

A PIONEER IN OUTSIDER PHOTOGRAPHY



John Brill, a creator of mysterious, dreamy images, represents an emerging field in the world of self-taught art-makers

By EDWARD M. GÓMEZ

Within the broader world of Outsider Art, a specialised area of research and investigation has begun to emerge, one that examines photos made by self-taught photographers. It is still too early to tell if it might take off and spawn an active, new field among collectors, but recently some examples of the kinds of works on which it focuses have surfaced at art fairs and other venues.

In the United States, the American John Brill is an emblematic creator of what is becoming known as "Outsider Photography". Like makers of other forms of Outsider Art, Brill, who is 64 years old, is completely self-taught in the use of the equipment, materials and techniques he employs to produce his photographic works. Based in New Jersey, where he was born and grew up in a large, Italian-American family, Brill obtained his first camera, which was made of Bakelite plastic and used 620-size roll film, when he was eight years old. He did not go to art school but instead attended Colgate College in central New York State, where he earned an undergraduate degree in physiological psychology. His training in that subject area, he explained in a recent interview, "was rooted in an empirical, scientific point of view." He said, "As I've gotten older, I haven't jettisoned that empirical approach but I have augmented it with introspection. Now, with age, everything does not appear

to be either/or. I've learned that a lot of what one sees in the world has to be viewed along a continuum."

That more expansive way of observing his environment and finding ambiguity in it may well be reflected in the mysterious, imprecise, curious photographic images Brill creates. Often ghostly or enveloped in light-saturated mists or shape-shifting clouds of light, the vaguely recognisable human faces or bodies that appear in his pictures are the most fleeting of subjects. Like snapshots of a dream world, his photographs seem to document the ineffable. Their unusualness in some ways parallels Brill's own outsider status, which he acknowledges and seems to embrace.

Describing himself as "someone who had authority problems and could never fit into any structured job", Brill nevertheless spent many years after college driving a beer-delivery truck. He enjoyed the work and often, along

opposite:

Ecstasis, 1999

selenium- and sulfide-toned silver print
(edition of ten)

image 6.75 ins., 17.1 cm diameter

paper 11 x 14 ins., 27.9 x 35.6 cm

right:

Plasma, 2013

pigment print on rag with UV-shielding
varnish

image 5 x 4.5 ins., 12.7 x 11.4 cm

sheet 8.5 x 11 ins., 21.6 x 27.9 cm

framed 13.25 x 12.25 ins., 33.7 x 31.5 cm





above:
Discarnate, 1999, selenium-toned silver print, image 12 x 9.25 ins.,
 30.6 x 23.5 cm; paper 11 x 14 ins., 27.9 x 35.6 cm



below:
Canadian Kid, 2015, pigment ink on 100% cotton paper with UV-shielding
 varnish, image 3.5 x 4 ins., 8.9 x 10.2 cm; paper c. 5 x 8 ins., 12.7 x 20.3 cm;
 framed 11 x 13 ins., 27.9 x 33 cm

above: *Baby Aunce*, 1970, re-printed 2006, selenium-toned
 silver print with oil colour, image 12.5 x 10 ins., 31.7 x 25.4 cm;
 paper 14 x 11 ins., 35.6 x 27.9 cm; framed 20 x 17 ins., 50.8 x
 43.2 cm

below centre:
Self-portrait, Paterson, NJ, 1987 (1987–25), selenium-toned silver print, image
 3.4 x 4.4 ins., 8.7 x 11.3 cm; paper 5 x 7 ins., 12.7 x 17.8 cm



his delivery route, would stop along the highway or in small towns to snap photos of buildings and other sights. In more recent years, Brill has worked as the driver of a school bus. He lives modestly in his own home, where he keeps fish tanks – he is a self-educated expert on many species of fish and has written extensively about them –

and has a fully equipped photo darkroom.

Brill dates his decision to dedicate his attention and energy to being a photographic artist to the year 1981, at which point, he recalled, "I came to the art world with my sensibility for photography fully formed." He showed his photographs at various galleries in New Jersey and nearby

opposite, top right:
Trish #1, 2013,
pigment ink on
100% cotton paper
with UV-shielding
varnish, image 6.5 x
8.75 ins., 16.5 x 22.2
cm, paper 11 x 8.5
ins., 7.9 x 27.6 cm



left:
Rapture, 1999,
selenium-toned
silver print,
image: 7.25 ins./
18.4 cm diameter,
paper 11 x 14 ins./
27.9 x 35.6 cm

New York City, and in the mid-1990s entered the stable of artists of Kent Fine Art, a gallery in Manhattan.

Over the years, to make his photographs, Brill has used both conventional-film and digital cameras. He has produced a large archive of what he calls "work prints" of many of the images he has shot, and it is from these prints that he selects the ones he will extensively, physically manipulate, often using a bleaching technique he has refined over time, to create his strange, haunting images. Sometimes he uses a scanner to create a digital version of an already well-handled print, which he then further alters using a software programme's basic image-manipulating tools. From the final version of such an image, Brill might make a limited edition of ten digital prints. Some of his photographic prints are unique pieces.

