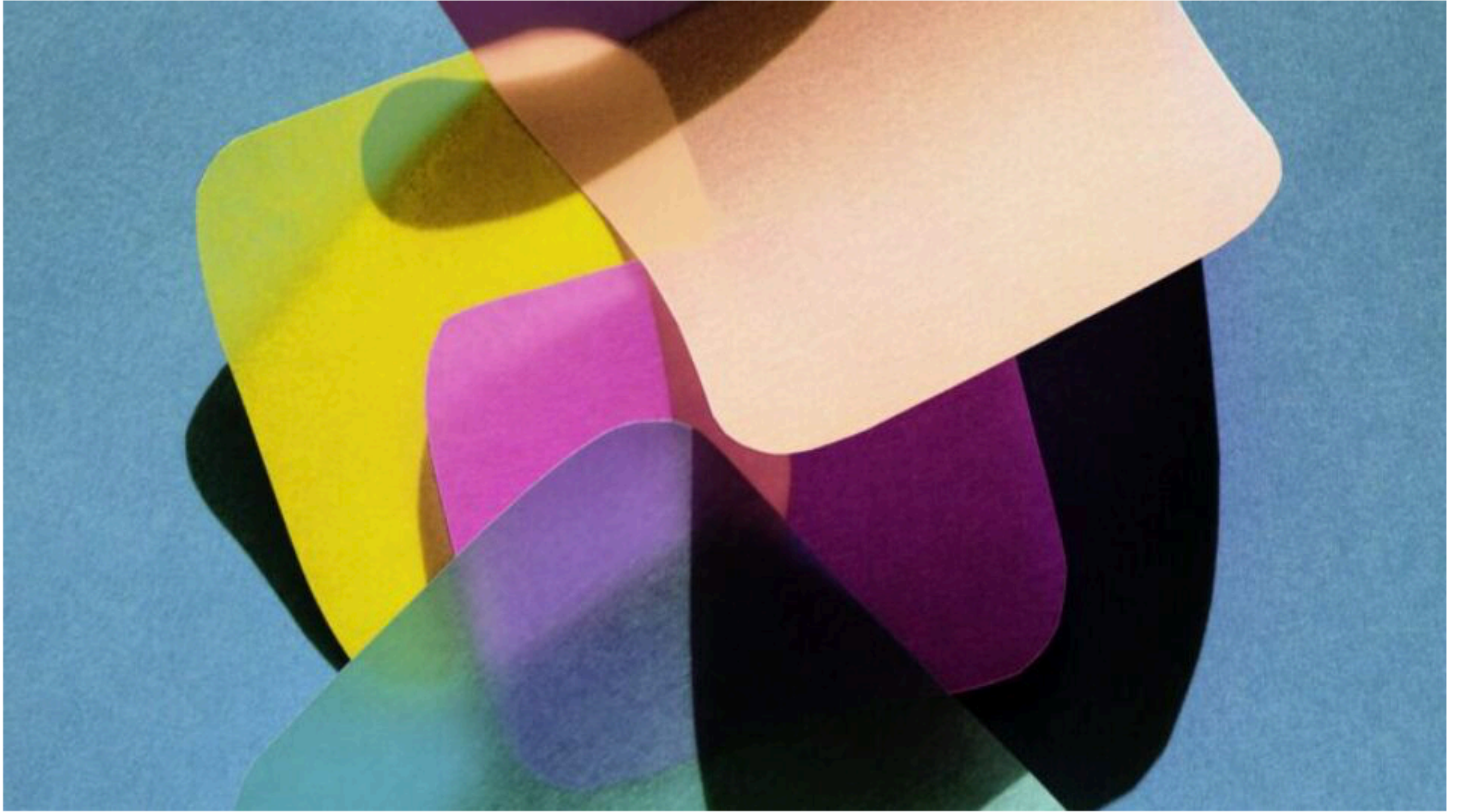
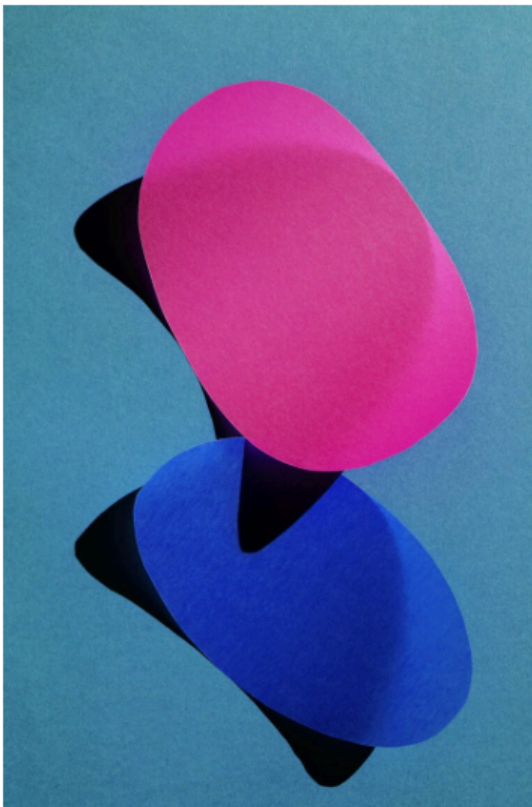


Abstracted Movement



Jessica Backhaus (b. 1970) arranges tiny paper cut outs in the baking Berlin summer sun. As the pink, blue and yellow shapes begin to curl and bend, she captures their dance-like forms with her camera. In conversation with *Aesthetica*, she discusses her most abstract works to date, published by Kehrer Verlag.

