379 NBI NO.6856

"DESIGNING WITH LIGHT": CARLOTTA CORPRON AND THE NEW BAUHAUS

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of North Texas in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Ву

Erin L. Waugh, B.A., B.S.J.

Denton, Texas

August, 1992

Waugh, Erin L., "Designing with Light": Carlotta

Corpron and the New Bauhaus. Master of Arts (Art History),

August, 1992, 131 pp., 22 illustrations, bibliography, 32

titles.

A major figure to emerge in the history of American photography is Carlotta Corpron (1901-1987), who taught art at Texas Woman's University in Denton, Texas from 1935-1968. The rediscovery of her abstract images created during the 1940s reflects the growing recognition of the experimental photography at the New Bauhaus in Chicago from 1937-1946.

Corpron's abstract photographs were stimulated by her interaction with Lazlo Moholy-Nagy and Gyorgy Kepes.

Corpron was an innovator in the development of abstract photography in the United States. This thesis connects her work to that of Moholy-Nagy and Gyorgy Kepes as well as other major figures in American photography of the twentieth century.

Copyright by Erin L. Waugh

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	P	age
LIST OF	ILLUSTRATIONS	v
Chapter		
I.	INTRODUCTION	1
	Statement of the Problem Review of the Literature Methodology	
II.	CARLOTTA CORPRON AND THE BAUHAUS	10
	Early Biography The Bauhaus Moholy-Nagy and Kepes: Philosophy Association with Moholy-Nagy and Kepes Corpron's Teaching Philosophy	
III.	CORPRON'S CONTEXT IN PHOTOGRAPHY AND LATER BIOGRAPHY	43
	History of Abstract Photography in the U.S. Corpron's Place in Twentieth-Century Photography A Comparative Study Late Biography	·:
IV.	EVALUATION OF ABSTRACT PHOTOGRAPHS PRODUCED BY CORPRON DURING THE 1940S	64
	Nature Studies Light Drawings Light Patterns Light Follows Form Space Compositions Fluid Light Designs	
V. (CONCLUSION	95
ILLUSTRA	ATIONS10	02
APPENDIX	K	25
	Chronology	
SELECTED	BIBLIOGRAPHY	30

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure		Page
1.	Caladium Leaves	. 103
2.	Nature Dancer	. 104
3.	Three Oil Tanks near Jefferson, Texas	. 105
4.	Design with Oil Tank	. 106
5.	Solarized Calla Lilies	. 107
6.	Church in Havana	. 108
7.	Commentary on Civilization	. 109
8.	A Walk in Fair Park, Dallas	. 110
9.	Bisymmetric Design	. 111
10.	White Paper Shapes against White Background	
	Light from a Venetian Blind	. 112
11.	Six Cubes	. 113
12.	Suspended Glass Cubes	. 114
13.	Light Follows Form	. 115
14.	Illusion of Male and Female	. 116
15.	Nautilus and Concave Mirror	. 117
16.	Chambered Nautilus in Space Composition	. 118
17.	Eggs Reflected and Multiplied	. 119
18.	Fun with Eggs	. 120
19.	Eggs Encircled	. 121
20.	Captured Light	. 122
21.	Light Creates Symbols	. 123
22.	Flowing Light	. 124

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A major figure to emerge in recent years in the history of American photography is Carlotta Corpron (1901-87). The rediscovery of her substantial production of a broad range of abstract images created primarily in the 1940s reflects the growing recognition of the experimental photography at the New Bauhaus in Chicago during the years 1937 to 1946 as well as the recent interest in the neglected work of women artists. Corpron's place in twentieth-century photography can be seen as that of an independent artist who can be associated with the abstract experimental spirit of the Bauhaus and the New Bauhaus.

Statement of the Problem

This study will examine the relationship of Corpron's work to the principles and teaching of Bauhaus artists Lazlo Moholy-Nagy and Gyorgy Kepes in terms of the investigation of light patterns in Corpron's abstract compositions produced during the 1940s.

Review of the Literature

The literature on Corpron discusses her life and accomplishments only briefly. Two articles written by

Corpron from an educator's point of view (1949, 1962) explain her methods of teaching creative photography. The articles give details about photograms and light modulators, both of which were essential to her teaching and her photography. These articles strongly suggest the influence of Moholy-Nagy and his method of teaching photography.

Corpron's first major exhibition since the 1950s was Marjory Mann's "Women of Photography" (1975), a travelling show organized in 1975 by the San Francisco Museum of Art, which included a range of artists and works from the late 1800s to the early 1970s. The text on Corpron consists of three paragraphs: one about her style, one about her life, and one citing locations of some of her photographs in various collections. During this period, the majority of women photographers were working as commercial or documentary photographers, rather than exploring the possibilities of complete abstraction. In this show there are few abstract works. Lotte Jacobi is represented by several cameraless abstractions, and Corpron is represented primarily with her Fluid Light abstractions. Jacobi produced photograms as a diversion from portrait photography, for which she is better known. 1 Jacobi's simple abstractions are playful and carefree in contrast to Corpron's carefully thought out compositions.

Margaretta Mitchell's book, Recollections: Ten Women of Photography (1979), written in conjunction with a travelling exhibition that included Corpron is more extensive. The book is based on interviews with the photographers. Sections about each photographer present a selection of words and photographs mutually agreed upon by the editor and photographer. The text material gives biographical information and explores their relationship as photographers and as women in the history of the medium.

Another exhibition catalogue, <u>Light Abstractions</u>, written by Jean S. Tucker, was published by The University of Missouri-St. Louis. Included are ten photographers who dealt with light and abstraction in their work. Each artist makes a brief statement about his work illustrated by several images. Also included in the exhibition were Moholy-Nagy, Kepes, as well as only two other women, Jacobi and Barbara Morgan. In the prologue Beaumont Newhall says, "It is strange that the concern of photographers with light as subject, as well as light as medium, has received such little attention".²

The most recent publication, aside from exhibition reviews, is the Amon Carter exhibition catalogue (1980).

Carlotta Corpron: Designer with Light, by Martha A.

Sandweiss, discusses Corpron's life and her works produced during the 1940s. It contains statements by Corpron and

Corpron says she was directly influenced by Kepes without further discussion. Corpron worked with both men but does not acknowledge Moholy-Nagy's influence on her.

The literature on and by Moholy-Nagy and Kepes documents the visual relationship of their art to Corpron's works produced in the 1940s. Moholy-Nagy wrote extensively about photography. Two well-known books are <u>Vision in Motion</u> (1947) and <u>Moholy-Nagy: Experiment in Totality</u> (1950); both give detailed information about the experimental potentialities of photography and his light experiments. Kepes wrote about the visual arts as a whole focusing on the optical revolution and our present-day conception of space and the visual approach to reality in his book, <u>Language of Vision</u> (1944). Kepes was primarily a painter who did some work in photography in order to understand light. A discussion of his photography, and specifically light which is the common element of all Kepes's work, is in <u>Gyorgy</u> Kepes: The MIT years, 1945-1977 (1978).

A recent publication, Photography at the Bauhaus (1990), edited by Jeannine Fiedler, has background information on the Bauhaus and its Masters, which includes Moholy-Nagy. This publication accompanied an exhibition based on the collection at the Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin, which had been accumulated over almost thirty years. It is a comprehensive catalogue covering the broad range of work produced by Bauhaus

photographers. It was not until 1929, after the appointment of Walter Peterhans, that Bauhaus students really were able to learn photography in a photography class.³ The catalogue only pays homage to two women, Lucia Moholy and Florence Henri. Rolf Schasse says:

When Lucia Moholy came to the Bauhaus in Weimar in April 1923 it was as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's wife. It was expected that she would be involved in her husband's work, and help with projects and exhibitions, but not that she should develop ideas of her own, nor create an image for herself, possible at the expense of her husband, who was already quite controversial enough among his colleagues. Until quite recently Bauhaus historiography kept to patriarchalist models that allotted minor roles or inspirational functions to women, and did not allow them to impinge upon the stories of great men.⁴

Florence Henri took a preliminary course in photography in 1927 at the Bauhaus in Dessau. While she was at the Bauhaus she investigated the design possibilities of photography as well as painting. At first she was just involved in photographic exercises at the Bauhaus as she studied under Moholy-Nagy. Later, in 1928, when she moved to Paris, she started to be seriously involved in photography. Henri was rediscovered in 1971 at the age of 78 by Ann and Jurgen Wilde, owners of a photographic gallery in Cologne, Germany, who sought to find photographers who had disappeared. 5

The influence of the Bauhaus style on Corpron has never fully been explored. General sources on the history of photography have shown a lack of inclusion of women in

photography. There are two general sources which include women with acknowledgement of their contributions to photography. Beaumont Newhall's The History of Photography from 1839 to the present (1982) includes a chapter addressing experimental and abstract photography. The number of women mentioned in the book includes less than twenty and they fall into the categories of portraiture and documentary photography. Naomi Rosenblum's A World History of Photography (1984, 1989) is a more comprehensive history of photography discussing far more women artists. However, she only has two sentences on Corpron and her experimental photography, suggesting the influence of Kepes's work with light. Corpron's image Mardi Gras (c. 1946), is also included in the book. Mardi Gras is a Fluid Light design, an investigation into abstraction in which Rosenblum says Corpron was reacting to the teachings of Kepes. 6

On women artists in general, one source for information is Charlotte Streifer Rubinstein's American Women Artists:

From Early Indian Times to the Present (1982). She discusses the circumstances surrounding women artists during the years Corpron was active. She provides insight into the position of women in their chosen field and the social consequences of that choice. She says, "As the United States entered World War II, American Scene painting and regionalism began to seem isolationist, stale, and narrow-mindedly chauvinistic". 7 She

goes on to point out that the forties, fifties, and sixties turned out to be a time of increased discrimination with the leading galleries carrying few works by women and offering very few solo shows for women in major museums.

Corpron had approximately six individual exhibitions between the late 1940s and mid 1950s, and was included in approximately five group exhibitions during the same time period. This may seem like quite a few exhibitions, but it must also be noted that between the early 1950s and the mid 1970s Corpron's work was not shown. Included in some group exhibitions in the mid 1970s, she finally had a retrospective at a major museum in 1980.

Methodology

Primary data for this study consisted of Corpron's portfolio of photographs and papers from her estate located at the Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas. The Amon Carter has catalogued as part of their collection fifty-three of Corpron's photographs. The museum has created a detailed record of her estate materials including personal letters and correspondences, books Corpron owned, and other images. The only documented surviving negatives of Corpron's are housed at the Amon Carter. Corpron's negatives, of which there are about eight hundred, are currently being contact printed by the Amon Carter to facilitate future research.

A special urgency for this thesis was the fact that many people that knew Corpron are still alive. Research included interviews with Marguarite Stauver, a personal friend of Corpron and executor of her estate; Professor Don Schol, who arranged a show of Corpron's photographs in the North Texas Art Gallery in the 1970s, and was responsible for her rediscovery leading to her inclusion in the travelling exhibition "Women of Photography: An Historical Survey"; as well as Carol Roark, a friend of Corpron's and former curator at the Amon Carter Museum.

Additional research included information from the Artist Files located at the Amon Carter Library; (2) an interview with Corpron produced for cable television which includes footage of her photographs (1980); (3) archival resources at Texas Woman's University Art Department and Administrative office; as well as (4) books and articles on Moholy-Nagy and Kepes consulted to view images of their works and obtain information about their philosophies.

NOTES

¹Jean S. Tucker, <u>Light Abstractions</u> (University of Missouri at St. Louis, 1980), 60.

 2 Ibid., 7.

3 Jeannine Fiedler, <u>Photography at the Bauhaus</u> (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), 127.

⁴Ibid., 25. ⁵Ibid., 55.

⁶Naomi Rosenblum, <u>A World History of Photography</u> (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989), 432.

⁷Charlotte Streifer Rubinstein, <u>American Women Artists:</u> From Early Indian Times to the <u>Present</u> (New York: Avon Books, 1982), 267.

CHAPTER II

CARLOTTA CORPRON AND THE BAUHAUS

Early Biography

Carlotta M. Corpron was born in Blue Earth, Minnesota, in 1901, but moved to India in 1905 with her mother, sister, and missionary-surgeon father. She spent fifteen years of her childhood in India. Margaurite Stauver, a friend of Corpron's, said that during Corpron's childhood and as an adult the artist was closer to her father than her mother. Corpron often referred to her father and possibly as an afterthought, her mother. She attended English boarding school in the Himalayan Mountains away from her parents and did not return to the United States until she was ready to attend college in 1920:

I was frustrated growing up in India. The boarding school was a cold, remote place. I felt frustrated because I saw things all around me that I wanted to know more about. But it was a very British school and they tended to look down on anything Indian.²

She spent the winter months at home in the plains where the hospital at which her father worked was located. Corpron says early on her mother encouraged her to think in terms of a career instead of marrying.³ The reason for this was that her sister, Ruth, carried a hereditary disease, neurofibromatosis, which is a genetic disorder characterized

by brown patches on the skin, neurofibromas of the skin and internal organs, and in some cases skeletal deformity. Corpron's parents felt that this could be passed on. When she was young, a doctor told her that if she wanted to live a full life she would have to live a very controlled life. She had to avoid nervous habits and getting upset. As a result she could sit for hours, quietly thinking. She thought perhaps that her years in India influenced her philosophy of life. If you have a kind of acceptance of what comes as you get older, you can adjust to whatever the limitations might be:

Being alone and away from my family, I had to develop self-reliance. I was tall and dignified and gave the impression of being more self-sufficient than I was. I always felt more English than American, in a way, having gone to a British school.⁶

These experiences taught Corpron to become independent and to trust her own intuition. Corpron said that the fact that she did not have any time alone when she was younger may have influenced her life. In boarding school there were two dorms, one for the big girls and one for the little girls. The thing that bothered her was that there were one-hundred people sleeping in one room and there was no privacy. As a result she became a loner in many ways, "I can live alone and never be lonely". Stauver confirms this statement by describing her friendship with Corpron as unconditional.

Selecting her friends carefully, Corpron was very committed to those friendships. 8

In 1920, Corpron returned to the United States and enrolled at Michigan State Normal College, now Eastern Michigan University, in Ypsilanti. She received her B.S. in Art Education in 1925, then moved to New York to continue her studies at Teachers College of Columbia University. She studied art education and fabric design, intending to become a teacher or textile designer, and graduated with an M.A. in 1926. That same year, Corpron accepted a job teaching at the Woman's College of Alabama, now Huntington College, in Montgomery. After two years she moved to Cincinnati in 1928 to accept a position at the School of Applied Arts at the University of Cincinnati.

While she was teaching at the University of Cincinnati (1928-1935), she became interested in learning more about Oriental art. She went to the University of Chicago for a summer session to study the religions of India. She had some knowledge of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Mohammedanism, having lived in India, but was interested in studying the architecture and sculpture of the country. 10

During these same years Corpron began to practice photography. As part of a course on textile design she wanted to expose the students to designs in nature. When

Corpron first bought a camera in 1933, it was to use as an instructional aid for her courses:

I was teaching a course in textile design at the time. I had always been fond of nature forms and I thought if I could somehow do interesting photographic designs made with tendrils, different parts of the flowers, leaves, it might inspire my students to design a little more originally. 11

She would photograph flowers and leaves and other natural forms to try to motivate the students. With the camera she could also keep a record of the work of her students and their original designs. "When I had the camera in my hands, I was at home. I did not think of it as a mechanical thing". 12 Corpron did not have a darkroom in which to work, so she joined a camera club in order to learn about enlarging negatives.

After Corpron purchased her first camera, the images she created for herself were the result of her desire to become a better teacher. 13 According to J. Brough Miller, former chairman of the Texas Woman's University Art Department, Corpron was "a superb teacher of pure design". 14 From the beginning Corpron was concerned with abstract patterns and natural objects and with pure form and shape. 15

In 1935, Corpron moved to Texas to accept a position teaching art history and advertising design at Texas State College for Women, now Texas Woman's University, in Denton. The first year she taught in Denton she was asked to

photograph the department heads of the college, an assignment she resented: "I just could not be a general portrait photographer trying to please everybody. It would not work. It is my way to like just a few people, and not to reach out to the whole world". 16

Soon after Corpron arrived, Mary Marshall, head of the art department (1930-1948), asked her to give a course in photography. 17 At this time Corpron knew very little about the technique of photography. 18 As a result, in the summer of 1936, Corpron went to Los Angeles to study at the Art Center. Although her technical knowledge increased, Corpron found the formal photographic assignments in Los Angeles trivial and uninteresting:

They'd just give me problems like photographing the Seventh Street Bridge or the Beverly Hills Courthouse. What do you learn from that? All the time, being a teacher first, I thought in terms of really understanding light so that I'd be able to help my students understand too. 19

Returning to Denton, Corpron began her first experiments with light and photography. She drew her students along with her, cautioning them always to be original—not imitative.20 Corpron's own experiments with light were closely related to the assignments she gave her students, even in her use of the same objects and ideas for subjects. They were still primarily traditional images in 1936—1940: landscapes, old houses, flowers, children, light reflections on water:

With my Rolleiflex I captured moving lights in amusement parks and created abstract light drawings. This was the beginning of my fascination with light. Then I observed the way light transformed simple objects into exciting things of beauty by literally following the countours and penetrating the shadows. ²¹

At Texas Woman's University Corpron taught history of art, freshman design which covered general concepts, advertising design, and lettering, as well as creative photography. Teaching made it difficult for her to find time and energy for her own work, which is often a dilemma for teachers:

I love teaching above all else, and I have found that as I developed as a creative photographer, the work of my students has become more interesting and creative. As the students work, my thinking is stimulated by their fresh approach to problems. I am keenly aware of the contribution that my students have made to my development as a creative artist, and I have been most fortunate in having the privilege of teaching in a progressive art department.²²

Corpron was one of the fortunate individuals whose vocation and avocation $merged.^{23}$

The progressive atmosphere was the result of the formidable achievement of Mary Marshall, head of Texas Woman University's Art Department from 1930-1948, which she modernized. Marshall was a graduate of Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York and had received Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Art from Columbia University in New York in 1925. She came to Texas State College for Women in Denton in 1916

and was an Associate Professor of Art until 1930 when she became the head of the department.

