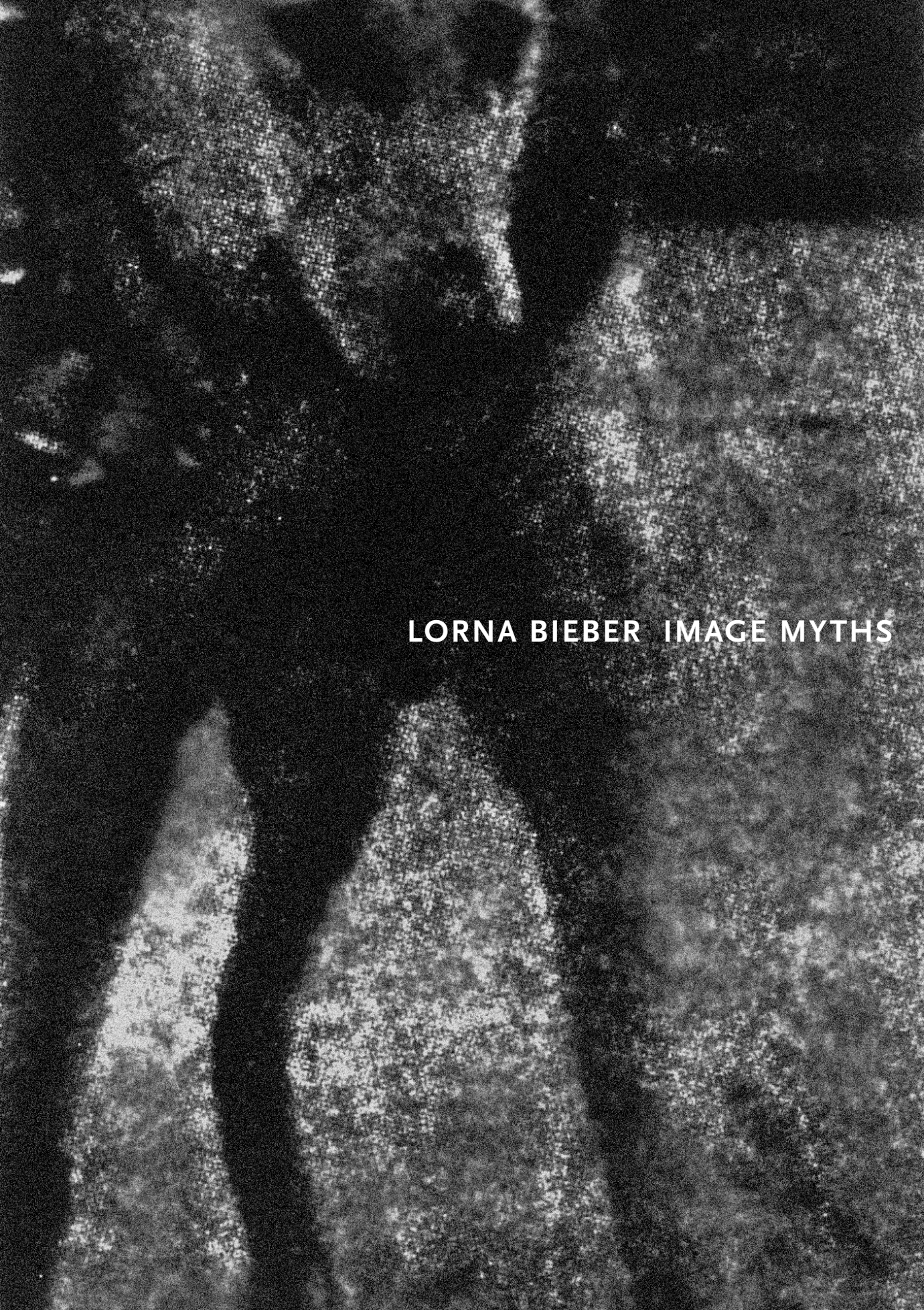


A high-contrast, grainy black and white photograph of a person's face, heavily shadowed and textured. The image is dominated by deep blacks and bright whites, with very little mid-tone detail, giving it a stark, almost abstract quality. The person's features are barely discernible through the noise and shadows.

LORNA BIEBER IMAGE MYTHS







cover image:

Dog, 1999

Gelatin silver print

72 x 49 in.

overleaf:

Branches, 2007

Gelatin silver prints

104 x 207 in.

above:

Bush, 1999

Gelatin silver print

72 x 49 in.

right:

Tree / Tree Trunks, 2005-06

Gelatin silver print

68 x 42 in.

