

On Marlene MacCallum’s Shadow

Deborah Root

ABSTRACT

On Marlene MacCallum’s ‘Shadow’ is an interpretative essay which examines the interlocked themes of impermanence and mortality running through the three separate cantos comprising the work. In the analysis presented by this essay, it is suggested that each of the three cantos utilizes linked aesthetic and conceptual strategies to investigate the tensions and interconnections between human and natural worlds. These strategies include MacCallum’s use of poetry, music, and the recurring image of birds, as well as her use of colour. In exploring the nature of shadows, and their role in marking the passage of time, MacCallum is able to utilize fragmentary images to underline the part absence plays in meaning construction. The essay further considers the historical nature of the book as a container of truth.

SHADOW, IN THREE PARTS

The three cantos that constitute Shadow, Marlene MacCallum’s multi-component artwork, offer a contemplation of transience and mortality. This work integrates MacCallum’s imagery and writing into a variety of book-like structures, with each canto utilizing a different folded structure and presenting different sets of images and text to investigate the theme of impermanence. Shadow is a variation on the long poem format with distinct book works forming the discrete cantos, each of which references an undervalued art genre that informs the nature and structure of each piece in its exploration of the poetic potential of our everyday lives. The works are all hand-printed and hand-bound.

Together the three cantos tell a story, the narratives unifying through the recurring image of a bird and in scenes of private, domestic space. The sculptural nature of these books allows the story to be revealed in space—looking at the structure one way, a particular narrative is apparent; looking at it

differently, another aspect is revealed. One of the traditional differences between poetry and prose is poetry’s ability to construct meaning through fragments, suggesting that what is left out, or absent, is as important to meaning as that which is there. As in a painted triptych, each canto reflects part of a larger story through shifting images of absence and presence. If shadows express a counterpoint to that which is explicitly revealed, and allude to the absences inherent in the fragmentary nature of meaning construction, then Shadow is a fitting title for a set of cantos that

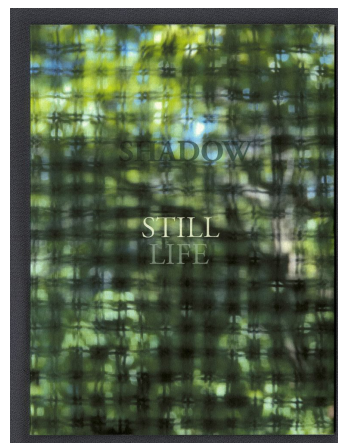


Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 1. Shadow: Still Life (2018) by Marlene MacCallum. Pamphlet bound book work with digital pigment print, 237 x 175 x 10 mm (closed)

Figure 2. Shadow: Still Life (2018) by Marlene MacCallum. Pamphlet bound book work with digital pigment print, 234 x 685 mm (expanded)

are, in effect, a triptych, in which fragments of text and image create the whole.

MacCallum is interested in the movement between domestic space and the natural world: domestic space is where we live, in private, and where we are meant to feel most secure (although this is an illusion for many). Although domestic space can appear more stable than the undomesticated wilderness, where we are aware of seasonal changes and cycles of decay, our built environments are also always transforming, as personal situations change and physical structures break down.

SHADOW AND TRUTH

In Plato's allegory of the cave, captives famously believe that shadowy illusions constitute truth. Accordingly, much mainstream western thinking tends to imagine that the real is best perceived in the full light of day, as in the biblical idea of seeing through a glass darkly, which suggests that vision is inevitably distorted in darkness. Yet many so-called archaic traditions understand the cave as a site of wisdom, in which the shifting nature of shadows simultaneously conceals and reveals truth, allowing access to a deeper reality. An early example is Paleolithic cave painting, in which images of the hunt and of spiritual forces were created deep inside the earth. Although specific reasons for this is not known, it seems evident that here, and in places such as early Mesoamerica, where images of kingly authority were created deep inside caves, darkness is where spiritual leaders and others went to attain wisdom. Awareness lies in the perception of this movement, this oscillation between light and dark. In this way we find truth in what is not there, and in what hovers on the edge of consciousness.

