

PAULA COOPER GALLERY

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BING WRIGHT ESSAY

Bing Wright Mirrors and Windows

BY KELLY SIDLEY

In both concept and practice, Bing Wright's photographs reflect his deep respect for the medium's history, materials, and past masters. While art that alludes to other art can often feel flat-footed and overly reverential, his work finds a delicate balance between its referents and its own formal ingenuity. One of Wright's constant touchstones has been curator John Szarkowski's exhibition *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960*, presented at The Museum of Modern Art in 1978. In the accompanying catalogue, Szarkowski formulated a dualistic view of contemporary photography: on one side, artists sought a means of self-expression, and on the other side practitioners used the medium as a tool to explore the world. Szarkowski conceded that "no photographer's work could embody with perfect purity either of the two divergent motives; it is the nature of his problem to find a personally satisfactory resolution of the contesting claims of recalcitrant facts and the will to form."¹ Using windows and mirrors as both the conceptual springboards and structuring agents for his work, Wright has sought his own resolutions of such problems as he has explored the chemical and metaphysical evolutions of photography.

In 1989 Bing made his first series, *Windows*, which he shot with an 8x10 view camera from the interior of a Catskills farmhouse. Each photograph centers on a single window and the cropped landscape beyond its dark frame. The images are never purely documentary or wholeheartedly realist. The materials and circumstances are factually descriptive—the pictures capture actual glass and rain—but this capturing is only the departure point for Wright's inquiries. Each pane of glass would stand rigid, transparent, and barely acknowledged in our field

of vision if it weren't for the slippery veil of rain that clings to it. Parallel planes of material—glass, screen, water, flies—jockey for our attention. Wright focused his camera on the frame itself, thus rendering the landscape out-of-focus and quietly underscoring what a lens can and cannot see at any given moment. The tension between the structure of the frame—a rigid, geometric form—and the unruliness of the pastoral landscapes cemented Wright's interest in the porous space between abstraction and representation.

In the series *Wet Glass* (1995), Wright banished the frame to zoom in on the confrontation between glass and water. The black-and-white prints suggest austerity and cleanliness while also alluding to minimalist picture planes energized by dripping paint. They recall Brice Marden's early oil-and-wax paintings marked with subtle drips of pigment or Robert Ryman's sublime white fields. These mid-century paintings and their kin nod to gestural abstraction by way of measured minimalism; via photography, Wright takes us deep into the trenches of twentieth-century abstraction.

Until he dismantled his darkroom in 2007 and began to work digitally, Wright had carefully printed his own work. As a farewell to the historical materials and processes of photography—for instance, the silver salts used to make gelatin silver prints or the ground glass of a view camera—Wright produced the series *Silver Prints* (2007). His starting point was Man Ray's photograph *Dust Breeding* (1920), which was made with a two-hour exposure to capture the accumulation of a year's worth of stray matter on the surface of Marcel Duchamp's *The Large Glass* (1915–23). Wright began each work, which are

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dedicated to master photographers including Julia Margaret Cameron, Gustave Le Gray, and Edward Muybridge among many others, by randomly placing silver leaf on a sheet of glass, which he then photographed and developed as a gelatin silver print. Before each print could completely dry, he sprinkled it with pieces of silver leaf, which stuck to its surface. Once the silver had tarnished, Bing sealed the prints with wax to stop the chemical reaction. Laced with free-floating particles and tissue-like blocks, these images are hazy and depthless. Thus, in the *Silver Prints*, we see matter as well as abstraction.

If the *Silver Prints* feel ethereal and nebulous, the series *Silver on Mirror* (2010) brings us back to earth through clashing reflections, hard edges and glittering surfaces. Each image is of a pristine mirror supporting bits of silver leaf. Visual analogies are abundant, from lunar surfaces and icy terrain to crashing waves and roughly cut diamonds. These surreal views, each one uniquely bizarre and kaleidoscopic in its intricacy, are akin to seeing specimens under a microscope. Wright expanded this hall-of-mirrors effect in the series *Broken Mirror on Mirror* (2012) by substituting shards of looking glass for silver leaf. These aggressive images dazzle and repel while hinting at the possibility of violence.

