John Bladen Bentley

Double Transfer Colour Carbon Printing Process
Article by Norah Wakula

"I'm not interested in monumental images. It seems my task is to elevate the ordinary – and make it extraordinary," said John about his work.

John Bladen Bentley's photographs are all captured by a large format camera with colour film and then exhibited as colour carbon transfer prints - an exceedingly demanding and ultra-laborious 19th-century photo-processing technique. Unlike his 19th century counterparts, John did not need to relegate himself to static subjects such as buildings, landscapes and nature; instead he seeks out ephemeral, almost surreal moments in time, in which unusual objects and unlikely colours are boldly juxtaposed, and random encounters (which he considers is the poetry of chance) with a world where he sees all things as equal.

In a world dominated by digital manipulation, John is challenged by the pure act of seeing. His singular purpose is to make images manipulated, not through tricks, but with facts. In 1993, disillusioned by the competitive world of commercial photography, and a desire to get back to his photographic roots, he closed up his studio in Toronto, and armed with an 8 x 10 Deardorff, headed off to the highlands of central Mexico with no preconceived notions of what he might find in his wanderings. He felt mule-like, packing forty-five pounds of gear on his back; in hindsight this was to his advantage. He was so damn obvious, the sheer size, and the antiquated design of the camera, together with his head hidden beneath the black cloth guaranteed his freedom to do pretty much as he pleased. He is convinced that he would have had a vastly different experience if he wandered around with a Nikon around his neck.

John is of the old school where you compose a potent photograph in the frame and press the shutter so all is full frame; what is in the original frame will be in the finished print; NO cropping! He was selective not only because of the content, but also because the 8 x 10 colour transparencies were expensive, and would soon be hard to get. Because of the transition from large format to small format film cameras, then film to digital, traditional film supplies are beginning to dry up.

John processed his sheets of film in bathrooms or on desolate roadsides inside his renovated twenty-one passenger bus, giving him a direct dialogue with the work. He'd know immediately if the image worked, and if not, he'd go back again – and wait. Each day held a new adventure; each image was a new lesson in the many lessons that were to come. His life and methods seemed completely natural and harmonious. There, outside the security of the studio, he could take as many risks as the universe allowed him. "It's always been about challenging me – never a challenge or competition with other photographers. My brother tells me that since I was a little kid, I always picked the hardest thing to do. He says I always made things so difficult. If there was an easy route, I wouldn't take it. Guess it's just in my blood, part of my genetic makeup. There's not a whole lot of quit in me. What I don't have in brains, I make up for in tenacity."

When he returned to Canada he realized that no conventional colour print process would capture the depth, the colour, the richness or the intensity of his new photographs. Whilst researching for an alternative, he discovered the rarest of all photo processes in the history of photography – the colour carbon transfer print – the ancestor of dye transfer prints. Colour carbon transfer prints were theoretically even more beautiful than dye-transfer and even more difficult to make. They were the very first permanent prints fixed to paper, but unfortunately because of its complexity and astronomical cost the process had long ago been abandoned. A few photographers were experimenting with black and white carbon prints with moderate success, except for less than a handful of printmakers scattered throughout Europe and the U.S., no one had made a colour carbon transfer print since the late 19th century.

John began another journey of discovery. For over a decade, he worked in exhaustive research and development to resurrect a printmaking process that had virtually lain on the dust heap of photographic history for over a century. His partner describes his small lab, "you can't call it a darkroom – it is a jungle of wet tables, dry tables, labyrinths of copper plumbers tubing climbing the walls, sheets of Mylar saturated with colour pegged to racks suspended from the ceiling, a mayhem of materials, including some discarded egg shells – and toppling stacks of photographs printed on stiff over-sized sheets of Fabriano fine art paper." The response to John's photographs is visceral, your gut tugs and you feel compelled to touch the prints and run your fingers along the smooth texture of the wall. He lets you, "this one's a discard, after all." You touch it, and yes, there is texture. Not prickly, but you can feel the fine detail under the soft pads of your fingertips; the shapes, the moulding, the carving in the shadows.

Bentley's wild silver grey hair, handle-bar moustache, and calm manner conjure an image of a man from another era, as though transported into the 21st century from another place, another time. He cares little for the trappings of modernity; he's a dying breed, a slow walking, slow talking kind of guy – a man who knows that creating perfection takes time, and doesn't come easy. Strangers often stop John in the street, "Do you know you look like Einstein?" This person wasn't the first to ask and certainly won't be the last. Regretfully he says, "When I was young, people used to say I looked like John Lennon, now it's Albert Einstein!" John Bentley may not be Albert Einstein, but he

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is a mad scientist, a bit of a genius, and a few parts magician, who set himself a near to impossible task.

