
PATI HILL
AIR DE PARIS

PATI HILL

Born in 1921 in Ashland, USA
Died in 2014 in Sens, France

Pati Hill was born in 1921 in Ashland, Kentucky. After a short but dazzling career as a model, between 1951 and 1962 she wrote a dozen short stories and five books which earned her real critical recognition. Hill published One Thing I Know in 1962 after giving birth to her first and only daughter. She was then forty-one years old, and would later claim to have decided at that time to «stop writing in favour of housekeeping.»

If it is true that she published no work for thirteen years, Hill continued to write: poems and a diary. She also opened an antique shop. But above all it was during this period that Hill began her first plastic experiments with a photocopier, which she began to use, untrained as an artist, as an artistic tool to explore the relationship between image and text. In 1974, Hill publishes a collection of poems with an unambiguous title, Slave Days, in which her first works appear: xerographs of household objects that seem to float in indistinct space. By using the copier—a machine that was stereotypically linked to secretarial work and thus to feminized labor—to trace everyday objects such as a comb, a carefully folded pair of men's trousers, or a child's toy, Hill develops an artistic practice that programmatically translates invisible domestic labor into a visual and public language. Through her use of this reproductive apparatus, she creates a model of artistic production that critically opposes the convention of individual expression as well as the supposed neutrality of technologically produced images.

At fifty, Pati Hill began a career as an artist which led her to exhibit in France and the United States, creating a considerable body of work, over nearly 40 years, made up of thousands of photocopies, texts and drawings. When she died in 2014, a part of her archive was transferred to Arcadia University, Glenside, Pennsylvania.

SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Frac Île-de-France, Paris, France
Centre Pompidou, Paris, France
Whitney Museum, New York, NY, USA
Arcadia University, Glenside, PA, USA

Pati Hill by Baptiste Pinteaux

Pati Hill was fifty-four in 1975 when she published Slave Days, a collection of thirty-one poems and twenty-nine photocopies showing the biting, sardonically detached gaze of a housewife contemplating her existence. This was her first book after thirteen years, which she laconically summed up with the words «housewife, mother». It was also the first appearance of the xerographs she had began making a few years before and the introduction to a considerable oeuvre encompassing texts, hundreds of drawings and thousands of xerographs. This exhibition – the first in France since her death in 2014 – will, I hope, reveal her work's distinctive brand of attentiveness to its subjects: delicate but never romantic and at the same time dark-hued, subtle and cruel.

Pati Hill was born in 1921 in Ashland, Kentucky, and was soon being raised single-handed by her mother. With the divorce of 1928 came a relative poverty, which nonetheless left her free to test out an independence rare among women of that time, while inculcating in her daughter a taste for writing as a means of considering her own emancipation. She will say later as an adult: «My idea was to live lives, different lives. . . I suppose I got that from the idea of being different books, or living in different books.»1 After a brief spell at university, Pati left her newly remarried mother and moved to New York. There, at the age of twenty, she began a career as a model which gave her the independence she had been dreaming of – but one qualified by the discovery of a «peculiar feeling of 'reality'". "The reality of an object, maybe"2 she says. She was required to embody the provincial teenager freshly arrived in town, whose spontaneity never overstepped the bounds of good manners – in short, the ideal girl of American fantasy. The mistrust she expressed very early on regarding social mythologies and their underlying ideological rhetoric, together with her taste for autonomy and her inability «to make [herself] and [her] image and [her] opinion take on any kind of permanent relationship,»3 were some of the reasons behind her urge to write in the mid-1940s. She began with a column for Seventeen just at the time when Audre Lorde was publishing her first poems. With a shrewdly pragmatic lightness of touch, Pati Hill celebrated the art of interior design, explaining to her teenage readers how to make your room a true reflection of your personality. I'll return to these pieces later, but they merit our attention in that it was in opposition to the image they advocated – a domesticity at once harmonious, placid and unfailingly authoritarian – that her own work would take shape. Between 1953 and 1962 she published three novels, a memoir, a collection of poetry and ten short stories, earning the respect of a circle of writers grouped around George Plimpton's Paris Review. Rather than a novelist, however, she preferred to describe herself as «more a journalist, maybe, with nothin journaled yet4», and deliberately kept her distance from the romantic creative vision of her writer friends. Already committed to a hard-working daily experimental output, she nonetheless sensed early on that the pleasure she found in describing personal disasters would be the key to writing about «[her] own plight and the plight of women in general.»5

In 1960 she married her third husband, Paul Bianchini, a young Frenchman who had just opened a gallery in New York, notably exhibiting Roy Lichtenstein, Lee Lozano, Claes Oldenburg, Robert Ryman and Sturtevant. Bianchini came from a family of Lyon industrialists

