

HOTSHOE



Contemporary Photography
Winter 2014

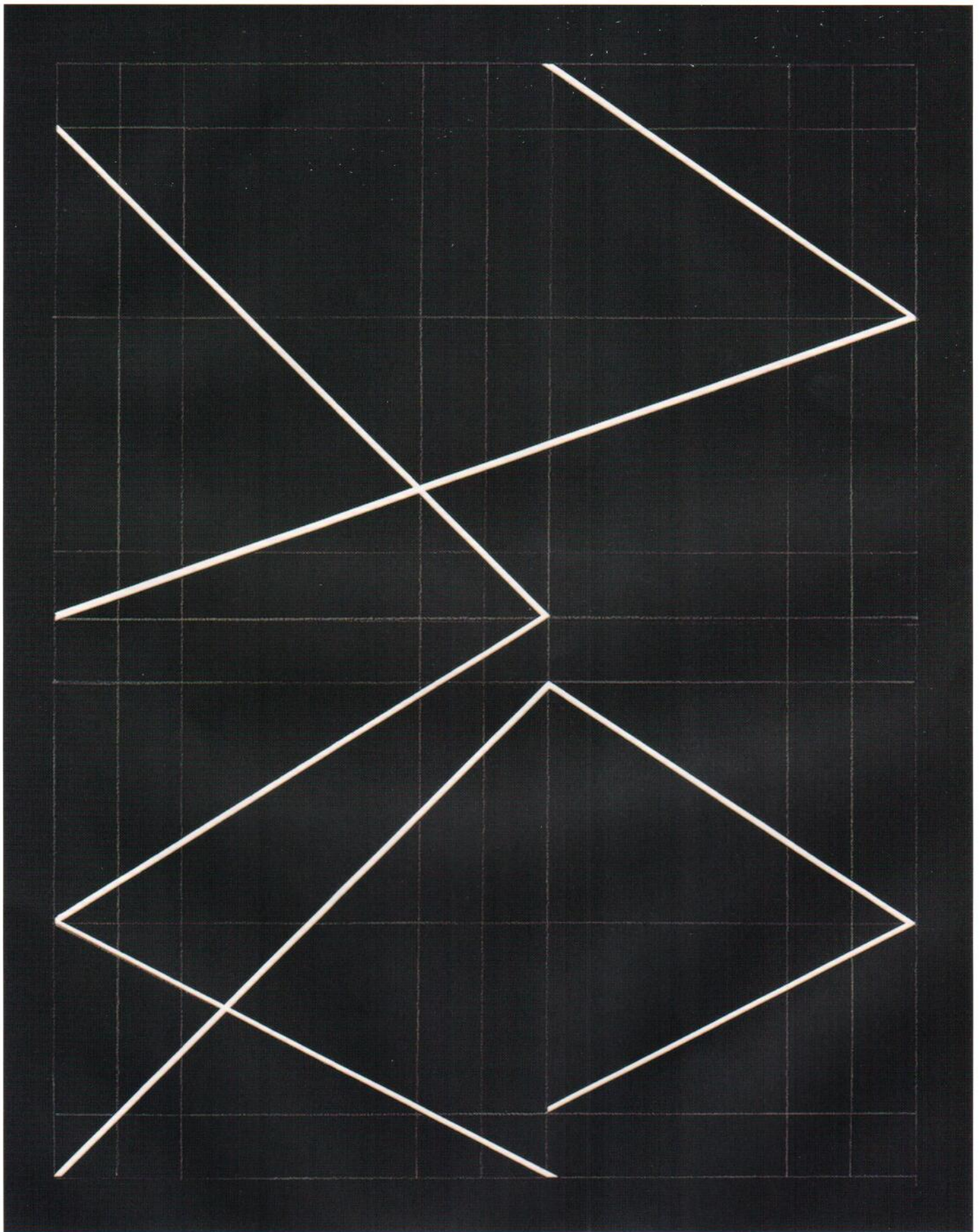
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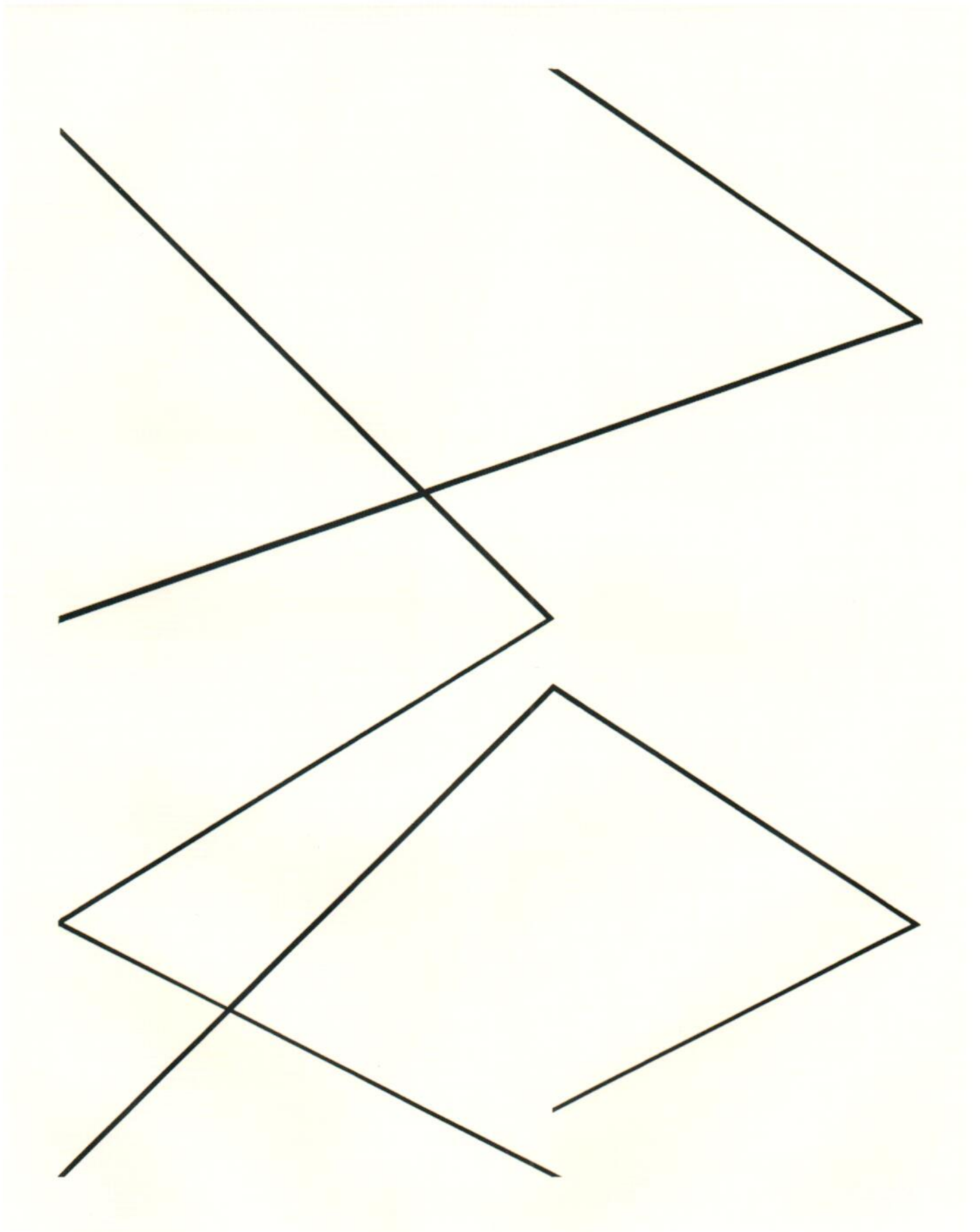
