

*Chuck Kelton, A HISTORY OF THE WORLD, Unique Gelatin Silver Chemigram, 2022*

# *TERRAIN*

CHUCK KELTON

ALISON BRADLEY PROJECTS

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# *TERRAIN*

Alison Bradley Projects  
September 8 - November 5, 2022

Alison Bradley, Principal  
Rebecca Humphreys, Director  
Cayla Blachman, Gallery Associate  
Eimi Tagore-Erwin, In-house Curator

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## Introduction

Chuck Kelton (b. 1952, New York) discovered his passion for photography at an early age, gaining a reputation as a Master Printer in New York City after studying at the Kansas City Art Institute and then earning his MFA in photography from Ohio University. Kelton has worked with Lillian Bassman, Danny Lyon and Mary Ellen Mark, amongst many other renowned photographers of the era; as well as being a virtuoso artist in his own right. His cameraless chemigrams and photograms pay homage to the photographic process, while creating a genre of his own that blurs the boundaries of photography.

*TERRAIN* explores the culmination of Kelton's mastery of process, form, and color. These chemigram works, sometimes combined with elements in photogram, not only reflect the vast possibilities of Kelton's chosen medium, but also embody the landscapes the camera traditionally captures. In his exploration of the materiality of the photographic process, Kelton also considers the reproduction of nature. His manipulation of chemicals, metals, light, and silver photographic paper mimic the creation of worlds. In these alchemical works, a cosmic landscape reveals itself; the subject and process are unmistakably intertwined.

In the 22 works introduced in this exhibition, Kelton demonstrates what the medium is capable of in the absence of the camera. Rather than capturing an image, the artist constructs it himself, challenging the relationship that photography traditionally creates between the author and subject. In this sense, this body of work both embraces and eschews tradition. Kelton gestures at aspects of reality through the inclusion of a horizon line and other terrestrial bodies, a nod to the long lineage of the landscape in photography. He relies on the technical history of the dark room, even using chemical formulas dating back to the 19th century.

For *TERRAIN*, Kelton reignites this disappearing analog craft by using its tools to create work independent from the camera but indebted to the photographic process. Though the landscape is utterly abstracted, the artist's process grounds the work in a physical world. While much of the reaction between chemicals, light, and paper are up to chance, Kelton controls these interactions and as such, his compositions. *TERRAIN* exhibits that Kelton is not just a master of his craft, but an artist who has taken it forward into new ground.



## Press Release

**Alison Bradley Projects** is pleased to present *TERRAIN*, unique works by Chuck Kelton (b. New York, 1952).

*TERRAIN* presents 22 recent works by Chuck Kelton, a culmination of his lifelong experimentation with chemicals, light and paper. The exhibition includes six distinct, yet related, series of chemigrams, some with elements of photograms: *SEARCH FOR A WORLD*, *A NIGHT SKY*, *MOONRISE*, *TERRAIN*, *A HISTORY OF THE WORLD*, and *PARADISE*.

Kelton demonstrates what the photographic medium is capable of in absence of the camera. Rather than capturing an image, Kelton constructs it himself. Manipulating his media with an almost painterly abstraction, Kelton creates otherworldly landscapes. This reference holds onto some aspect of reality, but the work simultaneously moves away from the traditional bounds of photography. However, these works are still deeply entrenched in this heritage.

In terms of technique, Kelton gestures to the history of the dark room, employing aspects of the chemical formulas dating back to the 19th century and making them his own. He reignites this disappearing craft by using its tools to create work independent from the camera but indebted to the photographic process. This use of traditional media grounds the work in the physical world, but the landscape itself is utterly abstracted. While much of the reaction between chemicals, light, and paper are up to chance, Kelton controls these interactions and, as such, his compositions. His nod to the landscape gestures toward a long history of the subject within photography, even nudging the master negatives that have passed through Kelton's hands, such as Ansel Adams' *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico*. Instead of emulating these masterworks, Kelton challenges photography's traditional relationship between author and subject. In this sense, Kelton both embraces and eschews tradition, enabling him to create something entirely new. *TERRAIN* exhibits that Kelton is not just a master of his craft, but an artist who has taken it forward into new ground.

*TERRAIN* is accompanied by an online catalogue featuring texts by art historians Allison Pappas and Larry List.

## Biography

Born in New York, Chuck Kelton graduated from Kansas City Art Institute in 1975 and then received an MFA in Photography from Ohio University in 1977. Kelton went on to work with some of the greatest photographers of the era with the foundation of Kelton Labs, including Lillian Bassman, Danny Lyon, and Mary Ellen Mark. However, Kelton's own work has as much in common with the abstract expressionists as it does with these photographic legends. Chuck Kelton is a virtuoso artist creating chemigrams, an artwork involving a complex alchemy of darkroom chemicals, toners composed of precious and semi-precious metals, combined with unconventional methodologies such as the folding of the light sensitive paper itself. He is also a master of photograms, using light to create form. These techniques are combined in his unique cameraless works to evoke

imagined landscapes. Through his manipulation of chemicals and light, Kelton creates worlds much like our own, however touched by ethereality and enigma. In these planetary compositions, he explores the reproduction of landscape and nature, as well as the vast possibilities of photographic printing.

