

M ANALOG FOREVER

Edition 5 | Winter 2021





Steven Williams

Theoretical Landscapes

“My work with the cameraless image is not part of a new language but a return to the art-making tenets I learned: form, texture, depth, and shadow.”

- Steven Williams

Steven Williams received his first box of antique dry plate glass negatives from his father. His parents frequented farm auctions and estate sales in rural North Dakota, where their family had long farmed the land, and would purchase photography-related finds for their son. A ribbon-wrapped box might hide turn-of-the-century family snapshots, and possibly the dust and pigeon droppings that collected in the barn where they sat forgotten for decades. Fascinated by these relics, Steven held onto his growing collection of glass plates for years before artistic inspiration struck him. In his hoard of vintage negatives there was an unopened box full of unexposed plates. Would their light-sensitive emulsion still be viable after a hundred years?

Steven has long held a fascination with photographic materials and how they can be manipulated to their extremes. Visually he is primarily inspired by the idea of abstraction and using photography in a way that is not strictly literal. He often turns to the landscape for inspiration by creating imagined topographies through the use of abstract forms or collaged materials. “When I started art school in the ‘70s, I was interested in studying the materials used in photography, but not necessarily to create traditional prints. I found inspiration in the photograms of Man Ray, the chemigrams of Pierre Cordier, and the use of Polaroids by Lucas Samaras.”

