Patricia McDonnell and Emily Stamey

With contributions by

Toby Kamps, Laura Moriarty,
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and Robert Silberman

Photo-essay by Larry Schwarm

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When Imogen Cunningham began making photographs, in 1901, the medium was just six decades old. Clare and Floating Seeds represents an important early moment in her development, one that was largely unknown until she received a Guggenheim Foundation fellowship in 1973 that enabled her to create new prints from her early glass plates.

Born in Portland, Oregon, Cunningham attended the University of Washington in Seattle, where her chemistry professor encouraged her interest in studying photographic processes. Meanwhile, she also worked for the university’s botany department, capturing images of plants. After graduation in 1907, Cunningham found employment in the Seattle portrait studio of Edward S. Curtis, now renowned for his photographs of Native Americans. Thanks to a scholarship, she was then able to spend a year at the Technische Hochschule in Dresden, concentrating on photographic-development techniques.

In 1910, the year the Ulrick’s photograph was taken, Cunningham returned to Seattle and opened a portrait studio. Until 1917, when she moved with her artist husband, Roi Partridge, to the San Francisco Bay Area, she created lyrical images in the pictorialist vein. In their effort to establish photography as an art form, early practitioners of this genre evoked the imagery of naturalist and impressionist painters through the use of soft focus, arresting nature scenes, and romanticized subject matter. Pictorialists favored emotional expressiveness over empirical exactness, often depicting scenes from Romantic poetry, medieval legend, or the Bible. Employing simple costuming, artful staging, and dramatic lighting, many imbued their images with allegory. Because of Cunningham’s admiration for the nineteenth-century British artists William Morris and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, one critic characterized her work from the first decade of the twentieth century as “Pre-Raphaelite.” Cunningham herself said she was most inspired during those years by Gertrude Käsebier, whose photographs she saw in the Craftsman magazine.

Cunningham’s artist friends Clare Shepard and John Butler served as compliant models for a series of photographs. They posed in misty woods or at twilight so Cunningham could seek a dramatic, timeless effect. Here, Clare gazes thoughtfully as milkweed seeds drift up her arm and over her shoulder. Allegorically, the image suggests a woman contemplating her fecundity and capacity for motherhood. In doing so, it recalls work by women photographers such as Käsebier and Julia Margaret Cameron and painters such as Cecilia Beaux and Mary Cassatt.

Cunningham’s reputation, however, is not due to her dreamy early pictorialism but to her later pursuit of a distinctly different vision. After moving to San Francisco, she joined a circle of photographers who rejected soft focus in favor of imagery that was crisp, clean, and exacting—a reflection, they felt, of modernity itself. In 1930 Cunningham, Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, and several other friends founded the f/64 group in order to promote photographic precision. Cunningham became known for her striking close-ups of plant forms, stark pictures of industrial buildings, and portraits for Vanity Fair magazine.

10 Clare and Floating Seeds
1910
Gelatin silver print on paper
20 x 15 in. (sheet); 10 5/8 x 8 in. (image)
Museum Purchase, 1979.0001.001

Patricia McDonnell

Toby Kamps is senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston. He has organized exhibitions on the work of Vanessa Beecroft, Ellsworth Kelly, and Claes Oldenburg as well as such themed exhibitions as Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art (2000), Lateral Thinking: The Art of the 1990s (2002), and The Old, Weird America (2008).

Patricia McDonnell is director of the Ulrich Museum of Art. Her scholarly focus is upon European and American modernism, and she is a leading specialist on the painter Marsden Hartley. Her publications include Marsden Hartley: American Modern (1997), On the Edge of Your Seat: Popular Theater and Film in Early Twentieth-Century American Art (2002), and Painting Berlin Stories (2003).

Laura Moriarty is the author of three novels and the recipient of several literary awards. Before becoming a full-time writer, she was a social worker. Moriarty lives in Lawrence, Kansas, where she teaches creative writing at the University of Kansas.

Antonya Nelson has written three novels and published six short-story collections. She contributes often to the New Yorker and the New York Times Book Review. Nelson holds the Callen Chair in Creative Writing at the University of Houston. Her award-winning novel, Living to Tell (2000), takes place in her hometown of Wichita, and her forthcoming novel, Bound, is set there as well.

Timothy R. Rodgers is director of the Scottsdale (Arizona) Museum of Contemporary Art. Formally chief curator at the New Mexico Museum of Art, Santa Fe, he is involved in a range of writing and curatorial projects. His scholarly concentration is on American early modernism.

Robert Silberman is an associate professor of art history at the University of Minnesota’s Twin Cities campus. His chief scholarly interests have been photography, film, and contemporary art. Silberman collaborated with former New York Times photography critic Vicki Goldberg on the companion volume for the 1999 PBS series American Photography: A Century of Images.

Larry Schwarm is a professor of art at Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas, and a nationally regarded photographer whose work has been shown at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. His 2003 book, On Fire: Larry Schwarm, won the Honickman Book Award and Prize.

Emily Stamey, the Ulrich Museum’s curator of modern and contemporary art, is the author of Julian Schabel’s The American Prints (2001) and The Prints of Bürger Steenwijk: A Catalogue Raisonné, 1588-2001 (2006). Her scholarship centers on ethnic identities and social themes in American art.

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