AARON SISKIND’S TRANSITION TO ABSTRACT PHOTOGRAPHY: 1940-43, MARTHA’S VINEYARD

A Thesis submitted to the faculty of The School of Continuing Studies and of The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Liberal Studies

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AARON SISKIND’S TRANSITION TO ABSTRACT PHOTOGRAPHY: 1940-43, MARTHA’S VINEYARD

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ABSTRACT

Aaron Siskind was an acclaimed social realist documentary photographer in the 1930s. By the end of the Second World War, using his camera as a tool of self-expression, he created abstract photographs that led to his reputation as one of the leading art photographers of his era.

This study challenges the conventional art historical narrative that considers his oeuvre as fractured, jumping abruptly from documentary photography in the 1930s to abstraction in 1944. The narrative assumes that his friendship with Abstract Expressionist painters, and exposure to their work, beginning in 1943-44, influenced his transition to abstraction. The narrative is buttressed by the fact that many of Siskind’s abstractions predating these friendships have been ignored in archives or, if discovered, misdated. This study presents a collection of thirty abstract photographs from 1940-43 justifying consideration of his oeuvre as evolutionary, with Siskind’s goal of self-expression uniting his documentary and abstract works. This study, based on archival photographic evidence, argues that his transition to abstraction began in 1940, years before the beginning of his friendships with Abstract Expressionist painters.
This study’s collection of thirty abstract photographs fills in an important missing period of Siskind’s aesthetic life. Thirteen of the photographs have never been published. Understanding the life journey of Siskind enriches our understanding of how visual images work and how they increase our knowledge of the world.

Siskind’s transition to abstraction was fueled in part by his desire to create ambiguous images expressing his personal philosophy of dualism, derived from his interest in pre-modern literary forms as expressed in his earlier poetry. This study considers the influence of medieval poetry, particularly troubadour poetry, the prose of Renaissance medievalist Ernest Renan and the poetry of William Blake upon the creation of Siskind’s philosophy. The study not only challenges the dating of this transition, it also re-contextualizes that transition as influenced by his dualistic philosophy.

The title, location and publication history of each image in the collection is identified in footnotes. Siskind and his associates spent hours in taped conversation with his biographer and archivists. The collection of photographs, the tapes and the poetry are not included in the Bibliography.
PREFACE

This thesis is a study of the process of artistic creativity that focuses on one acclaimed photographer, Aaron Siskind, a man shaped by personal struggles in a difficult time in world history, an aspiring poet who picked up a camera and developed an ability to integrate his poetic aspirations into an enduring new form of visual expression.

First an unsuccessful poet, then a documentary photographer frustrated by the limitations of the genre, he started making abstract photographic images of common objects – seaside detritus, driftwood, seaweed, bits of vegetation – that came to symbolize the human condition.

Eminent photo historian Keith Davis, in summarizing Siskind’s mature abstractions, notes:

Siskind sought a newly purified way of seeing, unconstrained by habit or convention. From this perspective, the most trivial subjects had the potential to serve as symbols of the human condition. Thus, the tension, asymmetry and ambiguity of Siskind’s pictures were understood to evoke the uncertainty, longing and dread that characterize every life. From fragments and shards of the common world, Siskind created an artistic realm that was often beautiful and revelatory. The compositions of his pictures, which often teeter on the edge of chaos, underscore an existentialist belief that life is uncertain, meaning conditional and survival a function of individual will.1

My study of Siskind’s successful aesthetic odyssey affirms the importance and utility of the ancient precept “Know Thyself.” His struggle for an aesthetic that would facilitate self-knowledge and self-expression was a lifelong motivating force. It

1 Keith Davis, An American Century of Photography: From Dry-Plate to Digital: The Hallmark Photographic Collection, 2nd ed. (Kansas: Hallmark Cards, 1991), 269.
propelled him from failure to success as he invented a new language of subjectivity for photography and a new use of the camera as an unbounded tool of self expression.

Lessons can be learned from his successful aesthetic odyssey, lessons that can help anyone develop this capacity for self-expression. Siskind’s creative turn, and the personal satisfaction that propelled him to fame, resulted in the abstract photographs he began making in 1940-43. This study examines his transition from documentary to abstract photography, opining that this transition was evolutionary and not fractured, made in community and not as an isolate, producing photographs with the potential of examining human experience at several levels simultaneously through the lens of a camera and thereby presenting a new way of seeing the world.

Instead, his odyssey was evolutionary, incorporating lessons learned from failures into his understanding of what aesthetic product he required to meet his need for self-expression. Failure initially fueled his creativity. His unsuccessful teenage attempts at music informed his later photographs. A dualistic philosophy derived from his interest in pre-modern literary forms inspired the poetry that he wrote in his twenties, which inspired the abstractions that are the subject of this study.

The conventional art historical narrative views his transition from documentary to abstract photography as fractured, resulting from his exposure to the images created by his friends, Abstract Expressionist painters. This study presents archival evidence refuting this narrative. Siskind did not have a flash of
insight while looking at an Abstract Expressionist canvas and understand from this how to express his interiority with a camera. His was a journey of failure and frustration, which evolved into success after summers of camera experimentation from 1940-43.

His odyssey affirms the value of community. It contradicts the popular notion of the romantic isolated genius creating art while sheltered from the external world. Siskind was both gregarious and needful of private time. He drew years of sustenance from his high school mentor, established life long friendships with his collegiate literary friends, some of whom became Abstract Expressionists writers. He was a leader in the Photo League while producing some of his generation’s most valued documentary photographs. He taught for over twenty-five years, attributing his feeling of a successful life to having found a profession that gave him the stimulation of likeminded colleagues as well as private darkroom time.²

Siskind’s mature photography can increase its viewer’s self-knowledge. Not only can the viewer see Siskind’s interiority, his way of looking at himself, but the multiple allusions within the work are also capable of stimulating a response in the viewer, which can increase the viewer’s knowledge of his or her self and the world. For example, Siskind’s image of the rubble resulting from the razing of a theater built in the classical style, with its fractured head of a goddess amid broken,

² Aaron Siskind interview by Kit Schwartz, Providence, Rhode Island, Sept. 28, 1974, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, AG30:35.7.
scattered columns, alludes to destruction, time's passage, personal and cultural losses. Siskind’s wife was sliding deeper into mental illness as Hitler was invading Poland. Siskind created a photograph conflating personal and political circumstances with classical myths, producing a multivalent image capable of resonating on different levels with his viewers.

Siskind’s mature work testifies that the camera is an unbounded tool of self-expression. No one will ever see exactly what the photographer sees when he captures his image. Each viewer sees the resulting photograph differently.

Siskind’s discovery of pictorial value in discarded objects usually thought without significance enlarges his viewers ability to comprehend their visual world. His photographs are capable “of revealing an entire pictorial universe where few others had even bothered to look.”

This study, by correcting a mistaken but prevalent view of the date of the beginning of his shift to abstraction, moves historians of photography closer to the truth about this area of scholarship. And it adds weight to Siskind’s faith in the unlimited potential of the camera for self-discovery. Siskind came to his truth by means of camera experimentation, not by copying painters’ images.

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3 Photograph 16, Aaron Siskind, The End of the Civic Repertory Theatre, 1938, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, 190.19.44.

4 Keith F Davis, et al., Callahan, Siskind, Sommer: At the Crossroads of American Photography (Sante Fe, NM: Radius Books, 2009), 24.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project would not have come to light without the counsel of my doctoral committee. Jo Ann Moran Cruz continually pointed the way through her commitment to historical analysis and hard questioning of relevance. Frank Ambrosio’s philosophic questionings kept me pondering the myriad paths of creativity. Frank Goodyear’s solid instruction in photography’s history and his curatorial point of view firmly anchored my archival research. Ori Soltes’ verbal leaps kept me reaching for the ineffable. I am also indebted to Maurice Berger for his psychological insights in Siskind’s work, and David Gewanter and David Townsend for their assistance with my analysis of Siskind’s poetry.

My greatest pleasure during my years of research came from personal collaboration with Charles Traub, Director of the Siskind Foundation, Bruce Silverstein and Liam D. van Loenen of the Bruce Silverstein Gallery, Robert Mann of the Robert Mann Gallery, Leslie Squyres, Director of the Volkerding Center for Research & Academic Programs at the Center for Creative Photography, Joe Sturbel, Curator of the Still Photography Archive at the George Eastman House, and Jan Howard, Curator of the RISD Museum. The librarians, curators and archivists of the The Museum of Modern Art, The Metropolitan Museum and The Smithsonian’s Archive of American Art made this work both possible and vitalizing. The steadiness of my partner, Pete Bungay, enabled my continuing focus throughout this long process, making it both both lively and fulfilling.
DEDICATION

This project is dedicated
to the memory
of Ira Lowe
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INTRODUCTION

Aaron Siskind viewed the creative potential of the camera as a means of self-discovery and self-expression as unbounded. His work testifies that a camera can do more than simply record the object it is focused on; it can render a poetic expression of the thoughts and feelings of the photographer. His camera was an instrument of limitless invention and expression, capable of endless subjective interpretations of the external world. “No one else can ever see quite what you have seen” he explains “and the picture that emerges is unique, never before made and never to be repeated.”

Siskind’s towering influence on twentieth-century photography stems from his dual career as an artist and a teacher. As an artist, his quest for self-discovery and expression led to the creation of a new language for the camera and a new way of thinking about photography. As a teacher, he helped establish the model of photographic education that continues to this day and impacts contemporary visual culture. He led photographers into the world of other artists, believing that art comes from art. His thoughts about the potential of the camera for self-discovery and self-expression, as well as a source of personal imagery, still reverberate in our culture.

A highly respected documentary photographer in the 1930s, Siskind began making abstract photographs during the summers of 1940-43 in Martha’s Vineyard.

The art historical conventional narrative assumes that his stylist change occurred in 1943-44 when he began to copy, to the extent permissible by his camera, the images created by his contemporary Abstract Expressionist painter friends. The present work considers his transition to abstraction as beginning at least by 1940 and an independent step in his evolving concept of the photograph as a means of self-discovery and self-expression. It argues his turn to abstraction started years before the beginning of his friendship with, and the influence of, Abstract Expressionist painters.

This study discusses his transition to abstraction through reliably dated and recently discovered archival photographs. This Introduction describes the transition with words and images. It briefly reviews the beginning dates of his friendships with Abstract Expressionist painters. It reviews and revises the creation of the conventional art historical narrative.

Three photographs can visually illustrate his evolution from documentary to abstraction and provide a platform to consider the growth of his theories of the camera as a tool of self-discovery and expression.

*Father Divine Movement*, ca. 1935, Photograph 5 in the Appendix, depicts a member of a popular Harlem self-help group selling inexpensive food, wishing passersby “Peace” and at peace with himself. This metaphoric rendering of benign Harlem life was included in the *Harlem Document*, a widely acclaimed photo series produced by Siskind as a leader in the Photo League. As the 1930s progressed, Siskind became increasingly frustrated with making documentary photographs
intended to convey a social message. He wanted to create photographs conveying his personal thoughts and feelings, not his thoughts about the object photographed.

Photograph 47 in the Appendix is an untitled negative made in Chilmark, Martha’s Vineyard, in 1940. It depicts a pitchfork whose handle leans against wooden wall planks with the forked end piercing the fingers of a glove. The image alludes to the domination, subjugation, of one force over another. It could remind the viewer of the devil, a political tyrant, an oppressive relationship or other polarities of domination/subservience, depending on the life experience of the viewer. Siskind, in 1940, began to understand that photographing suggestive objects in a way that accentuates their formal meaning, not their narrative content, could produce pictures expressing his thoughts and feelings.

*Gloucester 1H*, Photograph 49 in the Appendix, dates from 1944, Siskind’s breakout year, when his new style of abstract photography matured. The photograph depicts a glove lying on a wharf. By removing all references to context and emphasizing only the form of the glove, Siskind moved from the description of an object to the evocation of an idea. The glove becomes a disembodied, monumentalized, hand, extruding from a wooden wall, beckoning, maybe hypnotizing, followers. *Gloucester 1H* could be viewed as rendering in visual terms the subjective influence of charismatic leaders, perhaps Hitler or Christ or the Buddha, on their followers. Contemporary, personal and international problems are linked with mythic struggles. Siskind’s quest for self-discovery led to a new
language for the camera, abstractions based on forms, which this work entitles “formal abstraction.”

Siskind’s formal abstractions are metaphors for his view of himself and humanity. He photographed the most trivial of everyday life – detritus left seaside or on city streets, parts of graffiti and aged decaying billboards, peeling paint – turning these found bits into symbols of the human spirit and destiny, humankind decaying, triumphing, enduring. His photographs make no attempt to represent the object in front of his camera in any recognizable way. They privilege the expressive potential of the form and shape and symbolic value of the object over its more obvious narrative and emotional associations.

Siskind’s mastery of his signature style of formal abstraction resulted in critical attention, exhibitions in major artistic venues and influential teaching positions. For over twenty-five years, first at the Chicago Institute of Design and later at the Rhode Island School of Design, he taught generations of photographers and photography teachers. As demand for photography programs peaked in the 1960s and 1970s, many of his students filled academic posts, extending and continuing his new ways of seeing the medium. Charles Traub, a student of

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Siskind’s and prominent photography educator, in summarizing Siskind’s teaching philosophy, notes:

For him, the medium was one of infinite possibilities of expression and, if done well, he had no bias about any form it might take—whether abstract, documentary, experimental, or commercial. Aaron perceived the camera as a tool with myriad means through which someone could find something to say. That is what he taught his students.4

Siskind insisted that his students find their own emotional understanding of the object photographed. Almost twenty-five years after his death, every area of photographic education continues to reflect his influence.5

Of all the photographers of his era, Siskind had the closest ties with the avant-garde artistic community. He was a friend to many of the leading Abstract Expressionist painters, including Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, Barnett Newman, Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning. He showed regularly at the Charles Egan Gallery in New York City, which specialized in the work of this circle. He was the only photographer included in the 1951 landmark “Ninth Street Show” which served to define Abstract Expressionism as a distinct movement.6


6 Davis, Callahan, Siskind, Sommer, 130.
Siskind began creating abstract images in 1940. Chapter Four of this research presents a collection of thirty abstract images made during the summers of 1940-43. In 1940 he had no artistic or social connections with any painters, nor was he interested in the visual arts; he “would rather go to a concert than an exhibition.”

His artistic home was the Photo League and photography was not considered an art form. He did not begin to establish friendships with painters and visual artists until 1943.

Meeting Ethel Jones in 1943, an art student more than twenty years his junior and a professed “culture vulture,” expanded his artistic horizons. He began frequenting art galleries and establishing friendships with the larger art world of avant-garde painters. Mary Ellen “Mell” Beistle, Ethel’s roommate, met Mark Rothko, who was also more than twenty years her senior, while attending a party with Siskind and Jones. The two couples socialized together from 1943 until 1945, when Jones ended her relationship with Siskind. Siskind, Jones, Rothko and Beistle shared a summer vacation at Gloucester in 1944, where Rothko’s friend, Adolph Gottlieb and Gottlieb’s wife, Esther, joined them. Siskind and Gottlieb had been

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7 Columbia College interview of Aaron Siskind, Chicago, Nov. 29, 1982, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, AG30:35/11.

8 Carl Chiarenza, *Aaron Siskind: Pleasures and Terrors* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1981), 52-4. This research is indebted to Chiarenza’s research documented in his written works and hours of taped interviews with Siskind, his critics, friends, academic colleagues and students.
friends in college but had lost contact until 1943, when Rothko’s mutual friendship re-ignited their friendship. It is crucially important to recognize that Siskind’s move toward abstraction occurred before these friendships were expanded and solidified by a summer together in 1944.

By 1943, Siskind was a recognized photographer and a charismatic party-goer, living and socializing in Greenwich Village, the home of avant-garde artists. As a man, he established deep and lasting friendship with painters Rothko and Gottlieb. As an artist, these painters did not respect him. A camera was mechanical, a photographer was a craftsman, not an artist. He recounted this history to Barbara Shikler, interviewing him on behalf of the Archives of American Art’s Mark Rothko Oral History Project, “I was an outsider… [not a painter]… I was very conscious of the fact that I myself knew very little because my whole background had not been in the visual arts but in the written word, or music.”

In 1943, Gottlieb and Rothko were experimenting with abstract styles. Gottlieb’s pictographs were grid arrangements filled with two-dimensional ideograms, not unlike Siskind’s Chilmark 1940 negative images. Barnett Newman, a college friend of both Siskind and Gottlieb, brought Gottlieb to Siskind’s studio to view his early abstractions. But Gottlieb could see no similarity between his hand-hewn paintings and Siskind’s mechanically created images. Gottlieb, in a 1971

9 Ibid., 20.

10 Chiarenza, Pleasures and Terrors, 52.
interview with Siskind’s biographer Carl Chiarenza, opined that Siskind should have continued with his poetry.\textsuperscript{11} Rothko, even as his friendship with Siskind deepened through the mid-1940s, never developed any interest in Siskind’s photographs.\textsuperscript{12}

Abstract Expressionist Barnett Newman and Siskind were both members of their college literary club, Clonia. They remained in occasional contact during the 1930s and 1940s. Newman did not begin painting in an abstract style until 1947. Art historian Leja comments that “until 1947 his (Newman’s) professional identity was in large part that of critic and occasional curator.”\textsuperscript{13}

Two Abstract Expressionist painters, Franz Klein and Wilhem de Kooning, were both friends of Siskind as well as admirers of his abstractions. But the friendship with de Kooning did not begin until late 1945.\textsuperscript{14} His friendship with Klein began a few years later.\textsuperscript{15} Both artists were figurative painters until 1950,\textsuperscript{16} years after Siskind’s breakout into mature abstraction in 1944.

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{11} Carl Chiarenza, Interview with Adolph Gottlieb, March 12, 1971, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, AG87:4:24.
\bibitem{12} Shikler, Siskind Oral History, 19.
\bibitem{13} Michael Leja, \textit{Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s} (New Haven: Yale University, 1993), 41.
\bibitem{14} Chiarenza, \textit{Pleasures and Terrors}, 67.
\bibitem{15} Ibid., 63.
\end{thebibliography}
By the late 1940s, Siskind had cemented friendships with many Abstract Expressionist painters, drinking, laughing and debating at various Greenwich Village clubs. These painters were experimenting with representing their psyches on canvas. This similarity of subject matter led to friendships, which led to Siskind’s place in art history as the only photographic founding member of the first generation of Abstract Expressionism, the most important movement in American art in the twentieth century. His reputation during the late 1940s, at a time when most critics did not consider photography a fine art nor embrace abstract photography, partly resulted from these friendships. His first solo show was held in 1947 at the focal point of Abstract Expressionist New York City exhibition, the Charles Egan Gallery. Egan characterized Siskind as “an artist who happened to use a camera,”17 succinctly circumventing the prevalent view of photography as a craft and not a fine art.

In the 1950s, as a result of his Egan Gallery exhibits, Siskind’s abstractions received critical attention from dominant New York City art critics who championed Abstract Expressionism. These critics had intensive painting backgrounds and little knowledge of photography. They recognized Siskind’s innovations in photography, but lacked the analytic ability and vocabulary to explain his art to their audience. Photography criticism had no canon at this time. They could describe similarities between Siskind’s photographs and modern paintings; they could tell the story of

17 Chiarenza, *Pleasures and Terrors*, 70.
his friendships with personalities in the avant-garde art world. They helped create the conventional narrative.

This work reviews and revises the conventional narrative. The first step in this task is to look at its content and evolution. In 1951, on the occasion of Siskind’s fourth Egan Gallery exhibit, Elaine de Kooning, respected painter, critic and wife of Wilhelm de Kooning, related Siskind’s aesthetic concerns to those of Abstract Expressionist painters. She characterized Siskind as “a painters’ photographer whose . . . work is much more directly related to the contemporary style of painting than to those of photography . . . [Siskind] look[s] for forms as highly personal as any painter can invent.”18 Harold Rosenberg, the dominant 1950s New York City art critic and the most influential critical supporter of Abstract Expressionism in that decade, opined in his catalogue essay to a 1959 Siskind exhibit that “Siskind’s photos are inseparable from painting . . . ARE paintings as they appear on the printed page . . . Siskind uses the camera to establish the continuity of contemporary visual understanding as well as his own personality.”19 Thomas Hess, editor of Art News, reviewed Siskind’s involvement in the development of Abstract Expressionism through Siskind’s exploration of its painters’ major conceptual innovation - the flatness of the picture plane, eliminating


perspective. In his 1965 catalogue essay to Siskind’s first retrospective, Hess argued that Siskind’s “position is unique . . . [he] push[ed] photography to the point where it engages one of the most complex and mysterious issues in modern art: the ethics and aesthetics of the [flat] picture plane.”

By 1965, photography criticism had developed its canon. The respected photography historian and critic, Henry Holmes Smith, also contributed a catalogue essay to Siskind’s 1965 retrospective. Smith discussed “photography’s debt to Siskind,” gave him a photographic genealogy as Alfred Stieglitz’s heir and offered an erudite elucidation of his aims and methods. But he sidestepped contesting the conventional narrative, avoiding any discussion of whether Siskind’s work was derivative of his contemporary Abstract Expressionist painter friends. Smith established the template for Siskind’s critical reception. Siskind’s critics, regardless of training, invariably opt for Smith’s roadmap.

Siskind’s statements regarding his aims are lucid. Again and again he explains his techniques for achieving his signature tension and conflict. But he offers no interpretation of his work and expects every viewer to have his own way of understanding it. As such, both Siskind himself and Smith did not refute the conventional narrative, at best leaving it an open question.


Siskind’s biographer, Carl Chiarenza, enjoyed the full cooperation of Siskind and his colleagues for over 15 years, beginning in 1965 with research resulting in a Harvard dissertation and continuing through his 1982 biography *Aaron Siskind: Pleasures and Terrors*. In a 1978 article, Chiarenza dated the beginning of Siskind’s stylistic shift to 1943, the year he started a relationship with Ethel Jones and began his friendship with Abstract Expressionist painters.²² Chiarenza argued that these friendships were only part of the multiple factors resulting in the shift. “... Siskind’s creative production is intimately tied to his development as a person in New York City at a certain time and under certain circumstances... The essential elements of his photography were fully developed in his poetry of the 1920s.”²³ This 1978 assertion that Siskind’s abstract style was developed partially independently of Abstract Expressionists received no critical recognition. It did nothing to loosen the hold of the conventional narrative.

Chiarenza, in the final stage of his preparation for the publication his 1982 biography, found abstract images reliably dated to 1940 in Siskind’s home negative file. His discovery of the “Chilmark 40” negatives, dated in Siskind’s hand and long ignored in the recesses of Siskind’s archive, will be discussed in Chapter Four of this study. Given the last minute timing of his discovery, only a few pages of his biography, with eight images, discuss the 1940 abstractions. But those few pages


²³ Ibid., 832.
laid the foundation for the refutation of the conventional narrative. “Several recently viewed [negatives] in Siskind’s files, and untouched for many years . . . marked ‘Chilmark 1940’ forces an earlier date for the . . . changes that have been attributed to work from 1943 to 1945.”

Chiarenza briefly describes the Chilmark 1940 negatives depicting objects (fish head, boots, rope coil, gloves) photographed in an abstract style. He considers these images to be abstract, either metaphoric or symbolic, but not intended to be documentary photographs. Chiarenza opined “By radically changing his subject matter, by radically structuring the new subject matter within the frame, and by radically condensing space to the plane of the picture, in these new photographs he forces his viewers to speculate on something other than representation of ordinary objects.”

In separate essays in 2004, Jan Howard and Deborah Martin Kao critique the narrative, concluding that the transition was a result of multiple factors, not solely the influence of Abstract Expressionist painters. Jan Howard’s 2004 essay, “Interior Drama,” argues that the shift resulted from Siskind’s explorations with the camera under the influence of Surrealism prevalent in the New York City art world in the late 1930s and early 1940s. She dates the beginning of the shift to the “early 1940s.”

24 Chiarenza, Pleasures and Terrors, 43.

25 Ibid., 46-47.

She dates at least four of the Chilmark 1940 negatives as circa 1940-43, which does not refute, and could be interpreted to reinforce, the conventional narrative.

Deborah Martin Kao’s 2004 essay, “Personal Vision in Aaron Siskind’s Documentary Practice,” argues that Siskind’s personal vision was honed in his social-realist work with the Photo League’s affiliated Feature Group, which he led in the late 1930s. This “personal vision” served as the basis for his later abstractions. Martin Kao’s research only involves his documentary phase, particularly his Photo League work, and ends in 1940. She makes no attempt to link his “personal vision” with specific examples of his abstract work.

