



**LEARNING TO SEE
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
NANCY
HELLEBRAND**

An exhibition of photographs at the
JAMES A. MICHENER ART MUSEUM
Doylestown, Pennsylvania
www.michenerartmuseum.org
October 29, 2011 to February 26, 2012

All photographs © Nancy Hellebrand, 2011
www.nancyhellebrand.com
All written material © by the individual authors, 2011

Introduction by Bruce Katsiff
Foreword by A.D. Coleman
Essay by Julie Mellby
ISBN # 978-0-979788864

Design: Frank Baseman
www.basemandesign.com
Printing: Brilliant Graphics
www.brilliant-graphics.com
Paper: Mohawk Navajo Cover, 65# Brilliant White
Manufactured with windpower
20% postconsumer waste fiber



*The photographs in this catalogue are dedicated to my mother,
Janet Fleisher, who died in 2010.*

Cover: *Untitled*, #6677, 33" x 44," 2010

Learning to See

**PHOTOGRAPHS BY
NANCY
HELLEBRAND**

*Introduction by Bruce Katsiff
Foreword by A.D. Coleman
Essay by Julie Mellby*

JAMES A. MICHENER ART MUSEUM
Doylestown, Pennsylvania
October 29, 2011–February 26, 2012



UNCOMMON PHOTOGRAPHS

IT HAS BEEN MY GOOD FORTUNE to have known Nancy Hellebrand for over 35 years. During that time I have watched with interest and admiration as she has used her camera to explore the world around her with a passion and excitement that time has not diminished. Nancy has always been overflowing with energy and wonder as she moves from one subject to another with an almost childlike joy that seems to yield an endless source of new pictures produced with extreme skill and mature artistic judgment. Many artists hope to retain that childlike openness and appreciation of the world they encounter while at the same time applying the discipline, knowledge, and mastery of craft that comes with age. Nancy is one of the few artists I have encountered who completely blends the two opposing qualities.

The range and focus of Nancy's picture making have been wide and intense. She explores each new subject for years and generates hundreds, if not thousands, of new images as she seeks to discover and understand the world she encounters. Her visual curiosity has been matched by her technical experimentation. I remember her endless trips to the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia with her 4 x 5" Graflex camera, photographing people and then printing the images in platinum. Next she struggled with and then mastered her 8 x 10" Deardorf camera, photographing faces and carefully assembling complex sequential constructions. Not wanting to stand still, she soon adopted digital tools and photographed the sea and lagoons of the Florida coast. And now she presents us with layered images of the most common objects in nature, trees.

The trees may be common, but Nancy's photographs are not. Using multiple images carefully cropped and selected, she asks us not to see trees but to feel and taste the experience of nature. Nancy helps us marvel at the joy of our planet by creating her personal world, one richly layered and carefully organized into a new reality that is more spiritual than physical. These images are not of any single place or individual object, they are instead an artist's construction of experience, of feeling, of impressions, of emotions, and of life. It is a special joy to share my personal knowledge of this artist's work with the wider audience at the Michener Art Museum. It is especially gratifying that an artist whose work merits attention is also a friend I admire and respect.

BRUCE KATSIFF

Director/CEO, James A. Michener Art Museum



Untitled, Kensington, 4" x 5," 1979

NANCY HELLEBRAND: DIGITAL PALIMPSESTS

IN 1984, BEGINNING ON HER FORTIETH BIRTHDAY, Nancy Hellebrand commenced a one-year retreat from photographing. She'd already moved from the social documentary approach that she'd pursued at the outset of her work in photography to something else: the ways in which time and experience inscribed themselves onto small portions of the human anatomy.

At the conclusion of that self-imposed hiatus, she concentrated on the appearance of fragments of handwriting and the accidental or chance results of "different organic substances blotted onto tissues . . . and other substrates." If we consider photography, in one of its fundamental aspects, as a mark-making process, then Hellebrand had evolved past simply using it to make marks, reaching a new stage in which, self-reflexively, she applied her medium's descriptive and interpretive capacities to the scrutiny of several different kinds of marks.

