

BIFF HENRICH



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In Camera / Of Camera

1975–2024

May 10 – June 28, 2024



Biff Henrich told me a story from the 1970s about when he lived across from the Essex Street complex that housed the original Hallwalls and where co-founder Robert Longo maintained a studio. Visiting one day, Henrich found Longo sitting between two piles of drawings, one noticeably much larger than the other. Longo looked up and said, “I’m separating my bad ideas [gestures to large pile] from my good ideas [gestures to smaller pile].” Longo paused then added, “I don’t have very many good ideas.” It might sound somewhat apocryphal though I trust Henrich’s recollection. It’s an anecdote that speaks to the challenge of artmaking, of editing one’s work, discerning what is lasting, what works, what was worth making, and what is worth keeping.

Over 49 years of image making, Biff Henrich has applied an unerring consistency alongside an economy of production. As we surveyed his work across several decades, there was plenty to consider (and hardly everything is exhibited here), but not an onerous amount. There weren’t thousands of proofs and contact sheets. There was rarely a sense that Henrich ever shot endless rolls of film in the hopes of capturing something, as many photographers might have. As he told me, “I tend to throw out before prints. Almost editing as I shoot. Usually, I have a specific image I am striving for and keep adjusting as I shoot until I get what I want. Then make the final exposure. That still allows for happenstance to occur during the exposure”

As we began looking through his work, it became clear immediately that what Henrich had was what was worth keeping. Most works were assiduously stored in the original boxes from

which his most common size of 40 x 30-inch paper was derived. In the case of some larger vertical portraits, Henrich told me, “I sent these to San Francisco for a show in 1984. They sent them back in a crate. I never opened the crate until now.” That sounds vaguely hilarious but much less so if you’re confident in what you’ve made.

Henrich’s photographs straddle an interesting era in photography, when it emerged in the 1970s as a conceptual, artistic tool rather than a predominantly pictorial or documentary form. Henrich was still mostly making pictorial images, but they are always imbued with thematic depth. Some of his themes are specifically generational. As part of the substantial cohort called the Baby Boom Generation, Henrich was grappling with the delights and predicaments of a world awash in surplus, where suddenly a one-pound bag of cheese curls was just part of the available landscape of the world.



Henrich navigates his internal delight at these consumerist icons with an awareness that they exemplify a potentially problematic condition. In depicting someone aggressively pulling long strands of licorice between fist and mouth, there is a bacchanalian pleasure combined with an underlying awareness that perhaps consumer culture offers too much of a good thing. You can love the licorice while still maybe hating yourself for loving it.

Consumption itself is a pervasive theme in many works, particularly in the large photo murals of individuals at a county fair and a baseball game—everybody is eating. It is a series of ravenous encounters in the midst of community and commonality—perhaps we know all this is bad for our teeth and health, but we relish it at the same time. There is a copious proportion of delight in these depictions that evoke the spacious relish of old master paintings, rich in details and peculiar moments, marking the individuals, the crowd, and the occasion. These two murals are perhaps among Henrich's most *American* works, iconic images of postwar splendor in the most iconic of settings. Henrich is not specifically sentimental about these scenes—they may still be critiquing the richness of consumer gluttony—but they are depicted lovingly with great affection for his subjects and the scene they inhabit. They are stage-directed by Henrich with planted figures of friends and artists (having given them all cash to

buy their food of choice), but that staging occurs within a spontaneous and uncontrollable reality.

Consumption is not just a matter of devouring the world but, in some respect, devouring oneself. Henrich's beauty portraits, which single out specific gestures we apply for the betterment of our personal appearance, directly address the consuming of the self. Applying eyelashes or fake nails consume the self by veiling or disguising its original demeanor, while a skin peel—as refreshing as that may be—literally consumes the self and its dead skin in the hopes of locating some kind of better version of ourselves. Our vanity razes the self in the hope of resurrecting the self we imagine in our mind's eye.

Alongside consumer culture and consumption in Henrich's works is the profound scent of mortality. Which is not to say the photographs are about death but Henrich's Baby Boom generation was as aware of imminent nuclear annihilation as it was of a hundred varieties of cereal or candy. There is a codependent paradox in understanding how civilization was coasting along a razor's edge while simultaneously being able to purchase junk food at any time anywhere in any quantity. It's not quite schizophrenic but they are disjunctive forms of awareness and Henrich uses these themes in subtle ways to remark upon each other.