## Of Chemical and Conceptual Experiments: Chuck Kelton's Created Worlds

Allison Pappas

Is this a photograph? It is probably not a question we ask ourselves often, particularly not in the context of an exhibition at an art gallery. But Chuck Kelton's work encourages this kind of speculation, revealing the benefits (and perhaps even necessity) of carefully considering our ideas about a medium. How is meaning generated at the intersection of the particular qualities and capacities of a photographic process, and the viewer's defining associations with it?

Take *Search for a World #7*, for example. A nocturne, the image portrays a dark moon hanging low above a mountain range, with a constellation of stars above and the glow of a city in the distance, as a flash of lightning cuts across the sky. The scene appears grainy, as though the film were fighting against the darkness, and yet it perfectly captures the luminous experience of long, slow looking at night. But on second glance, this landscape cannot be real: atmospheric conditions do not behave like this, and various unexplained elements do not quite line up as they should. The forms seem to have grown rather than registered on the photosensitive surface, and the tonal range offers nuances not typically associated with a black-and-white photograph. Of course, as we know, this is not a typical photograph of a landscape; as a cameraless image, it is "of" a landscape only insofar as we feel that it is.

And it is in this catch—where the viewer realizes that the image is not what they thought it was, and "what" becomes "how," testing the expectations of a photograph—that Kelton's work so productively encourages us to question our conceptions of the medium. When we think about photography, we tend to think of a kind of naturalistic picture with a special relationship to reality, perhaps with a greater purchase on "truth" due to the way it is understood to be made and its seeming correlation to our visual experience of the world. This idea generally assumes a lens-based image, but cameraless photographs have been made alongside these images from the beginning, as well. In fact, photochemical experiments on paper or metal surfaces represent the first experimental steps in the medium's history.

Working in France in the 1820s and 1830s, inventors Nicéphore Niépce and then Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre first had to test the light sensitivity of various chemical formulas before they could bring the camera into the equation. And in England around the same time, William Henry Fox Talbot and John Frederick William Herschel continued to privilege making cameraless photographs, even after they began working with cameras. The simple "specimens" they made by placing everyday objects like lace and leaves (or even nothing at all) directly on a sensitized surface were experimental—technically and aesthetically—individual steps in a process of experimentation and refinement. These inventors made educated guesses based upon a combination of scientific knowledge and material affinity, and sometimes a bit of chance; expectations failed, accidents succeeded, and over time they and other early photographers developed the instincts and expertise that constitute artistic practice. Ultimately, they produced a new kind of image to be assimilated into visual culture, a process of making and making sense.



Figures like Talbot and Herschel laid the foundation for both the chemical processes and conceptual understanding of the photographic medium; since then, artists have turned to the core materials and techniques of their craft with great concentration (in both their numbers and serious attention) in different historical moments. The 1920s and 1930s saw a revival of cameraless photography amongst avant-garde artists in Europe and the United States, driven by a desire to push photography towards abstraction, solidifying its recognition as a fine art form. In the midst of the “photo boom” of the 1970s and 1980s, artists in the United States returned to historical processes to explore the implications of the singular object in a new commercial market. Today, working in a dominant visual culture of digital production and circulation, artists are once again engaging in a material dialogue with the past that promises to reconceptualize, not canonize, our ideas about the medium.

As Kelton’s practice demonstrates, experimental rigor is the through line in this historical lineage of cameraless photography. Inventors, at whatever stage in the medium’s history, transform a mastery of materials and techniques into new terrain—creating a world that never existed. In expanding the boundaries of the material, Kelton makes images that push against horizons of expectation, demanding a reconsideration of our social construction of the medium. We assume a photographic quality of realness, for example, but where does this “real” reside? Is it tethered to the subject as it exists in reality, whether a leaf placed on a photosensitive surface or the form of a mountain delineated by light reflecting through a lens? Or is it generated by the viewer, who brings a lifetime of associations to the image, recognizes their own experience of a landscape at night within it, and so projects meaning upon it? Perhaps all photographs subscribe to this more subjective understanding of realism—“truth to life,” not as exact reproductions of a subject in the world, but images through which we make meaning about the world.

Such experimental rigor, then, is conceptual at heart. Kelton engages the development of photography, literally and conceptually, as a material examination of foundational ideas about the medium he has practiced with great mastery for decades.

**Allison Pappas** is currently a doctoral candidate at Brown University, focusing on the history of photography. She previously worked at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, where she was the Assistant Curator of Photography. She has also held positions at the J. Paul Getty Museum, the RISD Museum, and the David Winton Bell Gallery; in addition to being an accomplished writer, contributing to important publications such as *For a New World to Come: Experiments in Japanese Art and Photography, 1968–1979*. Pappas is also the co-director of Framing the Field: Photography’s Histories in American Institutions.

