

# MAGNUS STARK



Magnus Stark's visual pursuits have led him down two very different paths. As a commercial architectural photographer based in Los Angeles, he creates tightly controlled, classically balanced compositions that follow all the rules. But when he unleashes his fine art instincts, that rulebook goes out the window as Stark explores the medium's outer limits. This propensity for pushing an image to the extreme finds its most potent expression in Stark's *Alchemy* series. Begun in the mid-1990s, this work channels subliminal impulses in order to effect a singular and disquieting transformation of his subject matter.

"I wanted to create something new that I had not seen before," he explains. "Something that would surprise myself and hopefully surprise and challenge viewers. I wanted to provoke a reaction that might help them to learn something about themselves. To do that, I realized I needed to explore the fringes of photography and see what

might develop by embarking upon a technical and alchemical journey. A longtime interest in the Surrealist Movement and its artists inspired me to incorporate the unconscious in my photography, so over the years I have developed my own automatist techniques."

Each of Stark's one-of-a-kind images starts out as an unexposed (or partially exposed) piece of Polaroid Type 55 film, which he treats as a blank slate, a *tabula rasa*. He treats the emulsion of this cellulose "canvas" to various chemical manipulations to summon his compositions from the primordial id. Without giving away too much of his formula, Stark relates that the process is essentially one of distillation that plays out for hours, days, and sometimes weeks as he "exposes" the images.

"I work with the image and wait, watch and discover what can be revealed," he says. "As with karma, many things can influence the result, but at a certain point in the journey, the

image is fixed with my scanner. Next comes the post-processing stage, which includes toning in Photoshop, before I output onto rag paper."

This highly personal, symbiotic combination of film and digital yields enigmatic and provocative images that resonate with various kinds of visual tension. The shapes and textures that Stark conjures seem poised uncertainly between the organic and the metallic. Some of the images suggest strange, amoebic life forms; others might be topographic details of far-flung alien planets. They also exude a pronounced sense of decay—an impression that is enhanced by a subtle array of corrosive tonalities—while simultaneously exhibiting a curious feeling of warmth. And the apparent surface disintegration seems to induce a dislocation of time. One is unsure whether these images represent chronological stasis or progression. This aesthetic of unconventional and uncomfortable beauty is in perfect accord with Stark's stated desire to explore a parallel universe through photography.

"The massaging of these images is based on an intuitive reaction inclusive of visual, emotional and metaphysical terms," Stark says. "To put it another way, the subject matter is latent inside the images. Sometimes it emerges as something big and complex, sometimes as small and simple, and on a good day as both. However, I have no control over the mood of each piece. Some are inviting, others are more ominous. This is up to each individual viewer to experience and interpret."

Stark began his photographic journey during his childhood in Sweden in the late 1960s. A gift of a plastic Diana camera, hands-on instruction in his father's darkroom, and imagery from Ingmar Bergman films instilled in him a desire to create visual moods and narratives through the manipulation of light and shadow. Exposure to the work of Edward Weston and Duane Michaels led to the realization that there were any number of ways to make compelling images—both straightforward and mysterious. After moving to San Francisco in the mid-1980s, he further refined his skill set by working in photo labs and assisting a prominent architectural photographer. The latter experience inspired an enduring love for meeting the technical challenges of this particular genre.

While the influence of his architectural work can be discerned in Stark's more representational fine art portfolios, his "Alchemy" series stands apart in its approach and results. Setting aside rational thought and technique in favor of a meditative, instinctive state, Stark is able to tap into new ways of seeing and new insights. By courting the element of chance, he's found heretofore unseen doors that open onto unclaimed worlds of beauty and complexity.

—Dean Brierley

#### ■ PRINT INFORMATION

For pricing and availability, please contact the artist.

#### ■ CONTACT INFORMATION

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SHE HAS LEFT BUT LEFT HERSELF BEHIND, LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA—1994



RHYTHM OF SPACE, LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA-1994



IT NEITHER COMES NOR GOES-2008



THE THUMB PENETRATION TEST-2008



THE CATASTROPHY OF TIME-2008



HAPPY PEOPLE DON'T NEED TO HAVE FUN-1994