Dr. Betty Copeland, current head of Texas Woman's University Art Department, said she felt that Marshall was trying to give the department a broader scope and make it more progressive. To move beyond traditional plaster casts to twentieth-century design Marshall decided to build the department aggressively. Marshall was responsible for bringing Thomas Hart Benton, Moholy-Nagy, and Frank Lloyd Wright to Denton to lecture: "They kept the highway between Dallas and Denton hot because these people were not coming to Dallas." Marshall also interacted with Jack Finney in the Architecture Department at Texas A&M, another avant-garde thinker.²⁴

In 1941 as part of her desire to modernize her program at Texas Woman's University, Marshall went to Chicago to study with the New Bauhaus at the Institute of Design, and particularly under Moholy-Nagy. On her return she encouraged the teachers to begin to think in terms of the abstract design principles and exercises that the Bauhaus had initiated.

Marshall also asked Moholy-Nagy to come to Denton and give a workshop in the summer of 1942. This was a turning point for Corpron: Moholy-Nagy's workshop in Denton would

give her first-hand exposure to the Bauhaus philosophy and style of photography.

The Bauhaus

The ideas that Moholy-Nagy, and later Kepes, brought to Denton stem from the German Bauhaus (1919-33) approach to art that replaced the romantic individualism of contemporary Expressionist or Surrealist art with an ideal based on the potential of the machine in various fields of art.25 Therefore it is necessary to look at some length at the original Bauhaus to understand the philosophies about art that these two men developed. In its technical teaching the Bauhaus initially was experimental; it neither attempted to "propagate nor did it achieve a particular style or doctrine; instead, the school sought to come to some kind of artistic reconciliation with the machine age, to open it up to new forms and new potentialities of creativity". 26 The Bauhaus generated an awareness throughout the world that the machine and its products were capable of producing beauty in art based not only on craftsmanship but also upon functional appropriateness, clarity, and precision- a beauty not of applied ornament but of abstract forms.27

Moholy-Nagy's importance at the Bauhaus has been said to be second only to that of Walter Gropius, the director. 28 Moholy-Nagy brought about significant change in Bauhaus aesthetics following his arrival in 1923. In place of the

individualistic Expressionism and mysticism about materials employed in its original teaching, the Bauhaus distinctively shifted to an atmosphere of controlled laboratory exercises, rejecting traditional plaster casts for teaching art.²⁹

Moholy-Nagy stressed objective and rationalist methods in his teaching. Taking advantage of the many aspects of modern technology, such as visual experiences from photography, and using industrial materials, such as clear plastics, Moholy-Nagy organized his teaching around a core of Constructivist aesthetics.³⁰

When the Nazis became more powerful in Germany and closed the Bauhaus in 1932, Moholy-Nagy and many other teachers at the Bauhaus emigrated to Great Britain and then to North America. In the United States their theory and design methods eventually entered the basic teaching curricula of innumerable art and architecture schools. Foremost among the sources for Bauhaus ideas in the United States was Moholy-Nagy's New Bauhaus in Chicago. 31 The New Bauhaus opened in the remodeled Marshall Field mansion on October 18, 1937, with thirty-five students.

Moholy-Nagy opened the New Bauhaus under a contract with the Association of Arts and Industries in Chicago. He planned that the students would get instruction in biotechnique [sic] and biology, chemistry and physics, mathematics and geometry. Psychology, philosophy, and

sociology would supplement painting, sculpture, architecture, photography, weaving, and all branches of product design.³²

Due to financial reasons the New Bauhaus was closed after one year. Moholy-Nagy was not easily defeated and reopened the New Bauhaus in 1939. This new venture of Moholy-Nagy's was called the "School of Design" in Chicago. The Bauhaus had a direct impact on both American design and fine arts, and it became an important force in establishing in the United States the international abstract traditions of the European avant-garde. 33

Because of the centrality of Moholy-Nagy's principles for Corpron's development, it is worthwhile to examine them in detail. Moholy-Nagy had always been fascinated with light and space. Walter Gropius, founder of the Bauhaus in Germany (1919), described Moholy-Nagy:

His greatest effort as an artist was devoted to the conquest of space. His genius ventured into all realms of science and art to unriddle the phenomena of space and light. In painting, sculpture and architecture, in theater and industrial design, in photography and film, advertising and typography, he incessantly strove to interpret space in its relation to time, that is, motion in space. 34

Sybil Moholy-Nagy describes Moholy-Nagy in the introduction to Experiment in Totality:

The total framework of his influence included painting, sculpture, architecture, the printed word, the kinetic picture, implements, machines, dance, poetry, theatre. Moholy's profusely misinterpreted and ridiculed axioms that 'everyone is talented' and that 'to the artist an ink-bottle label is as important as a painting or the

planning of a town' referred to the perceptive potential of each designed object, not to their hierarchical order. The raw materials of all visual creation were the eternally present visual fundamental: line-color-texture-light, and the three dimensions of form, space, and movement. Everyone in possession of his senses could be a creative participant. 35

In 1923, for the catalogue of his first photographic exhibition, Moholy-Nagy wrote about light and and its importance in photograms:

The concretization of light phenomena is peculiar to the photographic process and to no other technical invention. Cameraless photography (the making of photograms) rests on this. The photogram is a realization of spatial tension in black-white-gray. Through the elimination of pigment and texture it has a dematerialized effect. It is a writing with light, self-expressive through the contrasting relationship of deepest black and lightest white with a transitional modulation of the finest grays. Although it is without representational content, the photogram is capable of evoking an immediate optical experience, based on our psycho-biological visual organization. 36

By exploring photograms and photography at the same time Moholy-Nagy arrived at clear definitions for both. He said,

The photogram was the creation of elemental optical relationships, and basically one with Constructivist painting. Photography was representation of symbolic form, bound by the associative content of plant, animal, structure, and man. 37

Moholy-Nagy wrote extensively about light and photography and in his book <u>Vision in Motion</u> the relation of light and shadow in black-and-white photography:

Black-and-white photography revealed for the the first time light and shadow in their interdependence. The development of reliable artificial illumination, like electricity, brought an increasing adoption of flowing light effects and richly graduated shadows. Through these elements a greater animation of surfaces and more delicate visual intensification was possible. This multitude of gradations is one of the fundamental 'materials' of photography. This fact holds true even when we pass beyond the immediate sphere of black-whitegray values and begin to think in terms of color. 38

Moholy-Nagy wrote that in order to learn about the properties of light sensitive emulsion, which is the basic element of photography, it is best to start with the making of cameraless photographs, or photograms:

The photogram exploits the unique characteristic of the photographic process—the ability to record with delicate fidelity a great range of tonal values. The almost endless range of gradations, subtlest differences in the gray values, belongs to the fundamental properties of photographic expression. The organized use of that gradation creates photographic quality. The photogram can be called the key to photography because every good photograph must possess the same fine gradations between the white and black extremes as the photogram. 39

For Moholy-Nagy, the second step in learning the elements of photography was the light modulator. The function of the light modulator is to catch, reflect and modulate light:

A flat surface does not modulate, it only reflects light. But any object with combined concave-convex or wrinkled surfaces may be considered a light modulator since it reflects light with varied intensity depending upon its substance and the way its surfaces are turned toward the light source.⁴⁰

As the rays of light strike a light modulator some are reflected, others absorbed, others pass through it if it is transparent. If the light modulator is translucent, it diffuses the rays of light.⁴¹ The variety of modulators is

endless. "Each light modulator is the product of the individual's own ingenuity, dexterity and interest". 42

Moholy-Nagy wrote that one of the photographer's tasks is to identify unmistakably for the spectator the true shape and nature of his object. This can be achieved by lighting, from one or many angles, or with different combinations of light. The light modulator represents the "object." "The task remains to use the light sources in such a way that the light defining the object immediately communicates the content". Content lay in the endless variation of light reflections.

Moholy-Nagy suggests using the light modulators in a "light box." A "light box" is an instrument "made from a carton, two sides of which are perforated so that spotlights, some of them fitted with filters, can be placed at the holes. Objects hung on strings stretched within the box. The spotlights can then be arranged to strike the strings and objects in any manner desired. He referred to the light box as a particularly effective "laboratory" for the study of receding and advancing values of the lit surfaces:

These effects produce direct emotional reactions which can be enlarged upon through the combinations of visual fundamentals, shape, contour, texture, black and white and gray values and color. Thus, one may paint with light as surely as one can paint with oil and pigment. 45

Nathan Lerner, a colleague of Moholy-Nagy's at the Institute of Design in Chicago, was the first to make creative use of the light box:

Anyone working with light soon discovers that freedom of selection, a necessary factor in the creative activity, is limited unless there is some method of separating the accidental qualities of light from those qualities desired. I felt that if I could create a virtual world of darkness, which I could then develop into a disciplined world of light, I would be approaching the solution of the problem of controlled selection. 46

Light is one element, material object another, and the relationship of one to the other makes up our visual world:

In the light box they become easily understood elements of visual communication. The light box, therefore, has significance for any artist. Working with it can give him a deeper insight into the visual-psychological elements that play an important role in making any picture exciting and meaningful.⁴⁷

Gyorgy Kepes worked closely with Moholy-Nagy. They collaborated in Europe, and later in the United States they both worked together at the New Bauhaus, which later became the Institute of Design in Chicago. Sybil Moholy-Nagy gives a comparative description of the two men on her first meeting of Kepes in Berlin:

A few days later I went to Moholy's studio, to return a film manuscript which he had urged me to read. The face of the young man who took me in the elevator to the top floor of the studio building on the 'Kaiserdamm' reflected intense concentration. He was Gyorgy Kepes, a Hungarian painter who had come to work with Moholy a few years earlier. His reticence, and the perpetual solemnity of his mien, seemed to contrast strangely with Moholy's enthusiastic eloquence and outgoing cordiality. In time I came to understand their partnership. It was founded on their common devotion to 'seeing' as a

philosophy of life. Their differences of temperament and social orientation, often aggravated by their furious Hungarian egos, were settled through a deep mutual understanding about the fitness of demonstrative means. It was a matter of common emphasis and common taste. Later, in their American years, they added to this unifying vision the dedication to teaching. On behalf of the shared responsibility for the future of universal design they formed a team which lasted for twelve years. It added much to the visual pedagogy of our time. 48

Kepes was primarily a painter. His activities as a painter, photographer, educator, and writer culminated in the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology which he conceived, founded and directed until his retirement in 1978. ⁴⁹ In 1953 Kepes did not consider himself a painter by profession, but in his retirement he is ready to be judged on his record of a painter, no less than on that of an educator and pioneer in the use of artificial light as an expressive medium. ⁵⁰ Around 1928-29 he gave up painting to pursue photography, photomontage, and film:

Kepes's photograms starting with his work in Budapest took their starting point form nature. . . . The photogram, with its essentially abstract image, lies metaphorically between science and poetry: it is a dematerialized light recording of natural processes having close links with Kepes's later interest in scientific records. 51

Only a few of Kepes's works of the 1930s survived the war and his many moves.

Kepes met Moholy-Nagy in Berlin as a result of his interest in film making. He felt that film was a vital

medium for social beliefs. 52 Kepes wrote Moholy-Nagy in Berlin and asked to join him. From 1930 to 1937 they collaborated intermittently, first in Berlin and then in London. 53

In Berlin, Kepes's interest in the developing social and aesthetic ideals had opportunities for an even greater scope. ⁵⁴ In addition to his friendship with Moholy-Nagy, he came to know the Hungarian sculptor Laszlo Peri, the architect Walter Gropius, and the filmmakers, Vertoff and Dovzhenko, who Wechsler says, "were admired particularly for their ability to mobilize social imagination through the union of art and technology". ⁵⁵

Moholy-Nagy asked Kepes to found the light and color department at the New Bauhaus in 1937. Moholy-Nagy wanted "to form a nucleus for an independent reliable educational center where art, science, technology will be united into a creative pattern". The Kepes's light and color workshop in Chicago a variety of forms and techniques for visual elements were researched and related to their potential social and psychological impact. Repes's purpose in these exercises was to increase understanding of visual organization by using many media in different contexts:

Although Kepes didn't see photography as primary it was mediator between eye and world, filtering and framing, an instrument of crystalization and transformation. Photography is a link between his painting and his technological and environmental art projects. Light,

the essence of photography, is the common element of all Kepes's work. 59

Nature is the source of Kepes's photographic images as well as his paintings, and more specifically the four basic elements:

Earth--his celebration of nature; the here and now; the sand ground of his paintings; earth materially and metaphorically; Air--the mediating element for light; Fire--a predominant image in his painting, and the theme of his project 'Flame Orchard', fire with all its primal associations--Prometheus, enlightenment, force, harnessed energy, potential destructiveness; Water--the scene for urban celebrations, the water purification plant, his project for a water garden, the proposed gateway to Boston Harbor. 60

The eye is a predominant image in Kepes's photography and the camera's analogue is the eye's accomplice. 61 One photograph taken in Chicago in 1938, <u>Juliet with a peacock</u> feather eye, presents the eye of the feather superimposed on Juliet's eye. In other photographs of this time Kepes begins to abandon the figure and concentrate on the abstract qualities created by light.

There is a thematic play of forms and the shadows in Juliet in Shadow Cage (1939), in which her head is placed within a three-dimensional frame. The frame casts a shadow on her face; her face casts a shadow on the background; her hair is both figure and shadow, contrasting with the geometric lines. This photograph appears simultaneously personal and structural. There are also some abstract studies of form and light, such as Fluid Patterns and Optical Transformations, both of 1942, Magnetic Pattern (1938), and Calligraphic Light Play (1948).62

These abstract studies of form and light occurred during the same time Corpron was pursuing her experiments with light.

Kepes experimented with the light box and light drawings.

Moholy-Nagy and Kepes: Philosophy

Moholy-Nagy wrote extensively about his fascination with light. When he was twenty-one years old he wrote the creed of his life. He wrote about light which he never quit exploring from that point on. Corpron's fascination with light is similar to that of Moholy-Nagy's. They both became interested in light and ended up pursuing its qualities, characteristics, and potentials for the rest of their lives.

In the first of his New Bauhaus books, <u>The New Vision</u> (1938), Moholy-Nagy said that ever since the introduction of high-powered, intensive artificial light, it has been one of the elemental factors in art creation, although it had not yet been elevated to its legitimate place. ⁶³ Reflectors and neon tubes of advertisements, the moving lighted letters on store fronts, and the rotating mechanism of colored electric bulbs were all elements of a new field of expression. ⁶⁴ Through the development of black-and-white photography, light and shadow were fully revealed for the first time. ⁶⁵ In 1932 he wrote:

Through the development of reliable artificial illumination, and the power of regulating it, an increasing adoption of flowing light and richly graduated shadows ensued; and through these again a greater animation of surfaces, and a more delicate

optical intensification. This manifolding of graduations is one of the fundamental 'materials' of optical formalism: a fact which holds equally good if we pass beyond the immediate sphere of black-white-gray values and learn to think and work in terms of colored ones. 66

He felt that photography, through its black-white-gray reproductions of all colored appearances, had enabled recognition of the most subtle differentiations of values in both the gray and chromatic scales. These differentiations represent a new and until his time unattainable quality in optical expression. 67

Moholy-Nagy's light modulators were based on his "Light-Space Modulator" a six-foot high apparatus of moving aluminum and chrome-plated surfaces driven by an electric motor and a series of chain belts. 68 Moholy-Nagy, in Beyond Modern Sculpture, states: "To achieve its full effect the machine must be experienced in a room darkened, with spotlights alternately thrown upon its turning members. The result: a myriad of dissolving shadows passing over walls and ceiling". 69 At the New Bauhaus in Chicago his basic design course included several problems to demonstrate how sculpture in the round could be transformed by alterations of lighting. 70 This emphasis on form through light became the impetus for "Light Modulator" problems. 71 Students were taught not only to see form, but form as it could be created by beams of light and the resulting shadows. 72

Kepes had collaborated with Moholy-Nagy in Berlin and London, and when Moholy-Nagy opened the New Bauhaus he asked Kepes to be on the staff. Both men were concerned with the effects of light and their artistic output is unique to each of them. Kepes took a leave of absence from the Institute of Design in Chicago in order to write his book The Language of Vision. This book would establish him as a leading analyst of the structure and function of graphic imagery. 73 Kepes came to Denton to teach and work on his book in 1944.

Kepes, simultaneously with Man Ray and Moholy-Nagy, experimented with the photogram in the late 1920s shortly after his graduation from the Royal Academy of Art, Budapest. Kepes wrote, "We preserve the present and retrieve the past with light-sensitive emulsions coated on film, on glass, on metal printing plates". 74 Though there is impressive richness communicated with the light media, there is a growing gap between the scientific perfection of information, and the poetic vision of human sensibilities. 75 Kepes said he felt that spontaneity was crucial in the simplest graphic expression:

I felt the strong need to give the photographic media the freedom and richness of the graphic quality. My wish is to bring photographic processes into direct contact with inner events and utilize kinesthetic experiences in the same way as the very best of the great masters in graphic art. ⁷⁶

Kepes's goal was not to make "abstract art," but rather to utilize the richness of the light-form tonal ranges--"to seek out in myself not-yet-seen poetry". 77 He wanted to link rather than separate in his photography by using modulation of light effects created by painted glass surfaces, fusing different viscosity of liquid pigments, inks and paints. 78 He responded to the accidental configurations and he called these images photogenic images, "they are produced by light, and if I am lucky, generate light". 79

Association with Moholy-Nagy and Kepes

In the early forties Corpron learned Bauhaus techniques directly from Moholy-Nagy and Kepes while they were in Denton. Moholy-Nagy was the first to arrive with new ideas for creative photography. Moholy-Nagy suggested two problems for his Light Workshop, held at Texas Woman's University in 1942. One was the photogram, a design made without a camera of light and shadow on sensitized paper; the other was what he called a "light modulator."

