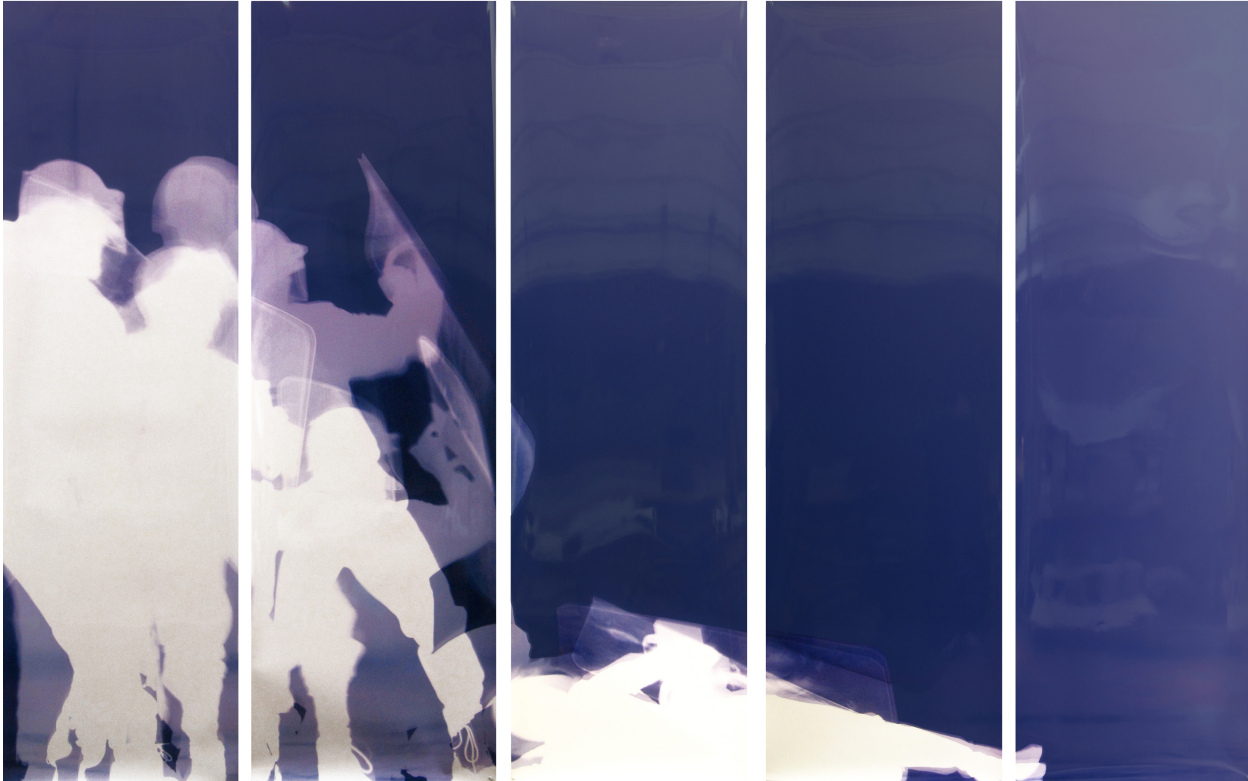


ARTFORUM



Farrah Karapetian, *Riot Police*, 2011, five chromogenic photographs, overall 8 x 13'.

500 WORDS

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Farrah Karapetian

Farrah Karapetian is an artist who works with cameraless photography and sculpture. She lives and works in Los Angeles where her solo show "Representation3" opens on April 14 at Roberts & Tilton, and her ongoing project, Student Body Politic, will be shown at the Vincent Price Art Museum from May 22 through August 17. Here, Karapetian discusses her photogram process and the nature of the photographic signifier in her reenactments of pictures of current events.

I STOPPED USING CAMERAS IN 2002. Up to that point, I made pictures that emphasized the formal qualities of the photographic print through abstraction. I then went to Kosovo to photograph a story that my friend was writing for *Metropolis* on the politics of architecture within the city. When I came back, I spent hours in the darkroom trying to be faithful to the landscape of burned villages and UNMIK troops. I got really frustrated and slammed a small fan down on the enlarger table, accidentally hitting the button that turned on the light. That was my first photogram: a rocky cliff blocked by the shadow of a fan.

When I started graduate school at UCLA a few years later, the real space of my studio led me to consider how a photograph actually occupies space: the shadows I had been using to make imagery were in fact falling against walls and floors. I began to see pictorial space in sculptural space, sometimes recognizing this phenomenon in pictures from the news: a section of highway falls and the flat plane of asphalt with its painted stripes seems to be a picture dripping off of its frame, shadows burnt into walls in Hiroshima, bodies of illegal immigrants register on Z-Backscatter scans of trucks crossing the border.

I admire strong documentary photography, but I also want to critique it: does it really communicate what it was like to be under fire or in a hurricane? I began to try to recreate these scenarios, but without the conventional attitude towards the photograph's role in history—that it is documentary, accurate, or evidence-oriented.

Many of the pictures I've worked with this year have been images of protest. I've long been attracted to the marks people make on architecture to express their concerns, in part because the marks I make through photogramming express mine. I now use sculpturally or digitally constructed elements to achieve pictorial and architectural effects that go beyond what found objects or light alone can do. My photograms are planned and constructed up until the moment of exposure, at which point chance intervenes. The resulting image is more of a provocative metaphor than a sober document.

What you see in the gallery is incredibly different from the thing I saw in the newspaper. I am remaking a picture of a child's bedroom that was destroyed in a tornado. In the end, my picture of the destroyed bedroom is stripped of all personal affective associations. It is a structure, with some pictorial detail, and the structure itself suggests vulnerability. I would never pretend to have been through a tornado, but I have moved my family through foreclosure, helped a friend's family climb through their garage to take the floorboards and furniture from their foreclosure, helped partners and friends through times of houselessness, and been nomadic myself. When I was a child, my family would get realtors' lists and visit houses we knew we couldn't afford, projecting ourselves into rooms and lives we wouldn't have. How much can I abstract an image, how much can I leave out, in order for viewers to have their own associations? I am betting on baggage, even as I'm eliminating it.

— *As told to Megan Heuer*