## **Chuck Kelton: Artist/Alchemist of a New Era**

Larry List

Chuck Kelton is an artist thoroughly grounded in the history of art and photography. Informed by decades of technical experience behind the camera and in the darkroom as an edition printer and artistic collaborator with many of the leading photographers of the last four decades, Kelton has acquired an encyclopedic command of the means to make any kind of photographic image. And so, when everything is possible, what does a mature virtuoso artist like Kelton decide is “necessary?”

Rather than editions, Kelton chooses to produce unique works. Like legendary ceramist George Ohr a century earlier, Kelton’s mantra is “No Two Alike!” Abandoning the arsenal of cameras and state-of-the-art darkroom at his disposal, Kelton produces camera-less images that he calls “Chemigrams,” which he creates and develops in broad daylight, away from safety lights and the darkness of the traditional darkroom.

He often folds his photo paper, cracking and violating the sanctity of the emulsion surface, then exposes the photo paper to sunlight for varying lengths of time, allowing it to oxidize and darken. Working “backwards” with stencils, brushes and spray bottles of developer, fixer, bleaches, toners and water he then creates the shapes, shadows, and textures that become his images.

These 21st century refutations of the accepted tenets of his medium echo those of the early 20th century Dadaists Christian Schad and Man Ray. Working independently, each artist extended Anna Atkin’s 19th century concept of camera-less photo printing into rich territories of experimentation and expression with their “Schadographs” and “Rayographs.”

Kelton’s unique, camera-less gelatin silver “Chemigram” process renews the Dadaists passion for alchemy, the quest to materially or metaphorically transmute “base” materials into “noble” materials. Following the pattern of all past serious alchemists, Kelton has collected and studied all of the classic, as well as obscure technical and conceptual manuscripts of earlier generations of photo chemists and practitioners.

Like the Dadaists’ friend, Modernist sculptor Constantin Brancusi, Kelton’s quest has become the discovery of beauty via the reduction of the world to its essential “essences.” In the 20th century, Albert Einstein posited that “things should be as simple as possible, but no simpler,” while more recently, digital pioneer Bill Gates has admitted that “simple is hard.”

Kelton’s efforts to reduce the world to essential essences has resulted in a constant stream of romantic evocations where even a simple horizontal line created by a contrast of tones or textures can separate heaven and earth/earth and sky. Carefully noted and perfected silhouette stencils may suggest an entire mountain range. But like Brancusi, it is not a specific mountain range or landscape, but an archetypic one that embodies all others. In such works as *Terrain*, 2021, the silhouette mirrored, implies a reflection on a lake. In *Night Sky*, 2021, a

textured circle gleaming in a dark field above a horizontal line may suggest at once a sunrise or moon rise, or even, a distant planet earth, viewed from the more coarsely textured surface of the moon.

While Man Ray's Rayographs present identifiable objects at a knowable, finite life-size scale in a ghostly form, Kelton's Chemigrams present the ancient Greeks' four primary elements,– earth, air, fire, water– as pieces of an infinitely elastic, but “un-scaleable” universe that we can hold in our hands. In Kelton's private universe the four primary elements have become paper, chemicals, darkness, and light.

The natural sense of turbulence we encounter in works such as the iterations of *Paradise*, 2017, seem “photographic” because they record the actual physical, chemical shocks and reactions of the elements used - a sense of the self-portraiture of the elements caught in the process of being themselves. For Kelton, the process and materials themselves become the subject. His ability to capture these images at precisely the right time in the process perhaps offers us a new form of what Henri Cartier-Bresson once termed photography's “Decisive Moment.”

Just as the silhouettes of prehistoric artists' hands recorded on cave walls with the textures of rocks and blown soot offer us a seemingly “simple” but ghostly record of their time so too do Chuck Kelton's Chemigrams capture for us a ghostly and enigmatic reflection of our era.

**Larry List** is a New York-based independent curator and writer. He has organized exhibitions and written essays about Dada, Surrealism, modern and contemporary sculpture, painting, and photography for the Noguchi Museum, The Tate Modern, The Menil Collection, The Warhol Museum, Reykjavik Art Museum, DOX Center for Art, Prague and others. List's 2005 *Imagery of Chess Revisited* exhibition and book were nominated for the College Art Association's Alfred H. Barr Award. He is currently part of the Man Ray Catalogue Raisonné project.



## Works

The works in ***TERRAIN*** combine photogram and chemigram techniques, exploring the possibilities of color and form within the photographic medium. These cameraless works are made using a variety of chemicals and iron, gold, and selenium toners. Kelton draws from 19th and early 20th century formulas, then bending the rules to create an image entirely his own. These chemical baths produce the rich tones throughout his work—his controlled experiments create the subtle shifts of blues and golds. Kelton has moved out of the darkroom, using shapes, stencils, and daylight to craft each composition on photographic, light-sensitive paper. The combination of these techniques result in images that are graphic, while simultaneously subtle and romantic.