In 2012, Mason Klein published his research into the Photo League archives, which harmonizes with Kao’s research into the Feature Group’s archives. Photo League mission statements as early as 1938 emphasize the goal of personal growth of the student through photography. Klein’s research is limited to the Photo League and makes no mention of Siskind, who left the League in 1940.

Gilles Mora, in his October 2014 *Aaron Siskind: Another Photographic Reality*, the only book on Siskind currently in print, adopted the traditional dating of 1943-

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44 as the beginning of Siskind’s transition to abstraction and explicitly attributes his
transition to the influence of Abstract Expressionist painters.\textsuperscript{29}

Siskind himself contributed to the conventional narrative’s mistaken date of
his transition. He was initially confused about this date. In 1963, during his first oral
history, which accompanied his first retrospective more than twenty years after his
transition, he told Jaromir Stephany that it began during a Vineyard summer
“probably in 1943.”\textsuperscript{30}

But sometime, probably shortly before the 1982 publication of his biography,
at Chiarenza’s insistence, Siskind went over every word of the biography, which
contained eight abstract images dated 1940 and a discussion of the Chilmark 1940
negatives.\textsuperscript{31} Siskind presumably had his memory of the dating of his transition
refreshed. In a 1982 Columbia College lecture he explained that his “1940 …
change [of] style … took place gradually.”\textsuperscript{32} In a 1982 oral history interview with

\textsuperscript{29} Gilles Mora, \textit{Aaron Siskind: Another Photographic Reality} (Austin: University of Texas, 2014), 190.


\textsuperscript{31} John Bloom, “An Interview with Aaron Siskind: Providence, Rhode Island,
Bloom (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), 106.

\textsuperscript{32} Columbia College, Siskind interview.
Barbara Shikler, the seventy-nine year old Siskind dates his transition to “oh maybe 1941 or ’42, something like that.”

This study presents new archival evidence indicating that Siskind’s shift to abstraction occurred at least by 1940. It presents a collection of thirty abstract images created between 1940-43 and given by Siskind to various archives. Thirteen images in this collection have never been seen outside of these archives. The existence of these abstract images argues that Siskind’s stylistic shift began before his friendship with Abstract Expressionist painters. They call for the creation of a new theory to interpret Siskind’s oeuvre. His goal of self-discovery remained the same during his documentary and abstract period. The referents evolved from images of social reality to images carrying personal meanings about his condition and the condition and destiny of man. His experimentation with an abstract style began years before he re-ignited his friendship with painters who would become known as Abstract Expressionists. Additionally, this research contextualizes the shift to abstraction differently. It contends that Siskind’s shift was fueled by his desire to create ambiguous images expressing his personal philosophy of dualism, which was derived from his interest in pre-modern literary forms, particularly medieval forms. This study both examines the dating of his transition and adds a missing element to the contextualization to the transition, considering it through the lens of his 1920s poetry.

33 Shikler, Siskind Oral History, 7.
Siskind's sixty-year photographic journey was an odyssey primarily fueled by his judgment of the primary value of self-discovery and self-expression. His other major goal was to achieve the recognition for his tool, the camera, as a limitless enabler of both of these values for the photographer. This journey was fueled by his search for truth in his interior as well as the exterior world. The truth about the most important artistic transition in his life, his shift from documentary to formal abstraction, is that it happened through camera experimentation. This research provides archival evidence to establish this truth.

Additionally, Siskind, in finding another way to use the camera to express the photographer’s subjectivity, created knowledge hitherto unavailable. This new knowledge allows viewers to see how the photographer feels about the object photographed and what that object means to the photographer.

His mature abstract photographs engaged contemporary cultural ideas about human nature, the mind and the human condition – knowledge gleaned from psychology, anthropology and philosophy. His form of subjectivity, riven with cultural constructions of the “unconscious” and “primitive instincts,” still dominates our world. His photographs still respond to the terrors of the manmade world.

His photographs advanced the new paradigm of the artist - a creator involved in the struggle to discover and to assert and to express interiority. Understanding the journey of this acknowledged master photographer will enrich our understanding of how visual images work and how they increase our knowledge of the world.
Understanding Siskind’s mature work as a product of camera experimentation, and not imitating other visual art that attempted to make statements similar to his, refines his stance as an interdisciplinarian. He freely admitted that his photographs were influenced by other visual art. He advocated the sharing of images between artistic disciplines. This research argues that his sharing came after he understood his tool, after he began to understand what he had to do with his camera to express his thoughts. Once he was grounded in his tool, other visually aesthetic works influenced the images created by it.

Siskind’s shift to abstraction has not been previously viewed through the lens of his literary interests of the 1920s. His personal philosophy, a variant of dualism, was derived from his interest in pre-modern literary forms. As he expressed his dualistic philosophy in poetry, he explicitly acknowledged the influence of Ernest Renan, a renaissance expert in medieval philosophy and literature. In examining the literary influences on Siskind, it is, therefore, a mistake to view his poetry and its derived philosophy through the lens of modernist literature. His early poetry expressed his feelings and desires in ambiguous lyrics capable of multiple meanings. His poetic search for ambiguous words was fueled by his personal philosophy of dualism, a philosophy with roots in the pre-modern world. And this search for ambiguity to express his dualistic philosophy influenced his transition to abstraction in his photography.

Following this Introductory Chapter, the thesis includes four more chapters and an Appendix of Siskind’s photographs. Chapter Two, Early Life and Poetry,
examines the Siskind’s youthful interest in medieval literature, philosophy and poetry, which spawned his personal philosophy of dualism and was reflected in his poetry.

Chapter Three, Documentary Photography, examines Siskind’s photographs of the 1930s, including his veristic Harlem images and his introspective images of architectural fragments made during his summers at Martha’s Vineyard.

Chapter Four, Transition to Abstraction, examines the collection of thirty abstract images made during the summer of 1940-43 on Martha’s Vineyard. This collection contradicts the conventional narrative’s dating of Siskind’s transition as beginning in 1943, when exposed to Abstract Expressionist painters’ images. The chapter examines comments of Siskind, his biographer and agents of the Aaron Siskind Foundation on the dating, history, and description of the photographs.

Chapter Five, Conclusion, summarizes this research and argues that the discovery of archival poetry and photographs evidencing Siskind’s expression of his dualistic philosophy through ambiguous images, both poetic and visual, influenced the beginning of his transition in 1940, years before his friendship with Abstract Expressionist painters began. It re-contextualizes the 1940-43 collection of photographs, arguing their creation was influenced by Siskind’s interest in pre-modern literary forms. It considers the importance of this re-dating of his transition to the history of photography. The chapter discusses the human values at stake in correctly dating Siskind’s transition.
The Appendix contains the name and date of every photograph of Siskind discussed in the thesis. It also lists the page number of the thesis which begins the analysis of the photograph.

Siskind, in late life, reflected on his luck at finding a home in photography. His message matched his medium! His aesthetic message was the expression of his personal philosophy of dualism. His medium, photography, is inherently dualistic. The viewer knows the image depicted in the photograph is a selected version of the objective world. But the viewer wants to believe, and the power of photographs comes from this want, that the image presented is reality. Every photograph presents the viewer with this ambiguity, the photograph is, and at the same time is not, the depiction of the world in front of the camera lens.

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34 Schwartz, Siskind interview.
CHAPTER TWO

EARLY LIFE AND POETRY

Siskind's parents emigrated with the millions of Russian Jews fleeing religious persecutions at the turn of the twentieth century and settled in the tenements of the Lower East Side of New York City. He was born in 1903, the fifth of six children, the eldest of whom was mentally disabled. His father and grandfather were tailors, operating a series of increasingly unsuccessful tailor shops in the front room of the family's constantly shifting home, which also served as a boarding house for new immigrants. His mother was an orphan with no schooling. His father quit Hebrew school at fourteen. The family spoke Yiddish; the overworked and irritable parents had little energy to devote to their children or to assimilation into their new world. As a result of this non-assimilative perspective, his siblings stayed at home whenever they could.¹

Siskind was a child of the streets. Small, quick, smart, and curious, he was rescued by the external world of events and people from lifelong feelings of darkness. "I'm coming out of the dark into the light all of the time."² From early childhood to his early 80s, Aaron's extroversion brought him from darkness to light as his leadership abilities catapulted him into rich learning environments.

At three years old, he was dragged home by his parents from under a bench in Madison Ave Park where he was listening to a concert. He learned to beat up

¹ Chiarenza, "Form and Content," 809-10; Chiarenza, Pleasures and Terrors, 6.
² Schwartz, Siskind interview.
bigger kids to get admitted to the neighborhood gang and was a phenomenal stickball player. At eleven years old, his soapbox oration caused a traffic jam. The police took him to headquarters for a family pickup. He was a leader of the boys hanging out at Harlem’s Young People’s Socialist League and a favorite of the older members. His teenage girlfriend and future wife, Sonia Glattner, was beautiful and cultured with a relatively elegant home that became his after-school hangout. He was an insatiable reader and prize-winning political essayist and debater. Mentored by his high school English teacher, medievalist Garibaldi LaPolla, he was inspired by the richness of LaPolla’s aesthetic life as well as the richness of poetry, which he began studying and writing as a junior in high school. Under LaPolla’s mentorship, he eschewed politics for culture, developing a devotion to the arts that lasted until his death at 81.³

Music was Siskind’s first and greatest passion. Its structure inspired his poetry and photography: he strived for the accents and rhythms of music when using words and the camera to convey his feelings.⁴ During high school, Siskind and Glattner haunted free music venues and avidly listened to classical recordings. Siskind took piano lessons for years, hoping for a life as a musician, before concluding that his hands were too small for excellence. A college composition

³ Chiarenza, Pleasures and Terrors, 6-7.

course convinced him he lacked the ear to excel as a composer, that he was not able to translate melodies from his head to paper.\textsuperscript{5}

But his passion for and study of music continued for the rest of his life. He told Kit Schwartz in 1974 that “listening to music … [was] the greatest pleasure of all [making him] more awake and more alive … Mozart [being] his greatest pleasure.”\textsuperscript{6} When describing his initial reactions to the criticism of his abstract photographs by contemporary critics, he remembered:

“… abstract expression comes from music. Never occurred to me that what I was doing was not meaningful because I had experienced it in the most meaningful of all the arts, music. Here it is: it means the most and what the hell does it mean? The goddam thing just knocks your head off and you just cannot translate it – to me that was always the idea.”\textsuperscript{7}

In later years in answer to a direct question about the relationship between his photography and music, Siskind explained, “I found that even in the early years, that I used to compose my pictures in terms of rhythms. Visual forms had musical equivalents. So music gave me a kind of structural basis and a feeling for a picture. If it weren’t for those experiences, I’m sure my pictures wouldn’t be the same.”\textsuperscript{8} He also set his poetry to music, using musical terms to convey poetic as well as photographic ideas. Siskind’s quest to find an aesthetic form that would convey his

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 9.

\textsuperscript{6} Schwartz, Siskind interview.

\textsuperscript{7} Hagen, Sweetman, and Goodman, “Thoughts and Reflections,” 5.

\textsuperscript{8} Bloom, “Interview with Aaron Siskind,” 114.
personal feelings and thoughts about life led him to music, then to poetry and finally to photography.

Siskind's next attempt at self-expression was through words. He spent the 1920s writing poetry that expressed his conflicted thoughts and feelings. His personal philosophy was a form of “dualism”, believing that bad was as necessary for good as unhappiness was for happiness, that contrary emotions were mutually interdependent. His aesthetic rendering of this philosophy was the creation of ambiguous poems. Despite serious effort and application, Siskind was not satisfied with his ability to find words to express ambiguity; his dualistic philosophy found its mature expression in his ambiguous abstract photography of the 1940s. His poetry of the 1920s reflects the genesis of this dualistic philosophy.

Siskind’s relationship with Sonia Glattner, begun when both were thirteen, changed after her father, Aaron, died during her final year in high school. She became possessive of Siskind, fearful of being without him, and threatening suicide when he attempted to pursue other relationships. Siskind hoped her confusion between viewing him as a lover and as a father surrogate would pass with time. Pregnant during college, “while technically still a virgin,” the ensuing abortion was traumatic. From that period onward, she refused any kind of sexual relationship. Siskind and Glattner graduated from college in 1926. They both taught at New York City public schools and spent most of their time together. It appeared to close friends that they had an ideal relationship. They married in 1929. By 1933, Glattner could not be left alone in their apartment. By 1937, she could not keep order in her
class, which Siskind attributed to overcrowded classrooms. Eventually, he could no longer deny that she was sinking into her own delusional world. In 1937, following unsuccessful electric shock and experimental insulin treatments, she was confined until her death to New York State hospitals. Siskind visited her every two weeks for about a decade. He supplemented her pension for a few years. He ultimately had the marriage annulled in 1945.\footnote{Chiarenza, \textit{Pleasures and Terrors}, 7-31.} He told his first housemate after Glattner’s institutionalization, Max Yavno, that he held himself responsible for the failure of his marriage.\footnote{Ibid., 32.}

Siskind attended The City College of New York from 1922-26, from nineteen to twenty-three years of age. He took English and Middle English and Medieval literature courses, concentrating in Middle and Old English. He stayed in close contact with his high school mentor, medievalist LaPolla, during and after college. His devotion to music and literature was shared and stimulated by members of CCNY’s literary society, Clonia. Barnett Newman, the future Abstract Expressionist painter, was a Clonian. Adolph Gottlieb, another future Abstract Expressionist painter was an honorary Clonian and introduced the circle to the visual arts. Leo Yamin and Bill Lipkind, his summer housemates at Martha’s Vineyard for decades of summers, were Clionians.\footnote{Ibid., 8.}

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\begin{enumerate}
  \item \footnote{Chiarenza, \textit{Pleasures and Terrors}, 7-31.}
  \item \footnote{Ibid., 32.}
  \item \footnote{Ibid., 8.}
\end{enumerate}
The Clionians devoured and discussed the works of Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and other “moderns” of the 1920s. Modernist poets reflected their fast and fragmented world after the Great War, with its relentless pace of change resulting in feelings of loss and destabilization. Themes of mass warfare, racial inequities, sexual liberation and other social changes found their way into poetry. Modernist poets, in searching for new modes of expression to articulate this new world, utilized fragmentation and jagged edges; their poetry unsettled readers expecting the traditional regular meter and rhyme.\(^{12}\)

Siskind, although an ardent reader of modern poetry, did not, or could not, write it himself. His poetry is innocent of post war trauma. It is concerned instead with romantic entanglements, religious skepticism and other expressions of his personal feelings. He seems to continue the Romantic tradition of relocating his feelings in nature. His poems are formally coherent, utilizing regular meter and rhyme. As Professor David Gewanter noted, “They (Siskind’s poems) do not seem to innovate against the accepted forms of his time.”\(^{13}\)

As his biographer Chiarenza summarized Siskind’s collegiate, and life-long yearning, “He was in search of ‘a relation between an aesthetic and an idea.’ Like the


\(^{13}\) Private conversation with Dr. David Gewanter, Georgetown University, Washington D.C., Jan. 14, 2015.
medieval poets he admired, he pondered the experience of love, the omnipresence of God, the individual’s knowledge, perceptions, and interactions with the world.”

Many of his poems utilize medieval settings, metaphors and words, far distant from themes reflecting the carnage of the Great War and the weary urban life following it.

Siskind’s poems express his attempts to relate his own life experiences to what he believed was “the major principle of life in the Western world . . . the principle of duality . . . evidenced in the opposition of good and evil . . . “ The oft-stated mature expression of his philosophy, which he labeled “dualism,” consists of his belief that unhappiness is necessary for happiness, that evil is necessary for good and that the resulting inevitable tensions and conflicts, on both a personal and universal level, are the fabric of the Western culture.

Siskind creates an ambiguous voice to express his dualistic philosophy. His words have more than one, and often times contradictory, meanings. These opposite meanings illuminate the division within him. The poems often are dialogues between his opposing interdependent truths.

This research presents his poems in the context of Siskind’s early interest in pre-modern literary forms, probably originating with the influence of his high school medievalist mentor, and then stimulated further by his collegiate course

14 Howard, Interior Drama, Preface.

15 Chiarenza, “Form and Content,” 810.

16 Chiarenza, Pleasures and Terrors, 10-11.
work. This early interest in medieval poetry and prose, particularly troubadour poetry and the prose of Ernest Renan, combined with his admiration of the poetry of the Romantic mystic William Blake, emerges in Siskind’s poetry of the 1920s.

His poetry was published in the Lavender, a magazine of his literary club, Clonia, in 1926. He printed a booklet, Poems, 1925-27, which was unpublished but presumably distributed to Clionians. He won a medal from Clonia for his poems; the circle respected his poetry. Siskind harbored doubts. “I couldn’t read as much as they did, even if I wanted to. I didn’t have the equipment . . . they had . . . facility (with words) . . . I didn’t have any facility!” Despite his doubts, he continued to write poetry, perhaps because he lacked another avenue of self-expression.

The 1926 edition of the Lavender contains “A Sequence of Lyrics,” which included eight of Siskind’s poems. The first poem of that sequence, “My Beloved’s High Love,” also included in Poems 1925-7, illustrates his reach for

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17 Center for Creative Photography, AG30:28/6. The Aaron Siskind Foundation holds the copyright for all of the poetry of Aaron Siskind quoted in this work. The reproduction of this poetry is courtesy of the Aaron Siskind Foundation.

18 Center for Creative Photography, AG30:28/4-5.

19 Chiarenza, Pleasures and Terrors, 9.

20 Center for Creative Photography, AG30:28/6, 15.
ambiguity.

MY BELOVED'S HIGH LOVE

Line 1
When I love another
You will not say
“O blessed be she, though I
am cursed to-day.”

Line 5
You will take my head in your hands,
And kiss my soft brow,
And whisper O softly,
“You may go now.”

The only certainty in the poem is that the speaker will, in the future, tell his beloved that he rejects her, that he loves another. The speaker contemplates the results of his actions “when”, not if, he loves another (Line 1). The reader is presented with two mutually conflicting views of the beloved. Does he presently love another, making the appellation “Beloved” (Title) refer to a past love whose memory he treasures? Or does “Beloved” refer to the woman he currently loves and to whom he will certainly, at some future time, tell of his future love of another? The latter view seems doubtful, given his certainty of love for another. But the future tense used in the first word of the poem, “When,” seems insistent.

Is his beloved an exalted and idealized Madonna or flesh and blood? He hopes that she will be moved by her high love and react as a mother would toward her son, in a non-erotic, restrained emotional fashion, holding his “head in her hands”, kissing his “soft brow” and blessing his current love as if he has done her no wrong (Lines 5-8). But he can imagine a conflicting scenario, one in which she would react in a full bodied, emotional, sensual way to the rejection of their sexual
and intimate relationship, feeling “cursed” according to the Old Testament view of cursed, as killed, as if he has killed his love for her and blessed another with it (Lines 3-4).

The text and the meaning of the poem are ambiguous. The text contains a double system of mutually exclusive clues available to the reader to interpret the poem. Either he loves his beloved currently or he doesn’t. Their relationship is either chaste or erotic. Siskind has created a poem that can hold more than one meaning at the same time, with each possible meaning conflicting with another.

Siskind’s early reach for ambiguity may have been fueled by his knowledge that Glattner and his literary club would read his poems. His double meanings might permit Glattner to be assured of his present love and allow his literary friends to believe that their relationship was appropriately sexual.

Siskind, in explaining his poetry to his archivists, remembered that “(Sonia) was a great problem, childhood friend, I knew it was hopeless. All my poems were trying to explain away problems by mystical things. Creating an image of her to escape reality.” 21 “My Beloved’s High Love” expressed Siskind’s wishes. What Siskind could not do in reality was to end his relationship with Sonia. His poem unambiguously gave the speaker this ability. What he feared Sonia could not do was to take his rejection maternally, to not view it as a “curse” causing death. His poem

gave her the ability to react to his changed feelings as a Madonna or mother would to her beloved son, an unrealistic but understandable wish.

Another way Siskind used to “escape reality,” to “explain away problems by mystical things” was to set the action of his poems in medieval times, with his speaker presenting ambiguous, conflicting choices through metaphors utilized by the troubadour poets. These poets wrote for an audience that had only come into existence in the twelfth century, a courtly society with the leisure to explore its interiority, to become aware of a sense of self. 22 Some troubadour poets celebrated a consummated love with their lady. Others celebrated the eternal longings of an unconsummated love, described as either impossible to fulfill or deliberately denied.

Medieval historian Frederick Goldin describes the continuing influence of the troubadour poets as follows:

The lyrics of the troubadours . . . have never stopped affecting Western literature. If we read a modern work of any genre in which a beloved one is somehow glorified by a lover’s longing; or in which the lover looks to the beloved not simply as a partner but as someone who gives his life meaning and protects him from failure; or in which the lover grieves and rages over the unworthiness, or worst of all the ordinariness, of the beloved, then, whether we think about it or not, we are reading a work that owes to these early courtly poets the preparation for its existence.23


23 Frederick Goldin, Lyrics of the Troubadours and Trouveres: An Anthology and a History (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1973), 1X.
If Siskind knew any troubadour poem, it would be the troubadour poem, “When the Days Are Long in May,” written by Lord Jaufre Rudel (fl. mid-twelfth century). Siskind would have been introduced to this poem in his college medieval literature course work. Rudel’s speaker expresses his despairing feelings about his “love far off,” an inaccessible love thwarted by miles and the warfare of the disastrous Second Crusade. The object of his “love far off “ is ambiguous, capable of numerous contradictory meanings. His love object could be sensual, directed toward a full-bodied woman. Or his love object could be spiritual. The interiority of the speaker’s spiritual love of God could be expressed externally by crusading, traveling to the Holy Land to prove the speaker’s love of God by fighting to protect God’s earthly territory.25

A *vida*, (short biography) of Rudel, written decades after his death and of little historical value, interpolates from clues in the poem that the poet, while living in France, fell in love, sight unseen, with the Countess of Tripoli, dying in her arms immediately after arriving in the Holy Land as a Crusader.26 Other scholars have

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26 Goldin, *Lyrics of the Troubadours*, 100-1.
used the same clues to conclude that Rudel’s “love far off” was the Crusaders’ goal, City of Jerusalem, standing for a love of God.\(^{27}\)

WHEN THE DAYS ARE LONG IN MAY

**Line 1**
When the days are long in May  
I enjoy sweet song of birds far off,  
And when from there I’ve gone away  
A memory comes of love far off;

**Line 5**
I leave there pensive, bent and dour,  
So neither song nor hawthorn flower  
Can please me more than winter’s cold.

I trust the Lord be true always  
Though whom I’ll see my love far off;

**Line 10**
But for one good that comes my way  
I’ll have two ills: she’s so far off.  
Ah, that I a pilgrim were,  
So that my staff and mantle there  
She might with her fair eyes behold!

**Line 15**
What joy for me, when her I pray  
For God’s love, me to lodge far off;  
And, if she please, there I shall stay  
Near her, though I’m now far off;  
What sweet discussion shall we share

**Line 20**
When the far-off lover will be near  
And tales of solace will unfold.

Mournful and glad I’ll go my way,  
If ever I see my love far off  
But I know not if ever I may

**Line 25**
See her – Our lands are too far off;  
Many a road between us lies,’  
And in such things I am not wise . . .  
But all must be as God does hold.

No joy of love I’ll ever know

**Line 30**
If I have not my love far off,  
None nobler or better do I know

\(^{27}\) Switten, “Singing the Second Crusade,” 70.
In any place, near or far off;
So perfect is her worth, so fine
That for her sake the Saracen
Could me a willing captive hold.

May God who made all things that move,
And who did make this love far off,
Grant me the power, the will I have,
That I may see this love far off;

For verily in such a haven
As her bedroom or her garden
I’d always seem in halls of gold.

Who call me greedy, truly say
That I desire my love far off,

No joy can please in other way
Than possession of my love far off.
But my desire is hindered still
By my godfather’s fateful will
That I should love and she be cold.

But my desire is hindered still.
Cursed be my godfather’s will
That fated me to a love that’s cold.

The speaker first expresses his enjoyment of the long summer daylight hours filled with the “sweet song of birds far off” (Lines 1-2). Birds, as navigators between the celestial and terrestrial worlds, bring him joy particularly during May’s summer migration season when their songs fill the air as they mate and raise families. After the speaker leaves this songful place, his mind is filled with memories of his “love far off” and he is “dour,” unable to identify with anything but “winter’s cold” (Lines 3-7).