Consider how the large vertical portraits of gluttonous consumers are isolated in a black environment. Or how that same field of black is so complete it almost submerges tiny iconographic objects—a PEZ dispenser, a Kool Aid pencil sharpener, a miniature coffin spilling candy, or the popsicle pencil sharpener whose single hole suggests a dark interior space. These objects, many of them quite colorful, are almost entirely overwhelmed by darkness. It's not a morbid presentation but it is such that we intuitively understand that "the darkness" is everywhere. The presence of mortality is an ongoing condition—it's not bad or worrisome or fearful, it just is. Henrich's images suggest an acceptance of that unknowable realm.

Mortality presents even more directly in Henrich's taxidermy portraits, which are strikingly expressive and, again, bathed in fields of black. They are not strictly documentary in nature but they do accomplish what refined taxidermy does in articulating a subject whose body has been preserved and presented. There is a blunt, clarifying demeanor to these portraits. There is such a sense of internal composure to the subjects, they begin to look like official, royal portraiture. And maybe they are.

These themes of consumption and mortality express themselves in other series as well. Sometimes a paper bag is just a bag, sometimes it is

an icon for consumerism, and sometimes we perceive it to look empty and then it remarks upon our own internal emptiness and the void beyond. Hardware tools cutting into fruits and vegetables are darkly humorous but also aggressively and violently highlight these themes. Vegetation set against camouflage backdrops read as strangely mournful. And tools floating against shimmering grounds appear both celebratory and awkwardly out of place. Henrich's affection for visually isolating people, object, and animals—apart from the murals, he never crowds the picture plane—lends a gentle existential demeanor to everything. There is a bit of edge to that isolation, an acute consideration that lends itself to much wider implications.

Are Henrich's photographs about consumption? Yes. Are they about mortality? Also, yes. But they are also about pictorial space, what the camera sees, what we think we see, and how these depictions are realized. In some of his earliest works—you could say his most *labored* photographs—Henrich would either manipulate the negative while printing or augment his incidental photography with hand-drawn lines scratched directly onto 5 x 7 negatives, then printing from there. These works intrigue because they are the young artist exploring his form: *Maybe if I scratch/draw on the negatives....* and yet they become almost more interesting in hindsight when we see how quickly in his career he abandoned these



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gestures, opting instead to trust to the camera's image without augmentation or intervention.

From this, we get some impactful in-camera works. His series of portraits of individuals with bodily scars result from long exposures in which the scanner sensor of the digital camera is moving across the picture plane over several minutes, during which Henrich would indicate the subject turn their head or readjust their body, culminating in the erratic depiction presented. A simple trick, but you need great, accumulated skill to recognize the simple tricks and accomplish them well. The erratic disruption of a portrait in this manner connects to the scratched/drawn elements of earlier works but eschews the hand of the artist in favor of the hand of the camera. Or the sensor of the scanner. The hand of the artist remains, to be sure, but is less overt and acquiesces to the range and functionality of the artist's tool.

Even more interestingly, in this respect, are the abstracted images which derive from photographs of architectural spaces but are concocted by unexpected glitches produced in using digital photography. How the image scans or stutters and how this disrupts form. Where the scar portraits result from an applied intention of the artist, these abstractions frequently emerge from unexpected and unintentional technical anomalies. These photographs approach a painterly realm while still

