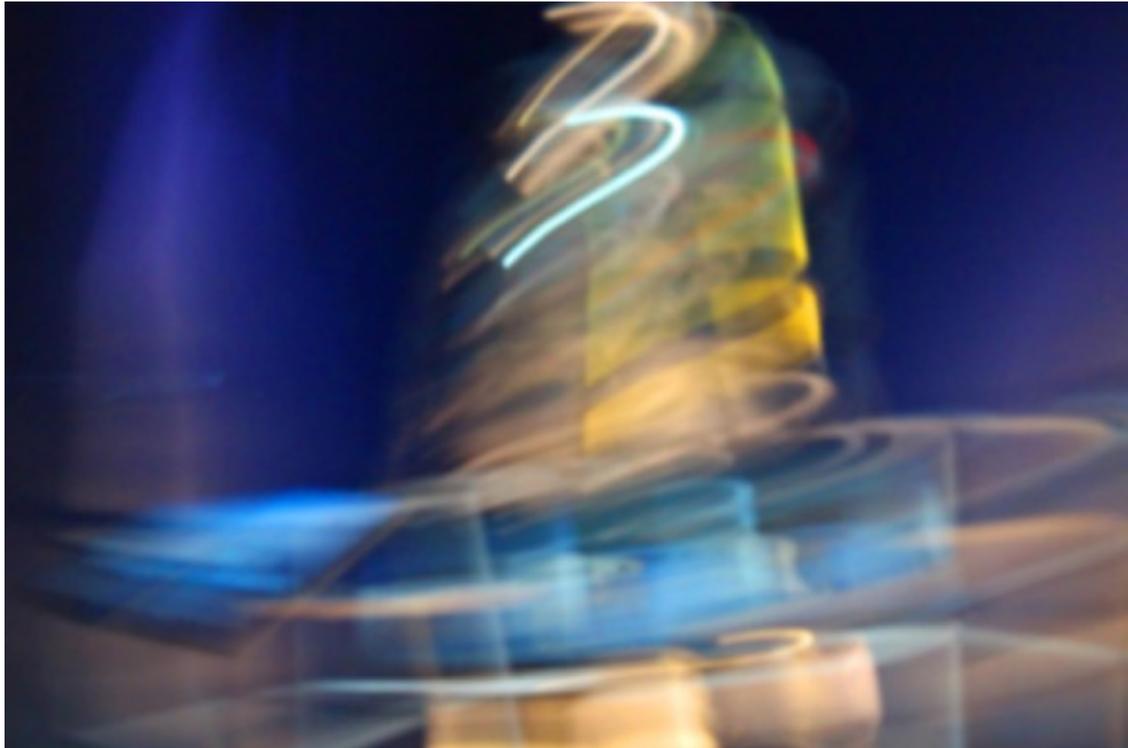
2018



*Photographic Abstraction no.4*

60 x 40 inch photograph on canvas

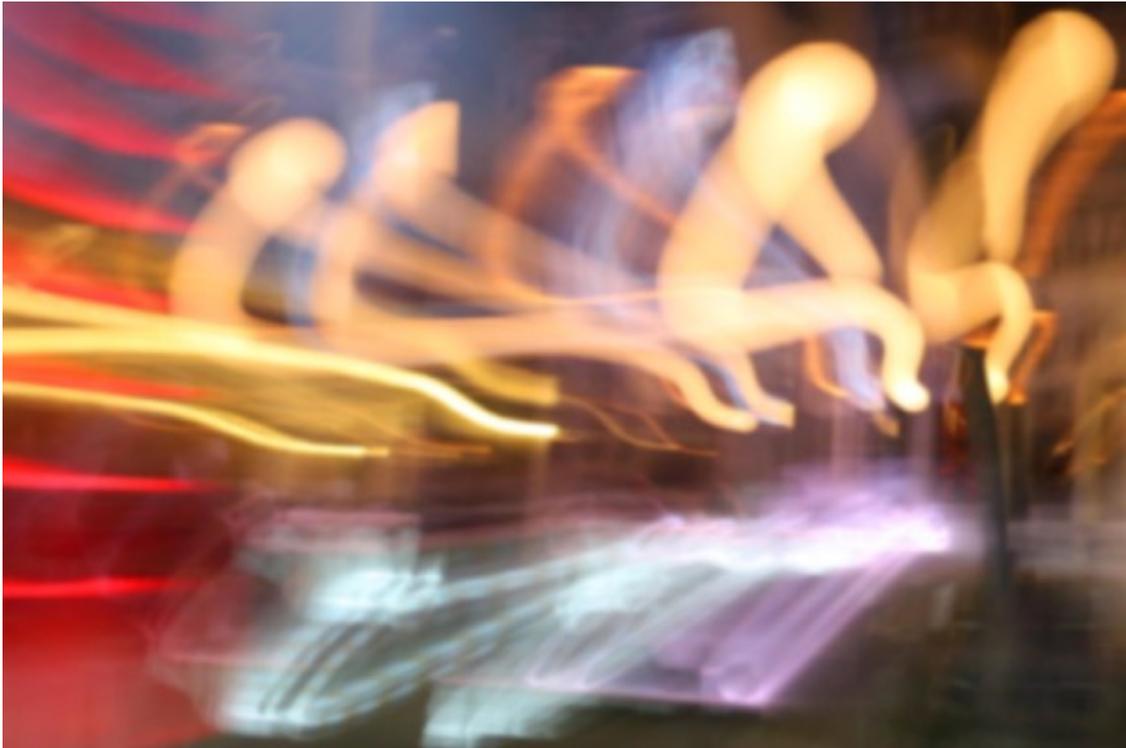
2018



*Photographic Abstraction no.5*

60 x 40 inch photograph on canvas

2018



*Photographic Abstraction no.6*

60 x 40 inch photograph on canvas

2018



*Photographic Abstraction no.7*

60 x 40 inch photograph on canvas

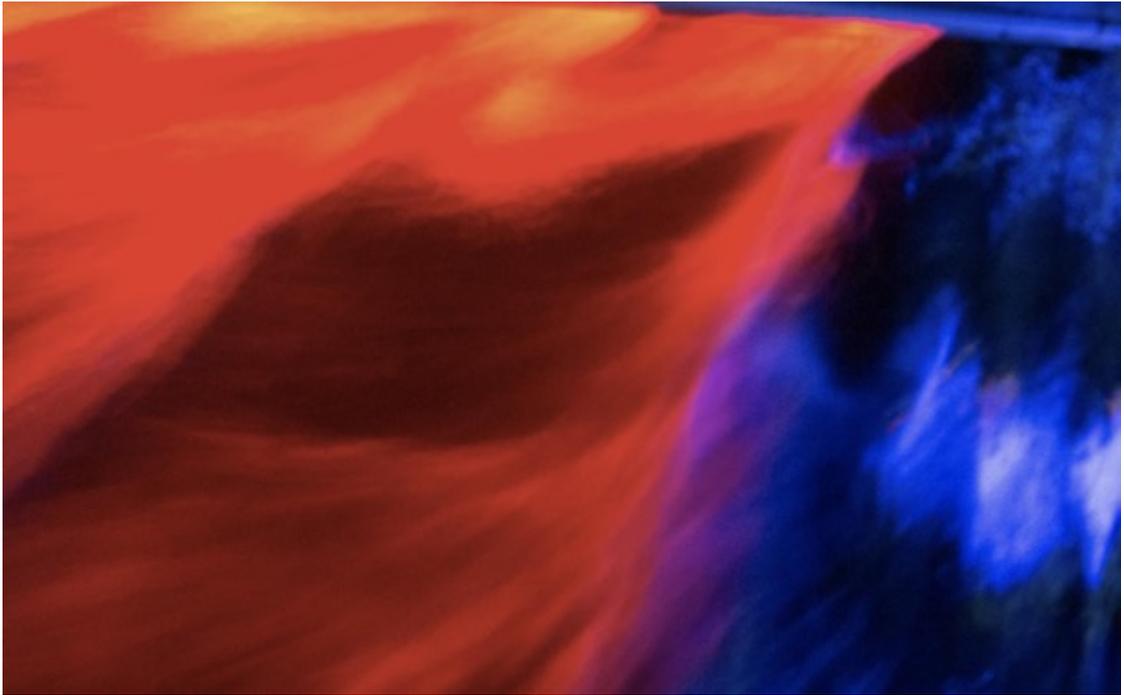
2018



*Photographic Abstraction no.8*

60 x 40 inch photograph on canvas

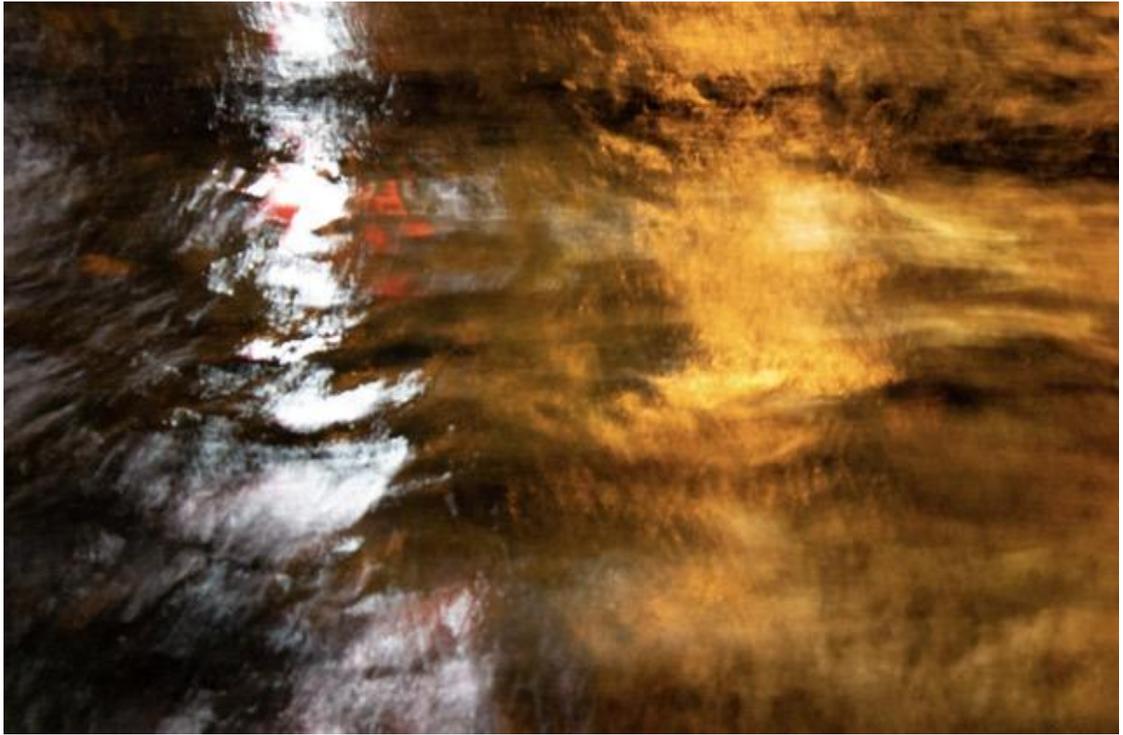
2018



*Photographic Abstraction no.207*

