

LYNN STERN

Photographs from Ten Series



November 8 - December 15, 2001

UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY
STALLER CENTER FOR THE ARTS
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT STONY BROOK

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Most of all I wish to thank Lynn Stern for sharing her work with the Stony Brook community.

Rhonda Cooper
Gallery Director

I would like to express my gratitude to Rhonda Cooper, Marge Debowy, and Donald Kuspit for all their work on the exhibition as well as the catalogue.

Lynn Stern

Cover: Dispossession #2, 1990-1992

Photographs: Gelatin Silver Prints, 47" x 38"

LYNN STERN: SELF-POSSESSED AND DEATH-OBSSESSED

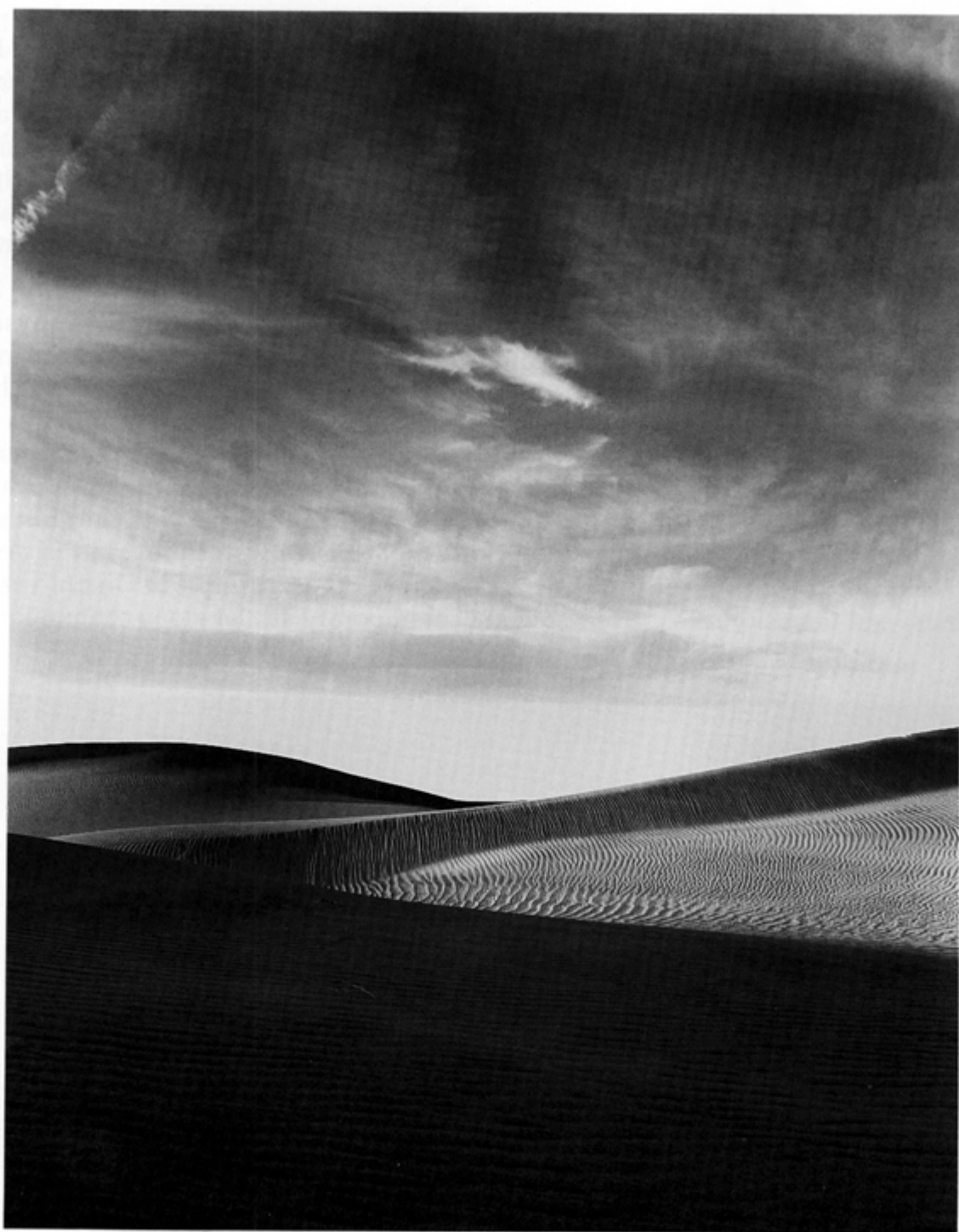
by Donald Kuspit

The *Unveilings*, the *Extended Landscapes*, the *Forebodings*, the *Whiteness* works — all these photographs, with their subtle luminosity, tainted by darkness, are but prelude to Lynn Stern's preoccupation with death, evident in the *Skulls*, *Dispossessions*, and *Animus* series. In death, we not only lose life, but the light that nourishes and sustains it, and by which we see. Stern's photographs raise a question: Is it possible to "see" death, that is, to see the absence of light — that special absence of light which is not simply darkness, however much darkness may embody it, but that is blankness, non-being? Can one give the absence and loss signified by death presence?

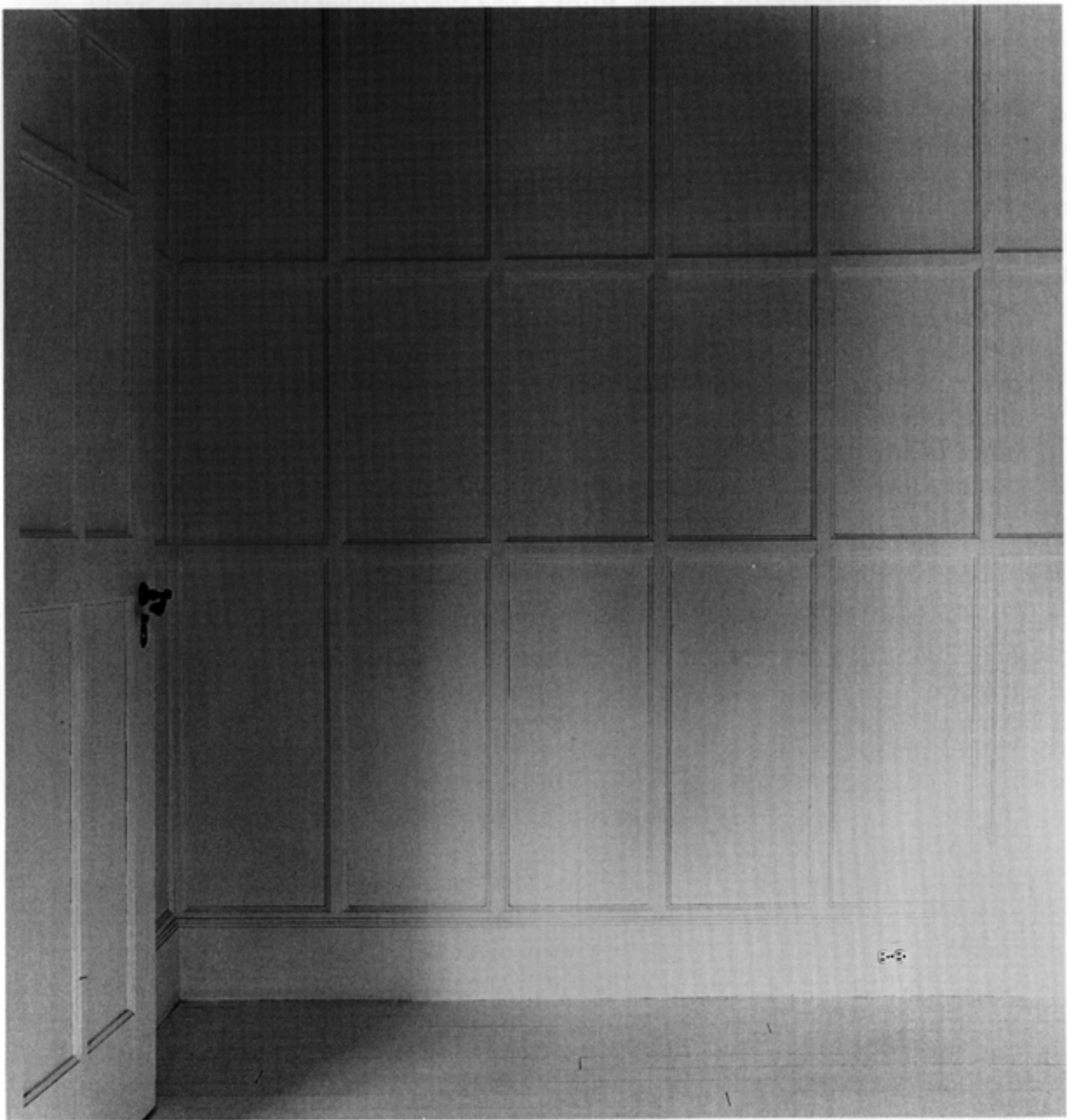
The white skull is a material artifact of death, epitomizing its inevitability, but Stern's skulls are dark, that is, they lack light — a paradoxical reversal of physical reality that makes death visible. Whiteness is displaced into the surroundings, becoming an auratic sea on which the skull floats, a seemingly weightless shell nonetheless made heavy by its opacity. Enthroned on a pedestal, it dominates the luminous void, even as it represents the ultimate void. A ruthless presence, uncannily self-evident, death rules the picture, the power at its center: Our attention cannot escape it, for it seems to focus its attention upon us. It has been said that nothing concentrates the mind so wonderfully as death; Stern shows us the mind of death itself, concentrated in a skull. Thus Stern pictures the Triumph of Death, with a boldness and intensity rarely attempted in contemporary art, let alone contemporary