1 Pati Hill and Avis Berman, unpublished interview, 26 September 2010, p. 7. Pati Hill Collection, Arcadia University.
2 Pati Hill, Letters to Jill, New York, Kornblee Gallery, 1979, p. 100
3 Pati Hill, The Pit and the Century Plant, London, Victor Gollancz, 1956, p. 185
4 Pati Hill, The History of Dressmaking, unpublished manuscript, 1962–1997, p. 169. Pati Hill Collection, Arcadia University.
5 Pati Hill, Family History, unpublished manuscript, undated., p. 18. Pati Hill Collection, Arcadia University.

and through him she discovered France's haute bourgeoisie, which she describes with a mix of fascination and disgust as "huge watery mammals that live deep in the ocean where the pressure and the lack of ordinary nourishments keeps other fish from venturing. [...] A race, a strata, tranquilly passing on their ways from generation to generation, hardly aware of calendar time.»6 Two years later, in 1962, she gave birth to her only child, a girl. She who had always tried to smooth over the rough edges recounts the difficulty of adjusting to the life of a housewife and the complications she encountered when trying to renegotiate her notion of her independence and her work. The literary circles she had been moving in up until then, mainly made up of married white men, considered her marriage and her life as a mother as a betrayal, a desertion of her vocation as an artist. She left New York for Stonington, Connecticut, where there were regular visits from her husband. As a welcome gift, the poet James Merrill – a long-time friend and now her neighbour – gave her a cat, pointing out to her that she «might as well have all the little luxuries that went with being a prisoner.»7 She published nothing between 1963 and 1974, but kept on writing – and working: she opened her own antique shop in Mystic, Connecticut and renovated a property at Les Massons, near Paris. Having built up substantial debts over the years, her husband closed his gallery early in the 1970s, while it fell to her to continue organising the family's domestic life – a job which, American writer-artist Frances Stark commented, «bears no evidence of productivity – save for the fact that the home isn't falling apart.»8 Its realities were not lost on her.

Thirteen years went by between the publication of her third novel, One Thing I Know, and her second collection of poems, Slave Days (1975), with its insider's account of the discomfiting experience of being a housewife. In short, the experience described in her memoir The History of Dressmaking where she wrote: «I wish I did not feel so blameless. If I were at fault I could change our destinies by changing myself, but I have been such a good mother, cook, taxi driver, dog feeder etc. according to the American myth.»9 Each poem is a digression based on the observation of an object Hill photocopied and reproduced in the book. A few years earlier she began keeping various objects in a laundry basket and reproducing some of them, using an IBM Copier II. To keep a record, she said. The first xerographs that she published in Slave Days and exhibited the same year in New York mostly depict ordinary subjects such as flowers, tools, clothes and documents. (Alphabet of Common Objects is the title of an emblematic series dating from the late 1970s, some of whose images are included in the exhibition.) It would be tempting to make them appear as the expression of a gift, generally – and perversely – attributed to women to justify their dependence on domesticity: the gift of being able to turn their intimate contact with matter into a certain «poetry of the everyday». But Pati Hill's works say the direct opposite. True, they may signify one of those «little luxuries that went with being a prisoner»: that of a more finely honed attentiveness to things and their presence, but this attentiveness is not so much sensitive as critical. When things are photocopied life-size, the more their reproduction seems to reside in some infallible objectivity; and the sharper their contours, the more their images will elude clear definition. The machine offers the eye what it flattens, as shapes at once familiar and strange, living and mummified: a succession of hard, autonomous, impenetrable sculptures that defy immediate understanding.

Displayed alongside the copies of Slave Days, the xerographs thus seem like an implacable response to stories of domesticity based on women's alleged fascination with objects and their ability to create balanced and harmonious interiors. But on the contrary,

6 Pati Hill, History of Dressmaking, op. cit., p. 110.
7 Pati Hill, Family History, op. cit., p. 14.
8 Frances Stark, The Architect & the Housewife, London, Book Works, 1999, p. 12
9 Pati Hill, History of Dressmaking, op. cit., p. 292.

they present shapes with no pre-established meaning and which never coincide with the desire they are supposed to satisfy. The machine's utterly objective gaze is then overlaid with an inseparable mixture of tenderness and naivety, a form of detachment which gives one the impression of watching a cruel little tale unfold or a methodical settling of scores.

In 1960, Pati Hill began collecting the advertisements, instruction manuals and users' guides she claimed were the art form she felt closest to. She made them the subject of several series of xerographs in which she observes how, while supposedly allowing specific information to be conveyed by means of slogans and symbols, the accumulation of informational signals in these commercial images ultimately generates an inverse subtraction effect, the upshot being confusion, misunderstandings and pretexts for the projection of fantasies. This is one of the things that strike you immediately when you're confronted with the considerable collection – some six hundred images, all of them of vacuum cleaners – that Hill built up from the early 1960s to the early 2000s.