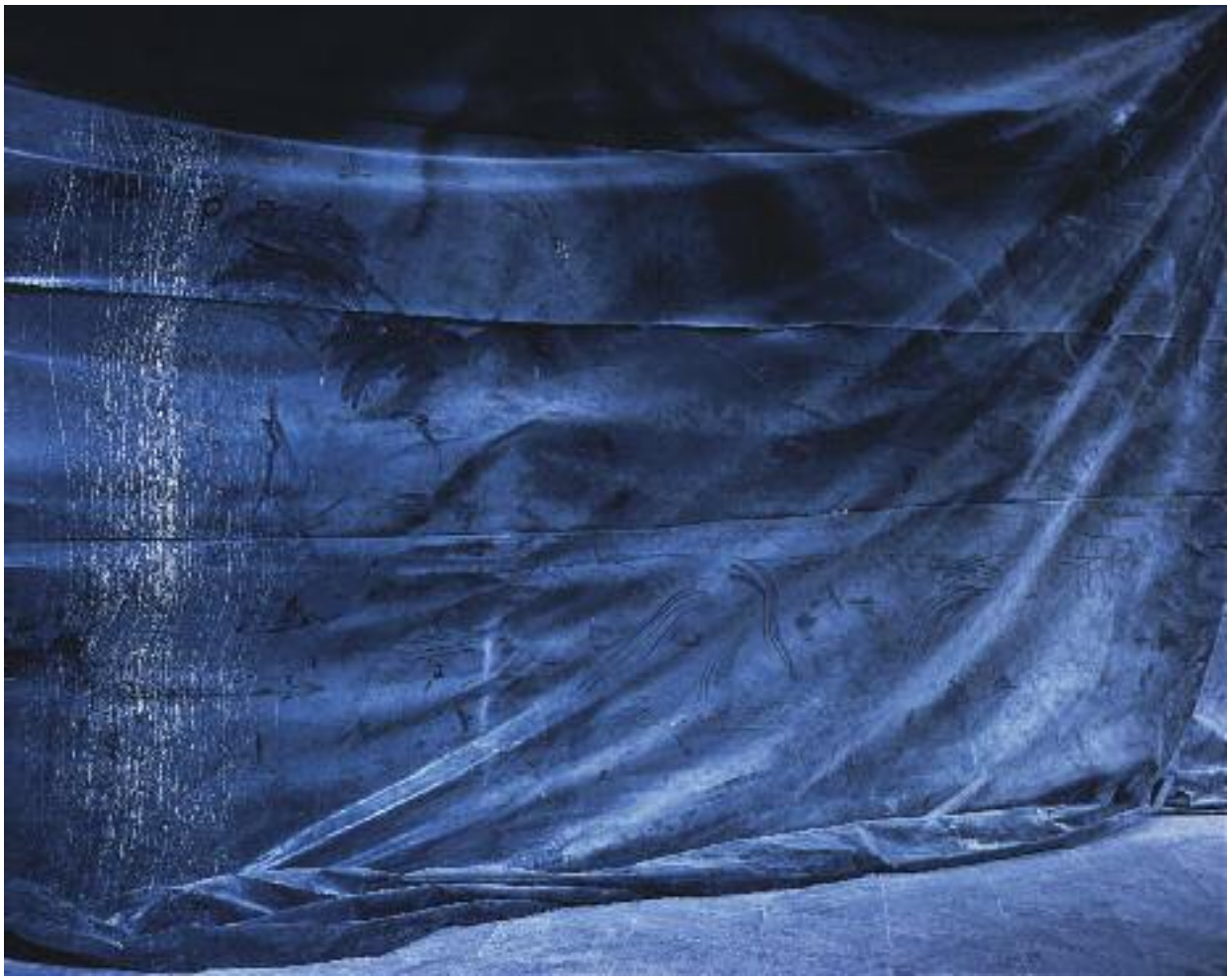
Why does he do it? "The challenge is to go out with a box and make something masterful. You see, what made photography distinctive, distinguishing it from other arts such as painting, was that it was believable – people believed photographs. Any time you destroy that believability, photographs become suspect; you've killed their credibility. They're no longer bearers of the truth. My photographs are straight out of the box, no cropping and no manipulating. What you see is the colour that was there when I made the photograph. When I commit an image to a piece of film, I live with my decision." He laughs, "And, I commit to the twenty bucks it costs me for a single sheet of film. "I'm romanced by the whole idea of photography – working with an antiquated camera, unraveling the focusing cloth and sequestering myself underneath it, the tactile sense of measuring and pouring out the chemicals, mixing the gelatin and pigments, getting my hands wet, processing the film, watching it develop in the chemical baths, and hoping it will turn out the way I saw and imagined it; and finding out if I was smart, or, if I wasn't." Needless to say his prints are 100% handmade and he makes all his own materials.