Forebodings #52a, 1987
(Central Park, NYC, 1987)
Photograph: Gelatin Silver Print



Extended Landscape #82:03c
(Dunes, Death Valley, CA, 1982)
Photograph: Gelatin Silver Print



Interior Light #4
(East Hampton, NY, 1979)
Photograph: Gelatin Silver Print

photography. Journalistic photography records the numerous dead as mute matters of fact — the unending supply of prematurely dead bodies our society produces (the narrator of T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* states that he had not realized how many had died; he should have added: and died before their time) — but Stern, "metaphysically," has articulated death itself, in all its sublime somberness. Some of Stern's skulls seem informed with all too human feelings — the anger and agony evoked by death, complementing its gruesomeness, for emotional resistance to it is futile. But this expressiveness is an illusion created by Stern's placement of the skull and the angle from which she photographs it — *Skull No. 28*, 1991 makes this clear — rather than inherent. The skull is blank: One reads oneself into it at one's own peril.

Stern, in fact, does read herself into it, as the *Dispossessions* make clear. In a daring juxtaposition, Stern pits her face, eyes closed, against the skull of death, with its eyes — black crevices — permanently open. Two heads, one alive, one dead; one luminous, the other shadowy; one turned inward, the other facing outward; one seemingly meek and passive, the other waiting to pounce like a predator; one barely expressive, the other all too expressive,