The speaker then establishes the crusading context of the poem, imagining meeting his “love far off” as a pilgrim in the Holy Land (Lines 12-14) sharing “sweet discussion” (Line 19) in “her bedroom or her garden” (Lines 41-2). He extolls the
virtue of his “love far off.” There is no love “nobler or better . . . in any place” (Line 31-2). His love makes him able to imagine being captured and imprisoned by Saracen soldiers as his beloved is “so perfect in her worth” (Line 33).

Switten, in her analysis of the love object of the poem, notes:

The complex metaphors woven into the poem’s texture express, as the poem unfolds, a love that is eternally absence and longing. From the place of his speaking, the poet turns his desire toward another place . . . which is the place of possible fulfillment, the far-off land, perhaps Jerusalem itself, the chamber and the garden, the earthly or spiritual paradise.28

The complex metaphors are ambiguous, supporting, at one and the same time, conflicting interpretations of the love object.

Metaphors describing human love, “her bedroom or her garden,” can be used to talk about divine love. Desire for God starts with human desire. Switten further notes:

. . . the object of love is the object of salvation; this is the source of the emotional intensity, the “interiorized” motivation of the Second Crusade. Through words and sounds, text and melody, Jaufre Rudel projects the passion and the desire, the longing and the hope for salvation that set fire to men’s hearts, propelling a whole segment of the lay population toward Jerusalem.29

Both the crusading knight and troubadour lover desire a distant goal, not possible of accomplishment on earth, whether it be the distant lady, Jerusalem, unity with God or paradise.30 “When the Days Are Long in May” was a popular crusader

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28 Ibid., 72.
29 Ibid., 74.
30 Ibid., 68.
song. It adeptly fused themes of the crusades with themes of love, both pursuits being directed toward the eternally unattainable.

As medieval historians Moran Cruz and Gerberding summarize “… (troubadour) poetry has an ambiguity, an enigmatic quality. The loved one is never named and has no personal qualities; often the poetry barely masks another purpose, sometimes sexual … (sometimes) crusading. The poet usually seems more interested in his own emotional state than he is in the love he is courting …”

The fourth poem of Siskind’s “A Sequence of Lyrics,” “Song,” which is also included in Poems 1925-27, echoes troubadour themes as it alludes to conflicting desires in a relationship that is set in medieval times. Does the speaker want his romantic relationship to be chaste or erotic, idealized or real?

SONG

*Line 1*
Pale man and paler maid
Beside a brook on a day;
O that their lips were red
Were red another way.

*Line 5*
Pale man and paler maid;
O which do I prefer? –
Those seated on the bank
Or the dream of him and her.

The speaker sees a man and young virginal woman, a “maid,” sitting beside a brook in a chaste fashion. He wishes they had “another way,” a sexual relationship...

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32 Center for Creative Photography, AG30:28/6, 18.
that at least included kissing, making their lips red (Lines 1-4). This scene inspires a reverie in the speaker. He wonders what kind of relationship he “prefers,” the chaste relationship he has just witnessed or the “dream” of its opposite, an idealized and sexual relationship (Lines 5-8).

Many of Siskind’s poems, as well as recollections shared with his biographer Chiarenza, describe his sexual frustration during the enforced celibacy of his relationship with Glattner, which began after her collegiate traumatic abortion and continued until her confinement in 1937. In “Song,” Siskind gives his speaker the ability to choose the type of relationship he prefers, erotic or chaste, a choice that Siskind was denied with Glattner.

In “Song” the speaker’s only concern is with his choice, his wonder, about what kind of relationship he prefers. Nothing except the words “paler maid” describes, or could be intended to charm, a beloved woman. The medieval setting, the medieval word “maid”, and the double system of mutually exclusive clues within the text create “Song’s” ambiguity.

Siskind’s poetry creates an omniscient speaker who has a measure of control over the conflicting forces plaguing him. In “My Beloved’s High Love,” the speaker will end his romantic relationship and hopes that his beloved will react with restrained emotion. In “Song,” the speaker has control over the sexual nature of the relationship and can choose either a consummated or chaste union. These poems are attempts to gain a kind of agency that Siskind did not have. Celibacy was imposed upon him, not chosen by him. Glattner was mentally ill, dependent upon
him, attempting to harm herself if he left her. He had no hope of an easy termination of the relationship. Indeed, he was never able to terminate it. Her involuntary mental commitment was not what he would have preferred. They continued to live together until she was not longer able to live outside of an institution.

Ernest Renan, a celebrated 19th century French philosopher, writer and expert on religions of the ancient Middle East, was a major influence on Siskind. Both Siskind and Renan believed good came from bad as happiness came from unhappiness, both states being mutually interdependent.33 He was most likely introduced to Renan’s philosophy by his medievalist mentor, LaPolla, or in one of his college medieval literature courses.

While Renan’s life work made him sensitive to traditional Judeo-Christian values, he developed a very modern contemporary faith in the scientific outlook. In his last book of essays, Feuilles Detachées, 1891, he explained his ethics, which were based largely on Christian teachings denuded of supernatural dogma. He explored conflicting aspects of his self in an effort to formulate an ideal self, hoping this idealized self might serve as a model of the human condition. He explored his wish to maintain Christianity’s belief in transcendent goodness while, at the same time, maintaining his conflicting belief in science and skepticism of Biblical dogma. In an essay, “La Double Prière,” (The Double Prayer) he creates two discordant voices, the male voice of science and reason juxtaposed against the female voice championing the mystery of religion and its instinct for faith and poetry. Renan believed that

33 Chiarenza, Pleasures and Terrors, 10.
human nature was dual, composed of male insistence on intellect and of female irrationality or trust in instinctive being. His idealized self would grasp humanity’s simultaneously conflicting wants and desires. In “La Double Prière,” Renan fashions this harmonizing voice of humanity. Renan came to believe that “…a truth, to become true, needs to be completed by its contrary.”

Siskind transformed Renan’s “La Double Prière” into “The Twofold Prayer” composed of “25 Lyrics in Verse Suitable for Music,” which was included in Siskind’s unpublished booklet Poems, 1925-27. Siskind created a motet for two voices, a peasant and his wife, each individually chanting twelve coupled lyrics and joining together to chant the final, twenty-fifth lyric.

Siskind gave physicality to Renan’s concept of dualism by placing his two conflicting voices on opposite pages of the booklet. The reader’s eyes have the ability to see and maintain, simultaneously, written expression of conflicting perspectives. This ambiguity is ratcheted up another level by the motet’s presentation of the contrasting perspectives. Each paired couplet has the same rhyming scheme and syllabic pattern, making the contrasting voices look and sound consistent. But in each of the twelve pairings, the theological perspectives of the

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36 CCP AG30:28/4, unpaginated.

37 Chiarenza, Pleasures and Terrors, 10.
husband are consistently different from those of his wife. Only in the last lyric, chanted jointly and on a single page, is there a superficial melding of the two perspectives. But even in this three-stanza final lyric, only the last stanza is not distinctly either the male or the female perspective. The first stanza articulates the male perspective, the second the female and the third their joint professions of a love of God, which is based on differing perspectives. There is no resolution of the conflicting perspectives, only a difference in the form of their presentation. Siskind presents the reader with irreconcilable opposition.

Hear the peasant’s voice in the first lyric:

**Line 1**

Faith have I in your strength, my God,
Pulse of the world!
That draweth life from stone and clod.
White flame from out a mortal brain.

**Line 5**

And force from what as dust has lain.

The adoration of my breast
Is now unfurled!
God, may this banner never rest.
And when slow coming is my breath,

**Line 10**

And when I seem most near to death,
I feel your presence in my heart.
Hearken! – the urge that makes my body start:

**Line 13**

Pulse of the world!

The male voice praises his God of “strength” as “the pulse of the world,” responsible for all human life, thought and activity. He believes that God starts all life “draweth life from stone,” causes man to think “draweth. . . white flame from out a mortal brain” and act “draweth. . . force from what as dust has lain” (Lines 1-5). He

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38 Center for Creative Photography, AG30:28/4, 1-M(Peasant).
Implores God to preserve his adoration, that it “never rest.” He observes that when doubt arises, he feels God’s “presence in my heart” (Lines 6-11). God, “as the pulse of the world,” lives in his heart and is necessary for his life (Lines 12-13).

The first lyric describes the peasant’s beliefs and his creation story, which parallels the Biblical creation story, wherein God created Adam, the first man, from “dust”. The peasant understands that future events might give rise to doubt, that his faith is volitional. The peasant prays that God will help him continue to believe, “may this banner never rest” (Line 8).

Siskind was evidently pleased with this lyric. It was printed twice in Poems, 1925-7, firstly as a stand alone lyric in the beginning pages of the booklet and later again as a part of “The Twofold Prayer.”

Hear the peasant’s wife’s voice in the first lyric.39

| Line 1 | What other wealth but Thou to know. Throb of my heart? Who filleth my breasts with overflow Of milk to end our children’s cries |
| Line 5 | Shineth soft-glowing in my eyes. Thou art the soothing of my pain. Dial of my chart! Prop of my faith without a stain. Who maketh my ribbed breast rise and fall |

| Line 10 | Save He whose name I ever call? This beating walled within my breast, Praise it! – this voice that rises unheed: Throb of my heart! |

39 Center for Creative Photography, AG30:28/4, 1-W (Peasant’s Wife).
The peasant’s wife of the first lyric, in contrast, believes in a God she
instinctively feels as the “throb of my heart” (Line 2). Her instinctual truth, the
“wealth” of her life, is God (Line 1). Her God “maketh (her) ribbed breast rise and
fall”, is responsible for the “soothing of (her) pain” and milk for her children (Lines
3-9). His love “shineth soft glowing” in her eyes giving comfort to her children (Line
5).

The first lyric of the peasant’s wife recites her belief in God as her father. Her
role as mother is part of the natural order. God created her to create children.
References to “ribbed heart” (Line 9) allude to the Biblical creation story, Eve’s
creation from Adam’s rib, and her banishment from Eden to a life of painful
childbirth and obedience to male authority.

Hear the peasant’s voice of second lyric:40

\begin{align*}
\text{Line 1} & \quad \text{The work of genius is the blossom of Thy word:} \\
& \quad \text{And though my lot be labor sore.} \\
& \quad \text{How good to ever travail for} \\
& \quad \text{Humanity, this earth of Thine and Thou, our Lord.} \\
\text{Line 5} & \quad \text{To be a victim of Thy mighty universe} \\
& \quad \text{Is gladness in the soul of me:} \\
& \quad \text{Aye, know I well all’s made for me - -} \\
& \quad \text{Each thing: the sun’s warm blessing and the black clouds} \\
& \quad \text{curse.} \\
\text{Line 10} & \quad \text{This is for sure: each man’s reward} \\
& \quad \text{Will with his love-work well accord}
\end{align*}

\footnote{40 Center for Creative Photography, AG30:28/4, 2-M.}
The peasant's voice of the second lyric again looks to the Bible as his abiding law. He believes his "labor sore" (Line 2) lot in life is to follow the "genius" (Line 1) of God's laws, helping the "humanity" (Line 4), which God created. He is the grateful "victim of (God's) mighty universe" (Line 5). He loves his life, believing it is minutely orchestrated by God's law regulating "Each thing: the sun's warm blessing and the black clouds curse" (Line 8). He believes in a just God who will reward him in accordance with his obedience to His dictates regarding love and work (Line 10).

Hear the peasant's wife's voice of the second lyric:

**Line 1**  
Praise be this mighty universe, fair poems sing!  
For it is great and good and bright;  
Be praised! Though justice by Thy Light  
Is made to walk our vexed ways a veiled thing.

**Line 5**  
My heart knows this: more sweet and faciles happiness  
Than age-old Justice to all men;  
Oh, might they wait in unison  
As I, resignedly, the coming of Thy blessedness.

**Line 10**  
Build Thou on us and all our years  
Elysium – though there be tears.

The peasant's wife's voice of the second lyric professes her love of her God-given life which springs from her poetic appreciation of the beauty of the "mighty universe" which is "great and good and bright" (Lines 1-2). She contrasts her heart's "sweet and faciles happiness" as she waits "resignedly (for) the coming of Thy blessedness" (Line 8) with man's search for justice (Lines 6-7), which she finds elusive in her "vexed" (Line 4) circumstances. She pleads with God to give her

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41 Center for Creative Photography, AG30:28/4, 2-W.
family the happiness of an afterlife in “Elysium” while acknowledging the
inevitability of “tears” in their earthly life (Line 10). The beauty of the world gives
her happiness in her earthly life and hope for a rewarding afterlife.

The ending lyric, jointly chanted by both peasant and his
wife, is as follows:42

*Line 1*  
Thy laws, O God, these laws  
Drawn from Thy own profundity,  
Borne on the wings of sanity,  
We’ll ever keep as we would Thee.

*Line 5*  
And love Thou gav’st is sacred:  
Aye, we shall break that horrid phial  
All ribboned round in gaudy style.  
Wherefrom upsprings the flowers of evil.

*Line 9*  
To Him, we e’er return,  
Not for he giveth fair gifts and riches,  
But that He made the souls of us

*Line 12*  
Love life and truth, His name we bless!

This ending lyric seems to expresses a merging of the differing beliefs into a
unified whole. The peasant and his wife both affirm the peasant’s reliance on
Biblical law and his wife's reliance on her emotions as avenues leading to the love of
God. In the first stanza, both celebrate the wise “profundity” of God’s laws (Line 2).
They believe their “sanity” requires obedience to these laws (Line 3). In the second
stanza, both acknowledge their emotional commitment to God stemming from his
“gift of love” (Line 5). This emotional bond to “the sacred” helps them avoid evil,
which appears in the feminine guise of “ribboned, gaudy, horrid phial (holding the)

42 Center for Creative Photography, AG30:28/4, 13 M + W.
flowers of evil” (Lines 5-8). In the final stanza, both admit their hard life. God did not give them “fair gifts and riches” (Line 19). But their belief in God has made their souls “love life and truth” (Line 12).

Siskind’s attempt at reconciliation of the conflict between man and woman is unsuccessful. He relies on form to achieve content, his hoped for reconciliation of conflicting beliefs. His final stanza’s joint chant by husband and wife is the only stanza in which they have a philosophic agreement, which centers on the rewards of a god-based life. The first stanza, while chanted by both husband and wife, is entirely the husband’s Biblical law derived perspective. The second stanza is entirely the wife’s poetic perspective. The conflicting perspectives about the avenues to God still differ, even though formalistically they are jointly chanted and presented on a single page instead of individually chanted and presented on opposite pages. The agreement of the third stanza concerning the benefits of a God-based life has not been the source of conflict. The conflict consists of their differing beliefs concerning the ways to achieve their God-based life. Siskind’s conflicting perspectives have not been reconciled.

Siskind acknowledged his debt to Renan by an attribution on the title page of “The Twofold Prayer” – “After ‘La Double Prière’ (prose) in Ernest Renan’s ‘Feuilles Detachées.’”  

He also gave credit to Renan’s inspiration by creating an endpaper inscription to his booklet Poems 1925-27 - “Here are praises for the universe that

43 Center for Creative Photography, AG30:28/4, unpaginated.
rears itself, star-high, from dark pools of our tears. (From Renan: ‘La Double Prière’)

Renan, like Siskind, championed music as the highest form of the arts, capable of expressing the subtleties of thought that eluded words. Renan’s early attempts to articulate his dualistic philosophy of man through words were accompanied by music. In the “Preface” to his Collected Dramas, Renan, discussing his use of music to express the subtleties of thought that elude words, opines:

Modern philosophy will have its definitive expression in drama, or rather in an opera; for music combined with the illusion of a lyrical scene would serve admirably to continue thought, at the moment when words no longer sufficed to express it.

Siskind’s “Sonata: Ave Night” was included in Poems 1925-27. It uses music to structure a poem conveying his philosophy of dualism. Night and day are described in separate stanzas as being both good and bad. Day naturally evolves into night, which naturally evolves into day. Evil and goodness also naturally evolve into each other.

SONATA: AVE NIGHT

Allegro
Line 2
Bethink thee quick of morn
Ere Night is torn
To shreds
And finds a bitter berth

Line 5
In the dust
Of the earth.

44 Center for Creative Photography, AG30:28/4, unpaginated.

45 Chadbourne, Ernest Renan, 122.

46 Center for Creative Photography, AG30:28/4, unpaginated.
Andante

Startling this Earth,
Whose every being
Was wrapt in sensuous sleep,
The golden spears of the Sun
Have pierced the star-eyes of Night,
And they are blind
All Nature-
Blossom, leaf and flower-
Lotus memory it keeps.
But ill content with murder, theft
This slave of Day will add:
Too soon each weeping blossom, leaf and flower
Will find itself of all it tears bereft.
And then revenge when punishment were meet:
It burnishes each boson, leaf and flower
That dared to weep.

Adagio

What will Night be
Chilled by fright.
Ah, what will Night be?-
Bale as light!

Scherzo

The moon a jolly friar.-
Or, too, a doughty sire
Of the elfin stars.-
And it is told
How, sliding down the bar
Of a wicked blue beam,
He sends a star
To learn the secrets
Of us all. He is
The keeper of each soul,
Sweet and foul;
Of harlot and witch
Sterile and rich
This all know,
Since God gave sight,
And man looked up,-
Of the lilting fight
Of the moon, a friar,
and the white robed sun
a perfect nun;  
But know you as well?-  
Astronomers foretell  
The end of this race:  
The friar will darken  
The nun' bright face!

The reader is urged to “Bethink” (Line 1) morning’s daylight, the murderer and thief of night’s “sensuous sleep” (Line 9). Nature’s “blossom, leaf and flower” (Line 9) weep dewdrop tears as the sun “blinds” (Line 12) the stars. But nature is forgetful, “lotus memory” (Line 16) its tears dry, “all its tears bereft” (Line 20) and daylight burnishes each blossom, leaf and flower.

“Bale” (Line 27) night, afraid, wickedly turns upon daylight, “learning . . . secrets sweet and foul” (Lines 35-38) as it darkens the sun. Night is treated playfully, with its moon depicted as either a “jolly friar” (Line 28) or the “doughty sire” (Line 29) of “elfin stars” (Line 30). Or night could be both friar and sire. It is the night’s man-in-the-moon friar that will defeat the sun with its “nun’s bright face” (Line 52).

The first word of the poem, the command to “Bethink,” hints of the obscure, metaphorical allusions that follow. Sunshine causing blossoms to “weep” (Line 15) refers to dewdrops. The sun’s “punishment” (Line 21) for weeping refers to the sun’s heat drying the dewdrops. The sun’s “revenge” (Line 21) refers to the sun’s rays “burnish”(ing) (Line 22) the blossoms. The dark moon wickedly sends his star to “learn the secrets of us all” (Lines 35-6) as “The keeper of each soul” (Line 37) and will defeat the bright sun. In the last sentence of the poem, Siskind uses
gendered opposition with his metaphor of the male night moon inevitably
darkening the bright female sun. Reconciliation is impossible. The moon of
darkness and bright sun daily fight, never achieving a grey compromise.

Siskind often connected his passion for music to his evolution from
documentary to abstract photography. The influence of this passion on his poetry is
directly referenced in “Sonata: Ave Night.” Siskind uses music to structure the
poem. The title word “Sonata” tells the reader what to expect – four independent
movements or stanzas with varying moods and tempos. Each stanza is prefaced by
a musical direction controlling the rate of speed at which it is to be read. The speed
of the first stanza is “allegro,” a quick and lively tempo. The second is “andante,” a
slow walking speed. The third is “adagio,” a slower speed than andante. The final
stanza is “scherzo,” a quick triple time speed.

The words of “Sonata: Ave Night” add to the ambiguity and tension of the
poem. “Sonata: Ave Night,” as well as “Song” and “My Beloved’s High Love,” are
situated in medieval times. But “Sonata: Ave Night” achieves this placement by the
use of words uncommonly used in the 1920s but commonplace in eras using Middle
English language – “Ave,” Bethink,” “ere,” and “bale.” The second word of the title of
the poem, “Ave,” has an ambiguous double meaning, functioning as a greeting used
for both welcome and farewell. Additionally, “Ave” becomes “Eva” when spelled
backwards, a symbolism easily recognized in the medieval era and to students of
that era.
Siskind was also influenced by the eighteenth-century English mystic poet William Blake’s dialectical philosophy of life, which strongly resonated with his dualistic philosophy. Poet Laureate Stanley Kunitz, in summarizing Blake’s complex mythology, remarks:

Blake tells us that the way for the mind to become free and whole is not through denial of the instinctual life, but through a reconciliation of creative tensions and contradictions. The same holds true for every aspect of the social order. “Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence.”47

Blake pits love’s competing goals, selflessness and self-interest, against each other in his poem “The Clod and the Pebble.” Blake’s oft quoted poetic lines are lapidary in their precision – Love “builds a Heaven in Hell’s despair,” as it “builds a Hell in Heaven’s despite.” 48 This inevitable conflict stems from man’s inability to establish “a kinship with the beloved . . . (only being capable of ) regard(ing) the latter as a possession, something to contemplate in solitude.”49

Contrarily, Blake’s idealized woman, Oothoon, in his poem “Visions of the Daughters of Albion” personifies an “emancipated female’s demand for free love” in conflict with the “tyranny of convention.” Frye describes Oothoon as follows:

…(Oothoon) cannot argue or rationalize, but she has passed through sense to imagination and can no longer be persuaded against her own direct

48 Ibid., 26.
knowledge that the world is one of uniform law. She knows that every living thing has a unity and integrity of character, and because it has that there is an infinite variety of life which no law can approximate. The ox and the lion have nothing in common; each obeys the law of its own character, and there is no general law which applies equally to both of them . . . She has learned that this life is a transfiguration of the sexual life of the natural world, and has nothing to do with the refined fantasies of spiritual eunuchs.  

Blake views the “Judeo-Christian (God) . . . (as) a cruel and angry moralist, a distributor of guilts and punishments, in league with tyrants and priests and magistrates and the money lords . . . His real name is Satan, or, in Blake’s private mythology, Urizen (your reason), a dry, restrictive, unloving intelligence, suited to an age of rationalism, legalism and materialism.”  

Urizen is Blake’s mythological personification of the conventional reason of the law and of religious dogma that represses the imagination and sexuality.

The first poem in Poems 1925-27 is “I Deny Urizen,” a dramatic monologue in which the speaker pleads with Urizen for freedom for himself and his lover, enabling them to enjoy sexual consummation.

I DENY URIZEN

“Six days they shrunk my free existence.”

Ibid., 239-40.

Kunitz, Blake, 6.

Center for Creative Photography, AG30:28/4, unpaginated.
Accepting you, making you
High confident as on all other
Days before, singing your praises,
And giving you of my good strength,
Sun-begotten. I fear the burden
Of your darkness as I fear

Life-burial in the denser earth:
Now when the land seems choked with blackness,
The flora of the hill and of the valley
I live in distorted blotches only,
And beasts, bodies tensed with strange desires,

Seek stranger prey: Have I not heard
The deer call on the mountainside?
Have I not seen the Snake raise up,
Raise up its body and flaunt its venomous
Tongue across the sky? Who whips

The wind to dance madly, or smothers
Its breath in the dank earth? He hangs
His lanterns in the sky, and fires
Us with warming philosophies.

What do you hold for me, Dark Blossom?- -

Forgetfulness. Though it be
A sorrow or be it a joy,
Forgetfulness is a dying more keen
Than that last death you mimic diurnally,
Consuming each day with a ugly jest.

What have you taken from me? - - One whom
By day I love, and drew by signs
Ocoul, Compelling to your fields,
To live and grow by nurture of
Abstractions, Logic and Universal Law.

Reason, I said, would draw all wealth
From all the universe about her:
But it has taken all her joy away.
If release is not the end, free her,
Free me: - - I am flesh that wishes only

To err, but cannot, being by
Your might withheld. She would only be.
But cannot bear the burden you
Through me have long imposed on her.
The speaker hints at a conflict in the first two lines: He sleeps in a single uncomfortable bed in a shared room (Lines 1-2); he fears sleep as he fears death (Lines 8-10). He fears his dreams with their primitive urges, visions of beasts tensed with strange desires, venomous snake’s tongues lashing out (Lines 13-19). What, he asks, has Urizen given him? Urizen’s “warming philosophies” have given him “forgetfulness,” which he considers a “dying more keen . . . (than sleep) consuming each day with a ugly jest” (Lines 24-29). What, he asks, has Urizen taken from him? Urizen’s reason has taken his lover, who cannot bear the burden of Urizen’s reason; it has “taken all her joy away” (Lines 30-38). He views his lover as “ocoult,” possessing esoteric knowledge that allows her to exist in the world without the burdens that reason imposes. He hoped that reason would “draw all wealth from all the universe about her” (Line 35). For him, reason has an unbounded potential and utility for engaging with the world (Lines 33-36). But his lover is different; reason robbed her of an innocent joy. He asks Urizen if release from her “ocoult” way of looking at the world and conversion to his understanding of reason is possible. If not, he pleads with Urizen to free both of them from the burden of his reason, allowing them to enjoy “flesh” (Lines 35 to 43).

