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CHIAROSCURO AND THE VISUAL DEFAMILIARISATION OF THE CORPOREAL FORM IN PHOTOGRAPHY

This visual essay analyses the use of chiaroscuro in photography to reveal the uncanny, a phenomenon that occurs when the familiar and the unfamiliar intersect. Through an original series of photographs produced in a controlled studio environment, this essay demonstrates how chiaroscuro functions beyond stylistic convention. By manipulating light and shadow to create dramatic contrasts, it can disrupt conventional perceptions of the body, producing unsettling yet compelling transformations of the human form. Engaging with Surrealist photographic strategies and the Freudian uncanny, this visual essay highlights the interplay between concealment and revelation, positioning chiaroscuro as a means of constructing alternative visual realities in an era of increasing visual ambiguity.

Introduction

Photography's reliance on light is fundamental, yet its manipulation through lighting techniques like chiaroscuro invites an assessment of its ability to challenge conventional perceptions of the human form. Lighting brings images to life and creates illusions of shape and form[1], enabling photographers to explore beyond presentation and critically represent reality through the construction of new realities[2]. This visual essay examines chiaroscuro's capacity to disrupt perception through photographic experimentation to explore how light and shadow shape corporeal representations. While research has documented the

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use of various lighting techniques and their roles in shaping visual narratives across photography and art history[3], little attention has been given to how chiaroscuro, in particular, constructs corporeal narratives. Chiaroscuro employs a singular light source in a low light environment, with dark backgrounds used to emphasise contrast. The interplay between light and shadow reveals and conceals to aid in the construction of narratives, making it an integral technique in Surrealist photographic strategies.

As photography continues to evolve, questions surrounding perception and truth remain increasingly urgent. The visual instability once examined through Surrealist lighting techniques finds renewed relevance in contemporary image culture, where the rise of AI-generated imagery and digital misinformation has significantly reshaped visual perception since early 2023[4]. The increasing influence of these technologies necessitates a renewed examination of photographic strategies that challenge perception and reality. Similar to how Surrealist photography sought to disrupt conventional ways of seeing and understanding reality, generative AI and computational manipulations complicate distinctions between the real and the unreal. Though separated by time and technological means, both movements engage with the idea that images shape how one perceives reality. Given these concerns, it becomes necessary to revisit chiaroscuro's role in shaping corporeal narratives—not only through historical analysis but also through experimental photographic practice.

Surrealist photographers working in the aftermath of war and political upheaval, amid the rise of European fascist ideology, employed experimental lighting to destabilise the body's legibility. They sought to challenge perception by exploring the connection between the unconscious and the social world, recognising that 'psychical representations could not be dissociated from the social and political environment around them'[5]. Photography was already embedded within ideological structures yet also served as 'a vital tool in undoing that function,'[6]. It offered a way to resist through visual subversion. Surrealist photographers such as Man Ray and Germaine Krull used chiaroscuro to construct imagery of distorted, fragmented, or unfamiliar representations of the human form, often influenced by traumatic war experiences[7]. Similarly, Edward Weston leveraged chiaroscuro in still-life photography to defamiliarise everyday objects, transforming them into unfamiliar, sculptural form[8]. By concealing and revealing through light, Surrealist photography defamiliarized the human form, amplifying themes of the uncanny, a concept rooted in Freudian notions of subconscious tensions and repressed desires[9].

This visual essay expands upon these Surrealist strategies by experimenting with chiaroscuro in a controlled studio environment to investigate its capacity to disrupt conventional perceptions of the body. The images presented here explore how chiaroscuro manipulates bodily perception, emphasizing the tension between familiarity and distortion. These conventional perceptions of the body are informed by historical ideals such as the Renaissance ideal of proportion and the Classical ideal of beauty[10], built upon perceptive understanding of shapes and patterns[11] and through lived experiences[12]. Additionally, the embodied experience of viewing these images further aids in the nuanced perception of the familiar[13] from amongst the form made unfamiliar. Through these experiments, chiaroscuro functions not just as a stylistic

device, but as an agent in manifesting the uncanny and shaping corporeal forms in photography.