Skull #28, 1991
Photograph: Gelatin Silver Print

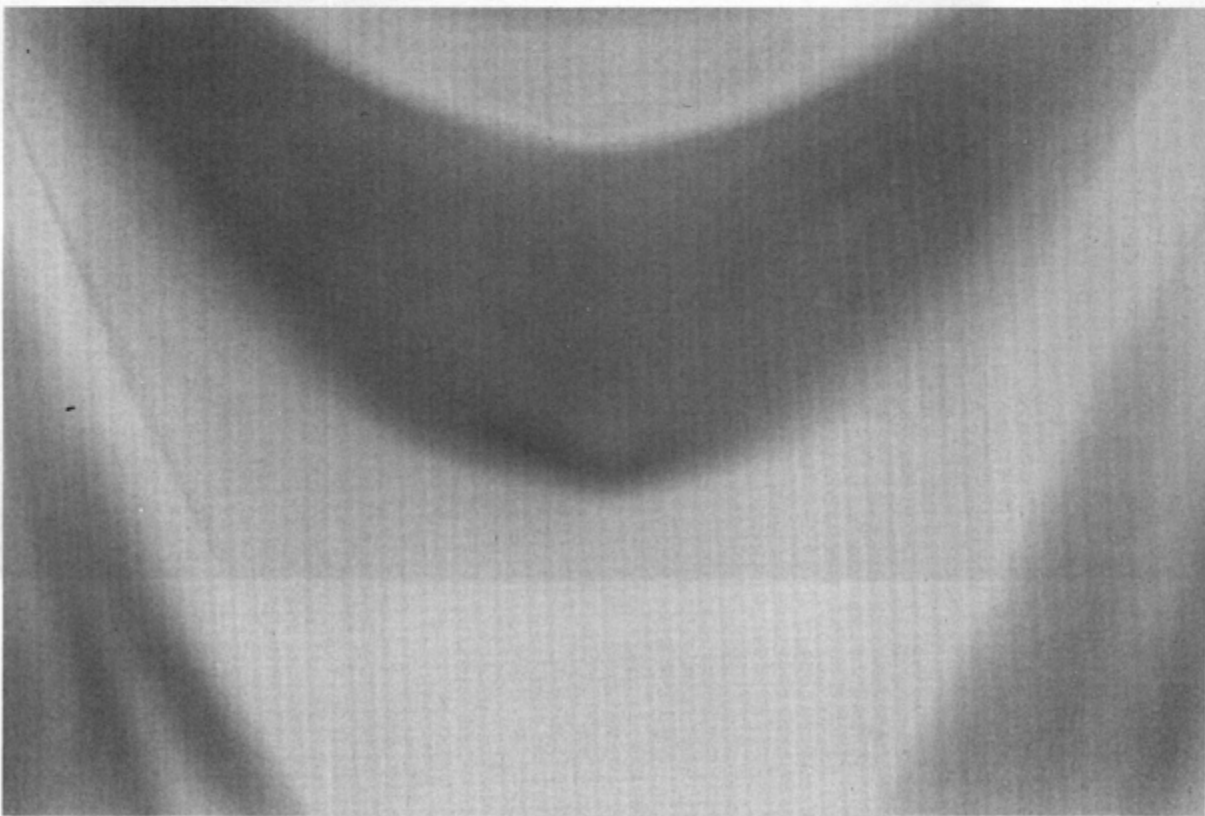
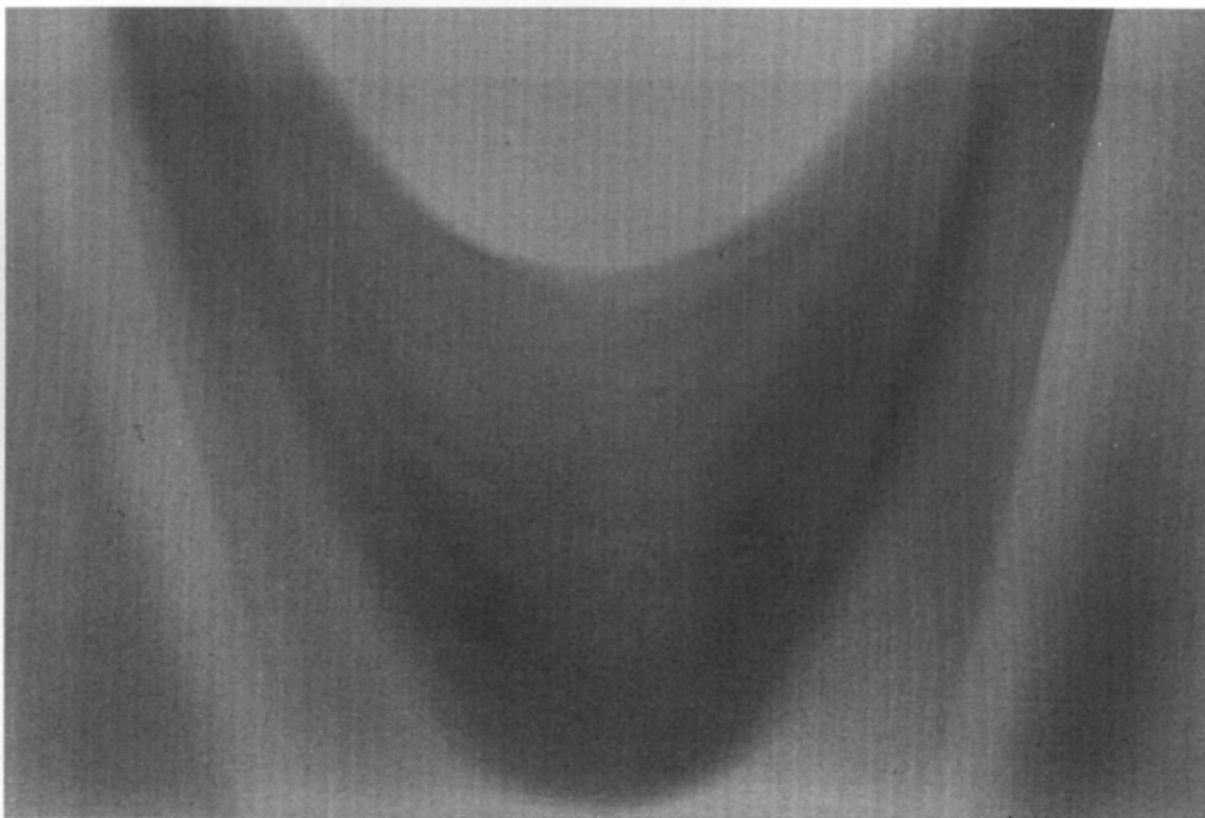
however much its expressiveness is a fantasy. It is a fantastic, dangerous encounter of opposites, yet behind every face there is a skull, patiently waiting to emerge. The face is no more than a mask on the skull, which has the last ironical word. Stern's oval head, contained in a black square — an ironical Suprematist reference? — sits below the skull, which is also geometrically framed. It is as though she is showing us a picture of what is in her mind — her fantasy of her own skull, that is, her own death. Stern's head and skull are on the same central vertical axis, suggesting their "correspondence." Our eye moves back and forth along the axis, doubly fixated, uneasy with both face and skull, unhappy with the choice between death and life, which both appear to be hallucinations — dubious mirages suspended in a black void, emblematic of the nothingness of it all. Every act of introspection ends in the contemplation of death, Stern suggests. It is the mystic's insight. But the self seems unreal to itself just at the moment of its greatest self-realization, for that involves its realization of its own death — which itself comes to seem unreal at the moment the self acknowledges its inevitability. Both self and death become ironically abstract the moment they realize they are meant for each other.