In the early 1920s Alfred Stieglitz produced a series of studies of clouds that he called "Equivalents." He'd elected, as he wrote later, "Through clouds to put down my philosophy of life—to show that my photographs were not due to subject matter." Stieglitz found a means to move beyond what photographer Richard Kistel termed "the tyranny of the subject": the tendency of the viewer (and, not infrequently, the photographer) to assume that a photograph is *about* what it is *of*, and, no less perniciously, the inclination of both to hold the photographer to some imagined obligation to received ideas about the subject matter. Like her predecessors, Hellebrand had to find her own way through, or around, that obstacle.

We might consider those black-and-white images as her own first "equivalents." Not coincidentally, Hellebrand resolved the imagery resulting from her exploration of the consequences of inadvertent staining as digital prints, leaving behind the gelatin silver vehicle she'd employed until then—and, with that, also abandoning the direct optical-chemical connection between the subject, the negative, and the print that underpins analog photography.

She then turned for the first time to color photography, and, at the seashore, discovered more raw material. The resulting beach- and ocean-scapes initiated a relationship with the natural world that has preoccupied Hellebrand since. She has produced series of color studies of waves, streams, lagoons, clouds, rocks, and trees, rendered as digital prints. For these, use of the computer enabled a control of the color palette unavailable in any analog printing format.

Hellebrand's most recent work involves the creation of palimpsests—marks upon marks, complex layerings and juxtapositions of multiple images of trees, melded in ways that sometimes resemble collage, sometimes montage, and sometimes a distinctive combination of those techniques. From conception through actualization they depend on digital tools. Their power and beauty result from the fact that, though steeped in the premises of analog photography, Hellebrand has embraced what this radically different toolkit offers. The possibility of communing with one's tools, materials, and processes does not favor particular technologies. It's a mindset, and, as Hellebrand's work demonstrates, sometimes a transportable one.

A.D. COLEMAN

Critic, historian, curator



Untitled, Tissue Landscapes, 13" x 19," 1995

Between Elegance and Chaos

NANCY HELLEBRAND WRITES VISUAL POEMS using shapes and forms found within the natural world. These photographs pulse and pull and put us on the spot, in sharp relief to the traditional reverence and awe of historical landscape photography. Each print is a combination of several views balancing somewhere between elegance and outright chaos. Dissolving lines and unexpected color combinations wrap the surface plane of each print; they are daring ciphers of color and form left for us to decipher.

Hellebrand has traveled a long distance to get to this place. As a young photographer living in London during the early 1970s, she began photographing people using a 35mm camera and black-and-white film. She somehow persuaded her subjects to let her into their homes and their lives, capturing images that are disarmingly intimate (fig. 1). This led to an unprecedented solo exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery, London, where she was the first American artist (and the first living female artist) to be given such an honor.

Over the next ten years, Hellebrand moved further into portraiture, literally, by creating extreme close-ups of faces and bodies. Multiple images were shown together, and occasionally printed together, to offer several aspects or views simultaneously (fig. 2). “Subtle and unexpected areas become prominent,” she wrote. “New priorities are established.” In many ways, it was the abstracted picture itself, not the description of the person, which led Hellebrand to her next level of work.

In the 1980s, she began working on a series of close-ups of handwritten notes, fragments of script that became raw material with which to write her own photographic verse (fig. 3). Hellebrand remarked at the time, “The handwriting itself became more poignant and evocative for me than the message it conveyed.” Releasing her dependency on the literal physical world, the photographer found that qualities of line, shape, tone, and space could themselves carry meaning.



Fig. 1. *Iris Relaxing, Londoners at Home*, 14" x 14," 1972



These gestural fragments of writing are reminiscent of Aaron Siskind's work in the 1950s, when he similarly photographed the found gesture in seaweed left drying along the beach. “For the first time in my life,” he wrote, “subject matter had ceased to be of primary importance. Instead, I found myself involved in the relationships of these objects, so much so that these pictures turned out to be deeply moving and personal experiences.”