In Figures 1 to 4, the chiaroscuro illuminates the subjects as the focal point of the image, which, in the context of z-axis compositional tropes, emphasises and thematizes the revealed centre and initiates a process of exposure of the unseen[14]. These photographs demonstrate this methodology; combined with posturing and unconventional angles (Figures 2 and 4), the body undergoes defamiliarisation through concealment within the shadows and is reframed to reveal 'abstract, decontextualised surfaces'[15]. Yet corporeal familiarity remains pervasive throughout the images. Figures 1 to 4 captures glimpses of the human form, directing a soft focus towards regions of the body that otherwise remain overlooked, where presence manifests from absence as chiaroscuro illuminates upon fragments of the body. It echoes not just sentiments of the lighting technique employed in Ray's *Lee Miller* (1930), but also within Rembrandt's paintings as he took to the canvas the dramatic and naturalistic applications of the chiaroscuro to give life to the unknown depths of vision and feeling[16]. Chiaroscuro requires a balance between the light and dark areas, much like Rembrandt's lighting. Rembrandt's lighting refers to a lighting technique that Rembrandt frequently used, in which a singular light source is placed 45-degrees from the subject to create a natural and dramatic look.

The chiaroscuro in Figures 1 to 3 afford enhanced depth and dimensions to the human body and does not merely aid in the generation of perceptive realism, it allows the unknown to rise from inconspicuousness and claim existence. Lighting within a studio environment is conventionally lit from above to reinforce normative expectations of illumination ingrained from perception, through practice and the surrounding environment such as sunlight. The dramatic light falloff, as seen in Figures 1 and 3, renders the bottom half of the image and subject into darkness and obscurity. As seen in Rembrandt's portraits, shadows do not merely
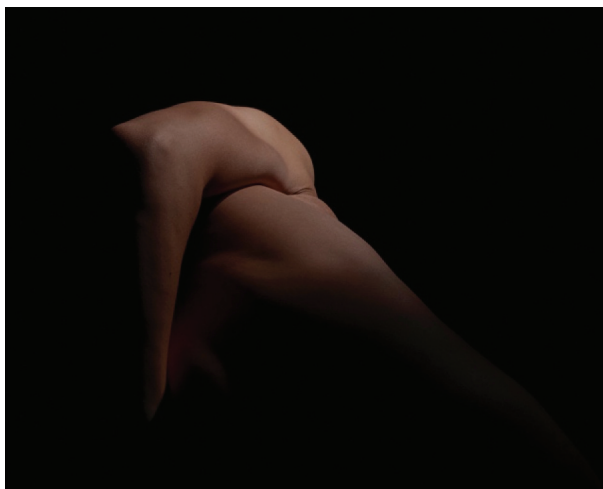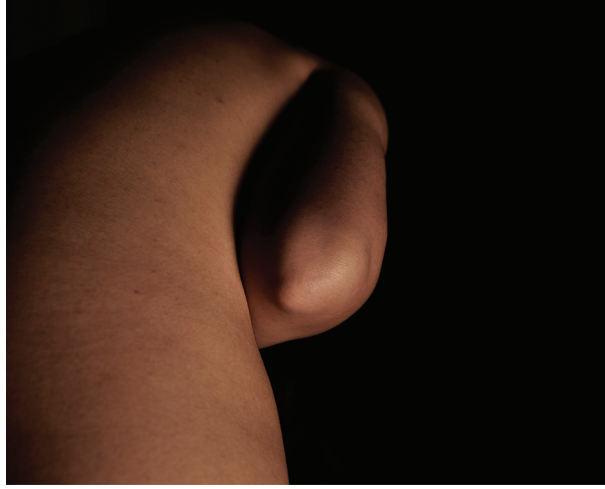

Fig. 1.   Dissimulation #1. Lin Wei, 2017.

Fig. 2.   Dissimulation #2. Lin Wei, 2017.

