

*First Photographs*

*Series 00*

*1976-1986*

*Eighteen Photographs*

*Essay, October 2024*

*Michael Nye*

## *First Photographs: Series 00*

It is the nature of the world to change. On a bluff overlooking Corpus Christi Bay, my childhood friend, Janet Moody and I watched a thunderstorm at night moving across a stage. Each lightning strike appeared to be one moment in time. When did we finally stand and run for protection from the down-pour? The next morning, the water in the bay became a still smooth glass reflecting only sky. There was one world above and another world below.

I became a photographer not by taking pictures but by looking at other people's photographs. I thought of photographs as puzzle pieces. Photographs are strange ways to re-visit the past. Memory can be reduced, amplified, minimized, exaggerated or romanticized.

Above my desk is a small portrait of a young woman that I found in a flea market. I don't know her name. She is dressed in a uniform, white blouse, military cap, and a large letter "A" sewed onto her left sleeve. She is looking into the camera with a strange confidence. Her uniform revealed that she was a part of the US Army Signal Corps, known as "Hello Girls" in World War I. Many considered them to be the first women soldiers. They operated the telephone switchboards while under bombardment on the front lines. There were 223 women in this division and they connected 150,000 calls a day. On the back of the photograph, in her handwriting she wrote: "My passport picture taken in uniform – August 3, 1920 – Paris." How many grief-stricken voices did she hear? How many emergencies can there be in one day? On August 3rd, 1920 the War had ended. A new life was the only thing in front of her.

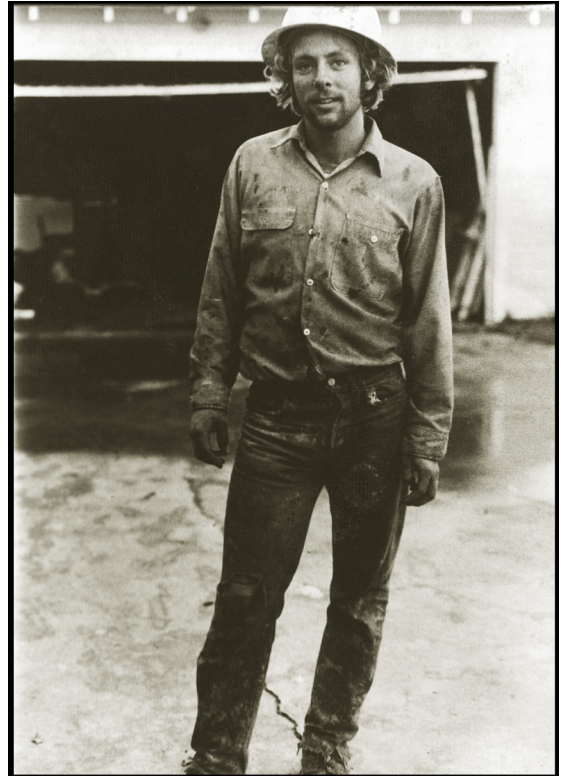


In law school, my Contracts professor on the first day of class slammed his fist against his desk, "*Boom*" and said, "*NEVER, NEVER use your intuition, always use reason.*" Why choose between these two helpful neighbors? It was in law school that I first went to a photography exhibition at a Houston Museum of Art. There were black and white photographs made by Imogen Cunningham, Paul Caponigro and several by Paul Strand. It wasn't the content but the way the photographs felt that was so powerful. Shades of deep blacks were stark utterances against the ranges of whites and melancholy grays.

That same month, I purchased a simple used camera, enlarger, trays and a small book, “How to make a photograph”. Walking along Galveston beach with my camera changed the way I thought, changed the way I paid attention and changed the way I looked at light and shadows. I thought, “what visual moment will I try to hold onto? I thought about the relationship between the shutter and aperture, the speed of film, the quality of photographic paper and how much dark do I need in my makeshift darkroom?