The poem’s speaker views his loved one’s plight, her joyless existence, as resulting from his insistence that she employ reason to comprehend the world, instead of allowing her to simply be in the world. His responsibility is similar to the
responsibility Siskind felt for Glattner’s plight. The speaker drew his loved one by “signs ocoult” (Lines 31-32), her perspective on the world was grounded in esoteric knowledge with its own unique rationale which enabled her to successfully deal with her world. Glattner’s increasing mental illness is “hopeless.” Siskind attempts in his poetry to make it appear “mystical” as a way of escaping this reality. The lover in the poem is an enigma, a respected entity that the speaker reveres yet cannot possibly understand. Glattner’s delusions are of a different order.

The poem is rife with ambiguity. The title, “I Deny Urizen,” implies that the speaker is freeing himself from the shackles of Urizen’s reason. The body of the poem, wherein he pleads with Urizen for his freedom, implies he needs Urizen to release him, that this release is “being by Your might withheld” (Line 41). Most of the poem describes the speaker’s use of reason. He asks Urizen “What do you hold for me?” He later asks Urizen “What have you taken from me?” But the speaker cannot consider these questions as reasoning. The title “I Deny Urizen” conflicts with the body of the poem. The title is what the speaker wishes for, the ability to deny Urizen. The body of the poem describes what he views as his individual reality; his need for Urizen to release him from conventional reason.

53 Chiarenza, Pleasures and Terrors, 32

54 Johnson and Pitts, Siskind interview, (DVD 1 of 6).

The poem describes the conflict between the speaker’s belief in conventional reason and his lover’s belief in the instinctual life. The speaker describes the differing perspectives, his belief in the nurturance of “Abstractions, Logic and Universal Law” (Lines 33-34) and his lover’s instinctual life, which he describes as “signs occult” (Line 33). These occult beliefs resemble Oothoon’s naturalistic philosophy, that “there can be no general law because there is an infinite variety of life which no single law can approximate, that this life is a transfiguration of the sexual life of the natural world.” The speaker wants, but may not be able to, choose the instinctual life. There is ambiguity between the title of the poem, the speaker’s ability to deny Urizen, and the body of the poem, where he seemingly abdicates this ability, needing Urizen’s to free him from conventional reason. This ambiguity supports two different, conflicting, interpretations of the poem.

Another poem in his unpublished booklet, Poems 1925-27, is directly attributed to Blake.

TO A BLAKE ENERGY

Line 1
She is a bright gold star
Fell down in this muddy pool,
Nor can its darkness darken
It, its coldness cool.

Line 5
She is the field’s green grass
Trod down by us all,
She is the sky’s deep blue
The clouds ne’er long can shawl.

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56 Frye, Symmetry, 239.

57 Center for Creative Photography, AG30:28/4, 17.
And who would think to love her
   Would dare embrace a flame;
And who would think to call her,
   She who has no name?

Earth, you have tears enough
   For all her weeping;
But have you joy enough
   For her white soul's keeping?

This poem resonates with the Blakian theme of irreconcilable opposites. The speaker ascribes to the female subject of his poem multiple conflicting attributes. She is a "bright gold star" (Line 1) fallen into Earth's "muddy pool" (Line 2); she is defenseless as "grass trod down by us all" (Lines 5-6) while seemingly impervious as "sky's deep blue the clouds ne'er long can shawl" (Lines 7-8); and most compellingly, the poem intimately explores its female subject, and yet she remains completely unapproachable, for she is never named.

The poem alludes to Blake's view of woman as instinctual, similar to his idealized Oothoon. She is described in terms of nature. He is describing indomitable nature, above man's conventional reason, whose "flame" could engulf man. But she presents the possibility of ecstatic, mystical joy. The poem presents the polarities of death and ecstasy. It does not resolve these different perspectives on the potential of life. The poems title is apt – "To a Blake Energy." Its woman is a metaphor for an energy, a force, perhaps an ecstatic state of mind, that does not deny her instinctual life, but is able to reconcile its creative tensions and contradictions.
“To a Blake Energy” was written between 1925-27. By 1937, Glattner’s mental state had deteriorated to the point where she could not be left alone. Siskind denied her illness almost until her institutionalization in 1937. It is tempting to interpret this poem as Siskind’s attempt to understand her varying moods in a mystical way, his way of escaping a hopeless situation.

Chiarenza, distilling many hours of conversation with Siskind on the subject of Glattner, notes:

It was indeed a powerful bond, one that gave Aaron reason to turn many of Sonia’s failings into a mysterious, enigmatic personality. In fact, the contrasts between Aaron and Sonia were not simply those of distinct personalities, but those that exist when one of the lovers – Sonia – treads the line between sanity and insanity. Of this Aaron was unaware for many years.

Though Chiarenza asserts that William Blake was “the most important influence on Siskind at this time,” it seems that Renan’s poetic tradition permeates Siskind’s written work. Siskind continually asserts that his search for an aesthetic to communicate his dualistic philosophy is the thread linking his disparate aesthetic pursuits of music, poetry and photography. Renan, a celebrated medievalist with whose work Siskind was probably familiar during his collegiate Middle English and Medievalist Literature studies, articulates this dualistic philosophy. Siskind’s

58 Chiarenza, Pleasures and Terrors, 28. Siskind, in 1937, believed Glattner’s inability to maintain order in her classroom was a result of overcrowded classrooms and undisciplined children.

59 Ibid., 9.

60 Chiarenza, Pleasures and Terrors, 10.
inscription to his Poems 1925-27 is a fragment of his transformation of Renan’s “La Double Prière.” Renan’s early attempts to articulate his dualistic philosophy of man were accompanied by music. Siskind used music as a way to structure both his poetry and his photography.

Siskind’s philosophy of dualism necessitated his quest to create ambiguous poetry. His ambiguity is created in different ways. It is often created by using words having multiple, contradictory meanings. Gendered opposition often creates it, with the male perspective conflicting with the female perspective. Placing the situation in medieval times and using obscure metaphors sometimes create his ambiguity. This search for ambiguity was influenced by his interest in pre-modern literary forms, particularly medieval poetry, the prose of medievalist Ernest Renan and the poetry of William Blake.

In 1930, Siskind received a gift camera to memorialize his honeymoon with Glattner. He was surprised and delighted with the first pictures he produced with this camera. He stopped the “agony” of writing poetry.\(^6^1\) He began to explore the camera as an avenue to the personal expression of his dualistic philosophy.

\(^6^1\) Shikler, Siskind Oral History, 4.
CHAPTER THREE

DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY

Siskind's poetry and photography sought to express his dualistic philosophy, which was derived from his youthful study of pre-modern literary forms. His dualism found expression in the creation of ambiguous aesthetic works. His poetic search for ambiguous words in the 1920s is echoed in his photographic search for ambiguous images in the 1930s.

His poems and photographs, while both reaching for ambiguity to express dualism, differ in an important way. His poetry did not express contemporary styles of modernity. The poems harkened back to earlier times and echo earlier poetic styles. But his photographs of the 1930s and 1940s reflect, from their initial inception, the contemporaneous photographic style of modernity. Siskind started out, and continued for his entire sixty years as a picture maker, to be a modernist “straight photographer.” He was against the fuzzy, soft focused, sentimental pictorialist style of picture making that made photographs resemble paintings in order to achieve the elevated status of “art.”

In 1930, after receiving his gift camera and abandoning his poetic endeavors, Siskind started a two year solitary study of photography. He made his negatives by following the camera manufacturer’s instruction. He relied on a drugstore to process his prints.¹

Forty years later, when viewing Photograph 1, a view of a nighttime skyscraper, Siskind expressed delight with “his first photograph [taken with] a box camera . . . [the photograph was] genre and technically naïve . . . [but] I could hardly make a bad picture.”

Siskind quickly discovered the expressive potential of photography, learning to create visual metaphors and utilize sophisticated camera and darkroom techniques to convey his personal thoughts about his subjects. He built on his understanding of the power of ambiguity, learned in his dozen plus years of writing poetry, to express his dualistic thoughts and feelings. He crafted ambiguous poems by using words that had multiple, often conflicting meanings.

His earliest photographs can be interpreted as simple images of what was obviously in front of his camera lens. The same photograph can be viewed as an image deliberately constructed to and capable of conflicting interpretations, depending upon the perspective of the viewer.

Siskind used contrast to create photographs conveying his dualistic philosophy. Black and white tones are inherently dualistic, capable of blending into each other. Black can become white, as white can become black, as good can become bad and happiness can become unhappiness. Use of contrast filters in the darkroom can darken black and lighten white tones. These filters can also lighten

\footnote{Aaron Siskind, Untitled, no date, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, 76.6.27.}

\footnote{Johnson and Pitts, Siskind interview, (DVD 1 of 6), 78:048.}
black and darken white tones. This contrast adds visual tension and conflict to the photograph and increases ambiguity.

Two photographs, *May Day Parade* and *New York City*, from his period of solitary apprenticeship illustrate his early growth. By this time, Siskind had upgraded his box camera to a professional camera. Both photographs are pre-conceived, not snapshots, utilizing a tripod to gain the long exposure time necessary to give fine details of the subject matter. Neither are social documents concerned with economic class or the depression era poor. His primary concern is with form and presenting his subject matter formally. His tight framing and selective use of contrast created highly personal, metaphoric statements.

*May Day Parade,* Photograph 2, ca. 1932, illustrates his early mastery of metaphor and photographic technique. A policeman on horseback is maintaining order in the Communist Party May Day Parade. The image could be viewed simply as a picture using an innovative framing device – a horse framing the parade crowd. It could also be viewed as a statement about overwhelming state authority. Tight framing merges the horse and policeman into a monolithic authority symbol. By focusing on the near horse with paraders in the far background, the foregrounded horse is giant-sized and could easily trample the relatively smaller crowd. Because the camera is only capable of rendering a two-dimension image, without depth, it seems that part of the crowd is under the horse instead of behind it. The

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4 Aaron Siskind, *May Day Parade,* ca. 1932, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, 76.6.53.
foregrounded policemen’s body is headless, cropped by the top of the rectangular picture frame at chest height. But most of the horse’s head is within the frame, allowing the illusion that the horse and rider are one and the same. The angle of the policemen’s seated body, from buttocks to lower chest, reflects the curve of the rear of his horse. The policeman has his horse tightly reined in, with his stirrups pressed into the stomach of the horse, demonstrating his ability to direct the horse’s heft and power onto the relatively powerless crowd. If Siskind had wanted to simply record the event of the parade, instead of his feelings and thoughts about authority, and the excessive differential between those in power and those out of power, he could have done so by moving his camera a few feet to the left and creating another picture of a mounted policeman reacting to the parade. This alternative picture would depict a mounted policeman on the edge of the parade, at a size realistically proportional to the crowd, not a gigantic force with people captive under it. The full body of the policeman and his horse would be visible, defeating their merger into a giant creature. The other horse is relaxed. The policeman’s reins and stirrups are loose. The crowd is relaxed. One member of the parade is preparing to play his saxophone.

Contrast helped to create the menacing policemen. Siskind’s darkroom manipulation of the relationship of black and white tones made the dark horse darker and the crowd lighter. The almost black horse and policemen’s uniform stand in ominous contrast to the grey tones of the crowd and background buildings.
New York City,5 Photograph 3, ca. 1930s, also illustrates Siskind’s early reach for an ambiguous image. It could be viewed simply as the nighttime New York City skyline. It could also be viewed as a moody version of Siskind’s feelings about the modernistic skyscrapers of business barons dwarfing old New York. It is symbolic of modern New York City straining to be the mightiest city in the world. The point of view from which it was taken emphasizes the disproportion between the giants of industry inhabiting skyscrapers and their smaller-sized neighbors. The photograph might symbolize the prevalent unequal distribution of wealth. It might be a comment on the difference between old and new New York, side by side, with new New York encroaching, perhaps violently or unfairly, on the smaller historical city. These skyscrapers reach to the clouds, symbolizing their makers’ might. The dark buildings set against the much lighter clouds creates a mood of menace. The framing accentuates this menace. The skyscraper army still has room to dominate. They are massed together; their territorial ambitions are not satisfied. There is space on the left, right and top of the frame for the skyscrapers to take over the rest of the land and encroach even more on the view of the clouds. There are no medium-sized buildings with the strength to defeat this encroachment. Either the building is sky high or it is less than half the size of the skyscraper. This distorted effect is achieved by Siskind’s camera angle. He pointed his camera from a low

5 Aaron Siskind, New York City, ca. 1930s, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, 76.6.39.
vantage point, tipping it at an extreme angle to emphasize the verticality of the skyscrapers in contrast with their much smaller neighbors.

Siskind realized he needed help in mastering his camera. He joined his neighborhood camera club, the New York Worker’s Film and Photo League (NYWFPL), precursor to the Photo League, in 1932. The organization had its own exhibition space, sponsored lectures by leading photographers, held classes in photography and encouraged an informal salon discussing issues of photography. The club’s 1933 *America Today* show contained the first public exhibition of Siskind’s work, *May Day Parade*, Photograph 2. The NYWFPL was committed to using veristic documentary photography to achieve social reforms and advance the Communist Party’s agenda. Members believed that creating photographs depicting the human face of poverty, illiteracy and discrimination would catalyze improvement in depression-era slums. The veristic photographer did not reveal personal feelings about the subject matter. Simply showing personal tragedy produced by the depression, which was caused by the capitalistic system, would bring about improvement.

Photography historian Davis, in remarking on the principles of the Photo League and presumably its predecessor, the NYWFPL, notes:

> The passion for social justice, and a faith in the basic dignity of human life, lay at the heart of the Photo League’s activities. Photo League photographers

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6 Chiarenza, “Form and Content,” 17-22.

7 Rhem, *Aaron Siskind*, 16.
sought an emotional as well as political understanding of their subjects... their images depicted the rhythms of daily life in the deeply sympathetic manner, even when their subject matter was gritty... pictures encouraged an essential respect for the humanity of those depicted. 8

Siskind quickly became head of the club’s exhibitions committee, necessitating continuing liaison with Communist Party administrators to decide the subject matter of pictures to be made and exhibited. He became frustrated with this political interference in the artistic realm. “Sometimes a guy would get up and make a speech, ‘no more photographs of bums and broken down houses, we have to emphasize the working man is noble.’ Then a year later we would go back to bums.” 9 Siskind, when pressured to join the Communist Party in 1935, 10 resigned.

*New York,* 11 Photograph 4, ca. 1932, is an example of an omnipresent street scene deliberately composed to radiate ambiguity, with multiple conflicting meanings. It is one of the many Siskind images of bums. Although many NYWFPL photographers were taking veristic pictures of this common subject matter in the early 1930s, Siskind adds ambiguity to this stock image. The photograph is centered on a group of men huddled in a circle around a fire on an open sidewalk of an

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8 Keith Davis, *An American Century of Photography: From Dry-Plate to Digital,* (Kansas: Hallmark Cards, 1999), 163.


11 Aaron Siskind, *New York,* ca. 1932, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, 76.6.4.
uncrowned commercial intersection in a poor part of the city. It is freezing winter, given the long, heavy overcoats of the hatted men. It is probably early Sunday morning, given Siskind's preference for shooting urban architectural scenes at that time. Dark shadows at the far right of the image argue for a strong rising morning sun. The men have probably spent the night in their circle, given their lethargic postures resembling sleeping positions and crouching fetal-like poses. Some of the back grounded buildings have vacant boarded-up units, certainly warmer than the outside sidewalk but unavailable to the homeless men. The circle is partially delineated by scrap material, probably gathered by the men as fuel for the fire. There is no sign of food. The men seem unconnected to each other and to Siskind. There is no eye contact between the members of the group or with any of the group and Siskind. The group is emotionally isolated, probably huddled together, even regularly huddling together, for the security offered by a sometimes busy intersection rather than a secluded park.

A sign high above the circle reads “DOST THOU BELIEVE IN THE SON OF GOD.” It is hardly visible at the top center of the frame. The center man in the circle is centered on the sign, with bowed head. The smoke of the fire rises indistinctly to the sign. There are other billboard signs lower to the ground advertising consumer goods. Two cars are on the mostly vacant streets. A dark-suited man with his hands in his pockets is jauntily moving away from the group off to the left side of the image.
The photograph offers evidence of Siskind’s deliberate compositional approach. He did not just happen upon this scene. It came about as the result of conscious choice. He probably did not have the ability to dictate poses and positions, but he did position his tripod to center the central man in the circle directly underneath the Biblical quote, with smoke directing the viewer’s eye up to the sky-high quote. He did place his camera to get the backs of the men and not their faces. He did pick a cold winter Sunday morning to shoot the regular homeless sleeping spot located beneath the provocative signage. If he had moved his camera a few feet to the right of the central man, a more visible consumer billboard would have formed the background. Siskind lacked the powerful lens required to get the biblical quote in sharp focus. But he positioned himself to maximize its visibility.

This photograph also illustrates Siskind’s early use of poetic ambiguity. The huddled mass of homeless men simultaneously alludes to Biblical passages describing the Last Supper and Jesus reaching out to the poor and Karl Marx’s view that “religion is the opium of the people.” Ideas underlying these tropes can all be found in the image in spite of the contradictoriness of their message.

The Last Supper allusion can be based on the circle of men, seated around a fire offering a meal under the shelter of the “DOST THOU BELIEVE IN THE SON OF GOD” command sign. The fire’s smoke conjuring ritual sacrifice offered to a supreme deity is emphasized by the crouching, kneeling positions of the celebrants. The single similarly dark-coated man leaving the group with a brisk jaunty stride could be Judas, in a different ideational and emotional state from the group he has
just deserted. The sign itself commanding belief in Jesus could symbolize Jesus reaching out, giving spiritual comfort, to the homeless men under its shelter.

The import of the image may also refer to the directive of the Statue of Liberty “Bring me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses,” which could be ironically alluded to. These immigrants find no land of opportunity in this slum. No hope for economic betterment. Slumlords board up windows to keep them on the streets in the cold. No one offers food or jobs, in spite of the visibility of their plight. They offer no solace to each other. The closest they come to the American dream is the sight of cars on public streets and consumer goods on billboards.

The Marxian belief that capitalism supports religion to keep the masses’ hopes on the next world and acceptance of the unfairness of this world is supported by the photograph. The homeless appear to be passively accepting their lot, sleeping outdoors, making the best of life’s unfairness instead of challenging the law’s protection of private property that prevents them from sleeping in an abandoned, warmer and dryer, living unit. The homeless crouch and pray to the Son of God. They do not invade empty private property.

In 1935, the NYWFPL reorganized into two separate units, the Film League and the Photo League. Siskind joined the Photo League after being promised freedom to concentrate on picture making and relief from administrative responsibilities. He never joined the Communist Party. Ever the teacher, he organized a group of young photographers into the Feature Group to explore the limits of the veristic photo essay.
The Feature Group pondered the best way to convey the idea of a poverty-ridden slum to an unfamiliar viewer in order to stimulate reform. It concluded that veristic photographs failed to effectively convey their social message, overemphasizing content and political ideology at the price of aesthetic unity. As a result, the Siskind came to view a photograph as primarily an arrangement of forms, with the “perception and feeling of the photographer” as manifested in the pictures “order, rhythm and emphasis” about the subject as the starting point. The formal properties of a photograph must be emphasized to achieve the aesthetic unity necessary to effectively convey the ideas, the point of view, held by the photographer.12

The most successful venture of the Feature Group was the Harlem Document, composed of both photographs and text. Cooperation with the Harlem Urban League gained access to private homes, churches and businesses.13 This pre-arrangement enabled the photographers to build a conceptual framework encapsulating their ideas for the photographs to be taken before ever picking up their cameras. As Siskind explained the working methods of the Feature Group, “... we made pictures to express a predetermined idea ... (we discovered a relationship between the clarity of one’s thoughts and feeling and the clarity of the


picture-making) . . . working away from the literal toward a growing concentration of feeling, from a picture without a point of view (the literal picture) to one whose meaning is more specific, limited, definite.”

The Harlem Document was widely acclaimed, exhibited seven times and excerpted in Fortune and Look magazine. It was a large part of the League’s exhibition at the Pageant of Photography, Ansel Adams’ 1940 Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco, seen by thousands of people. The Museum of Modern Art selected two of Siskind’s Harlem Document pictures to be included in its 1942 Image of Freedom exhibit.

Siskind wanted the Harlem Document’s photographs and their accompanying text to be published as a book. He failed to find a publisher. After he left the League, the photographs were dispersed individually to various archives and individuals, not kept together as a collected work. Many of the photographs are missing and the text was lost.

The present work discusses eight of Siskind’s Harlem Document photographs, tracing the development of his mastery of metaphor to express his thoughts and feelings about Harlem. All these photographs were taken with the cooperation of


the Urban League and his subjects. Siskind pre-arranged his environment; he was physically close to his subjects with his large camera, tripod and lighting equipment. At his regular Feature Group meetings, Siskind discussed how he felt about his subjects and the ideas he wanted his photographs to convey. He had predetermined ideas, his thoughts and feelings about the subject matter were clear before he picked up his camera. This preparation yielded metaphorical photographs with clear messages. He realized his oft-stated goal of expressing his feelings and point of view about his subjects, not just the literal scene in front of his camera, without becoming overly subjective or political.18

The *Father Divine Movement*,19 Photograph 5, ca. 1935, portrays a member of a popular self-help group contributing to his community. It depicts a light-suited middle-aged black man selling inexpensive meals from a ground floor window, one hand raised high with a plate of food, the other pointing down to a hand-made sign advertising “PEACE Home Cooked Meals 10+15 cents.” He gives off a sense of pride, dignity and ownership in his work, wishing his community “peace” and appearing at peace.20 The Father Divine Movement advocated self-help for Harlem residents. It considered New Deal welfare programs a harmful “handout.” It provided employment help as well as inexpensive food, clothing and shelter to those seeking

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work. In an effort to represent success symbolically, Father Divine always appeared in public in a business suit.

Siskind’s personal feelings about his subject resulted in his aesthetic choices concerning composition and tonality. In this particular photograph, he directs his viewer’s attention to the suited and beneficent food seller in his work environment. He achieved this by centering his subject amidst repeating rectangular forms of the window frame, signage and exterior bricks. A high contrast filter in the darkroom development process emphasized and lightened the seller’s clothes while darkening the interior, making him pop out from his dark surroundings. The eye is rhythmically directed around the image by the light areas of the sign, clothing, plate of food and vertical awning stripes. The plate of food accents the image. It acts as a dot in musical notation, drawing attention to the face of the subject. The white slightly oval shaped highlight on the balding pate of the subject adds another accent to his face.

Cultural Historian Joseph Etin notes that Siskind, in his Harlem Document photographs, neither establishes eye contact with his subjects nor poses them in comfortable, natural gestures. Most photographers achieve emphasis on the face by having their subject make eye contact with the photographer, giving the viewer the impression that the viewer’s gaze upon the subject is being returned to the

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21 Raeburn, Staggering Revolution, 237.

viewer by the subject. Siskind’s food seller’s face is in partial profile as he gazes at potential customers, not at Siskind. Although the gesture of the seller makes aesthetic sense, it is awkward and hard to maintain. Pointing one hand skyward and the other earthward toward a price list would be tiring after a few minutes. A seller would more likely hold the food plate closer to his waist, if standing, and speak the price. Or sit down and hold food plate out to street customers while saying the price. These two gestures would de-emphasize the seller’s face and his symbol of success, his business suit.

The Museum of Modern Art chose *Father Divine Movement* for inclusion in *Image of Freedom*, its 1942 wartime photography exhibit, which “challenged photographers to interpret an abstract ideal in concrete terms.” Siskind’s celebration of a black entrepreneur securely placed in his community, and giving back to that community, could be taken to visually represent minority freedom.

*Harlem,* Photograph 6, ca. 1935, illustrates Siskind’s deliberately ambiguous compositional approach when portraying Harlem family life. It is “also the Harlem Document’s most reprinted image then and now... [and] is so replete with ambiguities that it... belies the [Harlem Document’s] text’s certitudes.” It depicts a mother and daughter at mealtime. The daughter occupies the center of the

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image, her head even with her mother’s, sitting ramrod straight on the tin milk can, looking at her mother expectantly as she is served from a dish brimming with food. The daughter's plate is already full. She will not go to bed hungry. Her mother's closed eyes gaze down to the food she is ladling. Her back and shoulders are slumped toward the table. Her face is tired and despondent, in contrast to her daughter’s spirited and expectant stance.