The Indeterminate Moment

But wherever I step I am stepping into a place that was just finished at the moment I arrived. If I freeze here, one foot poised to go forward, to land on the path, I will at least be living in the present and the past will know it.

—Fanny Howe, *The Winter Sun*

One of the most beautiful and haunting things about Lorna Bieber's photographs is the pull of time that they embody, the way that one is drawn into and through them, as on a journey. The journey unfolds before the viewer in a lattice of paths across a mountainside, or in the eyes of a dog – paused for a moment on the way to someplace we do not know – but can imagine. The photographs begin with found images; they originate in an unknown place, at an indeterminate moment, and through someone else's eyes, and are then embraced by the psyche of the artist through intense looking, physical re-working, and careful arranging. Areas of each image are singled out and altered in relationship to the whole, and this creates a vision of place that feels strangely composited like the landscape of a dream. Surely part of the reason that we *know* we have seen or visited these places before, is because the hand of the artist summons us into the work. Roland Barthes referred to this as the *punctum* of the image – the mysteriously charged space of affinity. Like myths, Bieber's photographs engender shared memories, both real and fantastical.

Lorna Bieber, Image Myths slowly grew through conversations and studio visits over the course of seven years. I am deeply grateful to Lorna Bieber for the time and attention that she has given this project. A related exhibition, *Lorna Bieber: Fractured Narratives*, opened at the Addison Gallery of American Art in October 2011, curated by Allison Kemmerer, Curator of Art after 1950 and of Photography. Many thanks to the Addison for supporting *Image Myths*, and to art historian Doris Chon for authoring an exquisite essay on Bieber's work. The title, *Image Myths*, is drawn from an essay by curator Lisa Hostetler, Curator of Photographs, Milwaukee Art Museum. For one week during the exhibition, Lorna Bieber will be in residence at Reed College, working with students and faculty, and with Portland Public School students through the Open Gallery Program, the Cooley's no-cost educational outreach initiative.

Stephanie Snyder

John and Anne Hauberg Curator and Director
Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery



Elusive Recognition: The Photographic Work of Lorna Bieber

Doris Chon

Standing before one of Lorna Bieber's environmentally-scaled montages, one experiences a subtle yet remarkable sense of displacement. Free to move in any direction – left to right, top to bottom, from one panel across and down or up to another – and to take in the images at any pace, the eye lingers over and between the dozens of photographs that make up a single montage, while trying to maintain a purview of the entirety. Whether tracing a curious detail across several pictures, or navigating the panels at random, the fractured composition invites the viewer to wander uninhibited through a multitude of vaguely familiar scenes that have been juxtaposed for our perusal. Without a clear trajectory, we move in search of a logic or narrative that might anchor our fleeting impressions and lend coherence to the whole.

The individual photographs vary widely in their appearance, bearing diverse degrees of sharpness in their contours, the slightest gradations between black and white, and an atmospheric haze that seems at turns palpable and at other instants so sheer as to elude our notice. And yet we suspect a set of common pictorial terms that recur throughout the work in slightly modified forms – a mountainside, a group of rams, a cluster of trees on a snowy hillside, hanging branches. These variations have the effect of both soliciting and resisting the viewer's passing or penetrating gaze. Noticing slight differences between two coterminous panels that might be mistaken for duplicates, we peer closer to discern what sets them apart. Is it simply an adjustment to the cropping, or a discrepancy in the tonality of the images? Does a feeding deer or single bough seem more pronounced in one image than the next? The viewer is inclined to search for clues, seeking to reconstruct an "original" source image in our mind's eye, even one given to perpetual transformation.

This oscillation between recognition and indeterminacy has its basis in the artist's working process, which confronts its viewers at every stage with the paradoxical condition of the photograph as an indexically produced and reproducible image that circulates within an economy of iconic resemblance. Bieber's works originate as photographs recovered from the pages of guidebooks, training manuals, newspapers, art history textbooks, and brochures, among other sources. She starts by making a black-and-white photocopy of these appropriated images, the originals of which are often in color. Bieber then proceeds to reinterpret these achromatic

copies, subjecting them to continued transformation. With the help of the photocopier, she enlarges, reduces, crops, darkens, or lightens the image, sometimes reversing its tonality to produce a negative out of what was once a positive image. The ubiquitous halftone screens that appear across Bieber's pictures betray her reliance upon this dated technology of mechanical reproduction. From here she often further alters her photocopied "originals" by hand, making use of a grease pencil or gouache paint to embellish a detail, or scissors and glue to collage and import elements from elsewhere. Once the desired picture has been achieved through these recombinatory redactions and embellishments, and a final photocopy of the resulting picture is made, the artist works with Master Printer Chuck Kelton to reproduce the image yet again in its final form as a gelatin silver print. While remaining haunted by their sources, the silver-gelatin prints draw the viewer's attention to a severely reduced set of pictorial terms that frequently verge on abstraction.