Hellebrand developed a fascination with mark making, leading to an exploration of the calligraphic forms found in nature. Around this time she began to photograph and print digitally and to work in, and with, color. For the artist, it was a breakthrough to a new way of working and a new way of seeing. “It took digital photography to free me from the narrowness of my own views,” she commented. “My concepts about what I see can finally release and begin to change. Traveling from the physical to the non-physical is now my work, from taking the photograph to final print.”

Over the last decade or more, Hellebrand has focused on a series of color pictures that begin in nature. Portions of clouds, rocks, or waves are separated from their native context so that the materiality of the image is left freefalling through an ethereal space (figs. 4 and 5). As Siskind observed regarding his own work, Hellebrand's pictures turn out to be deeply moving and personal experiences.

In the current series, Hellebrand has gone a step further by layering and pairing the images. What began as a sequence of trees is now a succession of ruptures, one after another. These are no longer the trees from your backyard. Digital strips of vegetation have been created, then exaggerated with slightly unnatural colors, and finally, placed back together leaving glitches intact. We are confused, unsteady, off balance. The pastoral microclimates of the past have been cracked open, allowing conflict to seep through the frame. “I think of them akin to markings and currents issuing forth from the unknown world of nature,” writes the artist.

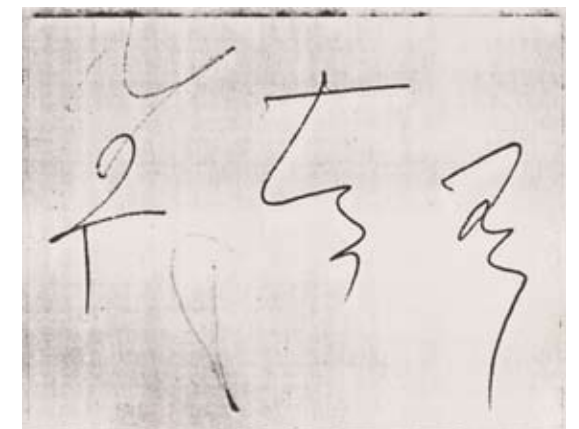


Fig. 2. (top) *Mary, Multiple Portraits*, 10" x 33," 1983; Fig. 3. *Untitled, Handwriting*, 22" x 29," 1988



Looking at the calligraphic nature of these prints, I would even go so far as to say they have been photographed with a cursive hand. The word *cursive* comes from the Latin meaning “to run” and refers to any style of handwriting in which the letters in a word are connected—that is, multiple characters formed in one single, complex stroke. In Ireland, this is called “joined-up writing,” and in Australia they call it “running writing.” Today, it is often the individual styles that become valued above the meaning of the words being transcribed. Hellebrand’s unique hand is ever present in these complex images, transcribing slices of nature into graceful strokes of photographic light. Multiple images are joined up in a running script to form one sweeping visual gesture.

The most talented of the scribes followed an artful logic of asymmetry, with characters written in varying lengths and varying spacing but altogether forming a balanced, harmonious page. So Hellebrand varies her scale, carves up the space in diverse ways, and surprises us (and perhaps herself) with unexpected lines and layers, while ultimately articulating the space with a fluid harmony.

Learning to See is not about one clean conceptual image: one tree, one view. These are conjuring images that will entice you and coerce you and “ultimately,” lure you into the world found within Nancy Hellebrand’s photographs.