Once again, Siskind’s personal feelings about his subject resulted in his aesthetic choices of composition and tonality. The mother and daughter are crowded into the lower right half of the picture frame. The viewer’s eye is directed by the dazzling back-lit window and illuminated laundry pointing downward toward the light-clothed subjects. The rest of the image is in tones of stark black to middle grey.

This is slum living. Tenants crammed into small and dilapidated spaces. No place to hang laundry. Pots hung on a nail in the wall. Daughter eating on a milk can. Bare light bulb. There is a hole in the floor. A piece of window molding is missing. But both mother and daughter are neatly coiffed in ironed clothing. The items controllable by the mother are clean – floor, laundry, tablecloth, dishes. Ample food has been prepared and served on an organized table by an attentive mother.

Siskind oversaw the table placement beneath the window, the laundry hung to form a cross, the daughter seated almost dead center of the image, the mother’s attentive stance and the arrangement of the table. He probably intended the viewer
to see a struggling single parent making the best of a bad living situation to give her child a nurturing environment. His mother made her child the center of her existence, working tirelessly outside and inside the home.

*Harlem* can also serve as another example of Siskind’s early use of poetic ambiguity. This mother-daughter image could allude to a frequent motif of Siskind’s later abstractions, the Christian symbol of Madonna and child. The prearranged window/crucifix accentuates this interpretation as does the sacrificial offering of heaping food to the centrally placed and elevated child with a downcast, humbled expression on the celebrant/mother’s face.

Another more contemporary symbolic reading of the image is reinforced by Siskind’s decades-long teaching in New York City elementary schools. He took many portraits of his students in the midst of their youthful exuberance. He met with many parents. The dejected, tired mother was once an expectant and nourished child but her future has been reduced by the circumstances of race, not the absence of loving family.

Scholar VanArragon, in providing another view of *Harlem*, notes:

In the photograph there are signs of a household out of order, a clothesline hanging across the room, a rag hanging on the wall, the downcast expression on the mother’s face. The dark shadow at the edge of the frame also implies ominous gloom metaphorically suggesting the shadow of poverty looming before them. Siskind shot the image from beyond the door, communicating a sense of distance and alienation: the perspective also makes the kitchen seem cramped and oppressive. The mother and daughter huddle together at the table, isolated from community without additional companionship, the husband and father who would complete the family unit. . . it
typifies the social and economic crisis in Harlem that Siskind . . .
identified or wanted to communicate. 26

VanArragon emphasizes elements of the photograph that are mostly out of control of the mother, stemming from obviously cramped space that has been badly maintained by the landlord.

Storefront Church, 27 Photograph 7, ca. 1937, illustrates the unifying role of religion within the diverse life of the Harlem community. Four women are participating in a religious services’ “call and response,” each with a differing emotional reaction – contemplation, boredom, exuberance and distress at Siskind’s interference. The youngest woman, holding an infant, is ecstatically shouting responses with her eyes partially closed and her large-lipped mouth wide open exposing her thick tongue and white teeth. Her infant seems precariously poised and in danger of falling from her inattention. Only one hand seems to be holding the infant. Closer inspection reveals her other hand, concealed in a white blanket underneath the infant, firmly anchoring the baby on her lap. The infant’s attention is happily fixed on something unseen happening to left of the preacher. To her right are two older worshippers, each in a black suit and white blouse. The woman seated next to her is looking in the same direction as the infant, past the preacher,

26 VanArragon, “The Photo League,” 268. In contrast, the “shadow of poverty” VanArragon finds at the edge of the frame is considered by Raeburn differently. “Siskind shot from just behind the door leading to the kitchen so that the picture’s left edge is the foreground blur of its frame, implying a privileged view of a private moment.” Raeburn, Staggering Revolution, 236.

27 Aaron Siskind, Storefront Church, ca. 1937, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, 90.19.54.
and distractedly fussing with her hair. Further right, an older women is calmly, with hands folded in contemplation, listening to the preacher. To the left of the woman with infant, a young woman gives Siskind an intense, annoyed, confrontational glance, probably distressed at the interference that this white man with his tripod, camera and lights makes to the service.

Siskind has positioned the woman with infant in the center of the frame, surrounded by darkly dressed, dark skinned women. The white blouses of the adjacent worshippers and the white robe in the upper left add accents to the photograph and serve to lead the eye in a diagonal back to the woman and infant, also wearing white. Another white diagonal, a carved wood rail coming from the lower left edge of the photograph, leads the eye to the woman and infant.

Although the photograph serves to show the unifying role of religion, tension and conflict are presented. The seemingly precarious hold the ecstatic woman has on her infant adds an element of suspense to the religious service. The obvious annoyance on the face of the young worshipper is directed at Siskind but also directed to, and felt by, the viewer, whose act of viewing the photograph could be an invasion of privacy similar to Siskind’s photographic invasion.

Why did Siskind include the younger woman with the annoyed look? She was extraneous to his mission of portraying the religiosity of Harlem. Her eye contact and annoyed expression resulted from his interference and was not a reaction to the service. He could easily have stepped a few feet to the left or backward and blocked the annoyed expression from his image.
Other *Harlem Document* photographs contain images of women visibly annoyed at Siskind’s invasion of their segregated space. These photos could be read as Siskind, the modernist, investigating the artist as he engages in the artistic process. They could be read as Siskind’s lack of sensitivity to his racial otherness. They could be read as Siskind’s raising the issue of black reaction to white authority while stopping short of exploring it.

Historian Berger reasons that Siskind’s conception of his role precluded his active investigation of black/white relation in this 1937 pre-civil rights era. Berger, in remarking on the way the Feature Group viewed itself, notes:

> Its photographers saw their subjects as largely anonymous actors who served to illustrate broad social categories and conditions. They saw themselves as neutral observers akin to social scientists ‘doing fieldwork.’

*Storefront Church* was preconceived by the Feature Group as one of a series of photographs portraying the role of religion in the life of Harlem, from providing companionship to dispensing charity to extolling spirituality. Their fieldwork was to depict Harlem community churches as “a Harlem institution that was owned,

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guided, administered and attended by blacks for blacks . . . a symbol of black independence . . . " It was not to remark on racial relationships.

*Savoy Dancers,*

Photograph 8, ca. 1935, illustrates jitter-buggers in a celebrated Harlem jazz club. It depicts two exuberantly sensuous black dancers executing an extraordinary sexually charged dance step. The male dancer lifts his smaller partner with his right arm while kicking his left leg waist-high. Etin, in describing the dancers, remarks:

His face, reared back and shot from a low angle, is dominated by his gaping mouth, stereotypical symbol of black sexual voraciousness and licentiousness. The man's expansive, exaggerated form engulfs and symbolically overpowers the woman with whom he is dancing: his arm obscures her face, and his leg, extended in a phallic position, splices our view of the woman's body in two. The woman's arched back and tiptoed stance emphasize the male figure's massiveness and dominant position; his capacious suit coat seems about to swallow her slender figure.  

The dancers are isolated on the dance floor. The background is almost black. The lightest parts of the photograph, toward which the eye is directed, are the wide-open mouths of the dancers, the frenzied, energized face of the male and the bust-line and shoes of the female. It is unambiguously sexual, a study in form and contrast.

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Siskind overcame formidable technical obstacles in Savoy Dancers. He had to isolate the couple from the bedlam of the other dancers in order to emphasize their gestures. He had to light the couple precisely to prevent loss of detail in their dark skin and clothing against a dark background. He placed his camera and two synchronized flash gun lights in a corner of the dance floor and watched the dancing couples. He spotted one couple whose style appealed to him. He asked them to dance in front of his camera. And he released his shutter at the right second, when the male’s leg was at its highest arc, the female’s feet were raised off the floor, their expressions were joyous with mouths wide open, and they were moving quickly through his lighting equipment.

The Museum of Modern Art selected Savoy Dancers for inclusion in its 1941 exhibit, Images of Freedom, describing as one of its criteria for selection photographs representing the “freedom...to enjoy leisure hours without regimentation.”

A small part of the Harlem Document consisted of photographs of fragments of Harlem buildings taken between 1937 and 1940. In these pictures, Siskind explored the metaphorical use of form. He isolated architectural fragments to convey his ideas about the inhabitants of the Harlem buildings he photographed. These photographs were taken after his exploration of architectural form to convey his feelings in Tabernacle City in the summers of 1933-36. It is apparent that his

36 Rhem, Aaron Siskind, 24; VanArragon, “Photo League,” 289.

New York City architectural work utilizes the lessons learned in his earlier summer work.

*Bob Jones Barbershop,*\(^{38}\) Photograph 9, ca. 1937, illustrates a cooperative community of small, proud shopkeepers. It depicts many black cultural institutions crowded into small idiosyncratic storefronts and "explores the aesthetics of the neighborhood's physical environment."\(^{39}\) The storefronts present a clean and ordered face to the world indicative of a cooperative and proud community. This metaphorical rendering is produced by Siskind's selection and placement of forms. Each storefront is multi-use, implying cooperation. The businesses bear their owners' name, implying pride in entrepreneurship. Number 422 is occupied by May’s + Johnson beauty school utilizing the Bonaparte system and Mrs. Johnson's beauty shoppe. The adjacent co-tenant, Mae, operates a beauty salon utilizing the Apex system. Their downstairs co-tenant operates an auto store as well as a photo studio specializing in chauffeur photos. The storefront church is home to various denominations offering Sunday school at various times.

The storefront signs result in a relatively flat surface. Siskind accentuates this flatness by lighting the exterior to completely darken the interior rooms, yielding additional flat surfaces. This lack of perspective concentrates the eye on

\(^{38}\) Aaron Siskind, *Bob Jones Barbershop,* ca. 1937, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, 76.63.33.

the gentle conflict visible in the contrasting geometric shapes. As scholar VanArragon notes:

In the absence of worshipper, student or client, the viewer is drawn instead to the pictures in the church windows, the pattern of stripes or squares in the windows, the contrasting text styles of signboards, the asymmetrical balance of doorways and windows. The absence of figures highlights the geometry of the arch as the basis of the images. 40

*The Catholic Workers Movement: St. Joseph’s House,* 41 Photograph 10, ca.1938, illustrates the beneficent work of religious followers of Biblical commands. It uses an architectural fragment as a Biblical metaphor. It was intended by Siskind to be captioned by a passage from St. Matthew’s Gospel “And whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold water . . .” as part of the Feature Group documentation of religious workers who fed the poor. 42 A white enameled cup, sitting on a large washtub attached to an exterior wall, is joined visually to a dark crucifix hanging higher on the wall by verticals leading downward from the crucifix to the cup.

There is a gentle conflict between the much larger, darker and higher positioned crucifix and the oval-shaped cup, which almost merges with the white wall. Spiritual concerns dominate physical concerns. Siskind has printed the

40 VanArragon, “Photo League,” 275.


42 Chiarenza, *Pleasures and Terrors,* 37.
interior of the washtub black, minimizing its depth and flattening the surface of the picture.

Airshaft,43 Photograph 11, ca. 1940, illustrates the claustrophobic overcrowding of tenements. It utilizes strong verticals to convey this overcrowding. Siskind positioned his camera on a rooftop and shot down the narrow airshaft of a high-rise apartment composed of many small units sharing the same limited access to exterior air and view. The extreme vertical emphasizes the narrowness of the airshaft, stacking the windows on top of each other, accentuating the overcrowding.44 Only the top window is un-curtained, allowing an interior view of a chair in a small otherwise windowless, darken, claustrophobic room.

The strong verticals of the shadow drain pipe and intersecting exterior walls conflict gently with the rectangular windows. The dark shadow serves to flatten the airshaft, changing a rectangular space defined by four exterior walls to a single flat wall.

Harlem,45 Photograph 12, ca. 1940, illustrates Siskind’s attempt to visually portray the interiority of his black subject. The metaphor is unsuccessful, probably because Siskind’s thoughts and feelings, his point of view, about the subjective

43 Aaron Siskind, Airshaft, ca. 1940, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, 90.19.55.

44 VanArragon, “Photo League,” 277.

45 Aaron Siskind, Harlem, 1940, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, 90.19.57.
feelings, dreams, hopes and aspirations of his middle-aged subject are not clear to Siskind. Photograph 12 depicts a fully clothed sleeping black man in a bedroom dominated by Hollywood publicity shots of white male and female Hollywood celebrities. Portraits of stars, including Edward G. Robinson, Jimmy Stewart, Ingrid Bergman and Joan Davis, surround the mirror of the dresser drawer behind his bed. He is “cast in a traditionally ‘feminized’ position, displayed like Titian’s Venus to the viewer’s gaze.”

He lies on the satin coverlet of a single bed, under a lamp beribboned and ruffled, with his sock-covered feet on a ruffled satin pillow. His sweater is tucked into belted dark pants. The dresser is topped with an embroidered cloth and decorative boxes.

The photograph evokes conflict and tension. It’s meaning is ambiguous. Why is this man sleeping in a feminized environment? Is he sleeping in his own bedroom? Is he sleeping in the bedroom of young women because of overcrowded conditions in Harlem? What is the significance to the man of the Hollywood publicity shots surrounding the mirror? Does the viewer interpret their function to give the man, as he looks at himself in the mirror, the temporary illusion that he is white? Or do they remind the man that he is constantly lives in a world overseen by whites? What is this man dreaming? What are his unconscious fantasies? Do his dreams fulfill his wish to be white? Or do they contain revenge fantasies against whites because of his mistreatments? If so, what would he do if he were unbelted,

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46 Etin, Sensational Modernism, 120.
unconstrained, un-feminized? These conflicting meanings result in an ambiguous picture.

In other *Harlem Document* photographs, Siskind’s point of view toward his subjects – the business-suited food seller, the single loving mother, the diverse worshippers and excited jitter-buggers – is clear both to Siskind and his viewers. He arranges his settings and his subject to convey this clearly thought-out point of view. He knows, and can convey, his thoughts about his subjects, who are photographed in action, selling food, serving dinner, worshipping or dancing. His subjects are aware of his presence and capable of reacting to it. These *Harlem Document* pictures can be easily read as sympathetic, as well as objective, about Harlem life. 47

In *Harlem*, the subject is not in action; he is sleeping, incapable of action or reaction to Siskind’s photographic intrusion into his private space. He is pictured in a provocative setting without any agency to actively interpret it. Siskind’s violation of the privacy of the sleeping, passive, man advantages the viewer who forms a story based on the observations of the man’s intimate environment. The viewer’s act of viewing makes him complicit in Siskind’s violation, adding tension to the photograph. 48

47 Ibid., 118-121.

Siskind is reaching to convey the interiority, the subjective thoughts and feelings and dreams of his sleeping black man. Siskind’s photograph poses the question “What kind of man is this?” and gives the viewer an assortment of conflicting, confusing clues. Siskind’s confusion leads to his viewer’s confusion.

Critical response to Photograph 12 reflects this confusion. Historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau, in analyzing the interested non-neutral gaze of the camera, reproduces Photograph 12 without specifically discussing it. 49

Historian Etin, in commenting on this photograph, notes:

As a whole, the composition of the image – the sleeping man, the empty mirror, the pinups – suggest Siskind’s awareness of the symbolic potential of photography. The combination of elements lends the image a metaphorical quality, suggesting that viewers regard the scene not only as a “document” but also as a consciously provocative artistic statement. The image of the sleeping man not only “captures the real,” bringing the interior life of Harlem to white viewers: it also prompts one to think of photography as a mode of personal expression, in which the arrangement of objects gestures toward a thematic statement about the very act of photography itself – in this case about the relationship of photography and dreams or the unconscious. 50

Etin’s critique avoids discussion of Siskind’s “consciously provocative artistic statement.” He avoids discussion of what Siskind believes to be the “interior life of Harlem (brought) to white viewers.” Etin settles for tamely noting that the camera can be used in attempts to convey “dreams or the unconscious.”


50 Etin, Sensational Modernism, 121.
Berger succinctly points out the obvious when noting that “Siskind's lack of psychic connection to his subject is taken to the extreme.” Siskind is trying to convey the interiority of a man of approximately his own age, living in an adjacent community, who is of a different race, religion and culture. And Siskind fails. He does not have a clear point of view on his subject’s interiority. His lack of clarity as to the meaning of the photograph is mirrored in the viewer’s confusion as to its meaning.

Photograph 12 is an important passage for Siskind as he moves toward his shift to abstraction. He is trying to convey thoughts and feelings about his subject’s interiority, not his subject’s actions. He is not trying to visually convey his thoughts about Harlem residents in the process of selling food, worshipping, preparing dinner or dancing. And he cannot imagine a point of view about a subject’s dreams and interior life when there exists a great distance between the subject’s lived life and his own.

But Siskind, in his private production of photographs independent of the Photo League, explored ways of using the camera to discover and express his self visually. He spent almost every summer of the 1930s vacationing at the beach, most often at Martha’s Vineyard and most often with the same college friends. This summertime freedom from teaching responsibilities gave him the leisure to explore his camera. The vastly different landscape gave him new ways of envisioning his

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51 Berger, “The Man in the Mirror,” in Mason and Evans, The Radical Camera, 42.
world. The personal vision he refined in his metaphorical photographs of Harlem life was reoriented toward depicting subjects gleaned from his leisurely seaside life among friends.

Siskind began to explore the architecture of Tabernacle City in Martha’s Vineyard in the summer of 1933. He learned to use the form of architectural details as symbols of his emotions. He began his journey toward formal abstraction, creating a new language for photography in which the forms depicted would express emotions. His oft-stated photographic goal was to make form equal content. 52

During the summers of 1933-36, Siskind photographed Tabernacle City, a Methodist retreat community founded in 1835 as a summer camp meeting ground. Originally consisting of a circle of tents surrounding a preacher’s stand, campers communed with God and nature and each other for fun and prayer. Siskind photographed its small A-frame cabins, each resembling a miniature gothic cathedral with unique and ornate gingerbread, built around a central tabernacle. 53 Tabernacle City’s architecture continued to symbolize “… the idea and activity of the retreat: communal sharing and individual meditation … [which, given that Siskind summered in the Vineyard for most of his adult life with the same college

52 Chiarenza, “Form and Content,” 824.

friends] must have seemed an expression of his own lifestyle.”

In describing this work, Siskind noted that he “… allowed certain things to happen, let it get out of control in terms of personal expression … making completely abstract (photographs)…”

In 1933 Glattner’s mental problems became acute. During the school year their marital life was structured. Both taught at the same elementary school. When she could not be left alone at home, Siskind found care for her. He continued to spend most evenings at the Photo League or photographing cityscapes.

Photography gave him a domestic outlet, providing “… an escape … get into little bathroom and develop film, escape from troubles.”

*Tabernacle City*, Photograph 13, ca. 1934, illustrates Siskind’s early use of architecture to explore form, convey personal emotion and provide structural order. Siskind’s reaction to Glattner’s mental illness, resulting in her life-long hospitalization in 1937, is reflected in the impending darkness inevitably enveloping the couple as it would the twin windows. The photograph depicts part of the side of a wooden home with a window unit composed of two identical double-hung

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54 Chiarenza, “Form and Content,” 824.

55 Johnson and Pitts, Siskind interview, (DVD 2 of 6), 78:049.


57 Johnson and Pitts, Siskind interview, (DVD 6 of 6), 78:053.

windows, rooftop gingerbread detailing and a recessed area. The sun is high in the sky. It throws shadows of the gingerbread detailing onto the exterior wall and shadows of an adjacent tree onto the window unit. It creates a triangular shadow of the recessed area.

The photograph is orderly, the left side equal to the right side, the top frame equal to the bottom frame. The rectangular windows of the right half of the image are balanced by, and spatially equal to, the triangles of the left side. The right vertical created by the space between the double-hung windows is repeated in the left vertical supporting the recessed area. The darker horizontal shadowed bands framing the top and bottom of the image are approximately equal and direct attention to the central area’s competing triangles and rectangles. The gingerbread detailing is both phallic and feminine.

As in Siskind’s Photograph 3, *New York City*, image of the geometric cityscape of new skyscrapers encroaching on smaller historic buildings, the window unit of Photograph 13 is threatened on its right by the shadow of a tree, which has almost completely engulfed the right-most window and partially engulfed its left-most mate. The window unit is threatened on its left by the dark triangle, still at a distance, but heading toward it. Both the roof’s gingerbread detailing and its shadow point downward toward the window unit. The image was created at a moment in time. But the sun will set and the shadows will inevitably conquer both windows as dusk falls. The relatively intact right window can protect its deeply shadowed mate, but not for long. Darkness for both is inevitable.
This play of light caused by the sun, as shadows become darker with sunset and lighten as the sun rises, would appeal to Siskind’s dualistic philosophy believing good becomes bad, light becomes dark, life becomes death. He used words to capture the rise and fall of the sun in his poem *Sonata: Ave Night*, in which both night and day are described as both good and bad as they evolve into one another.

*Tabernacle City 12*. Photograph 14, ca. 1936, is another example of Siskind's use of architectural detail to evoke personal feelings. He is estranged from Glattner but part of a community. The image forefronts a single comfortable rocking chair on the side of a porch looking out on the street and across from the community chapel. In the background, the chapel’s picket fence encloses a playground with a swing set. Neighboring homes are nestled in trees producing a soft light creating a tranquil, pastoral scene.

A tree trunk divides the symbols for individual and communal spiritual practice. The porch, playground and neighborly houses are to the left of the trunk, depicted in varying shades of grey. The chapel occupies the entire right side. Its starker black and white contrast and size dominate the image. The halves are approximately equal. Dark shadows dim the door of the porch leading into the interior of the home. But the remainder of the image, accented by the single rocking chair, is bathed in soft tree-shaded light.

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59 Aaron Siskind, *Tabernacle City 12*, ca. 1936, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, 83.93.6.
Although there are no people in the image, there are numerous associations that connote people – rocking chair, swing set, the street, the chapel and its surrounding homes. Siskind’s deliberate framing of the relationship among these elements connote human connection. He may be estranged from his wife, who may also live in the shaded interior cabin, or he may be living alone, but community surrounds him. This selective portrayal of the architecture of Tabernacle City stresses the importance of the connection between individual revelation and communal spiritual practices. Each home is part of a larger community.

In discussing his 1940s mature abstract images, Siskind credited what he learned in Tabernacle City as forging the path for his later abstract work. He remarks:

*Tabernacle City*, 1933-34, very first pictures I ever made. They were very close to ‘so called abstractions.’ Here I was making a document but what I was really concerned about was the abstract shapes and the rhythms of the things and the way light hit it and the order of the picture. We make our art to serve our need for order or to express all our struggles and pain and misery.  

In *Tabernacle City*, Photograph 15, ca. 1935-8, Siskind depicts multiple stacked up rooflines, perhaps looking for another metaphor for a shadowed individual in community, but also conveying again the impact of music on his work. Siskind, in discussing this image “… pointed to the delicately repeating shadows.

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60 Hagen, Sweetman, and Goodman, “Thoughts and Reflections,” 7.

61 Aaron Siskind, *Tabernacle City*, ca. 1938, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, 83.93.11.
These patterns were like music to him . . . almost more important than the building itself.” 62

Siskind practiced the summertime lessons learned in Martha’s Vineyard during the academic year in New York City. The End of the Civic Repertory Theatre 3,63 Photograph 16, ca. 1938, explores the metaphor of personal and political destruction. The Civic Repertory Theatre was a revered Manhattan site, constructed in 1866 in “pseudo–classical tradition with Renaissance, Mannerist and baroque elements . . . a monument to culture and tradition, to great ideals . . .”.64 Siskind photographed the site after the Theatre was razed to the ground. Photograph 16 depicts a close-up fragment of a woman’s head, destroyed and isolated, among the building’s rubble. The decay of knocked down classical columns and sculpted heads are enriched by the rich dark tonalities. Destruction, time’s passage, cultural and personal losses are conveyed by the dark shadows, fractured angles, and shattered columns and statuary. The lone, unrecognizable, once beautiful and treasured female, survives with nothing intact. Chiarenza remarks, “It is difficult not to see in these photographs Siskind’s examination of his personal situation.” 65 In 1938, Hitler moved into Czechoslovakia, Siskind’s wife’s mental illness destroyed their

62 Rhem, Aaron Siskind, 28.

63 Aaron Siskind, The End of the Civic Repertory Theatre 3, ca. 1938, Center for Creative Photography, university of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, 190.19.44.

