

**CHRISTOPHER RUSSELL**

**MARK MOORE GALLERY** | *STATEMENTS*

**"The purpose of the photo may be to see, but the etching longs to reveal something beyond sight, something under the skin of the photograph. If you look very closely at the incisions, turn them against the light, you see the trace of violence in the innocence."**

–Matias Viegner, *X-TRA*, Volume 10 Number 1

# CHRISTOPHER RUSSELL

## STATEMENTS



**Mark Moore Gallery: *Statements* introduces a featured gallery artist through images and candid interview. From noteworthy early examples to present bodies, the works featured in *Statements* act as an overview of the varying practices and movements implemented by a given artist in tandem with their thoughts and interpretations.**

Dealing less with the supernatural than the psychosomatic, Christopher Russell rouses ghosts. Within his scratched photographs, fractured glass panes, and hazy metallic paints, there are haunting recollections - the kind of outlier memories that plague our psyche well after childhood. Through a purposefully repressive fog, we habitually revisit the monsters of our innermost mentality, and find ourselves the protagonist of a lifelong plight - a cinematic tale evocatively illustrated by Russell's eerie ships and spectral trees. Like a folkloric odyssey into a cognitive web, his mixed-media works and installations traipse through places of fragility and wistfulness; evidence of the divine and unsettling encounters inherent to our complex mortality.

Russell (b. 1974) received his M.F.A. from the Art Center College of Design (CA). He has been featured in solo and group exhibitions at the Tokyo Institute of Photography (Japan), Barnsdall Art Center (CA), Armory Center for the Arts (CA), Oakland Museum (CA), Los Angeles County Museum of Art (CA), Hammer Museum (CA), among others. His work is included in the collections of Deutsche Bank, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Rhode Island School of Design Museum, Hammer Museum, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, to name a few.



# CHRISTOPHER RUSSELL



Interview by: Marielos Kluck, Mark Moore Gallery

**You often scratch drawings onto the surfaces of digital photographs thusly creating images that are simultaneously based on the notion of photographic reproducibility and the unique object making associated with a craftsman. When did your process of hand-altering photographs begin?**

In the early 2000s. I was writing my novel, *Sniper*, and building an installation around the text. Scratching photographs was a way of communicating the harshness of a particular character. Once I finished the first piece, which was just a few lines of text scratched into a portrait, I realized it had larger implications than the specific narrative I was working on. It was violent and clunky, raw, but also refined. Close in, the perfect surface of the photo became a frame for these fuzzy, lineal strikes. The photo was essentially damaged, but from a distance, it looked like it could have been printed. So the gesture was violent, but also subversive.

**Within your practice, how does the scratch challenge the authority of photography?**

I'm glad you ask that, because I joke that my drawings have a truth claim, because they are recorded photographically. If it's there in the image, it happened.

When we speak of photography, of dark rooms and silver nitrate,

its role is increasingly relegated to nostalgia as those techniques fade from dominant discourse. The way Arthur Danto says that art ended, but was replaced by something else also called art, this has been happening with photography. Looking at photography in galleries one sees ostensibly straight photographs listed as a "pigment print" or a "digital C-print." New processes with their own epistemology have supplanted film grain, and because the product isn't obviously distinct, it has crept in, a changeling, a thing referred to as photography replaced a historical thing called photography.

Empiricist photography, the photography linked to inalienable scientific truth, is all but an anachronism. Grain has effectively been replaced by the pixel, so the new signifier of the photographic is malleability, empirical instability. This was a part of the thought process when I started developing this technique a decade ago, as it moved from illustrative purposes to conceptual purposes. I saw a sea change happening in my chosen medium and infusing mechanical reproduction with romantic hand work seemed like a good way to address those changes. I think there is more discourse around this now, but 10 years ago there really wasn't.

**This process of the handmade can also be seen in your most recent work, *GRFALWKV* (2014), a handcrafted large-scale manuscript, what led you to create such a rigorous and unique work?**

As an artist, part of one's job is to manipulate viewers. The handmade book, its large size puts the viewer in the place of a child. The traditional binding, and drawings derive a sense of power from their association with historical manuscripts. As an object, it's authoritative yet comforting. It has an instant rapport, so as dark as the text gets, the viewer is sort of hooked by the time she gets there. The first one, *Runaway* (2010), ended with a critique of utopias that was all post-apocalyptic-necro-fucking, and people were lulled into acceptance, didn't flinch when the text moved from nostalgia to violence. I think more people, different types of people, read to the end than would have if it were presented as a computer generated or offset printed book.