The first canto, *Still Life* (2018, a pamphlet-bound book work with digital pigment print) invites us to contemplate an oscillation between inside and outside, light and shadow, the natural and human worlds. (See fig.1). The cover suggests the canto's themes: an image of leaves is bisected by a screen, the outdoor scene appearing like something one sees through prison bars. And, yet, an intense, bright green is visible through the metal mesh, alluding to the green of new life.

On opening the book, we first encounter a ghostly window superimposed over the sunlit leaves of a dense forest. MacCallum writes of a cedar waxwing's fatal flight into this window, and we imagine the bird observing this dappled shadow and flying towards it, the human-built structure a deadly decoy. Inside the house, the human observes as well, through the safety of the space's sunny aperture. Then, a heron weathervane appears inside an interior window, a metal image of a living bird captured and transformed for human purposes. Turning the page, we discover Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, overwritten and mostly unintelligible, occluded by the silhouette of the dead waxwing. MacCallum's text further obscures Nabokov's, and is written in the voice of the dead bird, the story's 'stilled life.'



Figure 3

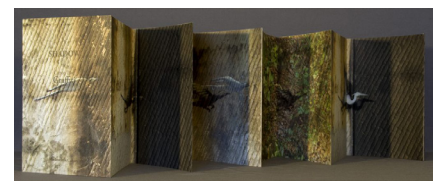


Figure 4

Figure 3. *Shadow: Graffiti* (2018) by Marlene MacCallum. Accordion book work with digital pigment print, 233 x 312 mm (page spread)

Figure 4. *Shadow: Graffiti* (2018) by Marlene MacCallum. Accordion book work with digital pigment print, 233 x 1248 mm (expanded)

The unsteady spiral between human and natural worlds deepens as we move through *Still Life's* folded pages; here is a shadow of a window, then a colour photograph of the lifeless waxwing placed atop more text, again overwritten. The metal weathervane mimics a bird in flight, and finally we return to the shadowed room, now with a door slightly ajar. For MacCallum, the relation between the human, domestic sphere and the natural world is not inherently fraught or contradictory; rather, because these inevitably exist in relation and proximity to each other, they exchange elements even as their distance increases and sharpens. And yet a paradox remains: the wild bird is killed by the human window, but the window is transparent, giving view to wild space.



Figure 5

It would seem that the movement between human and natural is revealed as the oscillation between life and death.

The cover of *Graffiti* (2018, an accordion book work with digital pigment print), the second canto, is the sandy brown of the earth. Ochre tones contrast with the white and grey of a flying heron, at times shadowed by green. Here, a painted image of a bird is captured on a roughened, textured wall, flying in white and grey and, soon, the white bird glides across the wall, trailed by its grey shadow. The forest floor emerges below a faint superimposition of the wall, and a shadow of the bird is present. Then, the copper heron we first saw in *Still Life* is superimposed on the painted shadow of the flying bird, still suspended on the wall, and the greenish quality of the weathervane's surface gives form to the image, sculpting it to resemble an ancient artifact, as in Fig. 3. Such relics of antiquity themselves offer a trace of a past way of life, a fragment of what was once whole. See Fig. 4.

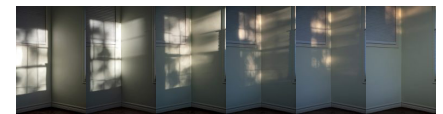


Figure 6

A second narrative runs through the book's obverse. First, we see the bird's trace on a faint baroque background, then fragments of a musical score, superimposed on the wall like the graffiti of the canto's title. The score appears across two pages, overwritten through a kind of repetition, and nearly illegible. Finally, these scores are rubbed out, and we are offered the scores' titles, with part of the bird painting, now headless and flying in the opposite direction.