A great deal of uncertainty still surrounds the status of this collection, currently held with the artist's archives at Arcadia University. We do know, however, that in 1996 she claimed to be using it for a book whose title, Women and Vacuum Cleaner, alludes to Men and Women in Sleeping Cars, an emblematic series of xerographs she made in 1979 from advertising images for the Compagnie des wagons-lits. A draft of this work is presented in a showcase, accompanied by a short text on the history of the machine. While Hill's work on the photocopier began a deliberate move away from her relationship with domesticity in the 1980s, when she decided to photocopy Versailles, this set of documents constitutes the continuation over nearly fifty years of the story begun by Slave Days.

The title of the only paperback book in the collection: «The Museum of Man. The fabulous decline of the masculine empire» suffices to make obvious the organised sabotage of a social mythology. The diversity and profusion of documents too, ranging from the first ads for vacuum cleaners early in the 20th century to the double-page spreads in Paris Match, revealing with a mixture of humour and bitterness, the immutability of a century-old iconography supposedly defending women's autonomy – «the art of sparing one's strength, time and money»; «the vacuum cleaner eliminates effort and fatigue»; «for four dollars a day you can finally have a reliable maid!» – while actually relegating them to the domestic existence.

Bringing together newspaper and magazine cuttings and their multiple copying avatars, the collection reminds us – like Claude Torey's film Toreador (1983), where we see Hill in her studio – that there's nothing delicate about her work with the photocopier: it's crushing, it's fast and blind. Then there are the artist's books she made throughout her life. Hand-bound and holding a hundred or so photocopies, for her they were certainly a way of saving scattered prints; but I believe that, like this collection, they should also be considered fully fledged artworks expressing the importance of interpreting her work, without seeking to write off its profusion as a form of fetishism.

Unlike the emblematic series that Hill produced during her lifetime (most of which were exhibited between 1975 and 1983), with their sets of variations around the same motifs, her books respond to a more narrative logic, albeit chaotic, elliptical, and requiring the reader to accept the profusion of motifs and their free association. The collection also tells us something about her notion of publishing, which for her «should be like taking your clothes to the laundromat.»10 – a means of circulating texts and images, allowing their meaning to be altered as they appear, in the uncontrollable recycling of formal associations

10 Pati Hill, Letters to Jill, op. cit., p. 122

and fantasies. The vacuum cleaner becomes both fully what it is and something else – an infant, a maid, a sexual instrument, a non-human figure.

Rereading Pati Hill during the preparations for this exhibition, I often thought back to some of the films of Vincente Minelli and their way of describing characters caught up in a deadly romanticism. Pati Hill's heroines often experience this same conflict when faced with their inability to make the fantasised image of their existence coincide with its material reality. This is precisely the subject of her last book, Impossible Dreams, published in 1976, which describes the disquiet felt by Genevieve, a young housewife who thinks she is falling in love with her neighbour, Dolly. In a moment of disheartenment she wonders: «Must we always live in our boxes like hamsters?»11

To simplify somewhat, I believe that the whole of Pati Hill's oeuvre can be understood as a rational, reassuring answer to this question. In her hands the copier becomes less of a divinatory instrument, supposedly with the power to reveal the hidden «essence» of things, and more of an instrument for accounting for their irregularity and contingency. What she describes as the copier's «yes/no» machines12», its ability to accomplish anything no matter when or how you press these machines ,transforming the bureaucratic, infallible and misogynistic instrument par excellence into a means of creating uncertainty and error, of producing a fluid, always renegotiable image of reality and existence, one made of radical but imperceptible ruptures. In other words, a way to «wake up and get on with [one's] real life, whatever that might be" by «walking along the precipice;»13 a way of being always ready «before slipping away to my next incarnation, as easily as an eel off a china plate.»

11 Pati Hill, Impossible Dreams, Cambridge, MA, Alice James Books, 1976, p. 110.
12 Pati Hill, Letters to Jill, op. cit., p. 123.
13 Pati Hill, History of Dressmaking, op. cit., p. 295

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

Pati Hill with Wolfgang Tillmans
Maureen Paley, London, United Kingdom
18.01.2025 — 15.02.2025

Both Pati Hill and Wolfgang Tillmans have explored the photocopier's capacity for duplication and abstraction and how the device can be both the subject of an image, and the facilitator of its production. A selection of Pati Hill's unique xerographs made between 1977 and 1990 are presented alongside a single inkjet print by Wolfgang Tillmans from 2011.