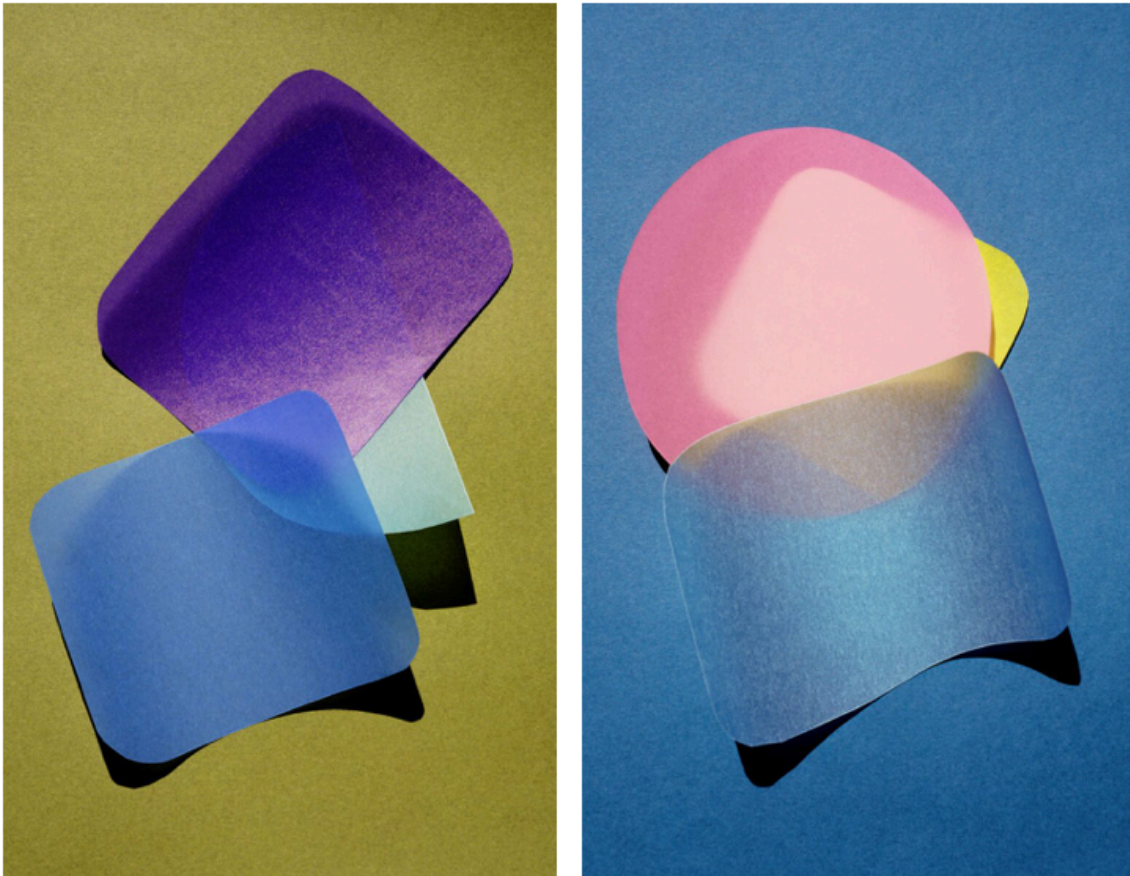


A: Your work has always focused on life's details, but *Cut Outs* takes a particularly minimalist, abstract approach. What was your journey towards making this series?

JB: You can see that even before my last series, I was very gently moving towards abstraction. Whilst working on the third part of *The Trilogy*, titled *New Horizon*, I experimented with different materials and collage, which I hadn't done before. After that I felt compelled to continue with collage – but I wanted to use my own materials. I started taking pictures from my own archives, cutting them up into various shapes. I kind of got addicted and started cutting out everything I could get my hands on! I'm a bit of a collector so I have all sorts of different paper, and I became curious about how the paper reacted to the sunlight. In the intense midday heat, the paper would take on a life of its own, curling and rising up. Depending on the light you would have different shades and shadows. It was fascinating.

A: Was it quite a meditative process, particularly during the height of the pandemic?

JB: I couldn't think of anything else. It was an escape from all that was going on in this world. As crazy as everything else was, I could find some light, some hope, some joy, some colour in this. I'm obsessed with colour. Even in our apartment, each room has a different colour.



