Eileen Quinlan
MIGUEL ABREU GALLERY

The mostly color work that Eileen Quinlan showed in the “New Photography 2013” show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York this past fall is evidently abstraction yet just as clearly consists of pictures “of” something or other, though what that might be is not readily identifiable. In those photographs, Quinlan—like Cubist painters a century ago—leaves just enough pictorial space to preserve the idea of the image as depiction. By contrast, the twenty-four black-and-white prints (all but one unframed) in her one-person exhibition “Curtains” at Miguel Abreu Gallery suggest that even when the photograph shows something immediately recognizable—when the photo is a portrait, for instance—it does so only in order to vacate the subject, to attain a kind of abstraction. One of the photographs here was called The Voidist (all works 2013), and I got the impression that this neologism might be Quinlan’s synonym for “photographer”: When her photographs are void of recognizable imagery, they point to what this exhibition’s press release calls “the photographic substrate” as the essence of the medium, but this characteristically modernist notion (seemingly justified by the work’s affinities with the ouvrages of such photographic abstractionists as László Moholy-Nagy or György Kepes) is voided in turn by the use of rephotography, which turns the substrate back into an image.

In lovingly mistreating her photographic materials—abrating the surface of the film with steel wool, or allowing the developing chemicals to decompose it—Quinlan engages in activities that could just as well be described as drawing or painting. Indeed, some of the images that were on view here would not look out of place in an exhibition of Christopher Wool (Makers) or Albert Oehlen (Brooks Brother); more broadly, her efforts recall the whole swath of postwar art that Paul Schimmel catalogued in his recent exhibition “Destroy the Picture: Painting the Void, 1949–1962” at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. And the connection is not arbitrary. One photograph here, Passing Through, is based (although you’d never know it without the press release to clue you in) on a rephotographed image of Laceration of Paper, a 1955 performance by Saburo Murakami, one of the artists featured in “Destroy the Picture.” But while Murakami destroyed his great sheets of paper by bashing through them, and Quinlan in turn ruined the emulsion on the negative of her rephotographed image of his action, the material traces of devastation are, so to speak, papered over in her gelatin silver print, which subsumes them in a once again seamless image, now incommunicative yet almost lyrical.

Lady and Tulips show portrait photographs tacked to a wall or bulletin board. The random blips and scratches that interrupt the image, thanks to Quinlan’s darkroom abuse, rhyme with the equally random marks that are pictured in it, such as the tiny holes in the background where other photographs were once pinned. Here, the “middle ground” of representation is bracketed by layers of aleatory evenfulness in the background and on the surface. By the same token, the alternating black and white vertical stripes in parts of Brooks Brother can be read as pure abstraction, but—especially given the work’s title—it’s hard not to wonder whether this might not be a close-up of the striped shirt worn by the man we see in two other pictures, The Searcher and Harry Rag. Just as photography brings Quinlan into the orbit of painting (and of modernist art history in general), her abstraction leads back to representation and vice versa, and damage is subsumed into a new but still provisional totality. “For nothing can be sole or whole / That has not been rent,” as Crazy Jane tells the Bishop. Maybe that’s why Quinlan’s gestures toward the void are not just beautiful, but strangely comforting.

—Barry Schwabsky