Fig. 3.   Dissimulation #3. Lin Wei, 2017.

obscure but shape presence, amplifying what remains in darkness. Figures 2 and 4 also experiences this light falloff using the chiaroscuro technique, and is photographed from a lower angle to centralise an element of the body that would have otherwise remained inconspicuous. In this moment, posture, framing, and contrast work in tandem to subvert the expected direction of light. Highlights slip into darkness, and shadows assert themselves as more than negative space. They become active forces in reshaping the body's visual and psychological presence. The interplay of highlights and shadows distorts the body's readability, fostering a visual and psychological ambiguity that mirrors broader concerns of perception

Fig. 4.   Dissimulation #4. Lin Wei, 2017.

and visual instability. enhanced depth and dimensions to the human body and does not merely aid in the generation of perceptive realism, it allows the unknown to rise from inconspicuousness and claim existence. Lighting within a studio environment is conventionally lit from above to reinforce normative expectations of illumination ingrained from perception, through practice and the surrounding environment such as sunlight. The dramatic light falloff, as seen in Figures 1 and 3, renders the bottom half of the image and subject into darkness and obscurity. As seen in Rembrandt's portraits, shadows do not merely obscure but shape presence, amplifying what remains in darkness. Figures 2 and 4 also experiences this light falloff using the chiaroscuro technique and are photographed from a lower angle to centralise an element of the body that would have otherwise remained inconspicuous. In this moment, posture, framing, and contrast work in tandem to subvert the expected direction of light. Highlights slip into darkness, and shadows assert themselves as more than negative space. They become active forces in reshaping the body's visual and psychological presence. The interplay of highlights and shadows distorts the body's readability, fostering a visual and psychological ambiguity that mirrors broader concerns of perception and visual instability.

Furthermore, these photographs introduce colour as an additional layer of engagement distinct from the Surrealist grayscale aesthetic toward a heightened sense of corporeal familiarity. Whilst chiaroscuro in painting revelled in the use of colour (such as Caravaggio, Rembrandt and Goya), early photography, in particular that of the Surrealist era, operated within the constraints of grayscale imagery. The adoption of chiaroscuro in Surrealist photography and its capabilities to compel complete perceptual transformations of the human form could not be realised to the extent to which their painting counterparts achieved. Colour held an intrinsic role in heightening chiaroscuro's impact on the

perception of form and interplay between visibility and concealment, especially in the likes of Rembrandt's paintings[17]. On the other hand, Surrealist photographers resorted to hand-painting and colourisation techniques to add depth to their compositions prior to wide-spread colour photography adoption[18]. Through Figures 1 to 4, colour introduces the material presence of flesh and skin tones through warm natural hues. It reinforces the presence of corporeality familiarity, while the chiaroscuro distorts perception. In contrast to grayscale imagery, colour enhances the tension between concealment and revelation as its primary intention, rooted in its Latin origin, is to hide, conceal, disguise yet render plausibility or misrepresent[19]. The colours, along with the textures of the skin; the microbumps; papules; pores and surface irregularities are brought into focus through chiaroscuro. It invites a tactile recognition that engages the viewer's senses[20] and amplifies corporeal familiarity. This tactility grounds the images in the uncanny, where the unfamiliar and familiar intersect, reinforcing chiaroscuro's ability to create dramatization, suspense and depth, working towards the appearance of reality[21]. By integrating chiaroscuro with colour, texture, and contemporary photographic methods, these images reframe the defamiliariza-tion of the human form.