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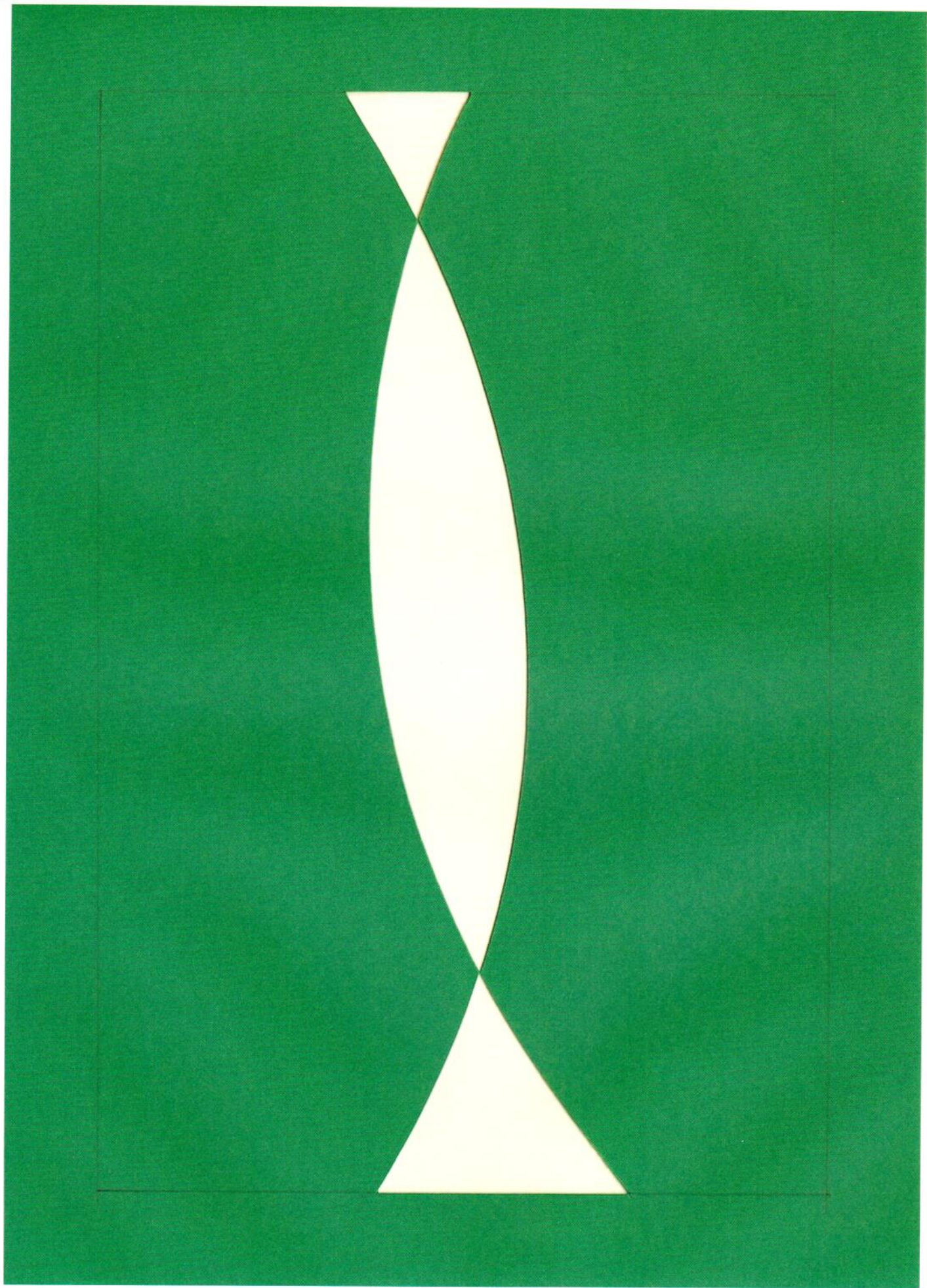
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RICHARD CALDICOTT

