

# Flash: Jennah Ward Bentley

July 9–September 24, 2016



*Terror 10*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.

**In the cyanotypes titled “Teviot” (2015) by Jennah Ward Bentley, the subject is universal as well as highly personal: windows in the artist’s home.** The twelve works that make up the series are atmospheric, transcendental records of light entering the artist’s home on Teviot Street in Los Angeles. The series defies traditional notions of photography as a self-contained medium, characteristically yoked to technical equipment. These seemingly innocuous but useful tools of the trade assume a weighty presence within the history of photography and often contribute to the prestige associated with photographic artwork. But do we need them in order to produce photographs? Ward Bentley proves otherwise. Producing work without the use of a negative, and the rejection of the negative’s latent capability for reproduction (both material and economic), can be a radical artistic act defying longstanding capitalist-centered conventions.<sup>1</sup>

To make the “Teviot” works, Ward Bentley forgoes the use of both camera and film—those magical devices of mediation, control, propagation, and authority—achieving works that directly demonstrate the dynamic experiences of time, form, and shifting light. In looking at these pictures, the viewer must “consent to two voices,” to borrow a phrase from theorist Roland Barthes—those of banality and of singularity.<sup>2</sup> On view here, *Teviot 10* offers no specifics in terms of location or character; all we can infer from this composition is some relationship between perpendicular planes, and that at least one of these planes contains a rectangular facet that appears angled on the page. It describes a moment that is at once universal and yet holds a trace of a specific room, floor, architecture, light, and person. We are left wondering: if we could transport photography’s invention back to ancient times, might we see other records such as this from beings of all cultures, all walks of life?

Throughout her practice, Ward Bentley explores interstitial concepts—those phenomena that defy categorization as either interior or exterior, or double as proxies for the idea of the aperture.<sup>3</sup> An aperture is the negative space created by a structural framework, an opening. Windows are both apertures and architecture. There is no architecture without negative space, and no aperture without an architecture that defines it.<sup>4</sup> Ward Bentley’s work articulates the dual functionalities that make up this dynamic whole. First, the concept manifests metaphorically in the representation of windows and curtains. Since the “Teviot” prints are created without the use of a camera, the windows pictured operate as surrogates for the photographic lens or aperture. Significantly, the subject of the work—the window—appears

only as its shadow, and, moreover, as the *negative* of the shadow. The work is a direct record of the most ethereal sort: an index of shadow and ambient light. While the composition of *Teviot 10* points toward the indexes of window frame and light stretching across floor, it remains predominantly abstract, with the viewer unable to discern positive and negative space, or whether the picture is constructed in photographic positive or negative.

**The cyanotype process was invented by Sir John Herschel (1792-1871) in 1842, just a few years after the announcement of photography’s invention in 1839.**

Herschel’s experiments with solutions of ferric ammonium citrate and potassium ferricyanide led to the creation of the cyanotype, the first successful photographic non-silver iron process. Like most other non-silver processes, it requires a negative the size of the print, or can be used to make photograms without the use of a negative. The sensitizer solution may be applied in dim lighting conditions by brush, immersion, spray bottle, or other methods, onto paper or most any porous material such as fabric. Cyanotypes are sometimes referred to as “sun prints” because traditionally they are exposed outdoors via sunlight after the sensitizer solution has completely dried. The exposure time is dependent on many factors such as available light and the material on which the image is being printed, and can range from a few minutes to about half an hour. The cyanotype is a “printing-out” process, meaning one may observe the development of the print as it is being exposed. Once the desired image has been achieved, the print is rinsed with water or an alternate solution, and can be toned with any number of chemical solutions if the artist desires a shift in color.<sup>5</sup>

Traditionally photographers using the cyanotype process made photograms by strategically placing objects directly on treated paper. Alternately, they used negatives, pressing them against the paper to create a positive print. Unlike those traditional methods of creating photograms, Ward Bentley’s process eschews any tools of mediation or direct physical contact of objects with the paper. Instead she works solely with sensitized paper as receptor for light and shadow as they fall across its surface. To make her prints, Ward Bentley first hand brushes chemical sensitizer onto sheets of paper, and once the solution has dried, she places the sheets flat on the ground in the room where the exposures are made. While this process is largely based on chance and the receptivity of the material, the artist makes compositional decisions as she places each sheet, and occasionally moves the paper during the long exposure process in order to facilitate additional marks and layers

within the composition. Once the exposure is complete, she rinses the print with water to stabilize it. The resultant print is negative, with the portions longer exposed to sunlight turning dark blue and those that were in complete shadow remaining white.<sup>6</sup>