**Where does the title *GRFALWKV* originate? What does it mean?**

*GRFALWKV* is an entirely made up word. It's a composition of letters and I developed it much the way I would a drawing. I made some random strokes of the keyboard and edited until I liked the totality. I need to decide on an exact annunciation before the opening, because I know that will be the most asked question—"how do you say xhdhdn?" "Is it shdhfhfdj?" But it's a stand in, it doesn't have a concrete meaning. It's like reading in a dream, or the rush to express something overwhelming, just a flood of sounds that don't make specific linguistic sense.

**Within each chapter of *GRFALWKV*, you investigate the general territory of “endings” through the use of narratives based on art theory, history and pop culture. Can you elaborate on the contents of each chapter?**

Page 2: *Explosion #3*, 2013

folded pigment print scratched with razor, 14 x 18 inches

Opposite Page, Left: Cover from *GRFALWKV*, 2013-2014  
carbon based fountain pen ink, pigmented fountain pen ink, spray paint, pressure sensitive adhesive, bound in cloth with collage on marbled boards, 18 x 24 inches

Opposite Page, Right: Excerpt from *GRFALWKV*, 2013-2014  
carbon based fountain pen ink, pigmented fountain pen ink, spray paint, pressure sensitive adhesive, bound in cloth with collage on marbled boards, 18 x 24 inches

# GRFALWKV



*The invigilator of prophecy  
fumbles through the door,  
wrapped in duty as thick as psychosis.*

*He unfurls a stack  
of mimeographed Latin,  
mumbling something of saints and stars,  
scarcely intelligible and wholly unbelievable.*



*Except for that one word,  
a single mental image  
that sparks of truth.*

The writing right now covers a territory, the way a number of artists are letting Google results dictate their image production, I am using the same key-word limitation, it just develops organically, over time, in my head rather than at Google speed.

I started trying to recall the story of *The Omen* movie, but got the events all mixed up, and scenes from other movies entered into it, so I wrote little poems that recounted the genre of antichrist movies, which were a bundle of conflicting dynamics about prophecy and free will. One always knew that the devil wouldn't win, that the battle was perfunctory. I thought that genre of filmmaking reflected a way of expressing Cold War frustrations—the ceremony of the empty threat.

That lead me to the idea of World War III. So I wrote a chapter about the physical devastation radiating from the impact point. There was a small amount of research, but that section is largely fictionalized. I was then reminded of Burke's writings on the sublime, that terror is the ruling principal, that to take a Burkian view, we experience a certain pleasure in dramatic, violent incidents, so long as we are uninvolved. I then thought about the art world, the criticisms leveled by almost every artist I know. I thought about a two former professors who died recently, the generally corporate aesthetic of post-minimalist redux, recent MFAs with their perfectly rehearsed elevator pitches reciting lessons without necessarily offering insight, and I thought it would be healthy for me to look at how unhealthy the art world can be. I finished it off with some pieces that describe scenes, things that were ordinary and flat, scenes with a sense of history or possibility where something may have once happened, which is a trope of photography that I tried to adapt to written form.

**You have worked on several artist's books, *Landscape* (2007), *Budget Decadence* (2010), *Sniper* (2011), *Pattern Book* (2013). How does your approach to writing relate to your photography?**

Both photography and fiction come from observation. It's the common point of writing and photography, the rubric under which Poe, Baudelaire, Friedlander and Araki make sense together. I try for work that is smart, but isn't "conference art," that's informed, but isn't necessarily beholden to the specifics of a canon.

**How are the accompanying scratched-photo-drawings related to your book project? What purpose do the drawings of animals and patterns serve?**

The drawings are another part of the territory that's mapped out in the book, another chapter, if you will. The photographs themselves are images of lens flair. I wanted to make huge lens flair and finally found a cheap plastic lens that would do the job. I think of the images as explosions. The orientation is often inverted, upside down, they are a bit more enigmatic, like something exploding on the horizon rather than sun creeping in from the sky.

The patterns are the most complicated to explain. I think they are compositionally satisfying, and I'm happy if people leave with only that understanding. Though, personally I think of patterns as a type of portraiture. Wallpaper is a stand-in for a value system, a type of daily affirmation through decor. They are aspirational, one builds the environment one hopes to live up to. Built into its repeating nature is a notion of the infinite, yet it peels and cracks and yellows and often loses its aesthetic potency to later generations.