Brill is, he admits, obsessed with craftsmanship and can take a long time to reach the stage at which he considers a particular image to be finished and ready for presentation. Of course, in the eyes of purists, his manipulation of the original photographic images he shoots himself has provoked something of a classification

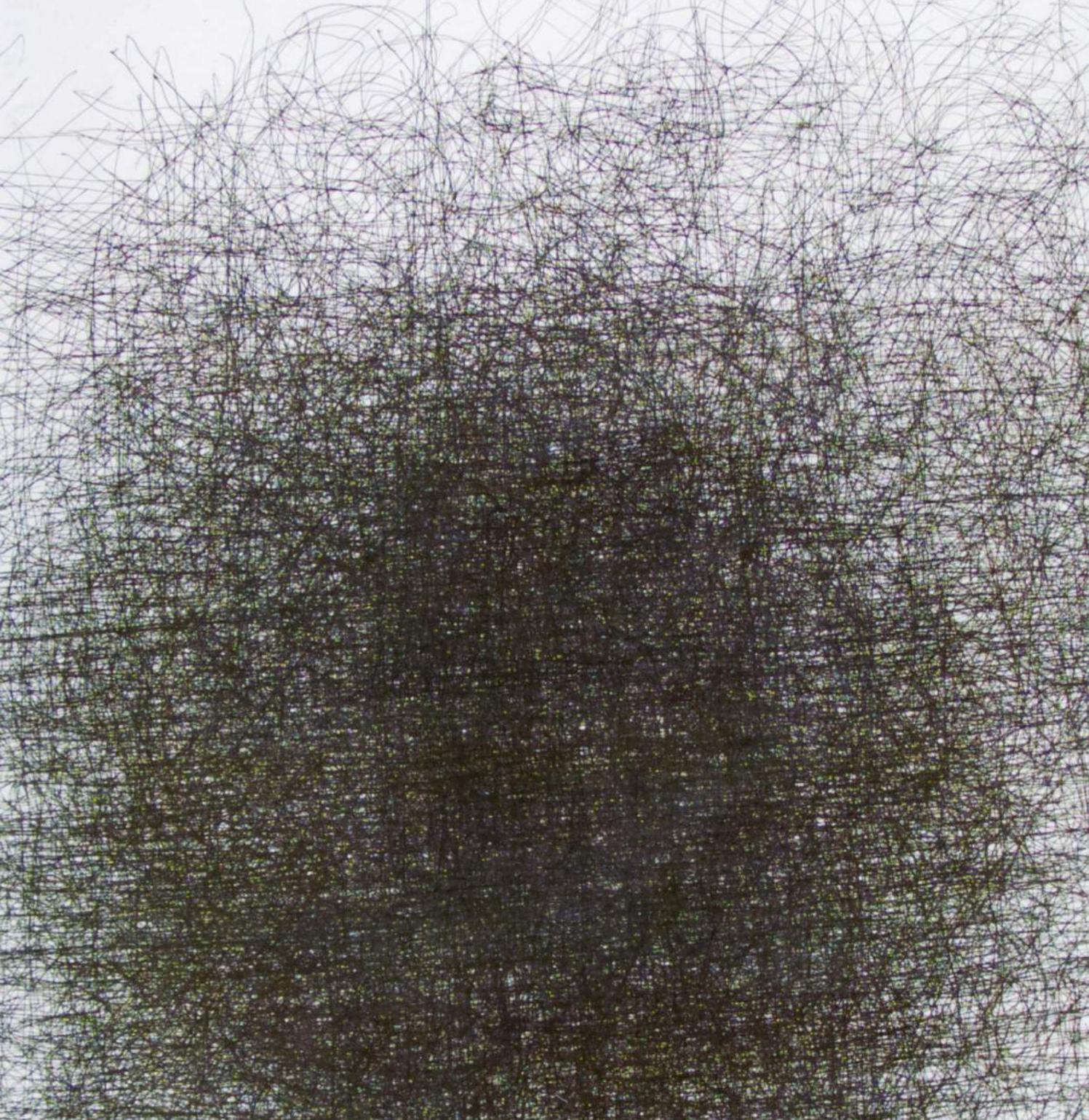
conundrum. That is because his artistic approach flies in the face of the old dictum that holds that a photo print should be the documentary representation of the image it depicts, which was captured for posterity on the film from whose negative it was printed. Brill observed, "A few decades ago, when appropriated imagery was hot, I was too craftsmanship-oriented for the postmodernists but not authentic enough for photography's old guard."

Brill, who recalled having been regarded as hyperactive as a child, still comes across today with an unmistakable sense of vigor, but it seems like more of a reflection of an irrepressible joie de vivre than an inability to sit still. "I have a rich life," he noted with gratitude. "I have my family, my photography, my school bus, my fish." He does not apologise for what he calls his "labour-intensive" approach to his photo work, as opposed to the easy appropriation that is still in vogue in many precincts of the contemporary-art world. When it comes to creating art, he insisted, "You actually have to make stuff!"

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