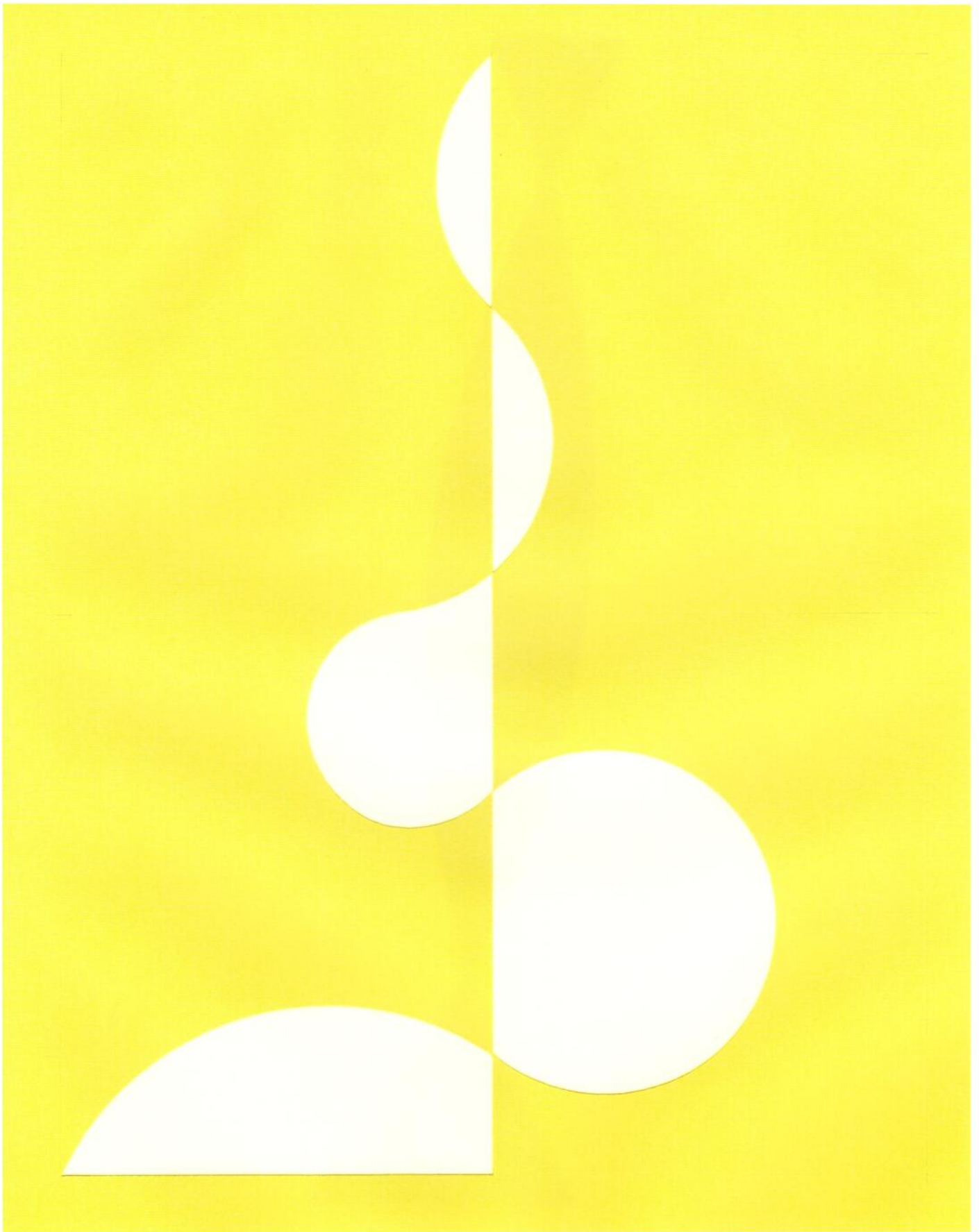
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“STRAIGHT LINES, CIRCLES, TRIANGLES AND OTHER CURVILINEAR GEOMETRIC SHAPES ARE SCORED INTO AND REMOVED FROM PIECES OF PAPER”

