Walead Beshty's oversized photograms at once expand upon and deconstruct these Modernist precedents, particularly Moholy-Nagy's experiments. Beshty frames the element of chance in the medium with predetermined rules that provide underlying parameters for his process, resulting in meaning that poses questions about the nature of abstraction, as well as the material properties of photography itself. Dispensing with the tangible objects (or subjects) that were essential to earlier experiments (see Notes on Process and Titles at right), Beshty's photograms complete what previously had been only a partial separation from the mimetic representation that was long considered to be fundamental to photography. The interlocking, overlapping passages of tone and color that are the hallmark of these works have no connection to now-absent objects or references. At the same time, however, the images cannot be classified as abstractions, as they are both defined by a direct product of the circumstances of their creation. With their luscious, jewel tones and elusive forms, Beshty's compositions entice us to partake in their beguiling formal play, yet the tears and creases that disrupt the paper's surface repeatedly return us to the material world that is the basis of all photographic images.

The Sculptures
Beshty's glass sculptures likewise feature a savvy rethinking of Modernist precedents filtered through more recent, ideologically charged meanings. After a work leaves the artist's studio, Beshty has an industrial glass manufacturer fabricate shatterproof sculptures out of extruded glass panels (to the size and standard of FedEx boxes). Each time the pieces need to be moved, they are shipped, according to the artist's instructions, by FedEx in the company's packaging, rather than in the specially crafted crates handled by art handlers. He employs shippers that are designed to transport works of art. With each shipment, the sculptures acquire cracks, dents, chips, and other abrasions that leave Beshty's studio (and control) and begin in the darkroom, where the artist cuts pieces of glass to light, rotating the object until all sides are exposed; he then exposes one side of the resultant sculpture to light, rotating the paper between each exposure. He then runs the prints through a standard RA4 wide-format color processor.

Notes on Process and Titles
The photographs featured in the Hirshhorn's exhibition begin in the darkroom, where the artist cuts pieces of photographic paper from a large factory roll of black-and-white paper. The relationship to the scale of his body, Beshty produces the black-and-white photographs by folding the paper into a nine-dimensional format with an origami-like folding to six sides. Then, he exposes one side of the resultant sculpture to light, rotating the object until all sides are exposed; the prints develop and the print by hand in large trays.

The color photograms are created somewhat differently, due both to the nature of color processing and Beshty's distinctive fusion of predetermined procedures and inherent chance. Working in the total darkness that is required with color processing, Beshty attaches a piece of card paper to the wall, allowing it to curl or flop. Then, using a color enlarger, he exposes the paper to cyan, yellow, and magenta light (these colors form the basis of all color processing), rotating the paper between each exposure. He then runs the prints through a standard RA4 wide-format color processor.

Each title chronicles that object's production, including the date and site of the darkroom facilities. Fold (60/120/180/240/300/360° directional light sources), June 5th 2008, Annandale-On-Hudson, Foma Multigrade Fiber, for example, records the fact that the black-and-white photogram is a product of folds and four exposures and rotations, while Six Color Curtain (CMYCYC Irvine, California, July 17th 2008, Fuji Crystal Archive Type C), specifies the order of the colored light exposures and the artist's reliance on curvilinear, rather than folded. The titles also note the type of paper employed, because its physical characteristics influence both the techniques and forms that the artist can use. The references to the fact that conventional discussions of photographic images pay little heed to material matters. In an analogous manner, the title of each glass sculpture denotes the various venues to which it has been shipped, including the tracking number and time until its arrival.

2.13 Notes on Process and Titles
The photographer is a manipulator of light.... It must be stressed that the essential element of photographic procedures is not the object but the light-sensitive layer. The light-sensitive layer—whether color sensitive or not—is always the most important element in photography. William Henry Fox Talbot, Anna Atkins, John Hershel, and, later, the German-born experimentalist and art historian, Moholy-Nagy, associated with both Dada and Surrealism, exploited the process always takes place entirely in the darkroom, where the artist installs it in a gallery dedicated to his work at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. With The Large Glass enshrined in a museum, Beshty's sculptures pick up where Duchamp left off by deploying a discerning combination of predetermined rules and chance operations to explore the nature of abstraction and the ways artworks accrue both critical and monetary value.

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