# Gottfried Jäger, Generative Color. Photographs @Sous Les Etoiles

By Loring Knoblauch / In Galleries / June 6, 2018

**JTF (just the facts):** A selection of individual prints and works in series, variously framed/unframed, and hung against white walls in the main gallery space, the office area, the side hallway, and the entry area.

The following works are included in the show:

- 1 set of 17 prints (4 gelatin silver, 13 chromogenic), 1965, each sized roughly 9×11 inches, unique
- 1 set of 5 pigment prints on Kodak Pro Endura Glossy, mounted on Dibond, 1973, each sized roughly 20×20 inches, in an edition of 5
- 1 set of 5 archival pigment prints, mounted on Dibond, 1973, each sized roughly 20×20 inches, in an edition of 5
- 2 sets of 5 pigment prints on Fujicolor Glossy, mounted on Dibond, 1980, each sized roughly 20×20 inches, in an edition of 5
- 3 archival pigment prints on Hahnemuhle, mounted on Dibond, 1973, each sized roughly 24×20 inches, in editions of 5
- 1 pigment print on Fujicolor Glossy, mounted on Aluminum, 1980, sized roughly 28×20 inches, in an edition of 5
- 4 pigment prints on Fujicolor Glossy, mounted on Aluminum, 1981, sized roughly 28×20 inches, in editions of 3
- 2 electrostatic prints, 1994, sized roughly 47×47 inches, unique
- 1 archival pigment print on Epson-Digigraphie, mounted on PVC board, 2000, sized roughly 32×32 inches, unique

- 1 video/animation, made in collaboration with Karl Martin Holzhauser, 1995, 12 minutes, with sound

(Installation shots below.)
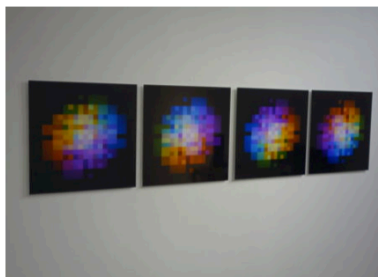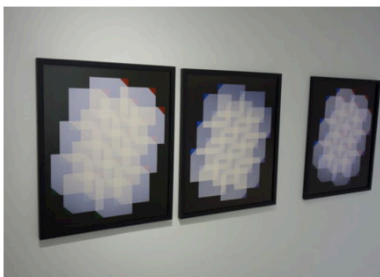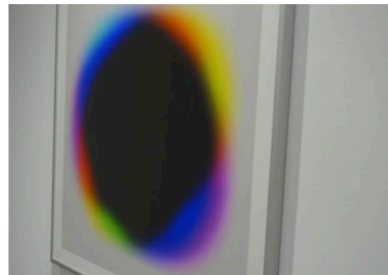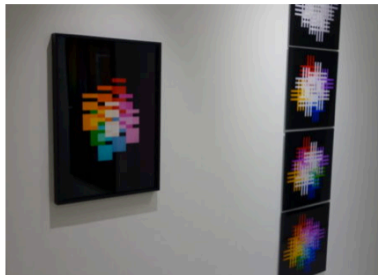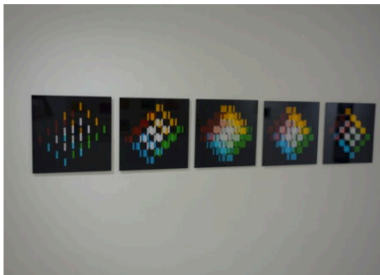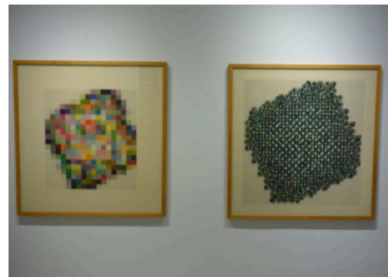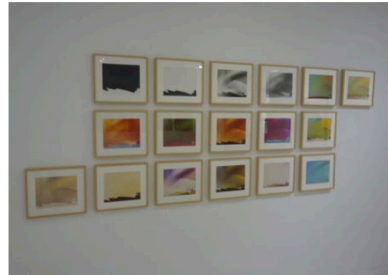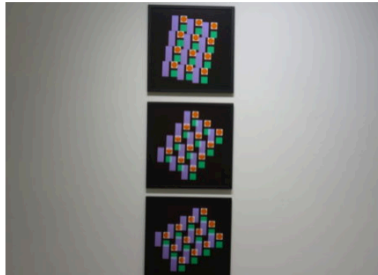
**Comments/Context:** As the years continue to pile up since the large scale switch to digital technology in photography, we are becoming increasingly comfortable with the idea that an image isn't really a singular representation anymore, but a computational array of bits that are then processed by software (often on-the-fly) into pictures that we can recognize.