60 x 40 inch photograph on canvas

2018



*Photographic Abstraction no.9*

60 x 40 inch photograph on canvas

2018



*Photographic Abstraction no.11*

60 x 40 inch photograph on canvas

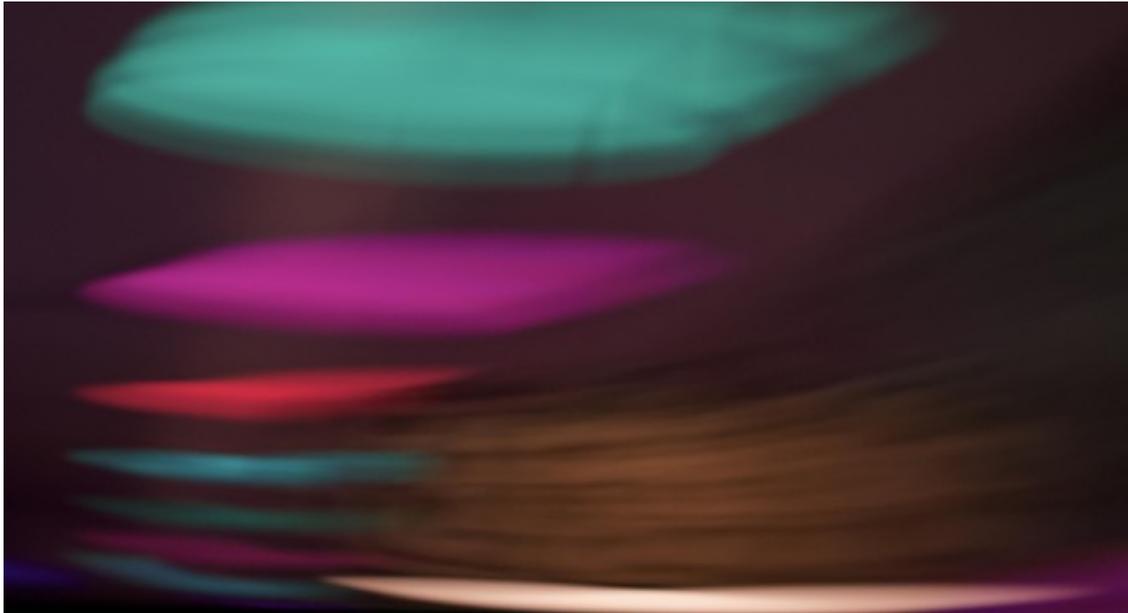
2018



*Photographic Abstraction no.12*

60 x 40 inch photograph on canvas

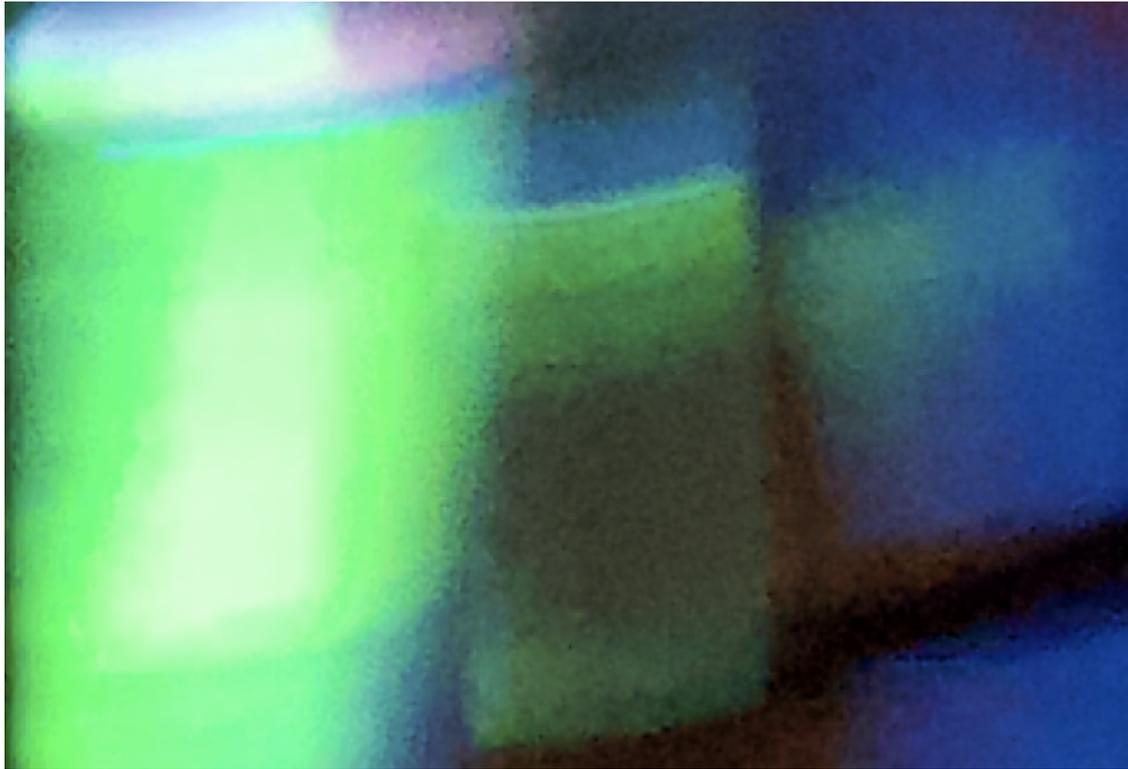
2018



*Photographic Abstraction no.13*

60 x 40 inch photograph on canvas

2018



*Photographic Abstraction no.14*

60 x 40 inch photograph on canvas

2018



*Photographic Abstraction no.15*