**Chuck Kelton**

*TERRAIN*

Unique Gelatin Silver Chemigram

2021

23 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 19 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

Signed, dated, and titled on verso

PROVENANCE

Artist



**Chuck Kelton**

*SEARCH FOR A WORLD #7*

Unique Gelatin Silver Chemigram

2020

23 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 19 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

Signed, dated, and titled on verso

PROVENANCE

Artist



**Chuck Kelton**

*TERRAIN*

Unique Gelatin Silver Chemigram

2021

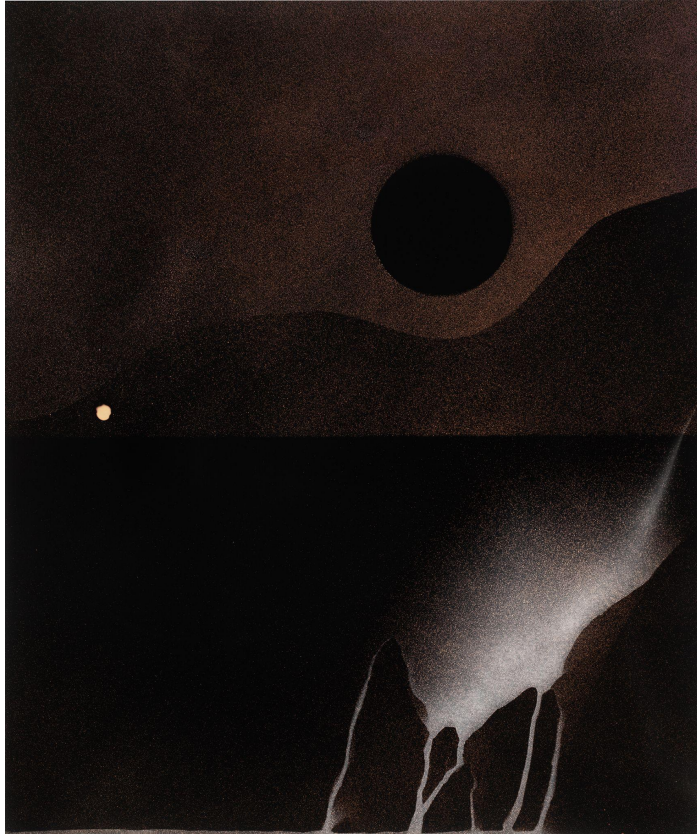
23  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 19  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches

Signed, dated, and titled on verso

PROVENANCE

Artist





**Chuck Kelton**

*MOONRISE*

Unique Gelatin Silver Chemigram

2021

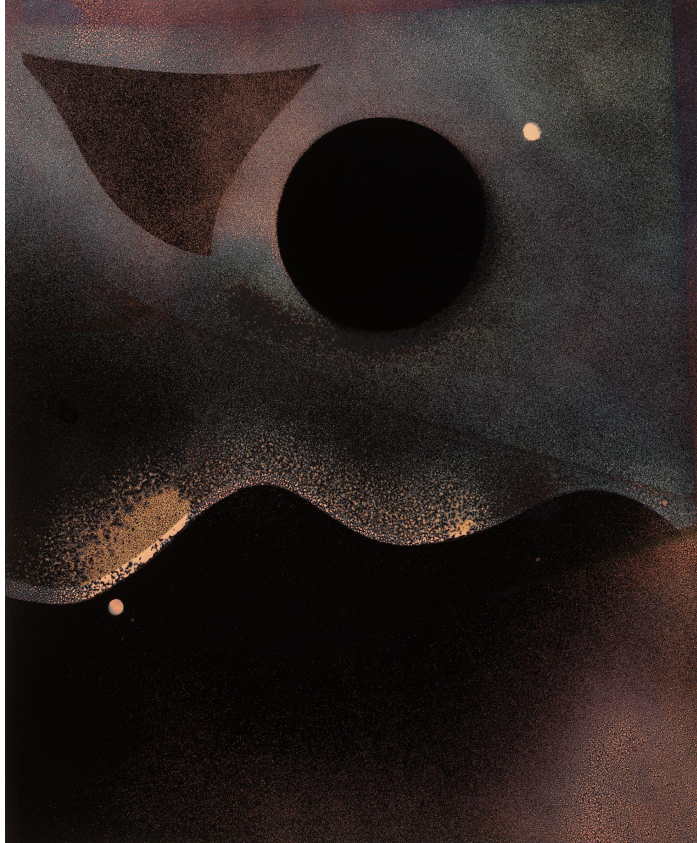
23  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 19  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches

Signed, dated, and titled on verso

PROVENANCE

Artist

.



