



ART

## The Personal and Poetic Prints of a Female Pioneer of Copier Art



Meredith Sellers April 20, 2016



Pati Hill, "Alphabet of Common Objects" (c. 1975–79), 45 black and white copier prints, each 11 x 8.5 inches (image courtesy Estate of Pati Hill)

GLENSIDE, Pa. — Last weekend, I made the short drive from Philadelphia to Arcadia University, about a half-hour outside the city. A friend had highly recommended an exhibition on view at Arcadia University, *Pati Hill: Photocopier, A Survey of Prints and Books (1974–83)*. I was not particularly excited to see a show of copier art. How different could the images of these photocopies be from the actual copies themselves? As I drove out to see it, I could not suppress the clichés of regrettable high school art projects, misconstrued collages, silly zines, and ubiquitous hands, faces, and ass cheeks pushed up onto Xerox machines.

Stepping into the gallery, I gazed at the show, curated by Richard Torchia, as it presented grids, lines, and vitrines bursting full of [Pati Hill's](#) delicate, remarkable images, all made on the rather unremarkable IBM Copier II. My cynicism was obliterated. I felt a stunning empathy for these images of daily life, laid bare on the cold, smooth glass of a hulking electronic machine, contextualized by snippets of writing that dipped in and out of memory, metaphor, wit, and the kinds of fleeting thoughts one thinks but never utters aloud.



Installation view of 'Pati Hill: Photocopier, A Survey of Prints and Books (1974-83)' at Arcadia University Art Gallery (image courtesy Greenhouse Media)

The perfect everydayness — the absolute banality of the objects Pati Hill copied — creates its own meaning. Each object glimmers and sinks into the darkness of the black pigment that surrounds it like a drawing in the most luscious charcoal. The sheets are all 8 ½ x11 inches, standard copy paper size, but the fragility of the medium struck me as stubborn, poignant, utterly unpretentious. A successful novelist and model in the 1950s, Hill's artistic production grinded to a halt when she married her third husband, New York gallerist Paul Bianchini, had a child, and became a self-described housewife. As she fell into the role of wife and mother, a 10-year hiatus of her creative practice ensued. In the 1960s, however, she emerged from her hiatus to become a visual artist, in addition to a writer.

According to one much-cited account, Hill became first enamored with the photocopier when she noticed her own fingertips being copied in the margins of her texts, after which she began a long love affair with the machine, acquiring one on long-term loan from IBM and installing the unwieldy machine in her home (she preferred the IBM copier to the more common Xerox copiers because she said they yielded richer blacks).

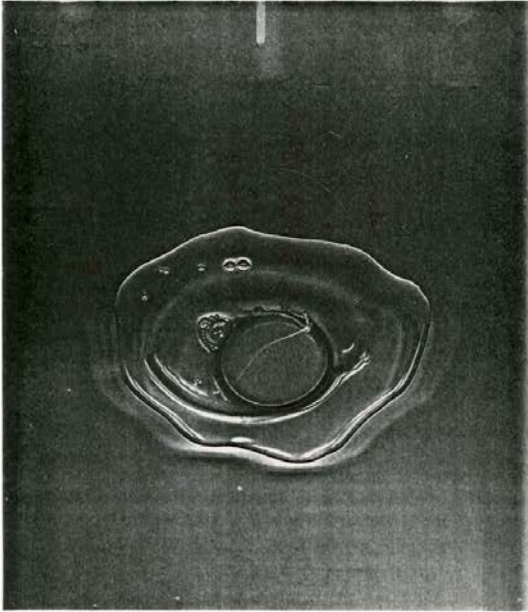


Pati Hill, 'A Swan: An Opera in Nine Chapters' (detail of Chapter 5) (1978), installation of 32 captioned black and white copier prints, 13.75 x 8.25 inches (image courtesy Estate of Pati Hill) ([click to enlarge](#))

A lightbulb, a shirt sleeve, a pair of glasses, a dandelion, a feather; singular objects are all permeated with light and subsumed into a beautiful inky, tar-like darkness. To achieve that darkness, Hill overloaded the toner on her copier, and embraced its imperfections, such as the white dots that sometimes occur when the pigment doesn't adhere to the paper. The images, staunch in their flat-footed objecthood, are transmuted into something contemplative, abstracted, metaphysical.

Never copying her own body, Hill deftly avoided the obvious tropes of feminist art, and even the subgenre of feminist copier art (forcefully tied in my mind to an utterly diluted iteration on a certain 1998 Tori Amos album cover). Hill said in an interview with writer and art historian Avis Berman:

I wanted to make something that had nothing in it that had anything to do with me, and this is where I started. But I realized, very difficultly, that you couldn't. It took me a long time to know that there was no such thing as that, but this is how I started working on a copier, because I wanted to get as far, as far, as far, as far, as far, and still, to me, be able to say what I wanted to say, but that there be nothing of me in it, and there couldn't be.

