

COLLECTOR DAILY

Klea McKenna: Generation @Gitterman

By [Richard B. Woodward](#) / In [Galleries](#) / October 3, 2018

JTF (just the facts): A total of 13 black-and-white photographs (1 in the foyer, 1 in the southeast rear office, the others within the main gallery) are framed in white and hung against gray walls. All of the works are unique photograms on gelatin silver. Seven are dated 2018, three 2017, two 2015, and one 2013. (Installation and detail shots below.)

An artist's book has been published in conjunction with the exhibit. Staple bound, 36 pages, with image reproductions, short text essays, and 6 collages of visual research. Each cover is unique, made from test strips and scraps from the larger body of work. In an edition of 113 copies. (Cover shot below.)

A concurrent exhibition of this body of work is on view at Von Lintel Gallery in Los Angeles ([here](#)).

Comments/Context: Over the last 5 years, Klea McKenna has repeatedly proven herself to be a contemporary master of the photogram. A technical innovator who has nonetheless remained true to this primal act of the medium—writing on pieces of paper with light—she has created ravishing prints that incorporate nature into the process of their emanation, an artistic philosophy that reflects an unconventional upbringing in northern California. (She describes herself on her website as the “daughter of renegade ethnobotanists.”)

Her exquisite black-and-white series *Rainstorms and Rain Studies* (2013-16) began during a residency in Hawaii, where brief gusty storms are so common that forecasters don't bother to report them. Each photogram was made outdoors, at night, from the drizzle of tiny droplets that fall during a passing shower. Individual examples in the series are remarkably unlike one another. With weather as the prime image agent, the watery patterns and gray imprints can be as unpredictable as a murmuration of birds in the sky.

Although in the early years of this decade, McKenna seems to have preferred color photograms, exploring the possibilities of nonobjective abstraction, all three bodies of work at Gitterman are black-and-white and squarely planted in the worlds of nature or human memory.

Webs (2013-16) examines the tracings of weaver spiders and their homes, bejeweled with dew or rain (2013-16). Against ghostly gray backgrounds, fragile parabolas are delineated. Descriptive of recognizable creatures from the insect kingdom, they are also fantastic photographs that might have originated in the subconscious. They wouldn't look out of place on the wall next to a drawing by Odilon Redon or Vija Celmins.

In the last few years, however, as McKenna's process has become more physical and interventionist, the architecture of her photograms has acquired levels of complication, on the surface as well as below it.

Both of the newer series here, *Automatic Earth* (2017-present) and *Generation* (2017-present), represent this shift toward more of an intaglio style of printing. Placing thin objects of personal significance (a cross-section of a tree, a sequined skirt, an antique Spanish shawl, thigh-high nylon stockings) against a sheet of photographic paper, she has put them together in a press and lowered the platen so that the objects leave a raised impression on the paper.

The surface bumps (and occasional paper tears) that result from applying pressure add three-dimensional layers to her images, which are carefully build up through multiple exposures, using overhead and low-angled, raked illumination. Flashlights serve as her paintbrushes in the darkroom.

Her statements in the catalog for *Generation* indicate that she now wants to be more than a passive receptor of nature's fleeting messages. Her printing process is intended to dig down and address issues of memory and history by bringing us closer to a "haptic" sense of the past.

As she writes on the first page: "By making touch more primary than sight, I subvert photography's intended use and ask it to transcribe texture, force, as well as light—to read the surface of the world in a new way." She has compared the reading of these images by the sighted to the way that braille functions for the blind.

Some of the materials she has chosen, mostly textiles, date back decades or centuries and are meant to evoke "millions of stories about migration, colonialism, and women's labor and sexuality."

La China Poblano (I), for instance, is made from a Mexican garment she found in a California thrift store. The many silver sequins on the heavy fabric suggest it was woven in the 1920s, while the addition of gelatin sequins indicate it had been altered by other wearers in the 1940s. These hand-threaded discs create a densely studded surface that is like the scales of a sleeping lizard of fantastic dimensions. The technique successfully brings the buried history of what has traditionally been women's work into the light so that we can almost feel it. The sepia tones she has added to the print further signal that this object exists in multiple eras or time zones.

The textures of *Paint Me Bare* convey a quite different idea about the history of women and dress. Made from pairs of nylon stockings, it's a diaphanous and sexy piece, with sinuous lines and tightly meshed, overlapping rectangles. She sees this filmy fabric, invented by Dupont in 1939, as a "removable skin, a layer that makes us smooth like dolls but can be shed to reveal the imperfect and storied texture of real human skin."

The history of photography and geology, anthropology and archaeology ran along adjacent tracks in the 19th century, and some of them led to the same destination. A photograph is not unlike a fossil, an impression left by objects that provides evidence of the past. Photograms—especially these new ones of McKenna, which are like 3D printer's sculptures—express this correspondence with the utmost simplicity.

I can't deny that her rain and spider studies remain my favorites among her bodies of work. They had a seemingly effortless purity compared to these more laborious pieces. McKenna has a lot on her mind here. I'm not sure that these sometimes inscrutable images can carry the sociological

loads she has put on them. Ishiuchi Miyako's series (200-02) on her mother's dresses and undergarments also swayed under the weight of sentimentality.

What is most admirable about her new work is that McKenna did not want to repeat herself in a manner that had already attracted wide acclaim. Like her fellow photogrammers Adam Fuss and Susan Derges, she is headed in directions we can't predict. I intend to follow wherever that may lead.

Collector's POV: The works in this show are priced between \$2500 to \$12000 (without framing), based on size. McKenna's work has little secondary market history at this point, so gallery retail likely remains the best option for those collectors interested in following up.