A: There's an interplay between your intervention in creating the cut outs and the unpredictability of the sunlight. Was this also about embracing that lack of control?

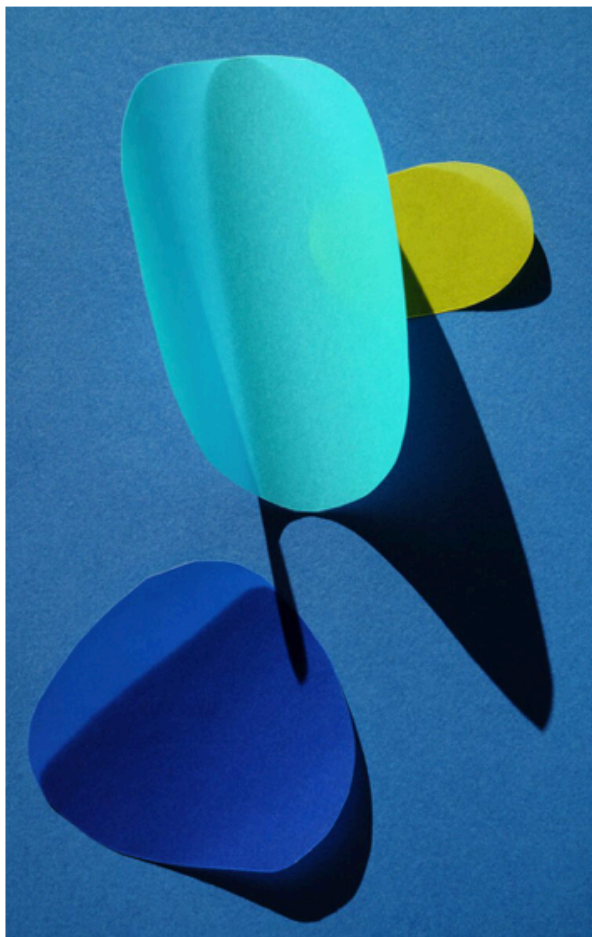
JB: Yes. Before this, I was known more for documentary still lifes. I'm still attracted to that way of working. But I remember – about 13 or 14 years ago – I spoke with a curator in Germany. He said: "maybe you don't see it yet, but I have a feeling that years down the line, you will end up in abstraction." At the time, I didn't really believe in what he was saying. Unfortunately, he has since passed away but I think of him so often because he was right. He knew me better than I knew myself. And I wish I could show him all these abstractions. When you take things away, it's quite daring. You think it's empty, you think there's nothing there. But actually, everything is there.

A: Do you keep them as sculptures after you've shot them? Or do they only exist to be photographed?

JB: No. Each cut out exists for a small moment in time and then it's gone.

A: There's an element of performance to this approach. You were brought up around the theatre – your father was a director, your mother an actress – did this influence you?

JB: I'm sure it had a huge influence. It was an incredible childhood: growing up in the theatre and being on tour. I was surrounded by artists in a very open environment. You could play and experiment and everybody would encourage you. But I was always the observer when they were rehearsing or on stage.



A: How do you conceptualise what you do now? Photography? Expanded photography?

JB: It's always this thing when you do photography: are you a photographer? Are you an artist? I would say I work in an artistic way, but, yes, I am a photographer. In recent years, I've been very much intrigued by what you can do other than just the act of taking pictures. The collage process, for example, has given me artistic freedom. In a way, the cut outs are pure photographs. But I'm inspired by sculpture, by painting. I'm open to see where the journey will go. There's so much more to explore and see.

A: Are you finished with these? Or is it an ongoing series?

JB: In the book you only see half the project: 50 images. There are 100 in total; it's a big project. I have finished it, but sometimes on a hot day I'm transported back there and I want to return to it. I enjoyed the process so much. Recently, I've been making new cut outs but putting them on my photographs instead of a coloured background. It's interesting to consider this relationship. I'm continuing with collage, and I'm also working on a long-term project called *Dare to Desire*. I'm going back to portraiture, something I haven't done since *Jesus and the Cherries*, combining straightforward portraits and still life.

A: You're also exhibiting this project at Arles, Photo London and elsewhere. Tell us about how you're presenting it in the book specifically. What's the thinking behind the design?

JB: When we started to work on the book, I said to Hannah (the designer), "how are we going to do this so that it doesn't become like a simple catalogue?" In her studio, she has this dark grey magnetic wall upon which we were assembling the sequence. When we tried it out with a white page layout, it didn't work. And then it hit me: the pages had to be dark. It comes back to my childhood. It's like when you're in a theatre, at a concert or the cinema. Everything surrounding you is dark – you just have this screen or stage where the magic happens. I realised we had to do the whole book in this dark grey, with coloured edging. For me, it was daring because I'm not a fan of dark colours. But I figured it was the way to let the works glow.

Cut Outs by Jessica Backhaus is published by Kehrer Verlag.

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