### *First photographs: 1976-1982:*

In my tiny darkroom in Houston, a photograph resting in water had a beautiful glow and magnetic pull. My first success was a photograph of my brother Patrick. It was summer, and he was just back from working a fourteen-hour shift as a “rough neck” on an oil rig. The photograph was a testament to tiredness. I photographed water dripping from a drainage pipe. A man sleeping on the beach in Galveston. A nurse comforting a young girl at a funeral. A family at a 4th of July fireworks celebration.



*Patrick*

My wife Naomi and I brought our first home on South Main Avenue just a few blocks south of downtown San Antonio. Our backyard and neighborhood were the area where Santa Anna’s army camped before charging the Alamo in 1836. I was working as an attorney for the 4th Court of Civil Appeals. On the weekends, Mexican love songs tiptoed inches above the San Antonio River. Our large walk-in closet was converted into a darkroom. I memorized three of Ansel Adams’ technical books. The Camera, The Negative and The Print. I studied the history of photography. I purchased a densitometer to measure the optical density of negatives. On a 22-mile bike ride with our young son, Madison we stopped to rest and eat a cold apple. Photography began with the same hunger and lusty desire.

Photography teaches that experience is best understood by paying attention. Every photograph holds a secret and a wish. I photographed a silver fire hydrant a few blocks from our house. With my camera on a tripod, I waited in the middle of the street for the light to soften. I dodged honking cars. One man yelled and shook his fist at me as he passed. How many people watched the weeds grow up secretly around this water hydrant sculpture? Perspective only needs experience. (Fire hydrant - Series 0 - One)



*Series 00 - One*



In the darkroom, time loses its memory. I finally made a transition from full time attorney and eventually to full-time photographer. My father did not speak to me for two years. He said, "Why would anyone want to become a photographer? He meant well, but who doesn't dream before falling to sleep.

The philosopher Moritz Schlick wrote, "Philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity." Philosophy and the Arts are closely connected to this notion of doing. Over a three-year period during the 1980s, I wrote letters (before computers, emails and the internet) to four photographers and one historian I admired: (Ray Metzker - Corlotta Corpron - Manuel Alvarez Bravo - Fredrick Summers and Beaumont Newhall) "Can I visit with you about your work and about the nature of photography?" Everyone wrote back saying, YES.

I spent the afternoon with Ray Metzker, (1931-2014) in New York City. He told me about his teachers, Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind. He embraced photography as "An experiment". He brought out some of his photographs, setting one and then another on an easel. He said he embraced complexity over simplicity. His cityscape photographs were dramatic. Some of his photographs were solarized, some torn, some were collages and others in high contrast. As we sat in his New York apartment, traffic and pedestrians moving below, Ray Metzker was pushing the boundaries of perception, trying to find out what he did not know. He told me as a directive, *"Don't be careful"*.

To photograph is to encounter. I met with Corlotta Corpron in Denton, Texas. (1901-1988) She served me green tea in her living room. She sat on a bright red sofa with one of her large photographs of light above her on the wall. She said, "When you fall in love with something, it is all you see. I fell in love with light." She photographed light bending on stones, light twisting against walls and imaginary angles, the elegance of light. She told me that Alfred Stieglitz, (one of the most influential photographers in the early 20th Century) wrote her a letter wanted to exhibit some of her work but he died before the exhibition. She was a teacher and mentor to many women photographers. She gave me one of her light photographs. She told me, "Investigate light".

To brush up against something leaves a mark. I met with Manuel Alvarez Bravo twice. (1901-2002) The first time in his office at a museum in Mexico City and the second time, (Naomi and our son Madison were with me.) at his home in his neighborhood, Coyoacan. He was alone in his large house. In his darkroom he had been printing small platinum contact prints. The tiny prints were hanging up to dry. He was gentle and present. I asked him many questions about specific photographs he made. (Striking Worker Killed, 1934) many others. Bravo felt deeply about his community, his culture and aspects of ordinary life. He made photographs for 70 years. He told me, not as advice, but as an imperative, *"Photograph what you care about."*

