DeCordova presents *second nature: abstract photography then and now*  
on view May 26, 2012–April 21, 2013  

Lincoln, MA, May 7, 2012—DeCordova Sculpture Park and Museum presents *second nature: abstract photography then and now* from May 26, 2012–April 21, 2013. Abstract photography continues to be a catchall genre for the blending of media and disciplines, and a fertile arena in which artists can test photography itself. It challenges the popular view of photography as an objective record of reality and calls attention to the constructed nature of the photographic image. Today, anyone who has a cell phone can take and send digital images instantaneously. In response to this ‘snapshot’ culture, many artists are taking up photography’s underlying properties to consciously construct an image of reality. *Second nature* looks at this embrace of the highly fabricated image as a return to an earlier time in photography’s history—and will pair the scientific and expressionistic experimentation of photography in the first half of the 20th century with current explorations of the medium. This exhibition highlights deCordova’s photography collection, presenting work by some of the field’s most prolific pioneers and innovators: György Kepes, Harold Edgerton, and Aaron Siskind.


“It is another nature which speaks to the camera rather than to the eye”  
—Walter Benjamin, *Little History of Photography* (1931)
In his essay on the history of photography, Walter Benjamin articulates photography’s ‘second nature’ as its ability to detach and abstract the visible from the real. Non-representational photography lives in this contested middle ground between material reality and photographic illusion—fact and fiction—first and second natures.

Since the rise of digital photography in the 1990s there has been a reactionary and renewed interest among artists to re-engage the slow techniques of analog photography. Artists are finding their way back into the darkroom, working in low-tech and labor intensive processes. This emphasis on photographic process as subject—photography about photography—foregrounds the debate on the medium’s tie to representation. In their return to the early days of photography, many contemporary photographers build from the same lines of inquiry that compelled scientists and artists in the early part of the 20th century, but now armed with a conceptual undergirding, propose alternate modes for thinking about and framing pictured abstractions.

Mel Bochner’s *Photography Before the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (2011) illustrates this conceptual repositioning. In the 1960s Bochner began to take notes on the “misunderstandings” of photography in literature, writing particularly telling quotes on 3 x 5 notecards. Decades later Bochner photographed one of these cards, a quote from *Encyclopedia Britannica* that reads, “Photography cannot record abstract ideas” and printed the negative in six different pre-20th century photographic processes: albumen, platinotype, collodion–chloride, gelatin, salt, and cyanotype. Bochner’s multiples sardonically question photography’s ability to represent the real or the “authentic,” through history and today. Returning to his 50-year-old *Misunderstandings (A Theory of Photography)* project, Bochner circles back to his initial investigations of photography and linguistics, revisiting the camera’s capacity to communicate.

Bochner is just one among many artists working then and now, who have made the questioning of photography—its mechanical roots and potentiality to transcend the pictorial—the heart of their study. This exhibition is not intended to be a survey of abstract photography, but rather a focused study of art being made today that revisits and continues some of the themes and creative explorations of early 20th-century photography. Through loans of 70 works,*second nature* will overlay a contemporary lens with which to reinterpret and recontextualize the Museum’s collection of non-representational photography.

*Second nature* is organized by Lexi Lee Sullivan, Assistant Curator. *Second nature* is made possible in part by generous support from Beth and Richard Marcus.

This exhibition will be installed on two floors of the Museum with different durations. -more-
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The Catherine S. England Photo Study Space, the Phyllis and Jerome Lyle Rappaport Media Space, and Arcade Gallery (2nd floor): May 26–August 12, 2012


Exhibition-related Programming

Artistic Process: Yamini Nayar
Saturday, June 16, 2 pm
Yamini Nayar constructs temporal imagined spaces made from found and lo-tech materials to form sculptural installations that only survive through photographic documentation. She questions constructs of the moment and the art of photography as a discipline. Visit deCordova, meet Nayar, and take the opportunity to get the inside perspective on the artists’ work, process, and creative inspiration. Free with Museum admission.

Lecture and Demonstration: Artistic Process of Bryan Graf
Saturday, July 21, 2 pm
Bryan Graf plays with the materiality of light in his three photographic series in the exhibition, *second nature*. Graf puts a spin on traditional photographic methods by taking the processes outside, exposing film to light, and taking images of photograms. Graf will discuss his work on view, as well as demonstrate the darkroom process of making a photogram, an opportunity not to be missed.

General Information

DeCordova is open Tuesday through Sunday, from 10 am to 5 pm and on select Monday holidays. To coincide with the new Strategic Plan, the cost of admission has changed to the following: $14 for adults, $12 for seniors, $10 for students (ages 13 and up), and Free for children 12 and under. Members, Lincoln residents, and active duty military personnel and their families are admitted free of charge with proper ID. The Sculpture Park is open year-round during daylight hours. Guided public tours of the Museum’s main galleries take place every Thursday at 1 pm and Sunday at 2 pm. Tours of the Sculpture Park are given on Saturday and Sunday at 1 pm from April to November. All guided tours are free with Campus admission. Visit decordova.org or call 781.259.8355 or further information.

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