

# CURTAINS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN BRIGGS

Windows on  
the Unreality  
we Live In



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We Live In

In 2013 my wife and I were walking in London near Westminster, enjoying the mild October weather. As we entered a quiet street behind The Mall, my attention locked onto the curtains filling the tall windows of the Old British Admiralty.<sup>1</sup>

There, unreality lay hidden.

From the sidewalk of the shady street the pale, filmy curtains exuded the sumptuous, classically sensuous feel I'd always admired in sculpture and paintings, from the tunics and togas of Greco-Roman statues to the tablecloths nesting (as if in folds of the cosmos itself) Cézanne's still life fruit. My mind vibrated at this gift of chance: an opportunity to participate in some of that classic sensuality myself, while at the same time indulging my particular taste for fractals and chaos.

The curtains were long for the windows and piled up at the bottoms in mounds, rolls, and funnels falling over themselves into bulges, dents, dimples, curls, creases, and flaps of luminescent fabric. This style of curtain hanging, I later learned, is called "puddling." Decorators allow their drapery a few extra inches in length so that it will ripple and flow onto the floor with an impression of spilling liquid. The Admiralty curtains appeared excessively long, though, and generated folds that had the feel of stylized wave-forms in Japanese block prints.

While Joanna waited patiently on the sidewalk — well used to her husband's sudden photographic fixations — I framed photographs of the most interesting folds, and then we made our way around the building to its public side where I encountered more. My heightened state of excitement ended abruptly when a policeman emerged to chide me against taking pictures in the windows of this government building, doing his job of suspecting that I intended to penetrate secrets. I protested there was nothing to photograph in the windows except curtains, but he seemed prepared to seize my camera if I kept on talking. So I departed, happy to escape with my treasure box and the gems I believed it contained.

Back home, the glowing, gauzy folds I'd beheld in the rush and excitement of taking the pictures now struck my eye as harsh and raw because of the way the industrial weave of the petroleum-based fabric resolved into digital details. For me the moiré pattern of the drapery negated the curtains' plush fluidity, rendering them not the least sensuous or classic. What had been attractive in the moment now seemed off-putting. I tried various blurring techniques to take the starch out of the folds, but nothing felt satisfactory. I abandoned the project.

Late one night in 2015 I stumbled into the digital folder containing the Admiralty curtain pictures and immediately re-experienced my disappointment. Resigned, but in a spirit of what-the-hell play, I opened one of the image files and began applying a very old and hackneyed photographic technique. I was astonished at the result. My excitement about seeing the curtains from the London street rekindled, flaring up from this completely unexpected spark.

The technique I applied was a digital version of a process discovered in 1840, near the dawn of photography. I was familiar with it from my darkroom years of emulsion film and prints. Back in the day, solarization involved partially developing a print, slowing the development by bathing it in water, then re-exposing it to a burst of light before continuing the development. The process caused the tones of the image to wholly or partially reverse: some dark areas appeared light, light areas dark. By altering exposure times, development times, contrast, or other variables, the defamiliarized look of the image could be varied.

In the 1920s modernist artists like Man Ray employed solarizing as a means to recast photography from its rather pedestrian place as a realist art into the loftier realms of abstract art. For the modernists, to make art meant letting go of the idea that art should represent so-called objective or familiar reality. Rather, the modernists wanted to evoke something much deeper — our enigmatic “feelings” of reality itself. They accomplished this by pulling out or abstracting simple elements (such as geometric forms) from our familiar perceptions then juxtaposing them in unexpected ways. As the Russian Suprematist painter Kasimir Malevich said, “The appropriate

means of representation is always the one which gives fullest possible expression to feeling as such and which ignores the familiar appearance of objects” (341).<sup>2</sup>

These feelings that modern artists sought to express are not what we usually mean by the word feelings, feelings of anger, fear, or pleasure. The modernists focused on existential feelings, like feelings every infant must experience at being immersed in a reality without names, explanations, and distinctions among things. Like the feelings of uncanniness or déjà vu that can emanate suddenly from familiar scenes. Or like the feelings of entanglement that Argentinian modernist painter Roberto Matta alludes to in his essay *Reality* when he says, “Art serves to arouse one’s intuition to the emotion latent in everything around one, and to show up the emotional architecture which people need in order to be able to live together” (443).