60 x 40 inch photograph on canvas

2018



*Photographic Abstraction no.16*

60 x 40 inch photograph on canvas

2018



*Photographic Abstraction no.17*

60 x 40 inch photograph on canvas

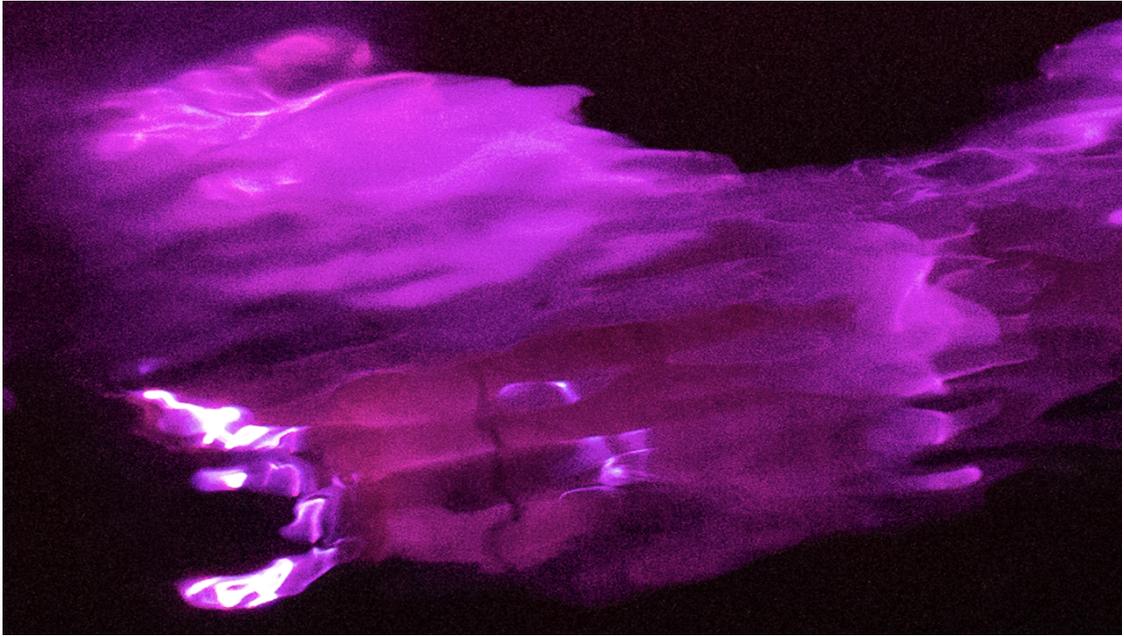
2018



*Photographic Abstraction no.18*

60 x 40 inch photograph on canvas

2018



*Photographic Abstraction no.19*

60 x 40 inch photograph on canvas

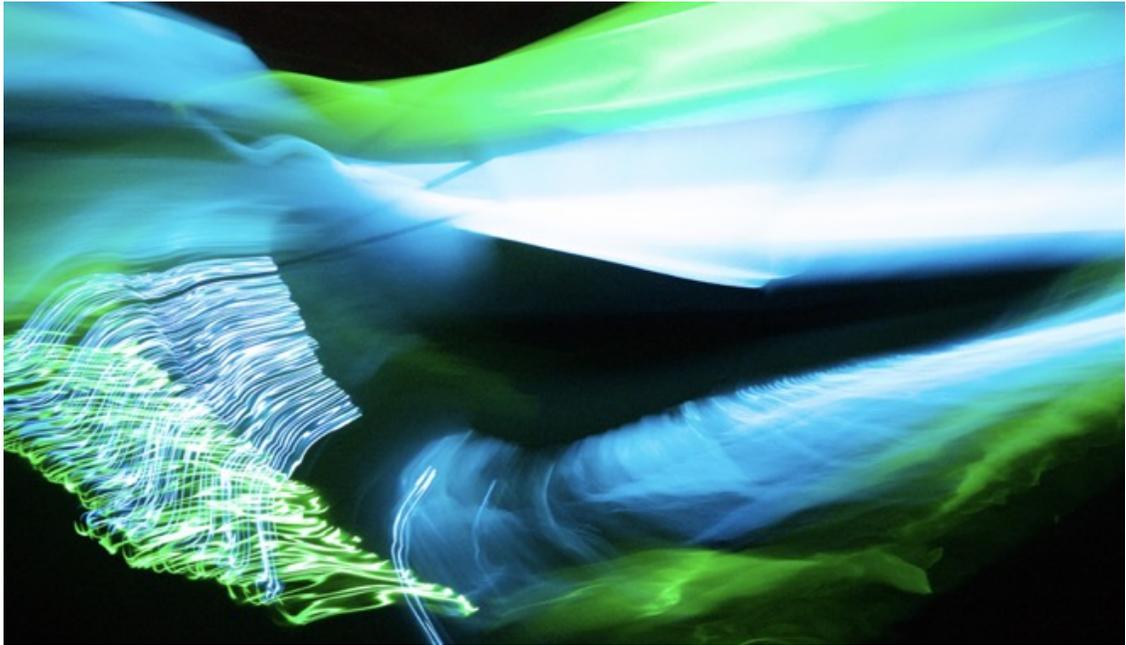
2018



*Photographic Abstraction no.20*

60 x 40 inch photograph on canvas

2018



*Photographic Abstraction no.21*

60 x 40 inch photograph on canvas