I use a lot of Arts and Crafts patterns as well, patterns that developed alongside a failed socialist politic. So they are fused with successive layers of hope and disappointment. I find them conceptually as intriguing as they are visually enchanting.

The animals I put in to help keep a narrative feel, if there is a character, people will want to make a story. They offer a point of empathy in the exhibition. The animal imagery asks for a different type of response from the viewer than any other part of the exhibition. People look at images of other people, with a certain amount of judgment, but that doesn't really happen with animals. A sad animal is a sad animal, without any real cultural baggage, so they round out the pathos of the exhibition.

### **What projects are on the horizon for you?**

That's always a hard one; I don't like to say things publicly before I've signed on the dotted line. But I have a couple solo shows that I'm negotiating right now, one in the US, one in Europe. Some of my older work will soon be getting some historical context in an important anthology series. I am beginning what will be a very long process of creating a video piece based on the *Runaway* text. It's a direction I've dodged for a long time, but am finally exploring. It's a diversion rather than a change in my studio practice. I've written a chapbook as a part of Susan Siltan's Whistling Project. I also have 2 editions coming out with The Aperture foundation, which will debut at Paris Photo LA.



Above: *Aftermath #15*, 2013  
pigment print scratched with a razor, 36 x 54 inches



**“Russell's deceptively simple works display his knack for infusing complex, often contradictory sensations into otherwise bland imagery.”**

—Christopher Knight,  
*Los Angeles Times*, February 23, 2007

Left: *Interiors (Triptych)*, 2010  
pigment print scratched with razor, 24 x 36 inches

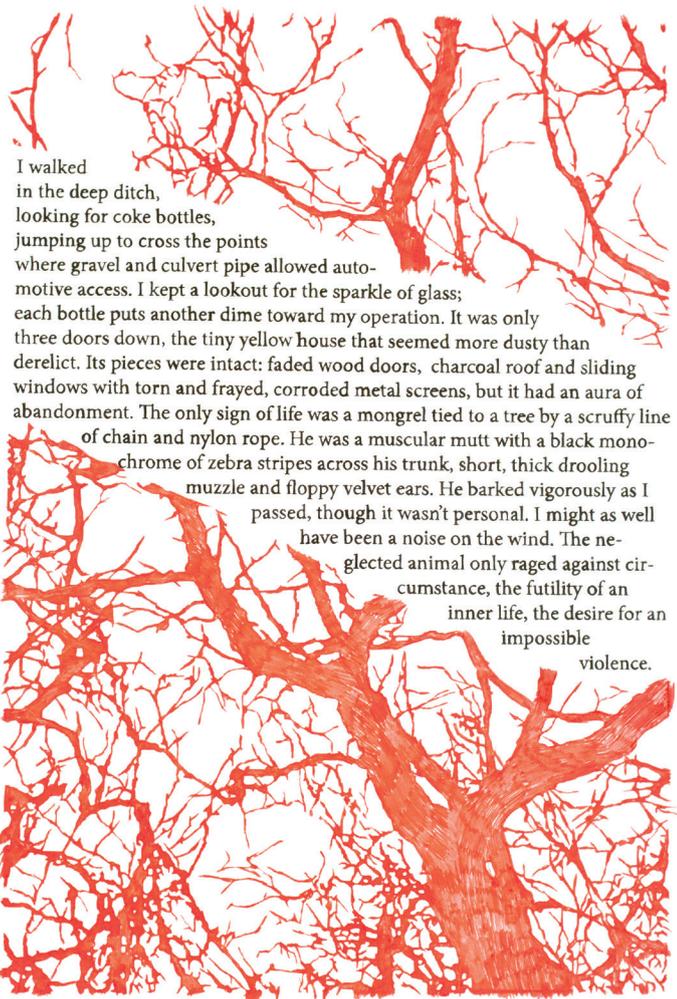
Opposite Page: *Budget Decadence*, 2008  
pigment print hacked with cleaver, 34 x 36 inches

Pages 10-11: *Aftermath #12*, 2013  
Pigment print scratched with a razor  
36 x 54 inches (detail)









