

ANITA DOUTHAT

UNDER THE SUN

“The most transitory of things, a shadow, the proverbial emblem of all that is fleeting, may be fettered by the spells of our “natural magic,” and may be fixed forever in the position which it seemed only destined for a single instant to occupy.”

William Henry Fox Talbot in *Some Account of the Art of Photogenic Drawing*

Using the sun as my light source and doors or window shades as my shutter, I produce photograms by placing objects on ultraviolet light-sensitive printing-out paper. The resulting exposures produce ghostly, negative silhouette-like traces. The exposed prints are later gold-toned and fixed for permanence. I am generally drawn to objects suggesting a connection to the human body. This extremely low tech and immediate way of working captures an essence or suggestion of an object rather than a surface description. This quality was beautifully described by William Henry Fox Talbot in discussing his role in the invention of photography.

It was Talbot who, in 1839, first placed a band of lace on light-sensitive paper, thus anticipating a long history of photographic artists drawn to the imagery of clothing. I made my first dress photograms in 1993 for a window installation, returned to the subject in the late 1990s, and exhibited *Transparent Uniforms* at the Weston Art Gallery in 2003. Following that exhibition, I declared an end to the series—no more dresses—an edict I was to abandon only a few months later when the artist Joel Otterson gave me five wedding dresses that had been hanging from the rafters of his studio for a decade. They were too tempting. I began cutting away the multiple layers of fabric in these dresses in order to achieve the desired degree of translucency and transparency. This process of manipulating fabric led to the *Alterations* series of 2007. A few more *Transparent Uniforms* ensued. These photograms have many precedents and influences from the history of fine art and fashion, but they are quite modest in their methods and materials. They employ clothing from the Salvation Army, a slip once worn by my mother, a string of old Christmas tree lights, and cuttings from the grape arbor in my backyard.

Concurrently with *Alterations* I began a second project, *Candelabras for Constantin*. The title honors Constantin Brancusi, an artist I greatly admire. My husband, the artist Cal Kowal, collected flea market candelabras. Drawn to the shapes, I playfully made exposures with these objects, sometimes placing them upright on my paper and sometimes placing them on their sides. I then added glass objects for their transparent, translucent, and refractive qualities. Something about the shapes reminded me of Brancusi, or possibly the abstract way he photographed his own sculpture.

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