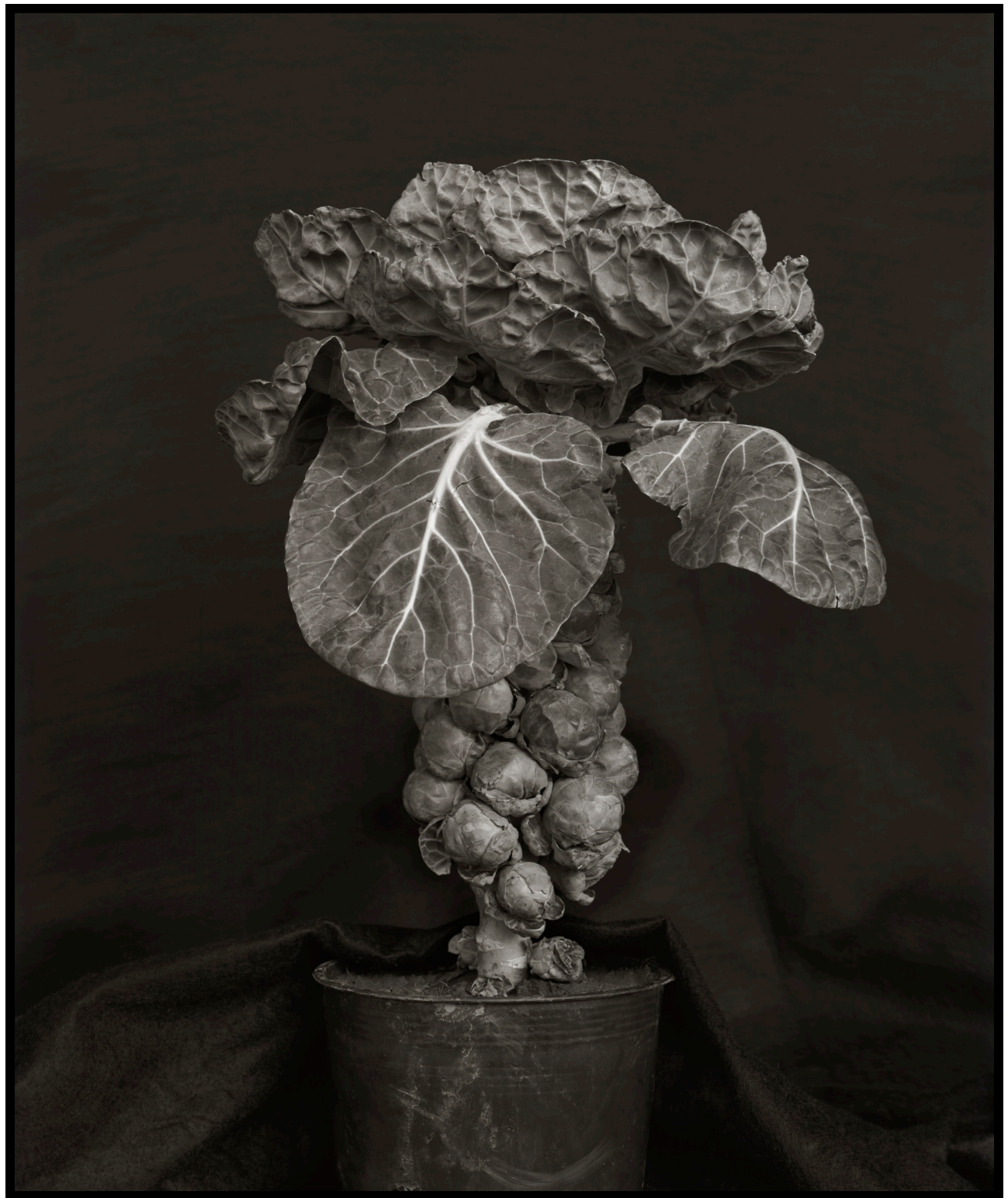
What is forgotten is lost. I met photographic historian Beaumont Newhall in Albuquerque, New Mexico. (1908-1993) He was attending a conference on, "The life and responsibilities of a Curators". In a small office we talked about the work of wife, historian Nancy Newhall. She died in 1974 from injuries received on the Snake River when a tree fell on their rubber raft. I asked about his friends, Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Weston. We talked about the nature of photography. He said, *"To write about photography one must understand the optical and chemical laws which govern its process. What is unique about photography is its inherent qualities."*

