

*Untitled Triptych 95, 190, 188, 1994. 48 x 36 inches. Gelatin silver prints.*

# CARL CHIARENZA: TRANSMUTATION

## TURNING DETRITUS INTO SPLENDOR

*Over the years Carl Chiarenza's photographs have evolved from tightly framed, documentary-style images into a vocabulary of visual abstraction. He achieved this by taking leave of the natural landscape and constructing collages from scrap materials for the purpose of being photographed under a copy stand with a 4x5 view camera.*

### Robert Hirsch

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Chiarenza's luminous, meticulously crafted black and white photographs remove his subject from the everyday world of color. This allows his images to transcend their specific subject matter and evoke an inner state of consciousness that grapples with his subject matter beyond its external structure. Chiarenza's spirit of experimentation disrupts customary expectations through his use of everyday materials to visualize their metamorphosis into hauntingly beautiful abstractions that hint at horizons, geological strata, and quixotic figures. His constructed meditative symbols forge a connection between the mind and nature that elicits emotional responses.

This work, often relating to the landscape, dismantles formal media boundaries and permits photography

to merge with graphic design, painting and sculpture. Conceptually, Chiarenza's transformative imagemaking pulls back the photographic cloak to reveal its illusional qualities. In turn, this draws attention to the difference between a photograph and the reality it depicts, reminding us that all photographs are constructed images and not concrete realities.

Ultimately, Chiarenza's work invites psychological speculation by encouraging us to examine the unconscious and/or the subliminal workings of the mind, thus demonstrating how knowledge about our world and ourselves can be gleaned through a fabricated methodology. Chiarenza is also a photo-historian noted for his acclaimed biography, *Aaron Siskind: Pleasures and Terrors* (1982).

**Robert Hirsch:** How did you get interested in photography?

**Carl Chiarenza:** The playground across the street from our house in Rochester, NY had a meeting and storage shack. When I was eight years old I made my first pictures of neighborhood kids playing ball with a Kodak Brownie. I processed them in a tiny darkroom the playground director built in that shack. My first serious picture was of a Rochester East High School wall on graduation day 1953, upon which people had scribbled their names over the years. It was essentially my first abstract picture.

**RH:** What is the key visual theme running through your work?

**CC:** In high school I was already leaning towards a formalistic picture. When I started attending Rochester Institute of Technology and making photographs for assignments Minor White gave us, I found myself doing close-ups. This furthered my interest in abstraction which can be seen in my 1957 senior thesis, *Interaction: Visual Verbal*, which essentially consists of close-

ups and details of a railroad yard (facsimile edition available from Nazraeli Press).

**RH:** How did your notion of the landscape evolve from outside to inside?

**CC:** I have always been attracted to the landscape and tried hard to photograph outdoors, but I couldn't get the pictorial ideas to evolve in nature. So I went into the studio and tried to let collage and light dream up images of my feelings for and about nature. Later, in 1983, I was invited to participate in an exhibition called *Arboretum* for which I made a series of collage pictures called *Woods*, which more directly explored my feelings about nature. I concluded that the idea of landscape is really a pictorial *construction*. In the past, people didn't refer to nature as the landscape out there. It only became a landscape after it was pictured. My sense of landscape, therefore, is that it is an abstract, emotional, pictorial mindset that we construct to examine nature in relation to ourselves.

Nature is not picturesque, it is often ugly and unruly, which is why one has to struggle to make a photograph



*Untitled Diptych, 99, 92, 2007. 14 x 22 inches. Gelatin silver prints.*



*Peace Warrior (Don Quixote) 188, 2003. 36 x 48 inches. Gelatin silver prints.*

out in it. By working in the studio, I have control over the light and its effect on the collage. This allows me to alter that relationship in a manner similar to how I burn and dodge in the darkroom.

**RH:** How have people created a landscape genre?

**CC:** People bring their feelings to the landscape and in turn the landscape affects them. The picture comes from a place in between by taking these experiences and reconstituting them into visual symbols that one associates with them.

In the studio, I play with scraps of paper, and with the lighting on my copy stand to make what I would love to see in nature, but isn't there. I can't see it out there, but I feel it. It is my way of giving back to nature something that I got indirectly from nature.

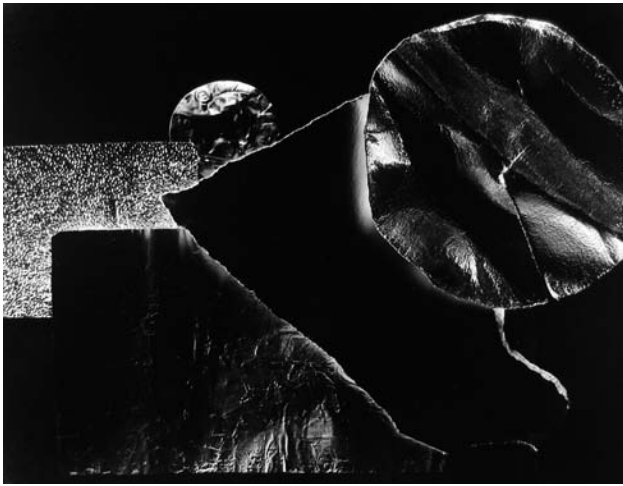
**RH:** What is your work's connection to the logic of perspective and the illusion of visible reality?

