

Joseph Akerman, Artist's Statement

2025

To photograph what can't be seen, to capture an image of the life force in pure form – that is what I seek to accomplish.

I want to create images of light— not as mere illumination of an object, person, landscape, or whatever is in front of the camera— but of the light itself. I believe light is the ki (Japanese: vital energy) of the stars. I strive for the direct abstract depiction of ki, not a corollary or representational metaphor. Life moves by at blinding speed and passes without remorse, leaving us aching at the ineffable beauty of its transience, imperfection, and incompleteness. I want to see that happening and find ways to show it.

I like to think I'm using light like a chisel to create sculptural images—dimensional and yet beyond dimension. I might bend light with lenses and bounce it off objects or surfaces. I move quickly, making many exposures, attempting to capture that exact instant when the life force reveals itself most plainly. I seek to show the genuine and authentic ki around us so we may experience its brevity and magnificence as we behold it.

All my work starts with a single-exposure camera capture. I sometimes distill the image using only simple photographic tools—brightness, contrast, saturation, hue—things I might use digitally, in a darkroom in processing, or on an enlarger. I don't use Photoshop or AI. I find those techniques produce images that are inherently and palpably false, and we can always tell they are such.

The viewer should approach these images as one might contemplate an abstract painting. Although there are sometimes recognizable elements in the images, they are secondary to the overall abstraction.

Although I give titles to some of the images for identification purposes, the actual subject of these photographs is nameless. The first lines of the Tao Te Ching are “The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal name.” Seeking to identify the pictorial subject will only interfere with being able to see the image's more genuine and deeper meaning. This approach to photography is not new. Minor White said, “One should not always photograph things for what they are, but for what e/se they are.”

Recently, I have begun to explore the use of precious metals, specifically gold, to breathe a sense of spiritual importance into images that are more representational than the work I usually pursue. I'm presenting some of those images in this show. Using simple things I find in nature, usually during the change of seasons, ranging from trees budding in spring or losing leaves in fall to rivers surging as they crest at flood stage, I add a layer of gold, which I find brings an ethereal glow to these elemental images, and imbues them with a spiritual quality which seems to enrich one's sense of the power of the ki within them.

Thank you for allowing me to share these works with you.