I arrived in Prescott, Arizona in the middle of a heavy snowstorm. I called Frederick Sommer, (1905-1999) from a pay phone at a convenient store. Fredrick and his wife Frances were so gracious and kind. Over lunch in their small warm kitchen, he asked me, *"Why are you a photographer? Are you committed?"* Sommer was born in 1905 in Italy and raised in Brazil. He spoke five languages and studied landscape architecture. He was both an artist and a writer. He was uncompromising. He wrote about fate and evanescence of chance. Many of his landscapes were devoid of contrast, nudes out of focus, he drew musical notes and then photographed them. He experimented with grace and elegance. He told me he was experiencing depression and was losing his enthusiasm. He wondered out loud, *"Where does passion go and how can I find it again?"* He told me, *"Think about verbs, not nouns."*

In the mid 1980s, one of my first exhibitions was at the Galveston Arts Center. At the opening, a woman came up to me and said, *"I was in the process of repairing the foundation of our home when one of the workmen found an old metal box buried deep into the earth. We hoped it might be a buried treasure"*. It turned out to be a rusted metal box of 5 x 7" glass negative plates, wrapped in a melting cloth, portraits from 1910s to 1930s. She gave them to me. They were a treasure of riddles and complexity. Every photographic portrait is a paradox because of the realization of THEN and NOW. Holding them up to light for the first time in decades, I saw women, men and children looking so alive, moving, wanting to be seen and to breathe again.