Corpron incorporated photograms into her photography courses. She felt it was a challenge to creative expression. Corpron suggested students explore various materials, solid, perforated, semi-transparent and transparent with a flashlight:

As shadows are cast on a piece of white paper the size of the sensitized sheet, fascinating abstract designs result. The direction of the light determines the

length and density of the shadows which are later translated into many photographic tones ranging from white to black. When two flashlights are used, the crossed shadows create unusual designs.⁸⁰

After experimenting with the light and the objects the students could create photograms. Although Corpron did not create many photograms herself, she found that they were a useful teaching device. Photograms were the first step in seeing light, the next step was the light modulator.

Moholy-Nagy's students at Texas Woman's University in Denton worked with white paper, folding, curving, and lighting it so that certain planes or surfaces would be distinct in the light, and others would retreat into shadow. 81 The students then learned to use a view camera to photograph their light modulators, and at the end of the three-week workshop they were able to put up an exhibit of about fifty photograms and light modulators. 82

Moholy-Nagy later commented on the empathy between Corpron and her students. 83 Moholy-Nagy complimented Corpron on her teaching methods and praised the work of her students. 84 In contrast, Corpron made few photograms, and Moholy-Nagy gave no encouragement to her more creative work, "The advice he gave me," she said, "which was so ridiculous in a way, was to photograph the girls who were working their way through school. He didn't understand my need, my desperate need to work and to do something original in photography". 85 On the other hand, Corpron and Moholy-Nagy

talked often about photography and he had a professional influence on her in that he felt that she was a good teacher. 86

When Corpron saw the photograms of Kepes, she felt that he was the one person in the world who could direct her work. 87 She decided to take a year off from teaching to go to the School of Design in Chicago to study with Kepes:

I received a letter from the school informing me that he had resigned to work on his book The Language of Vision. The next thing I knew, Mr. Kepes came to Denton to teach for a year at North Texas State University, now the University of North Texas, while writing the book. This was an extraordinary break for me. When I asked him if he would give me lessons, he said, at first, that he was too busy. After seeing my photographs he suggested that we meet once a week, at his house or mine, and talk about photography. Good fortune had smiled upon me when Mr. Kepes came to Denton, instead of my having to go to him. 88

During the year Kepes was in Denton, Corpron met with him informally once a week for several months and Corpron said she was greatly inspired by these discussions of photography: "We became friends and although our work is not a bit alike, his sensitivity appealed to my sensitivity: we understood each other". 89 Kepes later stated, "We shared the belief that photography could offer important aspects of a poetry of light. [But] no doubt I learned from her as much as she credits me with her learning from me, for she hardly needed my guidance, or anybody's". 90

At this time Corpron was investigating light in the studio with a 4x5 view camera. Kepes told her about the light box. ⁹¹ The light box was used for making controlled photographic studies of light, and light modulator's could be used with the light box. Corpron began experimenting with a two-by-three foot light box, shining flashlights and low wattage bulbs through the holes onto the light-modulating forms she placed inside. ⁹²

Light always determined the character of the photograph and Corpron never approached any subject matter with preconceived ideas. 93 Before taking a single photograph, Corpron would explore the forms with light for hours, watching the tonal variations and the ever-shifting patterns of light and shadow:

Personally, I don't like these paper designs except as a means to an end. I never wanted to go too far with them by creating beautiful structures. I wanted to see what I could do with light and shading by manipulating the lighting and the white paper. I never thought of them as finished works of art. To me it was a step forward, and it was one that Mr. Kepes suggested to me. He said to work until I photographed light instead of paper. I did. 94

Corpron and Kepes became very good friends during his stay in Denton and remained in contact after his departure. Kepes was a source of encouragement and a personal influence on Corpron's photography. 95 In a letter to Corpron dated August 2, 1946, Kepes commented:

Your photographs are definitely some of the finest, most wonderful examples of contemporary photography, and I enjoyed them immensely. I think you must know, as well as I, how much you have developed in your work so I will not tell you anything further in this general sense. I think the greatest thing that you achieved is the wonderful use of light as a fluid medium. I really have never seen such a logical, natural use of light. 96

In a second letter dated May 18, 1947, Kepes wrote:

The greatest contribution you have made with your work—as I see it—is that you handled light with freedom and understanding as a good sculptor handles a clay. You really mold your photographs from light—and in this way you have found the answer. This genuine use of the media gives an incredible richness of light pattern that I enjoyed tremendously. 97

Prior to Kepes, Corpron was sustained primarily by her own faith in the originality and merit of her work during her early years in Denton when she had little contact with other photographers. 98 Although Corpron said Moholy-Nagy was not a source of encouragement for her photographic endeavors, she adopted his problems of photograms and light modulators and incorporated them into her teaching and her own work. 1949, Corpron wrote an article about photograms and abstract photography for Design magazine. In 1962, she elaborated on this concept for an article in Art Education by including the importance of light modulators. Her commitment by then was the study of photography approached creatively, as an art that can become as dramatic as painting or sculpture. exploration of possibilities is limitless, and the results of such creativity deepen the appreciation of all existing forms", 99

Corpron kept in touch with Moholy-Nagy after he left

Denton. When Moholy-Nagy saw what Corpron was capable of, he

became more supportive of her creative work. In a letter to

Corpron dated August 26, 1946, Moholy-Nagy wrote:

I was most delighted with your letter of August 15th and the wonderful photographs enclosed. I do not know whether you will permit me to keep them or whether I can use them in any of the future publications I might put out. Fortunately during our many years of contact I was able to 'snatch' one of your photographs from Tri-Color and put it into my new book which will come out in October and is entitled Vision in Motion. 100

Corpron's Teaching Philosophy

Corpron was fascinated with light early on and she pursued its characteristics and qualities all of her life. She encouraged her students to study and understand light in her photography courses because light was an integral part of photography. Even after she retired from teaching she did not retire from her fascination with light. Corpron was always aware of and always watching light; she was always a teacher even after she retired. 101

Before Corpron concentrated on her own creative work, seven years after coming to Denton, her students were creating photograms and light-and-shadow patterns. Mary Marshall, head of the art department, believed that everyone should have a course in photography in order to learn to see that the world is an exciting place. 102 Every year they were

able to put up an exhibit of student work that was entirely different from that of the year before.

Corpron always wanted to be a teacher and she purchased her first camera to use in her teaching. Corpron always felt that her photographic art was a result of her intense desire to enhance her role as a teacher:

I always wanted to teach. I sometimes felt that I was a born teacher because I liked to explain things. To me, the most exciting experience is to have a really creative student. I didn't have more than two or three a year that I knew would go places but those were enough to stimulate me and make me feel that teaching was worthwhile. I felt that teaching was a giving process, and sometimes I'd want to go into a room and embrace the I have to give and when you're dealing whole class. with young people they give back to you. They respond. It's like watching a flower open, it's wonderful. would have put teaching above photography, but I am thankful I could teach photography which I loved too, so I could have my two interests combined. 103

All of these Bauhaus-related experiments, then, were to help Corpron become a better teacher teaching light. Corpron was not sure that she could have taught photography in a school where technique was the important thing. Teaching in a progressive art department where fine arts and the growth of the individual were stressed, Corpron was able to get away from mediocrity and develop standards of quality and originality. 104 Corpron told her students that she wanted their photographs to "sing." She said her students gave her something all the time, "it was not a case of my just giving to them". 105

Corpron's philosophy about teaching and her methods of teaching has similarities to those of the New Bauhaus in Chicago. The interraction with Moholy-Nagy and Kepes profoundly influenced Corpron's methods not only in her teaching but in her own photography as well.

NOTES

¹Marguarite Stauver, interview by author, Denton, Texas, 4 September 1991.

²Martha A. Sandweiss, <u>Carlotta Corpron: Designer with</u>
<u>Light</u> (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, 1980),
8.

³Margaretta Mitchell, <u>Recollections: Ten Women of Photography</u> (New York: Viking Press, 1979), 48.

⁴Marguarite Stauver, interview by author, Denton, Texas, 4 September 1991.

⁵Mitchell, <u>Recollections:</u> Ten Women of Photography, 50.

6Ibid., 48, 50.

⁷Leslie Phillips, "Corpron," <u>TWU Focus</u> II (Sprint 1982): 14.

⁸Marguarite Stauver, interview by author, Denton, Texas, 4 September 1991.

9Sandweiss, <u>Designer with Light</u>, 8.

10Mitchell, Recollections: Ten Women of Photography,
48.

11Phillips, "Corpron," 15, and Sandweiss, <u>Designer with</u> Light, 8.

12Mitchell, Recollections: Ten Women of Photography, 48.

13Carlotta Corpron, <u>Carlotta Corpron: Designer with</u> <u>Light</u>, Golden Triangle Communications, 1980.

14 Thid 15 Thid.

16Mitchell, Recollections: Ten Women of Photography,
49.

17Marshall was an Associate Professor of Art from 1916-1930, and Head of the Art Department from 1930-1948 at Texas Woman's University, Denton, Texas.

18Mitchell, Recollections: Ten Women of Photography,
48.

19 Sandweiss, Designer with Light, 9.

20_{Ibid}

²¹From Corpron's artist's statement in Texas Woman's University archives, and Mitchell, <u>Recollections: Ten Women of Photography</u>, 49.

22_{Ibid}.

23Corpron's artist's statement, Texas Woman's University archives.

²⁴Mary Hollers George, Letter to Margaret B. McDougal, ca. February 1985, Texas Woman's University archives. There is no date on the letter from George, but a reply from McDougal is dated 3 March 1985.

25Sam Hunter and John Jacobus, Modern Art:
Painting/Sculpture/ Architecture (New York: Harry N. Abrams,
Inc., 1985), 241

26_{Ibid}. 27_{Ibid}. 28_{Ibid}., 245.

29_{Ibid}. 30_{Ibid}. 31_{Ibid}., 246.

32Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Experiment in Totality, ed. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1969, first ed. published by Harper & Brothers, 1950), 150.

33Tbid., 162-163, 165-166. Due to financial problems the Association of Arts and Industries closed the New Bauhaus after one year. The Executive Committee refused to give Moholy-Nagy a free hand in saving the school. Enrollment had risen to eighty students for the second year, but the New Bauhaus was gone. Moholy-Nagy, not easily defeated, decided in 1939, to start his own school. With \$2,500 in the bank he hired five members of the previous New Bauhaus faculty, including Kepes. These men agreed to teach without pay for at least one semester in order to get the school started.

34 Moholy-Nagy, Experiment in Totality, viii.

35 Ibid., xiii. 36 Ibid., 27-28. 37 bid., 28.

 38 Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, <u>Vision in Motion</u> (Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1947), 178.

39 Ibid., 188. 40 Ibid., 198. 41 Ibid. 42 Ibid.

43 Ibid. 44 Ibid. 45 Ibid., 198-99. 46 Ibid., 200.

47 Ibid.

48 Moholy-Nagy, Experiment in Totality, 62.

49Marjory Supovitz, Gyorgy Kepes: The MIT Years, 1945-1977 (Massachusetts Institute of Technology: The MIT Press Visual Arts Series, 1978), 21. As of this writing Kepes is still alive (1901-).

50_{Ibid}. 51_{Ibid}., 9. 52_{Ibid}. 53_{Ibid}. 54_{Ibid}.

55 Ibid., 9-10. 56 Ibid., 10. 57 Ibid. 58 Ibid.

59_{Ibid.}, 18. 60_{Ibid.}, 19. 61_{Ibid.}, 18.

62 Ibid., 19.

63Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, The New Vision: Fundamentals of Design, Painting, Sculpture, Architecture (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1938), 142.

64Tbid.

65Richard Kostelanetz, <u>Moholy-Nagy</u> (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 50.

66_{Ibid.}, 51. 67_{Ibid}.

68Kostelanetz, Moholy-Nagy, 160.

69_{Ibid}. 70_{Ibid}., 159. 71_{Ibid}. 72_{Ibid}.

73Sandweiss, <u>Designer with Light</u>, 12.

74 Jean S. Tucker, <u>Light Abstractions</u> (St. Louis: University of Missouri at St. Louis, 1980), 48.

75_{Ibid.} 76_{Ibid.} 77_{Ibid.} 78_{Ibid.} 79_{Ibid.}

80Carlotta Corpron, "Light as a Creative Medium," Art Education 15 (May 1962): 5.

81Mitchell, Recollections: Ten Women of Photography, 49.

82_{Tbid}. 83_{Tbid}.

84 Sandweiss, <u>Designer with Light</u>, 11.

85Tbid.

86Marguarite Stauver, interview by author, Denton, Texas, 4 September 1991.

87Mitchell, Recollections: Ten Women of Photography, 48.

88_{Ibid}.

89 Janet Kutner, "'Designs with Light' Bring Ms. Corpron Dame at 79," <u>Dallas Morning News</u>, 16 November 1980, sec. C, p. 3.

90_{Thid}

91Sandweiss, <u>Designer with Light</u>, 12.

92_{Thid}.

93Kutner, Dallas Morning News, 1980.

94 Sandweiss, <u>Designer with Light</u>, 12.

 $^{95}\text{Marguarite}$ Stauver, interview by author, Denton, Texas, 4 September 1991.

 $^{96}\mathrm{Gyorgy}$ Kepes, letter to Corpron, August 2, 1946, Texas Woman's University archives.

 $97 {\rm Gyorgy}$ Kepes, letter to Corpron, May 18, 1847, Texas Woman's University archives.

- 98Sandweiss, <u>Designer with Light</u>, 11.
- 99Corpron, "Light as a Creative Medium," 7.
- 100Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, letter to Corpron, August 16, 1946, Texas Woman's University archives.
- 101Marguarite Stauver, interview by author, Denton, Texas, 4 September 1991.
- 102Mitchell, Recollections: Ten Women of Photography, 49.
 - 103 Sandweiss, Designer with Light, 8.
- 104Mitchell, Recollections: Ten Women of Photography, 49.
 - 105 Ibid.

CHAPTER III

CORPRON'S CONTEXT IN PHOTOGRAPHY AND LATER BIOGRAPHY

History of Abstract Photography in the United States

Corpron combined the Bauhaus ideas with other concerns
and issues in twentieth-century American photography.

Corpron's place in twentieth-century photography appears to
be independent in the respect that the work she was producing
was farily unique for a woman at that time. She was not
working closely with any other group of photographers. Her
abstract photographs are not without precedent though. The
history of abstract photography includes experimentation in
light and abstraction from its beginning and is heavily
related to the modern art movements of the early twentiethcentury.

Art, photography, and modernism all came together during the time between the two world wars. This was a time when photography was not only developed by expanded roles in journalism, advertising, and publicity, but it was also supported by acceptance within the avant-garde movements in the graphic arts. This was a world-wide phenomena with different countries displaying distinctive national

characteristics. This time of experimentation in photography is often referred to as the "New Vision."

In the 1920s there was an emergence of a wide variety of techniques, styles, and approaches in photography.²
Following World War I, greater economic opportunities developed in the medium and many photographers became conscious of the effects of technology, urbanization, cinema, and graphic art on the camera expression:

In addition to the 'isms' of prewar avant-garde art-especially Cubism--the aesthetic concepts associated with Constructivism, Dadaism, and Surrealism inspired a climate of experimentation, with photo-collage, montage, cameraless images, nonobjective forms, unusual angles, and extreme close-ups marking the photographic expression of the era.³

The search for new forms led to visual experimentation, including the increased production of cameraless photographic images. "Photogenic drawing," which was William Henry Fox Talbot's (1839) name for prints made by exposing real objects placed directly on light sensitive paper, actually preceded photography through the use of a camera. Photographers of the 1920s and 1930s updated this concept by using a variety of objects and light sources to create nonrepresentational images. Experimentation in photography has been present since its discovery in the early 1800s. Since photography is a young medium in the history of art it has been and still is conducive to exploration in search of its fullest potential.

In 1917, Alvin Langdon Coburn produced some completely abstract photographs by devising an optical device based on the kaleidoscope. Coburn "clamped three mirrors together facing one another to form a hollow triangular prism through which he photographed bits of crystal and wood on a glass table top." Coburn's friend Ezra Pound, spokesman for the vorticist group of English abstract painters, called the instrument a "vortoscope" and the results "vortographs." Coburn's experiments in abstraction were brief.

Christian Schad, a member of the Zurich Dada group, produced abstractions made photographically without the camera in 1918 which he called "Schadographs," and in the early 1920s Man Ray and Moholy-Nagy simultaneously reinvented cameraless images calling them "Rayographs" and "Photograms" respectively.

During the early twentieth-century artists found photography a liberation and felt they were free of the need to produce representational pictures. Thus, Cubism and abstract art developed in photography and painting simultaneously. This New Vision saw distorted reflections in which photographers used special mirrors and lenses, or photographed objects refracted in spherical forms. These photographs echoed the formal experiments of Cubist painters as well as expressing the disturbing personal or social realities.

