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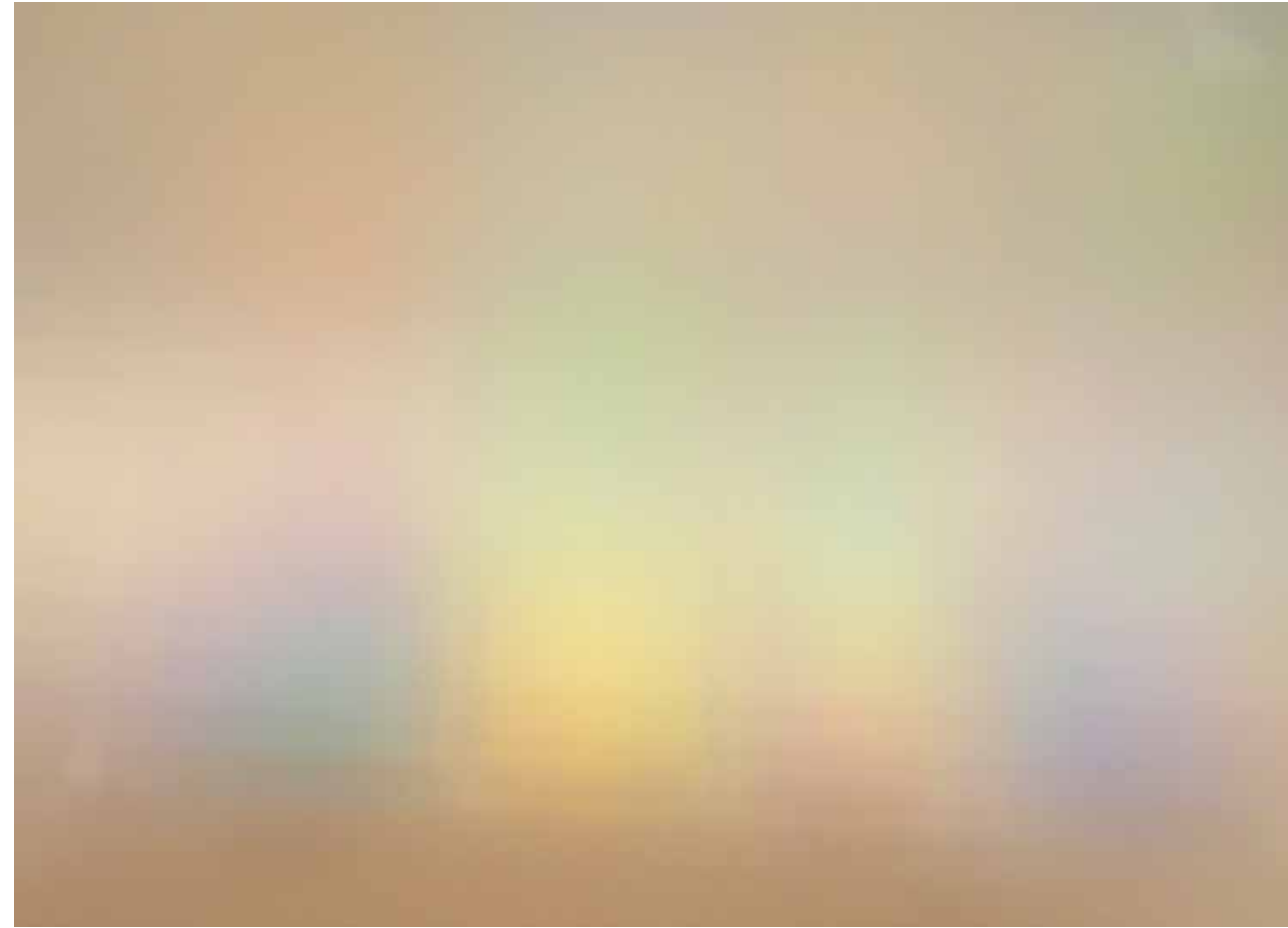