**CC:** My engagement with the landscape has led me to form an awareness about the effects of human incursion in our world, and I have no interest in recreating such scenes. My work has its own illusions, which occasionally do include a sense of visual reality. However, my goal is to draw viewers into a new experience; one of a non-physical reality, much as music does (one of my other passions). My photographs evoke rather than mirror a sense of place.

My working methodology of making and photographing my collages allows me to respond to imaginary places in a photographically expressive manner.

**RH:** Why do you work in black-and-white?

**CC:** In 1979 while working with the Polaroid 20 x 24-inch camera and color film, I discovered the only pictures I was satisfied with were monochromatic. This led me to realize the feelings and emotions I wanted to convey are best expressed in black and white.



*Untitled 253*, 1994. 36 x 48 inches. Gelatin silver print.

For me, color distracts from my objectives; it doesn't have that depth, that richness, that pulse, or as we would say in music, "that sound" I seek to convey.

**RH:** Why have you used Polaroid Type 55 Negative/Positive film?

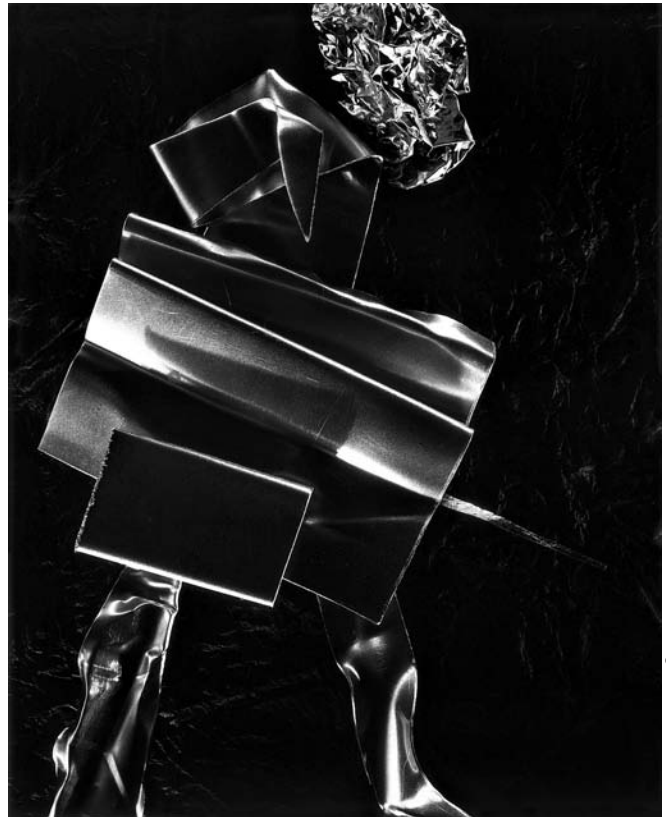
**CC:** By seeing the results I can immediately tell what I need to change in the collage or lighting or both. Without those instant prints I would have to develop film and then go back to remake the collage. The collages are not in themselves an end; rather they are a means to represent what I want to articulate. Once you touch them they are gone.

**RH:** What is your allure to photographic black?

**CC:** I start with black and something grows out of it that slows you down and encourages you to stop and stay in the picture. By reducing a subject to its essential qualities, black and white provides a direct connection to your thoughts and feelings. However it's not only the blacks, but also what happens with the light. It's really about light and the absence of light without the interference of those distracting colors. It's a riddle that simultaneously baffles and challenges one and reminds us that every photograph is an abstraction.

**RH:** How has a long life affected your picture making?

**CC:** As I have gotten older, I have the desire to simplify. My wife, Heidi Katz who is a landscape designer, has an excellent garden analogy. She says: "When one is younger one wants to grow everything. As one gets older, one accepts limitations and concentrates on specific plants."



*Peace Warrior (Don Quixote) 275*, 2003. 20 x 16 inches. Gelatin silver print.

All images © Carl Chiarenza

**RH:** What is a key factor in your picture making?

**CC:** I've been making pictures so long it's like eating. I go to work every day I can. I am interested in producing something, whether it's imagery, writing, or music, which gives back something of what I took in. Ultimately, the most important thing is just showing up.

#### Resources

*Transmutation: Photographic Works* by Carl Chiarenza A retrospective exhibition curated by Robert Hirsch at the University of Buffalo's Anderson Gallery, November 17, 2012–February 26, 2013, which will be accompanied by a catalog with text by Robert Hirsch. For more information visit: [ubartgalleries.org](http://ubartgalleries.org)

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*Editor's Note: More of Carl Chiarenza's work can be seen at:* [carlchiarenza.com](http://carlchiarenza.com)



Robert Hirsch's *The Sixties Cubed: Signs, Symbols, and Celebrities* photographic installation is on view at *The Weeks Gallery* at *Jamestown Community College*. See: [weeksgallery.sunyjc.edu](http://weeksgallery.sunyjc.edu). His *Manifest Destiny & The American West* photographic installation is in the *Everson Museum Biennial* *The Other New York: 2012* in Syracuse, NY and can be seen at the *Onondaga Historical Association Museum & Research Center*. See: [everson.org/curators](http://everson.org/curators).

For details about Hirsch's visual and written projects visit: [lightresearch.net](http://lightresearch.net). Article © Robert Hirsch 2012.