



**ARTIST**

Aspen Mays

**TITLE**

Face of God

**DATE**

2013

**DIMENSIONS**

43 in H x 71 in W

**MEDIUM**

Inkjet Prints

**IMAGE NOTES**

Mounted; Framed Archival Pigment Print

**CATALOGUE NUMBER**

2014.032

**CURRENT LOCATION**

Warehouse

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**ASPEN MAYS**

**BORN**

1980

**BIRTHPLACE**

Asheville, NC

**GENDER**

Female

**CITIZENSHIP**

United States

**CULTURAL HERITAGE**

European-American

**LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP**

Artist-in-Residence, 2012  
Kathleen O. Ellis Gallery, 2014  
Aspen Mays : Newspaper Rock

**LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS**

## BIOGRAPHY

Art Papers describes Aspen Mays' work as standing "in deft opposition to the technology we have come to rely on for answers, putting faith not in complex databases and rapidly evolving technology, but rather in the ability of everyday objects and materials to spark our imagination." In doing so, she "re-imagines the world around us, finding new possibilities in the commonplace."

Born in Asheville, NC, and raised in Charleston, SC, Aspen Mays received her MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her solo exhibitions include *Every Leaf on a Tree* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL; *From the Offices of Scientists* at the Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago, IL; *Sun Ruins* at Golden Gallery, New York. Mays was a 2009-2010 Fulbright Fellow in Santiago, Chile, where she worked with astronomers who are using the world's most advanced telescopes to look at the sky. Mays now splits her time between Los Angeles, CA and Columbus, OH where she is an Assistant Professor of Art at Ohio State University.

## ESSAYS

Photographs of distant stars distill the medium to a rudimentary form — all you're seeing is light in the darkness of space — and yet few experiences are more sublime and humbling than looking up at the night sky itself, especially in a remote place. Any single star is just a speck overhead, but the cumulative effect is profound, evidence of a massive universe that our eyes and cameras can't apprehend all at once. These thoughts came to mind when Aspen Mays first showed me her experiments using old negatives and prints from an abandoned darkroom at an observatory in Chile. The photographs she discovered there during a Fulbright Fellowship in 2011 were made decades earlier by professional astronomers. Even if stargazing becomes your job, one has to imagine that the feeling of awe never fully recedes. In her growing body of work, Mays begins to unsettle both romantic ideas of the cosmos and unblinking trust in the scientific gaze. A push and pull between the objective and the subjective takes shape. After sifting through leftover prints in the astronomers' darkroom, Mays began punching out the stars in photographs of far-off galaxies, systematically turning celestial bodies into paper chads, easily lost or brushed away. To tamper with the heavens or eradicate a galaxy like this quickly deflates any sense of wonder, with tragicomic undertones. The hole-puncher itself is a banal, bureaucratic office tool. These works also echo how Roy Stryker, working for the Farm Security Administration in the 1930s, would punch holes in negatives he deemed unworthy of publication. These "killed" images, by Walker Evans and others, were not intended to be seen, and Mays, examining a different crop of rejected photographs, takes Stryker's logic to almost stubborn excess. Punch by punch, she eliminates more of the image until the paper is mostly holes. In the process, something else emerges, a meditation on absence. Look at all the voids, a chaos of desolate circles. The results are beautiful and even a little startling. To remove all the stars from the universe, after all, would be to leave us in darkness. In turn, the very possibility of photography, a light-dependent medium, would cease to exist. In her appropriation of scientific material and in her own photographs, Mays is grappling with the fantasy of objectivity, which stems from the recognition that both science and photography reflect a human desire to find order in what we observe. Likewise, both scientific studies and photographs are viewed as incontrovertible evidence, bolstering the notion that we can grasp some objective truth, notwithstanding subjective biases. In a second body of work from Chile, *The Sun, 1957*, Mays responds more overtly to these desires and tendencies. Working with the remnants of a yearlong study from the same observatory, she compiled small black-and-white photographs of the sun, arranging the ghostly circles in columns and rows according to the month in which they were made. But what are we really seeing in these elegant grids, which knowingly adhere to standard methods of presenting visual information? As photographed, the suns are uniform in size and shape, but they vary in luminosity, as if fading in and out. Is this due to solar phenomena, old photographic errors, or new artistic manipulation? It's hard to know. Sometimes your vantage point makes all the difference. The sun is just another star. We just think of it differently since it's the star our planet orbits. It is also our most basic marker of time. In Mays's work, different temporalities begin to overlap, another aspect where empirical systems collide with more subjective impressions or measures. Mays's compiled photographs of the sun mark out a year month by month, but time is also implied in each single photograph as the camera arrests a fleeting instant. More unfathomably, photographs of the stars also look millions of years into the past — the time it takes for their light to reach the Earth. And Mays is working with decades-old negatives with their own mundane histories. Even the analog character of her sources is a marker of time, a tidemark of another era, this tangible materiality soon to be an anachronism. Looking back to when the Chilean darkroom was in use, time itself disappears like a hole punched in a picture. One month is missing from the grids of *The Sun, 1957*. No photographs exist from November of that year. What happened that month? Mostly it was a month like any other, if not without ominous reverberations. Diego Rivera died. Great Britain tested an atomic bomb. The U.S.S.R. launched Sputnik II. All the while, a group of astronomers were looking through a telescope and going about their lives. Something must have disrupted their study of the sun, though going by the evidence at hand the sky could have simply gone dark. Karsten Lund Karsten Lund is a curator and writer based in Chicago, where he works as a curatorial assistant at the Museum of Contemporary Art. He has organized exhibitions at a variety of institutions and non-profit spaces including MCA Chicago, Hyde Park Art Center, and the Museum of Contemporary Photography, where from 2007 to 2008 he was the museum's inaugural Collection Research Fellow. Lund's writing has been published in *Art Papers*, *Proximity*, and other publications and featured in recent books devoted to the work of Zoe Crosher and Greg Stimac. — Aspen Mays lives in Columbus, OH, and completed her residency at Light Work in March 2012. [www.aspenmays.com](http://www.aspenmays.com) Newspaper Rock Aspen Mays approaches her art-making practice with some of the same methods she learned acquiring a degree in anthropology. By embracing the art and science of photography her projects often begin by tracking down information, ideas, and experts in a variety of fields, including astronomy. She collects, unearths, and creates images and objects that celebrate the complex and sublime beauty of the physical universe. Her images question our capacity to comprehend, while expressing our deep desire to find meaning in the unknown. Her fieldwork has included a year in Chile in the Atacama desert and in Santiago at the University of Chile's National Observatory, known locally as Cerro Calán. Because of its high altitude, dry air, and almost non-existent clouds, the Atacama desert of Chile is one of the best places in the world to conduct astronomical observations. In the desert, with only the naked eye, Mays could view the night sky in stunning clarity and detail. "The Milky Way is so bright in the desert that it casts a shadow on the ground," she says. As she stood in the light she realized, "I knew something that is impossible to know, an awareness of how tiny I am and how connected." The astronomers of Cerro Calán granted Mays unlimited access to an abandoned darkroom and piles of film, photographs, negatives, and papers long ago discarded for their lack of useful scientific content. She became obsessed with these hand-made