Pati Hill was a multidisciplinary artist and writer who started to use the photocopier as an artistic tool to publish her first 'copy works' in the early 1970s. After the birth of her only child in 1962, Hill claimed to "quit writing in favour of housekeeping" and began a thirteen-year period that she later described on her resume with the words "Housewife, mother." As she resumed her creative output, she proposed that the copier machine could unite writers and artists owing to its original function of reproducing text. By laying various objects on the scanner such as a pair of scissors, a telephone, or pieces of sliced fruit she aimed to translate invisible domestic labour into a visual language that simultaneously presented objects as images and as scanned still lifes.

"The principles on which the copier works – yes / no, multiplicity, instantaneousness – are those that govern much of modern life, letting the copier impose rather than imposing on it may reveal something about our times and what is in store for us in the near future."
Pati Hill, Letters to Jill, A Catalogue and Some Notes on Copying, originally published 1979 by Komblee, re-printed by Mousse 2020.

Accompanying this group of Hill's copy works is a large unframed inkjet print by Wolfgang Tillmans who has a long-held fascination with the possibility of making new pictures and how the world is presented to us through images. The subject of CLC 800, dismantled, a, is a photocopier seen in the artist's studio and no longer operational – its external parts laid around the machine's core. Here, Tillmans uses the camera to analyse and record the complex inner workings of this image-making device. Tillmans had begun making works on a photocopier in 1987 by enlarging found images by up to four hundred percent. These experiments yielded Approaches (1987–88), a group of xerographic triptychs which were displayed at his first solo exhibition, held in 1988 at Café Gnosa, Hamburg. Throughout his career he has continually returned to the photocopier as a means of producing both moving and still images.

"The exploration of the image surface, of the very nature of what constitutes an image, has always been of great fascination to me... I started being interested in photography through deconstructing or destroying photography."
Wolfgang Tillmans, in Nathan Kernan, What They Are: A Conversation with Wolfgang Tillmans, Art On Paper, May-Jun 2001.





Exhibition views
Pati Hill with Wolfgang Tillmans
Maureen Paley, London, United Kingdom
2022
Photo : © Stephen James





Exhibition views
Pati Hill
Take Ninagawa, Tokyo, Japan
2022
Photo : © Kei Okano





Exhibition views
Pati Hill
Take Ninagawa, Tokyo, Japan
2022
Photo : © Kei Okano

Something other than either
Curated by Maurin Dietrich
Kunsthalle Zurich, Switzerland
12.12.2020 — 02.05.2021

Once in a while bodies of work emerge out of nowhere, artistic works that astound us thanks to their idiosyncrasy and brilliance. They seem brand new and everyone asks themselves why they had been unknown. This is the case for the oeuvre of Pati Hill (1921-2014). Kunsthalle Zürich follows in the footsteps of the Kunstverein Munich, showing the most comprehensive exhibition of the artist's works to date – an artist who was equally an author, columnist, model, antiques dealer and gallerist. Pati Hill's oeuvre includes four novels, short stories and artist's publications as well as a collection of instruction manuals and the invention of a new Symbol Language (1977-78), as well as thousands of photocopies from 1974 onwards. The latter make up her central practice and are divided into different work groups such as the Common Objects (c. 1977–79) and Photocopying Versailles (c. 1980–2005). Photocopying Versailles, for example, arose from the idea that Hill would photocopy the entire Chateau of Versailles 1:1, an undertaking that was as feasible as it was unrealistic.

As Maurin Dietrich, Director of the Kunstverein Munich, writes in a detailed article, Pati Hill's oeuvre is not easy to classify. This may be a reason why Hill's work is only now being seen by a broader public, for she stood apart from the canon and the avant-garde as well as being distinct from emancipatory movements like feminism. Hill's artistic approach can neither be classified in conceptual art nor in Pop art or photography. She used her photocopier to capture the world, to fetishize it and to delegate the creation of art to a machine. Marshall McLuhan's foresighted dictum «the medium is the message» from 1964 is applied literally in this work. Machines know no morality but can generate unexpected poetry as is the case here, where mundane objects are used like words and write stories. How significant this now appears in the contemporary context of memes and social media!