In the last five years, Wright has periodically returned to the exterior world before circling back to abstraction. The series *Broken Mirror/Evening Sky* (2012) combined the traditions of straight and subjective photography. Each work began with one of his own photographs of a sunset, which he projected onto the surface of a fractured mirror. Its reflection was then re-photographed, enlarged, and

printed at almost six feet in height. The ominous spider-like cracks contradict the exultant, saturated evening skies. Wright eulogized color printing processes by incorporating the names of defunct brands of film in his titles, which refer to Kodachrome, Fujifilm, Agfacolor, etc. Swerving again toward abstraction, the series *Silver/Surface* (2016) layered actual, photographed, and re-photographed silver leaf in the shape of bands, right angles, and rectilinear frames. In the past year, Wright has once again merged abstraction and representation in the series *Cherry Tree Grids* (2017), in which his photographs of cherry blossoms have been overlaid with squares of silver leaf arranged in patterns reminiscent of a botched checkerboard.

All of these series are part of a broader investigation. Wright's experiments are built from systems of reflection that work with a limited set of materials and forms, which he then combines in a wide variety of ways. Beyond the historical references to photography embedded in his practice, Wright's work engages with an expansive visual network of materials and methods to address the ever evolving language of vision, stretching from the Renaissance ideal of a painting as a window onto a scene that *seems* real, to photography's original promise to document people, places, and things that are real. In their unique ways, both painting and photography have expanded beyond simulacrum and realism in the last hundred years; they have periodically collapsed their old representational ideals to dip into abstraction before heading back out into the world of images. Through his own helix-like path that spirals through the space between representation and abstraction, between windows and mirrors, Wright has done the same.

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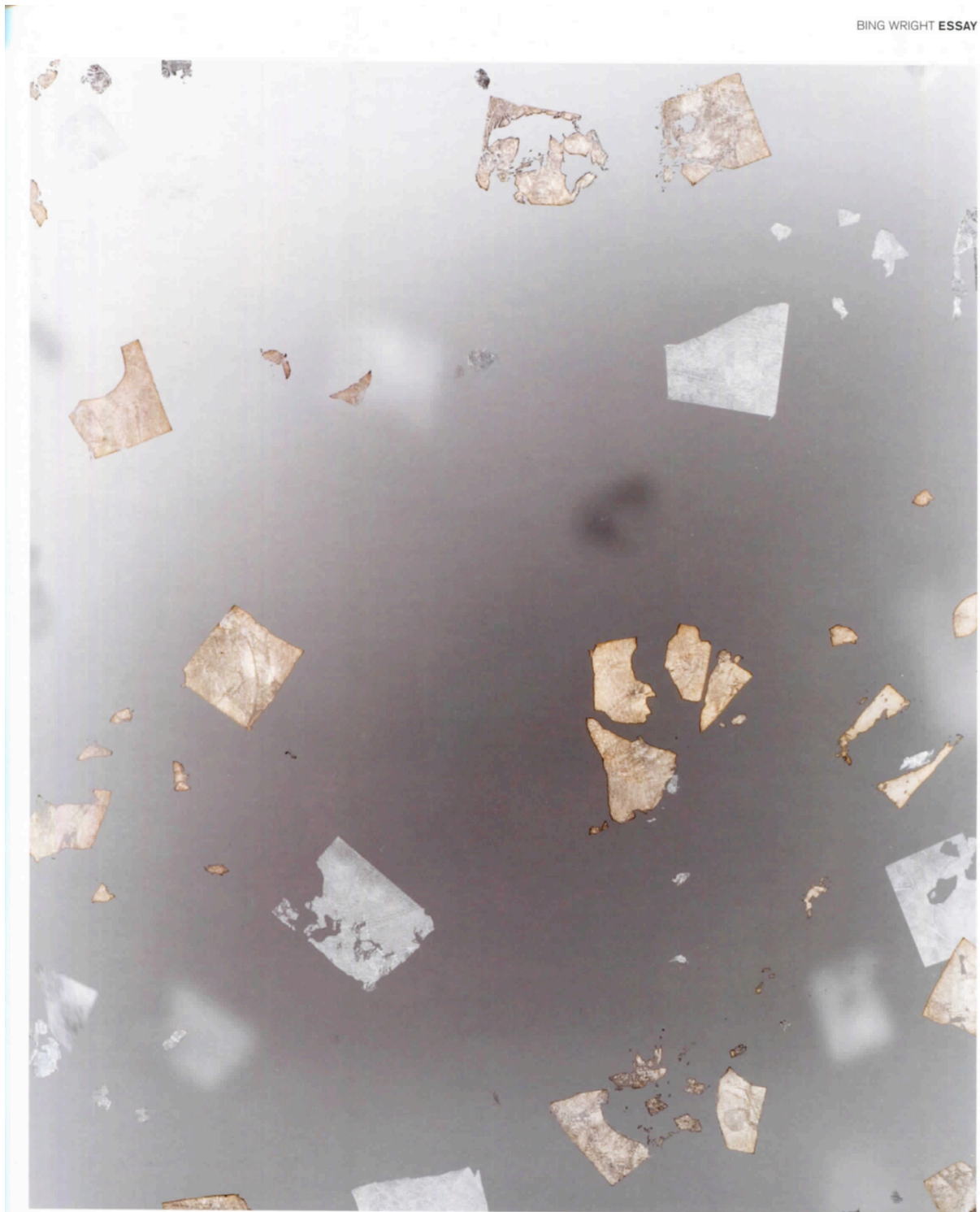
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Wet Glass 09, 1995

