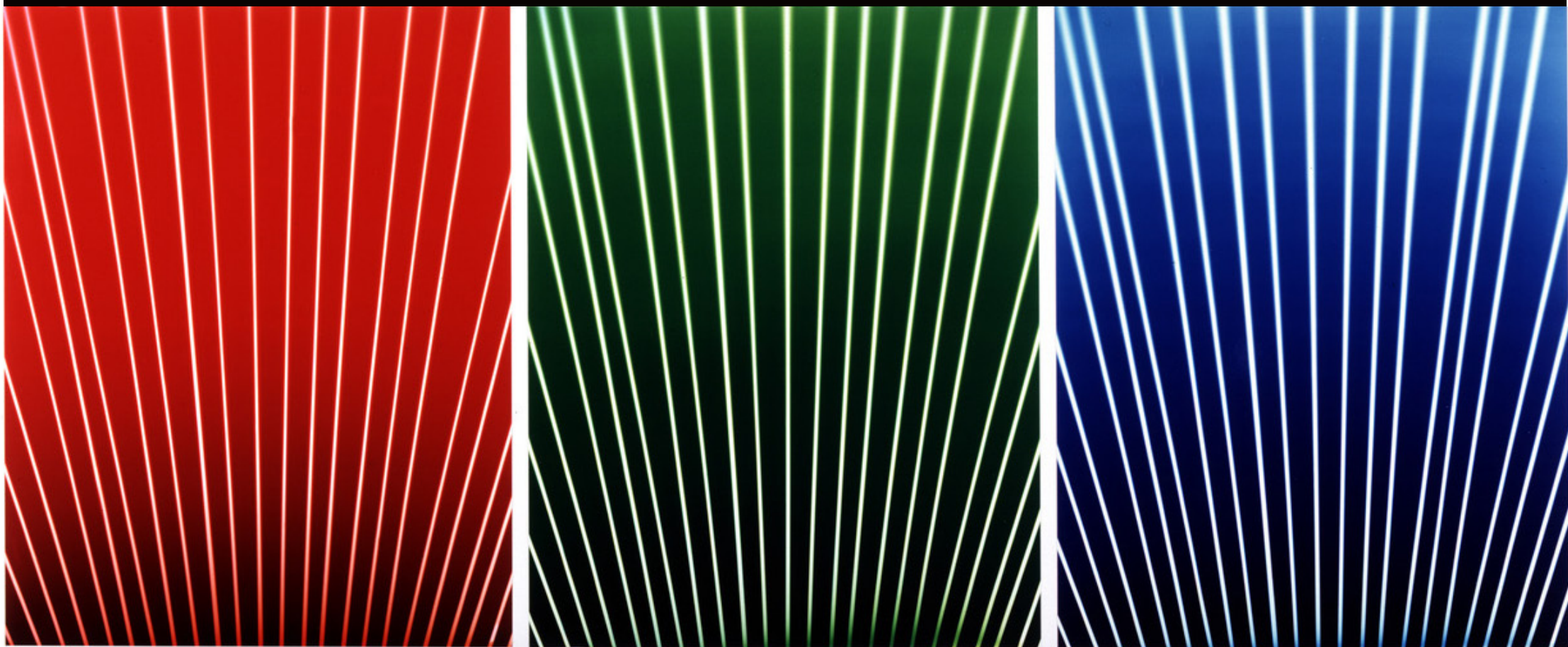

COLORS IN THE **DARK**: Ellen Carey

POLAROID 20 X 24 AND PHOTOGRAM



“Ray Bands” 2003, Color Photograms / Unique (RGB), 20" x 16" (each) or 20" x 48" (triptych)

The Bringer of Light: Ellen Carey

There are artists who seem to arrive in the world already speaking in a recognisable voice, and others who spend

a lifetime learning how not to echo too loudly what has already been said. Ellen Carey belongs, for me, to the latter group in the best and rarest sense: an artist who has stayed with the question long enough, and deeply enough, for her work to move beyond style and into territory unmistakably her own. Across decades, she has remained committed to experimental photography, working through photogram and Polaroid-based processes in ways that keep asking, with unusual persistence, what a photograph might be.