I walked  
in the deep ditch,  
looking for coke bottles,  
jumping up to cross the points  
where gravel and culvert pipe allowed auto-  
motive access. I kept a lookout for the sparkle of glass;  
each bottle puts another dime toward my operation. It was only  
three doors down, the tiny yellow house that seemed more dusty than  
derelict. Its pieces were intact: faded wood doors, charcoal roof and sliding  
windows with torn and frayed, corroded metal screens, but it had an aura of  
abandonment. The only sign of life was a mongrel tied to a tree by a scruffy line  
of chain and nylon rope. He was a muscular mutt with a black mono-  
chrome of zebra stripes across his trunk, short, thick drooling  
muzzle and floppy velvet ears. He barked vigorously as I  
passed, though it wasn't personal. I might as well  
have been a noise on the wind. The ne-  
glected animal only raged against cir-  
cumstance, the futility of an  
inner life, the desire for an  
impossible  
violence.

**“Russell's stories are beautifully written,  
combining a no-nonsense leanness  
that strips sentimentality to the bone  
with a great sensitivity to the  
deliciousness of details,  
the way ordinary things and  
everyday experiences shimmer with  
meaning when they make us feel deeply.”**

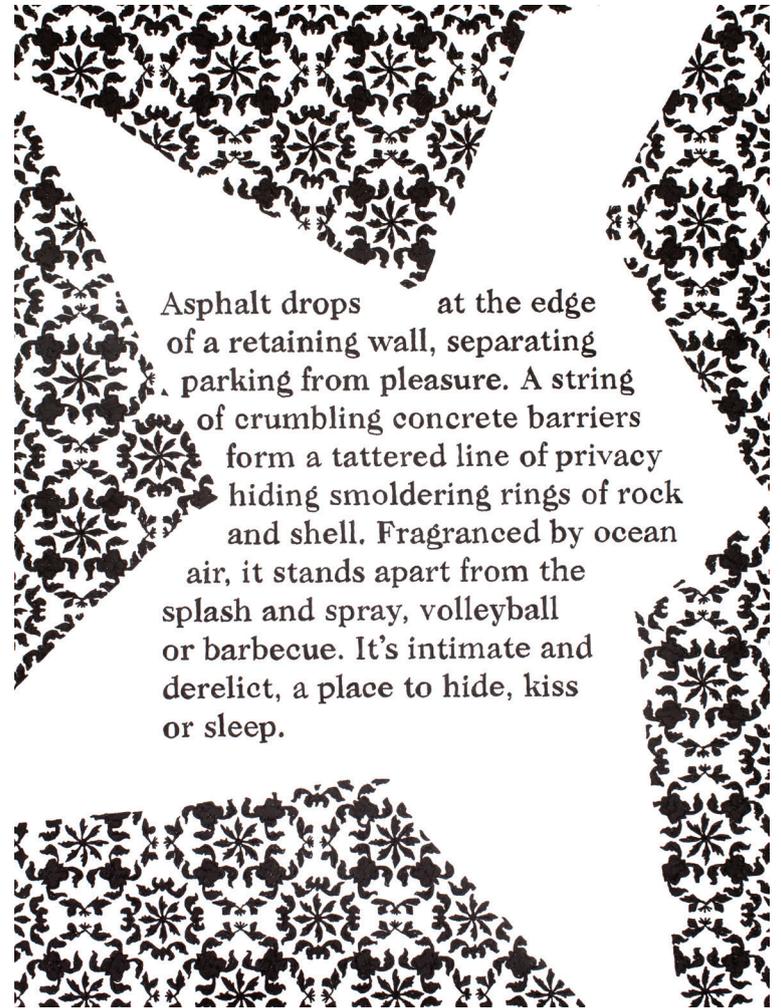
—David Pagel,  
*Los Angeles Times*, February 3, 2009

Right: Excerpt from *GRFALWKV*, 2013-2014  
carbon based fountain pen ink, pigmented fountain pen ink,  
spray paint, pressure sensitive adhesive, bound in cloth with  
collage on marbled boards, 18 x 24 inches

Opposite Page: Excerpt from *Runaway*, 2010  
handmade book, fountain pen ink on paper, bound in leather  
with marbled boards, 18 x 24 inches

Page 14: *Explosion #6*, 2013  
folded pigment print scratched with a razor, 21 x 33 inches

Page 15: *Explosion #1*, 2013  
pigment print scratched with a razor, 14 x 18 inches