The distorted image was first seen in 1888, when Louis Ducos du Hauron produced a series of experimental portraits, and was reintroduced in the late 1920s by Andre Kertesz, a Hungarian photographer whose interest had been aroused in the beginning as he photographed the bodies of swimmers refracted in a pool. 8 Some photographers actually included the typical geometric furnishings of Constructivist and Cubist paintings in their photographs. Cones, spheres, and overlapping transparent planes found their way into the work of Herbert Bayer and Walter Peterhans, both of the Bauhaus. 9

As early as 1916 in America, Morton Schamberg incorporated abstract machine forms in painting and he used the camera to create complex Cubist-like juxtapositions of geometric shapes in the urban landscapes that he photographed. Charles Sheeler photographed rural architecture and the industry of the city during the 1920s. He produced photographs showing the clarity of simple geometric relationships. 10

Also during the 1920s, the Clarence White School of Photography proved to be a source of modernist ideas despite the Pictorialist outlook of its director. 11 The school had to train photographers for jobs in advertising and publicity and therefore it needed to stress modern design. The transformation of the vocabulary of the New Vision into

personal and commercial expression can be seen in the work of Ralph Steiner and Paul Outerbridge. 12

Photographers on the West Coast became aware of the New Vision through personal contact, as well as American and European periodicals. Edward Weston, one of the leading photographers of the West Coast "f/64" group, began to focus on specific objects or object-oriented images in the late 1920s. He said he was revealing "the very substance and quintessence of the thing itself." At times his concentration on form transmuted the object into abstraction. These photographers on the West Coast referred to their work as Precisionist. They were impressed by Weston's photographs and a group of photographers, including Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham, and Weston, formed a society which they called "Group f/64." 15

Between the end of the first World War and the Depression of the 1930s, industry grew throughout the world providing boundless opportunities for the images to be recorded. The major sources of the new visual language essentially represented a mixture of the fantasy of abstract Surrealism and the geometric vocabulary of Cubism, the absorption in science, engineering, and the new industrial materials of Constructivism. ¹⁶ The widespread belief in progress through technology that was held by followers of the Bauhaus, Soviet Constructivists, and American industrialists

provided inspiration and, in conjunction with rise of pictorial advertising, made possible unprecedented opportunities to photograph industrial subjects and places. 17

In 1939, when the second World War broke out in Europe, many artists had escaped the continent for England and the United States. With them, they took the ideas, style, and language of the art of their generation; for most of them that meant Surrealism as well as the Bauhaus philosophy. 18

Corpron's Place in Twentieth-Century Photography:
A Comparative Study

Both early and later abstract photography in the United States impacted Corpron's work. Prior to Moholy-Nagy's visit during the 1940s she explored the approach of Sheeler and Weston, who primarily depicted abstraction in an objective manner. After Moholy-Nagy's visit to Denton, Corpron's images grew increasingly non-objective the more she experimented. Her experiments in photography were varied throughout the 1940s. Corpron's photographs began as objective works with hints of abstraction, similar to the work of Sheeler and Weston, and developed into completely abstract studies of light.

As Rubinstein has pointed out, the middle of the twentieth-century was a time of discrimination towards women artists. There were few women represented by galleries and few major solo exhibitions of women artists. 19 Even at the

Bauhaus in Germany there were women artists who were not recognized until much later. Florence Henri made her first photographic experiments at the Bauhaus and was influenced by Lucia Moholy-Nagy. 20 Both women were not recognized until long after they left the Bauhaus.

Women photographers during the thirties, forties, and fifties are primarily associated with documentary photography:

Referring to women artists as 'independents' is already an arbitrary and misleading designation for no artist is independent of the complex of economic, social, and cultural practices through which art is produced. Nor can lumping together a diverse group of women be intellectually or theoretically justified when it produces alliances reducible only to gender. Yet at the same time, many women artists working in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had an ambiguous relationship with the developing mythology of the vanguard artist.²¹

During the early twentieth-century, figurative and abstract art coexisted. The majority of work by women photographers was figurative:

Women have photographed since the process was invented, and they have found the medium satisfying both as an art form and a profession. While there have been fewer women than men who have photographed, women have been creative artists, and they have been successful in every field of professional photography- portraiture, photojournalism, industrial, architectural, scientific, and advertising photography. 22

While other women were pursuing photography from a journalistic or commercial pictorial aspect, Corpron was pursuing the abstract with regards to controlling light.

Other women have pursued the abstract, but they are the minority in the history of the medium.

One crucial comparison with Corpron can be made by looking at the work of Florence Henri. Henri was an artist who was also directly influenced by the Bauhaus and like Corpron created some abstract photographs using mirrors. Although both artists were women, working in abstraction, and influenced by the Bauhaus, they were working in different environments. Corpron was isolated in Texas which was not a center of cultural activity during the 1940s. Corpron's stated occupation as a teacher rather than an artist was probably due to the fact that she was a woman, supporting herself, and had little interaction with the avant-garde artistic community in New York and Chicago at this time. She loved photography and pursued it on her own in addition to teaching. Henri's background is quite different, she was at the center of the avant-garde in Europe and had many friends within that circle, including Lazlo and Lucia Moholy-Nagy, Michel Seuphor, Piet Mondrian, Sonia and Robert Delaunay, Luigi Russolo, and Andre Kertesz.

Lucia Moholy, Moholy-Nagy's first wife, came to the Bauhaus as Moholy-Nagy's wife, and was not recognized as an artist in her own right until much later despite the fact that she was known at the time to have had superior intelligence, and the sober working disciplining of a

scholar.²³ Henri was a painter in Paris and decided to visit the Bauhaus in Dessau in the Spring of 1927. Here she made her first photographic experiments and was influenced by Lucia Moholy-Nagy.²⁴

Lucia Moholy-Nagy's portrait of Henri is a close-up in which distracting background details have been eliminated in order to focus intense interest on the geometry of the individuals features. The result was a view of Henri as an independent woman with a commanding appearance, but also with an introspective, even melancholy side to her nature.

According to Rolf Schasse, Lucia Moholy "seemed to be proud of having influenced Henri in taking up photography . . . Henri surely was a student of both Lazlo and Lucia. . . the only one I know."

Corpron was in the same sense a student of Lazlo Moholy-Nagy's and she was a strong independent woman. Kepes described Corpron as an independent, solitary artist:

With admirable consistency she insists on the quality of the photographic image and searches for a broader horizon of photographic vision. For many years she has lived and worked in Denton, Texas, away from the explosive, tough, hustle-bustle of the competitive art world of the large cities—but she is not behind. With calm, caressing attention she has created work which is undoubtedly her own—honest and, in the best sense, contemporary.26

While Henri was attending the Bauhaus, photography was not formally taught, but experiments using photography were carried out in Moholy-Nagy's portion of the <u>Vorkurs</u>. ²⁷ The

most important Bauhaus instruction to Henri was the <u>Vorkurs</u>, a two part foundation course, the first part of which was taught by Josef Albers and the second by Lazlo Moholy-Nagy. Moholy-Nagy's part of the course emphasized experimentation with basic abstract shapes and elemental colors, industrial materials and processes previously thought unfit for art and new concepts of space. Moholy-Nagy's influence on Henri extended beyond Russo-German Constructivism; his aesthetic theories planted the seeds of an artistic transformation that would soon result in her decision to pursue photography.²⁸

At the Bauhaus Henri explored radical new perspectives, such as worm's-eye and bird's-eye views; double and multiple exposures; montage; photograms; microphotographs; and negative prints. Experimental activity was intense, and there were no distinctions between the amateur and the photographic artist.²⁹

With the spirit of New Vision photography Henri experimented with radical new methods. The most distinctive aspect of her photography in its early period is her extensive use of the mirror:

I use mirrors to introduce the same subject seen from different angles in a single photograph so as to give the same theme a variety of views that complete each other and are able to expound it better by interacting with each other. All this is much harder to explain than to do.30

Corpron too experimented with reflection, using a ferrotype which is similar to a mirror in that it has a reflective surface. As an effective pictorial means of creating new sensations of time, space, and form, the mirror actually had an earlier history in avant-garde photography seen in the vortographs of Alvin Langdon Coburn in the early twentieth-century. 31

Following the Bauhaus, in Paris Henri was associated with the trend toward pure abstraction. Her affiliation with the Bauhaus, the <u>Cercle et Carre</u> in Paris, and her experimentation with Purism and late Synthetic Cubism, helped prepare the way for her involvement with geometric abstract art in Paris. The pursuit of abstraction in painting and film as charted by <u>Cercle et Carre</u> provides context for Henri's investigations into abstract photography. Diana C. DuPont, former Assistant Curator of Photography at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, discussed Henri's pursuit of abstraction:

Although she herself did not experiment with filmmaking (despite the work of Leger and Moholy-Nagy in that medium), her explorations, too were linked to the most current ideas in contemporary painting. Early examples of abstract photography, all inspired by Cubism, such as the abstractions of Paul Strand of 1915, the Vortographs of Alvin Langdon Coburn of 1917, and the light abstractions of Francis Bruguiere that began in the midtwenties, are precedents for Henri's abstractions, but they were not her source. Even Moholy-Nagy's abstract photograms do no offer a satisfactory parallel. Although Henri tried her hand at many of the New Vision stratagems, she did no experiment with cameraless photography by means of which Moholy-Nagy sought extreme

abstraction. She clearly and consciously manipulated the camera's special eye, but she never crossed the line into pure non-objectivity. 33

Henri's compositions are abstract in intent, but they exploit the dialogue between abstraction and reality. 34 They have an insistent connection to the physical world which explains why Henri's mirror compositions are both still lifes and abstractions. Her Abstract Composition (rolled foil with mirrors) (c. 1930) presents elements that are obviously from the physical world. The rolled foil, at the top of the composition, has two rows of holes punched in it from one end to the other, and part of the coil is extended diagonally from the coil on the right down towards the lower left of the composition. A mirror is placed directly beneath the roll of foil and part of the roll is reflected as well as all of the extended foil. The reflection from outside of the composition and from the foil depicts diagonal lines creating the abstraction. If the image is viewed close-up, the planar forms and diagonal lines demonstrate abstract qualities in a manner entirely keeping with international Constructivism. 35

Thus, Corpron and Henri were both producing abstract photographs based on the Bauhaus, but in completely different environments. They both had the desire to manipulate the camera, to control the subject, and to create their own unique images. Henri's focus is on the geometric abstraction created by the use of mirrors, and Corpron's focus is on the

quality of light and the abstraction that could be created by it. Both of these women were slow to be recognized for their contributions to photography, receiving recognition years after their works had been produced.

Late Biography

Corpron went to New York during the summer of 1945 to make a pilgrimage to Alfred Stieglitz's gallery, An American Place. Stieglitz had helped to promote the careers of photographers from Gertrude Kasebier and Edward Steichen to Paul Strand and Ansel Adams. Stieglitz was eighty-years-old at this time and a well known promoter of American art and photography. Looking at Corpron's portfolio, he told her that her "photographs changed the way he saw the world." He asked her to send him contact prints of her new work, mentioning that he might want to exhibit her photographs, though he had not exhibited photography in his gallery since an Eliot Porter exhibition in 1938. Torpron did send him contact prints after she returned to Texas. In July, 1946, Stieglitz died; his widow, Georgia O'Keeffe, wrote to Corpron:

I am returning your little prints to you. They came too late. I opened your letter with other mail after he was gone. He had said to me that he thought of showing your photographs, but I think he did not have the energy. He would want you to go on—it is the only way. 38

Corpron continued her experiments with light and abstraction until the early 1950s when her health began to fail. Corpron's photographs were included in several group exhibitions between 1944 and 1952, as well as several individual exhibitions between 1948, at the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, and 1953, at The Art Institute of Chicago.

Corpron was not included in any major exhibitions for the next twenty years. Retiring from Texas Woman's University in 1968, she remained in Denton.

In the early 1970s she became friends with Professor Don Schol, who was then the Director of Photography at North Texas State University, now the University of North Texas. He had seen Corpron's photographs and become very interested in her work. As their friendship grew, he decided in 1975 to put together a show of her photographs, as well as his own work. The exhibit, "Two Generations: Two Photographers," was held at the University Art Gallery, University of North Texas, in October. Schol felt that Corpron's work deserved more recognition. He had heard of a show about women photographers being organized by Marjory Mann in San Francisco.³⁹ Schol sent Mann some prints of Corpron's work and they discussed Corpron's inclusion in the show. said that Mann definitely felt that Corpron should be included and he helped Corpron to print up some of her old negatives for the show "Women of Photography: An Historical

Survey" in 1975. The show travelled to the Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe, the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, and Wellesley College Museum, Wellesley, Massachusetts.

In 1979 Margaretta Mitchell organized "Recollections:
Ten Women of Photography," which included images by Corpron.
The exhibition opened at the International Center of
Photography in New York City. After showing in New York the
exhibition travelled around the United States for two years
beginning in January 1980.

In 1980, the Amon Carter Museum purchased two Corpron images: Eggs Reflected and Multiplied (1948) from the Afterimage Gallery in Dallas, and Solarized Calla Lilies (1948) form Marcuse Pfeifer Gallery, New York City. Both prints were modern gelatin silver prints made from negatives taken in 1948.

In 1980, the Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, exhibited Corpron in a retrospective. After this showing of her work Corpron was satisfied with the recognition she had received as a photographer. Ocrpron had only wanted to be recognized as a photographer at some point in her life and she felt the retrospective at the Amon Carter was enough recognition, and that her work would go on from there and her photographs would have a life of their own long after she was gone. In 1981, Corpron presented a gift of seven images of her work to the Amon Carter Museum.

In the last ten years of her life, Corpron focused on organizing her work. When Corpron was active in creating photographs in the 1940s she had not kept her negatives or prints in any particular organization. In her last years she wanted to organize everything before she died. Corpron had offered her negatives and prints to the Amon Carter Museum in hopes of having all of her work catalogued, but they were "dragging their heels" and Corpron was anxious to have this completed. 42

At this point Walter Hardgraves, "who was supposedly an archivist," came to Denton to catalogue Corpron's negatives and place everything in order. Up to this point Corpron had kept her negatives in envelopes and expandable files in the garage. Corpron gave Hardgraves free reign in her house and would even leave to go have lunch while he was working. It has been alleged that Hardgraves had stolen some of Corpron's negatives and copies of some of her prints, as well as a photogram that had been given to her by Moholy-Nagy. This was not realized until later. 43

Hardgraves was active in organizing a retrospective of Corpron's works at the Avron Gallery in Dallas in 1985. He had permission to have some of her negatives reprinted. This retrospective, which included forty prints from private collections and museums, coincided with Corpron's eightyfourth birthday.

When Corpron suspected that something was not quite right with Hardgraves, she told him not to come back to her house and told him he would not be cataloging her works any longer. A short time after that, Hardgraves showed up on Corpron's doorstep with a stack of prints that he had had made and requested that she sign them. She refused and told him to go away. Stauver said that Corpron was so upset that she requested that Stauver go into Dallas and retrieve her prints and negatives while they were in his possession. 44

Barry Fellman, a gallery owner in Miami, Florida, called regarding some of Corpron's photographs he had seen in a Sotheby's auction catalogue, as well as a photograms by Moholy-Nagy. It was the photogram that had belonged to Corpron. Fellman also said that he had seen some of Corpron's photographs in a Christie's auction catalogue. Stauver said that she and Corpron felt that this must have been the work of Hardgraves, who had long since disappeared from Dallas.45

The Amon Carter Museum finally accepted Corpron's gift and began cataloging her work. Stauver said she felt this was the result of some of Corpron's images hitting the art market through Christie's and Sotheby's. 46 Carol Roark, who worked in the photography collection at the Amon Carter, came to Corpron's home to take the bulk of Corpron's gift in 1986, which consisted of a large amount of prints, negatives,

slides, and prints by other photographers. In 1987, Corpron gave four more images to the Amon Carter. After Corpron died in 1987, the Amon Carter Museum received additional photographs, negatives, and estate materials pertaining to the collection from Stauver, executor of Corpron's estate.

As Corpron had reflected on her life, she said she was content with it. She felt that she was liberated long before the women's movement, as far as attitudes were concerned. 47 She enjoyed living alone, adding that she had never been entirely alone. Summing up her experiences as a photographer she said, "I have been 'neither fish nor fowl.' That is, most photographers could not understand what I was doing, and very few artists were willing to accept photography as an art. I hope that my photographs have a life of their own."48 Stauver claimed Corpron was happy with the bits and pieces of recognition that came along:

She did photography for herself, she did it because she loved it. She did photography for the the joy of it not realizing her work was worth anything until much later. Teaching was pulling everything along and after a few big shows she felt that that was enough.⁴⁹

Corpron died April 17, 1987, in Denton. It has been several years since Corpron's photographs have been shown. Once again her work surfaced into the spotlight in two Soho Galleries in New York during the Spring of 1990. Corpron's wish that her work would go on after her death had been granted.

NOTES

¹Naomi Rosenblum, <u>A World History of Photography</u> (New York: Cross River Press, Ltd., 1984, 1989, c/o Abbeville Press, Inc.), 393.

²Ibid. ³Ibid.

⁴Beaumont Newhall, <u>The History of Photography: From</u>
1839 to the Present (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1982),
199.

⁵Ibid. ⁶Ibid., 167.

⁷Rosenblum, <u>World History of Photography</u>, 401.

⁸Ibid. ⁹Ibid., 403. ¹⁰Ibid., 418.

11The promotion of the photograph to the status of an art object was the goal of a movement known as Pictorialism. Rosenblum says white images of unusual artistic sensitivity and sweet compassion, with the people and places of his intimate surroundings as subjects. His best images reveal a perceptive appreciation of the special qualities of domesticity and feminine activities, themes that also attracted a number of the painters of the time.

12Rosenblum, World History of Photography, 419.

13 Ibid., 420. 14 Ibid.

15 Newhall, History of Photography, 188.

16Sam Hunter, and John Jacobus, Modern Art:
Painting/Sculpture/Architecture (New York: Harry N. Abrams,
Inc., 1885), 241.

17Rosenblum, World History of Photography, 422.

18 Van Deren Coke, <u>Signs of the Times: Some Recurring</u>
<u>Motifs in Twentieth-Century Photography</u> (San Francisco: San
Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1985), 16.

- 19Charlotte Streifer Rubinstein, American Women Artists: From Early Indian Times to the Present (New York: Avon Books, 1982), 268.
- ²⁰Diana C. DuPont, <u>Florence Henri: Artist-Photographer</u> of the Avant-Garde (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1990), 19.
- ²¹Whitney Chadwick, <u>Women</u>, <u>Art</u>, <u>and Society</u> (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1990), 265.
- 22Marjory Mann, Women of Photography: An Historical Survey (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Art, 1975), introduction.
- 23Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, Experiment in Totality, ed. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1950, 1969), 21.
 - 24DuPont, Henri: Artist-Photographer, 19.
 - ²⁵Ibid.
- ²⁶Martha A. Sandweiss, <u>Carlotta Corpron: Designer with</u>
 <u>Light</u> (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum of Western Art,
 1980), 5.
 - 27_{DuPont}, Henri: Artist-Photographer, 19.
- ²⁸Ibid., 18. ²⁹Ibid., 19. ³⁰Ibid., 20. ³¹Ibid., 21.
- 32Cercle et Carre was an association, organized in 1929, devoted to promoting the ideal of abstract art with an emphasis on structure and geometry and opposing the irrationality of Surrealism. The international character of this group reveals that pure abstraction developed in Paris in good part from the energies and enthusiasms of foreign artists and critics.
 - 33_{DuPont}, Henri: Artist-Photographer, 27.
 - 34_{Ibid}. 35_{Ibid}., 14.
 - 36Sandweiss, Corpron: Designer with Light, 14.
 - 37_{Ibid}.