That is perhaps what strikes first, though not always what is first spoken of. Not simply that the work is innovative, though it is; nor only that it is technically unusual, though it certainly is. It is the steadiness of her refusal to let photography settle too comfortably into description. Carey has turned instead towards photography as event, material encounter, and argument with light itself. Her *Dings & Shadows* are cameraless colour photograms made entirely in the darkroom, without traditional subject matter or an intervening negative stage, while her long-running *Photography Degree Zero* practice uses the monumental Polaroid 20 × 24 format to press the medium towards abstraction, process, and photo-objecthood.

That commitment to the Polaroid 20 × 24 matters, not only as a technical fact but as a kind of lineage. Carey has continued to work with these large-format Polaroid cameras long after many artists would have treated them as relics of photographic history. In her hands, they remain living instruments, capable of surprise, resistance, immediacy, and scale. There is something moving in that fidelity to a machine so closely bound to Edwin Land, Polaroid's founder and one of photography's great modern inventors. Land was Connecticut-born, and Carey's forthcoming exhibition, *Colors in the Dark: Ellen Carey*, at The William Benton Museum of

Art on UConn's Storrs campus, draws that connection into a beautifully circular form. A Connecticut-born inventor, a Connecticut-based artist, and an exhibition devoted to colour, darkness, experiment, and photographic possibility: the resonance feels more than incidental.



“Dings & Shadows” 2016, Color Photograms / Unique, 24" x 20" (each) or 24" x 40" (diptych)

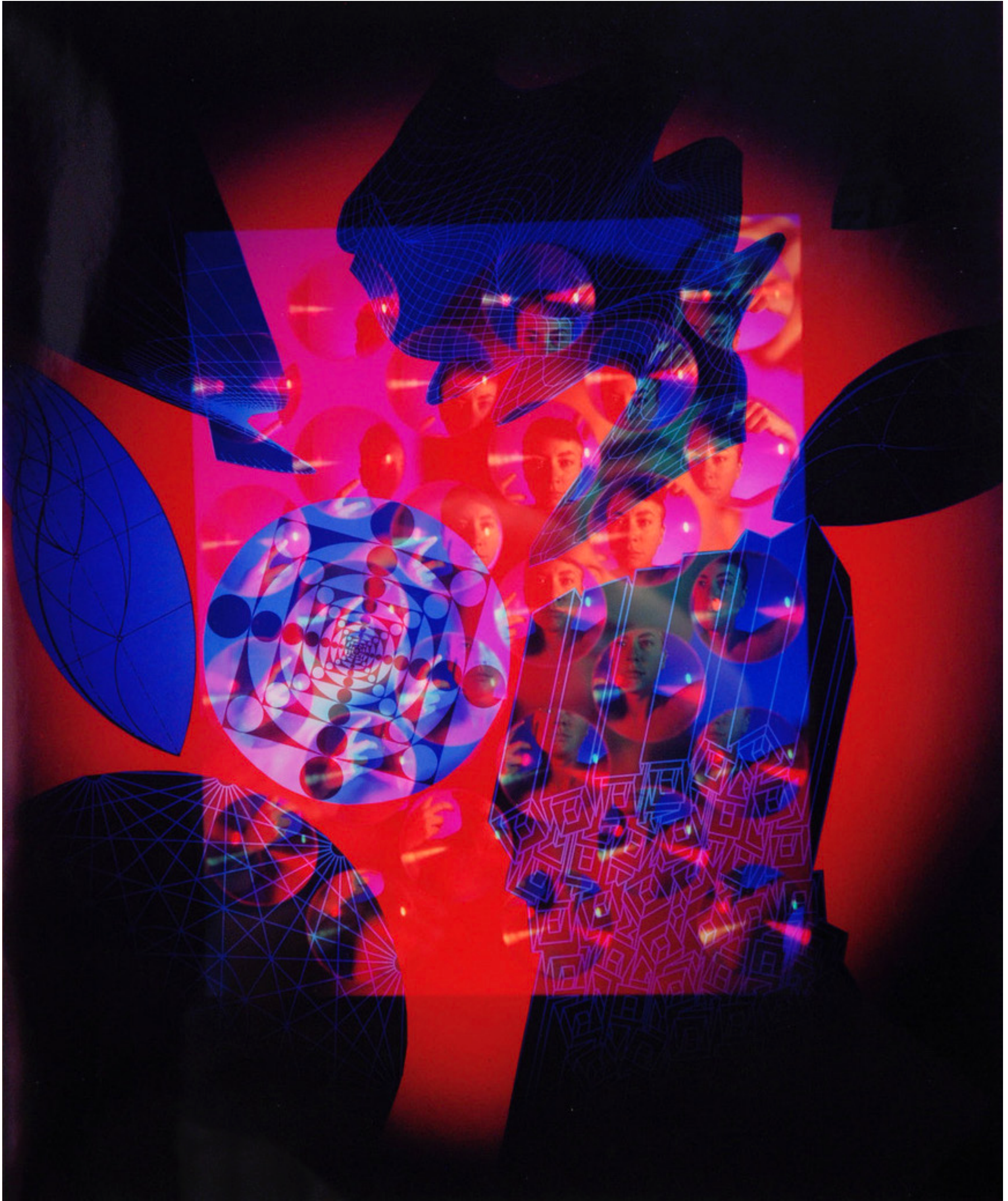
What emerges from Carey's practice is not work that illustrates the world back to us in any ordinary sense. It does something more slippery and more demanding. It asks us to meet photography before it has fully agreed to become image. In Carey's hands, paper is crushed, manipulated, exposed, and transformed; light is not merely captured but coaxed, tested, and set loose. The result is a body of work often described as defying photographic convention. The phrase is accurate, but perhaps a little too tidy for something so alive and searching.