His work has been exhibited at Verve Gallery in New Mexico, Beckett Fine Art in Toronto as well as the National Gallery of Canada, Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, New Media Portfolio Corporation and numerous private Collections in Canada, U.S.A. and Mexico.

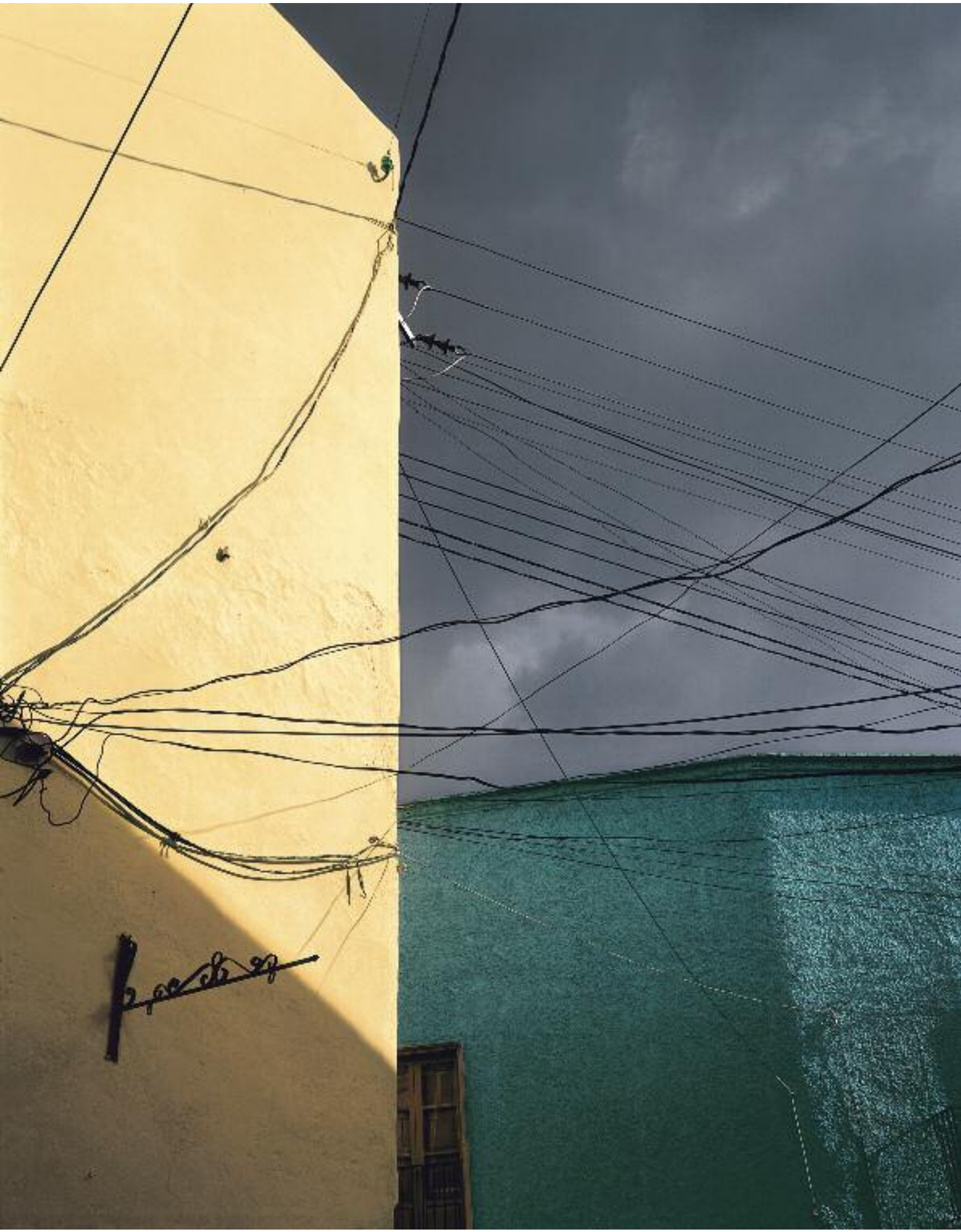
More of his work can be viewed at "VERVE's Online Gallery" at the following link:
http://www.vervegallery.com/?p=works_available_by