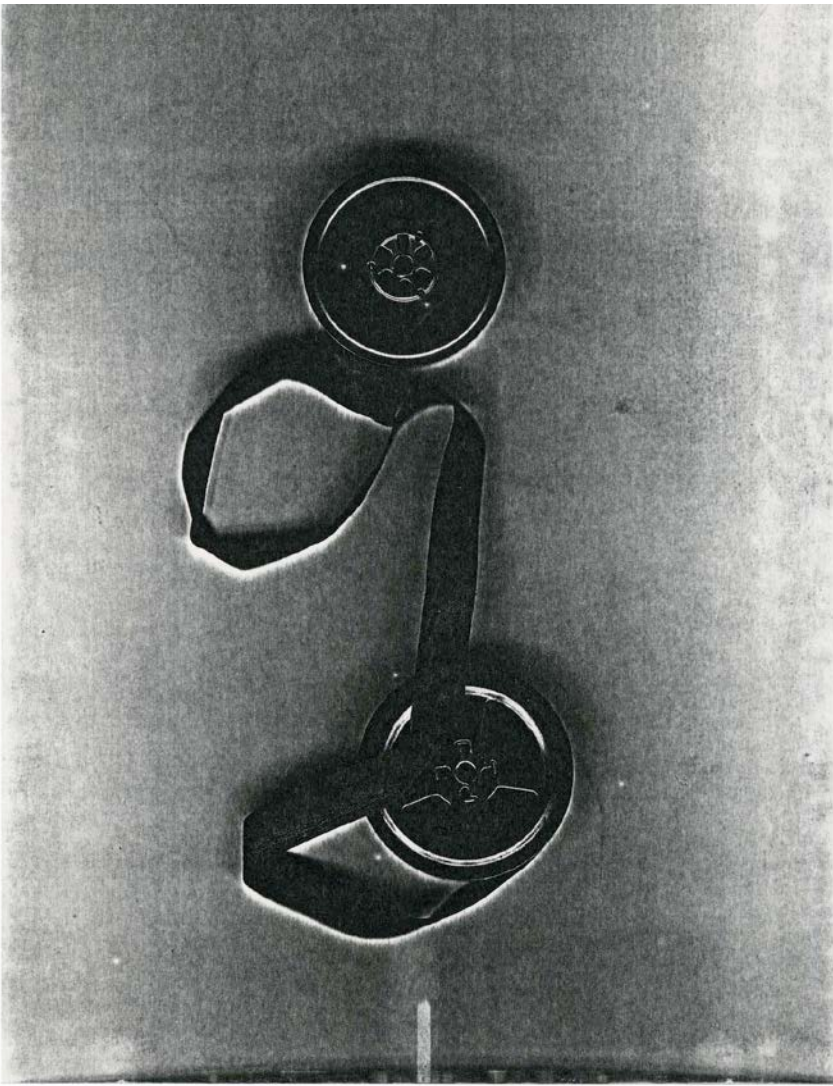


Pati Hill, "Common Objects (egg)" (c. 1975), black and white copier print, 11 x 8.5 inches (image courtesy Estate of Pati Hill) (click to enlarge)

In an auxiliary gallery, the exhibition continues with grids of multicolored copier paper in the standard shades of mint green, marigold yellow, and pale pink, presenting short poems that are each multitudes, containing drifting sentences inspired and posed by her images. "The conditions of my life appear to me as three salad bowls marked, respectively, 'Coarse', 'Medium' and 'No Time,'" read one. Many of these texts recall private moments of anger, embarrassment, or beauty that feel particular to femininity, to a woman tethered by social expectations. A line from her book

*Slave Days*, which included 29 poems with images of her copier prints, reads, "A local housewife/ aged forty-eight/ sent off for a dream/ and received a plate."

Pati Hill refused labels, working alone with objects culled from her surroundings, making work radical in its simplicity and poeticism, and all on a mundane machine associated with administrative tediousness and boredom, in a medium that some did not even consider to be art. Her process and images find contemporary reference in painting, drawing, photography, sculpture, and even net art. Her works are unusual in that they do not perform feminism; they do not present her body, or ask for your gaze, or play on your guilt. They exist, with an extraordinary matter-of-fact poeticism, as documents of the interior life of an irrepressible woman.



Pati Hill, "Alphabet of Common Objects (typewriter ribbon)" (c. 1975), black and white copier print, 11 x 8.5 inches  
(image courtesy Estate of Pati Hill)

Pati Hill: Photocopier, A Survey of Prints and Books (1974–83) *continues*  
at the Arcadia University Art Gallery (Spruance Art Center, 450 S Easton  
Rd, Glenside, PA) through April 24.