If one were to describe Richard Caldicott's Untitled photogram and paper negative series (2014) in the manner and spirit of minimalist painting, it could be condensed to just two words: sophisticated simplicity.

This on-going series, which he began in 2011, now numbers over 100 photograms and is part of a trajectory that has evolved since his early series of still-life photographs using Tupperware containers and lids in the late 1990s, for which he created over 200 photographs, carefully transposing and compressing three-dimensional space and form into bold, two-dimensional abstract blocks of colour. Eschewing verisimilitude, and once freed from the straitjacket of documentation, Caldicott's recent photogram series pushes geometric abstraction further with the creation of abstract compositions (non-representational), which emphasise colour, shape and the surface of the object.

Caldicott's background is in fine art and he works across various disciplines — including drawing, sculpture and photography — to produce work that straddles and combines art forms and often defies clear categorisation,

though this series falls within the porous boundaries of abstract photography. His versatility as an artist allows him to experiment with materials and techniques; he has combined drawing with ballpoint pen and inkjet printing, used layers of card, and fed paper and paper envelopes through a printer multiple times. Subsequent works produced as large-format images involved making an artwork and then photographing it before sandwiching the positives together to produce a final print.

Unlike his recent work with photograms, these works were larger scale and utilised more obvious photographic processes, demanding the use of particular printing equipment. “A lot of it was produced using machines in Germany and so the process while not out of my hands, was more technician let...,” Caldicott explains. “With these smaller photograms, however, it was a way to work in the

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opposite direction." In effect, Caldicott has taken back control with the Untitled photograms. By scaling down the format and simplifying the process he is also distilling art to its fundamentals.