64 Chiarenza, Pleasures and Terrors, 30.

65 Chiarenza, “Form and Content,” 825.
marriage and the Civic Repertory Theatre was destroyed. If this image dates to late 1938, the context might also include Kristallnacht, occurring in November 1938. Siskind conflates his personal situation with contemporaneous political events and classical myth to create a multivalent image capable of resonating on many levels with the viewer of his picture.

Photograph16 was shown to members of the Photo League, who objected to the non-realistic dark tones. Siskind defended his choice of toning, asserting that he related the print quality to “the idea, the tones to the idea, rather than always getting a full range of tones . . . beautiful surface and toning . . . which is very nice, but sometimes it’s terribly irrelevant. Now I think that is kind of a dead end, making everything look beautiful.”

In 1939-40 Siskind produced a photo series of Tabernacle City with a different intent. His aim was not to discover and express his self though architectural images. Instead, he investigated the idea that the folk culture of Tabernacle City was expressed in its architecture. He was interested in conveying his ideas about this folk culture, not his ideas about his life. He considered the photo series a “document” of this culture.

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Tabernacle City,67 Photograph 17, 1939-40, is a reproduction of the exhibition board displaying five pictures from this photo series. These five photographs depict architectural details symbolizing the 1930s communal life of Tabernacle City, which was stimulated by its early 19th century design. Every house has a front porch, encouraging outdoor living, giving easy access to neighbors. A boy is lost in his book on a front porch. A man saunters down the street. Most porches look out on a communal area. Curved streets reflect the circular design around the central Tabernacle. Side lots are minimal, encouraging neighborliness. The mature shade trees lend deep, protective shadows, nestling the cottages. All roofs are triangularly shaped, reflecting their early tent counterparts and reminiscent of gothic cathedrals. All porches have gingerbread trim, also reminiscent of the decorative stone tracery of cathedrals.

The photo series was exhibited at the Photo League in January of 1941. The League audience disapproved of the series, considering it “too arty,” and “reject(ing) the worker’s cause.”68 This dismissal of his aesthetic choices was similar to League members rejecting the dark tones of The End of the Civic Repertory Theatre 3. Siskind quit the League in 1941. He also quit photographing in New York City until after the end of World War Two.69

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68 Chiarenza, Pleasures and Terrors, 48.

69 Ibid., 50.
A few months later, in the summer of 1941, the Tabernacle City photo series was successfully exhibited on Martha’s Vineyard. Photograph 13, the deeply personal 1934 image of double windows threatened by shadows, was included in the exhibition of 1939-40 work. Photograph 13 was mounted by itself, instead of on a large mat with other photographs, as is Photograph 17, which was the Siskind’s customary way of mounting photographs for exhibits. Scholar Koa speculates that Siskind might have chosen this new “format for the installation to mirror the new direction of his thought.”

For the deep introspection of Photograph 13 did signal the direction that his work had been taking since the summer of 1940, the direction toward abstraction that his work was to follow for the remaining fifty years of his life.

During the summer of 1940, while creating photographs of architecture that harkened back to the 19th century, Siskind found an outlet for his introspection. That summer he ventured into a new arena. He began photographing seaside detritus found on beaches miles from the cottages of Tabernacle City, in the seaside fishing villages of Chilmark and Menemsha. It is these photographs, to be discussed in Chapter Four of this study, which started his transition to abstraction.

Siskind, decades after he had developed his signature style of formal abstraction, in discussing his transition from documentary to abstraction, remarks that "He wasn’t made for it . . . my documentary pictures are very quiet and formal . . . . That’s not right for that kind of picture."\(^{71}\)

Berger posits that, with hindsight, Siskind’s transition to abstraction as a vehicle for personal expression is understandable. His admittedly “quiet” and “formal” photographs stemmed from his inability to empathize across racial boundaries, which is evident in Photograph 12’s image of a sleeping black man. This inability prevented Siskind from projecting his thoughts and feelings onto his peopled images.

In the mid 1930s in Tabernacle City, Siskind discovered architecture as a conduit for the visual projection of his thoughts and feelings. In the later 1930s, he used architecture to project his feelings about Harlem life. By 1940, he was beginning to express his interiority, not just through architectural forms, but through the forms and structure of discarded objects found along the piers of fishing villages. His began his search for expressive objects whose structure and forms could communicate his feelings.

\(^{71}\) Stephany, “Interview with Aaron Siskind,” in Koa and Meyer, Toward a Personal Vision, 43.
CHAPTER FOUR

TRANSITION TO ABSTRACTION

Archival evidence confirms that Siskind began photographing in an abstract, introspective style during the summer of 1940 in Chilmark. Siskind explained that his 1940 transitional abstract photographs had within them the aesthetics of his earlier pictures, that there “were elements of abstraction in (his) interest in architecture, (his) interest in form when he was doing documentary work.” It was during the period between 1940 and 1943 that he abandoned documentary photography, quit photographing in New York City and concentrated on creating what became a new language for the camera, his unique style of formal abstraction. This research considers thirty photographs, thirteen never before published, which trace this 1940-43 evolution. By 1944, during a summer in Gloucester, he photographed in what critics consider his mature style of formal abstraction.

Siskind has often explained his evolution from documentary to formal abstraction. During a Vineyard summer he began to take pictures the meaning of which he didn’t understand. In the fall in New York City, after developing these negatives into prints, he had a momentous “picture-making experience.” Siskind describes this experience in a 1963 interview:

... [a] great change ... takes place. This great change was a result not of any decision that I made – intellectual decision – and this is very important, what I am saying now. It was the result of a picture-making experience which almost, I would say, sort of surprised me as to its meaning to me ... and that’s

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1 Columbia College, Siskind interview.
what changed the whole course of the thing . . . I had made pictures that had a meaning very basic to my whole life . . . and these pictures have a consistency of meaning to me . . . (this) showed me that I had gotten at something very fundamental. So I decided to continue to work that way, because I was very stirred by it.²

Siskind realized that these profoundly personal pictures, which were basic to his whole life, would be considered lousy and dull to other people. In describing this analysis in a 1973 interview, Siskind notes:

I made these new pictures and saw how they related to me and my personality and my basic problem, which I thought was everybody’s basic problem – the duality of nature . . . even then I remember looking at those pictures and saying, this does it, this says it, this is what I want to do, but these are lousy pictures, they were dull. But you still have that problem, no matter what you want to say and no matter how important it is you’ve got to make it viable to other people, or even to yourself, if you can be objective, that these pictures are interesting, they have a lot of stuff in them, you can look at them again. They relate to other pictures, which enriches them. That was a problem.³

Between 1940-43, Siskind experimented with ways to make his pictures “interesting.” He searched for suggestive subject matter that could yield a visual vocabulary allowing him to convey his personal philosophy of dualism and his feelings about himself and his world. This research discusses the growth in his reach for a new visual vocabulary for the camera by way of analyzing individual pictures made during his transitional period. He began photographing in a new way, positioning his camera so the lens and film were directly on top of the objects.

² Stephany, “Interview with Aaron Siskind,” in Kao and Meyer, Toward a Personal Vision, 43.

photographed. He placed his found objects against fragments of buildings, boats, piers and sand, achieving a flat background and eliminating perspective.

This narrative separates the thirty images into five divisions, based on subject matter – architectural fragments, seaside detritus, sand-rooted vegetation, seaweed and man-made objects used by watermen.

The First Division analyzes photographs of seaside shacks, docked commercial boats and fishing piers that create a fixed background for the moveable objects he included in his images. Siskind had the ability to arrange objects on these backgrounds and/or to select parts of the background architecture to become the whole of his photograph.

The Second Division analyzes photographs of seaside detritus including driftwood and shells. These portable objects could be moved to different backgrounds. Siskind could manipulate the position of the object, the texture of the background, and the relation of the background to the object and other peripheral objects.

The Third Division analyzes photographs of fixed objects, sand-rooted vegetation, in which neither root nor background sand could be moved. Siskind could select the part of the root he wanted to photograph. He could choose the time of day to photograph and where he stood in relation to the root, which decisions would affect the position of the shadow of the root, and the intensity of the tone of the shadow.

The Fourth Division analyzes photographs of seaweed lying on sand, in
which both object and background are movable and easily manipulated by Siskind.

While his driftwood photographs of Division Two are similar, seaweed is inherently more flexible than wood and Siskind’s seaweed photographs primarily investigate the shapes he achieved by exploiting this flexibility.

The Fifth Division discusses his photographs of man-made objects. Many of these images were visual experiments; most of them quickly abandoned and not pursued. Most are only available as negatives in the Center for Creative Photography archives.

Biographer Chiarenza notes, “Siskind rarely titles his work.” Since gallery owners, authors and other art-related personnel need titles to do their jobs, various titles have been assigned to the photographs, usually relating to the village where the photograph was presumed to be taken (either Chilmark or Menemsha) and the date, which was typically prefaced by the qualifier “circa.” Fortunately, Siskind did index some of his negatives, most importantly negatives taken in the village of Chilmark in 1940, behind an orange index card labeled with a date, “Chilmark 40,” in his handwriting. This trove of reliably dated negatives was discovered by Chiarenza, and attested to by Siskind, in the late 1970s. The negatives were transferred to his archive at the Center for Creative Photography after his death.

This research utilizes the names and dates assigned to photographs published in Chiarenza’s 1981 biography, of which Siskind claimed to have read

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every word. Additional negatives and photographs from the 1940-43 period were discovered in the archives of the Center for Creative Photography, the Aaron Siskind Foundation, the George Eastman House, the Rhode Island School of Design and the J. Paul Getty Museum. This work continues the use of the name and date of any photograph obtained from these sources.

The First Division includes six photographs of architectural fragments that recall his mid-1930s images of Tabernacle City, when he “let it get out of control in terms of personal expression.”

*Chilmark,* 5 1940, Photograph 18, depicts the exterior wooden wall of a fishing shack. The wall is composed of even vertical pieces of wood with nails sticking midway between the floor and ceiling. A man’s underpants are attached to these nails; a cloth suspender that resembles a phallus hangs down from the middle of the crotch and dangles past the legs of the underwear. Directly below the dangling cloth is the end of a rope that is tied to the handle of a bucket and sitting on the pier. A round electric meter is near the left edge of the image, a few inches above and to the left of the top of the underwear. To the viewer’s right, the top half of a double-hung window allows an interior view of half a circular life saving ring used for the rescue of a “man overboard.” The bottom half of the window allows a view of a dark stick, which is placed directly underneath the rescue ring but a few inches too short to

$\text{5}$ Johnson and Pitts, Siskind interview, (DVD 2 of 6), 78:049.

$\text{6}$ Aaron Siskind, negative, 1940, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, AG 30:101. Photograph 18 is a Chilmark 1940 negative.
reach it. Opposite the bucket on the pier is a stack of firewood, forming another central hole incapable of penetration.

Chiarenza notes that Siskind characterized his early abstractions as “... [concentrating] on decay, collapse, frustration, and impotence.” Photograph 18 evidences the accuracy of this characterization. Whatever other allusions the viewer may bring to it, reference to impotency seems undeniable. The photograph is almost entirely composed of penile verticals incapable of reaching adjacent female holes. The dangling cloth attachment of the central figure of underpants is too short to reach of the bucket below it, the circular meter above it or the life saving ring on its side. The rope attached to the handle of the bucket is too short to penetrate its insides. The stick under the life saving ring is too short to reach its center.

The photograph is orderly and rhythmic, its left half containing the pants, meter, and bucket almost exactly in symmetry with the right half containing the window, life preserver, stick, and firewood. The top of the underpants is on the same horizontal as the middle horizontal of the double-hung window. The bucket’s right side is below the left underpants’ leg while its left side is below the right side of the meter. The firewood on the floor opposite the bucket balances the bottom of the image. The eye is easily directed to the underpants with its dangling penile attachment from all four corners and then directed from one corner to the next, with each corner containing a hole that cannot be penetrated.

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7 Chiarenza, Pleasures and Terrors, 54.
*Chilmark,* 1940, Photograph 19 depicts part of an exterior wooden slatted wall from which a dark chimney pipe extrudes midway. A dark rectangular cover, providing a tight fit between pipe and wall, surrounds the pipe. Off to the right, a man’s dark coat hangs from a piece of lighter wood horizontally even with the pipe. The coat is hung facing to the right of the wooden holder forcing it to be construed as looking away from the extruding, enclosed pipe.

This image also connotes frustration. The chimney pipe extruding from its surrounding dark rectangle can easily be read as sexual union. The dark coated male turns his gaze away from this union; he is alone with no potential partners in sight. The pipe, rectangular covering, and coat are all in similar dark tones. The white of the coat holder is the lightest value of the photograph, commanding attention. Diagonals on the roof are lighter in tone than the roof, pipe and coat, directing the eye to the union and the coat.

Three related pictures from 1940, a proof print and two photographs derived from different parts of the proof print, illustrate Siskind’s reach for ambiguous imagery.

*Martha’s Vineyard (Menemsha),* 9 ca. 1940, Photograph 20, is a proof print

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8 Aaron Siskind, *Chilmark,* 1940, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, Box 101. Photograph 19 was published in Chiarenza *Pleasures and Terrors, 44,* with the title and date *Chilmark,* 1940.

9 Aaron Siskind, *Martha’s Vineyard (Menemsha),* ca. 1940, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, Box 39. Photograph 20 was published in Chiarenza, *Pleasures and Terrors, 46.* It is dated on its verso “1940” in Siskind’s handwriting.
depicting a section of the exterior of a docked commercial fishing boat. The mainsail is furled with various ropes onto the boom. A workman’s rubber glove dries on top of a rudder-like board protruding from the floor. The door leading into the interior compartment is open. A barrel is sitting on the ground under another part of the boom.

The proof print lacks emphasis. Too many objects are presented without any particular accent. The overall tone is a muddy, mid-grey without contrasting higher or lower values. The image is unbalanced: its right half loaded with a plethora of unaccented detail, the left half is left almost blank.

Proof prints are the first prints the photographer makes of the negative. It’s not surprising that this one is muddy grey, unsigned, and untitled. They are used to guide later choices of contrast, tone, and cropping, which choices result in a more refined image.

It is tempting to speculate that Siskind was drawn to the centrally depicted drying glove directly under the coils of rope hanging from the boom. The glove and the rope coils are in the center of the image and have an obvious relationship with each other. *Martha’s Vineyard (Menemsha)*, ca. 1940, clarifies the muddle.

*Martha’s Vineyard (Menemsha)*,¹⁰ ca. 1940, Photograph 21, depicts the shadow of the workman’s glove futilely grasping for the unreachable shadow of the

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¹⁰ Aaron Siskind, *Martha’s Vineyard (Menemsha)*, ca. 1940, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, AG 30:98. Photograph 21 was published in Chiarenza, *Pleasures and Terrors*, 46. It was also published by the Aaron Siskind Foundation in *Aaron Siskind, 100*, titled Gloveboat and dated 1940.
ropes. The fragment of the boat’s exterior wall contains two rectangles of equal size forming the background upon which the shadows enact their Sisyphean drama. The eye is continually directed from the two dangling ropes to the right rectangle, which leads to the back of the glove, onto to the fingers of the glove, towards the left rectangle, and then back again to the left dangling rope. The image is of a never-ending circle with no center and no end point, connoting an eternally frustrating journey.

Photograph 21 depicts the same fishing boat as the proof print. Both images have identically frayed rope ends. The fingers on the glove are identically positioned. The boat’s exterior background wall has been rearranged. The two photographs were taken at different times of day. In the proof print, the sun is behind the background wall putting the glove and rope in its shadow and Siskind shoots into the sun. In Photograph 21, the sun is behind Siskind, casting the shadow of the glove and rope onto the background. Siskind’s darkroom cropping of Photograph 21 has eliminated the clutter of objects unnecessary to his story. Gone are the boom, barrel, floor, and interior view. He has also greatly increased the contrast to emphasize his four characters. The background wall is white, the shadows are almost black and the rectangular doors are a dark grey.

Sexual reference abounds, adding tension and conflict. Finely articulated fingers reach futilely for the lobes of the dangling ropes, which could connote female genitals. The rope’s curves gently conflict with the geometry of the two rectangles, male and female, and the frame of the photograph. Another possible reading is of
someone “getting to the end of his rope” and needing rescue.

The flat wall of the background eradicates perspective, not allowing the eye to wander, focusing the eye on the conflict of the depicted objects, which cannot escape past the sides of the frame. The proof print’s view into the boat’s interior is gone. There is only the flat background wall of rectangles and shadows.

*Menemsha*,

1940, Photograph 22 depicts a wooden barrel hanging by a rope draped around the boat’s wooden boom, the part of the sailboat holding down the bottom end of the sail. The barrel and boom of this photograph are identical to the barrel and boom depicted in the proof print of 1940. In *Menemsha*, the barrel is hanging closer to the mast, the part of the sailboat extending skyward attached to the side of the sail. In the proof print, the barrel is hanging further away from the mast. In *Menemsha*, a thin rounded board, possibly a tie down post for the ends of fishing nets, protrudes from the floor of the boat, pointing upward toward the barrel located a few feet above it. Probably Siskind moved the barrel closer to the mast in order to position it above the protruding board. This would date the image on the same day as the proof print, 1940, assuming that this commercial fishing boat went out to sea and when docked the sheets were arranged differently. This protruding

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11 Aaron Siskind, *Menemsha*, 1940. Photograph 22 is owned by the Aaron Siskind Foundation and is in the custody of its agent, the Bruce Silverstein Gallery, New York, New York. Photograph 22 is dated 1943 on its verso in handwriting not believed by the Bruce Silverstein Gallery to be Siskind’s handwriting. Given the 1940 date of the proof print of Photograph 20, dated on its verso in Siskind’s handwriting, and the similar composition of Photographs 20 and 22, Photograph 22 is considered by this work to have been created in 1940.
board is just as unable to penetrate the barrel, as the glove in Photograph 21 is unable to penetrate the rope’s semicircle. But the sexual reference of Photograph 22 is relatively strained because of the great difference in size between the small board and much larger barrel. Still, this image must have interested Siskind. Not only did he develop it, which he did not do to the proof print, but he also mounted it, presumably to facilitate its viewing.

_Chilmark_, 12 1940, Photograph 23, depicts pier planks casting deep shadows, tightly and dramatically framing a severed fish head that has been additionally mutilated to provide fishing bait to catch and kill other fish. The image takes up the entire negative. Siskind placed his camera on top of and very close to the fish head, eliminating almost all reference to context. This tight framing makes an object commonly seen at any fishing pier seem ominous, the artifact of violence. As Chiarenza comments on the image, “Whatever meaning one may wish to bring to this photograph from personal life experiences, it must be associated with mortality, with death, whether literal or figurative.” 13 Siskind’s career-long interest in Christian symbolism, medieval history and philosophy allows the interpretation that the death of Christ is used to facilitate other deaths.

The Second Division of five photographs, with both object and background

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12 Aaron Siskind, _Chilmark_, 1940, Center for Creative Photography, Tucson, Arizona, AG 30:101. Photograph 23 is a Chilmark 1940 negative. It was published in Chiarenza, _Pleasures and Terrors_, 44. It was also published in Howard, _Interior Drama_, 60, titled _Martha’s Vineyard (Chilmark)_ and dated 1940-43.

13 Chiarenza, _Pleasures and Terrors_, 44.
capable of being manipulated by Siskind, includes images of driftwood, plants and shells on a sand background.

_Untitled (driftwood),^{14} 1940_, Photograph 24, depicts a piece of dark driftwood resembling an animal on a wave-swept beach with raised rivulets of sand left by the falling tide. The rivulets resemble the waves that created them. He placed his tripod-mounted camera with its lens facing directly down on the sand and at an angle that rendered the rivulets diagonal to the picture frame. In nature, the rivulets would be running parallel to the shoreline. He placed the driftwood animal perpendicular to the rivulets. Thus the driftwood animal appears to be swimming in the waves, with its head precariously above the water. In the lower right hand corner, the direction that the animal is being pushed by the waves, an irregularly shaped oval form seems to be in the path of the animal. The dark driftwood animal is either surviving or drowning, moving toward safety or toward an aggressor. The sand background is almost a flat surface. It is also printed a light grey instead of white, which provides less contrast to the much darker driftwood.

Siskind described this early 1940s transformation of the object into a force in a 1963 interview:

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... \text{the objects themselves no longer functioned as objects. Although I would find a hunk of wood and put it there, it was no longer a piece of wood. It was still the piece of wood, photographed sharp, but you felt it move as a shape. And this shape might suggest a bone shape, or it might suggest an animal}\n\]

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^{14} Aaron Siskind, _Untitled (driftwood),_ 1940. Photograph 24 is owned by the Aaron Siskind Foundation (AS1 00505-SP) and is in the custody of its agent, the Bruce Silverstein Gallery, New York, New York.
shape. So it became transformed from an object to a force.\(^{15}\)

He further explained the power of the photograph on him by his discovery, in the 1940s, of the effect of the relatively flat plane of the picture surface. He had eliminated perspective. Photographers had strived to create perspective since the invention of the camera, believing perspective created more realistic, lifelike images, which was their goal. Siskind minimized perspective by placing his objects on the flat surface of sand. The uniform flatness of the sand throughout the photograph prevented the viewer from seeing anything behind or to the side of the driftwood animal swimming in the ocean. Siskind described his elimination of naturalistic space in a 1963 interview:

> I found I was getting rid of naturalistic space . . . this force [driftwood animal] was acting in a plane, in a setting that was no longer realistic. So I didn’t have to worry about any other objects which would be real and would disturb it. So you see, I was operating on the plane of ideas. I was wiping out real space and somehow making you feel that the objects were forces so that there’s a whole shift from description to idea, meaning.\(^{16}\)

The object of the photograph, a piece of driftwood, is not the subject of the photograph. The subject is a force, an idea and an allusion stemming from the photograph. In documentary photography, the photographer wants the viewer to believe that the object portrayed, for example, a man selling pies, is the subject of the photograph. Siskind learned through his “picture-making experience” that

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\(^{16}\) Stephany, “Interview with Aaron Siskind,” in Kao and Meyer, Toward a Personal Vision, 44.
object and subject could be vastly different. His driftwood is felt as an animal that was either drowning or surviving. Multiple allusions were possible. His subject was a force that could either be viewed as conquering or conquered.

He had discovered how to make a picture ambiguous. The object is there, fully rendered, but it is not perceived, felt, as an object. It is something else. It has a meaning, and the meaning is partly the object’s meaning, but mostly Siskind’s meaning. The photograph also allowed a multiplicity of meanings available to the viewer. Siskind believed this ambiguity was a characteristic of contemporary life and could be applied to photography.

The ambiguity adds tension to the photograph. The organic form contained by the geometric setting, the rectangle of the picture frame, also created tension. And the flat frame negated perspective, magnifying the tension of the picture because there was no space for the object/force to retreat. It was bound into the picture frame, captured by the flat surface of the picture and the rectangular edges of the frame. This tension echoed Siskind’s basic belief in the duality of the nature of man, reason conflicts with emotion, good comes from evil, happiness from unhappiness. It is impossible to escape from the conflicts arising from this duality, which makes all of life ambiguous, uncertain, lacking absolutes to anchor man.

\[17\] Ibid., 44.
_Driftwood_, 18 1940, Photograph 25 depicts another piece of driftwood resembling a sea animal lying on flattened sand resembling the ocean. The driftwood animal appears to be swimming underwater, trying to get its head above the surface of the water, which would be the line created by the top edge of the frame. The driftwood animal appears to be trying to escape the confines of the picture frame, seeking freedom by swimming past the constraints of the upper right hand corner of the frame. The head of the animal is diagonal from the corner, emphasizing the direction of the animal and its proximity to its goal. Its front arms are propelling its body upward by pushing through the water. The relatively lighter color of the sand directly below the front arms, neck, and head of the swimming animal suggests that the animal is moving upwards. This lighter color suggests the turbulence of water disturbed by movement of the front arms, neck, and head. Siskind could have produced this lighter color by making an indentation in the sand, which could have been achieved by pressing the front arms deeper in the sand and moving the arms upward. His camera could record this indentation as a color lighter than the otherwise uniformly flat sand background.

This driftwood animal of Photograph 25 resembles the driftwood animal of Photograph 24 as it becomes transformed from an object to a force, from description to an idea, carrying meaning. The object of the photograph is not the

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18 Aaron Siskind, _Driftwood_, 1940. Photograph 25 is owned by the Aaron Siskind Foundation (AS1 22038) and is in the custody of its agent, the Bruce Silverstein Gallery, New York, New York.
subject of the photograph. The viewer feels the driftwood as force seeking freedom.
The force could be victorious, finding freedom from its constraints, or defeated, kept in its constraints. Again, multiple allusions are possible. Ambiguity abounds. The duality of life makes for unending uncertainties. The subject of the photograph is this force, either conquering or conquered. Tension is created in both Photographs 24 and 25 by the organic form constrained by the geometric setting, the rectangle of the picture frame. And the flat background negates perspective, leaving no space for the object to escape, captured by the flat surface of the picture and the rectangular edges of the frame.