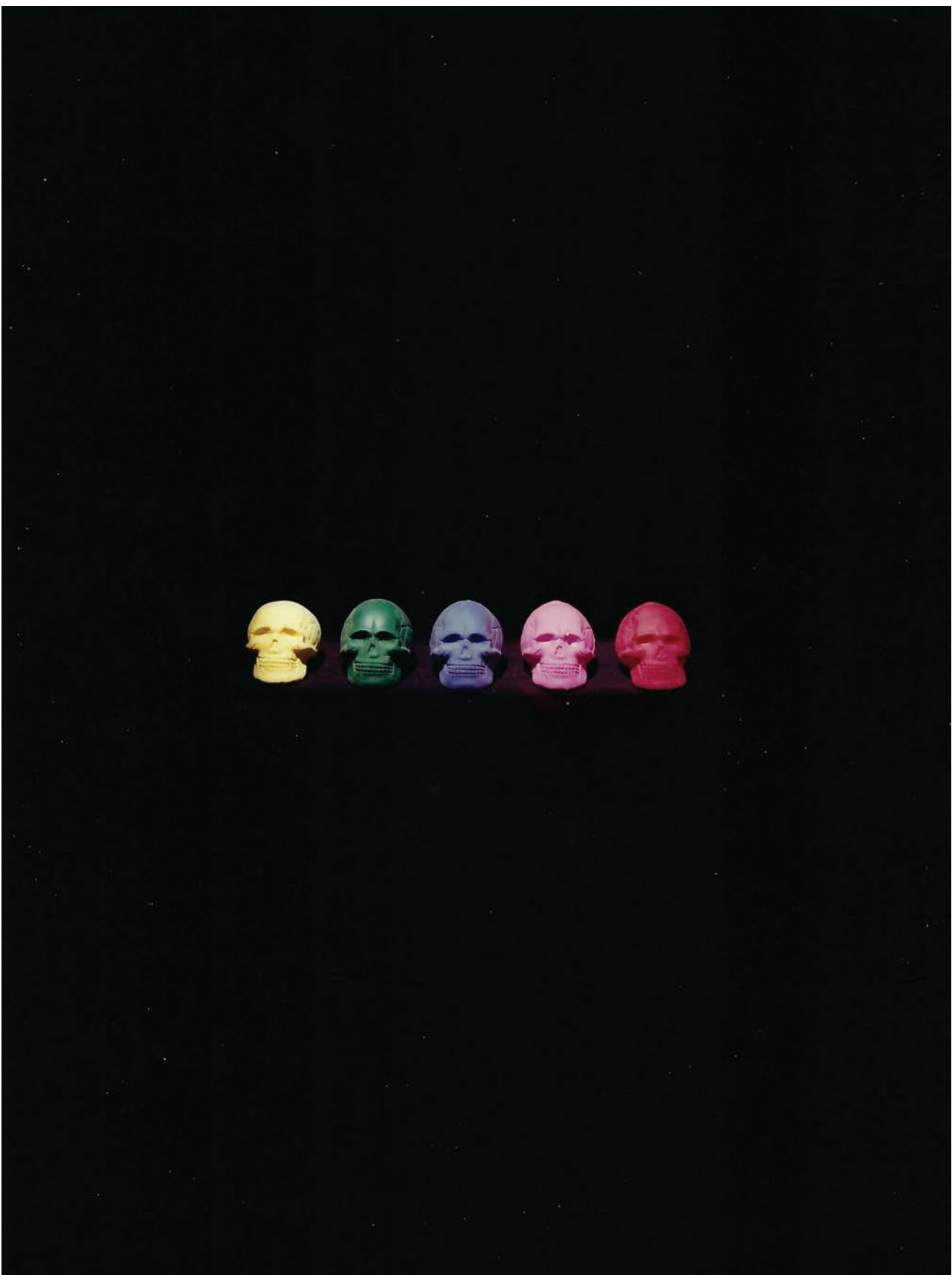
evoking the sense of physical space from which they are originally derived. Even more painterly are Henrich's large-scale long exposure night photographs. These are unabashedly romantic, even if the romantic object is a mechanical digger or the wing of an airplane. While they are digitally captured, it's relevant to mention that Henrich does not apply effects after the fact. He is making use of the camera—analog or digital—in the moment.

Henrich's five-decade body of work reverberates within itself over time, reinforcing themes and ideas that have fascinated the artist. Modes of expression incline toward concision and clarity. Even when the clarity is purposefully ambiguous because the themes are ambiguous. Consumption is about consumerism but also about desire. Mortality is about fear but it too is also about desire. There is the lush visual acumen of an image and its more abrupt and dramatic iterations. There are intentional manipulations of image and there are images that resolve themselves into an expression.

There is no bad pile here.