And while it may seem novel now, the idea of analysing photography in this kind of systematic and mathematical way goes back decades before the camera manufacturers made the digital changeover. Back in the late 1960s, a group of artists (particularly in Germany and Switzerland) were interested making connections between photographic light capture and data-driven processing, and they came together in what became known at the Generative Photography (or Concrete Photography) movement. In essence, these artists were attempting to apply forward thinking and cutting edge digital and computational analysis to the existing analog tools (and conceptual framework) of photography, and their works are now recognized as precursors of what has become, among other things, computer and net art. Most importantly, these artists pushed themselves to reconsider photography outside its inherent mechanical reproduction abilities, testing its limits within more iterative, recursive, and algorithmic systems of image making.

One of the primary movers in this innovative group of non-figurative artists was (and continues to be, more than half a century later) the German photographer Gottfried Jäger. The task of reintroducing Jäger and his now-prescient accomplishments to the contemporary photography world (at least in New York) largely began in a 2016 gallery show at Steven Kasher Gallery (reviewed here), and this show, with a small bit of overlap and commonality, builds on what was found there and extends more fully into Jäger's investigations of color in series.

While this exhibit offers a quick sampler of works from across Jäger's career, many of the works on display come from his series *Multiple Optics*. Using unorthodox cameras with multiple lenses, Jäger spent the better part of a decade during the 1970s building complex geometric arrays of shapes and colors, which he then leveraged to explore alternate approaches to variation and progression.

While it is of course possible to simply appreciate Jäger's compositions as bright arrangements of overlapping geometries, it's worth trying to puzzle out what's happening in each transition from image to image in a series, so as to understand the underlying structure of his thinking. In *Multiple Optics 4.3* (from 1973), arrays of strips and blocks in various colors build up in two additive steps and then build back down in two more, creating both a breathing in-and-out of density and a rotation. *Multiple Optics 4.4* takes a different array of squares and circles and iteratively turns the whole grid, with an ordered vertical orientation ultimately becoming horizontal with intermediate steps of messier overlaps. And *Multiple Optics 4.6* slowly builds up to a pile of white squares with dog eared corners in primary colors, the tiny triangles added to the squares in successive iterations.

By 1980, Jäger's efforts in this same series had inevitably become more complex, both in terms of the intricacy of the in-camera compositions and the sophistication of his use of additive color. In *Multiple Optics 4.54* (from 1980), a three-by-three woven mesh motif is repeated out into an array, starting in all white and iteratively adding four, then two, then two more colors, creating a rainbow pattern of dense interlocking forms. And in *Multiple Optics 4.58*, the colors in a brocade of blocks are iteratively rotated, the whole interlaced composition shifting as each primary color moves from bottom to left to top to right, like the hands of a clock.

In 1981, Jäger shifted to the darkroom, playing with strips and gradients of precisely controlled colored light. Two pairs of works from his *Luminograms* series show how he was building up these ideas. In *Luminogram XVI.1* and *XVI.2*, Jäger uses an angled array of colored stripes as his baseline, testing paired color combinations of gradient transitions and the alternating width of stripes to find balance in his compositions. One step later in *Luminogram XVII.1* and *XVII.2*, he narrows the stripes down to thin lines, making the patterns much more rhythmic and insistent. Seen together, the process feels highly mathematical, with some unseen function determining and "generating" the variables being chosen and employed.

The latest works in the show (from the mid 1990s) were made after the beginning of the digital revolution, and these images marry true computing activity with the image making. Here algorithms seem to determine the creation of dense mosaics of dots, squares, and pixels, the instructions allowed to bend in on themselves, creating the appearance of rigidity becoming unglued. It's as if Jäger can now allow his simulations to run thousands of iterations instead of just a step-wise handful.

As photography continues to evolve towards computation, it seems likely that the innovative thinking behind Jäger's work will become better recognized. It's almost as if he saw the future coming, and set out to work through many of the foundation problems that would be derived from the assumptions of that new order, even though all the tools he needed had yet to be invented. As a result, these works have a luminous back-to-the-future feel to them, their raw intelligence overcoming the limits of the then-available technology.

**Collector's POV:** The works in this show range in price from $5000 to $85000, with many sets between $12000 and $16000. Jäger's works do not come up for sale at auction with any regularity, so gallery retail likely remains the best option for those collectors interested in following up.