JULIE MELLBY

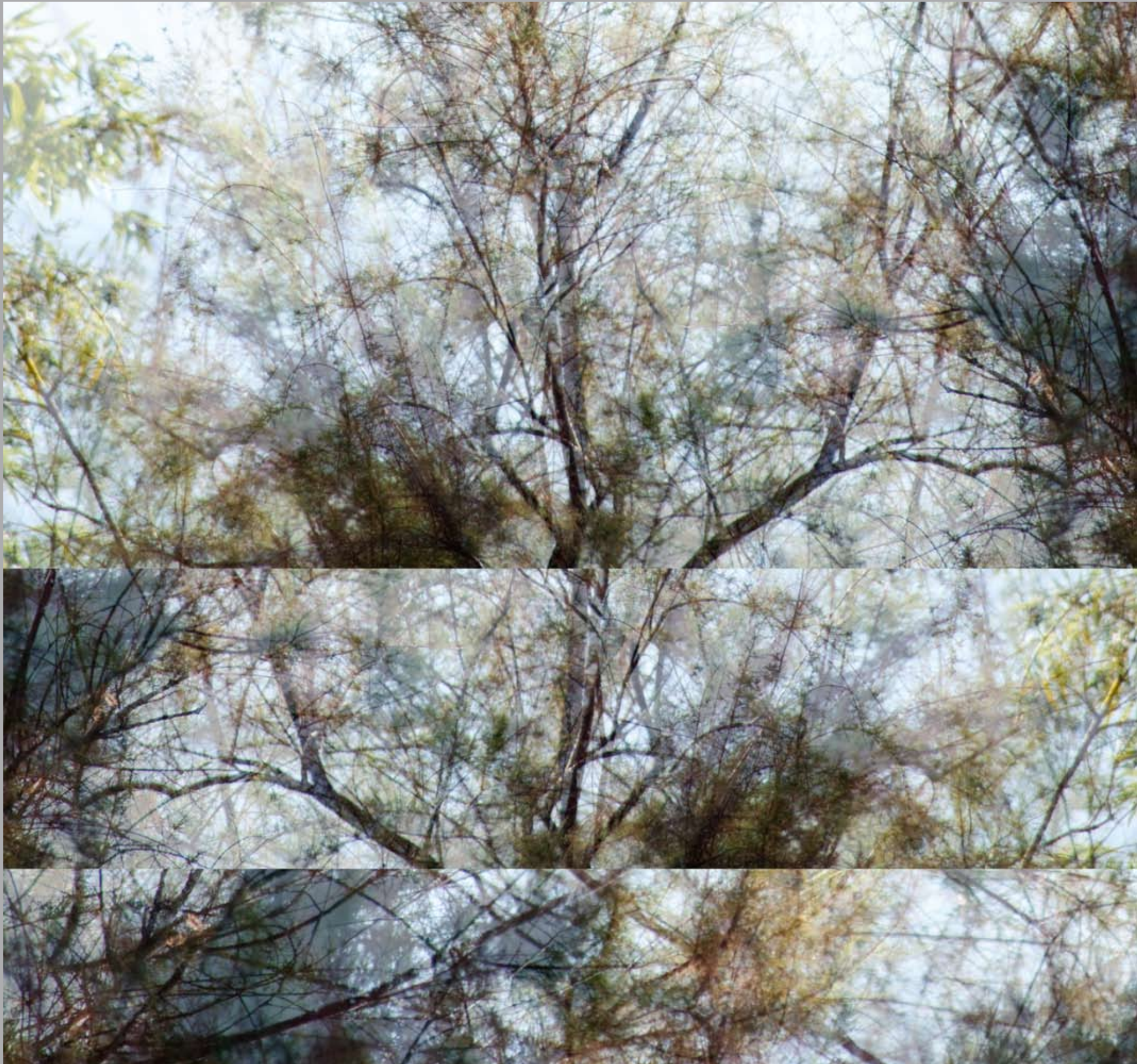
Graphic Arts Curator, Princeton University