Ward Bentley composes her works through a process of multiple exposures both to insert her own aesthetic marks as well as to manifest what she considers an authentic representation of her experience of time and place.<sup>7</sup> Visible brush strokes evince the hand-applied sensitizer and toner, contributing a compositional element in their own right. In these operations that push at the boundaries of what might be considered a photograph, *Teviot 10* also engages the medium of painting. In addition to hand-brushing the sensitizer solution, and using multiple exposures to make marks, the artist intervenes in the direct light-to-paper process by applying bleach and tannic acid to her prints. By submerging the entire print in a tannic acid bath, the whites of the paper are transformed to a cream-colored hue, the bleached portions absorb a brown color, and the blues are tempered to a more neutral hue. One might impose a dichotomous relationship between the ground of the picture—that part that codes as photographic—and the tannic acid foreground—the painterly. But the process used to apply both is, in a technical sense, nearly identical. The sensitizer and bleach solutions are brushed on to the paper by hand: the ground is hand-brushed and then immersed in light, and the foreground is hand-brushed and then immersed in toner. The whole work is evidence of a dance between receptive and active agents, both chemical and manual. In this way, Ward Bentley's process proposes an opposition to inherited notions of photography and medium specificity.

Whereas photographers are traditionally taught to conceal brush strokes when working with the cyanotype process, Ward Bentley emphasizes the role of the brush. Her brushstrokes spill over, seemingly, into the topmost layer of the composition in warm tones. Though that layer of tannic acid is, on one hand, the most additive and painterly part of the work, the application method causes it to become embedded into the bleached portion of the layer below it, belying the former notion. Ward Bentley's added layers do not rest tacitly upon a background, but come together with and eat into the chemistry of the cyanotype, a chemical interaction in the end more related to photography than painting. The artist inserts her hand materially just as assertively as she does formally.

Ward Bentley's prints are unique objects without the capability for reproduction, a characteristic more associated

with painting and its claim to the “aura” of originality, than of photography.<sup>8</sup> In our age of ubiquitous mechanical and digital reproduction, producing work without the use of a negative (or digital file), and the rejection of the negative's capability for mimesis, is an artistic act that challenges capitalist-centered conventions, even if to its own detriment. Such work lacks both the culturally privileged status of painting and the practical benefits inherent in photographic work. The power of *Teviot 10* lies in Ward Bentley's understated approach. The work exists in much the same way that we exist—in many unremarkable but singular moments, constantly seeking to grapple with the conditions that are thrust upon us in a manner authentic to ourselves.

—Kathryn Poindexter, CMP Curatorial Assistant

---

### Notes

1. See Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Picador, New York, 1977: 93 (originally published in 1973).
2. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Editions du Seuil, France, 1980: 76.
3. Conversation with the artist, April 7, 2016.
4. See Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Penguin Group, New York, trans. J.A. Underwood, 2008: 7 (originally published in 1936).
5. Christopher James, *The Book of Alternative Photographic Processes*, 2006: 102-108.
6. Conversation with the artist, April 7, 2016.
7. *ibid.*
8. See Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 1936.

**Jannah Ward Bentley** (born in 1974 in Detroit, Michigan) is a Los Angeles-based photographer. Her work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at Stephen Cohen Gallery, Los Angeles (2015); George Lawson Gallery, San Francisco (2013); and George Lawson Gallery, Los Angeles (2012), among elsewhere. Her work has been included in group exhibitions throughout the US and internationally, including at the Albright Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo; Charlotte Jackson Fine Art, Santa Fe; Gallery H29, Brussels, and elsewhere. Her works reside in private and public collections, including at the Albright Knox Art Gallery, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Ward Bentley earned her MFA at Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, in 2011, and her BA at San Francisco State University in 1999.

**Flash! contemporary art series** features single works made within the last year. The series is organized by Joanna Szupinska-Myers, CMP Curator of Exhibitions, at the California Museum of Photography at UCR ARTSblock. *FLASH: Jannah Ward Bentley* is the thirteenth exhibition in the series.