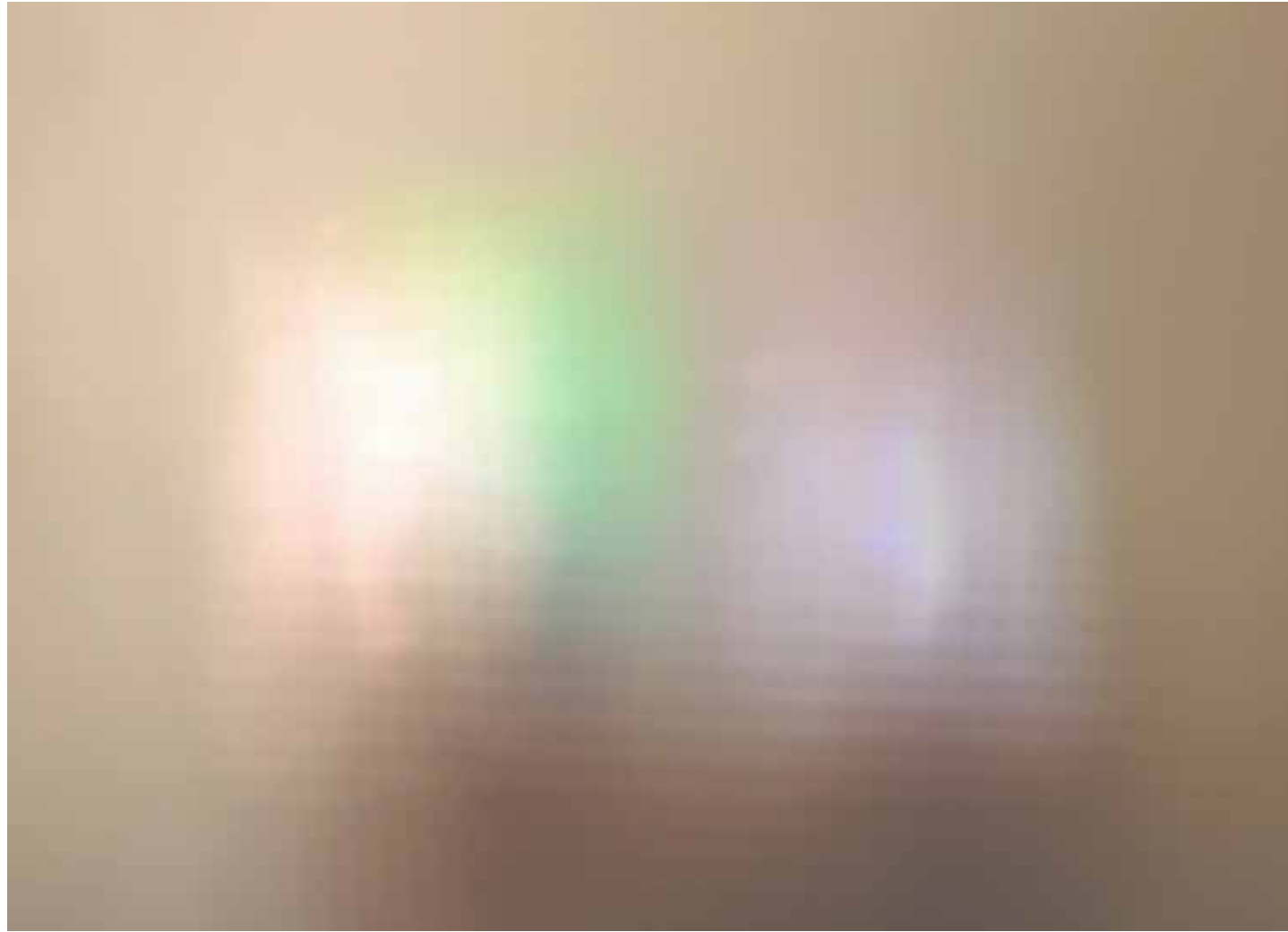
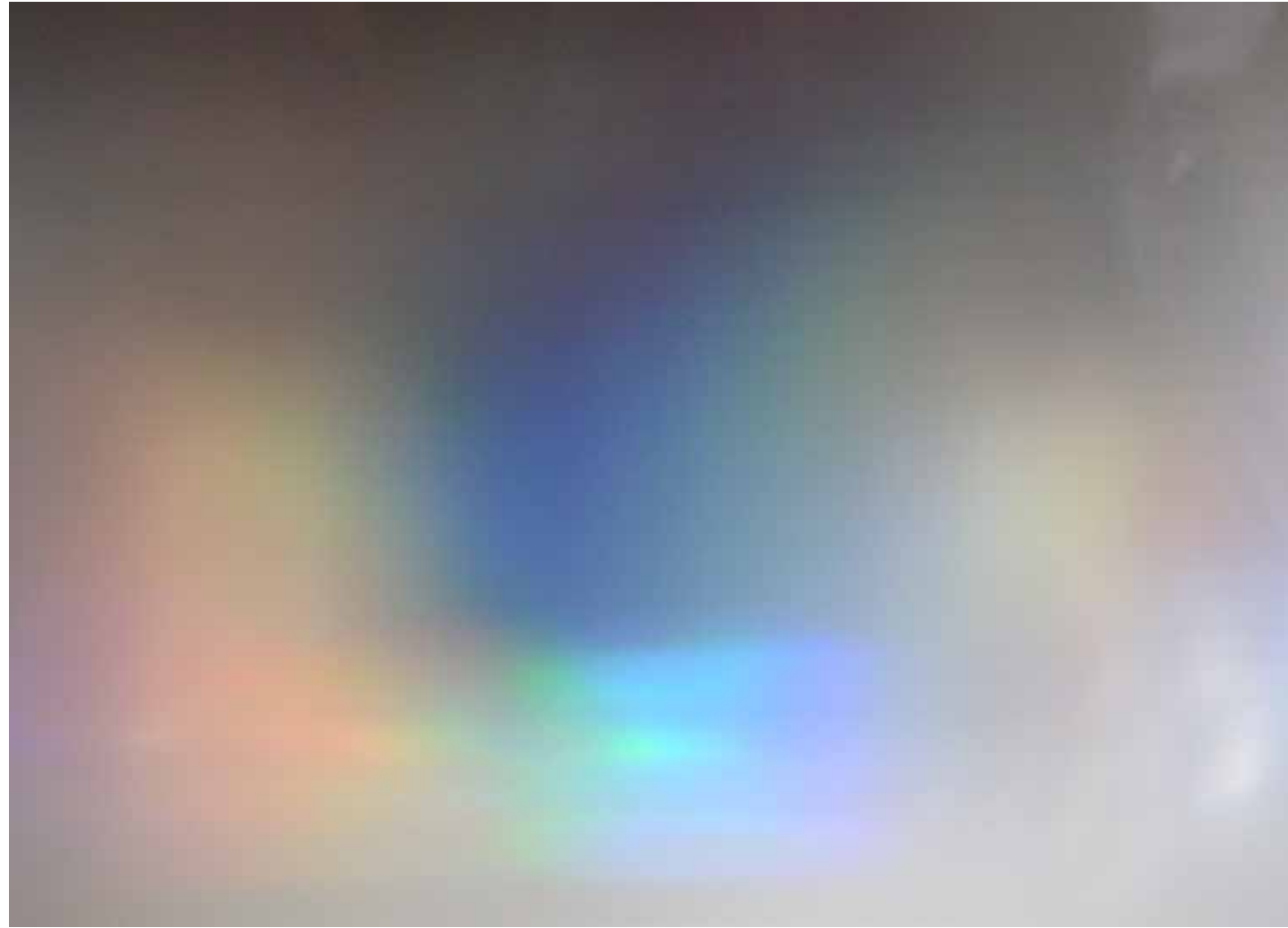
BEVERLEY