Carbon Transfer Printing

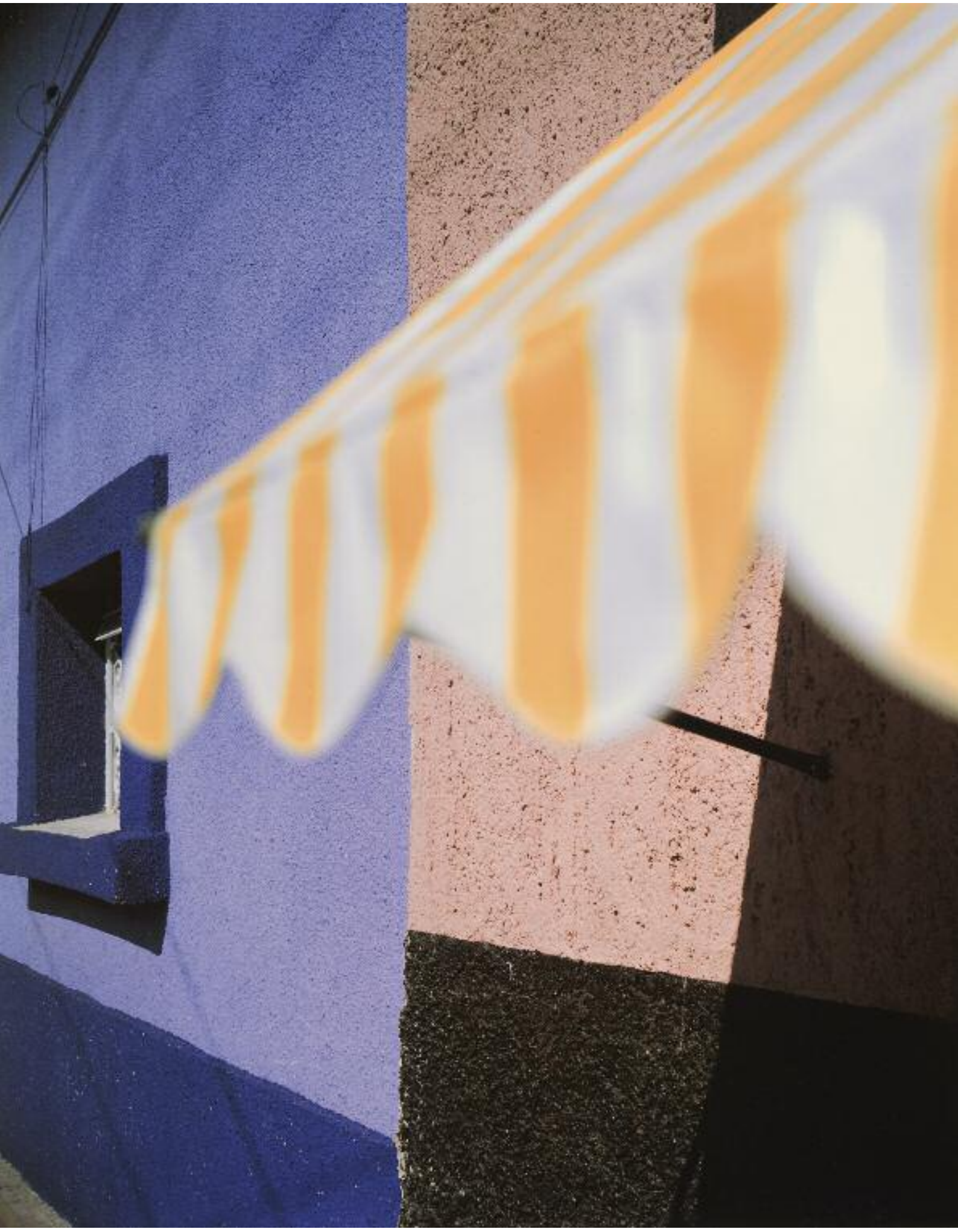
A three part series on Carbon printing was published in Silvershotz Volume 4, Editions 1, 2 and 3. Sandy King was the author and John Bentley had some of his images published as samples of the process. Carbon printing is a contact process that produces a final image where an inert pigment is suspended in a hardened gelatine colloid and placed on a final support; usually paper, but it can be glass or metal. Most users practise the single transfer whereas John takes a step further with the double transfer process. These prints have a three dimensional quality due to the fact that the shadows are physically raised above the surface support, which results in a discernable relief.
John captures the image on 8 x 10 colour transparencies and then produces four B&W separation negatives made the size of the finished image – Cyan, magenta, yellow and skeleton black. He then makes four pigment saturated gelatine emulsions (cyan, magenta, yellow & black) to which light sensitising material is added. The final print has in total 7 layers: 5 gelatine relief layers and 2 gelatine layers. The final print is even more stable than a platinum print.