- $^{38}\mbox{Georgia}$ O'Keeffe, Letter to Carlotta Corpron, dated July 1946, Texas Woman's University Archives.
- ³⁹Schol, Don, interviews by author, Denton, Texas, periodic conversations throughout 1991 and 1992.
- 40Stauver, Marguarite, interview by author, Denton, Texas, 4 September 1991.
 - 41 Ibid. 42 Ibid. 43 Ibid. 44 Ibid. 45 Ibid.
 - 46Ibid.
- 47Margaretta Mitchell, <u>Recollections: Ten Women of Photography</u> (New York: Viking Press, 1979), 50.
 - 48Ibid.
- ⁴⁹Stauver, Marguarite, interview by author, Denton, Texas, 4 September 1991.

CHAPTER IV

EVALUATION OF ABSTRACT PHOTOGRAPHS PRODUCED BY CORPRON DURING THE 1940S

Corpron's photographs produced during the 1940s demonstrate the influence of Moholy-Nagy and Kepes in terms of the investigation of light patterns in abstract compositions. Corpron made her own innovations in photography as she further developed the technical experiments of the New Bauhaus. Among the Bauhaus experiments of Moholy-Nagy and Kepes were abstract light images formed in the light box, the calligraphic use of the pen light in a darkened environment, the radical distortion of images using unusual projections of light and mirrors, and image manipulation through camera movement. Through adopting and expanding on these experiments, Corpron produced photographs that are characterized by an exceptionally refined and thoroughly disciplined vision.

Corpron's photographs fall into six main groups of work which she calls: Nature Studies, Light Drawings, Light Patterns, Light Follows Form, Space Compositions, and Fluid Light Designs. Each of these groups represents a different phase of her exploration of light as a medium for creative expression. Each photograph represents the working out of a

conceptual problem, and carefully and thoughtfully composing a work of art. Corpron said she was not a quick person, she had to create the moment. 2

Corpron had what Moholy-Nagy defined in 1943 as a "photocreative mind." She basically saw abstractly and:

. . . focused on the control of the effects for photographic purposes rather than on the event itself. . . He will not only select what he finds, but he will produce situations which for him contain the necessary qualities for photographic expression with devices so far unused and neglected.³

Corpron sought originality with her photography. The camera was an extension of herself and allowed her to express what she in particular wanted to say with and about light.⁴

Nature Studies

Corpron's Nature Studies were centered around the abstract patterns inherent in natural forms as well as studies of pure form and shape. These photographs grew out of the work she did for her textile design classes in Cincinnati.⁵

In <u>Caladium Leaves</u> (1940) [Figure 1], prior to Moholy-Nagy, she closed in on her subject so that only parts of the leaves filled the frame. These images are similar to the images produced by Imogen Cunningham. Cunningham worked on the West Coast, primarily in California with Group f/64, producing close-up, controlled images of flowers accenting shape and form through lighting. The large white forms of

the leaves in Corpron's image are accented by the contrast of the black lines throughout which begin at the lower center of the leaves and branch outwards to the edges. The emphasis is more on the pattern within the leaves than of the leaves themselves.

Another image, Sea Turtle in Aquarium, centers around shape and form found in a natural object set in the confines of a man-made object. The photograph depicts a sea turtle seen through the glass of a large aquarium. The composition is balanced asymmetrically with the dark shape of the turtle in the lower right and the bright light from above illuminating the water on the left. The composition is similar to Kasimir Malevich's <u>Victory over the Sun</u> (1913) with a curved diagonal line between light and dark creating The focus becomes the contrast between light and balance. dark in the natural form of the sea turtle and the water framed by the window of the aquarium. Corpron's early nature studies were made outdoors where the photographer has less control over the composition. She did produce some nature studies in a studio setting where she could control every element of the composition. Although there is no documented date for this image, which is common for Corpron's body of work, the content places the image in the early 1940s before she began her experiments with non-objective abstraction.

In Nature Dancer (1944) [Figure 2], Corpron carefully places the light to transform the head of Chinese cabbage into an evocation of a dancing creature. 6 Corpron says she had not preconceived the idea of the cabbage resembling a dancer but after she had printed the negative and looked at the image in every conceivable way, she decided to turn the picture upside down to create a composition she was pleased with. 7 Once turned upside down, she said it was then that it resembled a "dancer" and she saw what appeared to be a face in the upper part of the cabbage. 8 Corpron said, "I see things, I always have. Ever since I was a child I've seen faces and patterns in the clouds." 9 Even though several of her nature studies seem to reveal hidden creatures, she maintains, it is important that the image perceived in the object not overwhelm the overall composition or the beauty of the design itself. 10 Her central concern in these photographs is the abstract pattern inherent in natural forms as well as studies of pure form and shape.

Nature Dancer can be compared to the earlier work of Edward Weston as seen in his photograph <u>Cabbage Leaf</u> (1931). Here Weston also uses a studio setting and focuses only on the shape of the cabbage. The sharp focus accentuates the lines and ridges in the cabbage, suggesting the relationship to a woman as well as depicting a study of abstract shape and

form evoked by the cabbage rather than a documentary image of a cabbage.

The photographs of Texas oil storage tanks are studies of pure form and shape. Often shot against a cloudless sky, which lessens the chance of distraction from the forms, these photographs celebrate the industrial aesthetic of the 1920s and 1930s in America. 11 They are related to the Precisionist industrial photographs of Edward Weston and Charles Sheeler, and they testify to Corpron's ability to see and compose bold and exciting images out of doors. 12

In Oil Tanks with Bridge (1942), the composition is almost symmetrical. The oil tank on the left side of the image dominates only slightly. There are two semi-circular, spherical shapes of large oil tanks that fill the sides of the picture in the foreground. They are spanned by a bridge which is divided in the center by stairs rising up from the bottom of the picture. Cylindrical oil tanks fill the background between the two large oil tanks. By closing in on a portion of the scene, Corpron emphasizes repetition of spheres, cylinders, and lines which accent the pure form and shape depicted in objective abstraction within the frame in conjunction with what is known to exist outside the frame.

In <u>Three Oil Tanks near Jefferson</u>, <u>Texas</u> (1942) [Figure 3], Corpron once again demonstrates her sense of design. The three spherical oil tanks cut diagonally across the scene

diminishing in size in the distance. There is repetition of circles and straight lines in the positive space. The straight lines are formed by the bases of the oil tanks rising from below. The cloudless sky creates the negative space and backdrop for the study of the forms created by the oil tanks. Corpron saw these images as only preparatory sketches. 13

These images of Corpron's can be compared with Weston's Plaster Works, Los Angeles (1925) and Gulf Oil, Port Arthur, Texas (1941). These are similar to Corpron's industrial images of oil tanks. Here Weston shows only part of the scene, concentrating on the shapes created by the building itself or the pipes and oil tanks. By eliminating a definitive background, shape and form created by the subject are more important than the actual setting subject.

Another image also related to Corpron's is Charles Sheeler's well known River Rouge photograph Ford Plant,

Detroit (1927), where he presents vertical and diagonal lines of the factory filling the frame. By focusing on a part of the building he offers his interpretation of form in a precise clean photograph. He presents the clarity of simple geometric relationships in Untitled (c. 1928), a photograph from which Upper Deck was painted in 1929. Untitled is an arrangement of stacks and funnels on the upper deck of a ship. By closing in on a portion of the scene and

eliminating the telltale background, Sheeler composes a scene of rectangles, cubes, spheres, circles, and lines. The shapes and forms are without specific names, they are merely shapes and forms. Sheeler celebrates the machine age in his compositions, where Corpron's images focus on the abstraction rather than on the subject of the abstraction.

In <u>Design with Oil Tank</u> (1942) [Figure 4] Corpron creates a print composed with two overlapping negatives that makes an abstract geometric design, the true subject of the photograph. 14 By crossing the two negatives Corpron has taken control of her subject and made it more abstract. 15 The design subtly displays the spiritual glorification of an object of industrial America. The subject is industrial, the effect is abstract.

Prior to Moholy-Nagy, Corpron was experimenting with different ways of using light to reveal the structure of natural forms in her flower studies. She experimented with solarization, a process which results in a value reversal from positive to negative. Corpron said she would expose the film to light during the developing process to obtain the value reversal on film. 16 Solarization was in vogue in art schools across the country at this time.

In <u>Solarized Amaryllis</u> (1940) Corpron closed in on two blooms and fills the frame with the natural form of the plant. The experimentation with light effected of the value

reversal creating a mysterious scene. The change from a natural view to an experimental view emphasizes the overall shapes represented rather than a study of flowers. The same can be seen in Ray Ann with Amaryllis (c. 1940), a portrait of a woman with flowers and leaves at the base of her neck. The solarization technique causes the content of the photograph to be connected as one large shape at a first glance. The experiment with tonality creates a curious scene for the viewer in which the hair of the woman and the flowers at the base of her neck seem to be similar in shape and appearance. A thorough investigation of the photograph leads to a true understanding of the image and a separation of the shapes and forms within.

There are few solarized photographs in Corpron's body of work, although she did continue to work with it later in her career. One later photograph, Solarized Calla Lilies (1948) [Figure 5], a picture of three calla lilies which seem to be floating in center of the photograph, isolated the form. Corpron may have used solarization for this later print, because it was appropriate for the subject or, possibly, she developed the negative much earlier and decided the make the print later. The three blossoms are positioned so that they create a slightly curved line from the top to the bottom of the frame. The white lilies on white background exhibit strong black lines along the major contours, a result of the

solarization technique. The image presents a delicate study of natural forms from nature.

Solarization predates Moholy-Nagy although he also wrote about it and practiced it. Moholy-Nagy said that through the reversal of the values a new world arises out of the hidden: "a supernatural glow with sublime magnificence, a play of mysterious light sources with radiating aura enveloping the objects, giving them fresh potentialities for new relations." In his book Vision in Motion, Moholy-Nagy said that in photography one may find visual sensations just as surprising as in the direct records of light which are seen in photograms. He suggests several particular developments, including solarizations, which he said opened up a new field of visual presentation. 19 "Photography imparts a heightened and increased power of sight in terms of time and space." 20

He enumerated eight varieties of photographic vision, which he says enables the student to divine the power latent in the elements of time and space. 21 Number seven, part "b", on his list states: "mechanical and chemical manipulation of the negative during or after developing, using oil drops, suds, soaps, etc.' lighting, heating or freezing, resulting in distortion, reticulation, solarization, etc." 22

Negative prints are more prevalent in Moholy-Nagy's work than solarizations, although the two have similar attributes.

The negative print is a complete reversal of values from black to white. Moholy-Nagy often "caused 'positive' photographs made with the camera to be converted into negative prints in order to gain an effect of bright light forms on a black ground, a result that was closer to that of a photogram."²³

In a negative print of a cat, <u>Cat Negative</u> (c. 1926)

Moholy-Nagy has produced an image that resembles a photogram.

Abstraction is created with the strong contrasts of black and white. Moholy-Nagy described the photograph:

In any photograph the white spaces always produce an 'active' effect. Through the reversal into the negative the shape of the cat's body, normally immediately recognizable, is eliminated, and the internal pattern of the fur becomes the lambent principle feature of the composition.²⁴

Moholy-Nagy made several sets of images that would pair a positive and negative print of the same photograph together. He produced several sets of nude figure studies in which the positive and negative print were presented side by side:

The frequent negative rendering of pictures of nudes corresponds, as in the portraits, to Moholy's tendency to keep 'visual experience' free from any intellectual harmony and association. Like Renoir's disuse of light-play around bodies, so Moholy's photograph reveals patches of light adapting the curves of the body, sublimating tactile into optical sensation.²⁵

Corpron experimented with solarization and other chemical manipulation techniques only briefly and there is no

evidence that she produced negative prints. She said she wanted all of her experimentation to be with light and she wanted to catch it on the negative. 26 Her next step was to experiment with artificial illumination and capture the light on film.

Light Drawings

The early 1940s was a time of freedom and spirit of experimentation. With the Light Drawings series Corpron began her intense investigation of light as both the creator and subject of her photographs:

A painter works with color as the medium, a photographer works with light. I began looking around for a teacher who could help me most, because I wanted to be sure I was on the right track. In the early forties everything in art was geometric and abstract. I decided that experimental photography appealed to me most.27

The Light Drawings convey a sense of motion and thus a sense of the fourth dimension, time.²⁸ Corpron did not know in advance what would appear on the negatives. She said she would swing her camera before the moving lights of the carnival rides on the midway to catch the light on film.²⁹

Corpron said her photograph of the decorative lights in a church interior, Church in Havana (1942) [Figure 6], was a prelude to her photographs of moving lights. Here she presents a motionless staccato of small lights outlining the interior to the church against its darkened walls. The image

conveys an illusion of three-dimensional space, and her light drawings convey a sense of motion, as well.

Concentrating on carnival rides and the excitement of the midway, Corpron captured moving lights in <u>Pyramid of Light</u> (1943). Against the darkness of night the lights zigzag vertically in continuous lines, and they have the appearance of coils of light that are swirling and springing in the darkness. In this photograph, as well as <u>Light</u> Circles (1940), the moving rides are still discernible as the bases for the abstract image.³⁰ <u>Light Circles</u> depicts circular movement with the lights forming sets of concentric circles.

Two other light drawings, Commentary on Civilization (1940) [Figure 7] and A Walk in Fair Park, Dallas (1943) [Figure 8], have no apparent motif in nature as a source for their design. Commentary on Civilization depicts long vertical lines in a circle with another circle in the distance which has vertical lines as well as a portion of a star-shape within. The photograph was a visual metaphor; on the back of the print Corpron wrote, "Most people go around in circles, a few have luminosity, and some are individuals and can move away from the crowd."31. The delicate lines of light in this photograph and Pyramid of Light have a simple and formal elegance that underscores the close relationship between them and ink drawings.32

A Walk in Fair Park, Dallas is less repressed. This photograph anticipates Corpron's later Fluid Light series. 33 Here the lines of light are vertical, horizontal, and diagonal. The lines flow smoothly, curving and bending throughout the picture and each other.

Whether the source for the design is apparent or not, all of these light drawings have one thing in common: light functions not as a modeller of form or an illuminator of space but simply as line.³⁴ The line rhythms fascinated Corpron. The photographs were made by just moving the camera with the shutter open and knowing when to stop.³⁵ In these light drawings Corpron had little control over the source of light. Her desire was to be able to direct the light with accuracy and command rather than relying on chance and circumstance.

Light Patterns

Corpron began experimenting with a 2x3 foot light box, shining flashlights and low wattage bulbs through holes onto the light-modulating forms she placed inside. Corpron said she explored the forms with light thoroughly, watching the tonal variations and shifting patterns of light and shadow before ever taking a photograph.³⁶ With the lightbox, Corpron could control all aspects of the composition.

Corpron experimented with the light modulators and often created her final image by overlapping negatives of images

created by light modulators. Bisymmetric Design (1944) [Figure 9] and Abstract White Paper Design (1944) are two early images created by overlapping negatives. The image on film was created by white paper light modulators placed in the light box. Both images create a subtle illusion that borders on three-dimensionality created by Corpron's manipulation of the light and placement of the overlapping negatives.

Another image created by overlapping negatives, Fun Shapes (1945), has the appearance of a photogram. She used white paper shapes in the light box but the appearance is more two-dimensional. The final image has the appearance of a collage. Corpron refers to the flat amoebic shapes and broad areas of clearly delineated tonal values as her "homage to Miro," a Surrealist painter. 37 She uses these same or similar white paper shapes in White Paper Shapes against White Background--Light from a Venetian Blind (1945) [Figure 10]. This photograph was not composed inside of the light box. The freestanding paper shapes placed against a white paper background are illuminated by the bands of light entering through a nearby venetian blind. The bands of light and the placement of the paper light modulators give some depth to the image by means of value contrasts. The light modulators are arranged so that they reflect different amounts of light giving them their own density and causing

them to have individuality within the group. These shapes have been compared to Calder stabiles: flat, standing forms boldly defining the space around them, ³⁸ but in Corpron's composition there is sense of continuity in that the the paper shapes together complete the composition rather than standing alone as individuals within the composition.

The venetian blinds became a dominant and recurring theme in Corpron's work. They functioned as light modulators or filters in studies of abstraction. In the isolation of Denton, Corpron unknowingly adopted the formal device that Alfred Stieglitz had used in his photograph Sun Rays—Paula—Berlin (1889), a boldly patterned print of a seated woman in a room filled with bands of light. Stieglitz's print is considered one of the first truly "modern" photographs. 39

Once again Corpron combines two negatives in White Paper Forms with Venetian Blinds (1945). One negative is the study made in a light box of straight-edged paper constructions, the other a shot of a nearly closed Venetian blinds lit from behind. The overall effect is a three-dimensional geometric pattern of horizontal bands that intersect, overlap, and penetrate the receding white paper shapes.

Continuing her experiments with light modulators,

Corpron tried to photograph light as it passed through glass

forms, using translucent and transparent light modulators.

In Light, White Paper, and Glass (1945), Corpron uses the

same paper shapes used in <u>Bisymmetric Design</u> (1944). Here she combines the negative of the white paper shapes composed in the light box with a negative of light as it passes through glass. The glass has a vertical fluted pattern and Corpron photographs the glass at an angle so she has diagonal lines for the composition. The effect is mysterious, as if looking into rippling water and seeing the images below. Corpron abandoned the light box for <u>Woven Light</u> (1944). This is a photograph of artificial light flickering through the irregular surface of a glass brick. It has the glassy appearance of light reflections on water.