*Essay - October, 2024*

*First Photographs: 1982-1986*



*Series 00 - Two*





*Series 00 - Three*





*Series 00 - Four*



*Series 00 (Laura) - Five*



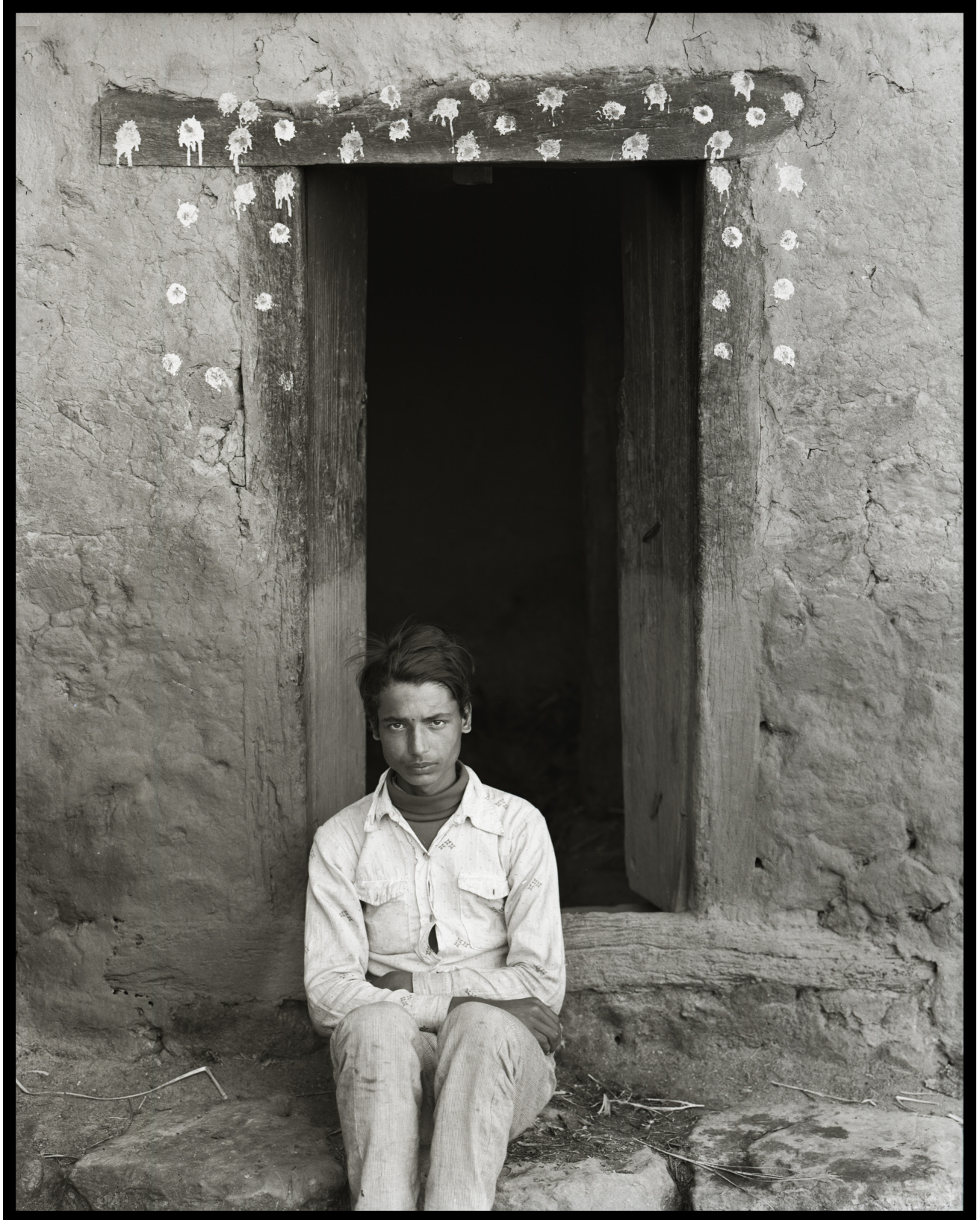
*Series 00 - Six*





*Series 00 (Laura's last Halloween) - Seven*