Tenebroso

Figure 5 deploys a more pronounced form of chiaroscuro—*tenebroso* to emphasise the distribution of dark intensities, encompass the body in shadows to conceal and reduce the familiarity of the body. In contrast to Figures 1 to 4, tenebristic lighting does not merely challenge the interplay of light and shadow, but rather conjures
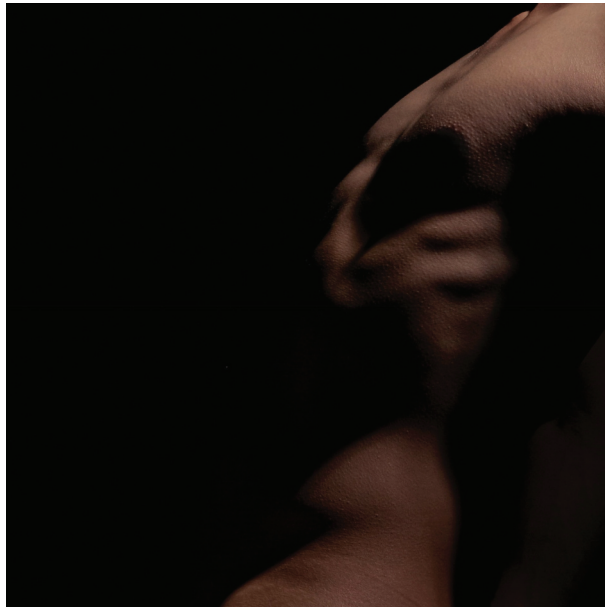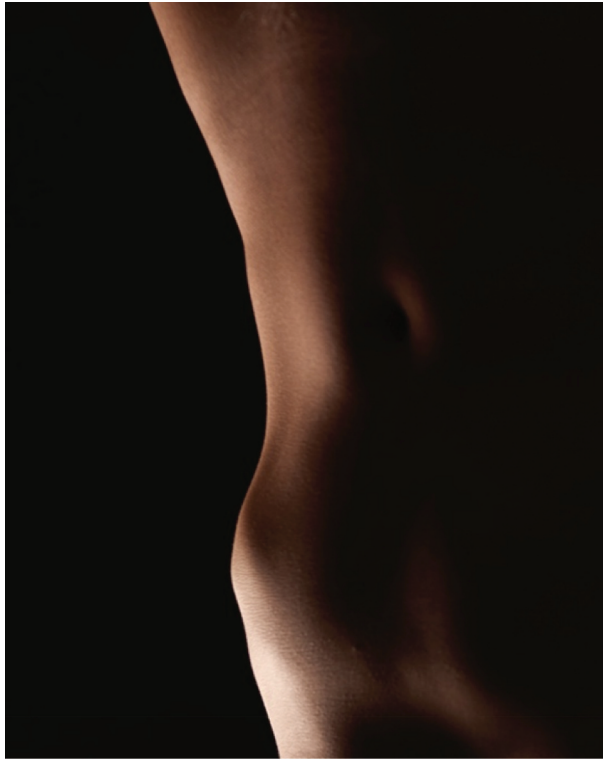

Fig. 5.   Dissimulation #5. Lin Wei, 2017.

Fig. 6.   Light and shadow. Lin Wei, 2020.

phenomenological experiences and heightened sensations of the uncanny. Figure 5 conjures the *monstrous* through the deliberate manipulation of light. As Foster[22] notes within the context of Surrealist photography, the monstrous is engaged as a site of rupture and instability. The disruption of perception and representation garners visual ambiguity. Figure 5 fractures bodily recognition, producing an unsettling effect where forms shift between materiality and dissolve into shadows. The monstrous does not merely denote the visually grotesque or symbolic attribute of the subject, but also the body's transformation beyond the familiar, evoking an estrangement from its own physicality. The torso emerges from shadow into light; the body's contours accentuated to evoke the unsettling impression of a gaping mouth as the diaphragm pulls away from the light, echoing similarities to Man Ray's metaphorical beasts (e.g. *Minotaure* (1934)) where Ray revelled in photographing the human as both living and inhuman and breaking away from the 'integrity of classical form'[23]. The careful positioning and angle of the singular light source in Figure 5 is essential; without it, the evocation of the mythical creature—a manifestation of repressed desires—would falter, and the uncanny transformation would remain unrealised. Chiaroscuro tends to lead to less complexity, as noted by Correa-Herran[24]. However, the greater the intensity in contrast—towards *tenebroso*—the more unsettling the image becomes, as Piotr Sadowski suggests, when familiar shapes are 'disfigured by violent contrasts'[25].

One can suppose that the reduction in technical complexity afforded by chiaroscuro's *tenebristic* nature connotes to possibilities of heightened psychological complexity as Figure 5 reveals.

The scope of the chiaroscuro is not limited by the interactions between light and shadow, but also the role in which objects interact and cast shadows to aid what is referred to as *shadow lighting*, for shadows cast by an object are darker than the shadow cast by the object itself[26]. Capitalising on this technique within the chiaroscuro lends itself to increasingly unsettling and grotesque forms. The exaggerated interplay between shadow and shadows cast by the body in Figure 5 evokes pareidolia, where one may be able to abstract familiar forms from the defamiliarized body, echoing sentiments of the uncanny. For Figure 5, the pectoralis major casts a pocket of shadow due to the direction of lighting which, combined with the severe gradation of light from the upper to lower pectoralis major, manifests a frightening face. Unnaturalness of the shadows results in an appearance that differs from the body, which humans are intimately familiar with through lived experience, such that one may expect a doppelganger to arise from the shadow[27].