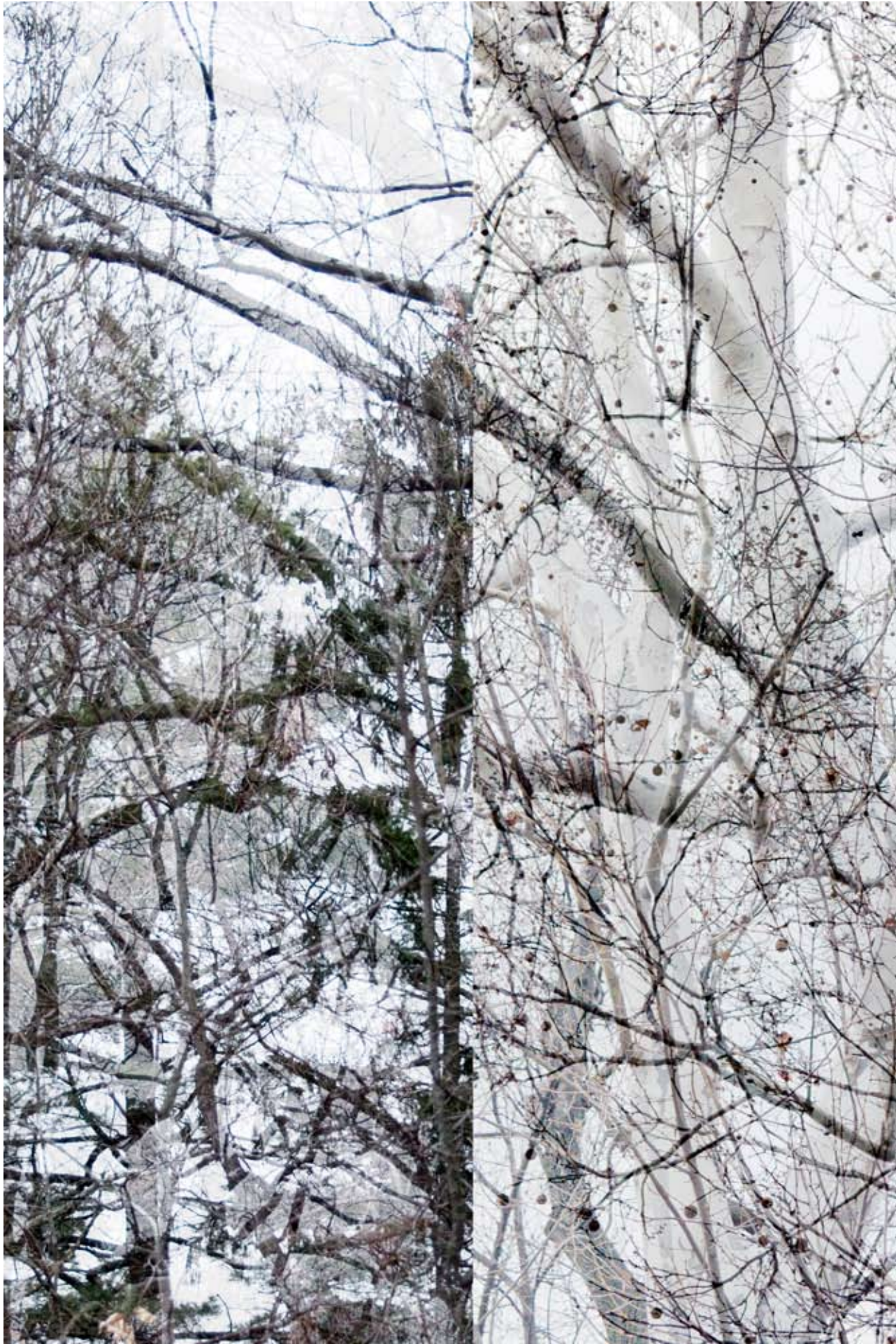
Fig. 4. (top) *Untitled, Waves*, 37” x 57,” 2001; Fig. 5. (left) *Untitled, Clouds*, 36” x 48,” 2003