It is worth remembering that music exists in time; it is performative, and as each note fades another takes its place, until the piece is finished. When we remember a musical performance, we are remembering a trace of a particular experience, which cannot quite be captured in a recording. Because each performance takes place in time, each event is different, depending on the musicians and conductor and on their nuances of interpretation. A musical score is not identical to the performance; rather, it functions as a kind of map or translation to this experience.

In the third canto, *Incidental Music* (2019, a double accordion book work with digital pigment print and letterpress), we are confronted more explicitly with the movement of time and, by extension, the impermanence of experience. Its cover depicts the shadow of a window, here with a fully closed blind, and diffused light filtering

Figure 5. Shadow: *Incidental Music* (2019) by Marlene MacCallum. Double accordion book work with digital pigment print and letterpress, 236 x 150 mm (individual image)

Figure 6. Shadow: *Incidental Music* (2019) by Marlene MacCallum. Double accordion book work with digital pigment print and letterpress, 236 x 300 mm (page spread)

into the room. Inside, we enter a room with filtered shadows seeping through a blind, a suggestion of sunlight in the warm colour of the light. The colours are a range of greys, sometimes blue-toned, sometimes sepia as we observe light come through the window, warming and cooling throughout the course of the day.

Soon, a sequence of shadows begins to move, and we become aware of time passing. As the narrative progresses, there is further movement of the window's shadow across the wall, and the light whitens. As the shadowed room fills with light, we become aware of a geometric web in the upper corner, and another balanced in a shadowy hand. The web is, in fact, a quilter's grid, recalling the folding pattern of the canto. A shadowy arm and hand, stretched across a sun-filled wall, lets the fragment of grid go (see Fig. 5) What is being relinquished: history, the past, the concern with mortality or, perhaps, an acceptance of change? Soon, the shadowed light is higher on the wall, moving away from our ability to perceive it.

The window's shadow, caused by the presence of the sun and transforming through time, becomes an afterimage of something that was once illuminated. But such ghost images are not only visual; they might be a sensation or a feeling, with meaning created out of fragments of experience. Or perhaps we might imagine an auditory afterimage where the brain compensates and creates, yet the sound is slightly changed, much as the image is, much as we, the perceivers, are. The human mind fills in the blanks, so to speak—but we each do so differently, and in this sense what each viewer hears or sees is unique.

Incidental Music doesn't open as easily as the other books; here the accordion-fold structure pulls at the pages, as if the canto wishes to be unbound, and we are required to work a bit to see the poem on the other side, hidden away in the lower folds. As fragments of a poem emerge, we must pay a different kind of attention, much as MacCallum's poem reminds us: 'the vanishing self slips out of sight.' Again, the experience of impermanence would seem to be central to Incidental Music.

A book is sometimes a container of esoteric secrets. Contemplating the three cantos of Shadow, I am reminded of the grimoire, where potentially dangerous knowledge is revealed to those deemed worthy of access to the text. Often, such knowledge concerns the nature of reality itself. In Shadow this knowledge has to do with mortality, and with the inevitable movement of time. In the grimoire's magical tradition, the path to knowledge is through shadows, which leave behind a trace, and afterimage. The progression of colour would also seem to be central to Shadow's mythical structure, from the green of the natural world, a world that contains both life and death, to the earth ochres of the human-built walls on which the bird painting is superimposed, to the grey, desaturated images that reflect the movement of light through time and, finally, to the shadowy silhouettes of leaves, which offers a ghostly trace of the natural world, and is visible indoors.

In MacCallum's narrative, the shadow initially appears as a counterpoint to bright light which lures the waxwing to its death through false promise, like the deadly lanterns once used by ship wreckers. I think of philosopher Maurice Blanchot's text, *Madness of the Day*, and the terror created by brightness, by a straight path to understanding. Blanchot[1] reminds us of the way perception inevitably creates a distance from the thing being perceived. Our consciousness of an event can never fully apprehend that event, but the paradox is that we can only perceive the event via consciousness. MacCallum's work lays bare this paradox by delineating the limits of representation in Shadow's unstable and shifting combinations and recombinations of image and text.

