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Pati Hill, How Something Can Have Been At One Time And In One Place And Nowhere Else Ever Again @Essex Street

By [Anne Doran](#) / In [Galleries](#) / September 21, 2018

JTF (just the facts): 16 black-and-white photocopies matted and framed in white frames; 1 artwork consisting of 10 individually matted and framed black-and-white photocopies; and 1 artwork consisting of 15 individually matted and framed black-and-white photocopies, hung on the white walls of the gallery's upstairs and downstairs spaces. The photocopies range in size from 6 ½ x 4 ½ inches to 11 ½ x 15 ¾ inches and are dated between 1976 and 1983. (Installation shots below.)





Comments/Context: In 1980 the *New Yorker* magazine ran a piece on the poet, novelist, and artist Pati Hill (1921–2014) and her photocopy art, which she began making in 1973 or '74 while a housewife in Connecticut. “For me, it started one day in Stonington when I was cleaning out a drawer,” Hill told the *New Yorker*. “Most if it was stuff I was going to throw away, but I decided I wanted to remember some things, like buttons and gloves, so I took them over to New London and got the copying service to copy them for me. Pretty soon, I was working their machine myself. I copied bars of soap, zippers, fruit, a light bulb, swan feathers, and parts of old clothes—underwear and linen dresses.”

For the next 40 years until her death, Hill’s art—which is only now becoming better known—would consist almost exclusively of photocopies of common objects. In 1975 Kornblee Gallery in Manhattan mounted a one-person show of her black-and-white photocopies; an accompanying booklet paired Hill’s images of such items as a rolled-up tape measure and a plastic lid for a carryout drink cup with her poems. A friend who worked for IBM invited her to use the company’s copiers in the New York office on weekends; shortly afterward, she met designer Charles Eames on an airplane, and with his help, acquired an IBM machine on loan. When the *New Yorker* caught up with her, Hill was living in France with her husband, Paul Bianchini (a leading dealer in Pop Art), and a Rank Xerox 2600 copier, with which she was attempting to copy Versailles through its parts—cobblestones, tree branches, and draperies.

The Hill exhibition at Essex Street focuses on four bodies of work made in the late 1970s and early '80s: close-ups of articles of clothing; copies of publicity shots of passenger train cars; studies of the same silk scarf folded in different ways; and pictures of such ordinary objects as an empty sardine can, a crumpled Handi Wipe, and a dead fish. These last images, especially, relate to the paintings of quotidian things made by such Pop artists as Roy Lichtenstein, Ed Ruscha, and Vija Celmins. At the same time, however, Hill’s choice of subjects—a detail of a bra; a freshly laundered shirt still in its paper band—makes her work more affective, interior, and poetic than that of the Pop artists and, in her preference for the irredeemably mundane and at times ludic object, far more subversive.

The vivid dimensionality of Hill’s subjects, harshly lit and emerging out of inky space, likewise sets them apart from Pop’s flatter, more iconographic images. “A copier works like a magnet, attracting or rejecting things,” Hill says in the *New Yorker* article. “It separates things, gives them an edge. On the grays, it’s always making up its mind which way it will go, toward black or toward white. A photocopy seems to me much more truthful to detail than a photograph. On a copier, the actualities of something become quite marvelous. Everything is symbolic.”

Hill was certainly not the only artist of her generation to see xerography's potential as a tool for making art. Curator Seth Siegelaub's book exhibition *The Xerox Book*, for example, with contributions from seven conceptual artists including Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Wiener, appeared in 1968. California performance artist Barbara T. Smith made Xerox art between 1965 and 1966. And Ray Johnson's New York Correspondence School flourished in the '60s, with the advent of coin-operated copy machines.

Unlike her Conceptualist peers, though, Hill was as interested in exploring xerography's formal qualities as in producing deskilled, dematerialized art. She preferred IBM copiers over Xerox machines, for instance, for their copies' richness of tone. She experimented with oversaturation, colored papers, and various kinds of objects to produce lush, high-contrast pictures in which textured surfaces seem to sit up off the page.

Similarly, while the copies of publicity photos here, including a noir-ish view of a woman on a train reading a magazine, might mark Hill as a precursor to the Pictures generation, she rarely appropriated mass-media images. Rather, her work's diffidence and funk, her almost willfully banal subject matter, and her engagement with process seem startlingly contemporary, aligning her as much with Sara Deraedt (another Essex Street artist), Seth Price, and Wade Guyton as with Andy Warhol or Richard Prince. Her singular oeuvre should be required viewing for any young artist making photo-based art today.

Collector's POV: All the works on view were lent from the Estate of Pati Hill and Arcadia University, Glenside, Pennsylvania, and are not for sale. Therefore, there are no posted prices. Hill's work has little secondary market history, so gallery retail likely remains the only option for those collectors interested in following up.