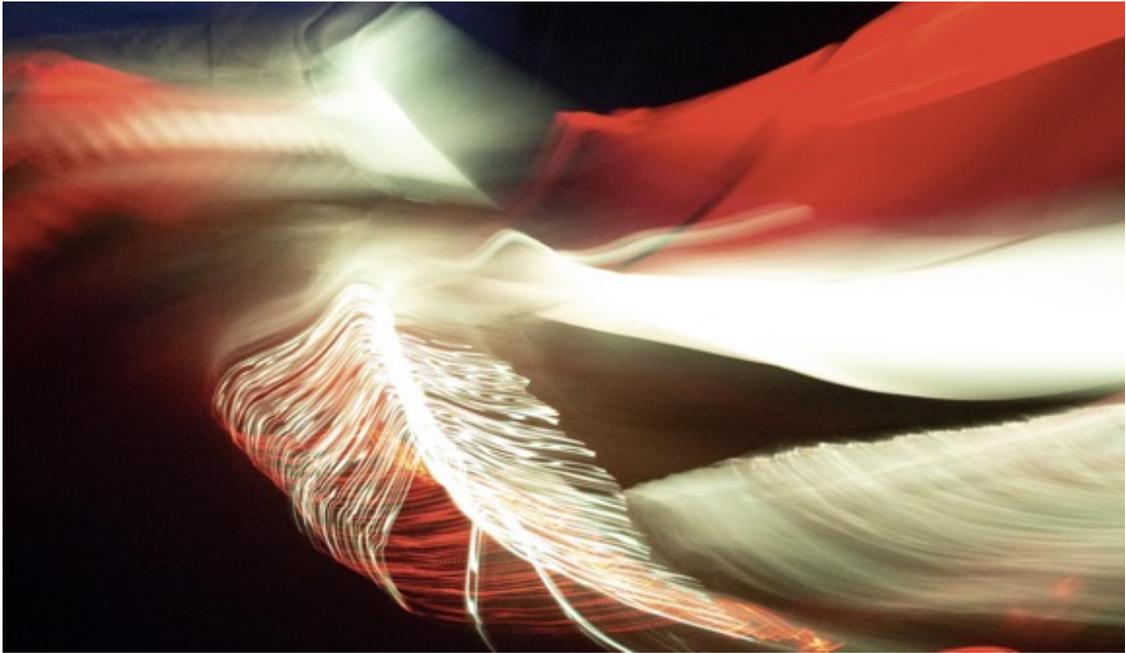
2018



*Photographic Abstraction no.22*

60 x 40 inch photograph on canvas

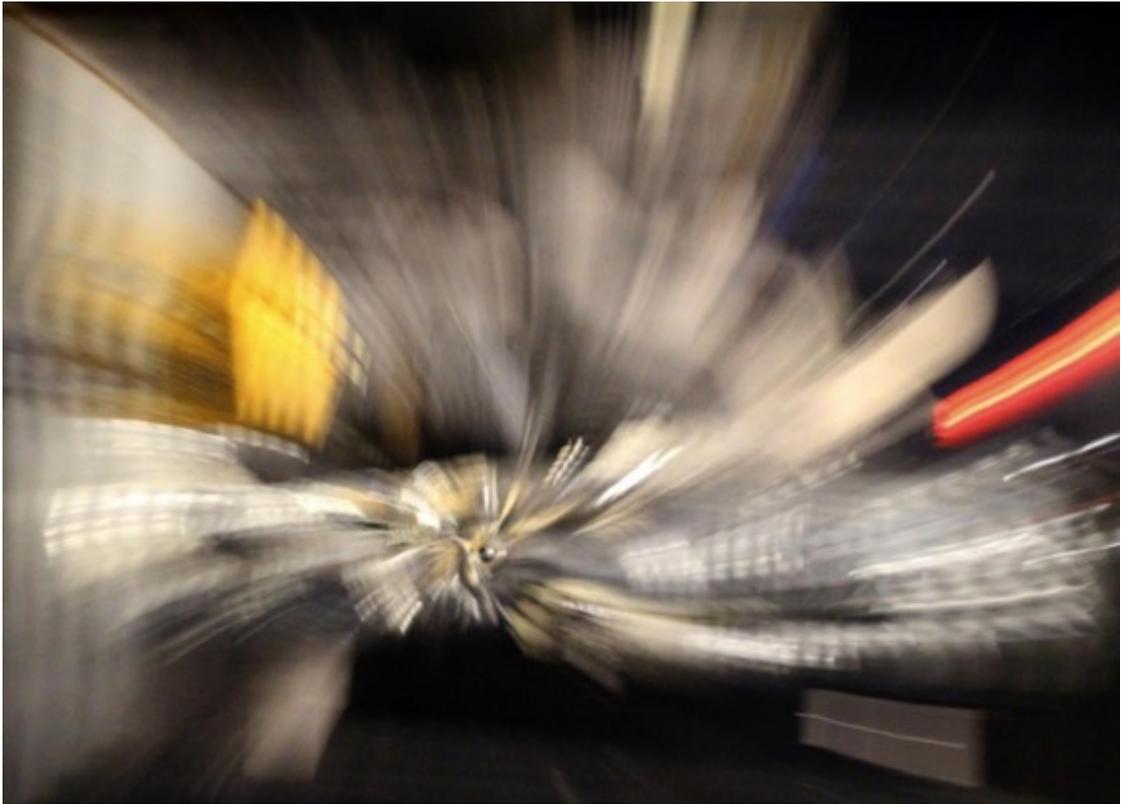
2018



*Photographic Abstraction no.23*

60 x 40 inch photograph on canvas

2018



*Photographic Abstraction no.24*

60 x 40 inch photograph on canvas

2018

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## VIII. EXHIBITION AND PUBLICATION

The immediate result of the “Photographic Abstraction” research was the MFA thesis exhibit, *In The Works*, at the Alexander Brest Museum at Jacksonville University, Florida, in August 2018.