Truth is always partial, and it moves. In our peregrination across time, we too change shape, and carry traces of the past with us. Shadow's birds understand this as they fly across space, at times faint and ephemeral, at times solid. Their flight becomes a palimpsest of earlier flights, earlier lives.

AUTHOR

Deborah Root is a cultural critic and writer. Her catalogue work includes substantive essays on Sarindar Dhaliwal, Jorge Lozano, and Ximena Cuevas, and her arts writing has appeared in *Art Papers*, *Prefix Photo*, *Public*, *C Magazine*, and the *Contact* photography and *Bienale de Sao Paulo* catalogues. She is the author of *Cannibal Culture: Art, Appropriation and the Commodification of Difference*, and has taught visual culture at the Ontario College of Art and Design, the University of Guelph, and Bilkent University in Ankara, Turkey.

ARTIST

Marlene MacCallum lives in Prince Edward County, Ontario, Canada. She is an Honorary Research Professor in the Visual Arts Program, of Memorial University. Her practice has evolved from singular photogravure prints, to their integration into book-like structures to the inclusion of writing and interactive digital formats. Consistent is the attention to the poetic potential of the ordinary matters of daily life. She and David Morrish co-authored *Copper Plate Photogravure: Demystifying the Process* (2003). Her research projects on *Artists' Publishing* and *The Visual Book* were funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Her recent interactive digital artwork was created with support from the Canada Council for the Arts.

FOOTNOTE

[1] Blanchot, Maurice, *Madness of the Day* (1995), Station Hill Press: Barrytown, NY