In addition to solarizing, I also used my photo-editing program to apply an “invert” algorithm to the pictures, another venerable but potentially gimmicky photographic technique. Unlike solarizing, where the swapping of tones is partial and variable, the invert algorithm faithfully reverses every tone in the picture. A straight invert gives you something that looks exactly like the old film negatives we used to put in the enlarger to make a black and white print.

I feverishly cropped, zoomed into, flipped, solarized, and inverted the ‘normal’ curtain images, which were my starting point, watching as nether-world realities emerged. Were these ‘things’ in the frame like alien creatures, beings, or forms from my own unconscious? As I made the images, I thought my familiar consensual reality had been converted into a kaleidoscope twisting and shuffling itself into strange new forms. My experience recalled me to Cézanne’s famous statement about his own artistic process: “The same subject seen from a different angle gives a subject for study of the highest interest and so varied that I think I could be occupied for months without changing my place, simply bending a little more to the right or left” (22).

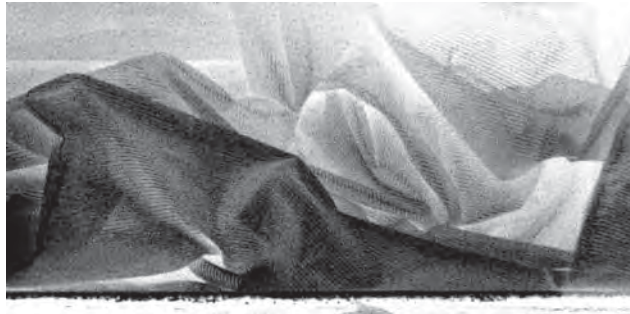
Moving the sliders to increase or decrease different varieties of contrast, I

experienced exactly what Cézanne meant. It seemed I could literally spend the rest of my life on these few images, using just these few simple procedures to unlock them, nourish them, and interrogate them, as I blundered along a path to — what?

That was the question. The images materializing on my computer screen seemed simultaneously whimsical and profound. The curtains had me in a thrall like the rationalist anthropologist Carlos Castaneda mesmerized by the shaman-trickster Don Juan in Castaneda's book, *A Separate Reality*.



The photographer in me found the process exhilarating. Beginning with 'normal views' of the curtains such as the one above, taken moments before the policeman arrived, I stumble headlong into strangeness, as witness these Bosch-like critters lurking in the crumples of the Admiralty curtains and drawn from their depths into light by a simple invert:



What hidden reality might reside in the folds of the curtains below? One answer that emerged can be seen in the image, Curtains 5.4.



Reality — or rather, unreality — did seem the issue.

These days it's generally accepted by scientific theorists that what we think we perceive as reality is actually a mélange of what our perceptual systems are hard-

wired to detect (abstract out), such as straight lines, geometric angles, and human facial features. In addition, we see what we learn to see from our environment, such as traffic at an intersection or 32 types of snow. Meanwhile, there must be something mysteriously ‘out there’ beyond our sensors and our learned constructs that is stimulating our perceptions even as the noisy filters of our perceptual apparatus and our acquired expectations of thought work to conceal what that something is.

I recall the statement from one of my very favorite books, *A Man Without Qualities*, by Robert Musil: “Life forms a surface that acts as if it could not be otherwise, but under its skin things are pounding and pulsing.”

What I found pounding and pulsing beneath the hyperspace skin of the curtain-folds seemed to clarify my long-standing belief that everyday consensual reality (and all of our entangled thoughts about that reality) might not be real at all. What if our reality is essentially a metaphor, the equivalent of a finger pointing for us to look in the direction of some thing, or things, that vanishes when we look? So we look at the finger rather than where it’s pointing. Perhaps the shadow realities and abstract forms unveiled by the Old Admiralty folds are examples (or further metaphors) of what’s hidden in plain sight all around us, alternative versions of the marvelous unreality that we live in.