Unveilings #39b, 1985
Photograph: Gelatin Silver Print

The point is that Stern is holding her own against the thought of her own death — against fate. Freud said that we cannot imagine our own death. It is always as though we're watching someone else die, at someone else's funeral. We see ourselves among the mourners, not as the corpse, about to decay — to become a pile of bones. But Stern sees herself as already dead. That doesn't quite work — she's anonymously dead, that is, a nameless skull. Recognition of the anonymity one acquires at one's death may be the ultimate — and best — defense against it, that is, against the terror it inspires. Nonetheless, for all her sense of dispossession by death, Stern's photographs show her to be remarkably self-possessed. The photographs are coolly and calmly composed. A balance is struck between death and self, without denying the tension — bizarre dialectic — between them. The small head supports the big thought — of death — without collapsing. The head does not need the support of a pedestal, as the skull does. Stern survives the blackness, enduring death with no fear and trembling, and even animates it with her own aliveness, not to deny death, but to remind us that, after all, it may not have the last word. Where the sides of certain ancient sarcophagi show bacchanalian scenes, to counterbalance inert death with instinctive life, Stern's *Animus* images imbue death with instinct, ironically vitalizing death. Brought to life, its triumph over life is compromised, even as its power over life is confirmed. Death and life are inseparable in Stern's images, each the indwelling core and ironical mirror of the other. They are like a devoted couple who have lived together forever and have come to resemble each other.

Writing about her *Unveilings* Stern declared: "What began as dialogues in light had become metaphors for vulnerability." In fact, the steadiness of her gaze at death suggests a certain invulnerability to it — a certain ego strength and detachment in the face of it — an unflinching awareness of it. There is no self-pity in her gaze — no facile poignancy. Her photographs have an air of calm purposiveness and minimalist candor. Without these qualities there can be no disclosure of the emotional truth within the material facts, no revelation of what we already unconsciously know but do not want to become conscious of. Stern's early dialogues in light — I am thinking of the laconic *Interior Light, No. 4, 1979* and *Air Shaft, New York City, 1984*, both remarkable minimalist studies of minimalist spaces and shapes — are already haunted by an unconscious perception of death, as their barrenness suggests. Minimalist barrenness recurs in Stern's photographs, but it eventually discloses itself as muted fullness. The void in the skull photographs is, after all, filled with luminosity, which spreads far beyond the dark skull, isolating it in the act of transcending it. Clearly, Stern's luminous face suggests that she can never be dispossessed by the darkness. Her struggle with it — her refusal to accept its completeness while acknowledging its inevitable presence — is, after all, what photography is about.