**Chuck Kelton**

*SEARCH FOR A WORLD #10*

Unique Gelatin Silver Chemigram

2020

23 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 19 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

Signed, dated, and titled on verso

PROVENANCE

Artist



**Chuck Kelton**

*A NIGHT SKY*

Unique Gelatin Silver Chemigram

2020

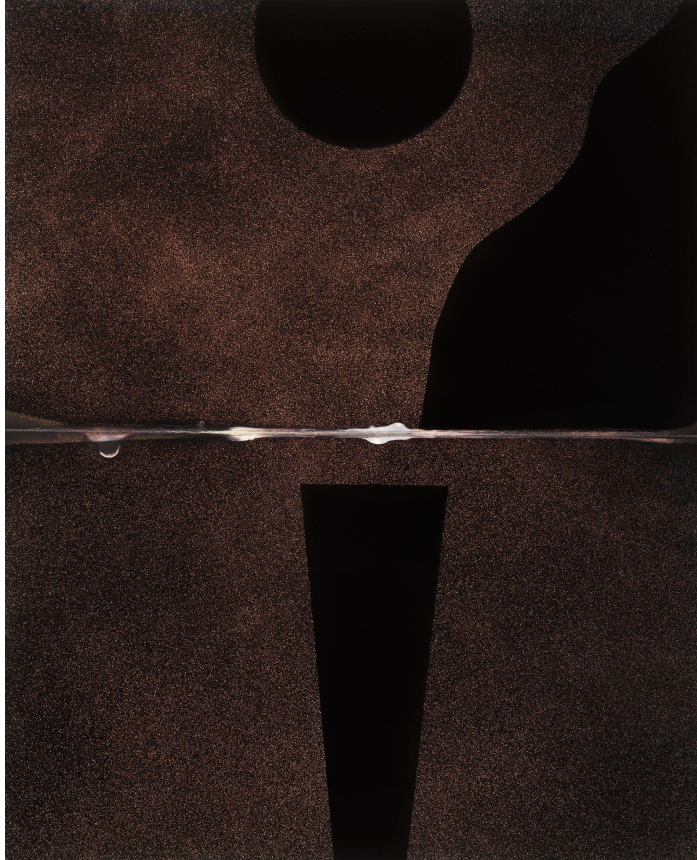
23 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 19 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

Signed, dated, and titled on verso

PROVENANCE

Artist





**Chuck Kelton**

*MOONRISE (with fold)*

Unique Gelatin Silver Chemigram

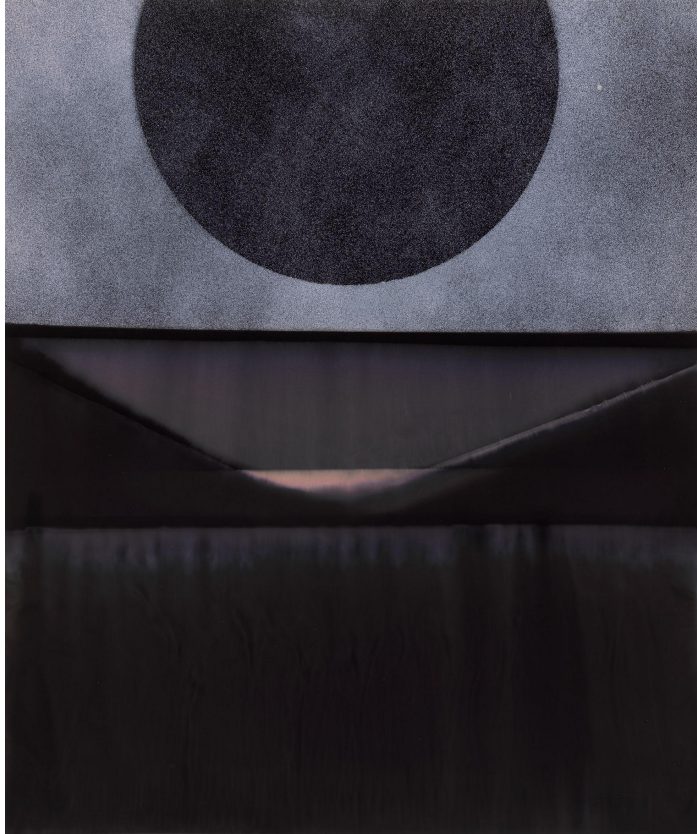
2021

23 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 19 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