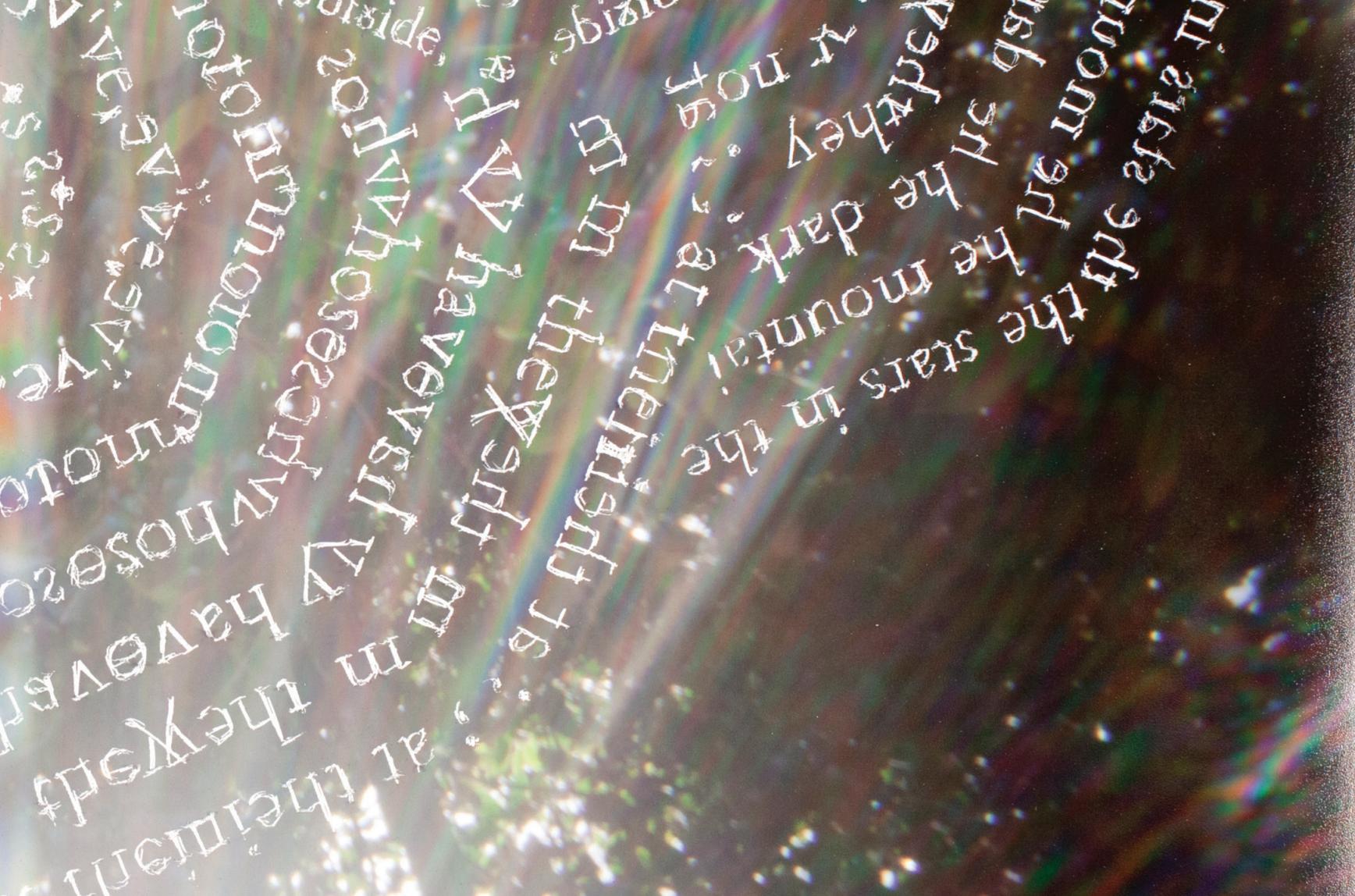


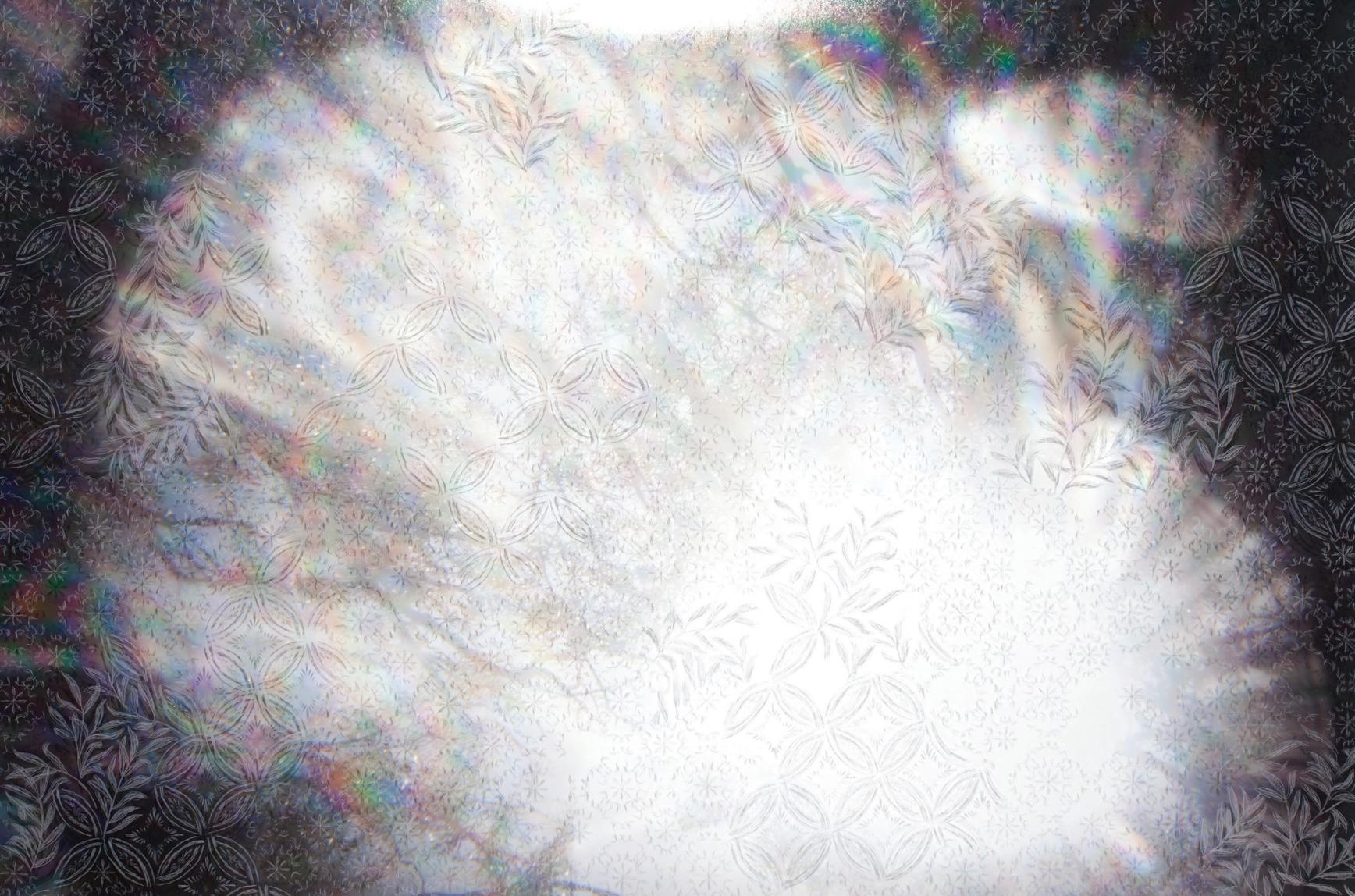
Asphalt drops at the edge  
of a retaining wall, separating  
parking from pleasure. A string  
of crumbling concrete barriers  
form a tattered line of privacy  
hiding smoldering rings of rock  
and shell. Fragranced by ocean  
air, it stands apart from the  
splash and spray, volleyball  
or barbecue. It's intimate and  
derelict, a place to hide, kiss  
or sleep.