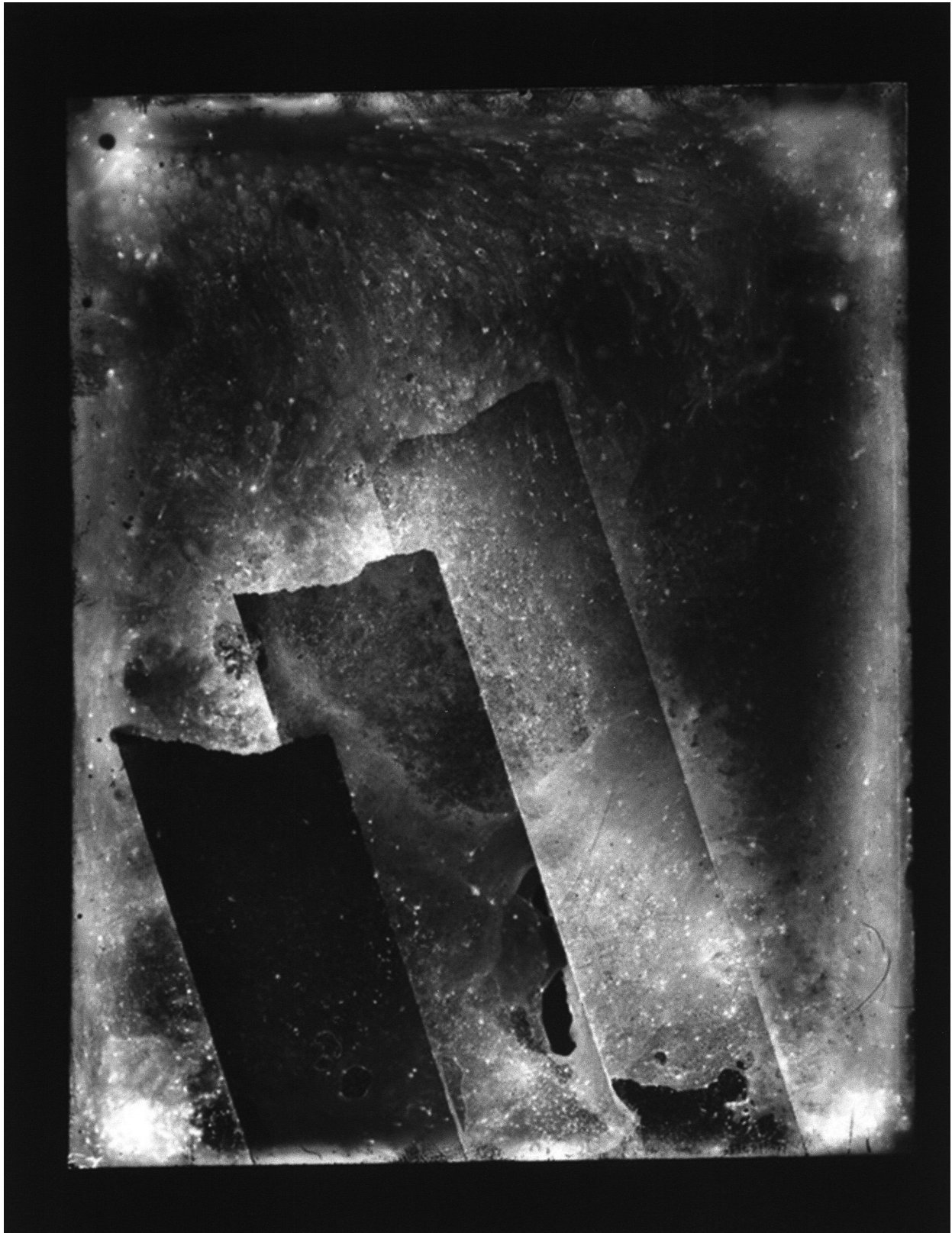
STEVEN WILLIAMS

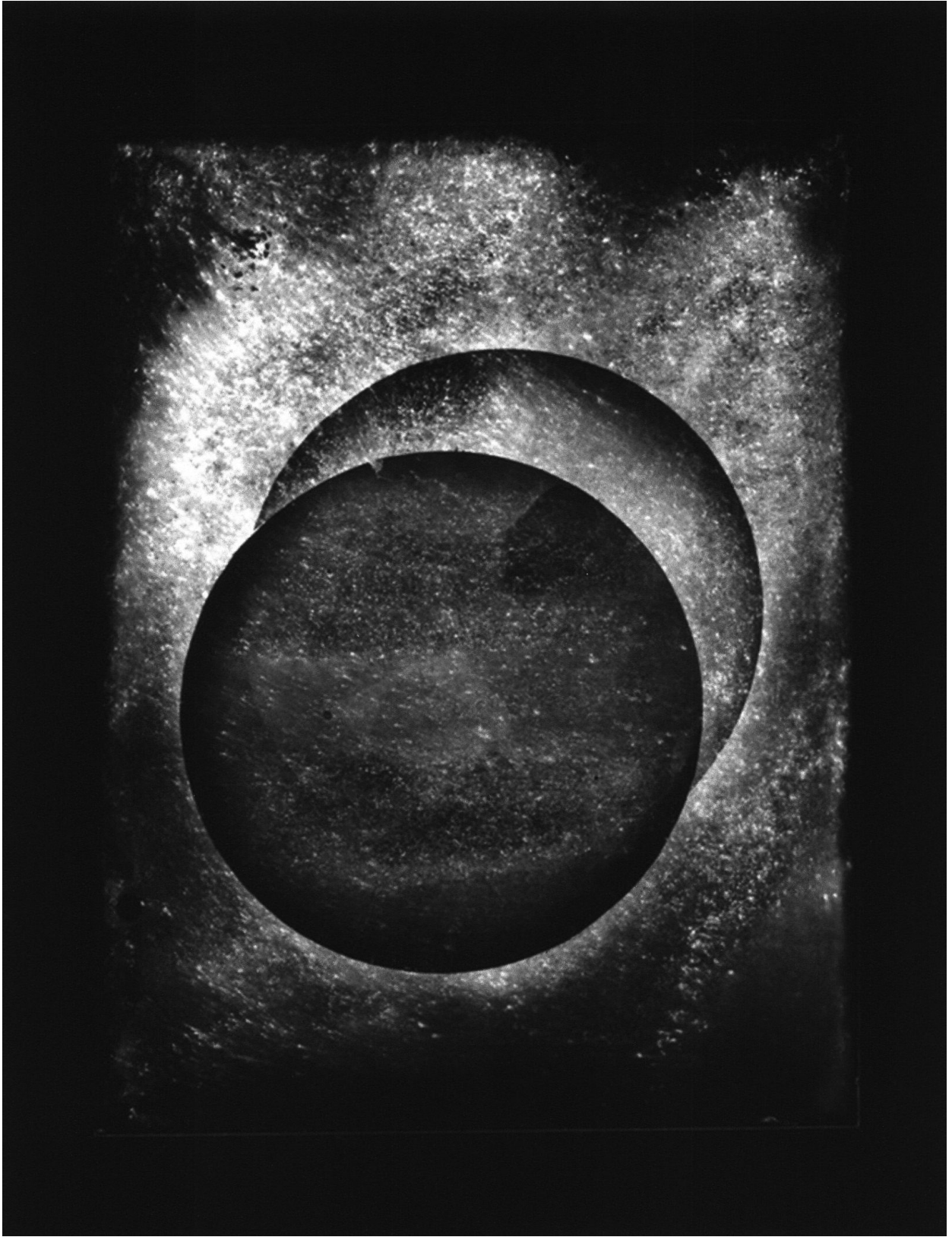
He bounced around from college to college looking for the right fit until he found his way to the University of Michigan. Run by Phil Davis, it was a highly technical program with an emphasis on the Zone System and historic processes, but the faculty also encouraged him to investigate his conceptual ideas. “I was always battling with the concept of abstraction with my work. People would say, ‘I don’t get you, why are you trying to make abstract images when photography is such a realistic medium?’ [University of] Michigan allowed me to experiment and I got a strong technical foundation from that. My work with the cameraless image is not part of a new language but a return to the art-making tenets I learned: form, texture, depth, and shadow.”