Signed, dated, and titled on verso

PROVENANCE

Artist



**Chuck Kelton**

*FROM MOONRISE*

Unique Gelatin Silver Chemigram

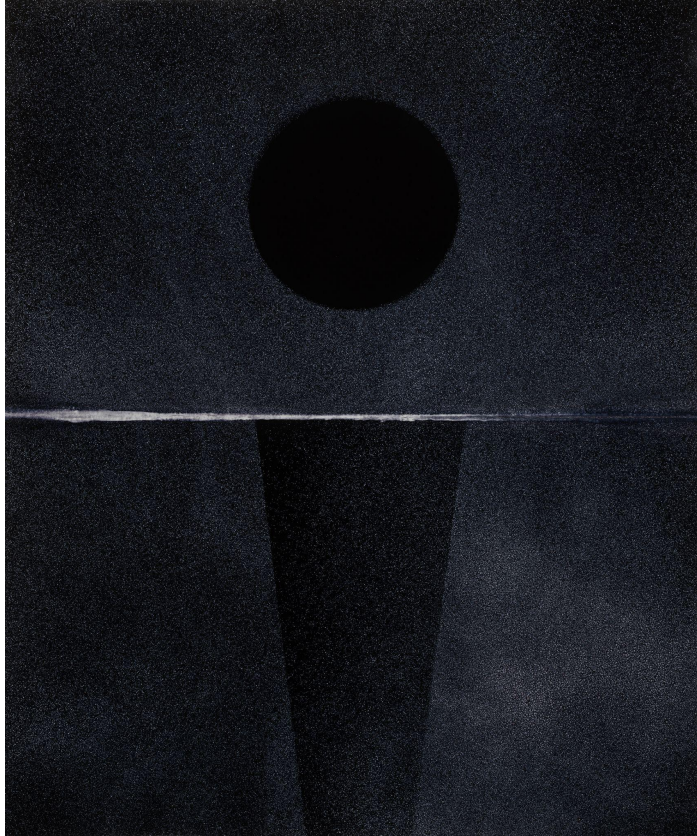
2020

23  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 19  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches

Signed, dated, and titled on verso

PROVENANCE

Artist



**Chuck Kelton**

*MOONRISE (with fold)*

Unique Gelatin Silver Chemigram

2021

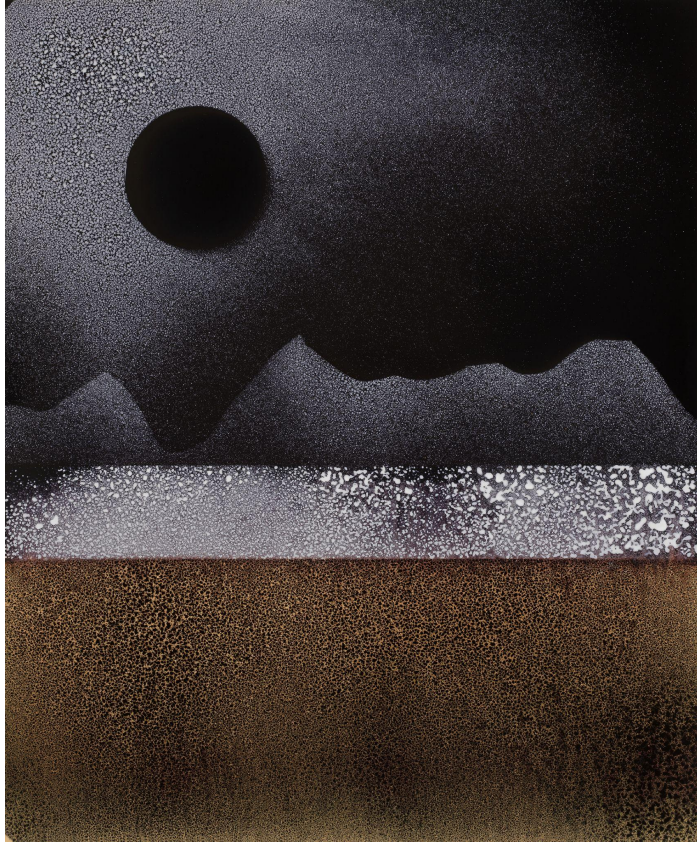
23  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 19  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches

Signed, dated, and titled on verso

PROVENANCE

Artist





**Chuck Kelton**

*TERRAIN*

Unique Gelatin Silver Chemigram

2021

23 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 19 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

Signed, dated, and titled on verso

PROVENANCE

Artist



**Chuck Kelton**

*A NIGHT SKY*

Unique Gelatin Silver Chemigram

2021

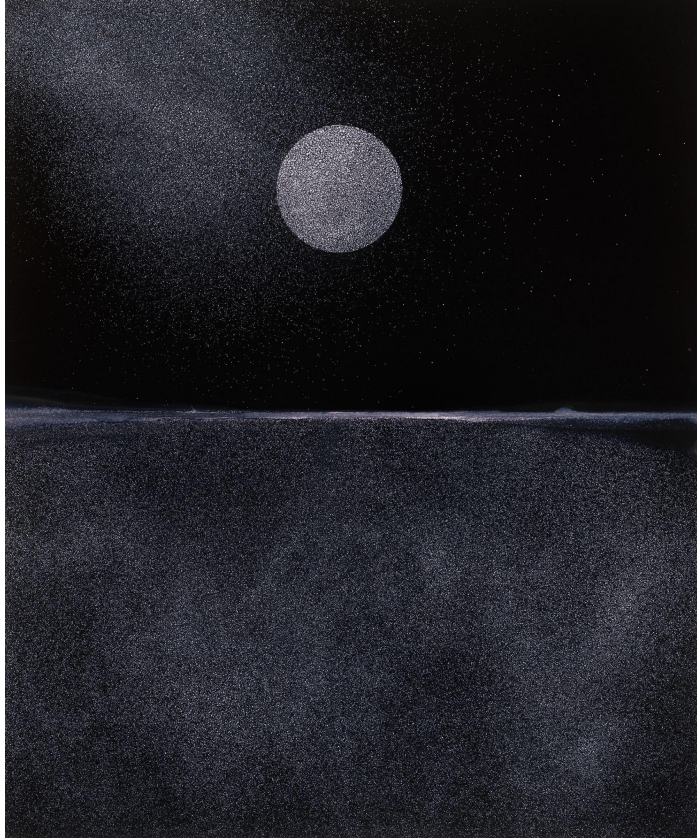
23 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 19 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