Her interest in the way light could be photographed with glass light modulators led her to use glass cubes for some compositions. She made several compositions which appear to be simple photographic studies of light, pattern, texture, and depth, such as <u>Six Cubes</u> (1945) [Figure 11] and <u>Glass</u> Cubes and Patterned Glass (1945).

With these studies Corpron began combining different negatives in order to obtain the perfect design which is achieved in <u>Suspended Glass Cubes</u> (1945) [Figure 12]. Here she overlaps two negatives of glass cubes and patterned glass at an angle that produces designs of reflected and transmitted light.⁴⁰ The intersecting cubes are suspended over the design of patterned glass. The patterned glass has evenly spaced lines that Corpron photographed at an angle to

create a repetition of diagonal lines for the background.

The overall composition is almost a mirror-image diagonally,
falling short of this due to the asymmetrical balance of the
composition in the final image.

Although the glass cube compositions are very different from the paper light modulators in that they appear more three-dimensional, Corpron categorizes them all as light patterns which can be seen in the end result. Suspended Glass Cubes (1945) obtains the effect she was creating with the white paper shapes. Corpron said she did not really like the paper designs except as a means to an end. She wanted to see what she could do with light and shading by manipulating the lighting and the white paper. They were a step forward and she said Kepes told her to work until she photographed light instead of paper, and she did. They became very good friends while Kepes was in Denton and remained in contact after he left. Stauver said Kepes was a personal influence on Corpron.

Light Follows Form

Corpron abandoned the light box and continued using the Venetian blinds as a filter for the natural light that illuminates her subjects in her Light Follows Form series. Her subjects are light modulators but her photographs have a completely different appearance from the photographs with paper light modulators. She uses solid forms which the bands

of light follow, remolding the shapes and giving a strong three-dimensional quality to the photographs.

In Light Follows Form (1946) [Figure 13] she arranges three rounded rock-like shapes on a tabletop and lets the sun from the Venetian blinds illuminate them. The bands of light follow the curves of the shapes, curving to follow the contours of the shapes. The curved bands of light on the forms are juxtaposed against the straight bands of light on the tabletop, which emphasizes the smooth, rounded shapes contrasted by the flat tabletop.

Corpron made three studies of a plaster cast light modulator and all three have a different aspect. The plaster cast of a Greek head is depicted in Sunlight through a Venetian Blind (1946), Light Follows Form of a Greek Head (1946), and <u>Illusion of Male and Female</u> (1946) [Figure 14]. The bands of light hug the forms, remolding the shapes and giving a strong three-dimensional quality to the photographs. The Greek head appears differently in each of the three prints. In Sunlight through a Venetian Blind the features seem sharp and well defined. The lighting creates strong contrasts and accents the details, such as pores and imperfections in the plaster. In Light Follows Form of Greek Head part of the cast is reflected in glass placed directly in front of it. As the light filters through the glass it follows the form of the cast and creates a texture on the

surface of it. Illusion of Male and Female appears to be soft and sensuous. The androgynous cast is half illuminated and half in shadow with lines of light following the contours on the shaded side. The photographs are less a study of Greek sculpture than a study of light as a sculptor of form. 42 This experiment led Corpron to realize that light modulators did not have to be confined to a light box.

Moholy-Nagy said the entire world could be conceived of as a collection of light-modulating surfaces and, "the human face is the best-known of all light modulators, and it ranks near the top of the list in complexity."43

Space Compositions

Taking a break from her investigations of light as a modeler of form, Corpron began to study light as it creates an illusion of space and depth. Corpron said:

The Bauhaus group was very interested in space, and it seemed an interesting idea to explore. I hadn't done it much. But I became very concerned with getting space and composition because I thought that a photographer could suggest three-dimensional design almost better than a painter. 44

Corpron's Space Compositions are a series of photographs composed with found objects. She used two chambered nautilus shells, some eggs, glass paperweights, and a curved ferrotype to act as a reflecting surface. These compositions were created on a table top and none of these photographs were put together in a conventional composition. Each photograph

expresses Corpron's desire to be original rather than copy photographs of this subject matter previously done by well-known photographers, such as Weston who focused primarily on the shell in a straight forward manner, objectively suggesting male and female connotations in his arrangements rather than creating unusual composition with light.

Corpron produced four compositions with a chambered nautilus shell over a period of five years and each of the. compositions conveys space in a different way. The first, Chambered Nautilus with Created Light and Shadow Background (1945), shows her concerns for creating composition with shadows by controlling the light. This is similar to using light modulators only this time Corpron uses a piece of twisted plastic behind the nautilus shells to create the shadows and a soft receding background. The shadows created by the plastic accent the shape of the nautilus shells and unify the entire composition. In the second photograph, Nautilus and Concave Mirror (1946) [Figure 15], she used a mirror to obtain depth in the composition. The shell is backed up to the mirror creating an identical image opposite the real image. She has controlled the lighting in the background so that there are continuous wavy lines of light and dark which also mimics the outer shell of the nautilus The background is reminiscent of the lines created by shell. Venetian blinds in her Light Follows Form series.

As in previous photographic studies, Corpron never eliminates the possibilities created by the use of double negatives to create an image. In Chambered Nautilus (1947) she overlaps two negatives of the nautilus shell and creates a floating swirling pattern. The shell itself fills the frame with a dark background. The curved lines of the two images overlapped create a sense of space and depth in the areas that are transparent. The image almost appears to be a skeleton for a dome or sphere.

The fourth composition, Chambered Nautilus in Space
Composition (1950) [Figure 16], contains a new element, which
Corpron calls a "ferrotype," a piece of flexible reflective
metal, to achieve the feeling of depth. The curved
ferrotype, the bottom edge of which is visible as the fine
dark line that curves across the image, reflects the pattern
that Corpron has created out of view with lights and sheets
of white paper. The reflection of paper in the ferrotype
echoes the shape of the nautilus shell, curving and swirling,
revealing a tight, well-composed photograph. 45

Corpron had begun to use the ferrotype, trying to achieve the feeling of depth in her photographs. In <u>Surly</u>

Faces (1948) she used glass objects that were reflected in the ferrotype and the result was multiple distorted reflections creating the illusion of receding space. The composition is made with a glass bowl, one glass paperweight,

and several small liquor glasses. The dominant part of the image is the distorted reflections. After she printed the photograph, Corpron said she saw odd "faces" staring out from the ferrotype. One reflection impressed her with its resemblance to Stalin and the photograph became a metaphor for her. She saw it as above all, a study of space, but it is also a statement about the Cold War. 46 Departure in its title from formalism suggests surrealism.

The ferrotype is the key formal element in the egg compositions which Corpron considered to be one of her best series because of the purity of the shape of the egg.⁴⁷ The egg as a subject for writers and artists appeared in the 1920s. In Sherwood Anderson's book of impressions from American life entitled The Triumph of the Egg (1921) he mused:

I awoke at dawn and for a long time looked at the egg that lay on the table. In wondered why eggs had to be and why from the egg came the hen who again laid the egg. The question got into my blood. It has stayed there, I imagine, because I am the son of my father. At any rate, the problem remains unsolved in my mind. And that, I conclude, is but another evidence of the complete and final triumph of the egg--at least as far as my family is concerned. 48

The egg has a history with photography and can be linked strongly to the Bauhaus. From about 1921-32 is the period that gave birth to the rise of the egg in the art photographic movements. A survey of Bauhaus photography and

other noted photographers of the twenties and early thirties finds the periodic recurrence of the egg.

This period of "egg photography" could begin with Edward Steichen's The Triumph of the Egg (1921), which depicts a microscopic version of the oval which is distorted under concave glass and end with The Triumph of the Egg (1932) by Paul Outerbridge, who claimed to have made 4,000 photographs of eggs during his lifetime. 49 Bauhaus photographers incorporated the egg in their compositions which can be seen in Moholy-Nagy's Once a chicken, always a chicken (1925), and Cameraless photogram (1927), Hannes Meyer's Construction 1926/4 (1926), Herbert Bayer's Breakfast eggs (c.1930-35), ringl + pit's The egg of Columbus (1930), and many others.

The variety of compositions range from straight photographs to abstract photographs, with underlying meaning and without. Giving a title to this period of egg photography, Louis Kaplan suggests "The Triumph of the Egg" gives way to the period that became known as "The Triumph of the Will" to usher in the political and artistic repression which closed the Bauhaus:

"The Triumph of the Egg" provides an index for the period emblematic of its playfulness in the construction and dissemination of meaning in opposition to the fascistic rigidity of "The Triumph of the Will", which defended the purity of the origin and which willed the expurgation of difference in the breeding of "proper" eggs.50

Corpron adopts the theme of the egg in her own unique, abstract way. She took six eggs to the darkroom one Sunday and planned to let the light guide her. She said, "I knew that most people photographed eggs either alone or in bowls, but I was very interested in what could be done with distortion."51

She used one 40-watt bulb to light the room and the ferrotype that she had been using before in her experiments with distortion. She curved the ferrotype into three or four curves and put it in back of the eggs. The dim light reflected back from the ferrotype. Since the light was so dim she could not use an exposure meter so she experimented with one- and two-minute exposures. She said all at once the eggs began to do amazing things. They stood on end and cast shadows and became distorted into very strange forms. 52 She captured many different images on film and then created her images by cropping, enlarging, and overlying the negatives.

The least complex of the egg photographs is Eggs

Reflected and Multiplied (1948) [Figure 17]. The elements of the composition are easily identifiable. The eggs set on a tabletop in front of the ferrotype creating reflections of many eggs. Though the ferrotype reflects more eggs than are visible in the foreground, the mechanics of the photograph are easy to understand.⁵³

In <u>Ouiet Harmony</u> (1948) Corpron deletes the majority of the foreground so that only a small portion of the tabletop is visible. There is only one egg shown in the photograph, but the other eggs out of sight of the camera create the illusion of many eggs seen in the reflection from the ferrotype. The multiple reflections of the eggs create a sense of a far-reaching depth.

Corpron takes the effect of the reflections one step further in Panorama (1948). The foreground is completely eliminated and the image reveals only the reflections of the eggs in the ferrotype. There is a Surreal dream-like quality about the photograph as some of the eggs float out of focus while others are distinct in their shape. Some of the reflections appear to be connected creating an unusual distortion of the egg.

In Composition with Eggs (Floating Egg Garden) (1948) and Fun with Eggs (1948) [Figure 18] Corpron used two negatives to create a single image. Each of the images reveals eggs as transparent and opaque shapes floating back and forth in space. She achieved a three-dimensional quality with these

images through the variation in egg-size between the two negatives, and the use of the ferrotype to reflect many more eggs than actually existed.

Another egg composition, Eggs Encircled (1948) [Figure 19], is a combination of her experiments with eggs and her experiments with fluid light. Five eggs are reflected in the ferrotype, doubling and even tripling the amount of eggs seen in the distance. She considered her egg photographs series and her Fluid Light Designs series to be her best and most original work. Her Fluid Light Designs involve light reflections on plastic and in this photograph she has combined a negative of eggs reflected in the ferrotype with a negative of light reflections captured on plastic. The lines of light reflected on the plastic appear to create a large overall shape that mimics the eggs and their reflections in the ferrotype. The combination of the two negatives is cohesive for an overall effect that accents the beauty and purity of the shape of the egg.

Fluid Light Designs

Corpron said the Fluid Light Designs, her last series of pictures, (exp. dates) were conceived in a moment. She said late one afternoon, as the thin light poured through the nearly closed Venetian blinds in her workroom, she watched as the light struck the rippled plastic wrapped around a print on a nearby table. The fluid, abstract designs that formed were unlike those she had achieved in her earlier experiments with light modulators of Venetian blinds. The props were unobtrusive; all she saw was light. 54

The first photograph of the series, <u>Captured Light</u>

(1947) [Figure 20], shows the frame of the plastic-wrapped print. The light bends and moves diagonally across the image in thin lines creating abstract forms within the confines of the frame of the print. This early print has a two-dimensional appearance due to the restrictions of the frame and the vantage point. As Corpron worked with these Fluid Light Designs they became increasingly complex. She began to print only sections of her negatives.

It's a matter of selection. So much of modern painting has been that. The painters who splash paint on a canvas will find a part that's very good and frame it off. When I did the Fluid Light pictures my control was not complete and so I had to select certain details of my negatives. 55

Corpron did not restrict her studies to light reflections on plastic. In <u>Fluid Light Design</u> (1947) she captures the rippling effect of sunlight on water. The light appears to flow and bend as it is captured on film. Corpron experimented with overlaying negatives in this series as well.

Corpron's photograph Mardi Gras (c. 1946) appears to combine several techniques that she had used before individually with success. The abstracted image seems to be reflecting itself, possibly in the curved ferrotype. The dividing line is not directly in the middle nor is it a perfectly straight line. The two forms on either side appear

to have similarities and meet each other at the division.

There is also evidence of double printing. The ghostly lines of a different fluid light design are seen in the foreground forming a flat plane that seems to project out from the vertical line of intersection from the dominant reflecting lines. This gives the photograph a feel of three-dimensionality.

In <u>Light Creates Symbols</u> (1947) [Figure 21] she creates a symmetrical print from two negatives. The result is a geometric pattern created by intersecting lines of light. Within the design of light there appears to be a bat-like creature floating in the center. 56

In Flowing Light (1947) [Figure 22] Corpron used only a section of the negative for the print. The lines appear to to be floating in deep space floating through and around one another. The plastic onto which the light is reflected is flat, yet Corpron presents an image with convincing three-dimensionality. Some critics have found it mysterious. The image has two qualities at once. It appears ephemeral, as though the lines of light could be turned off or disappear without a moment's notice and at the same time it also appears tangible, as if you could reach out and actually touch the lines created by the light. In one photograph, Corpron has combined all of her concerns for light as it creates design, reveals space, and charts time and motion.

In one negative, she has succeeded in capturing the very essence of light. 57

NOTES

1Martha A. Sandweiss, Carlotta Corpron: Designer with
Light (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, 1980),
7.

²Ibid. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., 9. ⁶Ibid.

⁷There is no documented date for this image. Many of Corpron's prints and negatives have no date recorded. Judging from the content of this photograph it was probably taken in the early 1940s before she had begun her experiments with complete abstraction.

8_{Ibid}.

9Sandweiss, Corpron: Designer with Light, 9.

10 Ibid. 11 Ibid. 12 Ibid.

13 Ibid. 14 Ibid. 15 Ibid.

16Carlotta Corpron, <u>Carlotta Corpron: Designer with</u> <u>Light</u>, Golden Triangle Communications, 1980.

Corpron's reexposure of the film during development is correctly termed Sabbatier effect. Sabbatier effect is a partial reversal of tones in an image, caused by reexposing the film or paper to light during development. Named after Armand Sabbatier, who discovered the phenomenon in 1862. Sabbatier effect is often called solarization by photographers although the definition for solarization is a reversal of image tones that occurs when film is massively overexposed.

17Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, <u>Vision in Motion</u> (Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1947), 197.

¹⁸Ibid., 206. ¹⁹Ibid. ²⁰Ibid., 207.

²¹Ibid. ²²Ibid.

23Andreas Haus, <u>Moholy-Nagy: Photographs and Photograms</u> (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 17.

24 Ibid., 71. 25 Ibid., 69.

²⁶Sandweiss, <u>Corpron:</u> <u>Designer with Light</u>, 9.

²⁷Margaretta Mitchell, <u>Recollections: Ten Women of Photography</u> (New York: Viking Press, 1979), 48.

28 Sandweiss, Corpron: Designer with Light, 10.

29_{Ibid}. 30_{Ibid}. 31_{Ibid}., 11.

32_{Ibid}. 33_{Ibid}. 34_{Ibid}.

35_{Ibid.} 36_{Ibid.}, 12. 37_{Ibid.}, 13. 38_{Ibid.}

³⁹Ibid. ⁴⁰Ibid., 14. ⁴¹Ibid., 12. ⁴²Ibid., 13.

43 Ibid. 44 Ibid., 14.

⁴⁵Ibid. Corpron's "ferrotype" was a piece of reflective metal that could be used flat or curved as a mirror-like surface for her compositions.

⁴⁶Ibid., 16. ⁴⁷Ibid., 15.

48 Sherwood Anderson, The Triumph of the Egg: A Book of Impressions from American Life in Tales and Poems (New York: B.W. Huebsch, Inc., 1921), 63.

49 Jeannine Fiedler, ed., <u>Photography at the Bauhaus</u> (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), 225.

50_{Ibid}. 51_{Ibid}.

52 Sandweiss, Corpron: Designer with Light, 15.

⁵³Ibid. ⁵⁴Ibid. ⁵⁵Ibid., 16.

56_{Ibid}. 57_{Ibid}.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Corpron's production of a wide range of abstract images are unique in terms of her place in time and her gender.

Although women have been active in the medium of photography throughout its entire history, the difference between

Corpron's output and that of other women photographers is her subject matter. Corpron was fascinated with light and she pursued it from the beginning of her photography up to her death. Reflecting on Corpron, Kepes said, "Though I am sure that she very rarely rationalized about her intentions, or packaged her goals into words, her fundamental aspiration is to bring order into disorder and unity to the manifold, endless variety of visual phenomena."

Contact with Bauhaus ideas was, then, one major turning point. The rediscovery of Corpron's work through her friendship with Don Schol in the 1970s was a second turning point in her life. Only a few women have been acknowledged as photographers in the abstract mode. With the assistance and encouragement of Schol, Corpron was included in two major exhibitions, Marjory Mann's "Women of Photography: An Historical Survey" in 1975 and Margaretta Mitchell's "Recollections: Ten Women of Photography" in 1979-1980.

These exhibitions were seen around the country and led to Corpron's inclusion in other shows concerning abstract photography, including the "Light Abstractions" show at the University of St. Louis, St. Louis, Missouri, where Corpron was noted as one of the ten important abstract photographers in this century.²

Corpron's photographs are an integral part of the history of abstract photography. She was pursuing the qualities of light and she produced unique compositions. Corpron recognized both her sources in Weston and Sheeler, as well as the crucial help of Moholy-Nagy and Kepes. Corpron never lacked confidence in her ability, even during the years of little public exposure. She sustained herself by maintaining the belief that her work was good, knowing that was best for her development as an artist.