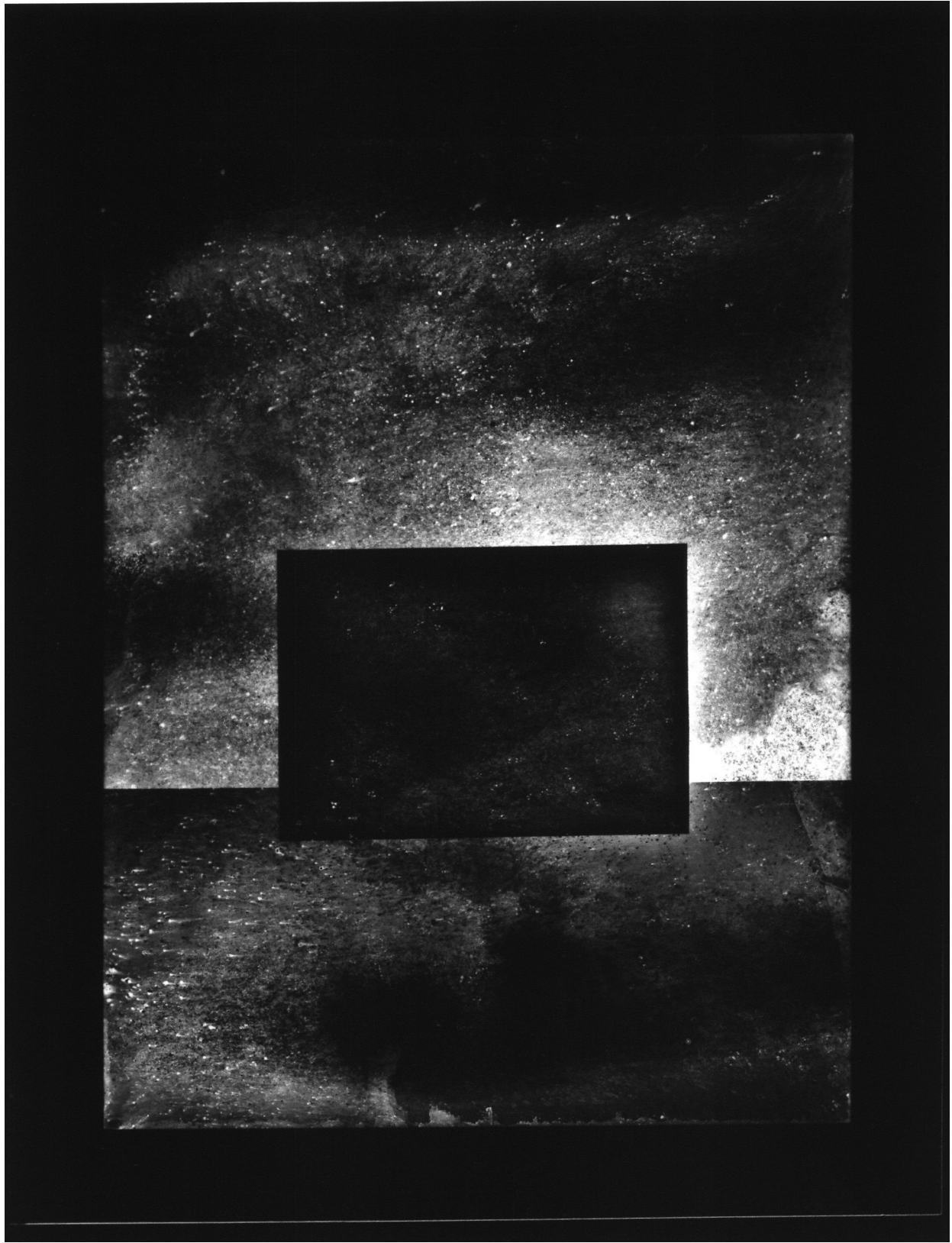
When approaching his first glass plate negative, he wasn’t interested in putting it in a camera. Rather, he wondered if he could get a chemical reaction just by the intervention of light and water. He let the water drip, drip, drip on the plate and the emulsion slowly began to transform. Having had this initial success Steven began trawling eBay and Etsy for other boxes of antique plates, which were largely manufactured from 1880 through 1920. He began to methodically test plates from the various companies to learn about their behavior, contrast, and sensitivity, which has helped him achieve consistent results across the body of work.