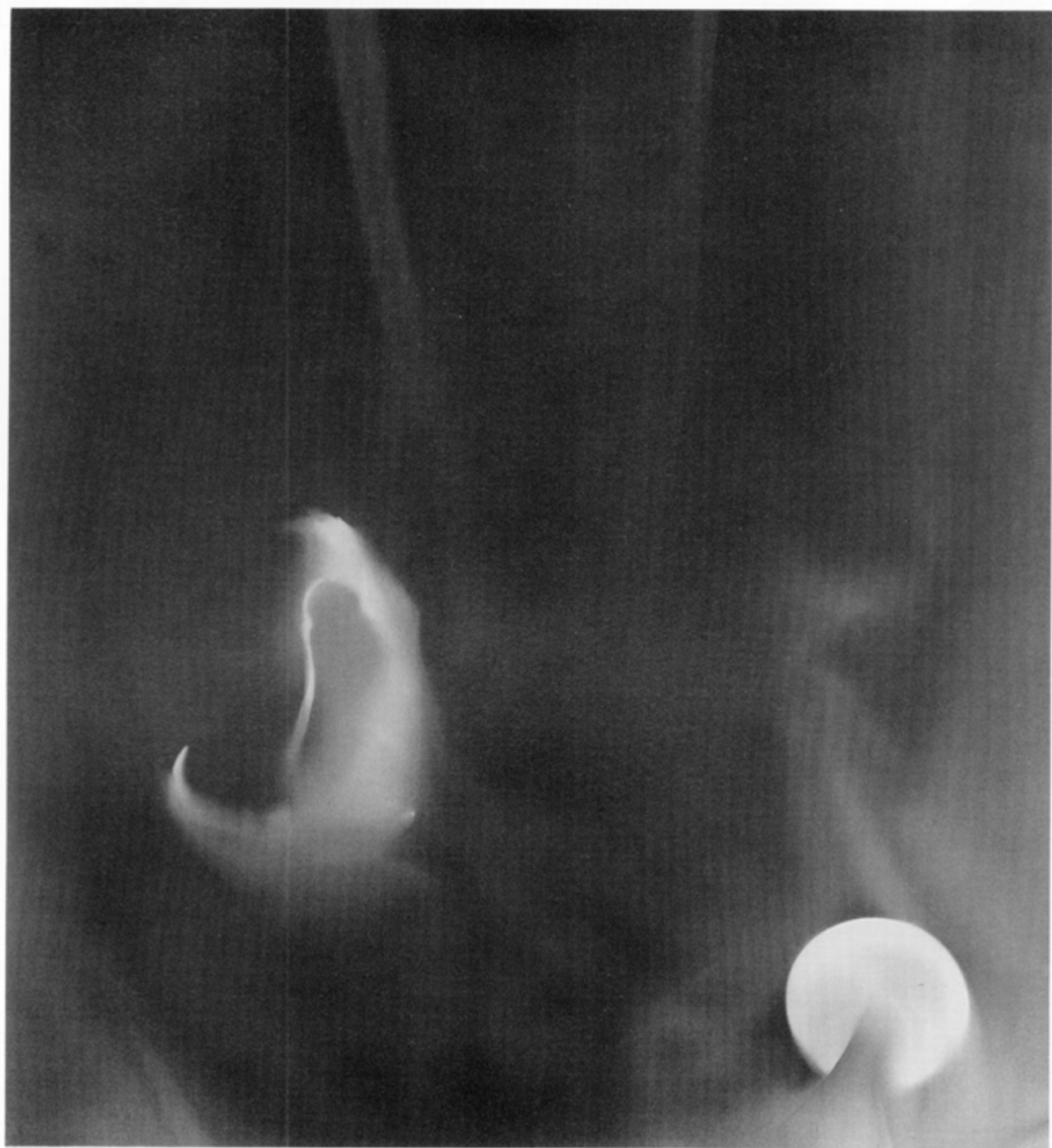
Whiteness #25a, 1987

Whiteness #36, 1987

Photographs: Gelatin Silver Prints



Animus #5a, 1995
Photograph: Multiply (Split) Toned
Gelatin Silver Negative Print



Animus #41, 1996
Photograph: Multiply (Split) Toned
Gelatin Silver Negative Print