Signed, dated, and titled on verso

PROVENANCE

Artist





**Chuck Kelton**

*A NIGHT SKY*

Unique Gelatin Silver Chemigram

2021

23  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 19  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches

Signed, dated, and titled on verso

PROVENANCE

Artist



**Chuck Kelton**

*A HISTORY OF THE WORLD*

Unique Gelatin Silver Chemigram

2022

23  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 19  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches

Signed, dated, and titled on verso

PROVENANCE

Artist



**Chuck Kelton**

*A HISTORY OF THE WORLD*

Unique Gelatin Silver Chemigram

2022

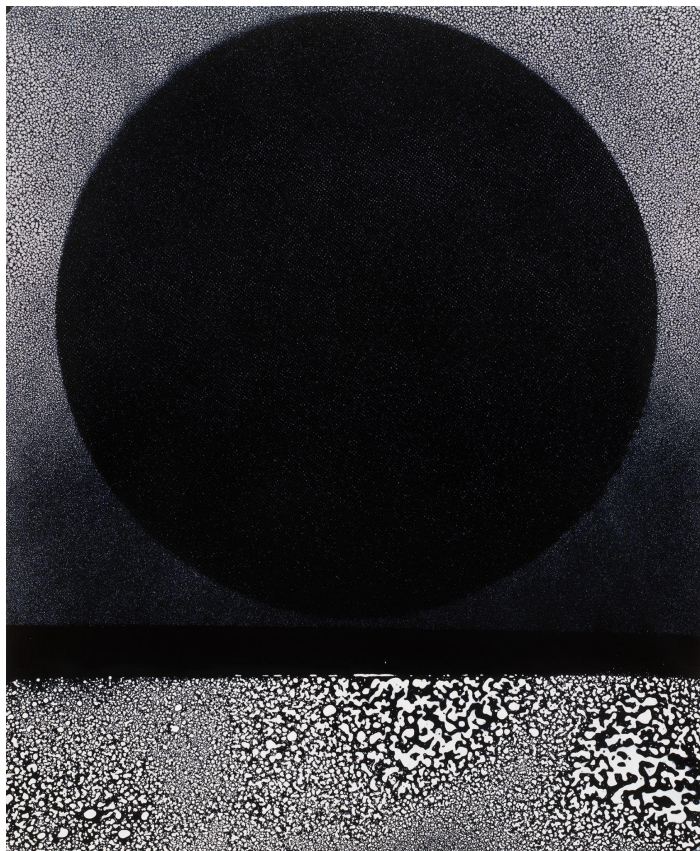
23  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 19  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches

Signed, dated, and titled on verso

PROVENANCE

Artist





**Chuck Kelton**

*MOONRISE*

Unique Gelatin Silver Chemigram

2021

23  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 19  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches

Signed, dated, and titled on verso

PROVENANCE

Artist



**Chuck Kelton**

*TERRAIN*

Unique Gelatin Silver Chemigram

2022

23  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 19  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches

Signed, dated, and titled on verso

PROVENANCE

Artist



**Chuck Kelton**

*TERRAIN*

Unique Gelatin Silver Chemigram

2022

23 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 19 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

Signed, dated, and titled on verso

PROVENANCE

Artist





**Chuck Kelton**

*TERRAIN*

Unique Gelatin Silver Chemigram

2022

23 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 19 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

Signed, dated, and titled on verso

PROVENANCE

Artist



**Chuck Kelton**

*MOONRISE*

Unique Gelatin Silver Chemigram

2021

22 5/16" x 18 1/16"