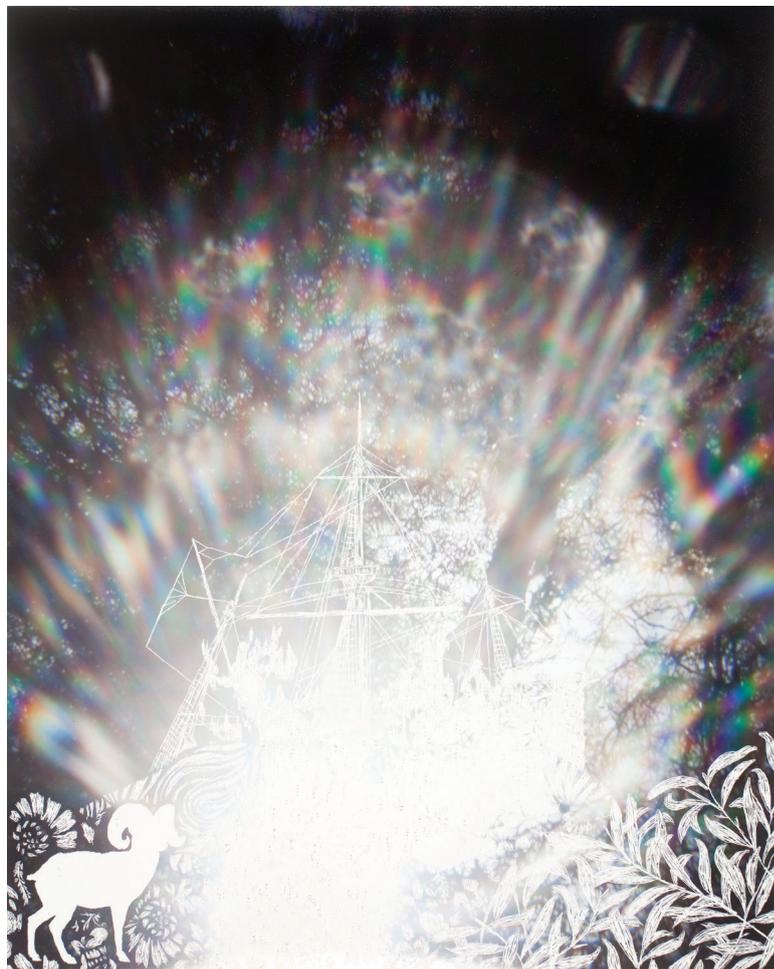
**“Russell’s photos are transitory views of the past, an examination of how one image can bring about varying reminiscences, here conveyed through alterations by the artist: scarred paper, dried flowers, violent cuts, colorful decoration and imaginative drawings.”**

–Tucker Neel, *ArtPulse*, January 12, 2012

Right: *Aftermath #8*, 2013  
pigment print scratched with a razor, 14 x 18 inches

Opposite Page: *Explosion #10*, 2014  
pigment print, acrylic sheet scratched with a razor,  
21 x 33 inches

Pages 16-17: *Explosion #1*, 2013  
pigment print scratched with a razor, 14 x 18 inches (detail)



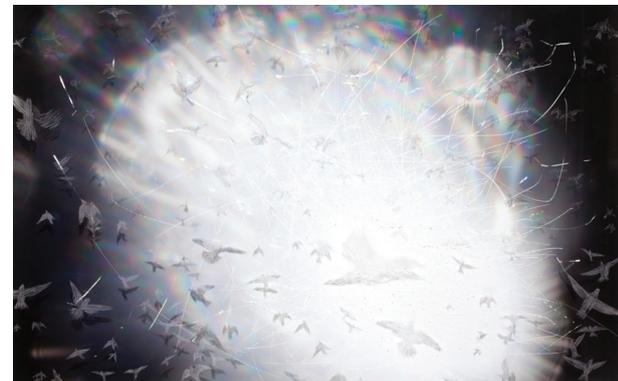


Left: *Explosion #13*, 2013  
pigment print scratched with a razor  
14 x 18 inches (detail)

Above: *Explosion #13*, 2013  
pigment print scratched with a razor  
14 x 18 inches

Opposite Page: *Aftermath #4*, 2013  
pigment print scratched with a razor  
14 x 18 inches





Left: *Aftermath #11*, 2013  
pigment print scratched with razor, airbrush  
paint, spray paint, 14 x 18 inches

Above: *Aftermath #2*, 2014  
pigment print hacked with cleaver, acrylic  
sheet scratched with a razor, 21 x 33 inches

Opposite Page: *Explosion #9*, 2014  
folded pigment print scratched with a razor,  
34 x 36 inches