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IMAGE GALLERY

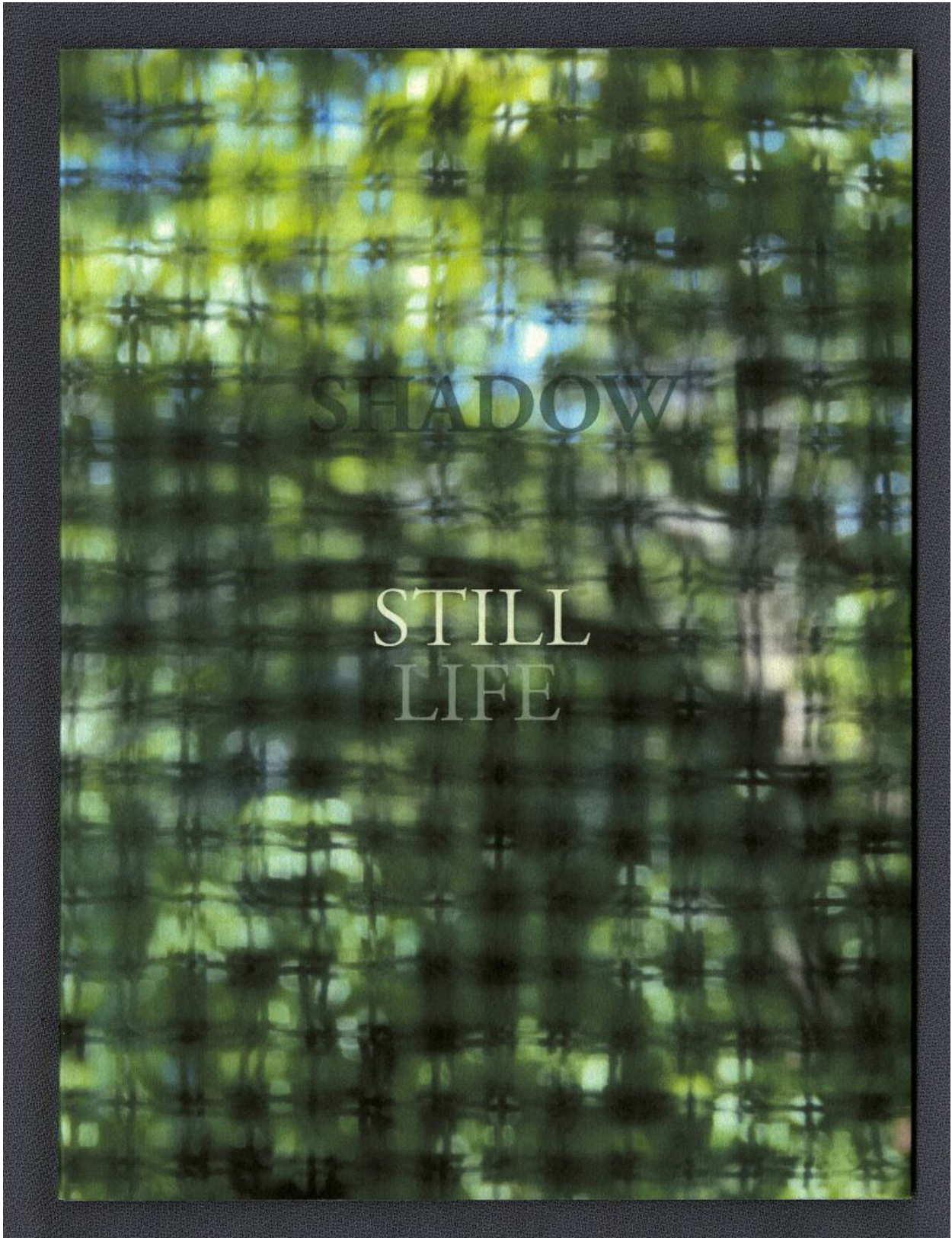


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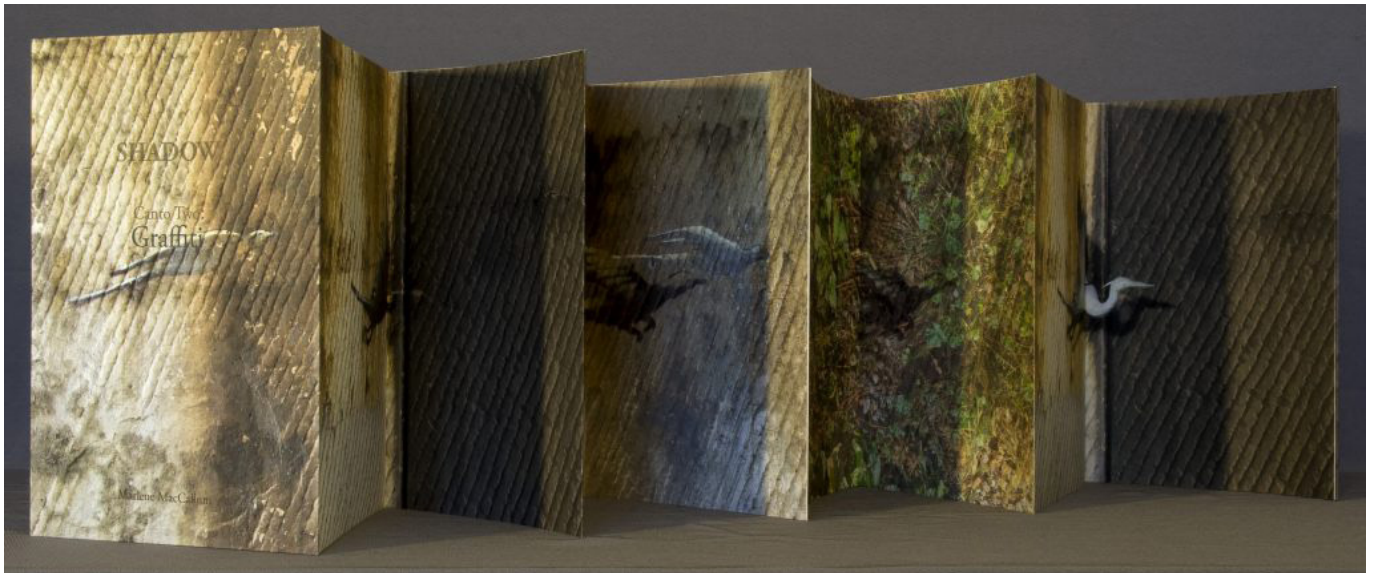