Trained as a painter, Bieber's engagement with photographic images and processes began when she relocated to New York, where she worked for more than two decades as a photo editor at major news publications. The artist recalls the thrill of working with stock photographs that she could transform, rendering them at once more specific and more undefined. In addition to manual interventions upon these preexisting images, Bieber began experimenting with the photocopier to produce collages. In this way the artist established a repertoire of photographic and painterly processes that she would continue to refine in the production of her mature work. Her reliance on the photocopier as an alternative photographic process brings to mind earlier artistic precedents from the late 1960s and 70s. These include the collage experiments of artists like Ellen Brooks, who used the technology to fuse contact sheets onto wax paper or Wallace Berman, who employed a Verifax machine – a predecessor to the more familiar Xerox photocopier. In a similar vein, the latter's Los Angeles-based colleague Robert Heinecken adapted printmaking techniques to camera-less photography and voiced reluctance at being identified as a "photographer," instead calling himself a "paraphotographer" or "photographist." Bieber shares his wariness at the title, referring to herself more simply as an artist who works with photographic processes.

Looking closely at the development of the artist's most recent bodies of work – from mural-size single prints like *Bush* (1999) to expansive montages such as *Winter Trees* (2007) into which her work has evolved in more recent years – lends further insight into Bieber's artistic practice and its relationship to broader currents in contemporary

art. The single prints range in size from fifty by fifty-four inches to seventy-two by forty-nine inches – scale ratios familiar to the field of contemporary photography. While the large format of these photographs invites the eye to meander over a wealth of visual information, the distortions resulting from the artist's manual and mechanical transformations ultimately impede the secure identification of what has been pictured. The nondescript and unattributed source photographs the artist has appropriated (from sled dog training manuals and forest guidebooks, in the case of the mural prints featured in this exhibition) merely constitute points of departure; the pictures in their final exhibited form remain far afield from these starting points, in some cases only barely resembling them. This is a crucial dimension of approaching and understanding Bieber's singular compositional strategy and the place of appropriation within it. Through her practice, a racing sled dog is reduced to a shadowy contour, a reedy bush in the snow takes on the appearance of thickly rendered charcoal strokes, and the trunk of a tree becomes a study in texture and coloration. To what degree can the commonplace representation of a sled dog, a forest path, or a tree trunk be transformed before it eludes recognition? The artist distills them, transforming them into archetypes verging on abstraction, a strategy reflected in turn in the generic simplicity of titles like *Dog* (1999), *Path* (2004-05), and *Large Tree Trunk* (2004-05).

The work of artists most readily associated with strategies of appropriation and pastiche, who rose to prominence in the 1980s and 90s, functions according to a logic of reception that is distinct from Bieber's. The photographs of Sherrie Levine or Richard Prince, photographers belonging to the Pictures Generation, offer up appropriated images of loaded cultural signifiers. The iconic source images of works like Levine's *Untitled (After Walker Evans)* (1981) or Prince's *Untitled (Cowboy)* (1987) need not be identified for their audiences as belonging to a famous Farm Security Administration photographer working in the 1930s and a ubiquitous advertising campaign for Marlboro cigarettes, though Levine nonetheless provides this information in her title. These works, and the artists who appropriate them, can and do rely upon the viewer's imminent recognition of their sources as culturally significant; this is a requisite condition of the critiques of authorship and commercial advertising that Levine and Prince's works perform. Bieber's visual references, on the other hand, are at once less specific and broadly universal, even while their visual intricacies and shadowy depths demand extended effort from the viewer to become recognizable. Her work is less a critique of what the concepts "dog" or "trees" stand

for, and more a meditation on the multiple ways in which the visual representations of these categories can be diluted, fragmented, and condensed before they become unrecognizable. Despite this key distinction, what Bieber's work shares with that of other artists engaged with the reframing of appropriated pictures, is an underlying desire to look repeatedly at the images that captivate us.