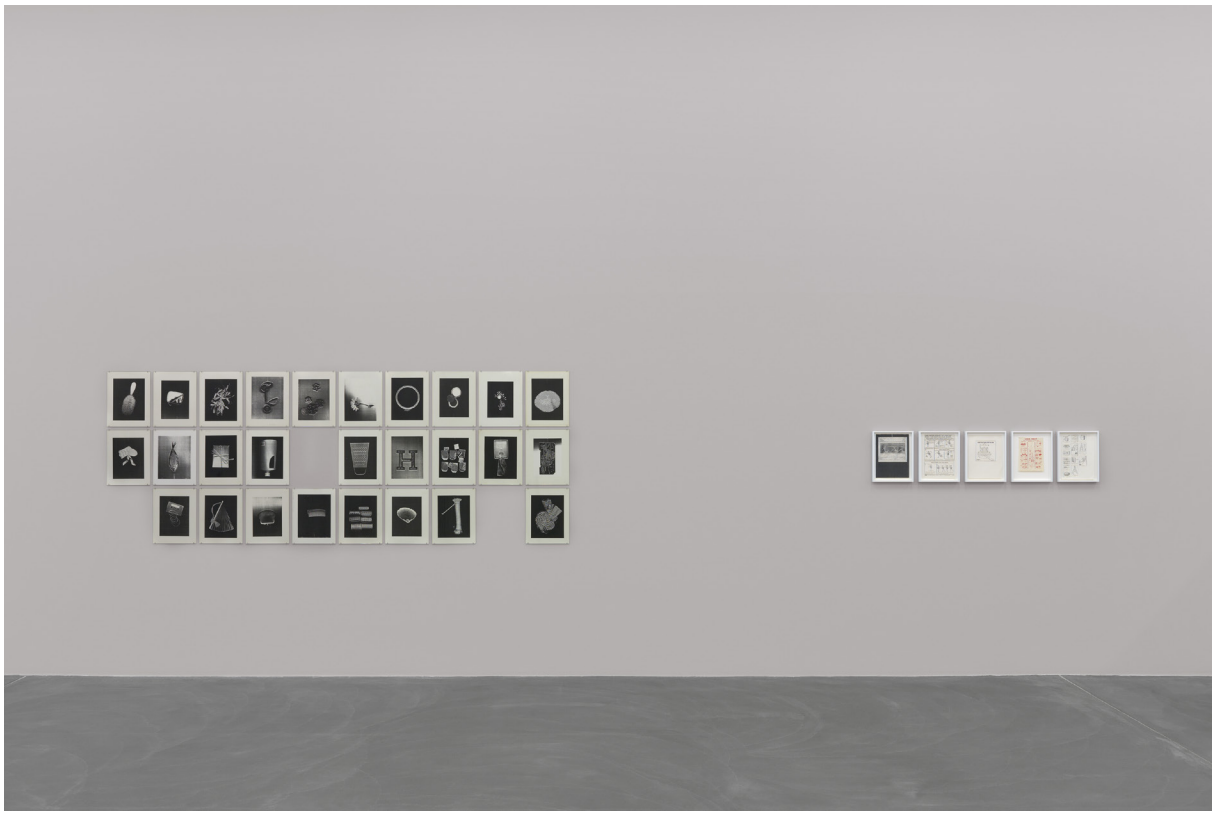
The third edition of Letters to Jill from 1979 is published on the occasion of this exhibition, a book in which Hill explains to her New York gallery Jill Kornblee how her work can be read. Letters to Jill is as instructive as it filled with a humour that should not be underestimated.





Exhibition views
Something other than either
Kunsthalle Zurich, Switzerland
2020
Photo : © Annik Wetter





Exhibition views
Something other than either
Kunsthalle Zurich, Switzerland
2020
Photo : © Annik Wetter





Exhibition views
Heaven's door is open to us / like a big vacuum cleaner / O help / O clouds of dust / O choir of hairpins
Air de Paris, Romainville, France
2020
Photo : © Marc Domage





Exhibition views
Heaven's door is open to us / like a big vacuum cleaner / O help / O clouds of dust / O choir of hairpins
Air de Paris, Romainville, France
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Photo : © Marc Domage





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Exhibition views
Heaven's door is open to us / like a big vacuum cleaner / O help / O clouds of dust / O choir of hairpins
Air de Paris, Romainville, France
2020
Photo : © Marc Domage

