Devorah

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In Devorah, I sought to deliver an image to a text I could only engage with through removal. Unable to read the original Yiddish memoir written by my great grandmother, Devorah Schneider, I relied on a translation. Upon realizing that a photograph of the world couldn’t properly illustrate the experiences I was reading, I decided to expose photographic paper beneath an empty enlarger, one with no negative. As the blank projections bled, grew, shrunk and glowed in my darkroom, I began to build an abstract language in dialogue with Devorah’s words.

The project began when I decided to engage with the text this past fall. I knew I wanted to make work that offered an opportunity for viewers to actually read Devorah’s experience, but I wasn’t entirely sure how to do it. Frustrated, I confined myself to the darkroom. Staring at the light coming out of the enlarger, light that had no representational image, I longed for some kind of illustration I could create that spoke to the experience of reading the text. Out of confusion I began exposing paper without an image. It was an attempt to free the photograph from reality.

I brought those abstract imprints of light to one of my first meetings with Stephen Shore, and admitted they were a reactive act against the challenges of engaging with Devorah’s text. What I soon came to understand was the reality that these images were entirely connected to the text. They were birthed out of my emotional conflict. Therefore, they were direct representations of my internal state when engaging with the text.

I made hundreds of abstractions, each one paired with and made in response to an excerpt of the text. The relationships may not be discernible by every viewer, but they are connections I personally drew. The point of the project was to grant any viewer the chance to feel what they feel when reading the text. Staring at an alien language, to a simple translation, to an even more stripped down selection, to a complete abstraction of light. I attempted to offer an antidote to the complexity and upset of the narrative, and grant an opening for contemplation freed from representative imagery.

Jackson Siegal, 2018