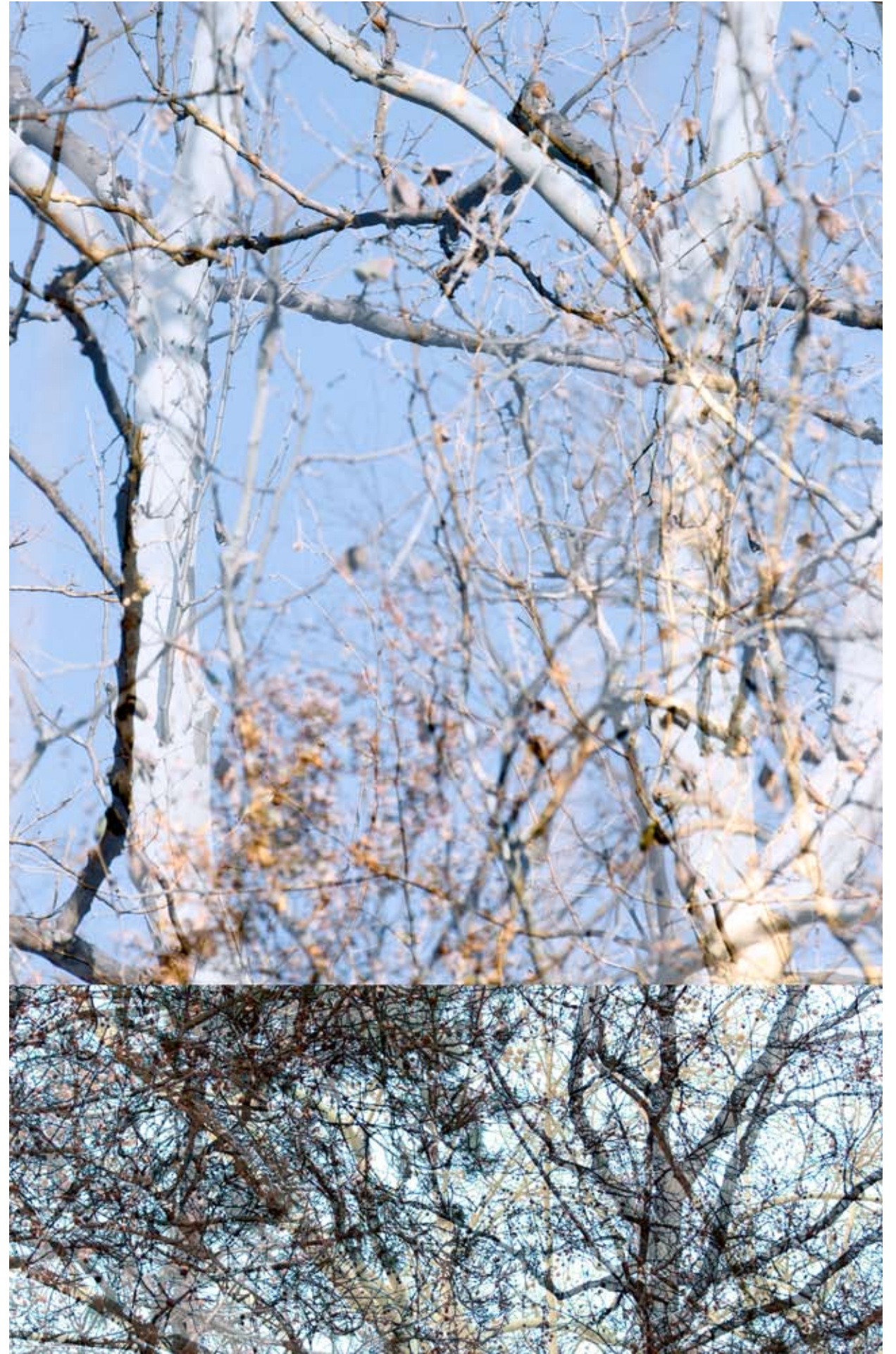
Untitled, #4059, 57” x 40,” 2009



Untitled, #0841, 31" x 34," 2009



Untitled, #1031, 51" x 33," 2009



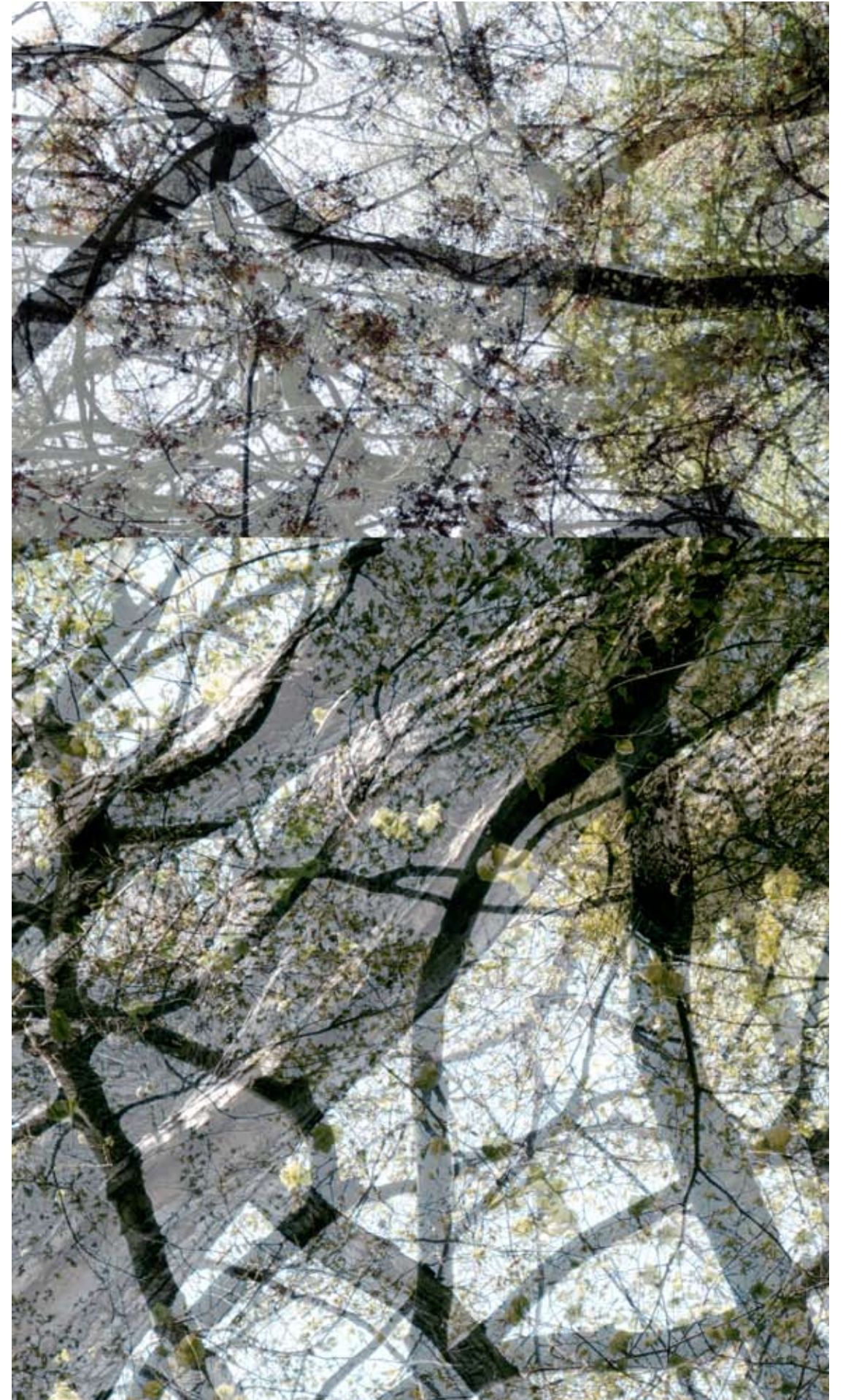
Untitled, #566, 51" x 33," 2008



Untitled, #7386, 34" x 33," 2011



Untitled, #7377, 33" x 46," 2011



Untitled, #0248, 31" x 18," 2011

NANCY HELLEBRAND

NANCY HELLEBRAND HAS EXHIBITED INTERNATIONALLY in museums and galleries since 1973. Her photographs are in public collections including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, National Portrait Gallery in London, Princeton University Art Museum, Yale University Art Gallery, and Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Hellebrand's solo gallery exhibitions include Pace/MacGill and Heidi Cho Gallery in New York and Morris Gallery of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Locks Gallery, and Paul Cava Gallery in Philadelphia. Her museum exhibitions include the Museum of Modern Art and the International Center of Photography in New York; the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C.; the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia; and the Tate Britain. Also in London, she had a solo exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery, where she was the first American artist and the first living woman to exhibit.

Awards include fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. She taught photography at Yale University, Parsons The New School for Design, University of the Arts, and Bucks County Community College.

Born in Philadelphia, Hellebrand studied photography and film at the University of Southern California and Boston University, and received a B.A. in Comparative Literature from Columbia University. She also studied with Alexey Brodovitch in New York and Bill Brandt in London.

Nancy Hellebrand is represented by June Bateman Fine Art in New York.