That searching has taken many public forms, each one extending rather than merely summarising the enquiry. Her exhibition *Ellen Carey: Light Struck* at the Fox Talbot Museum in Lacock, England, felt especially apt, placing Carey's contemporary experiments in direct conversation with one of photography's originating sites. Lacock is inseparable from William Henry Fox Talbot, the pioneering figure whose paper-based negative-to-positive process helped establish one of photography's foundational structures: the movement from negative to positive, from latent trace to visible image. In that setting, Carey's work bound nineteenth-century photogenic drawing to twentieth-century Polaroid 20×24 technology and contemporary colour abstraction. Both the photogram and the Polaroid process carry within them the medium's generative duality: absence and presence, dark and light, negative and positive.

That linkage also opens onto another photographic history. The Linked Ring, formed in 1892 by Henry Peach Robinson and others after their secession from the Photographic Society of Great Britain, argued for photography as art rather than as technical record alone. Carey's work does not belong to Pictorialism in any simple historical sense, but it does renew the larger question The Linked Ring helped make urgent: how can photography exceed mere description and become a field of visual invention? In Carey's hands, the "link" is not nostalgic. It is structural and contemporary, connecting photogram to Polaroid 20×24, analogue chemistry to global picture culture, and the medium's negative-to-positive foundation to the abstract image-world of the present.

The title *Light Struck* feels exact for her. Carey's titles often hold the work in productive tension: between event and evidence, between process and

form, between the literal action of light and the more mysterious afterlife of what light leaves behind. They remind us that photography is never only about seeing. It is also about contact, chemistry, touch, absence, darkness, and time.



One earlier exhibition sits especially close to the marrow of her project, and it is worth pausing over. In 2014, at the Akus Gallery at Eastern Connecticut State University, Carey mounted *Let There Be Light: The Black Swans of Ellen Carey*, a show whose title alone tells us a great deal. It reaches back to the first line of Genesis and forward into the darkroom in a single gesture, insisting that the making of an image is not so far from the making of a world. Photography itself carries this meaning in its Greek roots: light drawing. Carey has also spoken of discovering, after her mother's death, that her Catholic birth name, Ellen, was given in a book of Irish names for Catholic children as meaning “bringer of light” or “light.” For an artist whose work has so persistently asked what light can do, this private discovery becomes more than anecdote. It feels like a prescient gift from her parents, found at the moment when loss had made the word newly charged.

