

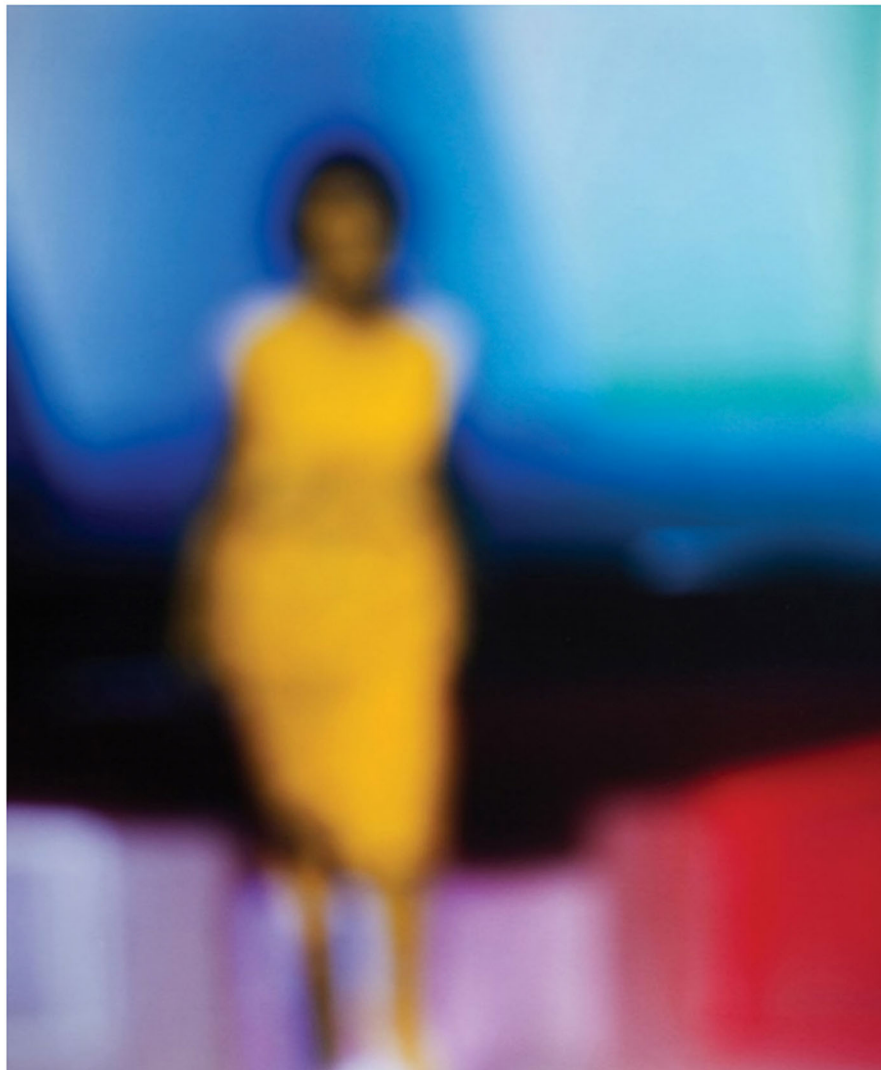
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February 14, 2013 Written by [Emily Macaux](#)

A Sense of Noir: Bill Armstrong at ClampArt

Standing before the photographs from Bill Armstrong's *Infinity* series, resistance is futile. Intense washes of color and uncertain, alluring forms beckon yet elude one's grasp, and the encounter between viewer and work becomes a question not of looking but, more powerfully, of experiencing. Critical distance is collapsed, vision becomes a channel for sensation, and image expands into an all-encompassing, alternative reality.