Corpron photographed with persistence for more than forty years before she was recognized and her true contributions to photography were acknowledged. Her discipline enabled her to overcome the myths of the 1940s and 1950s that a woman's place is in the home, that only men can be successful artists, and that successful artists must live in New York in order to obtain success and recognition. Corpron inspires women by her example to break from tradition and have the courage to be successful artists.

Although her documented output is small, there are hundreds of negatives that have never been printed. The question arises, what might have happened if her health had not failed and she continued to produce, and what might have happened if Stieglitz had lived to exhibit her work?

A teacher, photographer, and artist, Corpron described herself as a maverick: ". . . most photographers could not understand what I was doing, and very few artists were willing to accept photography as an art. I consider myself a designer with light." Her photographs are images both as pure abstractions and as symbolic forms that are significant as both abstract aspirations and as nature's clarity and order. 4

Corpron's development as an abstract photographer in the twentieth-century begins with objective abstraction, similar to the images of Edward Weston and Imogen Cunningham. Weston and Cunningham were working on the West Coast where the emphasis tended to be more on objective vision in the early twentieth-century. As Corpron developed as an artist, her abstraction tended to be more non-objective as a result of the Bauhaus influence. She began to experiment with different objects and brought them to a totally abstract depiction, similar to the mirror compositions by Florence Henri.

Corpron considered many of her images as metaphors of contemporary society, similar to the Abstract Expressionists of the New York School, who were creating compositions with emotional content. To get from the tangible to the intangible an apparent contradiction of some kind is frequently helpful:

For the photographer to free himself of the tyranny of the visual facts upon which he is utterly dependent, a paradox is the only possible tool. And the talisman paradox for unique photography is to work 'the mirror with a memory' as if it were a mirage, and the camera a metamorphosing machine, and the photograph as if it were a metaphor. . . Once freed of the tyranny of surfaces and textures, substance and form [the photographer] can use the same to pursue poetic truth.

On the other hand, in Corpron's images identification of subject can be so difficult that a title is required to promote further experience of the picture by the viewer.

The abstract photographs of the 1940s produced by Aaron Siskind challenge straight photography by transforming everyday subject matter into spontaneous abstract compositions. Siskind concentrates the world in the picture. Similar to Corpron, he chooses the insignificant for his subjects. Another similarity is Siskind's regard for the picture as "a new object to be contemplated for its own meaning and its own beauty." But Siskind always uses nature conceptually as a starting point: his images are less abstract than Corpron's.

Corpron's metaphorical images were accidental. Only after concentrating on the structure and light for the composition, and after printing the image, did she see metaphorical qualities in her photographs. Her primary concern was the use of light to create abstraction, and after viewing the result of her experiments, she often found deeper meaning in the photographs. Corpron's image <u>Surly Faces</u> (1948), which began as a study of space, also became a statement about the Cold War.

Corpron's isolation in Denton, Texas did not restrict her explorations into abstraction. Her images have similarities to the objective abstract photographs being produced in the United States on the West Coast during the 1930s, as well as literal Abstract Expressionists of the 1930s and 1940s on the East Coast. Direct contact with Bauhaus artists linked her to an international group of artists, particularly Moholy-Nagy, Kepes, and Henri. Corpron's experimentation with abstraction is an integral part of the history of abstract photography.

From this study we can see that Corpron's production of a broad range of abstract images shifted from slight abstraction to total abstraction due to her interaction with Bauhaus artists Moholy-Nagy and Kepes. She is contemporary with the Abstract Expressionists and she was exploring compositions that were seldom expressed by other contemporary

photographers. Corpron's father was a missionary surgeon in India in the early 1900s and in many ways, Corpron was a missionary during her eighty years.

NOTES

¹Martha A. Sandweiss, <u>Carlotta Corpron: Designer with</u>
<u>Light</u> (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, 1980),
5.

²Leslie Phillips, "Corpron," <u>TWU Focus</u> vol. II (Spring 1982), 16.

³Margaretta Mitchell, <u>Recollections: Ten Women of Photography</u> (New York: Viking Press, 1979), 50.

⁴Sandweiss, <u>Corpron: Designer with Light</u>, 5.

⁵Beaumont Newhall, <u>The History of Photography: From</u> 1839 to the Present (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1982), 281.

⁶Ibid., 283.

ILLUSTRATIONS

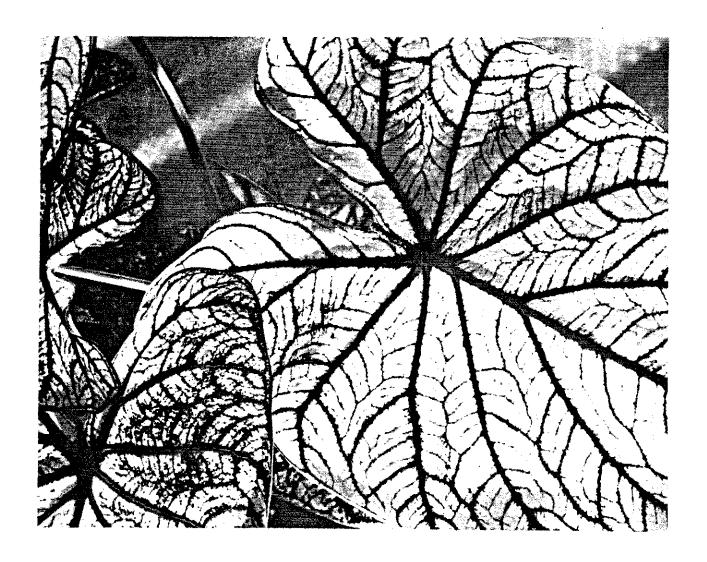


Fig. 1. Caladium Leaves

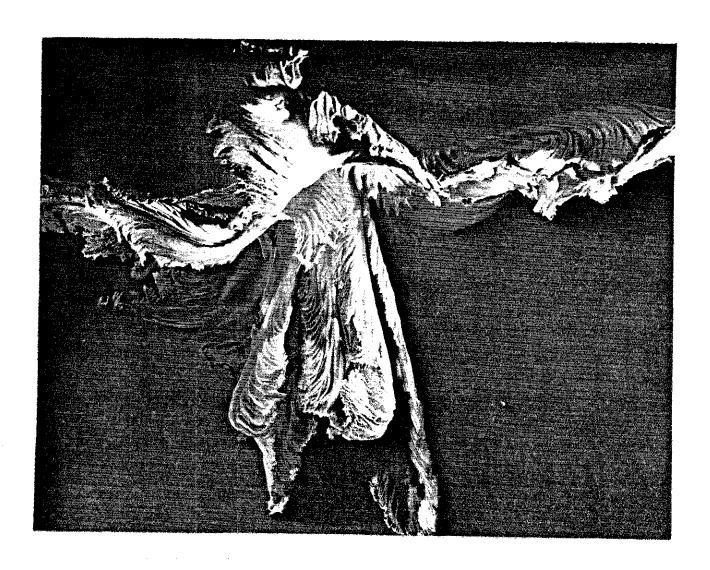


Fig. 2. Nature Dancer

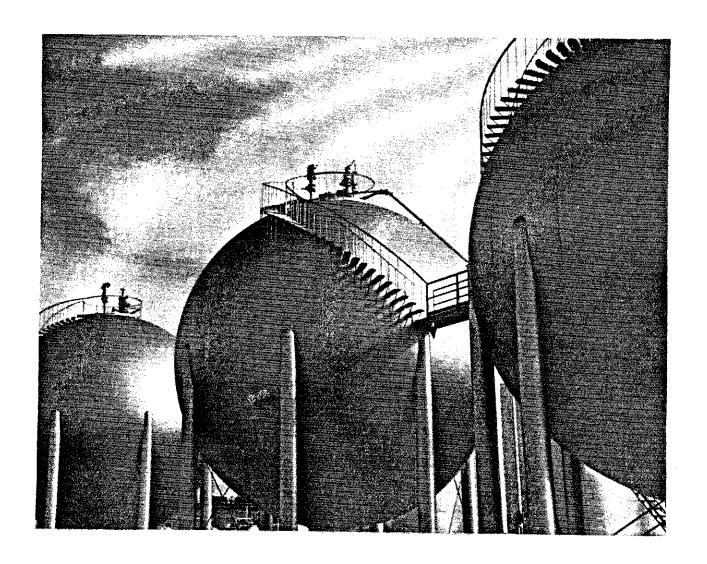


Fig. 3. Three Oil Tanks near Jefferson, Texas

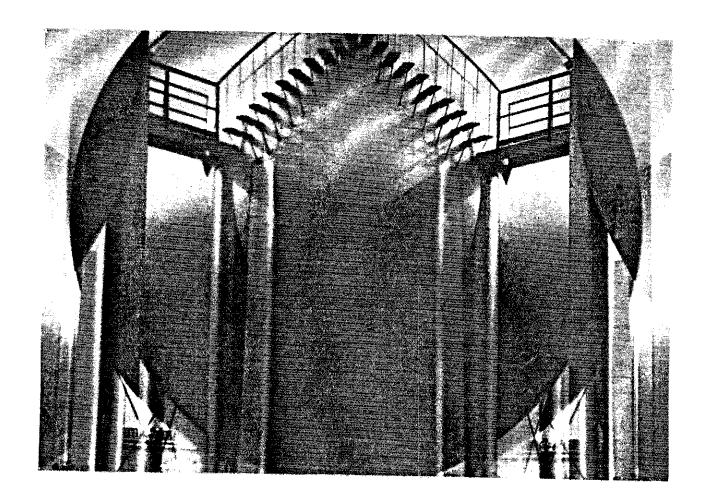


Fig. 4. Design with Oil Tank

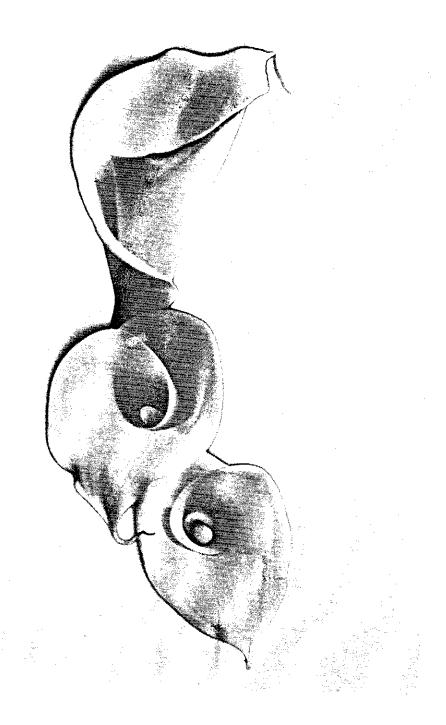


Fig. 5. Solarized Calla Lilies

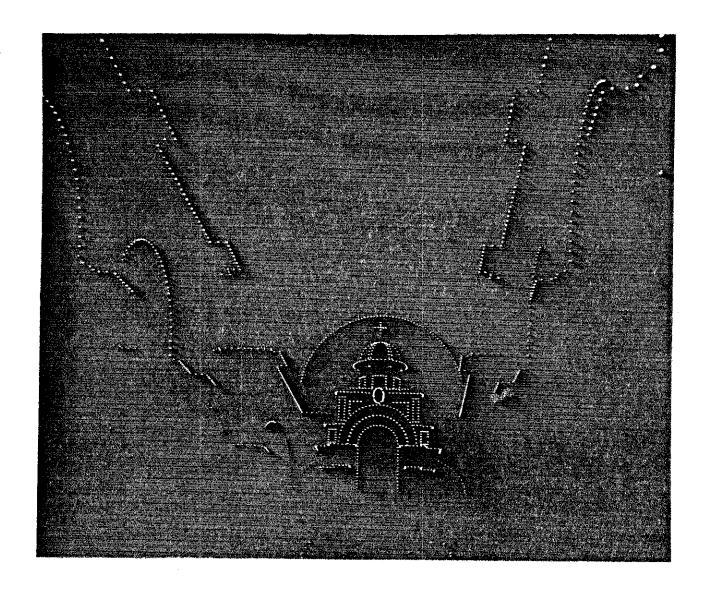


Fig. 6. Church in Havana

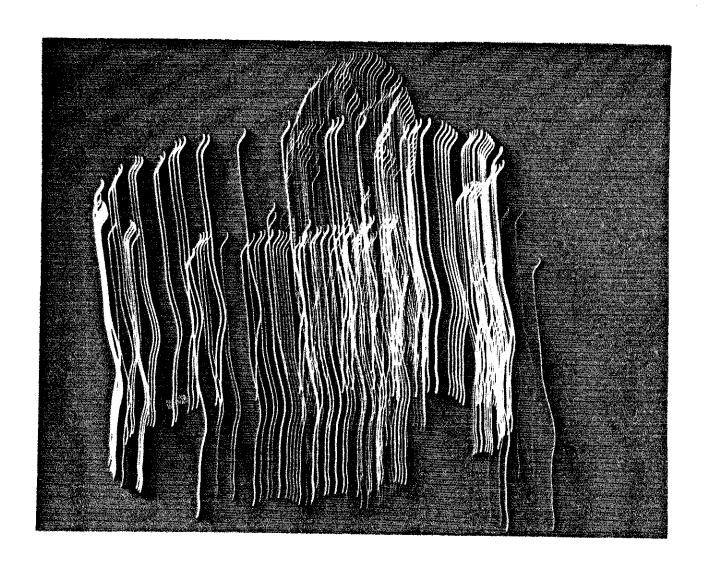


Fig. 7. Commentary on Civilization

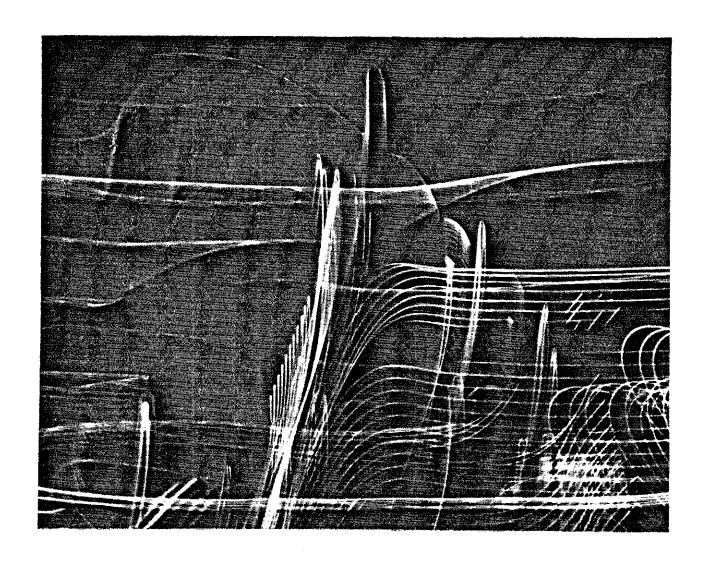


Fig. 8. A Walk in Fair Park, Dallas

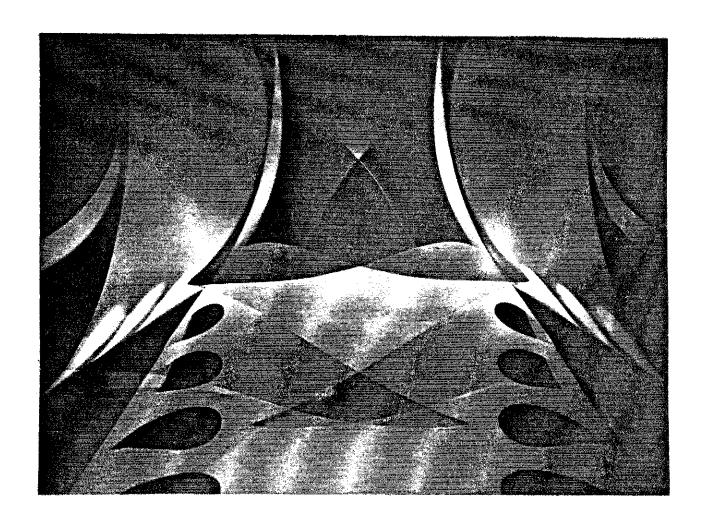


Fig. 9. Bisymmetric Design



Fig. 10. White Paper Shapes against White Background--Light from a Venetian Blind