*Series 00 - Eight*





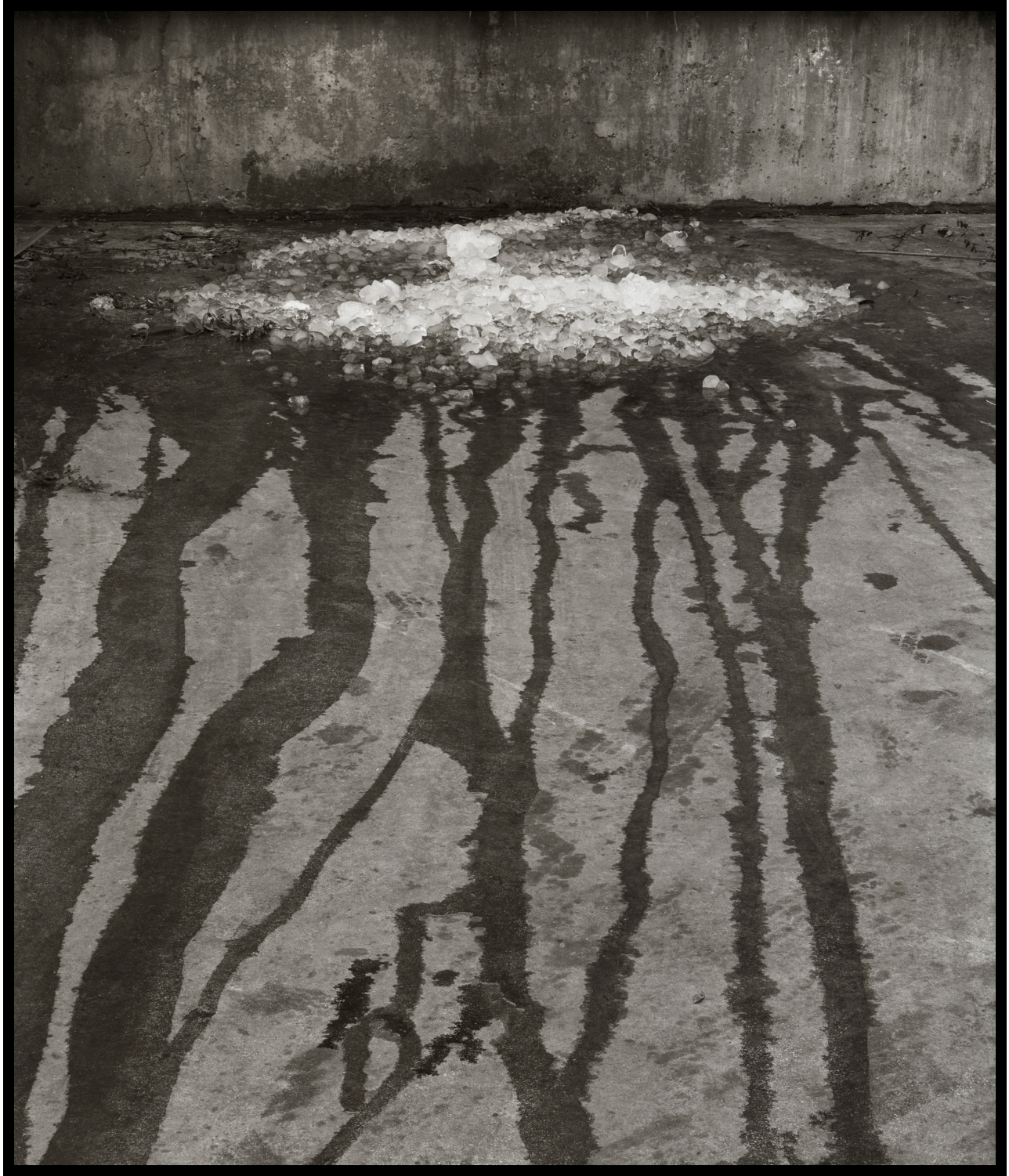
*Series 00 (Bangladesh) - Nine*





*Series 00 (Bangladesh) - Ten*





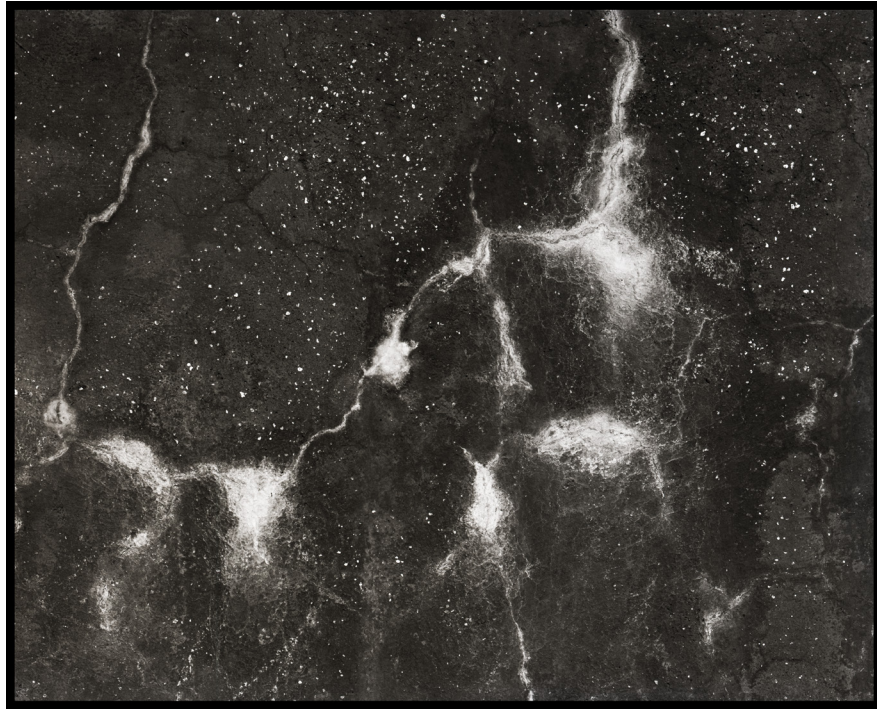
*Series 00 (melthing ice) - Eleven*





*Series 00 - Twelve*





