

OPENINGS

HÉLÈNE FAUQUET

JENNY WU

Below: **Hélène Fauquet, *Ether* (detail), 2024**, ink-jet prints, frames, table, 41 × 63 × 24".
Opposite page: **Hélène Fauquet, *Vortex* (detail), 2024**, ink-jet prints, frames, table, 40 × 60 × 18".
Both from "*Nuit de cellophane*," 2024, Ulrik, New York. Photos: Stephen Faught.



ON A WINTER AFTERNOON this past February, sunlight flooded a third-floor gallery in Manhattan's Chinatown, alighting on the extra-large rhinestones and metallic roses that adorned a few of the nearly one hundred kitschy mass-market photo frames that were on display. These intimately scaled, eclectic objects—which gave the impression of having been hand-picked over several years of weekend shopping in sundry antiques stores and junk shops—were distributed across nine office tables. The frames held photos of soap bubbles, in dusky blues and spectral silvers, which were either clustered together like viruses under a microscope's lens or captured as lone specimens, as though they were close-ups of blank, rounded faces. Altogether, these elements constituted H el ene Fauquet's first US solo show at Ulrik. In the evening, warmer columns of light crept menacingly over the works from the windows looking out to Canal Street, where assortments

of knockoff and discount commodities were gathered, like the frames, for the public's delectation. As the shadows lengthened, however, horrors unfolded across Fauquet's multiplicity of forms.

It takes audacity for someone to follow an idiosyncratic obsession to its logical conclusion. Occasionally, one can pinpoint the moment when an artist makes that leap in their own practice, reorienting themselves toward a singular pursuit. Consider how Mondrian's 1911 encounter with Cubist paintings catalyzed his turn from Impressionistic landscapes to graphic abstractions, after which, for example, he reduced the ocean to I-beam-like configurations of vertical and horizontal line segments; or how Moyra Davey's altercation with a subject of her street photography in 1984 led to her pivot from portraiture to domestic still lifes featuring bookshelves, light fixtures, and the dust bunnies beneath her bed. For Fauquet, a French





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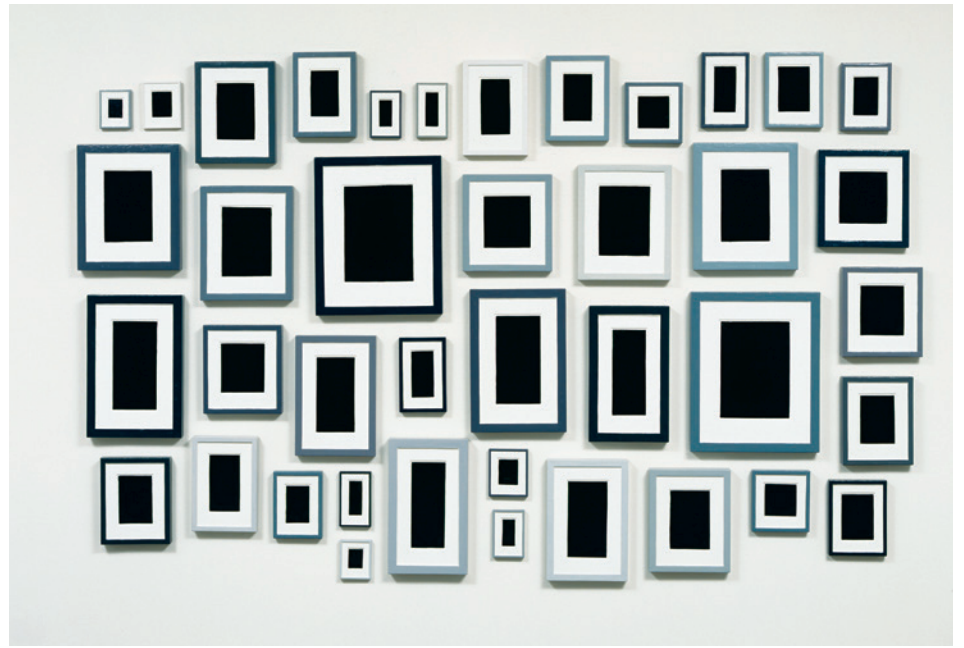
photographer, Conceptual artist, and avid reader and writer who composes pictorial essays that occupy space in the three-dimensional manner of sculpture, this shift manifested in a dramatic winnowing of imagery that occurred between the summer of 2023 and her Ulrik exhibition.