In making this series, Steven is rescuing these glass plate negatives from obscurity, or, even worse, the landfill. Like other photographers who work with expired film or vintage paper, he is giving these forgotten materials a second chance at fulfilling their original purpose. When using something this old and fragile, there are sometimes beautiful imperfections that come with their age. “There’s all this history in these plates that I find really fascinating. They’re just so intriguing to work with, here’s this material that’s just been kicking around for decades. I can’t do this project with film, it has to be these glass plates. And even if there’s a chip, that chip’s been there for a hundred years.”

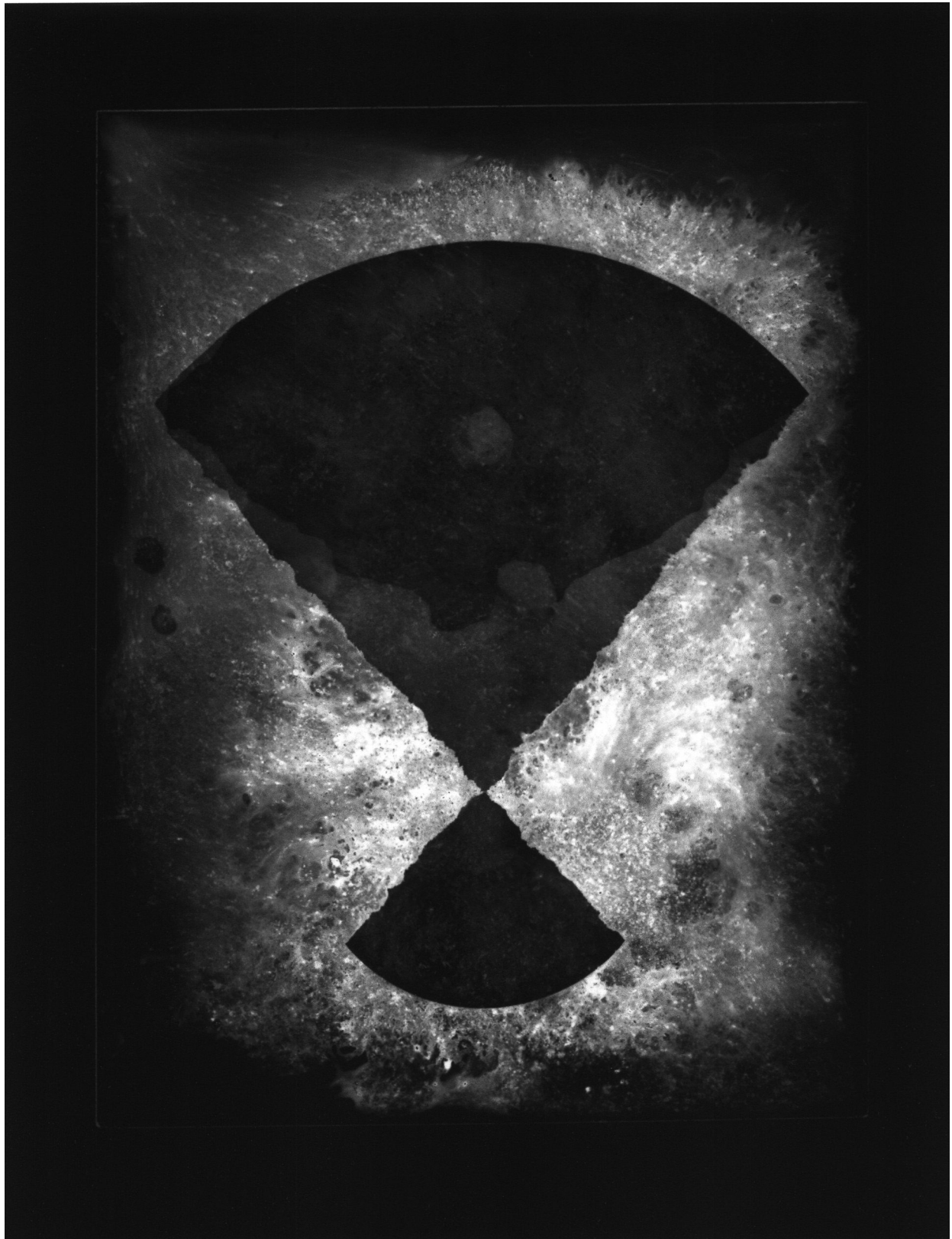


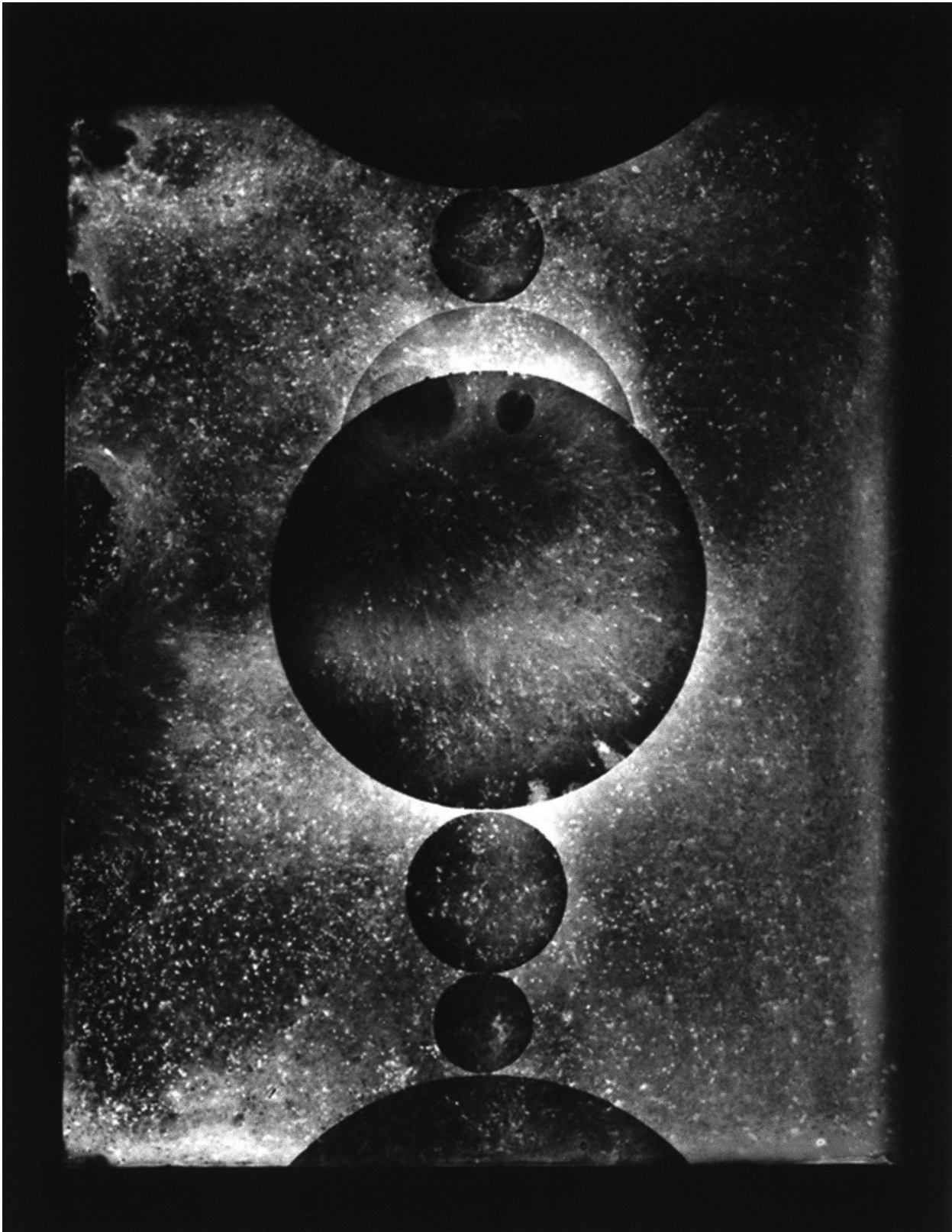




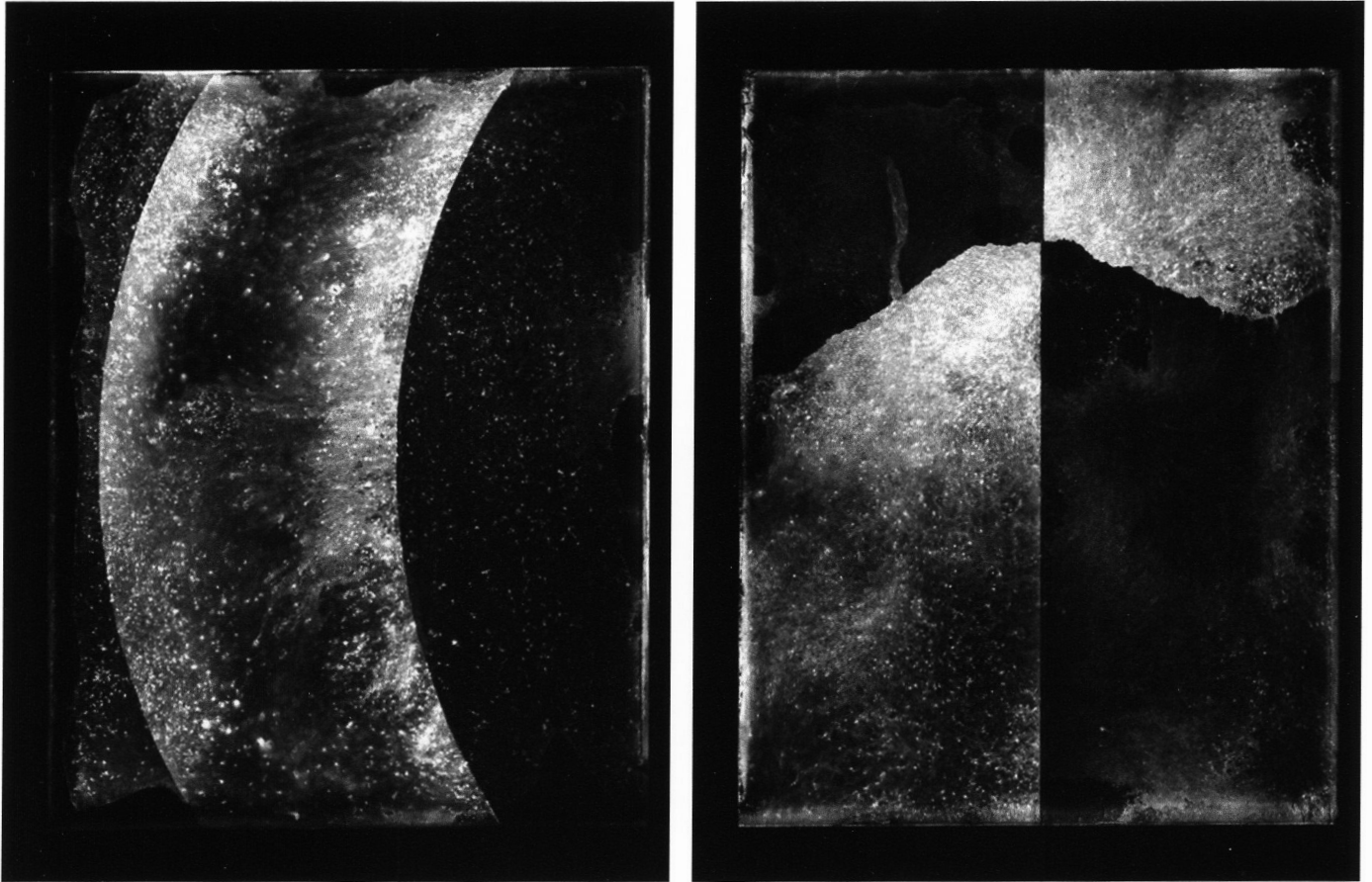








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Steven is fascinated by the reactions people have to his abstract images. Humans have a natural tendency to attempt to discern meaning or see objects where there are none, a phenomenon called pareidolia. It's what causes us to look for shapes in the clouds, see Jesus on a piece of toast, or read one of Steven's abstract images as a skyline full of buildings. "I like to share this work and ask people, 'What are you seeing? How are you seeing?' I have it in my head how I create the layouts for these pieces, but what do you see in them?"

These are the same ideas of finding visual meaning in the abstract that has preoccupied him since college and has fueled his artistic tendencies for 40 years. He is driven by asking these questions of himself and his audience. "When I went to Cranbrook for grad school I was taught to ask as many questions as possible, and that there are never any wrong answers. Everything in photography has been done before, but you have to look at what you're doing and see how you fit into the larger story. That's why I want to show this work to people, so it can spark a conversation. I'm constantly asking questions. You might not get answers to all of them, but you can keep asking. I like that."