SOUTHCOTT

/

CONDUIT

SPACE



LIMINAL VISION

BY CHRISTOPHER WILLIAMS-WYNN

One way to view the history of photography is to see it as a series of attempts to grant the photographic image ever greater clarity and precision. In the quest for high definition imagery, market demands and technological changes suppress various artefacts of photographic images, especially its blur. An opposing trend, one that refuses the supposed naturalism of sharp focus, is a relatively common tactic in contemporary photography. From the warm tones of Uta Barth's domestic interiors to the pixellated vistas of Thomas Ruff's landscapes, the lack of focus signals a need to re-examine the conventions, perhaps better understood as expectations, of photography.

This pull between clear and obscure vision parallels tendencies that Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin describe as hypermediacy and immediacy¹. Whereas hypermediacy refers to the capacity for a given medium, such as photography², to make itself apparent, immediacy signals a desire for the medium to disappear, as if its presence could be eliminated and unmediated access to the world granted. Such desire forgets one thing: the photograph, as image and as object, is part of the world. When blurred, the photograph refuses the demand that it disappear behind a façade of realism, instead asserting itself.

Such an insistence upon the qualities of the photographic image itself marks Beverley Southcott's work. Her abstracted compositions comprise subtle tonal gradations and gentle washes of colour, emphasising the variable qualities of light. In particular, the recurrent prismatic flairs point to a deconstruction of visible light. Like the prism that decomposes white light into its coloured components, Southcott's images foreground the multiple colours that support and allow for human vision. In this respect she

shares concerns with other contemporary artists that seem to take the very structure of vision and its mediated representation as a central concern in their work. Her work differs, however, in the severe attenuation of recognisable imagery, a necessary abstraction if the qualities of recorded light are to be laid bare for inspection.

Despite these comments, Southcott's work is not purely an exercise in formalist aesthetics, as though some pure mode of vision could be located if only abstraction could be pursued far enough. Rather, the works speak of loss, of a breakdown in the realist mode of photographic representation. We do not—cannot—see 'through' her photographs. Instead of providing a 'window onto the world', her work shows that peeling back the layers of expectation leads only to another veil of abstracted forms. Reflections and refractions float across the surface of these photographs, haunting the flat plane with the suggestions of something or someone out of reach. Not so much records of the world but hints of another, these photographs remind us that although we cannot move between image and world, we can re-imagine that rigid boundary as a liminal zone.

¹ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000).

² For the sake of argument, this text assumes that photography can be coherently and consistently defined as a medium. This point is, of course, a matter of significant debate. For recent work on the difficulty of establishing photography as a distinct medium, see the essays collected in *Heterogeneous Objects: Intermedia and Photography after Modernism*, eds. Raphaël Pirenne and Alexander Streitberger (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2013).

Front: *Conduit Space One* - 2013, Archival inkjet print on metallic pearl, 50.5 x 70 cm, edition of 4 / Inside flap: *Conduit Space Two* - 2013, Archival inkjet print on metallic pearl, 75 x 100 cm, edition of 4 / Right: *Conduit Space Seven* - 2013, Archival inkjet print on metallic pearl, 76 x 100 cm, edition of 4 / Back: *Conduit Space Four* - 2013, Archival inkjet print on metallic pearl, 73.5 x 100 cm, edition of 4