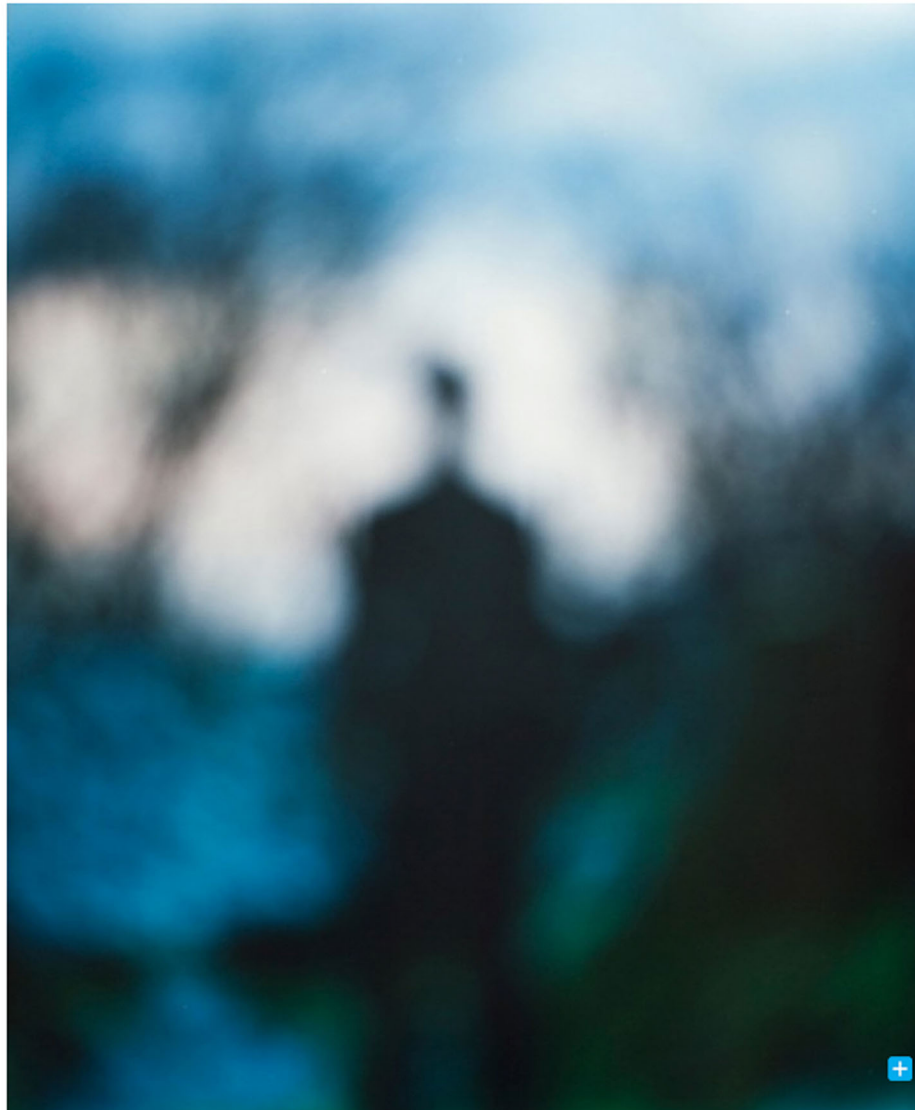


Bill Armstrong, "Untitled (Film Noir #1433)," 2012. Chromogenic print. Courtesy the Artist and ClampArt, New York City.

Such is the effect of *Film Noir*, Armstrong's latest exhibition at Chelsea's [ClampArt](#) gallery. A continuation of the artist's *Infinity* series, *Film Noir* represents a further distillation and deepening of the artist's singular aesthetic. In the manner of his prior series *Renaissance* and *Mandalas*, *Film Noir* is characterized by dense, saturated color and blurred, suggestive form. The series also elucidates the expressive potential of Armstrong's distinct approach to image making. Appropriating and collaging images from sources high and low, contemporary and historical, Armstrong re-photographs his material in extreme close-up, with his camera lens set at infinity. The effect is heady, surreal, yet paradoxically contingent on the materials' of-the-world physicality.

[Armstrong](#) has written that "the experience of visual confusion, when the psyche is momentarily derailed" enables a kind of spiritual liberation and sensory receptivity that "frees us to respond emotionally" to a given work. His images induce this very confusion even as they envelop the viewer in a visceral realm of the senses; in his photographs, an impenetrable uncertainty dissolves the bonds of reason and leaves the viewer disoriented but thrillingly unfettered.

In its reiteration of these dynamics, *Film Noir* is a continuation of Armstrong's earlier work; however, in its overt allusion to a cinematic world of obscurity and shadow, the series hints at a subliminal darkness absent from prior series like *Mandala*. Given this context, the artist's signature use of color is particularly fascinating. In *Mandala*, abstractions of vibrant color and concentric form channel the aesthetics and themes of Buddhist painting; color evinces a sensorial purity that induces in the viewer a sense of experiential suspension, a state of being-in-the-moment that displaces worldly awareness.



Bill Armstrong, "Untitled (Film Noir #1414)," 2011. Chromogenic print. Courtesy the Artist and ClampArt New York City.

In contrast, *Film Noir* conjures existentially stark, spiritually ambivalent terrain; otherworldly yet vaguely familiar, these images seem to visualize the dark shadings and unsettling shapes of the viewer's own subconscious. Color, richly deployed, acquires a newly ambiguous cast, and vivid hues intimate a newly fraught uncertainty. Amid bleeding pools of color, distorted human forms appear as dislocated specters—haunted, anonymous, lost. Plunged into a saturated chromatic world, they register as dematerialized, melancholic; they become, themselves, abstractions—vulnerable, fragile forms within a relentless existential blur.

Manifesting a concomitant sense of aesthetic vitality and existential enervation, *Film Noir* evokes the ever-shifting rapport between and among vision, sensation, and emotion. A deepening of the artist's implicit, ongoing inquiry into being and consciousness, the series is, for the viewer, a full-on immersion in the enigma of human experience.

"Bill Armstrong: *Film Noir*" is on view at ClampArt in New York from February 21 to April 6, 2013.



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