The final artworks are a modest 7 x 10 inches and 10 x 16 when each diptych is presented side by side, with its cut-out paper negative placed on the left and the photogram on the right to create physical objects. This method of display is reminiscent, as Lyle Rexer writes, of the nineteenth-century mode of showing the photographic negative and print together "in order to demonstrate both accuracy and artistry". In Caldicott's series, the pairing of the object and print in this way serves to further highlight the similarities between the paper negative and the positive photogram or print, as it is only colour that changes, not form or shape.

Caldicott's work is experimental, repetitive and serial in nature. At times it also reveals something of the ontology of photography. He experimented with using the sun as a light source to make "sun prints" but found that "there are conservation issues and the prints curl up", so he now uses artificial rather than natural light. Further, this series of work can be separated into two sets: monochrome and polychrome — a division that also reflects photography's binary opposition of black-and-white and colour photography. Over the last decade there has been a growing interest in camera-less work and the idea of the photograph as a unique material object, with artists creating photograms and using applied techniques such as folding or sewing onto the final print.

This trend towards producing one-off objects may be a reaction to digital photography and the dematerialisation of the photograph (as object); millions of photographs are disseminated widely online but will never exist as physical objects. Caldicott's works are often referred to as photograms, a mode of photography that has been explored since the early days of the medium. Of note in relation to Caldicott's work are Man Ray's "Rayographs", whereby he placed recognisable objects onto the surface of light-sensitive paper before exposing them to the light from an enlarger, and the work of the Hungarian painter and photographer László Moholy-Nagy, who was influenced by Constructivism and also created photograms using objects.

The precise colours used by Caldicott to make his paper negatives vary. While neon colours, silver and gold are absent, there are many works in primary colours — mostly yellow and red — and in some there is a feel of 1950s design, with the use of muted and earthy beige, green and orange. Caldicott's work explores the architecture of space by paying attention to the dynamics of paper and the placement of graphic elements within its frame. Straight lines, circles, triangles and other curvilinear geometric shapes are scored into and removed from pieces of paper that have been chosen for their material qualities in terms of colour and weight: "To make the photogram paper negatives the paper has to have a certain weight, otherwise the light goes through," he explains. "I'm always looking for new colours and I'm quite specific about them, heading towards stationery shops to find the more obscure papers, or those that are semi-recycled."

Matisse's brightly coloured collages have been described as "carving into colour"; this is a phrase that could equally be applied to Caldicott's photograms, if we regard him as carving into and then subtracting colour, rather than building up colour through a process of addition, as did Matisse. The paper cut-outs are a form of stencil, however it is not

paint or a physical medium that is being pushed through the perforations, but light. Stencilling with light suggests a more craft-based technique, yet it is a technique that Caldicott has used in previous works in which he combined drawing with the stencil, suggesting that it is at the confluence of these approaches that the photogram and paper negative series emerges.

Caldicott's influences can be found in Modernist painters, designers and architects, including Donald Judd, Max Bill and Ellsworth Kelly: "I like artists who do other stuff. With Judd I like his architecture, his furniture, his printmaking. It's the same with Max Bill, somebody who crossed over into different fields, with furniture and architecture."

In the photograms there are a series of monochrome pairs — photogram and black paper negative — that also suggest affinities with the Russian Suprematist art movement, founded by Kazimir Malevich during the early 20th century. Malevich developed a visual language using basic geometric shapes and a pared down range of tones to produce his well-known monochromatic works *Black Square* (1913) and *White on White* (1918): "I have established the semaphore of Suprematism. I have beaten the lining of the coloured sky, torn it away and in the sack that formed itself, I have put colour and knotted it. Swim! The free white sea, infinity, lies before you."

It turns out that this association has some currency. Although there appears to be a clinical aspect to Caldicott's cutting and slicing into paper with surgical precision — especially when viewing reproductions onscreen, with the inevitable compression of tonal ranges and detail — the actual works are clearly created by human hand and are not machine cuts. "I work on them quite intuitively," he says. "I measure things out but sometimes there is a bit of a wonky line. That's what I liked about the Malevich show, in the reproduction you never quite realise how not-square the pictures are. I am trying to keep it as simple as possible."

The works are not mounted flat and viewing the photograms and their associated paper negatives in situ allows for a much better appreciation of the sensuality and the three-dimensional quality of the paired works as well as the subtle interplay of light and shadow across the glossy surface of the prints.

However, when it comes to seeing Caldicott's work it may be a case of heading to Continental Europe, especially Germany, where there is, he says, a greater engagement with abstract and minimalist art.

MIRANDA GAVIN