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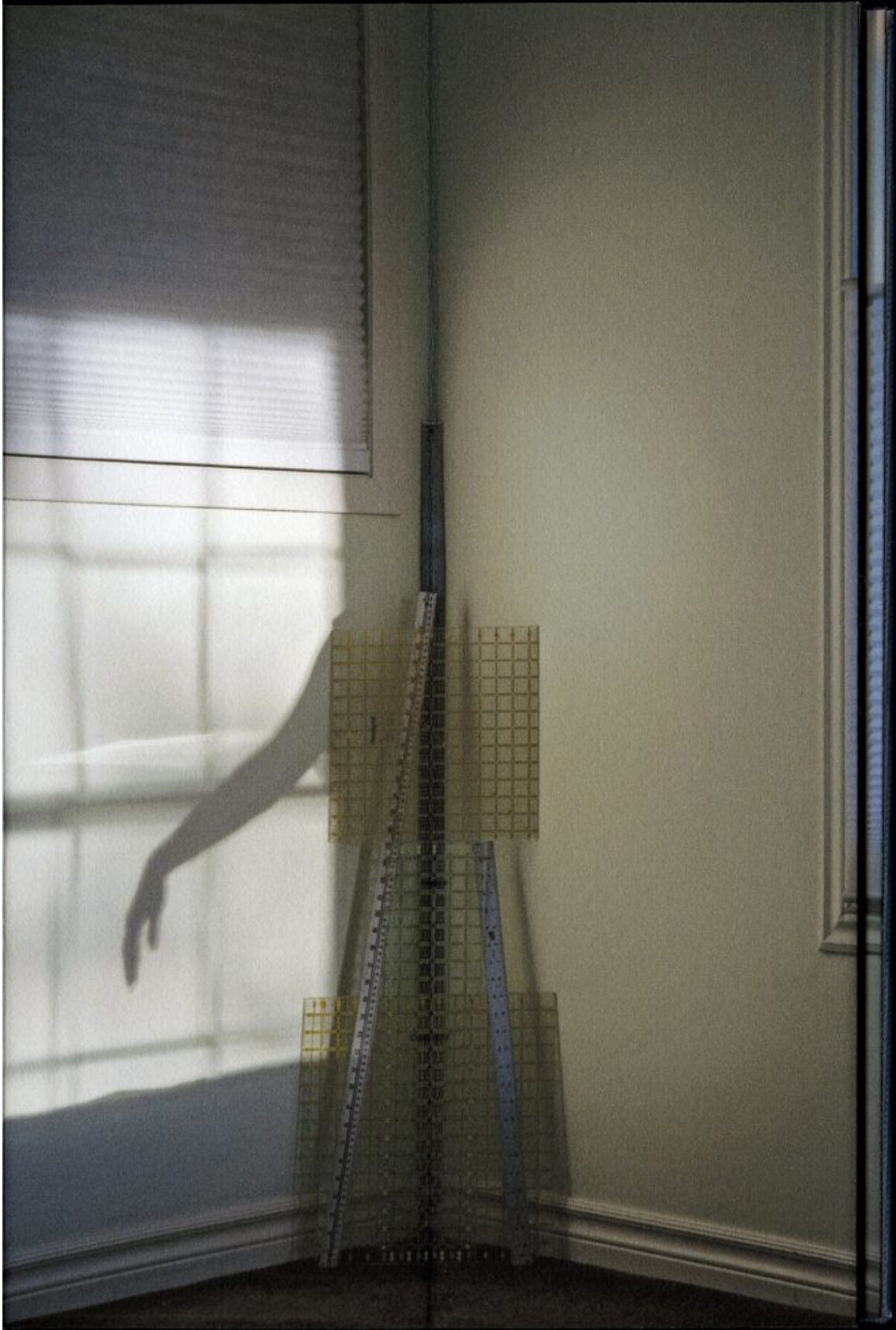


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