Before this change, Fauquet, who earned degrees from France's École Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Valenciennes, in 2009, and the Städelschule Academy of Fine Art, Frankfurt, in 2014, had been knee-deep in "poor images," as artist Hito Steyerl characterizes them. She UV-printed found photographs of stained-glass windows and 1960s-style bubble mirrors on wood, and once placed a large, low-definition snapshot of a Saturn ring mirror on a billboard in Aubervilliers, France. For "Phenomena," a 2023 solo presentation at Kunsthaus Glarus in Switzerland—the show was titled after Dario Argento's 1985 slasher about a serial killer and an all-girls Swiss boarding school—Fauquet expanded her repertoire beyond pictures of single subjects into what she calls image "systems." The exhibition featured eight unassuming and almost clinically utilitarian rectangular tables. On each of them stood a salon-style plethora of sterling silver and molded acrylic frames, suggesting worldly abundance and encyclopedic knowledge. Inside them were film stills from Argento's movie; photos of assorted wildlife, including a dew-encrusted locust, a cephalopod, and a baboon, clipped from a natural-history book (the show's title also referenced a popular science exhibition the city of Zurich hosted in 1984); and, finally, soap bubbles and other types of viscous (and even bloodlike) globules, which Fauquet captured on a DSLR camera equipped with a macro lens. Like Bjarne Melgaard's *Greenland, a novel*, 2008/2010, an installation composed of antique furniture covered in effigies, photographs, and texts that tells a fragmented personal account of sexual abuse, Fauquet's "Phenomena" hinted at of equally charged yet more oblique narrative that had undergone



a process of refraction and diffusion, the details of which were less important than its palpable aftershocks.

Fauquet included an image of Melgaard's installation in her notes for "*Nuit de cellophane*," her show at Ulrik. Here, the frame-and-table assemblages reappeared, yet their contents were conspicuously reduced. Gone were the film stills and nature prints: Only the suds remained. Nondescript forms that resisted interpretation, the blobs called to mind beauty serums and scientific specimens alike. They gleamed with surface tension, clumped together like sentient hordes. Fauquet's cryptic narrative seemed to have morphed into an obsessive repetition; the work hovered between the dispersed pathos of *Greenland, a novel* and the obdurate impersonality of Allan McCollum's *Plaster Surrogates*, 1982—, copious groupings of faux canvases, painted black, that Fauquet often references as well. Her bubbles, derived from mass-produced oils and cleansers, belong to everyone and no one. Part of the unsettling feeling of encountering one of Fauquet's profuse tableaux, however, comes from the sense that the artist has taken the docu-



Opposite page, from left: **Hélène Fauquet, *life-world* (detail), 2023**, ink-jet prints, gelatin silver prints, book pages, lobby cards, frames, table, 29½ × 33½ × 53⅝". From "Phenomena," 2023, Kunsthaus Glarus, Switzerland. Photo: Gina Folly. **Hélène Fauquet, *Saturn Ring*, 2021**, billboard. Installation view, 124 Henri Barbusse Street, Aubervilliers, France. Photo: Morgan Courtois. Above: **Hélène Fauquet, *Wrath*, 2024**, UV print on wood, 36 × 22". From "Nuit de cellophane," 2024, Ulrik, New York. Above, right: **Allan McCollum, *Collection of Forty Plaster Surrogates*, 1982/1984**, enamel on cast Hydrostone, forty panels, overall 64 × 110". Below: **Mark Cohen, *Bubblegum*, 1975**, gelatin silver print, 16 × 20". From "Mirrors and Windows: American Photography Since 1960," 1978, Museum of Modern Art, New York.



mentation and preservation of this impersonal imagery quite personally, as if she were framing and arranging portraits of deceased relatives.

Living between Paris and Vienna, Fauquet frequently works at home, and the studio she does use is shared with fashion designers in the Parisian quartier of Belleville. She reads voraciously—the sprawling notes she takes serve as a substitute for a private dedicated workspace. These writings are filled with quotations from figures like Roland Barthes, Paul Frankl, and Susan Sontag, which commingle with stream-of-consciousness entries akin to those in Louise Bourgeois's journals. In her notes, Fauquet uses the term "shapes in turmoil" to describe bubbles and blobs, which are often, she laments, employed by advertising companies to evoke the concept of youth when selling anti-aging products. Rather than instrumentalizing her bubbles for the sake of narrative or marketing, Fauquet imbues them with a sense of preciousness by framing them so exquisitely. Just as Jennifer Corvino, the neurasthenic main character of Argento's *Phenomena*—who often seems naive about the existential threats that surround her—is imprisoned by the headmistress of her school, ostensibly for Corvino's own safety, so too has Fauquet sequestered her own delicate, destructible subjects from external harm.

Given that a bubble can be both reflective and transparent, one might recall John Szarkowski's survey "Mirrors and Windows: American Photography Since 1960" at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1978. For that show, the director of MOMA's photography department divided the roughly two hundred works on view into two groupings: "mirrors," or pictures that expressed the photographer's state of mind; and "windows," those that offered a view into the world from a single vantage point. Fauquet's bubbles, however, refuse to conform to one category or the other. It is not immediately evident whether these thin, prismatic membranes tell us anything about life, or if the act of selecting frames constitutes a form of self-expression. Fauquet's persistent elaboration on a theme instead reveals the way an artist's obsessions refract into an array of associations and sympathies. □

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