Signed, dated, and titled on verso

PROVENANCE

Artist



**Chuck Kelton**

*PARADISE*

Unique Gelatin Silver Chemigram

2017

30 x 40 inches

Signed, dated, and titled on verso

PROVENANCE

Artist





**Chuck Kelton**

*PARADISE*

Unique Gelatin Silver Chemigram

2017

30 x 40 inches

Signed, dated, and titled on verso

PROVENANCE

Artist



**Chuck Kelton**

*Untitled*

Unique Gelatin Silver Chemigram

2020

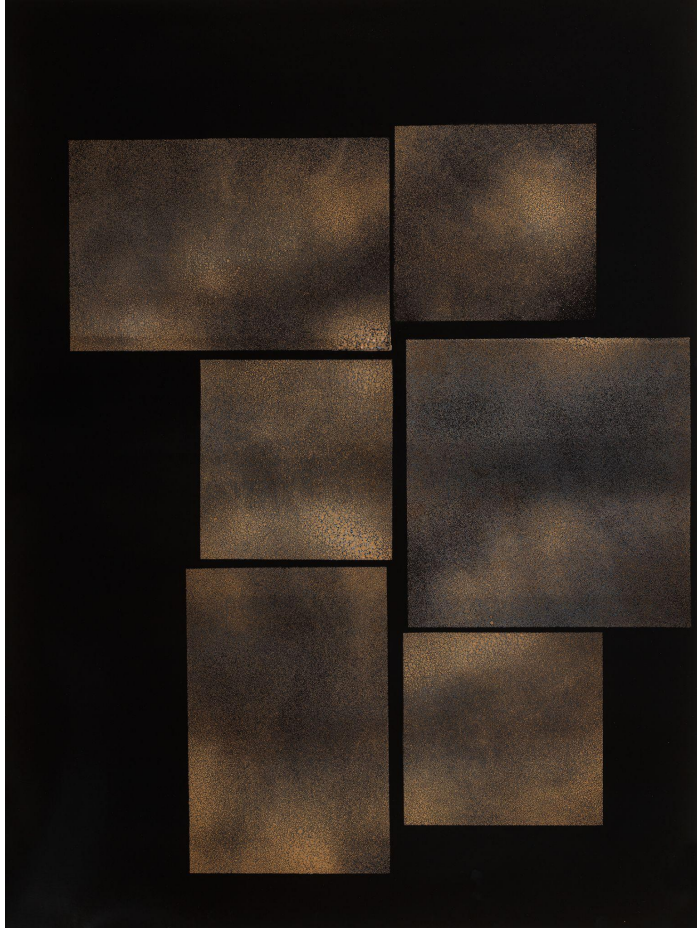
Each 30 x 40 inches

Signed, dated, and titled on verso

PROVENANCE

Artist





*Untitled* (detail)

Unique Gelatin Silver Chemigram

2020

30 x 40 inches

Signed, dated, and titled on verso



*Untitled* (detail)

Unique Gelatin Silver Chemigram

2020

30 x 40 inches

Signed, dated, and titled on verso

## CV

### Solo Exhibitions

- 2022 *Dipped in Gold*, The Space Gallery, Philadelphia, PA  
2021 *Chemistry and Light*, Von Lintel Gallery, Los Angeles, CA  
*The Alchemy of Landscape*, Galerie Miranda, Paris, France  
2020 *Folds*, Berman Museum, Collegeville, PA  
2018 *Light and Dark*, Sohn Fine Arts, Lenox, MA  
2016 Von Lintel Gallery, Los Angeles, CA  
2013 Bosi Contemporary, New York, NY  
2012 Mana Contemporary, Jersey City, NJ  
Causey Gallery of Contemporary Art, Brooklyn, NY  
2010 Causey Gallery of Contemporary Art, Brooklyn, NY  
1987 Hedgepeth Gallery, New York, NY  
1986 Hedgepeth Gallery, New York, NY  
1982 Bruxelles, Bibliotheque National, Museum Collection, Paris, France

### Group Exhibitions

- 2021 10 Year Anniversary Show, Sohn Fine Arts, Lenox, MA  
*Kankaku*, Alison Bradley Projects, New York, NY  
2020 MANA Contemporary, Jersey City, NJ  
2019 *Does not Reproduce*, Von Lintel Gallery, Los Angeles, CA  
2018 *9 New Jersey Photographers*, Stockton University Art Gallery, NJ  
2017 *DARK ROOM*, Yossi Milo Gallery, New York, NY  
2012 Robert Anderson Gallery, New York, NY  
2011 *Works On Paper*, Robert Anderson Gallery, New York, NY  
2010 *Art on Paper*, Monmouth Museum, Lincroft, NJ  
2009 International Center of Photography Education Gallery, New York, NY  
*Ingenious Methodology*, Causey Gallery of Contemporary Art, Brooklyn, NY  
2007 Hoxie Gallery, Westerly, RI  
Crossroads Gallery, Kansas City, MO  
Ch'i Contemporary Art, Brooklyn, NY  
*Line Drawing*, Queens Library Gallery, Queens, NY

### Bibliography

- 2016 Casper, Jim. "Creating with Light, Chemistry and Imagination; Photographs without a camera by Chuck Kelton." *Lensculture*, June 3, 2016.  
Ollman, Leah. "Chuck Kelton's lush landscapes, crafted in the darkroom." *Los Angeles Times*, May 31, 2016.

S. Bonnie, "Interview with Master Printer Chuck Kelton." *Onward*, Spring 2016.

- 2015 Silverman, Rena. "Hearing and Feeling What Photographers Are Saying." *The New York Times*, March 25, 2015.
- 2013 "Chuck Kelton/Eric William Carroll." *The New Yorker*, March 2013.
- 2011 "Chuck Kelton and Go Sugimoto." *The New Yorker*, April 2011.
- 2007 Meyers, William. "Out of One Darkroom, Many." *The New York Sun*, February 22, 2007.
- 1982 Focale Publication

### **Public Collections**

Houston Museum of Fine Arts, Houston TX  
Berman Museum of Art, Collegeville, PA  
Museum of Modern Art, Brussels, Belgium  
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, France  
Getty Museum, Los Angeles, CA  
Morgan Library & Museum, New York, NY  
Nelson Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO  
Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Santa Barbara, CA  
International Center of Photography, New York, NY  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA  
Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, FL  
New York Public Library, New York, NY

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