Donna Fleischer, writing on *Let There Be Light*, drew on Nassim Taleb's notion of the black swan — the rare, unforeseeable event that reorders what came before — to describe Carey's *Pulls* as “a black swan phenomenon” in photography: unprecedented, and, once seen, impossible to unsee.

What moves me most in Fleischer's reading is her insistence that the *Pulls* were not born of pure formal experiment but of loss. Carey's father died suddenly in 1979; her brother's death, too, was sudden. The terminal illness and death of her mother, and the end of her marriage, also belong to the emotional ground from which the work emerged. Out of that collapse of the ordinary world on a single day in August 1996, came the first

White Pull / Black Pull and *Family Portrait*, followed by *Mourning Wall*, 100 Polaroid negatives seen at Real Art Ways, and Carey's MATRIX #153 solo at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art. To title the exhibition of such work *Let There Be Light* is to acknowledge, quietly and without sentimentality, that abstraction here is not decoration. It is the form grief took when it was ready to become something else.

Love and loss, negative and positive, light and shadow: these are not only personal themes but deep structures in the history of photography. The old myth recorded by Pliny the Elder, in which the origin of drawing is located in the tracing of a lover's shadow, already binds image-making to absence. Photography inherits that myth through light, contact, and the shadow's trace. In Carey, those ancient terms return through modern materials. The blacks are not empty. The colours are not merely bright. They are, as Fleischer puts it, "poetic realities" pulled "from a primal darkness that dreams the next moment."

Carey has been recognised widely, including by the Royal Photographic Society's Hundred Heroines platform, and in major exhibitions such as *Ellen Carey: Struck By Light* at the New Britain Museum of American Art, that have traced the arc of more than thirty years of her work. But achievement, while important, is not the most interesting thing about an artist. What lingers more meaningfully is the sense of someone who has differentiated herself not by pursuing novelty for its own sake, but by going further into the medium than many would think to go. Rather than asking photography to behave, Carey has allowed it to become strange again: returned to its chemistry, its shadows, its physicality, and its astonishments.



“Dings & Shadows” 2012, Color Photograms / Unique (RGBYMC), 40" x 30" (each) or 40" x 180"

What interests me just as much is the life of mind and temperament such work suggests. To make in this way over many years requires more than originality. It requires a tolerance for uncertainty, a willingness to stand where no ready-made path exists, and a stubborn faith in process when process does not immediately reward you with clarity. There is something profoundly heartening in that, especially for women artists, who have so often been expected to be legible, explainable, and perhaps a little too grateful for their place. Carey's career suggests another way of being: rigorous without hardness, inventive without performance, serious without becoming solemn.

There is a difference between making a career and making a path. Plenty manage the first. Fewer manage the second. A path is something others can sense behind you, even if they cannot replicate your footsteps. It alters the landscape a little. It gives permission. Carey has done that kind of work, not by noise, and not by fashion, but by sustained attention. She has stayed with light, colour, shadow, process, and photographic risk long enough for them to open into a language that is distinctly hers.

And perhaps that is what feels most worth honouring. Not simply the finished works in their saturated brilliance or tensile abstractions, but the imagina-

tion behind them: the woman artist who kept faith with experiment; who trusted that photography could still be enlarged from within; who refused the easy satisfactions of repetition; who made room for scholarship, teaching, writing, and making as parts of one ongoing conversation with the medium.