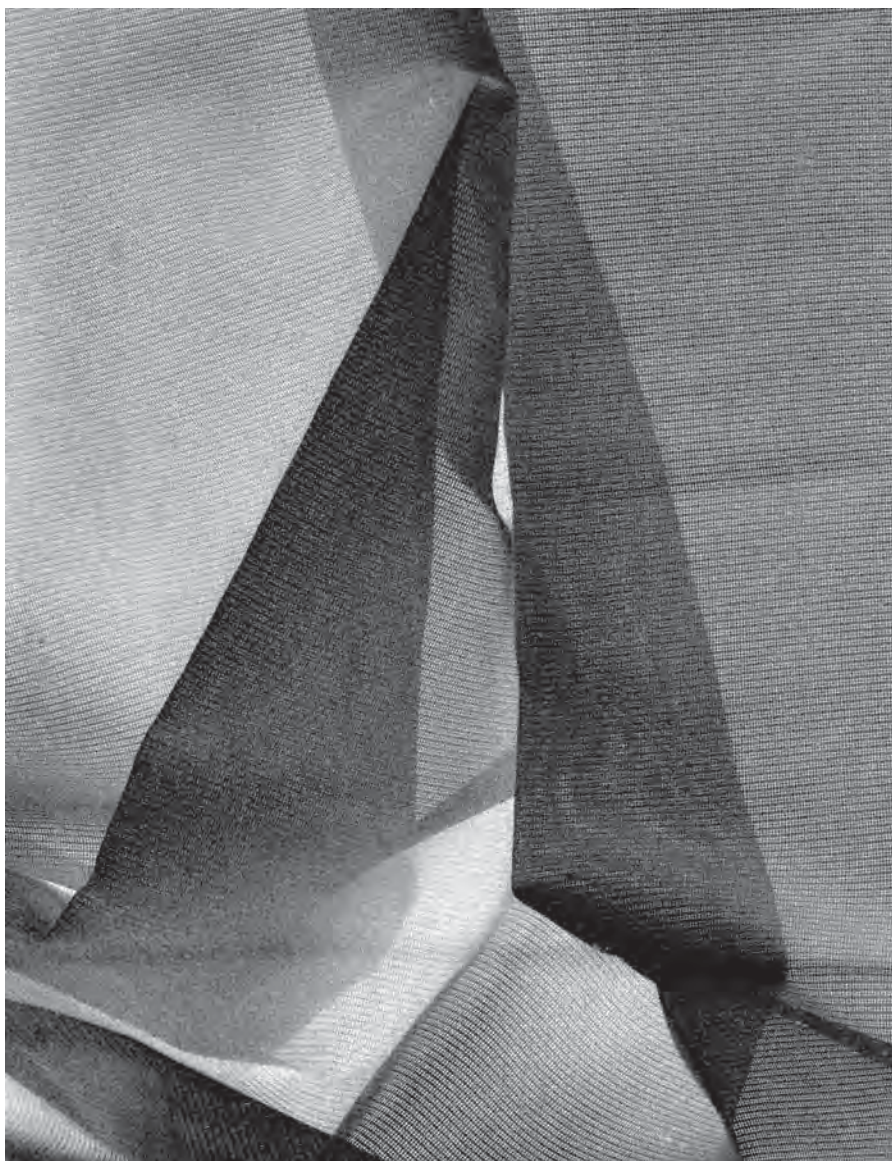
Anyway, I might have known. A book I consulted on the ubiquity of drapery in art said this: “The curtain is on the cusp of the inside and the outside, the real and the illusory, the seen and the unseen, the veiled and the truth, opening and closing.”<sup>3</sup>