The entire body of the driftwood animal of Photograph 25 is in the upper half of the photograph, reinforcing the illusion of upward motion directed toward fleeing the confines of the frame. In contrast, the entire body of the driftwood animal of Photograph 24 is also in the upper half of the photograph, but survival, not freedom is implied. This driftwood animal of Photograph 25 lacks the contrast of the almost black animal of Photograph 24.

Untitled,19 ca. 1940, Photograph 26, depicts a dark rounded plant on a background of sand that seems to head toward the top edge of the picture frame, perhaps to join similar plants. Its background is similar to the background of Photograph 24 - a wave swept beach with raised rivulets of sand left by a falling

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19 Aaron Siskind, Untitled, ca. 1940. Photograph 26 is owned by the Aaron Siskind Foundation (AS1 00281-SP) and in in the custody of its agent, the Bruce Silverstein Gallery, New York, New York.
tide, with the rivulets resembling the waves that created them. But in Photograph 26, the rivulets are parallel to the bottom edge of the frame, not diagonal. The plant is centered on a rivulet in the top right of the frame. It fills the space between other rivulets at its top and bottom. The sand below the plant is smooth, without rivulets, connoting upward motion and direction toward the top edge of the frame. On this top edge, slightly to the right of the plant and in the general direction the plant is headed, is a similarly colored remnant of a similar form, perhaps the bottom edge of a similar plant. The larger plant is felt as a force that could be viewed as either swimming toward its mates or continuing to swim alone. It could be viewed as Siskind’s attempts to make visible the dual, conflicted nature of man, simultaneously seeking connectedness and independence.

The plant is a less recognizable form, hence a more ambiguous form, than driftwood. Photograph 26, unlike the driftwood of Photograph 24, has an almost unrecognizable object. This increased ambiguity allows for more allusions by the viewer. The dark circular form could be read as a musical note drawn on the line of a staff formed by the parallel rivulets. Siskind’s musical background supports this interpretation. But the viewer brings his own experience to the image. An infinite number of allusions are possible, depending on the experience of the viewer.

Photograph 26 shares with the driftwood images of Photographs 24 and 25 the tension arising from the organic form in a geometric setting of the rectangular picture frame on a flat sand background. The three photographs are vintage gelatin silver prints mounted to the same size board showing similar age-related
discoloration and kept by Siskind in his home archive until his death. Presumably, he went to the extra effort of mounting the three prints to facilitate their viewing.

These three prints from 1940 illustrate Siskind’s experimentation with a language of forms to convey his feelings and thoughts, which experiment later yielded his signature style of formal abstraction. All three images are composed of similar forms (driftwood and plant) and background (sand) capable of arrangement by Siskind. In all three images, he positioned his camera in the same way – its lens bearing down on his arrangement. His selection of slightly different suggestive forms and their placement in the slightly different textured flat sand yielded very different potential feelings and thoughts about the images.

The plant/note form of Photograph 26 offers strong similarities to the driftwood animal of Photograph 24. Both have rivulet waves, high contrast between the dark object and the sand background, and an additional, relatively vague form on the edge of the frame that the object might or might not be in relation with. But sideways motion is suggested in the driftwood animal of Photograph 24 by the perpendicular placement of the driftwood animal to the rivulet waves. In Photograph 26, upward motion is suggested by the relatively smoother sand surface under the plant form. The rivulet waves are parallel to the edges of the picture frame supporting, not opposing, the object.

The plant/note form of Photograph 26 also resembles the driftwood animal of Photograph 25. Both objects are moving upward toward the top edge of the frame, leaving traces of this movement in the sand. They do differ in that the
upward motion of the driftwood animal is suggested by the lighter color of the sand's indentation while the upward motion of the plant is suggested by the smooth surface of the sand underneath the object.

The plant note of Photograph 26 moves toward Siskind's later style of “writing on the wall.” As Chiarenza remarks, “Evidence of man's mark-making, in its full range of forms, is the element most consistently present throughout Siskind's life work.” Photograph 26 anticipates his later seaweed series of alphabetical letters, which anticipates his later pictures of peeling billboards and walls, with differing layers of man's marking visible on the surfaces. Siskind, in explaining his “writing on the wall” in a 1963 interview, notes:

...I have always been excited by the writing on the wall. I suppose it's ever since I read the Bible and the whole business of the writing up on the wall. And to come across writing on the wall that are very sensitive writings, physically...the way it's been put on, very unselfconsciously. And it looks like it means something, and you'll never know what it means. Of course, the problem is to make a picture out of it.  

Siskind continued to shoot in his new way, trying to make a picture that he did not consider lousy. Chiarenza reports that Siskind thought he had succeeded by the summer of 1943. Siskind did not have the ability to print his negatives at his summer retreat on Martha's Vineyard. Siskind printed the photographs taken in the summer of 1943 in the fall of 1943. Chiarenza, in summarizing Siskind's view of his

20 Chiarenza, Pleasures and Terrors, 27.

progress, remarks:

Siskind found positive evidence of regeneration. The anthropomorphic shapes in the prints, unlike those of the summer of 1940, were composed with certainty. They contained the seeds of a new and lighter life...little remained of the earlier concentration on decay, collapse, frustration, and impotence. He had come through a period of unfocused, grouping experimentation. He had moved from one world to another...”

Driftwood (Martha’s Vineyard), 23 1943, Photograph 27, is an example of this regeneration. It ambiguously illustrates a piece of driftwood, viewable as either gentle or aggressive. The object has phallic protrusions on both the left and right side of its center: The right-sided protrusion is perpendicular to the center and 3 times longer and thicker than the protrusion on the left side; the left-sided protrusion is raised to forty-five degrees from its center. The space between the bottom of the object and the bottom of the picture frame is half the space between the top of the object and the top of the picture frame, the same proportion as the two angles created by the protrusions. The right-sided protrusion is almost to the edge of the picture frame, while the left sided protrusion is further from its edge. The longer and thicker protrusion is moving closer to the edge of the frame, pulling

22 Chiarenza, Pleasures and Terrors, 54.

23 Aaron Siskind, Driftwood (Martha’s Vineyard) ca. 1943, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, Box 101. A print of Photograph 27 is owned by the Aaron Siskind Foundation (AS1 0012-SP) and in the custody of its agent, the Bruce Silverstein Gallery, New York, New York. It is titled and dated Driftwood (Martha’s Vineyard) ca. 1943. It is matted in the same manner as prints exhibited by Siskind in his solo shows at the Egan Gallery. The image was published in Howard’s Interior Drama, 37, titled Martha’s Vineyard (Chilmark) and dated 1940-43.
the left sided protrusion along with it. These echoing proportionalities make the photograph orderly and peaceful, despite the uneven pull toward the right side. The object appears to be firmly and comfortably anchored while moving rightward. The object is transformed into a powerful thrusting force, virile yet peaceful.

Siskind exaggerated the contrast in printing, turning white sand into a rich black background with flecks of white. He isolated the object, cropping out all references to context. The viewer would probably not recognize either the object or the background, yet the photograph is sharp, detailed and familiar. Its anthropomorphism is composed with more “certainty.”

The organic shape of the object conflicts with the geometric setting of the rectangular picture frame. The surface of the sand is flatter than the driftwood of Photographs 23 and 24, lacking any rivulets or other illusion of depth into which either of the unequal sides can escape. Whatever allusions the viewer may make to the picture, whether the force or conflict is viewed as gentle or aggressive, the subject of the picture is not the object. Siskind, without doubt, is not interested in presenting the viewer with a representation of a bit of driftwood found and arranged by him on a beach at Martha’s Vineyard. Rather, he has transformed his object into a force, an idea.

The photograph is ambiguous and thus connotes multiple allusions. Is the force assertive or aggressive, mastering or supportive? Is it referring to life or

\[24\] Chiarenza, *Pleasures and Terrors*, 54.
death, perhaps evoking a human bone? Perhaps all of these conflicting states at the same or differing times. With his 1940s Martha’s Vineyard photographs, Siskind begins to successfully present his philosophy of life, his ideas on the duality of man’s nature.

The Aaron Siskind Foundation has a print of Photograph 27 in its original mounting. It is mounted to a Masonite board as Siskind mounted all of the prints he exhibited at the Charles Egan Gallery. This idiosyncratic exhibition mounting confirms that he found the image interesting.

*Martha’s Vineyard 8,*25 1943, Photograph 28, depicts a sun-bleached whitened jawbone placed on sand that has been printed a rich black. The jawbone is curved on every edge, with its left half symmetrical with its right half. It comprises a small fraction of the image dominated by the powerful black background. It’s placed in the bottom half of the image, on its diagonal axis, headed toward the upper right corner of the frame, devoid of content, seemingly adrift and alone in a dark world.

Chiarenza interprets Photograph 28 as “a stark picture of despair and isolation.”26 The symmetry of the jawbone alludes to Siskind’s views on human nature, containing hope and despair, happiness and unhappiness, good and bad, black and white. Man is in conflict with himself, isolated in a world devoid of absolute values,

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25 Aaron Siskind, *Martha’s Vineyard 8,* 1943, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, file ag30_bneg_mv8_1943. Photograph 28, was published in Chiarenza, *Pleasures and Terrors,* 53. It was also published in Howard, *Interior Drama,* 39, with the same title and date.

unable to find an anchor.

The jawbone of Photograph 28 and the driftwood of Photograph 27 were photographed in the summer of 1943; both present a single, strong object, were printed for high contrast with stark whites and rich blacks and have an idea, a force, as their subject. But the object dominates its background in Photograph 27 and is dominated by its background in Photograph 28. The subject of both photographs is not the object depicted, but a force, an idea. Phallic strength is alluded to in the driftwood of Photograph 27; curved vulnerability in the jawbone of Photograph 28. The difference in message comes mainly from the selection of the size of the background relative to the object. Siskind tightly cropped his phallic object, making it close to the edges of the frame, dominating the entire image. He gave his curved jawbone more background, making it farther from the edges of the frame, allowing it to be subdued by the darkness of the background.

The Third Division includes five photographs of sand-bound roots of seaside vegetation, and the shadows of these roots, as their object. They demonstrate Siskind’s movement from anthropomorphism to purer formalism between 1940 and 1943. Neither the root nor the background sand can be moved. Siskind can only manipulate the shadow of the root. The shadow is necessary to complete the image in three of these images and less important in the remaining two images. These roots grow partly above and partly below the sand and Siskind can photograph, but cannot move, the part of the root growing above the sand. But he can manipulate the position of the shadow of the root as it appears on the sand. Siskind, in choosing
the time of day to photograph and the position of his camera relative to the root, can influence the position of root’s shadow.

Three of the pictures, *Chilmark*, 27 1940, Photograph 29, *Chilmark 23*, 28 1940, Photograph 30, and *Martha's Vineyard 1*, 29 1943, Photograph 31, need the shadow of the root, as well as the root, to complete the image. The root and its shadow constitute a body, a self, and a shadow self, which connotes the duality of human nature.

Photograph 29 is the most anthropomorphic and least ambiguous of the trio. The root and its shadow combine to delineate the outer edges of a figure resembling an animal moving diagonally from the upper left to lower right of the picture plane. The shadow is distinguishable from the root. The root has a knobby protrusion toward its right end, which, combined with its shadow, looks like two eyes in a head, which connotes movement to the right as the eyes peer rightward. An offshoot of the main root growing along its lower right connotes, with its shadow, arms propelling the figure rightward. Another offshoot at the opposite end of the main

27 Aaron Siskind, untitled negative, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, AG 30:101. Photograph 29 is a Chilmark 40 negative.

28 Aaron Siskind, *Chilmark 23*, 1940. Photograph 30 is owned by the Aaron Siskind Foundation (AS1 00486-SP) and in the custody of its agent, the Bruce Silverstein Gallery, New York, New York.

root, to its upper left, connotes legs.

Photograph 30 is less anthropomorphic and more ambiguous. There is only a thin line of space between the root and its shadow, resulting in a form that appears divided in its central core, less life-like, and more mysterious. The root has nothing to connote the front or the back of the figure. It is positioned on a diagonal between the upper left and lower right of the picture plane, without any suggestion of direction.

Photograph 31 is the least anthropomorphic, most ambiguous, and closest to pure form of the trio. The root is delineated from its shadow. But this form has no protrusions recognizable as a body part. Nor is there anything to suggest direction. The form is static, attached to sand on its left and right side. The sand is stippled instead of smooth, which increases the mystery of the background and the image.

The shadow of the root is incidental to the figure in Driftwood,\textsuperscript{30} ca. 1940, Photograph 32, and Driftwood,\textsuperscript{31} ca. 1943, Photograph 33. Continuing the trend of the trio, the later work is less anthropomorphic, relying more on pure form to convey the subject of the photograph.

Photograph 32 depicts a root consisting of two thick strands of wood

\textsuperscript{30}Aaron Siskind, Driftwood, ca. 1940. Photograph 32 is owned by the Aaron Siskind Foundation (AS1 00524-SP) and in the custody of its agent, the Bruce Silverstein Gallery, New York, New York. Photograph 32 was published by the Aaron Siskind Foundation in Aaron Siskind 100.

\textsuperscript{31}Aaron Siskind, Driftwood, ca. 1943, location unknown. Photograph 33 was published by the Aaron Siskind Foundation in Aaron Siskind 100.
forming an approximate right angle, which echoes the right lower corner of the picture frame. The meeting point of the two angles is a circular knob. The two strands going from the left of the picture frame to the knob are intertwined, wrapped around each other. They become merged into a single knob at the corner then head upward as two separate and distant strands. The shadow of the root is invisible in most of the picture and not necessary to the image. The two strands of the root are sufficient to convey the duality of human nature, the conflicting and simultaneous desire for connection and independence. Siskind’s printing enhances the conflict. The sand background is printed medium grey, not white. The driftwood is printed light, popping out from its background and adding conflicting contrast to the image.

Photograph 33 depicts a single stranded root forming an angle with a central curve from which the root veers off into different directions. The part of the root photographed is not attached to the sand. The part of the root that veers off from the center and heads toward the upper left of the frame can continue past the frame. The part of the root that veers off toward the lower right of the frame is also unattached. The single strand can travel continually in opposite directions, upward or downward. In much the same manner, man will not resolve the duality of his nature. The struggle is inherent; man’s twisted path was made by nature. The sand is printed darker and the driftwood lighter, increasing the conflict of the image. This image is less anthropomorphic than photograph 32, less dependent on storytelling and more dependent on form to carry its message.
Siskind scholars have suggested that Swiss sculpture Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966) influenced Siskind in creating his root and seaweed forms. Chiarenza speculates that the root photographs “are positioned to suggest a vague figuration, much like the later wasting-away figures of Giacometti.”32 Photography historian Henry Holmes Smith notes that “Aaron Siskind could not have produced his lyrical seaweed photographs without having first seen the sculpture of Giacometti. He feels that this interrelation of the visual arts is the source of considerable richness.”33

The Fourth Division includes three photographs of seaweed arranged on sand. Siskind had more flexibility in creating their form since he was able to manipulate both the seaweed and its sand background. Chiarenza, placing the seaweed images in a historical context, summarizes:

The gentlest, most elegant pictures of this period [summer of 1943] began what became a fifteen-year attachment to the accidental, gestural drawing made by seaweed upon the sand. Siskind tipped the camera perfectly parallel to the ground, making of the sand a uniform ground of grain in or on which the seaweed existed as a linear movement. These pictures, sometimes playful, sometimes serious, call to mind the works of Klee and Miro, as well as of Giacometti.34

*Sea Weed – Martha’s Vineyard,*35 1940, Photograph 34, resembles *Driftwood,*

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32 Chiarenza, *Pleasures and Terrors,* 53.

33 Ibid., 255n5.

34 Ibid., 53.

ca. 1940, Photograph 32, in its figuration. Both images have linear strands of organic material, originating from opposite sides of the picture plane, meeting at a corner that has a circular form softening the jointure. The circular form in *Sea Weed – Martha’s Vineyard*, photograph 34 is more elaborate, comprising various circles of seaweed as well as the shadows of these circles. This elaborate presentation suggests that Siskind’s hand was responsible for the form, not nature. But seaweed by its nature is more pliable than wood, capable of the thrusts and apparent conflicts that pieces of wood cannot imply. Selection of seaweed as object necessitates a softer subject. Photograph 34 alludes to happier coitus, happier jointure and separation. The sand is not disguised, and it easily reads as sand, affining the identity of the object as seaweed. The seaweed is not anthropomorphic. It communicates Siskind’s idea, its multiple allusions, by purely formal means.

*Martha’s Vineyard (Seaweed) 1*, 1943, Photograph 35, depicts, according to biographer Chiarenza, “two lines, pieces of seaweed, (to) suggest in simpler terms than had Klee, Picasso, or cave artist, a playful bull or bison.” Beaumont Newhall, 36

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36 Aaron Siskind, *Martha’s Vineyard (Seaweed) 1*, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, negative MV1, 1943. Photograph 35 was published in Chiarenza, *Pleasures and Terrors*, 54. It was published in Howard, *Interior Drama*, 36, titled Seaweed 1 and dated 1943. It was published by the Aaron Siskind Foundation in *Aaron Siskind, 100*, titled Seaweed 1 and dated 1943.

37 Chiarenza, *Pleasures and Terrors*, 53.
the first curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art, selected it for inclusion in the celebrated *New Photographers* exhibition of 1946. Siskind, unusual for him especially at that early date, had titled the work *The Timid Beast*. Newhall objected to the title thinking it “restricted the viewer to animal resemblance and gave the photograph a ‘somewhat cute character’, which [he] assumed Siskind did not intend.”

But, as Chiarenza points out, “Siskind rarely titles his pictures. The few titles he has used are thus usually significant clues to the meaning he attaches to his work.”

*Martha’s Vineyard (Seaweed) 2,*

1943, Photograph 36, depicts, according to Chiarenza, “A single letter ‘a’, perhaps a reference to Aaron, . . .” The image is also one of gentle jointure, with a circle softening the intersection of the seaweed going in disparate directions. The sand reads easily as sand, helping to identify the object as seaweed. Because of the inevitable association of the “a” with the alphabet, the image alludes to Siskind’s mature works inspired by “writings on the wall.”

The Fifth Division includes twelve photographs, the majority of which depict man-made objects with their placement and background capable of being

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38 Ibid., 53


41 Chiarenza, *Pleasures and Terrors*, 53.
manipulated by Siskind. They are controlled experiments investigating form, characterized as “sketches”\textsuperscript{42} by Chiarenza. Most were taken with wooden pier planks as the background. Siskind achieved a flat background by positioning his camera so its film and lens were directly on top of the arrangement he composed. They are probably the images Siskind had in mind when he characterized his early images as “lousy”\textsuperscript{43} and concerned with “decay, frustration, impotence and confusion.”\textsuperscript{44}

Most of the images are not successful. The objects photographed lack the ambiguity that characterizes his more mature abstractions. During the early 1940s, Siskind was learning to find suggestive images. These photographs of his failures illustrate this struggle. A suggestive image for Siskind must have a meaning of its own, but also be susceptible to Siskind’s meaning, and the viewer’s other meanings, coming from the different experiences of the viewer. It is the ambiguity between multiple meanings that drives Siskind’s most successful pictures.

The unsuccessfulness of the photographs is evidence of their early date. Siskind, during his earliest experimentation with abstraction, did not know what he was trying to do. The unsuccessful images resonated with him, but he thought that they would not resonate with viewers. He had to experiment to find out how to

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 43.

\textsuperscript{43} Hagen, Sweetman and Goodman, “Interview with Aaron Siskind,” 4.

\textsuperscript{44} Chiarenza, Pleasures and Terrors, 54.
make his abstractions “interesting” to his viewer. This took time. It is reasonable to assume that he started in 1940 and improved in the summers between 1940 and 1944, this last critically recognized as his “breakout” summer at Gloucester when his innovative style of formal abstraction matured.

_Chilmark 3_,45 1940, Photograph 37, depicts a turnbuckle placed on a pier.

_Diver’s Suit on Dock – Menemsha, Martha’s Vineyard_,46 1940, Photograph 38, depicts part of a diver’s suit and facemask situated next to a pair of woman’s sandals whose straps touch the mask. These objects are placed on a pier. Siskind does not use these objects again. But he makes numerous references during his mature period to the underground nature of his imagery.

_Fish-in-Hand_,47 1940, Photograph 39, depicts a minnow-sized fish placed in the palm of an open hand. Given Siskind’s avowed atheism as well as exposure to Marxian and Christian theory, it is tempting to view this picture as a symbol of man’s creation of religious beliefs.

45 Aaron Siskind, untitled negative, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, AG 30:101. Photograph 37 is a Chilmark 40 negative.

46 Aaron Siskind, _Diver’s Suit on Dock – Menemsha, Martha’s Vineyard_, ca. 1940, George Eastman House, Still Photograph Archive, Rochester, New York, 69:0062:0005. Photograph 38 verso has an inscription handwritten in pencil by Siskind, dating the work to the “early 40s.”

47 Aaron Siskind, _Fish-in-Hand_, 1940, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, 2007.10.3. The negative is found at Center for Creative Photography, AG 30:97. Photograph 39 was published in Chiarenza, _Pleasures and Terrors_, 44 with the title and date of _Chilmark_, 1940. Photograph 39 was published in Howard, _Interior Drama_ with the title and date of _Hand B_, 1939-40.
Martha’s Vineyard 5, 1940, Photograph 40, depicts a severed fish head on the ground near a pier.

Chilmark, 1940, Photograph 41, depicts a coil of rope situated on a pier. The rope appears to have originated under the pier and to have come through the dark spaces between the pier planks to be situated on top of the pier. The rope appears to be “organically alive.” Many of Siskind’s mature abstractions utilize tension stemming from the presence of underlying, earlier created layers, intruding upon current surface layers.

Martha’s Vineyard (Menemsha), 1940, Photograph 42, depicts a clamming rake bound to and dominating the top of a post. This image is framed on the left and right sides by two ship masts. Chiarenza commenting on this image notes “The picture is clearly unresolved formally and even technically. The fact that Siskind

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48 Aaron Siskind, Martha’s Vineyard 5, 1943. Photograph 40 is owned by the Aaron Siskind Foundation (ASF 25012) and in the custody of its agent, the Bruce Silverstein Gallery, New York, New York. It is dated on the mount verso as 1943, but the Silverstein Gallery staff noted in a private conference that the date is not in Siskind’s handwriting.

49 Aaron Siskind, Chilmark 40, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, AG 30:98. Photograph 41 was published, titled and dated in Chiarenza, Pleasures and Terrors, 43 and 255n24.

50 Chiarenza, Pleasures and Terrors, 43.

51 Aaron Siskind, Martha’s Vineyard (Menemsha) ca. 1940-41, location unknown. Photograph 42 was published, titled and dated in Chiarenza, Pleasures and Terrors, 48.
bothered to make an enlarged proof of it indicates his interest in metaphor."

Three 1940 images depicting a pair of boots illustrate growth in Siskind’s understanding of the metaphorical use of form. *Chilmark,* 53 1940, Photograph 43, depicts a pair of folded over hip-high boots placed on a pier. The boots are placed in careful, but puzzling, relation to each other; half of the right boot lies on top of half of the left boot. *Untitled,* 54 1940, Photograph 44, depicts a pair of knee-high boots on the planked wooden floor of a boat. These boots are also placed in careful, but puzzling, relation to each other. The toe of the right boot is positioned on top of and near the heel of the left boot. *Martha's Vineyard (Menemsha),* 55 ca. 1941-42, Photograph 45, depicts a man in hip-high boots, standing on a pier, facing a diagonal ship’s line a few inches away from him. On the opposite side of the image is the support post of the pier, going downward into the water. It attaches to the horizontal pier with a high contrast metal rounded head of a bolt. The bolt head is

52 Chiarenza, *Pleasures and Terrors,* 46.

53 Aaron Siskind, untitled negative, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, AG 30:101. Photograph 43 is a Chilmark 1940 negative.

54 Aaron Siskind, *Untitled,* 1940. Photograph 44 is owned by the Aaron Siskind Foundation (ASF 36104) and is held in the custody of its agent, the Bruce Silverstein Gallery, New York, New York.