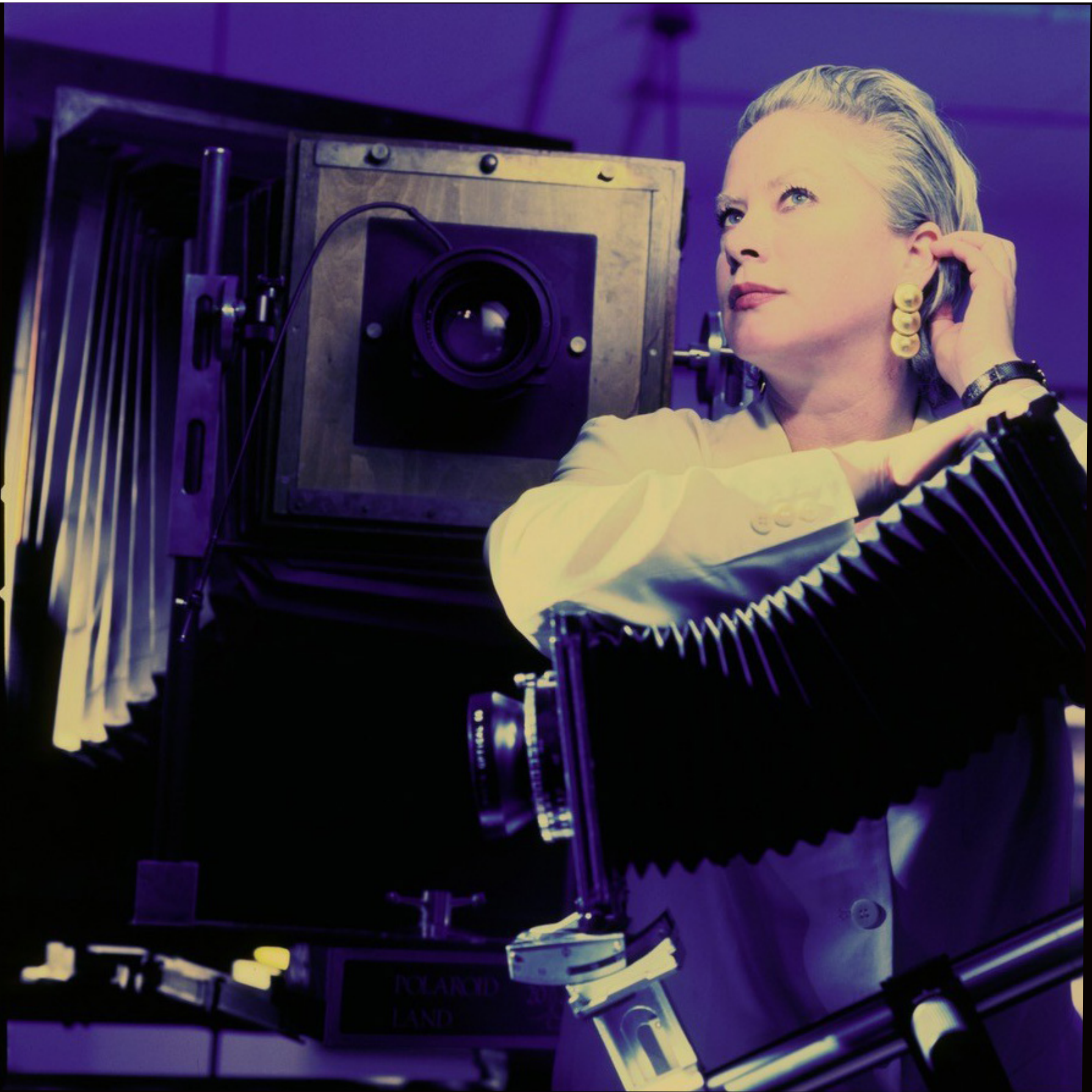
There is something quietly radical in such consistency. In a culture that often rewards speed, branding, and immediate recognisability, Carey's work belongs to a slower and more enduring measure: the long fidelity of a person to her own enquiry. That may be why the work feels both intellectually exacting and oddly generous. It does not close things down. It opens them. It reminds us that an artist can spend a lifetime not narrowing her questions, but sharpening them.

To look at Carey's work, then, is not only to look at photographs, though of course it is that too. It is to encounter the record of a mind that has persistently chosen exploration over ease. A woman who has made her own terms, and kept making them. A practitioner for whom experimentation is not a flourish added at the edges, but the central pulse of the work itself.

And that, in the end, may be the truest thing one can say of a path such as hers. It has not merely produced images. It has widened the field in which images can be thought, made, and felt. There is real distinction in that, and real courage too: the kind that does not always announce itself loudly, but is there all the same, steady as light, and just as transformative.

Doug Chinnery

North Uist - Outer Hebrides, July 2026



ellencareyphotography.com

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