Subsequently, the exhibit travelled to the Museum of Science & History (MOSH), following a review and selection by MOSH curator Paul Bourcier, and was on view from November 2018 to January 2019. The continued research at the MOSH explored the connections between art and science and the concept of invention, as the “Photographic Abstractions” use the physics of optics, light and color to invent non-objective world. MOSH selected this body of work for exhibit because it fit into the 2018 MOSH’s Arts Infusion theme: ImagINvention, “which explores the intersections of art with engineering and the hard sciences” (Bourcier, 2018).

The “Photographic Abstractions” were also featured at SCOPE Art, Miami Beach, during Art Basel in December 2018.

As of the print date of this document, the “Photographic Abstraction” have been published in the *Aquarian Literary Arts Magazine 2019*, in *The Wave* article, <https://wavemagazineonline.com/photographer-educator-professional-ballerina-ju-mfa-student-marcia-brito-wows-mosh-guests/> and at [britoart.com](http://britoart.com).

By signing below, let it be known that we have read this study and that, in our opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate in scope and quality as a written thesis, supporting the artist's work and exhibition, for the degree of Master of Fine Art.

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Bill Hill Date  
Chair of Thesis Committee

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Dana Tupa Date  
Chair of the Division of Visual Arts  
College of Fine Arts

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Tiffany Leach Date  
Director of Graduate Studies  
College of Fine Arts