materials and saw the darkroom as a time capsule. From this rich archive she continues to reinvent and re-contextualize her images. In *The Face of God, (Stargazer Lily II)*, 2013, Mays presents us with a single roll of 35 mm black-and-white film rescued from the trash. Thirty exposures are of the night sky, black stars on a white ground, which makes for more clarity in mapping the solar system. At the center of this abandoned roll of film are four exposures of an elderly woman in sunglasses. Her appearance is startling, incongruous, and absurd. She is beautiful in her garden with a shepherd's hook, the dot pattern of her blouse satirizing the pattern of the night sky. Who is this woman to the anonymous astronomer? And how is it, having placed her in the center of the universe, she is able to hold her own? Her presence reminds us of one definition of humility, something both extraordinary and ordinary at the same time. Mays's search for sublime ambiguity took her on a recent cross-country trip to the Petrified Forest in Arizona to view Newspaper Rock, a giant prehistoric petroglyph covered with hundreds of messages, symbols, or stories. Confounded by the meaning of these drawings incised in rock and occurring all over the world with amazing similarity, scientists argue they could be of religious significance or perhaps astronomical guides. Mays was drawn to the mystery and presence of a hand-drawn message from prehistory and began to think about them in relation to her collection of darkroom tools. Cobbled together with tape and cardboard, her collection of hand-made dodging, burning, and masking tools had its origins in the Cerro Calán darkroom. Placing them on photographic paper and working directly with light itself, Mays creates her own abstract patterns, forms and pictograms, enigmatic taxonomies of a disappearing photographic process. The exhibition includes one drawing and one photograph of a drawing. *Rock Eye (Anza Borrego, California)*, 2004, is a photograph of what looks like a petroglyph but is actually graffiti drawn by a contemporary camper. Mays has kept this photograph for many years, and perhaps it inspired the grease pencil drawing *Newspaper Rock (study for a photogram)*, 2013. In relation to this body of work the act of drawing feels like an attempt to connect to the touching humanness of the petroglyphs and our awareness that they do communicate something about the human activity of trying to understand the world through drawing and mark making. During her time in Chile Mays noted the astronomers' acute awareness of the setting sun. Upon arriving at the observatory they would ask, "How's the seeing?" Intrigued by the question, Mays set up her camera to record three distinct phases of twilight: astronomical, civil, and nautical. Allowing for longer exposure times and relying on the film's sensitivity to record traces of light she could no longer perceive, she recorded her experience of sunset and dawn. *Astronomical Twilight (Evening, Las Campanas, Chile)*, 2010, documents a tiny, momentary, and almost imperceptible whisper of red light along a jagged horizon in a field of inky black. The moment, says Mays, "the instruments begin their nightly ritual of looking into space." As we prepare for this exhibition NASA has just released a photograph of the earth from Saturn, a tiny blue dot, the size of a speck of dust. And the media is reprinting Carl Sagan's famous quote: "Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives." For the past two centuries photography has seemed to move us closer in our ability to define and describe the world around us. In a conversation about this exhibition Mays asked, "Which is more profound, using cameras to image the cosmos or the anonymous woman in a hydrangea garden?" Throughout this exhibition Mays explores this dilemma with great curiosity and delight as she invites us to consider small and big questions we can only dimly comprehend. Mary Lee Hodgens Associate Director Light Work