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Silver Prints (for Le Gray), 2007

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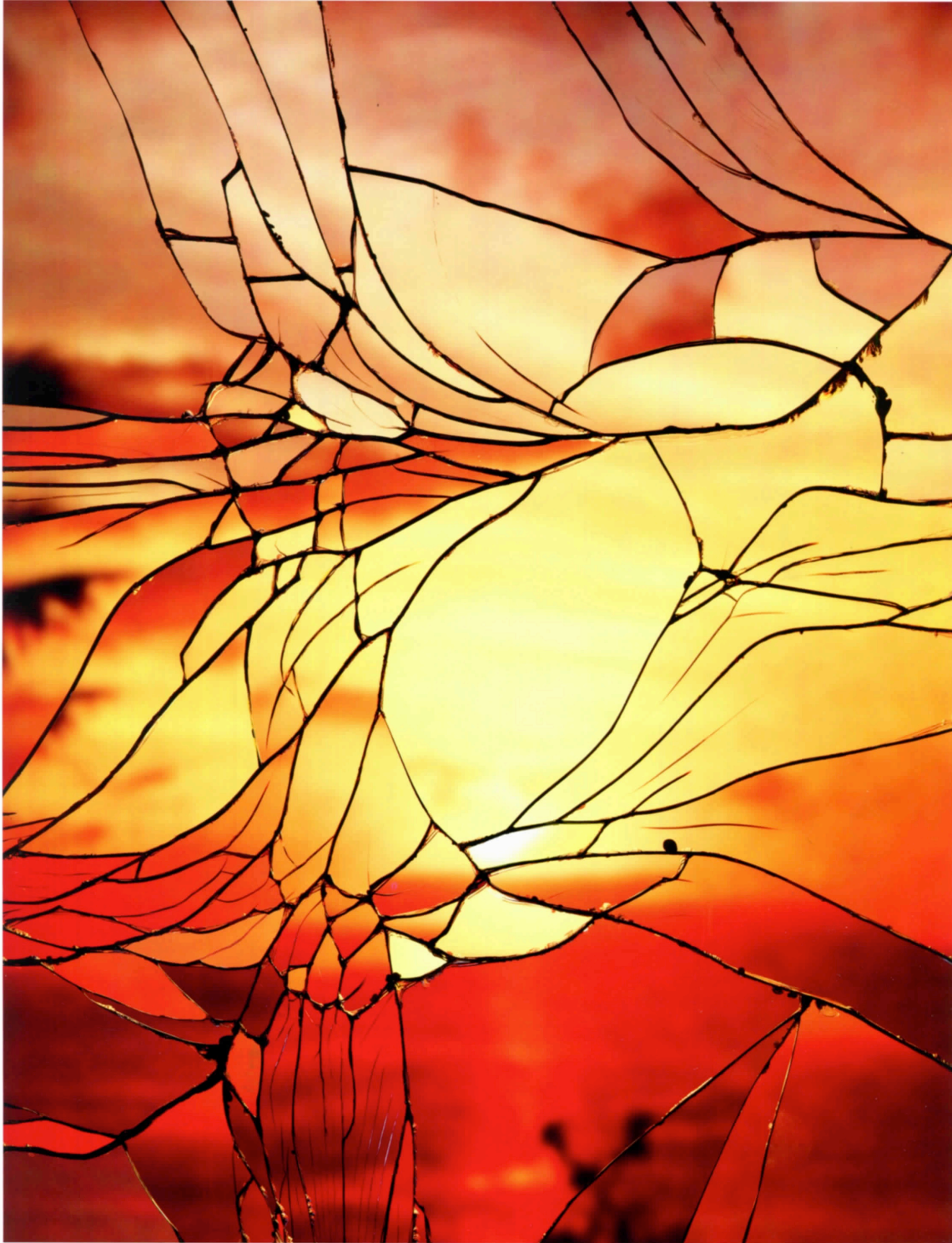