The tenebristic narrative continues in Figures 6 and 7, affording extreme shadow intensities to defamiliarise the human form. Here, the emphasis of shadows disarticulates the body, reducing its corporeality, becoming less legible and less familiar. The effects of such lighting is neither abstract or wholly representational; a liminal space is evoked. Ultra-tight crops and rim lighting emphasise sharp lit edges to reveal peculiar perspectives of the body. The rim lighting traces the curves and depressions of the body, yet the shadows lessen its anatomical coherence.

Figure 8 echoes the Surrealist act of visual violence towards its subject, leveraging the tenebroso lighting and positioning the torso in a way that casts a shadow at the waistline, severing itself from the lower body. Further adjustments to the body posture result in a form that is penile in appearance (Figure 9), with the flesh-like skin afforded by colour photography intensifying the Surrealist trope of phallicisation. It also echoes sentiments of uncanny forms photographed by Surrealist predecessors like Man Ray (*Anatomies*, 1929) and Brassaï (*Nude*, 1931). This phallic form resonates
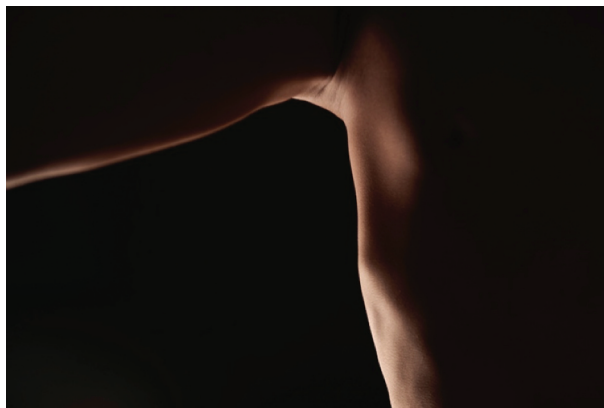

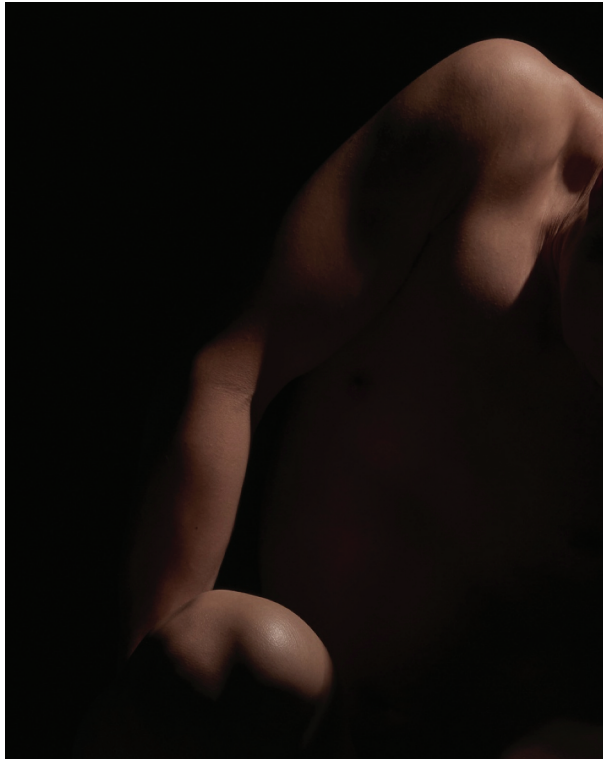Fig. 7.   Light and shadow. Lin Wei, 2020.

Fig. 8.   Light and shadow. Lin Wei, 2020.

with the *optical unconscious*[28] in which Rosalind Krauss connotes the photographic image as revealing more than the eye can consciously perceive. The knee bathes in light and couples with the softly illuminated forearm. Isolated in its prominence, the coalesced form finds its unconscious associations. Much like Hans Bellmer's violent amalgamations in his Doll (1934–37) series and the blotted inclusion of fleshy and red hues, the shadow dismembers the body in Figure 8. The tenebroso becomes an instrument of visual subversion, defamiliarising the body (Figure 9) to provoke the double, while the flesh-like skin tones aid in keeping the body grounded in realism.

