

Test Strips

Test Strips continues what has become an ongoing exploration of the materiality of paper. Past projects have transformed various kinds of commercially manufactured, mass-produced paper products—pages from the Bible, entire art magazines as well as the front and back covers, and blank sheets of white, letter-size paper. To create the images in *Test Strips*, my focus turned to standard sheets of 8 x 10 inch silver gelatin photographic paper. This shift back to conventional photographic materials after a decade of editing images on computer screens enabled me to more directly reference the medium that most fully defines my practice as an artist—photography. Working exclusively with light, light-sensitized paper, and photochemical processes to create *Test Strips* has renewed my excitement about the essential characteristics, inherent materiality, and ephemeral nature of photography. The magical and miraculous qualities of chemical photography remain a compelling force, the very things that attracted me to this medium in the first place.

In black and white darkrooms, test strips are used to determine proper density and contrast when making prints from negatives, and then generally discarded. However, my goal to experiment with test strips as aesthetic objects in and of themselves and to reflect upon the nature of photography. To produce these prints, I played with light and shadow on the surface of seemingly blank sheets of paper, which were then chemically transformed into bands of silver. Each unique photogram has eleven bands of tones ranging from pure white to pure black. The tones are the same from print to print; however, the widths vary from one to the next. The final group of modular prints may start out as either paper-base white or maximum-density black by simply turning them upside-down. Starting at one end of the spectrum the tones incrementally go to the opposite extreme, and then back again in endless variation. In a fundamental way, this work reflects upon the positive and negative relationships inherent in the medium of photography. Yet, the clearly defined steps between the tones resist the analogue nature of continuous tone silver gelatin paper; oddly enough, the gradients are reduced to a more stair-stepped, digital form of representation.

My recent interest in blank sheets of paper has evolved over many years, and in hindsight, is the logical result of my early training as a traditional photographer. During this formative time I spent countless hours staring at white sheets of photographic paper submerged in trays of developer until images slowly appeared upon them. Other times I would wait in anticipation while the paper remained a stark, blank white or nearly instantly turned into an inky-black void at the bottom of the tray. As an artist who appreciates the importance of all aspects of the creative process, I have come to welcome these kinds of mistakes and recognize their importance to future work. The final prints in *Test Strips* are darkest in those areas that received the greatest amount of light, and the lightest where no light hit the surface prior to being processed. The darkest parts are heavy with silver, while the silver has been washed away in the lightest areas. In this world everything is reversed, opposites prevail, and positive and negative have many associations and multiple meanings.

Test Strips expands upon my earlier projects to create a new iteration that fuses the lessons learned with happenstance that is part and parcel of the creative process. If one looks closely at the subtle twists and turns that have led me from one project to the next, it should be apparent that my meandering is with purpose. The intuitive impulse in my practice is always balanced with a more critical and reasoned approach. As straightforward as this newest work may seem, it has taken me decades to arrive at this point, and equally as long to have the maturity to recognize that it was worth pursuing in the first place. The prints in this series, individually and collectively, function as records of actions performed with the absence and abundance of light, as well as testaments to the passage of time. *Test Strips* has turned a new page in my practice, so to speak; it is utterly unlike my past work, yet unequivocally, one and the same.

Dean Kessmann