Silver on Mirror (Man Ray), 2010

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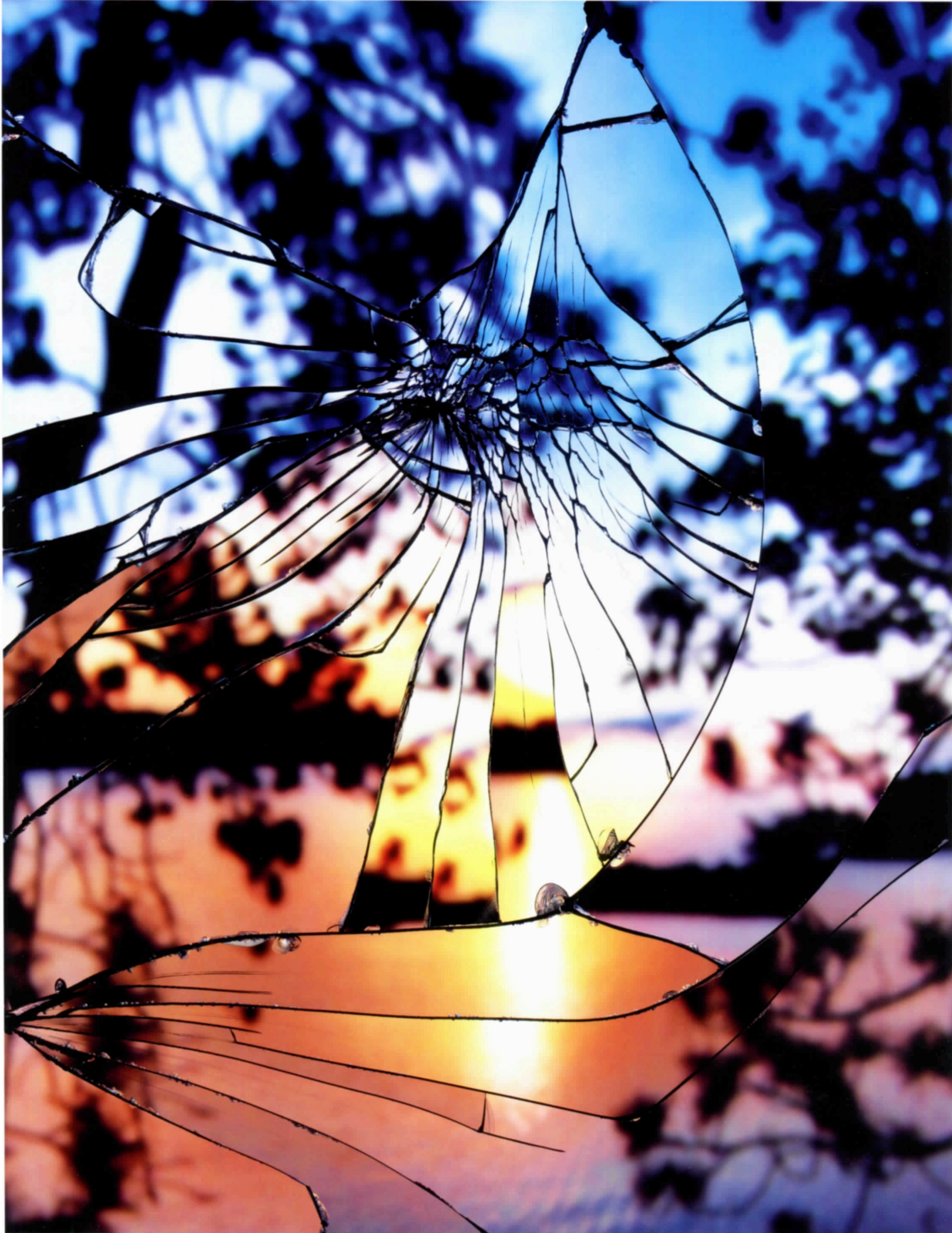
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Broken Mirror / Evening Sky (Agfachrome), 2012