SELECTED ARTWORKS



Untitled (pear)
c. 1976
Xerograph on green paper both side
25,7 x 22,9 cm
Unique



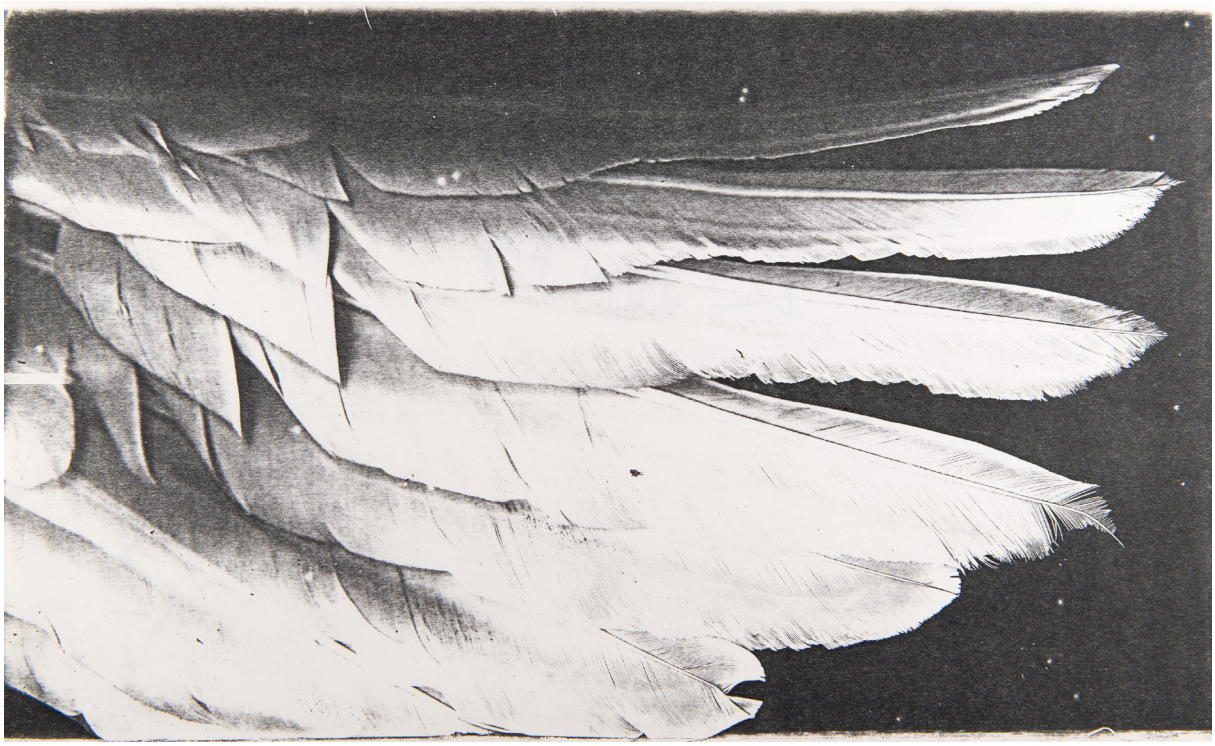
Untitled (roses)
c. 1990
Color xerograph
41,9 x 29,6 cm
Unique



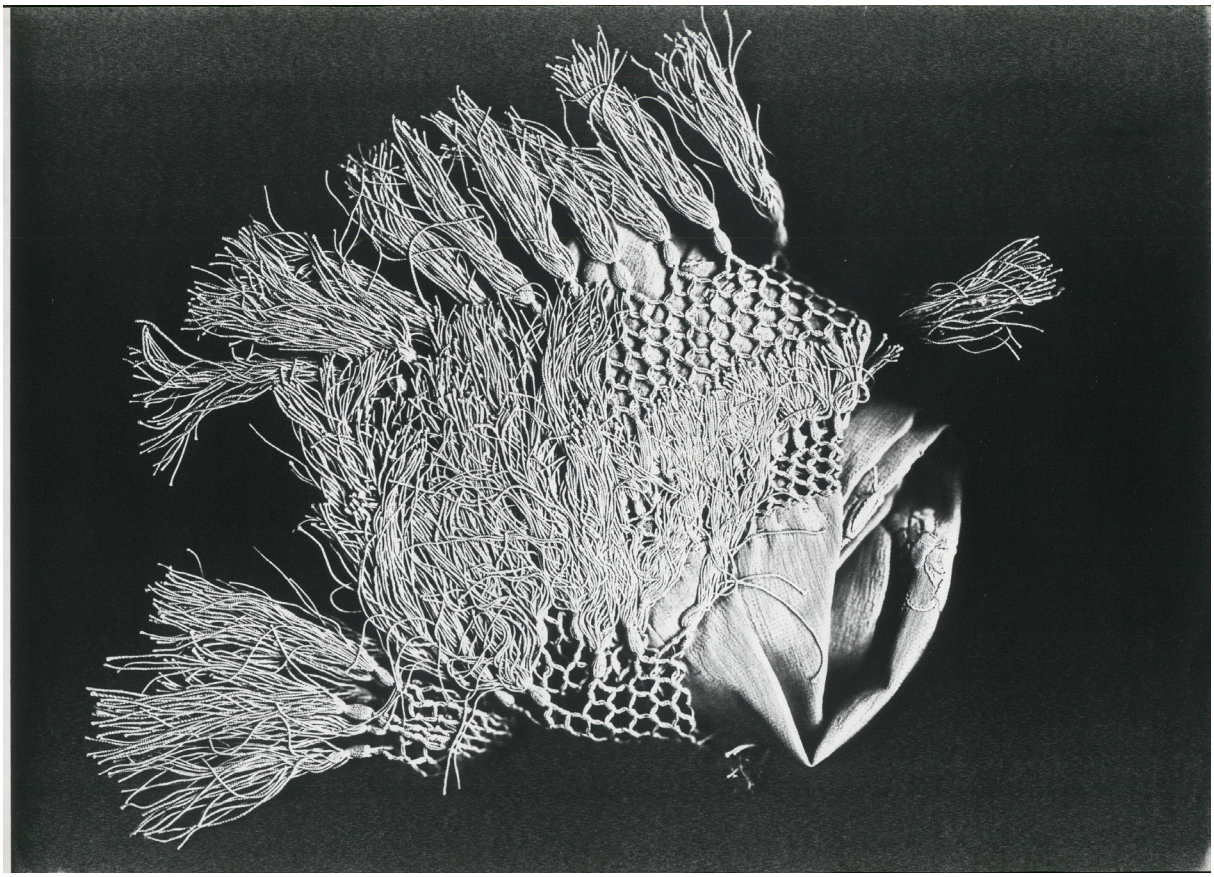
Untitled (roses)
c. 1990
Color xerograph
43,3 x 31 cm
Unique