55 Aaron Siskind, *Martha's Vineyard (Menemsha) ca. 1940-41,* J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Calif., 92.XM.76.4. Photograph 45 was published with the same title and date, in Chiarenza, *Pleasures and Terrors,* 47. The Robert Mann Gallery, then acting as agent for the Aaron Siskind Foundation, exhibited it in 1992 with the same date and title.
the lightest part of the image and holds down the right half of the image. It echoes the white of the sky and balances the left half of the image composed entirely of dark objects, the rubber boot, diagonal rope line and pier. This image is capable of multiple allusions. It could connote the contemporaneous Nazi menace of the Second World War. It could also connote rejection; the boot exercising the ability to turn away from the stationary rounded bolt head. Whether the two sexes are at a standstill or the male is rejecting, the boot is on top and can decide whether to turn around and encounter the female or maintain the current standstill or walk away. He is in command. The diagonal rope adds penile strength to the male.

Three images depicting gloves give another illustration of Siskind’s 1940 growth in understanding the metaphorical use of form. Chilmark,\textsuperscript{56} 1940, Photograph 46, depicts a coiled rope enclosing a pair of torn gloves placed on a pier. Chilmark,\textsuperscript{57} 1940, Photograph 47, another menacing image, depicts a pitchfork, perhaps an allusion to the devil’s pitchfork, whose handle leans against wooden wall planks with the forked end piercing the fingers of a glove placed on a floor.

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{56} Aaron Siskind, untitled negative, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, AG 30:101. Photograph 46 is a Chilmark 1940 negative. It was published with the title and date of Chilmark 13, 1940 by the Robert Mann Gallery, then acting as agent for the Aaron Siskind Foundation, in Aaron Siskind, 19.

\textsuperscript{57} Aaron Siskind, untitled negative, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, AG 30:101. Photograph 47 is a Chilmark 1940 negative.
Chilmark 40, 1940, Photograph 48, is a severely cropped version of Photograph 47. Chiarenza, in 1982, emphasizes the domination/subordination polarity of Photograph 48 by noting:

...the fingered portion of the glove...pinned down by three (pitchfork) prongs which, now seen in such detail, seem bloodied. The composition is of two elements, one hard and linear, the other soft and animate, tightly framed in a non-spatial plane. The issue here is not of balance of forces in opposition, it is of a clear distinction of one force over another.  

The metaphorical meaning of Photograph 48 is similar to the meaning of Photograph 42. Both photographs concern the domination of one force, a pitchfork or a clamming rake, over another, a glove or a post. The cropping of Photograph 48 and Photograph 21 (part of the proof print of a boat) increase the ambiguity of the object photographed by eliminating its context. The objects become forces. There is a shift in the meaning of the photograph from description to idea.

Siskind used Gloucester 1H, 1944, Photograph 49, his celebrated image of a glove made during his breakout to his mature style of formal abstraction, to explain how he learned to make his photographs interesting to viewers. He notes:

Gloucester [1H is] very important. Helped me understand what picture is.

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58 Aaron Siskind, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, Box 101. Photograph 48 was published with the title and date of Chilmark, 1940 in Chiarenza, Pleasures and Terrors, 45. It was published with the title and date of Martha’s Vineyard, 1941 or 1942 by the Robert Mann Gallery, then acting as agent for the Aaron Siskind Foundation, in Aaron Siskind, 21.

59 Chiarenza, Pleasures and Terrors, 45-6.

60 Aaron Siskind, Gloucester 1H, 1944, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, 76.6.84.
From 1943 (in Martha's Vineyard before Gloucester) I learned conflict between organic object and geometrical and concreteness of thing. I began to feel two opposite things. Organic in geometric setting. Had to do with idea. My understanding of the photograph, the picture is not the object. I began to see that no matter what picture you make there is the ambiguous nature. Organic subject put into geometric setting. I understood that tension became symbolic of all the formal elements in us and feeling. Conflict between man and society. Began to see that photograph itself had inner conflict all the time. Glove is more specific. Took pictures of gloves, many versions... on the ground. Continuation of natural seeing... make everything straight. When look at Gloucester. Not like rest. Others continue naturalistic way of seeing. In glove have put it on flat plane, gotten rid of objective reference. Force comes only from picture nature. Power. Damn thing is statement, exclamation. Everyone refers to it as hand. More complete transformation from the object to the idea. Special power, context not important, but I keep context a little.61

Siskind explains again his theory underpinning his unique way of seeing, which evolved into his style of formal abstraction. In his view, every photograph contains ambiguity and tension because of the conflicted relationship between the geometric frame and organic subject matter. This inherent ambiguity, conflict, or tension of every photograph makes photography the ideal medium for his message of the duality of man, the inherent conflict between man as individual and society, between man and his environment, between man and woman. To make his photographs interesting, he discovered, between 1940 and 1943, that the object photographed first had to be capable of multiple meanings, capable of ambiguous readings, capable of different, perhaps contradictory meanings. Then the object photographed had to be specific, had to be relatively free of its objective referents. The force of the photograph had to come from its “picture nature,” the conflict

61 Johnson and Pitts, Siskind interview, (DVD 3 of 6), 78:053.
between the geometric frame and the organic shape. His “many versions (of gloves) … on the ground” which he calls a “continuation of natural seeing “ can be seen in Photograph 46 (image of coiled rope with glove in its center), Photograph 47 (image of long-handled pitchfork holding down single glove) and Photograph 48 (image of cropped pitchfork dominating single glove). In Gloucester 1H, 1944, he got rid of objective referents, the coiled rope and the pitchfork handle, and simply let the glove speak, its force comes only from its “picture nature” or the conflict inherent in every photograph. The flat background became a wall and the glove extrudes from this wall, the fingers either motioning the viewer to follow, or signaling for the attention of the viewer. The glove seems to be a hand, whether of Christ or Hitler or someone else, depending on the imagination of the viewer. Siskind achieved a transformation from the glove to an idea, a “force” operating on the viewer, commanding a response, however varied from one viewer to the next.

In a 1945 artist statement accompanying his 1944 Gloucester work, Siskind penned his Drama of Objects,62 explaining yet again the goals of his abstract work. He explains that the objects he selects to photograph are not of primary importance to him. What is important, and deeply moving, is the relationship of the objects to each other and to the frame of his photographs. Aesthetically his photographs pretend to resolve sometimes fierce and sometimes gentle conflicting forces. His live forms relate to their flat unyielding background and cannot escape into perspective. His photographs present the viewer with the drama of this conflict.

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Thus his photographs are psychological in character, with the interior drama giving meaning to the exterior event. The interior drama of the photograph refers to the associations stirred in the viewer by the photograph’s depiction of inherent and inescapable conflict.

Siskind’s reputation as one of the leading art photographers of the post Second World War era was started with his inclusion in the Museum of Modern Art’s 1946 exhibit, *New Photographers*. In 1947, he had a solo show at the Mark Egan Gallery, which specialized in the work of Abstract Expressionist painters. He was the only photographer exhibiting with the first generation of Abstract Expressionist painters in the 1951 “Ninth Street Show.”

Siskind is conventionally thought to have found his abstractionist style under the influence of his Abstract Expressionist painter friends. This fallacy might have been fed by his confusion as to the dating of his transition as discussed in the Introduction of this work. If Siskind’s transition began in 1940, he started his journey to formal abstraction independent of any painter friends. Siskind found a home with Abstract Expressionist painters in a shared desire to create new objects conveying his emotions. As photo historian Rhem summarizes “His manner of zooming in on visual details and fragments in ways that explored gesture and shape but that had little to do with the nominal subject matter in front of the camera

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63 Chiarenza, *Pleasures and Terrors*, 90.
clearly made him a brother in the family of Abstract Expressionists.”  
64 But this home was found after he began his journey toward formal abstraction in 1940.

In 1946, Siskind paid homage to his Tabernacle City project of the mid 1930s. Chiarenza opines that this project was important to his transition from documentary to abstraction.  
65 His Return to Tabernacle City,  66 1946, Photograph 50, expresses tension in the contrast of shapes and of light and shadow. As Siskind explained in Drama of Objects, the image is of the shadow world, the internal drama that stimulates the external event.

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64 Rhem, Aaron Siskind, 3.

65 Chiarenza, Pleasures and Terrors, 69.

66 Aaron Siskind, Return to Tabernacle City, 1946, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, 76.6.84.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Siskind’s mature style of formal abstraction, as it evolved from 1940-43, brought him recognition as one of the leading high modernist art photographers of the post Second World War era. Although the work of his mature period is not the subject of this research, a summary of it puts his transitional photographs in context. After this summary, the study explains the importance of its collection of thirty images from 1940-43 to the correct understanding of Siskind’s transition. The study then discusses the importance of the human values at stake in Siskind’s innovative use of the camera for self-expression.

In his 1945 essay, “The Drama of Objects,” Siskind announced the “new departure” of his 1944 Gloucester photographs, which evidenced the birth of his style of formal abstraction. Siskind refined this style, with little variation, until his death 46 years later in 1991. Siskind, in emphasizing the psychological character of his new style, noted:

Essentially, then, these photographs are psychological in character. That may or may not be a good thing. But it does seem to me that this kind of picture satisfies a need. I may be wrong, but the essentially illustrative nature of most documentary photography, and the worship of the object per se, in our best nature photography, is not enough to satisfy the man of today, compounded as he is of Christ, Freud and Marx. The interior drama is the meaning of the external event. And each man is an essence and a symbol . . .\(^1\)

\(^{1}\) Siskind, “Drama,” in Kao and Meyer, Toward a Personal Vision, 53.
In 2014, almost 70 years after this departure, French photography historian Mora summarized the contemporary critical reception given his mature oeuvre.

Mora, writing in the only book on Siskind currently in print, remarks:

\[
\ldots (\text{his style}) \text{ has been sometimes mocked on the grounds that for the viewer it works like a Rorschach test, that tool invented by psychoanalysis for assessment of the psychological profile of a person interpreting a series of ink blots. Siskind, though, never seeks to confront his viewer with an image so open-ended or abstruse as to allow wildly undiscriminating interpretation.} \ldots \text{the sometimes anthropomorphic shapes that emerge have always been identified as such by the photographer. Their often nightmarish spookiness and undisguised animism took shape during the taking of the photographs – Siskind stresses his “terrific absorption” in things in ‘The Drama of Objects’ – which is triggered not by chance but by a deep correspondence between form (of the object) and content (subject of the image): ‘The interior drama is the meaning of the exterior event.’ Proliferating sexual connotations, surfaces eaten away by time or physical decay, erosion of light by the triumphant power of black that looms so large in Siskind’s prints: themes expressive of the artist’s private complexity, of his fears and fantasies \ldots .}^2
\]

Mora also addresses the decline of Siskind’s reputation as an avant-garde artist, suggesting:

\[
\ldots \text{he (Siskind) situates photography within an all-embracing act of comprehension of the world and the taking of a personal position \ldots We have lost the habit of this kind of credo: it belongs to a modernist past which, nonetheless, for two decades (1950s-1960s) engaged American photography in the venture of revelation of the self and the world \ldots .}^3
\]

Photographic historian Davis, in his 2009 analysis of the place of Siskind in the history of twentieth-century photography, begins with Siskind’s 1945

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\[^2\] Mora, *Another Photographic Reality*, 23.

\[^3\] Ibid., 22.
characterization of his 1944 breakout work as “psychological in character.” Davis then notes that this artistic stance “correlated logically with . . . the ideas of Freud, Jung and the existentialists, as well as the Abstract Expressionists’ celebration of intuition, myth and the spontaneous gesture.”4 After Siskind’s 1944 Gloucester breakout, he headed back to New York with his Abstract Expressionist painter friends, achieving critical success as he exhibited and discussed art in their circle. He helped to establish a new paradigm of the artist, a creator searching for a visual depiction of the psyche of man, drawing inspiration from concepts of primitive man and the unconscious. Siskind, in his 1950 explanation of his mature work, noted:

What is the subject matter of this apparently very personal world? It has been suggested that these shapes and images are underworld characters, the inhabitants of a vast common realm of memories that have been down below the level of conscious control. It may be they are.5

Kao and Meyer connect Siskind to Abstract Expressionist painters. In their view, Siskind, by referencing the “primal and existential meaning in his work . . . [which] parallels the aesthetic aims and writings” of the Abstract Expressionist painters and critics, positioned himself in the camp of avant-garde painters and not the documentary photographers of that time.6

4 Davis, Callahan, Siskind, Sommer, 25.


6 Ibid., The editors provided lengthy comments preceding the text of this chapter.
The body of work Siskind produced during the last four decades of his life, as he mastered his modernist style of formal abstraction, is beyond the scope of this research. That stage of his work and life has been amply explored. His mature work has been exhibited in hundreds of venues, national and international. The catalogue essays accompanying these exhibits typically follow the template established by Henry Holmes Smith, honed at Siskind's first retrospective in 1965. They describe his abstract style and, if mentioned, reprise the conventional art historical narrative asserting his transition to abstraction as a result of friendships with Abstract Expressionist painters in 1943-44.

Siskind’s dualistic philosophy as well as his abstract work arguably underwent a maturation process as he collaborated personally and professionally with his Abstract Expressionist friends, who passionately believed themselves on the cusp of an artistic revolution. The present study, however, examines Siskind’s artistic production of 1940-43 prior to this connection with Abstract Expressionists. His 1940-43 transitional abstraction laid the foundation for his later mature expressions.

This research contends that Siskind's transition to abstraction was fueled by his desire to create ambiguous images expressing his personal philosophy of dualism, a philosophy derived from his interest in pre-modern literary forms, and ultimately expressed during his photographic career as a modernist. It not only examines the dating of this transition to abstraction, it also re-contextualizes that transition.
Siskind was a modernist photographer, reflecting American photographic modernism and aestheticism prevalent during the 1930s and 1940s. He was a “straight photographer,” rejecting any methods of manipulation. He abjured solarization, soft lens, and unique developing procedures. His camera was a tool for capturing the reality in front of his lens. In the 1930s, his Photo League social realism work represented the harsh realities of depression era poor. His more introspective Tabernacle City and Civic Repertory Theatre work was still in the style of straight photography.

The present research presents a collection of thirty abstract images made during the summers of 1940-43, the moment of his transition from documentary to modernist formal abstraction. Thirteen images of this collection have never been published. The collection was amassed after scouring the photographic and negative archives of the Center for Creative Photography, the Aaron Siskind Foundation (including those of its agents, the Bruce Silverstein Gallery and the Robert Mann Gallery,) the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum, the George Eastman House, the Rhode Island School of Design, and the J. Paul Getty Museum. No single repository, except the Center for Creative Photography, held more than a few images. Additionally, the research included reviewing print catalogues of Siskind exhibitions.

The primary purpose of the research was to present the collection of thirty images made before 1944 and facts supporting their dating. The location, if known, of every image in the collection is noted. If an image was published, publication
facts are noted. If the publication assigned a date to the published image, this date is noted. Seventeen images of the collection have been published. No publication dated an image after 1943. The collection, for purposes of analysis, is divided according to subject matter. These divisions were intended to accent the growth in Siskind’s reach for abstraction from 1940-43 while using the same subject matter. The strongest argument for the dating of the collection is apparent upon a superficial visual inspection. Chiarenza characterizes the Chilmark 1940 negative images as “sketches.” When compared to his 1944 breakout images, these sketches seem obvious beginning steps. Analyzing the sketches in a way that accents their growth from 1940 to 1943 supports the earlier date. This work also offers an explanation for Siskind’s confusion when incorrectly dating his transitional photos. It documents his re-assessment of the date, from “probably 1943” to “1940.”

The research discovered, gathered, analyzed and presents the collection. It completes the story of Siskind’s artistic journey. This research also relates his poetry to his photography, viewing both, as he did, as avenues for expression of his personal philosophy. By bringing his poetry together with his private Tabernacle City introspective images, and his transitional images, Siskind oeuvre can be seen as evolutionary and not fractured.

Siskind’s attempts to express his dualistic philosophy are the threads uniting his aesthetic production during this period of study, whether as a musician, poet, documentary or abstract photographer. He was an eager student of music, literature and photography. Chiarenza spent hours with Siskind discussing his
dualistic philosophy and its aesthetic expression. Chiarenza crystalizes his philosophy in a summary sentence approved by Siskind. “The oft-stated mature expression of his philosophy, which he labeled ‘dualism’ consists of his belief that unhappiness is necessary for happiness, that evil is necessary for good and that the resulting, inevitable tensions and conflicts, on both a personal and universal level, are the fabric of Western culture.”

Siskind’s first attempt at aesthetic self-expression was through music. He avidly attended concerts, compiled an impressive collection of recordings, took piano lessons and a college music composition course. After more than a decade of study and practice, he concluded that he lacked the talent for musical excellence. But his passion and the study of music continued throughout his life. He frequently used musical terms to describe later poetic and photographic ideas explaining “... even in the early years, I used to compose my pictures in terms of rhythms... If it weren't for those (musical) experiences, I'm sure my pictures wouldn't be the same.”

His next attempt at aesthetic self-expression was through poetry. He spent the decade of the 1920s writing ambiguous poetry that was his aesthetic rendering of his dualistic philosophy. His poems have more than one meaning and are often contradictory, reflecting his internal conflicts and tensions. Siskind achieved ambiguity by grounding his poems in the medieval tradition, his speaker presenting...

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7 Chiarenza, Pleasures and Terrors, 10-11.

8 Bloom, “Interview with Aaron Siskind,” 114.
conflicting choices through metaphors utilized by troubadour poets of the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries. His poetry reflects his interest in pre-modern literary forms, which was stimulated by his high school mentor, a poet and medieval scholar, his college courses in Middle and Medieval English Literature, and the influence of the writings of Ernest Renan, a renaissance Medieval scholar to whom Siskind dedicated a booklet of his poems and liberally referenced. Again, after more than a decade of study and practice, he concluded that he lacked the ability to find, in words, the ambiguity necessary to express his dualistic philosophy. His poetry of 1922-26 reflects the earliest extant evidence available of his attempts at expressing his philosophy.

Siskind spent the decade of the 1930s living in New York City and vacationing on Martha’s Vineyard. He continually improved his understanding of the camera. His earliest pictures, Photographs 2, 3 and 4, show his reach for visual ambiguity, creating pictures capable of multiple, conflicting meanings about the subject depicted. By the middle of the 1930s, on Martha’s Vineyard, he was creating pictures portraying his interiority. Photographs 13 and 14, of architectural fragments found on Martha’s Vineyard in 1934-6, are abstractions conveying his feelings of loneliness and despair as his wife slid deeper into mental illness. By 1938, as depicted in Photograph 16, Siskind used architectural fragments as metaphors of both personal and political destruction.

During the 1930s, Siskind simultaneously explored veristic documentary photography. He created the acclaimed photo series, the *Harlem Document,* while
working with the Photo League. Siskind’s frustrations increased with the inevitable limitations, both as to subject matter and personal expression, imposed on documentarians seeking to create images carrying a social message. As his photographic skills and ambitions matured, his goal increasingly became self-discovery, self-expression and self-definition. The Harlem Document photographs reveal his increasing mastery of metaphor, his ability to arrange objects in front of a camera, select lighting, and manipulate negatives in the darkroom, all to convey his personal thoughts about the subject matter. His images of Harlem life, suggestive as they may be, did not resonate with his own experiences. He could not connect, for example, to the subject in Photograph 12, the sleeping black man, because of differences in race, culture and economic background.

In the summers of 1939-40, Siskind created his photo series documenting the folk culture of Tabernacle City at Oak Bluffs, Martha’s Vineyard. Siskind had taken introspective pictures at this site during 1934-38, as demonstrated by Photographs 13, 14 and 15 discussed in Chapter Four of this work. His 1939-40 creations had a different purpose. Siskind wanted his photographs to demonstrate the connection between the existing architecture of the earlier folk culture of the community.

In the summer of 1940, while working at Tabernacle City, without understanding why he was doing it, Siskind started lugging his heavy camera and tripod to the wharfs of the neighboring commercial fishing villages of Chilmark and Menemsha. He photographed randomly found objects, bits of driftwood, seaweed, fishing equipment that he arranged on flat backgrounds. These images are his
earliest extant abstract pictures. His summer retreat, shared with collegiate friends, had no running water. Siskind wasn’t able to see the results of his summer Vineyard photographs until the fall when he returned to his New York darkroom. He continued creating his abstractions during his Vineyard summers of 1941-43, honing his art, learning how to make ambiguous images referring to multiple, conflicting themes.

The thirty images taken during the summers of 1940-43 were made in a period in which photography was not considered an art. Photographs were made with a “mechanical” camera. Photography was a craft. Siskind’s background was in music and poetry, not painting, sculpture or the other visual arts. These collected images, however, reflect his philosophy, derived from his interest in pre-modern literary form, in a modernist photographic style. Many of these abstractions echo themes of his poems – gender conflicts and the polarities of dominance and subservience.

By 1943, he had taught himself how to make successful ambiguous, interesting images. As detailed in the introductory chapter, it was only in 1943-44 that Siskind established friendships with painters who would later become known as Abstract Expressionists. He spent the summer 1944 in Gloucester, Massachusetts with painters Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb. That summer’s photographs brought him critical acclaim, launching his career as the single photographic member of the first generation of Abstract Expressionists whose work came to represent the most important movement in American Art. His work during the
summer of 1944 ignited the conventional art historical narrative: Siskind’s transition to abstraction was produced by his familiarity with the images on the canvases of his Abstract Expressionist painter friends.

The 1940-43 pictures lay ignored over the years in Siskind's home negative files. His mature work, while appreciated by a few avant-garde artists and collectors, was little understood by contemporary critics. It was not until his first retrospective in 1965, twenty-five years after his 1940 transition, that the sixty-two year old Siskind was asked about the timing of his transition. He opined it was “probably 1943.”9 This confusion was clarified when Chiarenza, searching though Siskind’s home negative archive in anticipation of the 1982 publication of his biography, discovered the Chilmark 1940 negative file containing abstractions. Siskind’s memory of the date of his transition was refreshed by Chiarenza’s discoveries and in subsequent interviews he attributes his transition to 194010 – but this re-attribution was not thoroughly reflected in Chiarenza’s writing, or that of others.

This study has brought the collection to light for the first time, making the photographs available for critical analysis. Additional interpretations and visual analyses could add thematic clarity and contextualization to the collection. Dating the beginning of his transition to 1940 also leads to the question of whether

9 Stephany, “Interview with Aaron Siskind,” in Kao and Meyer, Toward a Personal Vision, 43.

10 Columbia College, Siskind interview.
Siskind’s early discoveries might have influenced painters who eventually became known as the Abstract Expressionists.

This research emphasizes the human values at stake in viewing Siskind’s career as evolutionary and not fractured. Siskind’s mid-century assertion that the camera has an unbounded potential for self-expression heralded his understanding of both his tool and his medium. As one of the foremost teachers of photography at a time of its apex in the academy, Siskind enjoyed an international podium. Siskind’s aesthetic productivity lasted through his eighth decade, as did his increasing circle of mentees. His view of the camera is accepted and continues to influence the teaching and practice of photography. This view came from experimentation with his camera, based on his own hard earned and evolving philosophy of life. It did not come from copying images made by Abstract Expressionist painters in 1944.

Siskind’s innovative way of viewing his camera led to his ability to express his emotions, to visually present his personal identity to himself and to the world. His search for self was a major preoccupation of his life. His self, and its continuing growth, was what he sought to capture with his camera. The objects in front of his camera lens were useful only insofar as they advanced this goal. Siskind’s preoccupation with self-expression has given the contemporary world another tool to seek, to find and to express interiority.

Siskind fulfilled the Delphic maxim “Know Thyself” with a camera in hand, blazing a trail which contemporary culture continues to follow. The context of the Delphic oracle’s maxim is the question “What does it mean to be fully human?”
Fulfillment of the maxim is implicitly a response to this question. The desire to, and the success at, fulfilling that maxim characterizes Siskind’s career, both as a poet and a photographer. It offers a straightforward engagement of profound human values as they have been thought about since the beginning of Western civilization.
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Photograph 25. Aaron Siskind, *Driftwood*, 1940

Photograph 26. Aaron Siskind, *Untitled*, ca. 1940

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Photograph 50. Aaron Siskind, *Return to Tabernacle City*, 1946
Photograph 18. Aaron Siskind, untitled negative, 1940, Collection Center for Creative Photography, The University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona. © Aaron Siskind Foundation; reproduction courtesy of Aaron Siskind Foundation and Center for Creative Photography.
Photograph 21. Aaron Siskind, Martha’s Vineyard (Menemsha), ca. 1940, Collection Center for Creative Photography, The University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona. © Aaron Siskind; reproduction courtesy of Aaron Siskind Foundation and Center for Creative Photography.
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