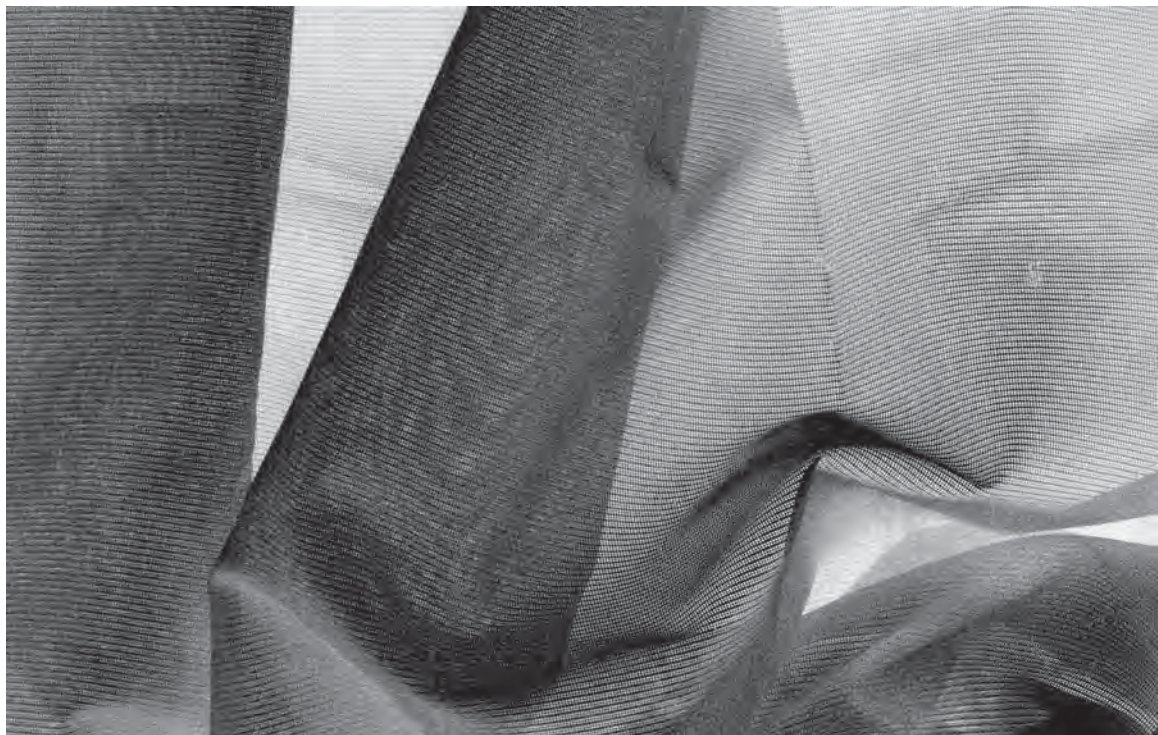
<sup>1</sup> Built in the early 18th century in a feeble Baroque style, The Old Admiralty is reputedly the first intentionally constructed office building in Great Britain.

<sup>2</sup> All modern artists’ quotes are from Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics* (Berkeley: U of Calif. Press, 1968).

<sup>3</sup> Gen Day, *Drapery: Classicism and Barbarism in Visual Culture* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 10.