Untitled (Swan's wing)
1978
Xerograph, annotated, signed and dated 1979 on verso
21,6 x 35,2 cm
Unique



Untitled (Swan's wing)
1978
Xerograph, annotated, signed and dated 1979 on verso
22,9 x 36,8 cm
Unique



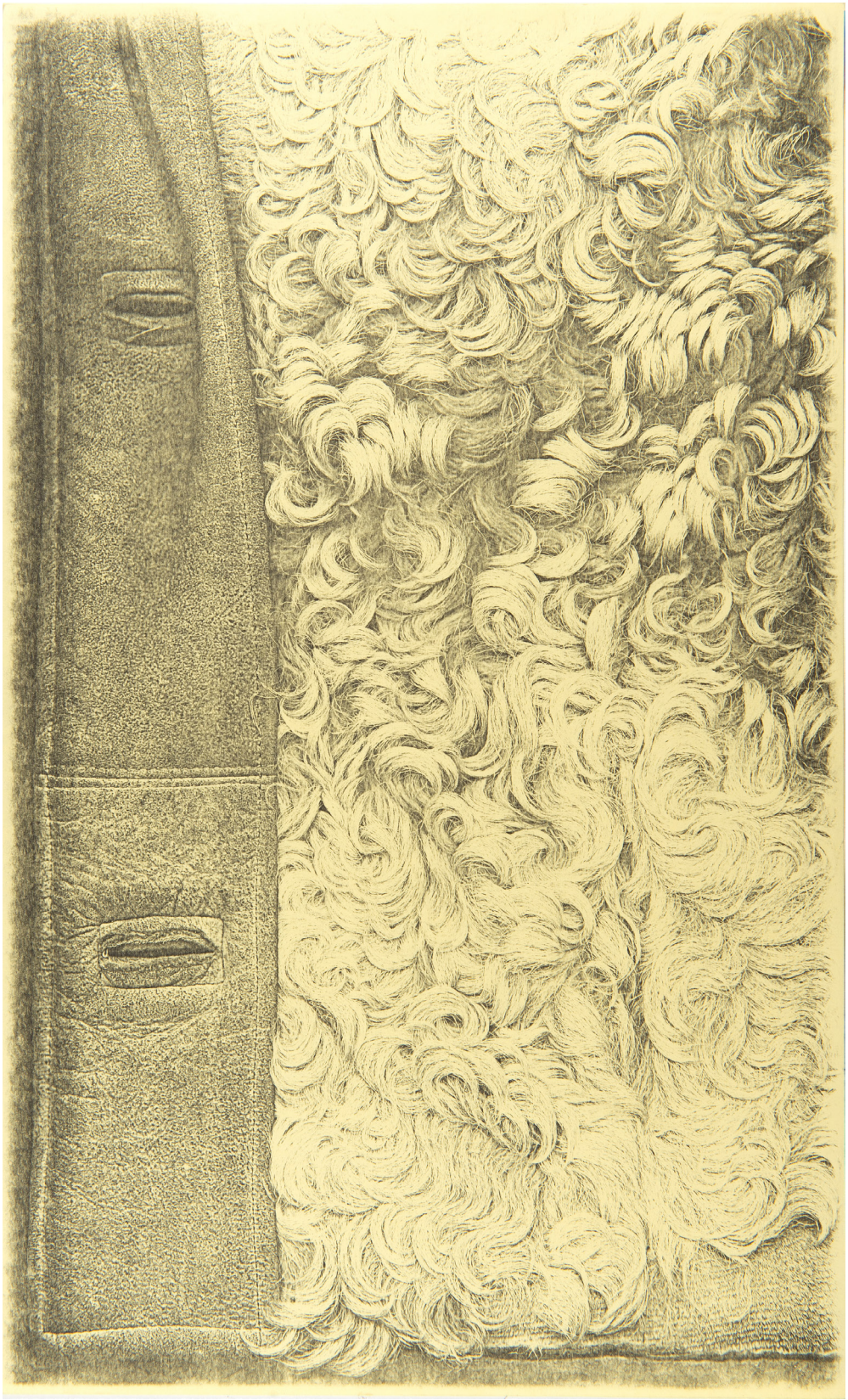
Untitled (scarf)
1983
Xerograph
31 x 43,3 cm
Unique