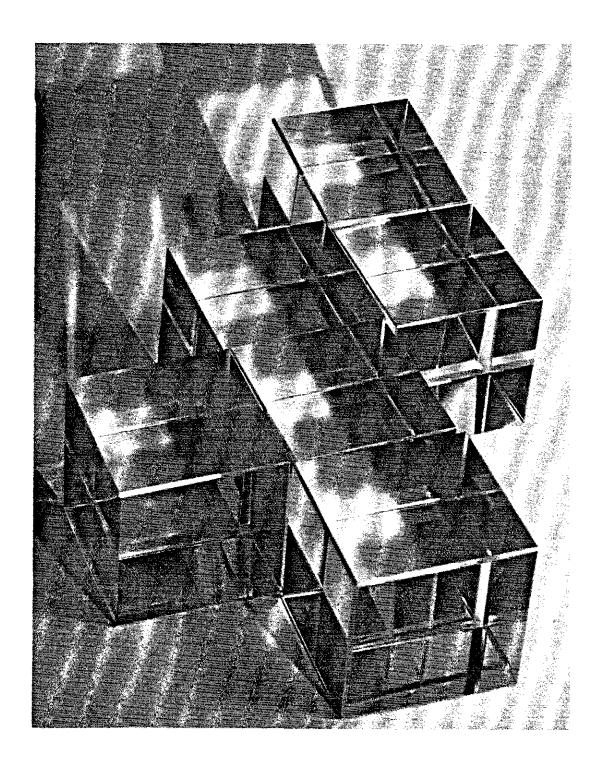


Fig. 11. Six Cubes

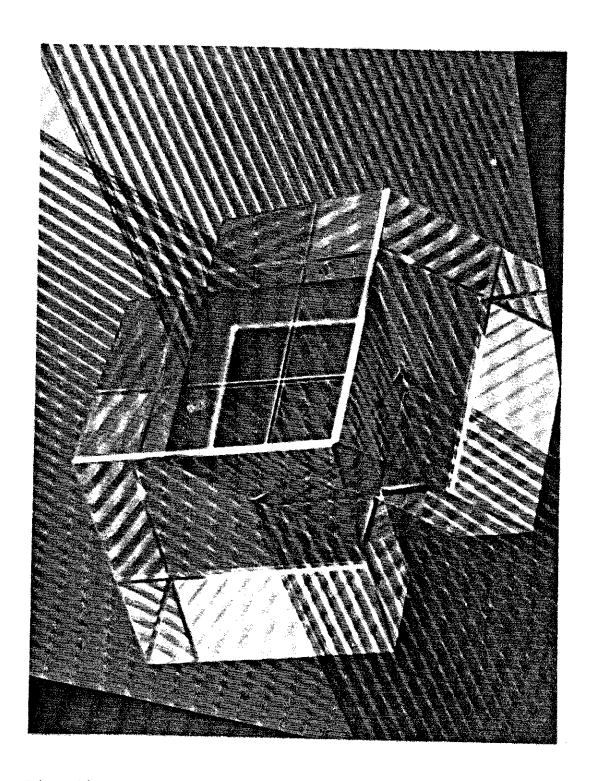


Fig. 12. Suspended Glass Cubes

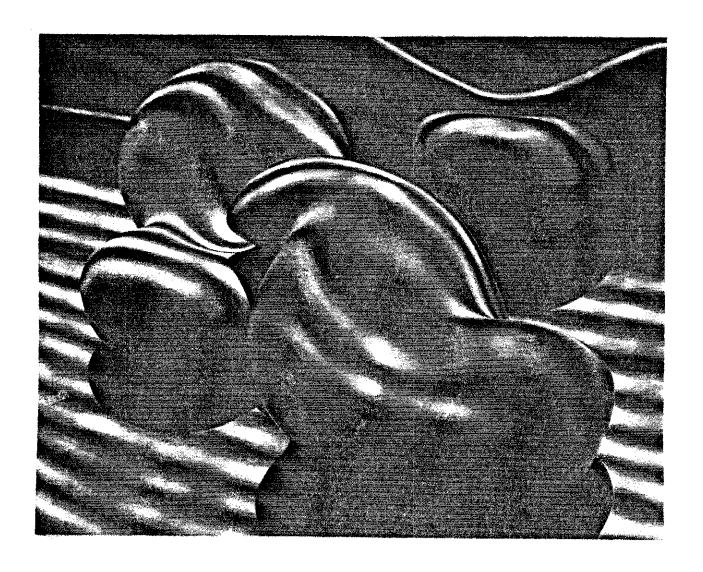


Fig. 13. Light Follows Form



Fig. 14. Illusion of Male and Female

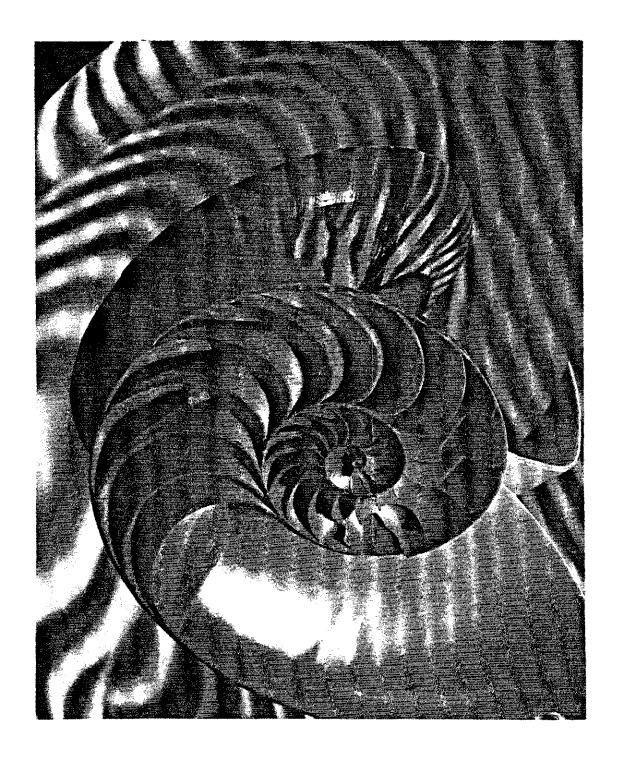


Fig. 15. Nautilus and Concave Mirror

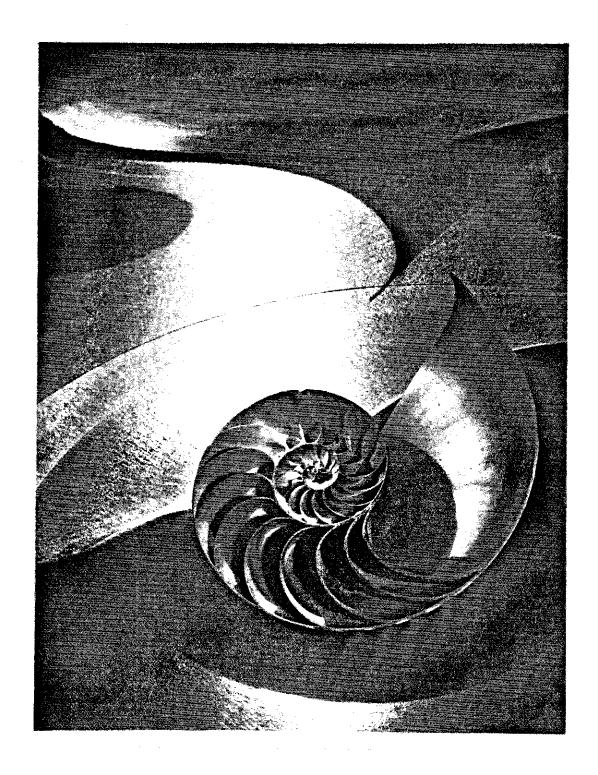


Fig. 16. Chambered Nautilus in Space Composition



Fig. 17. Eggs Reflected and Multiplied

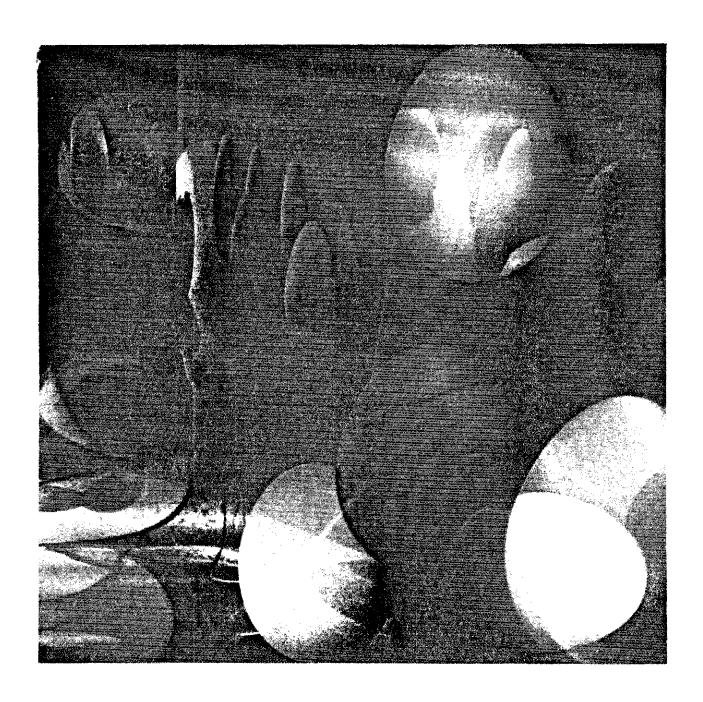


Fig. 18. Fun with Eggs

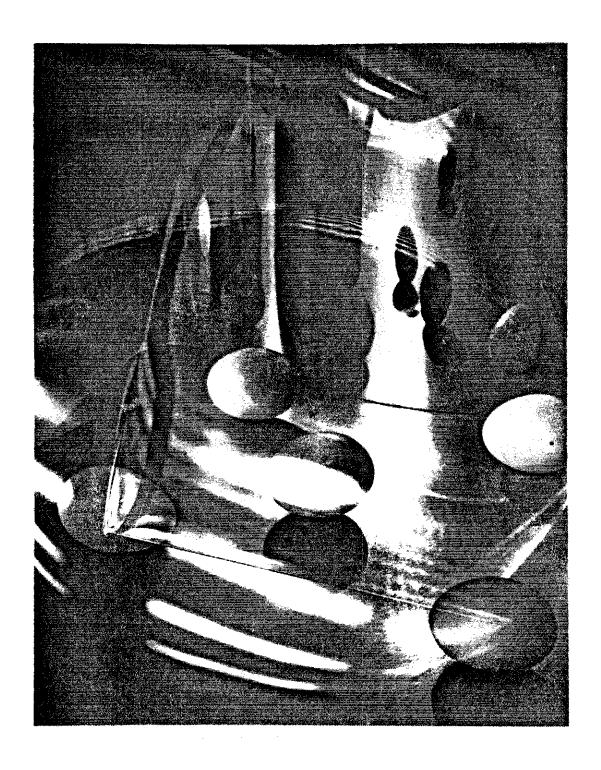


Fig. 19. Eggs Encircled



Fig. 20. Captured Light

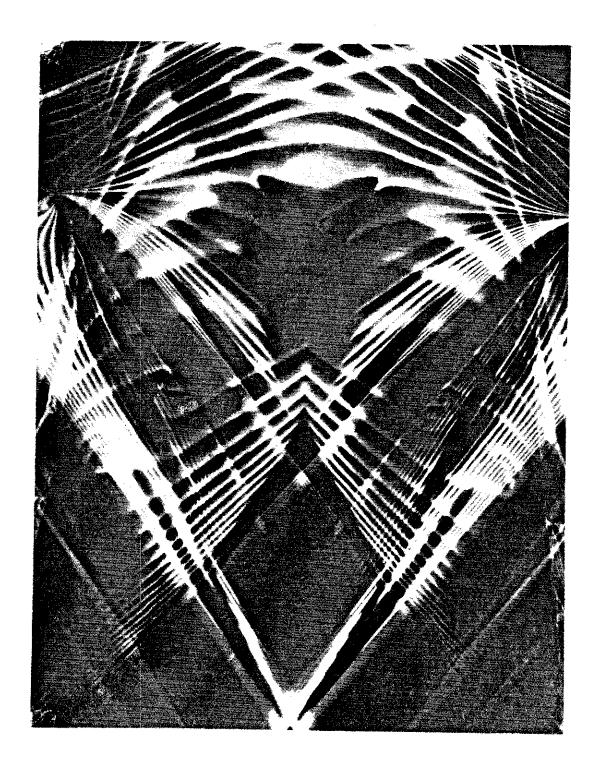


Fig. 21. Light Creates Symbols



Fig. 22. Flowing Light

APPENDIX

CHRONOLOGY

CHRONOLOGY OF CARLOTTA M. CORPRON

1901	Born in Blue Earth, Minnesota, December 9.
1905-20	Grew up in India; educated in English boarding
	schools.
1920-26	Moved back to the United States to study art
	at Eastern Michigan University and Teacher's
	College of Columbia University.
1926-28	Taught Design and Art Education at the Woman's
	College of Alabama in Montgomery (now
	Huntington College).
1928	Summer in Europe. Attended an International
	Art Congress in Prague.
1932	Summer in England to study medieval
	architecture and the arts of India in the
	museums of London.
1938-55	Taught at School of Applied Arts, University
	of Cincinnati. Bought her first camera as
	instructional aid for a design course.
1935-68	Taught design, advertising design, art
	history, and creative photography at Texas
	Woman's University in Denton, Texas.
1936	Studied photographic technique at the Art
	Center in Los Angeles for the summer.

1942	Worked with Moholy-Nagy.
1944	Worked with Gyorgy Kepes. Participated in
	"Captured Light" exhibition, Norlyst Gallery,
	New York.
1945	Participated in "Design with Light" exhibition
	at the Art Alliance, Philadelphia. Met Alfred
	Stieglitz.
1948	One-person exhibition, Dallas Museum of Fine
	Art.
1951	Participated in "Contemporary Photography"
	exhibition, Contemporary Arts Association,
	Houston.
1952	Participated in "Abstraction in Photography"
	exhibition, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
	Participated in "Design in Nature" exhibition,
	Contemporary Arts Association, Houston. One-
	person exhibition at the Louisana Art
	Commission, Baton Rouge.
1953	One-person exhibition at Art Institute of
	Chicago. One-person exhibition at University
	of Georgia, Athens.
1954	One-person exhibition at Woman's University of
	North Carolina, Chapel Hill.
1955	One-person exhibition at Ohio University,
	Athens.

1975	Participated in "Women of Photography: An
	Historical Survey" exhibition, San Francisco
	Museum of Art.
1977	One-person exhibition at Marcuse Pfeifer
	Gallery, New York, "Carlotta Corpron Form and
	Light: 1942-1949."
1978	Participated in "Works on Paper: Southwest
	1978" exhibition, Dallas Museum of Fine Art.
	One-person show, Galleria del Milione, Milan.
1979	Participated in "Recollections: Ten Women of
	Photography" exhibition, International Center
	of Photography, New York.
1980	One-person exhibition at the Amon Carter
	Museum, Fort Worth. Participated in
	"Photography's Response to Constructivism"
	exhibition, San Francisco Museum of Modern
	Art. Participated in "Light Abstractions"
	exhibition, University of Missouri at St.
	Louis.
1985	Retrospective of Corpron's works shown at the
	Avron Gallery, Dallas, December 17 through
	January 17.
1987	Died in Denton, Texas, April 17.
1990	Retrospective at the Virginia Lust Gallery,
	New York, "Carlotta Corpron: The First

Abstract Expressionist Photographs 1939-1952,"
April 17 through June 30.

Exhibition of photographs at Brent Sikkema Fine Art, New York, in April.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Chadwick, Whitney. <u>Women, Art, and Society</u>. New York: Thames and Hudson, Inc., 1990.
- Coke, Van Deren. <u>Signs of the Times: Some Recurring Motifs in Twentieth-Century Photography</u>. San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1985.
- Corpron, Carlotta. <u>Carlotta Corpron: Designer with Light</u>.

 Produced by Joan Young and Paul Bean. Directed by Paul Bean. Golden Triangle Communications in association with Amon Carter Museum, 1980. Videocassette.
- Corpron, Carlotta. "Designing with Light." <u>Design</u> 51 (October 1949): 10-11, 25.
- Corpron, Carlotta. "Light as a Creative Medium." Art Education 15 (May 1962): 4-6.
- DuPont, Diana C. <u>Florence Henri: Artist-Photographer of the Avant-Garde</u>. San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1990.
- Ennis, Michael. "Lady on the Edge." <u>Texas Monthly</u> 11, issue 7 (July 1983): 146-49.
- Fiedler, Jeannine, ed. <u>Photography at the Bauhaus</u>. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990.
- George, Mary Hollers. Letter to Margaret B. McDougal, dated c. February 1985. Texas Woman's University Archives.
- Haus, Andreas. Moholy-Nagy: Photographs and Photograms. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980.
- Hunter, Sam, and John Jacobus. Modern Art:

 Painting/Sculpture/ Architecture. New York: Harry N.

 Abrams, Inc., 1985.
- Kepes, Gyorgy. Letter to Carlotta Corpron, dated August 2, 1946. Texas Woman's University Archives.
- Kepes, Gyorgy. Letter to Carlotta Corpron, dated May 18, 1947. Texas Woman's University Archives.

- Kostelanetz, Richard. <u>Moholy-Nagy</u>. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970.
- Kutner, Janet. "'Designs with Light' Bring Ms. Corpron Fame
 at 79." Dallas Morning News 16 November 1980, 1,3 (C).
- Kutner, Janet. "Luck Keeps Increasing for Denton's Corpron."
 <u>Dallas Morning News</u> 24 October 1978, 14 (A).
- Mann, Marjory. <u>Women of Photography: An Historical Survey</u>. San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Art, 1975.
- Mitchell, Margaretta. <u>Recollections: Ten Women of Photography</u>. New York: Viking Press, 1979.
- Moholy-Nagy, Lazlo. <u>Vision in Motion</u>. Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1947.
- Moholy-Nagy, Lazlo. Experiment in Totality. ed. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1950, 1969.
- Moholy-Nagy, Lazlo. Letter to Carlotta Corpron, dated August 26, 1946. Texas Woman's University Archives.
- Newhall, Beaumont. The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1982.
- O'Keefe, Georgia. Letter to Carlotta Corpron, dated July 1946. Texas Woman's University Archives.
- Phillips, Leslie. "Corpron." <u>TWU Focus</u> II (Spring 1982): 14-16.
- Rosenblum, Naomi. A World History of Photography. New York: Cross River Press, Ltd., 1984, 1989, c/o Abbeville Press, Inc.
- Rubinstein, Charlotte Streifer. American Women Artists:
 From Early Indian Times to the Present. New York: Avon Books, 1982.
- Sandweiss, Martha A. <u>Carlotta Corpron: Designer with Light</u>. Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, 1980.
- Schol, Don. Interviews by author, Denton, Texas, periodic conversations throughout 1991 and 1992.

- Sherwood, Anderson. The Triumph of the Egg: A Book of Impressions from American Life in Tales and Poems. New York: B.W. Huebsch, Inc., 1921.
- Stauver, Margaret. Interview by author, Denton, Texas, 4 September 1991.
- Supovitz, Marjory. Gyorgy Kepes: The MIT Years, 1945-1977. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press Visual Arts Series, 1978.
- Tucker, Jean S. <u>Light Abstractions</u>. St. Louis, MO: University of Missouri at St. Louis, 1980.