Conclusion

Chiaroscuro enabled visual representations of subconscious tensions and repressed desires, warranting its appearance in a Surrealist photographer's repertoire of lighting techniques, as did Caravaggio and chiaroscuro to portray emotional impact and drama in his paintings[29]. Through these photographs I produced, it becomes evident that the uncanny emerges most powerfully when deep shadows intensify the contrast with the illuminated, allowing the concealed to gradually reveal itself. For the technique of chiaroscuro, this interplay between light and darkness constructs a visual space where
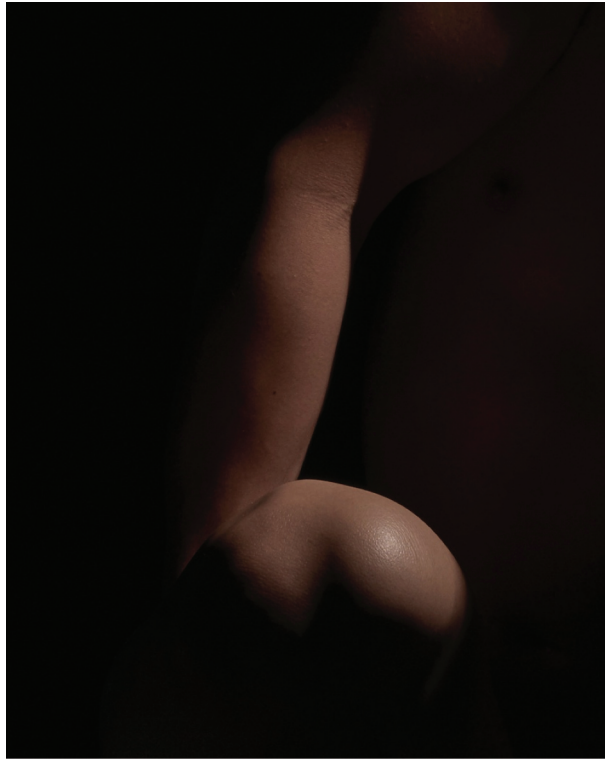
Fig. 9. Light and shadow. Lin Wei, 2020.

the familiar and unfamiliar collide, coexisting to evoke unsettling yet compelling transformations of the human form. In this delicate balance, the viewer is invited to navigate the tension between what is seen and what remains hidden, offering a new lens through which to engage with the complexities of the body and the unconscious. As we come to find, light and shadow remain important tools for interrogating boundaries of perception and navigating photographic truth and realism.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. Lavine and Bartholomew, *Lighting for Photographers.*
2. Bate, *Photography As Critical Practice.*
3. Weisman, *A Complete Treatise on Artistic Retouching, … and Individuality*; Weston et al., *The Daybooks of Edward Weston*; and Stevenson, *Shadowing Art.*
4. Dufour et al., *Ammeba.*
5. Bate, *Photography and Surrealism*, 9.

6.   Ibid., 9.
7.   For example, Ray's *Anatomies* (1929), *"Neck" (Lee Miller)* (1930) and Krull's *Hand Studies (1929).*
8.   For example, Weston's *Pepper No. 14* (1929) and *Cabbage Leaf* (1931).
9.   Freud, "The 'Uncanny'".
10.   Hutson, *Gallucci's Commentary on Dürer's "Four Books on Human Proportion."*
11.   Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception*.
12.   Wei, *Photographic Ways of Seeing*.
13.   Brodsky, *How to "See" with the Whole Body*.
14.   Daley and Bell, *Visual Abstraction and Anatomy*.
15.   Ibid., 195.
16.   Rosenberg, *Rembrandt: Life and Work*, 308.
17.   Ibid., 316.
18.   See Ruggles, *Paintings on a Photographic Base*.
19.   Hirsch, *Exploring Color Photography*, 17.
20.   See Note 1 above.
21.   See Note 3 above.
22.   Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*.
23.   Hoving, *Man Ray's Disarming Venuses*, 126.
24.   Correa-Herran et al. *Evolution of Neuroaesthetic Variables in Portrait Paintings Throughout the Renaissance*, 15.
25.   Sadowski, *Systemic Semiotics*, 155.
26.   See Note 3 above.
27.   Stevenson, *Shadowing Art*.
28.   Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*.
29.   Witting and Patrizi, *Caravaggio*.

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