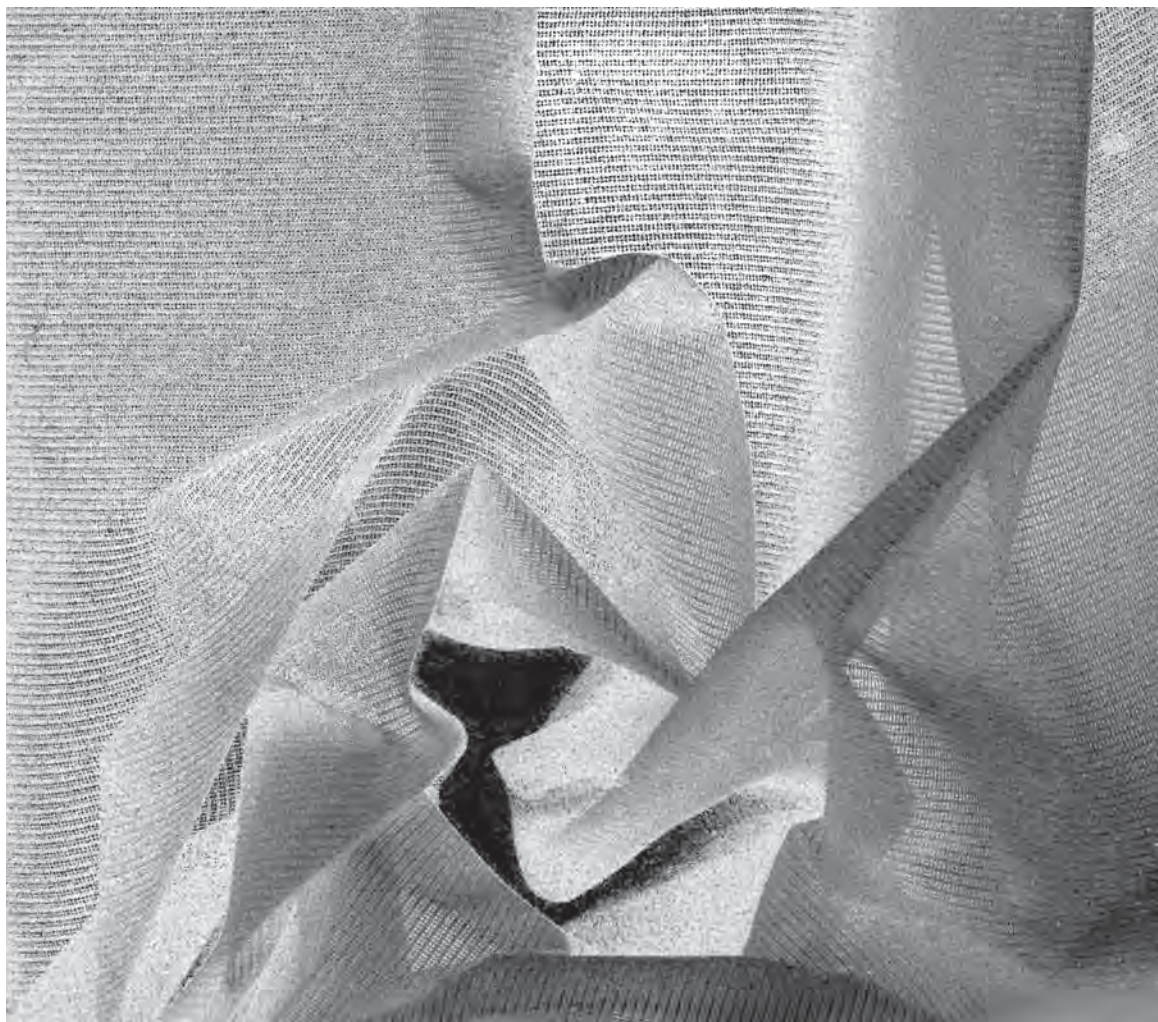




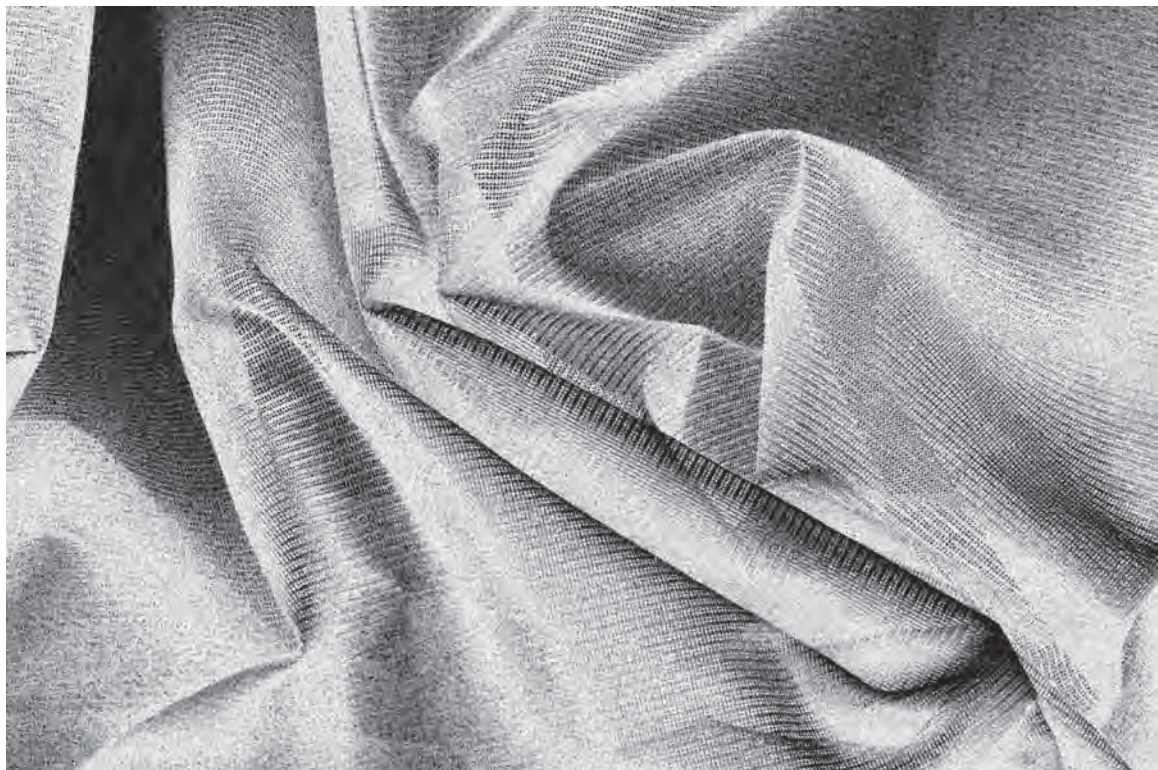












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*Curtains, Windows on the Unreality We Live In*

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