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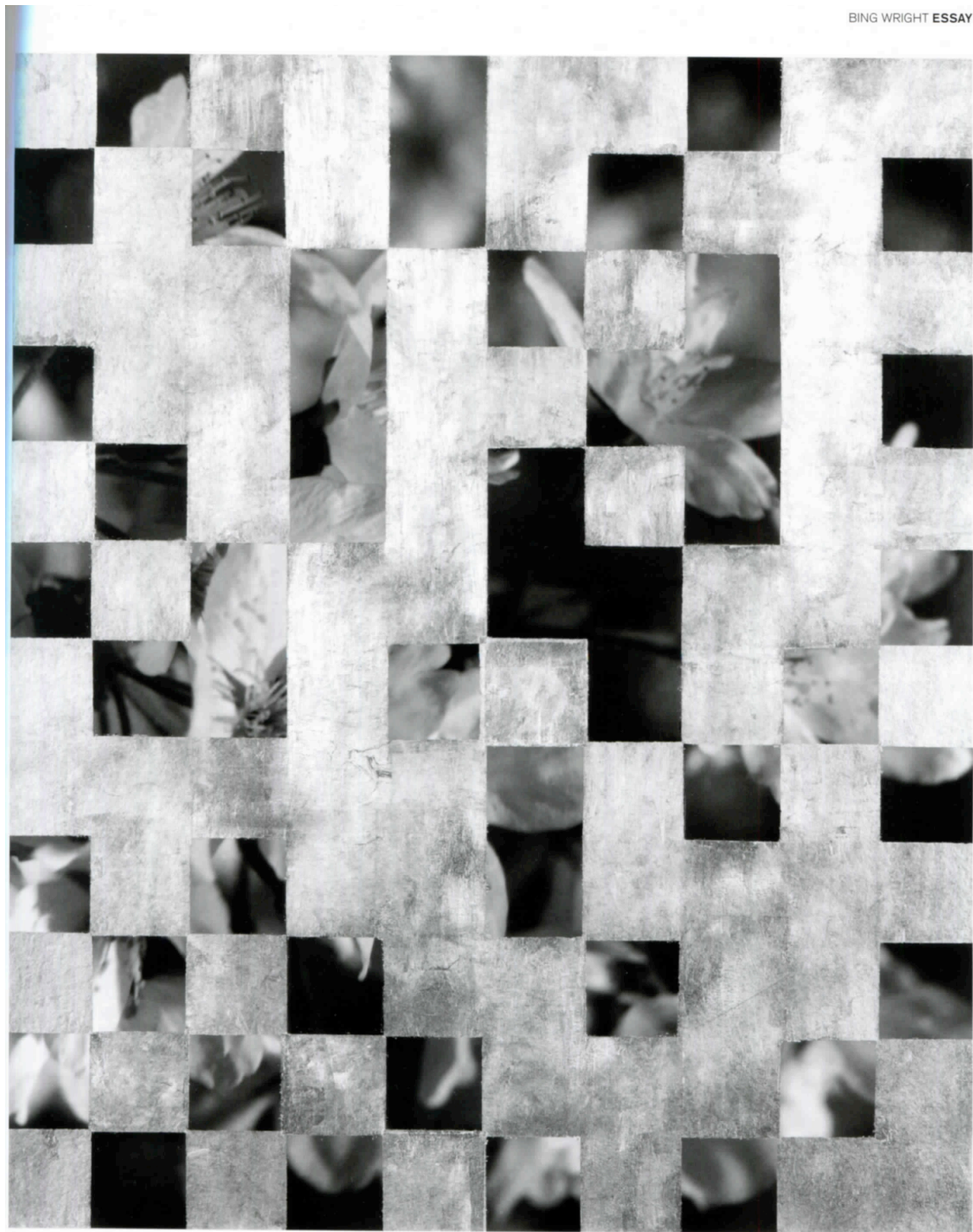
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Broken Mirror / Evening Sky (Agfacolor), 2012

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Cherry Tree Grid 012, 2017