The environmentally-scaled montages that comprise the artist's most recent body of work facilitate this inclination to look and look again, and invite the viewer to do so comparatively. Consisting of anywhere from ninety-six to one hundred and twenty individual silver-gelatin prints, these expansive installations organize dozens of unique eleven-by-seventeen-inch pictures derived from a selected set of source images into a grid. While the work's serial format hints at the stop-motion photography of innovators like Muybridge and Marey that preceded cinema, Bieber's montages stop short of implying continuous motion or a sequential narrative. Nor do they embody the same type of preservationist impulse driving contemporaneous artistic practices that utilize the typological grid, such as Bernd and Hilla Becher's photographs of obsolete industrial structures (1959-2007), Gerhard Richter's ongoing *Atlas* of personal and professional documents (begun in 1962), or even Sol LeWitt's *Autobiography* (1980), a photographic inventory of every object in his apartment. Bieber's artistic practice is concerned less with rescuing stock imagery in order to preserve it intact, and rather, with facilitating its dispersion and evolution into new pictorial forms. In a work like *Branches* (2007), the artist presents us with several variations upon a set of iconographic terms that include chiseled mountain peaks, grazing animals, a footbridge, swaying tree branches, and a man crossing water by row-boat. These individual vistas recur in slightly modified form throughout the montage; gazing closely, we realize that no two prints are absolutely identical. The longer we look at Bieber's pictures, the more we wonder at their resemblance to others we have seen elsewhere.

DORIS CHON is a writer and art historian currently based in Portland, Oregon. She is a Visiting Scholar in the Department of Art at Reed College, where she has taught the history of contemporary art and photography since fall 2010. Her current research project explores the intersection of photography, historical narrative, and the ethics of representation in contemporary art. She has recently authored essays on the work of Rheim Alkadhi, Gabriel Orozco, Walid Raad, and W.G. Sebald.

LORNA BIEBER IMAGE MYTHS

April 10 – June 3, 2012

Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Branches, 2007

Gelatin silver prints
104 x 207 in.

Winter Trees, 2007

Gelatin silver prints
105 x 219 in.

Tree / Tree Trunks, 2005-06

Gelatin silver print
68 x 42 in.

Tree / Black Branches, 2004-05

Gelatin silver print
68 x 42 in.

Large Tree Trunk, 2004-05

Gelatin silver print
68 x 42 in.

Sled, 1999

Gelatin silver print
54 x 50 in.

Dog, 1999

Gelatin silver print
72 x 49 in.

Bush, 1999

Gelatin silver print
72 x 49 in.

Pack, 1999

Gelatin silver print
72 x 49 in.

All works courtesy of the artist.

Gallery talk and reception with the artist

Saturday, April 21, 2012 at 5 p.m.

American photographer **Lorna Bieber** (b. 1949) creates enigmatic images and immersive photographic installations that emerge through the careful study and delicate transformation of pre-existing images appropriated from both common and esoteric sources. Bieber's work has been widely exhibited in one-person exhibitions at museums and galleries including: the Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, MA; the Southeast Museum of Photography, Daytona Beach, FL; the Houston Center for Photography, Houston, TX; C. Grimaldis Gallery, Baltimore, MD; Julie Saul Gallery, New York, NY; McKenzie Fine Art, NY; the Bronx Museum, NY; and ABC No Rio, New York, NY. Bieber's work has also been featured in group exhibitions at museums and galleries including: the Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, FL; the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA; the Brooklyn Museum of Art, NY; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY; White Columns, New York, NY; and Franklin Furnace, New York, NY. Bieber has completed fellowships and residencies at the Rockefeller Foundation, Bellagio Study & Conference Center, Bellagio, Italy; the MacDowell Colony, Peterborough, NH; Yaddo, Saratoga Springs, NY; the Bogliasco Foundation, Genoa, Italy; and the Camargo Foundation, Cassis, FR. Bieber's work is held in distinguished collections including: the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris; the Brooklyn Museum of Art, NY; Franklin Furnace, NY; the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA; I.B.M., NY; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY; the Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, FL; the New York Public Library, NY; Neuberger and Berman, NY; Prudential Insurance Company, NY; and the Southeast Museum of Photography, Daytona Beach, FL.

**HOURS: NOON TO 5 P.M., TUESDAY – SUNDAY, FREE
LOCATED ON THE MAIN FLOOR OF THE REED LIBRARY**

The mission of the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery is to enhance the academic offerings of Reed College with a diverse range of scholarly exhibitions, lectures, and publications.

COOLEY

Douglas F. Cooley Memorial
Art Gallery, Reed College

3203 SE Woodstock Boulevard
Portland, OR 97202
Information: 503-517-7851
www.reed.edu/gallery