John Massier

Visual Arts Curator





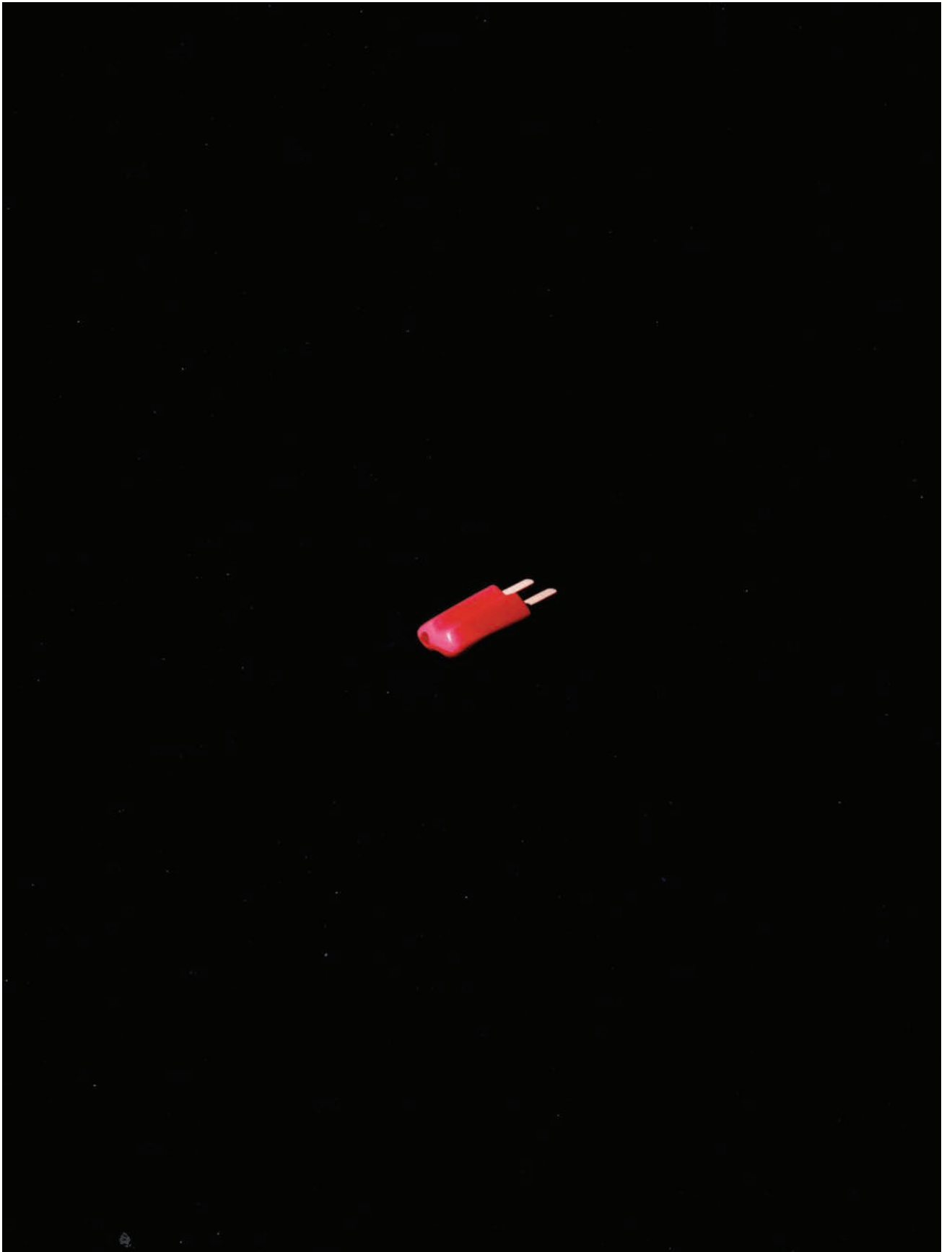














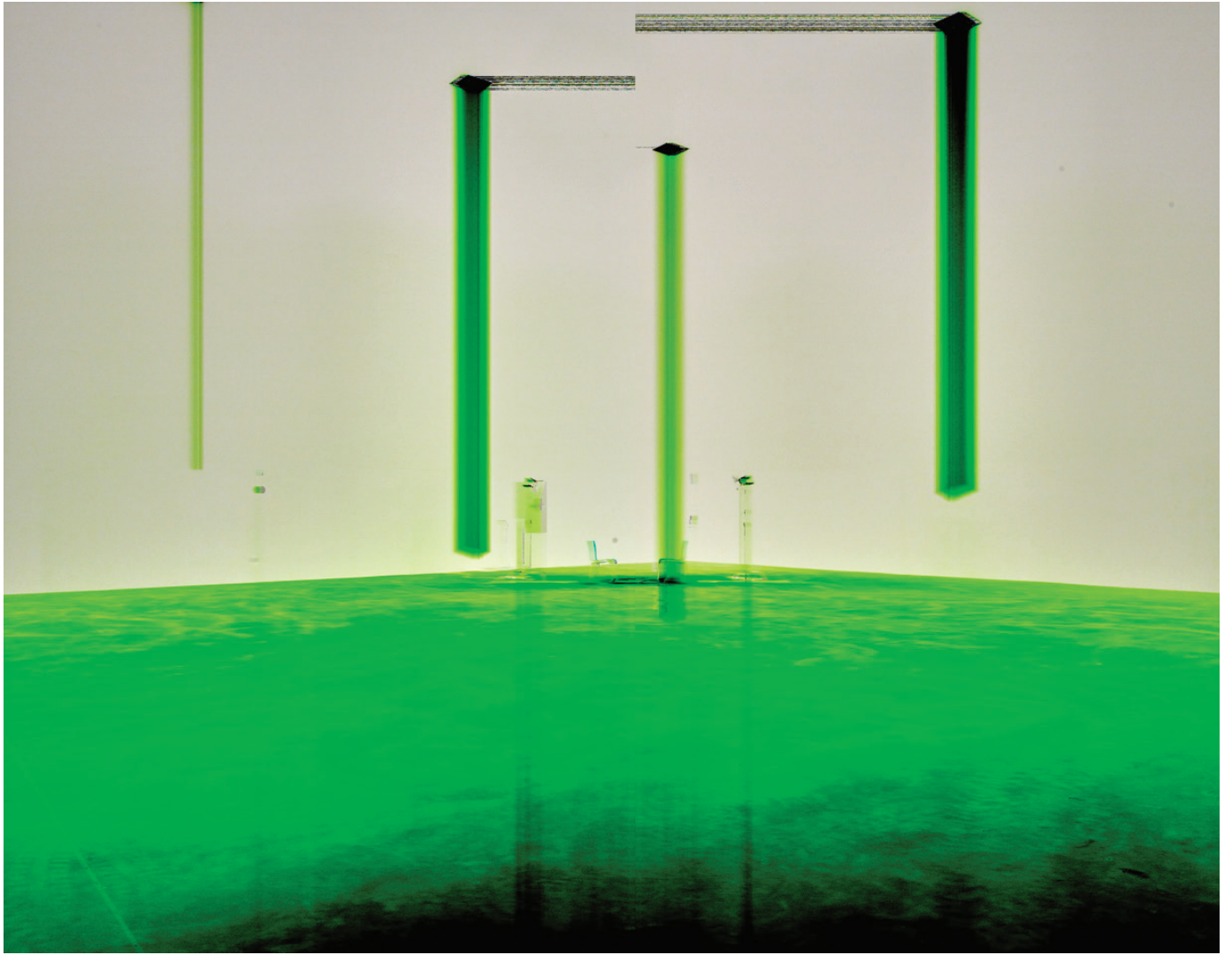
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Biff Henrich is a photographer.

He was born in Erie, PA. It was 1971 before he got his first camera while attending Hamlin University in St. Paul, MN. He received his Master of Fine Arts at University at Buffalo and his Bachelor of Arts at Hiram College in Ohio. Henrich has exhibited nationally at places including the Pyramid Gallery in Rochester, Artists Space in New York, the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, the California Museum of Photography, PS1, and the Contemporary Arts Museum of Houston. He teaches at University at Buffalo in the Visual Arts Department. His work is in numerous private and public collections including the Buffalo AKG Art Museum, Burchfield Penney Art Center, and the Castellani Art Museum. Henrich lives and works in Buffalo, NY.





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