*Series 00 (wall 1) -Thirteen*

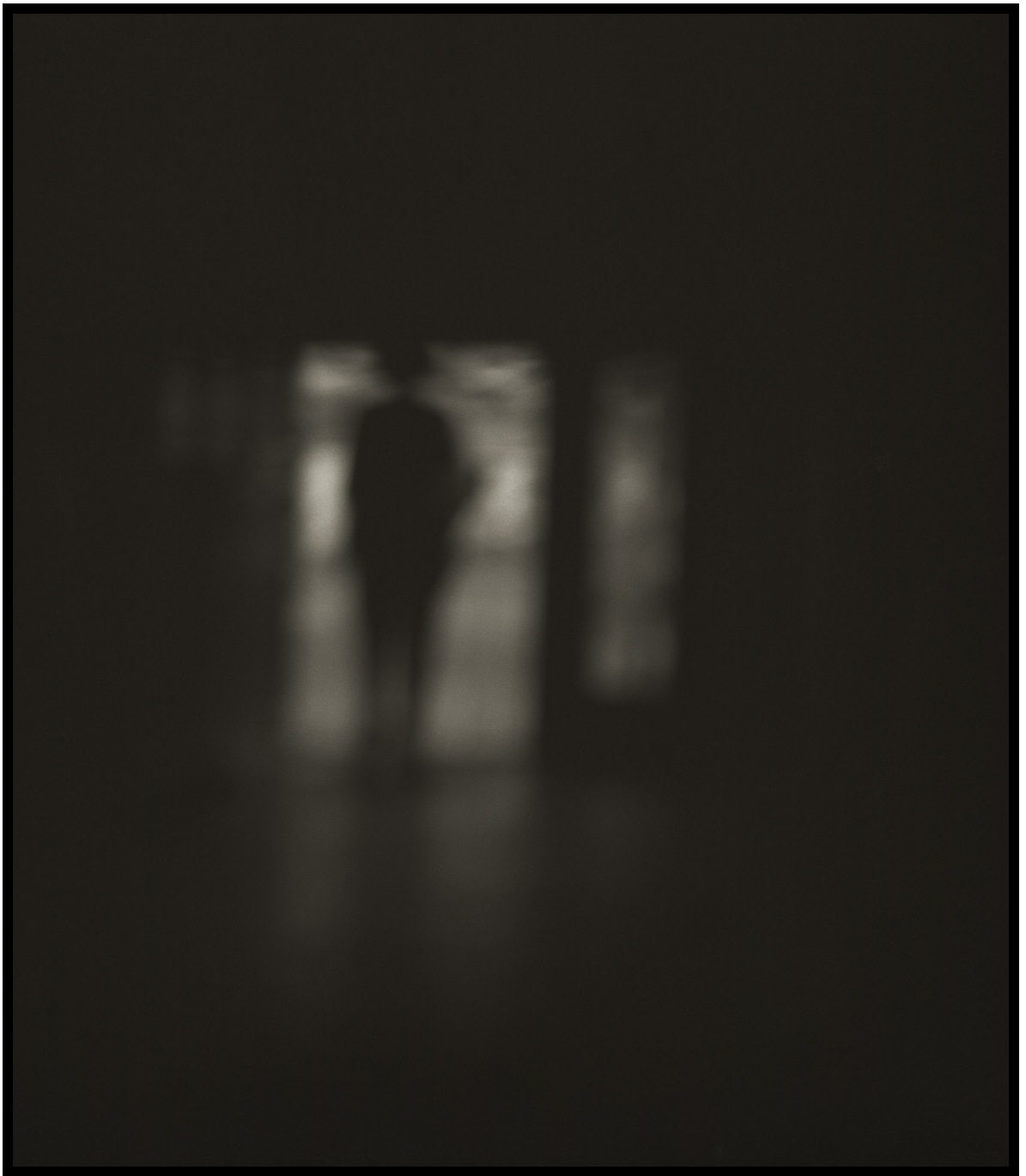


*Series 00 (wall 2) - Fourteen*





*Series 00 (Naomi's knees) Fifteen*



*Series 00 - (Self Portriat) Sixteen*





*Series 00 - Seventeen*



*Series 00 - Eighteen*



*Series 00 - Nineteen*