# BIO

## CHRISTOPHER RUSSELL

Born 1974

Lives and works in Los Angeles, CA

### Education

2003 Art Center College of Design, MFA

1998 California College of Arts and Crafts, BFA

### Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2014 *GRFALWKV*, Mark Moore Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
- 2013 *Landscape*, 2nd Floor Projects, San Francisco, CA
- 2012 *Bedwetter and Beyond: The Complete Bookworks of Christopher Russell*, LA Art Book Fair, MOCA Geffen Contemporary  
*Christopher Russell*, Art Brussels, Belgium
- 2010 *Christopher Russell*, NADA Miami, Runaway  
*Runaway*, Luis De Jesus Los Angeles, Santa Monica, CA
- 2009 *Ghost Story*, Sam Freeman Gallery, Santa Monica, CA  
*Interiors*, Circus Gallery, Los Angeles, CA  
*Christopher Russell: Hammer Projects*, Hammer Museum
- 2007 *Together*, Acuna Hansen, Los Angeles, CA
- 2005 *The Veil Trembles and is Very Thin*, Acuna Hansen, Los Angeles, CA  
*Becalmed*, One Institute, USC, Los Angeles, CA
- 2004 *New Work*, Van Harrison Gallery (Gallery 1R), Chicago, IL
- ### Selected Group Exhibitions
- 2014 *Queer Zines*, Curated by AA Bronson and Phil Aarons, LA Art Book Fair at MOCA's Geffen Contemporary, CA  
*The Book Lovers*, De Appel Arts Center, Amsterdam
- 2013 *10x10 American Photobooks*, Tokyo Institute of Photography, Japan

*10x10 American Photobooks*, 10/Ten, New York, NY

*10x10 American Photobooks*, PGH Photo Fair

*Essential: Selections from the Permanent Collection Celebrates UCR*

*Sweeney Art Gallery's 50th Anniversary*, Sweeney Art Gallery, UC Riverside, Riverside, CA

*Che Mondo*, Barnsdall Art Center, Los Angeles created by Carole Ann Klonarides, CA

2012 *Were Not Now*, KM Gallery, Santa Monica, CA

*After Image: The Photographic Process(ed)*, Cerritos College Art

*The Crash of Ruin Fitfully Resounds*, Luis De Jesus, Los Angeles, CA

*Drawing*, Another Year in LA, CA

2010 *Tilt/Shift LA*, Luis De Jesus, Los Angeles, CA

*Now WHAT?* Norton Museum, Palm Beach, FL

*Stille Post*, Kinkead Contemporary, Los Angeles, CA

*In the Realm of the Lenses*, Stephen Cohen Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

2009 *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, Armory Center for the Arts, Pasadena, CA

*Multiples*, Co-Lab, Copenhagen

2008 *Queer Zines*, New York Art Book Fair, Phillips de Pury & Company

*Schadenfreude*, The Collins Building, Miami, FL

2007 *100 Years in the Making*, Oakland Museum, Oakland, CA

*Reading Room*, Armory Center for the Arts, Pasadena, CA

*Material Concerns*, Robert V Fullerton Art Museum, San Bernardino, CA

2006 *Many Happy Returns*, High Energy Constructs

*Consider This; Eat the Market; Publish and be Damned*,

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA

2005 *Open Walls White Columns*, New York, NY

*The Picture I Carry in My Head*, Cirrus Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

- Eyebeam, New York, NY
- 2004 *Big and Holy*, Cartelle, Marina Del Rey, CA
- 2002 *Out of the Sky and into the Ground*, Black Dragon Society, Los Angeles, CA  
*Out of the Sky and into the Ground*, Pond  
*Behind Closed Doors*, Works Gallery, San Jose, CA
- 2000 *Family and Friends*, Mainstream and Alternative, Second City Council, Long Beach, CA Curated by Mary-Kay Lombino
- 1999 *Chicago Artists 1999*, 312 Gallery, Chicago
- 1997 *Shrink*, Southern Exposure, San Francisco, Curated by Julie Lazar

### Collections

The Brooklyn Museum  
 Berkeley Art Museum  
 Buffalo University Library  
 J. P. Getty Museum, Getty Research Institute  
 Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago  
 Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles  
 Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego  
 Museum of Contemporary Art, Antwerp  
 Museum of Fine Arts, Houston  
 New York University, Fales Library, Dennis Cooper Archive  
 Rhode Island School of Design Museum  
 Sweeney Art Gallery, University of California Riverside, Riverside, CA  
 Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography  
 Tom of Finland Foundation, Los Angeles, CA  
 Hammer Museum, Los Angeles  
 Deutsche Bank

### Front cover:

*Aftermath #12*, 2013

pigment print scratched with a razor  
 36 x 54 inches

### Back cover:

*Ghost Ship Wreck*, 2011

pigment print scratched with razor  
 40 x 60 inches

Collection of Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego (CA)

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