

# Steel Stillman: Black Point

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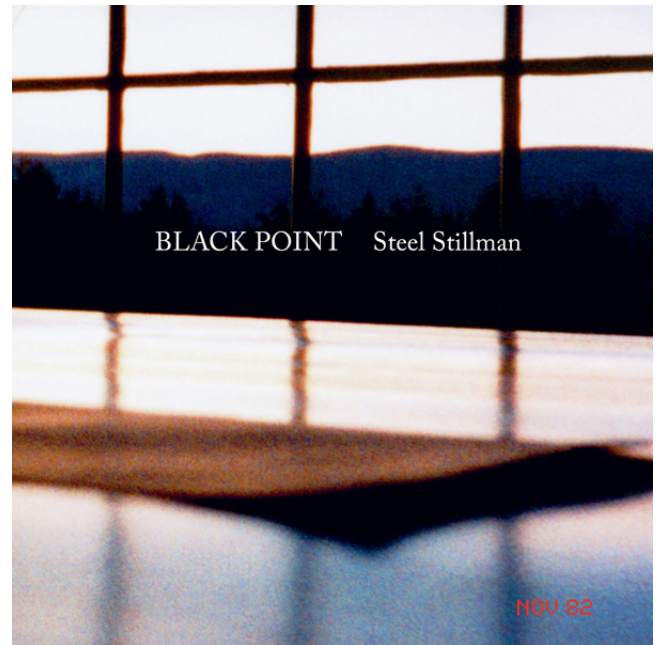
## **Steel Stillman** ***Black Point*** **(Hassla, 2018)**

In Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 film *Blow-Up*, there's a scene in which the main character, a fashion photographer, repeatedly enlarges a section of a certain image looking for a potential clue to a murder. As he blows up the photograph, the detail he's looking at slowly becomes apparent;

yet, at the same time, it also starts to seem more abstract—an amalgamation of photographic information rather than an index of captured reality. Eventually, we wonder if, like the character, we're looking for something that isn't even there.

This scene comes up in a short interview with Steel Stillman at the end of his new 112-page photo book, *Black Point*, published by Hassla. It's a helpful analogy for the work therein, and a reminder of our own impulse to naturalize pictures through narrative. "I came to think of my images as stills from a movie that doesn't exist," Stillman says in the interview. What that movie is supposed to be, though, we're not sure.

The pictures in *Black Point*—culled from a larger body of work called *Enlargements*—began as old point-and-shoot photos taken by the artist from 1979 to 2014. These older images were scanned from drug-store prints, reduced down to smaller segments—at a four by five aspect ratio—and enlarged. It's a simple gesture, but its formal effects are exaggerated by the



amount of time that's passed since the photos were originally created: the grain patterns become more prominent, the sharpness of the details is lost, and the overall images become a little fuzzy, much like the way that details of a memory are sanded off over time, leaving but a specter of the original moment.



Most importantly, the zoomed-in crop recontextualizes the photo. We might assume, given that Stillman is using the language of vernacular photography, that the original photo was illustrative of something noteworthy or memorable. But the abbreviated version we're given leaves us with an incomplete scene and few details as to what's going on. Some even verge on outright abstraction. It invites speculation: What is this picture showing us? Where is the place it depicts? Why was it taken?

The "when" question is ostensibly answered by timestamps that appear in the bottom corner of every shot—a common feature of recreational cameras in the '70s, '80s, and '90s. For instance, a yellowish, lamp-lit picture of a glass of water on a table has "NOV 89" in the bottom left corner. Elsewhere, a heavily-saturated photograph of a young man holding a sparkler before his face is accompanied by "MAY 83."

However, on closer inspection, it becomes clear that this, too, is dubious: we know the images have been cropped and enlarged, but the graphics of the timestamp seem unaltered, revealing that they weren't part of the original photo, but added after the fact. They read more like diary entries than information encoded by the camera itself—"APR 82" rather than, say, "4.10.82." It's as if the artist is going back and trying to codify his photographs with time. But why?





Steel Stillman, *Percolator*, 2017.

Photography's connection to the temporal is predicated on the frozen instant. For that reason, one could argue that every photograph is about the passage of time—an artifact from a moment that, necessarily, can never be experienced again. It is a profoundly sad sentiment. Stillman's book, pensive and affecting, both symbolizes this sensation, and feels like an exercise itself in coming to terms with it. "What I'm taking a picture of now, in scanning it, is the time since that snapshot was taken—what I think of as the afterlife of an image," he explains in the back-of-book interview. It brings to mind another picture: from the frame's foreground extends a pair of hands—presumably the artist's—holding two small snapshot prints, each of which features a woman in the center. The focus of the camera is beyond the prints, though, throwing them and their subjects into a blurriness that borders on

unrecognizability—embodying the elusiveness of capturing a single moment or person. Those women, mediated by photographs and blanched by time gone by, could be anybody. Maybe, we might wonder, they were never there at all.