Untitled (broken glass and dragonflies)
c. 1990
Xerograph
41,9 x 29,7 cm
Unique



Untitled (portrait)
nd
Xerograph
26,4 x 20,3 cm
Unique



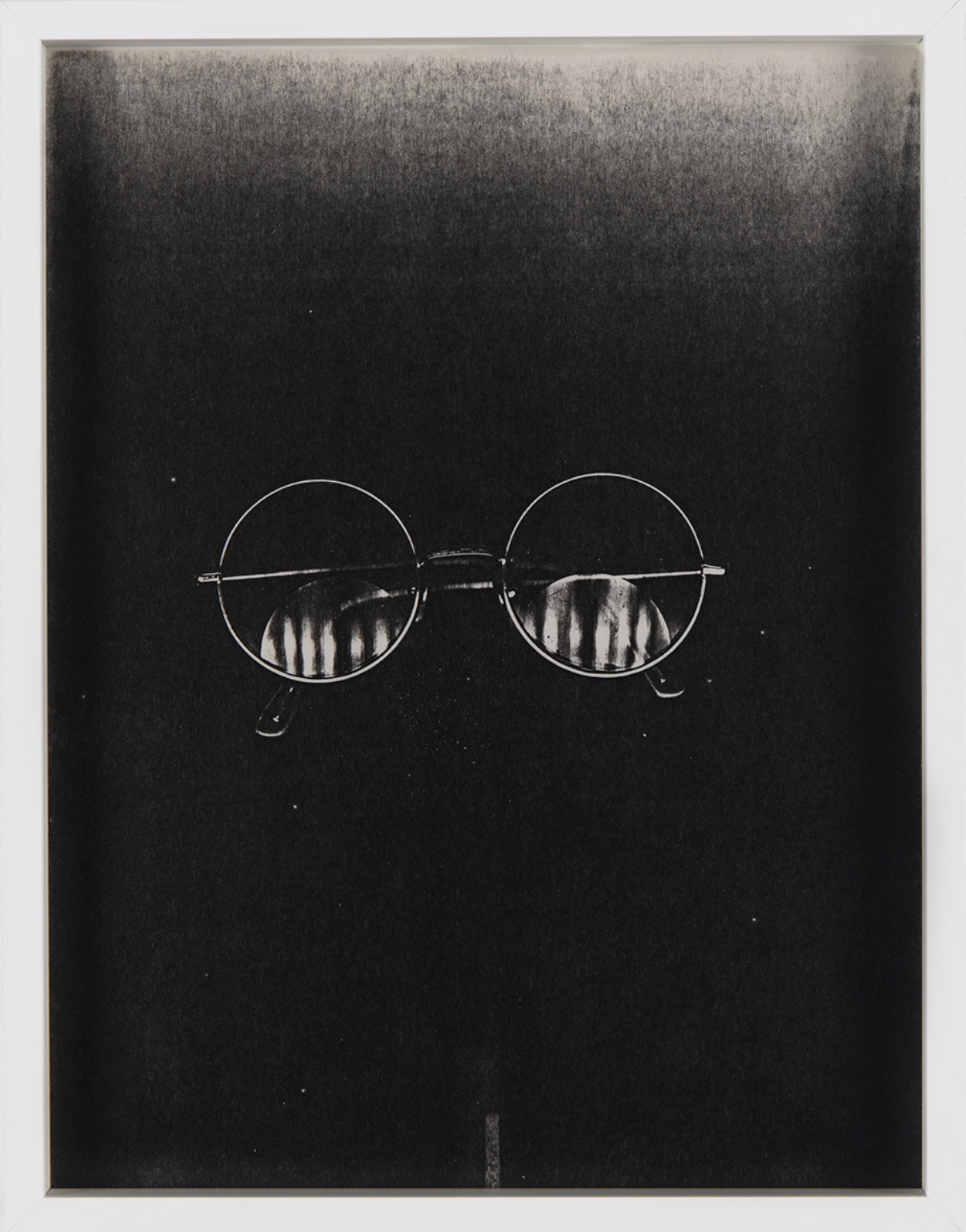
Untitled (fur coat)
nd
Xerograph
36,7 x 22,9 cm
Unique



Untitled (red petals)
c. 1990
Xerograph with red toner
29 x 20,3 cm
Unique



Untitled
c. 1980
Xerograph
22,2 x 31 cm
Unique



Untitled (glasses)
c. 1977-1979
Xerograph with red toner
29,3 x 22,8 cm
Unique