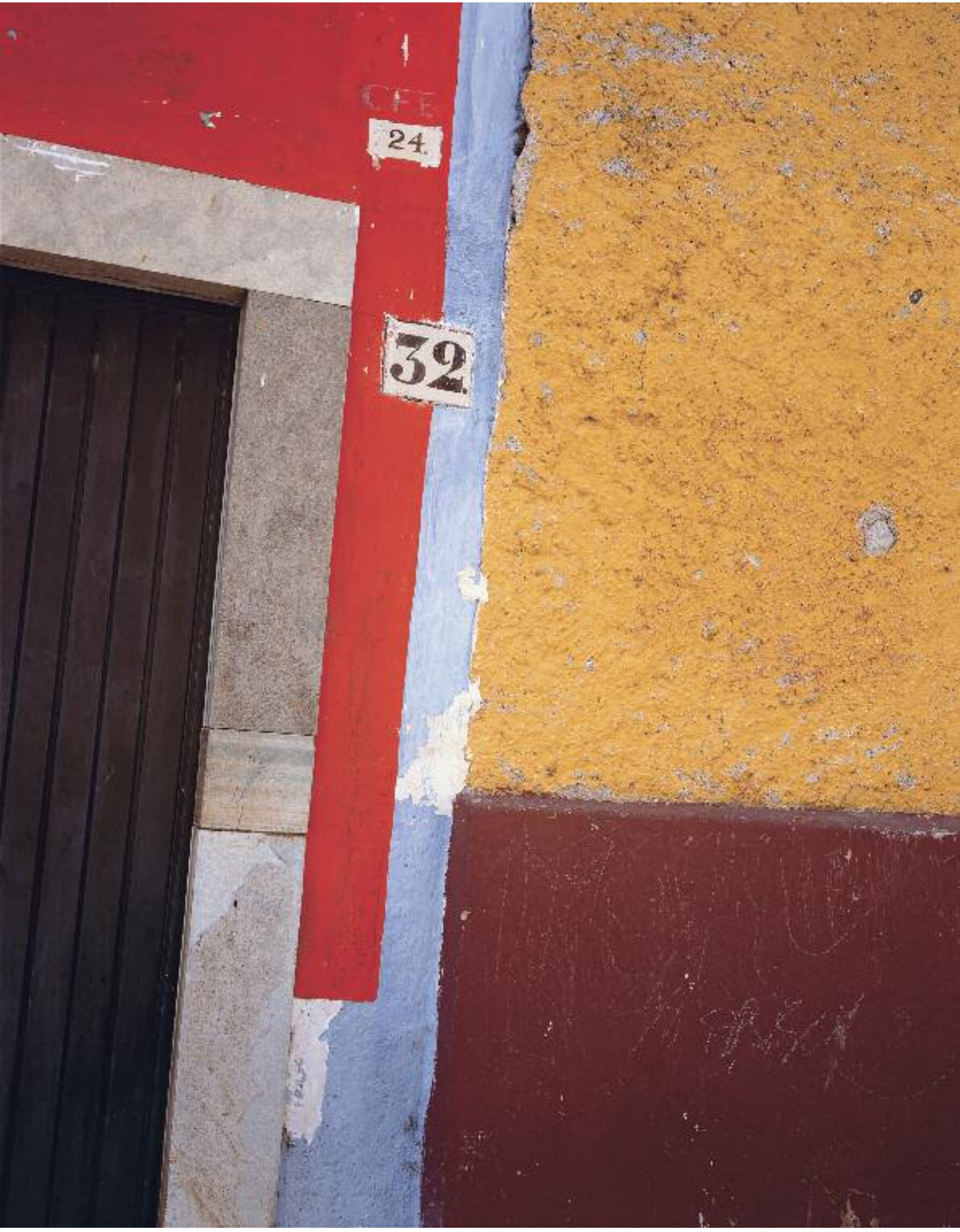
Top: Antes
Bottom: Headwaters



Electrical Storm



Somnabulist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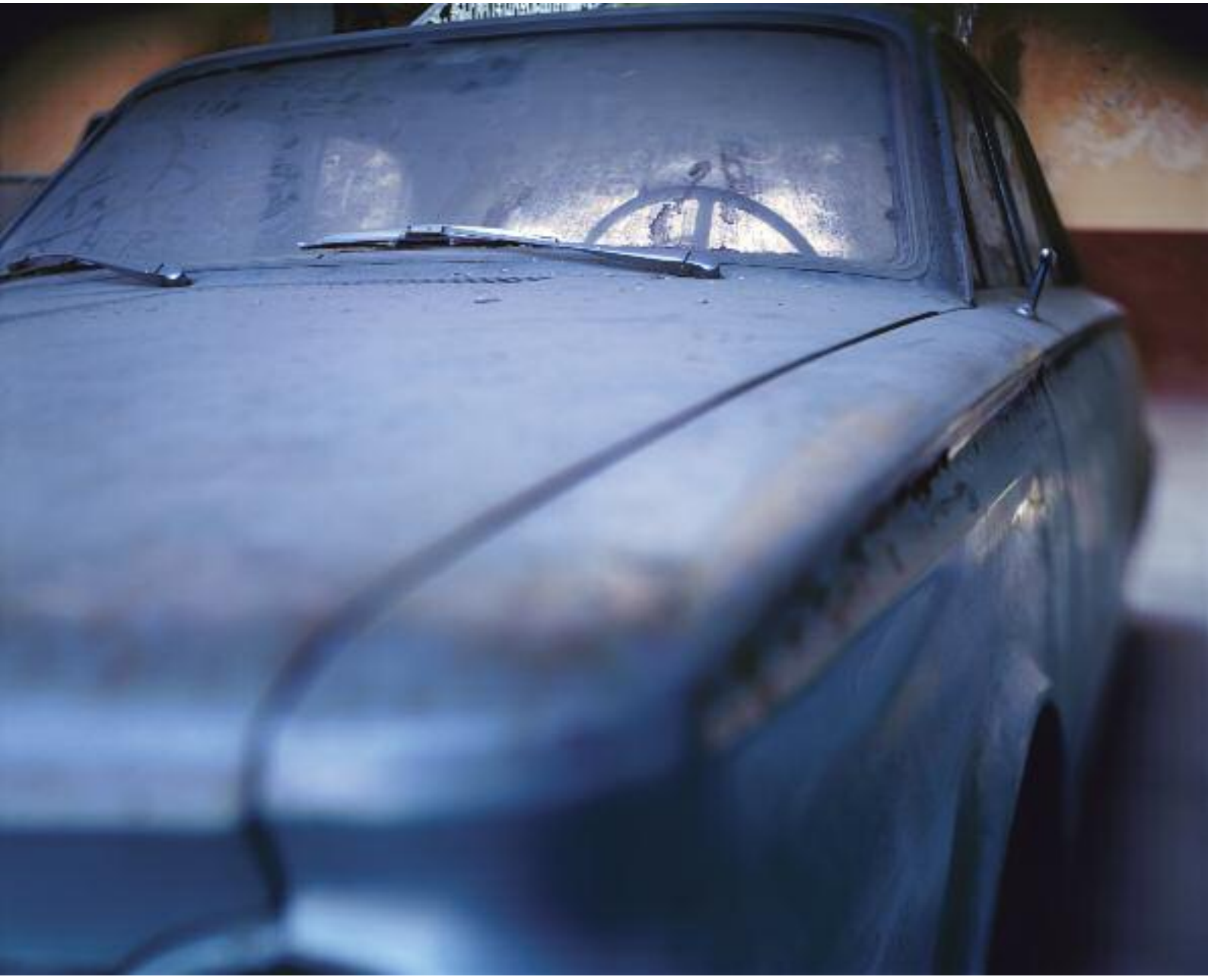

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Water& Stone

Top left: Caballo-C
Bottom left: Church Key
Top right: Carta Blanca
Bottom right: Crazed Window