

Steel Stillman: Incidents, 1969-2014

By Lyle Rexer



Steel Stillman, *Green Bowl*, 2013. Courtesy Show Room and the artist.

Steel Stillman, a writer and contributing editor to *Art in America*, is the sort of artist who is around but seldom front and center. His work shows up in smart group shows but rarely on its own, and so the chance to see a significant collection in one place was welcome – and haunting. The images, on view at the [Show Room Gowanus](#) through June 15, offered the strangest kind of retrospective, conducted by the artist himself. Since the late 2000s, Stillman has been going back into his 40-year collection of personal photographs and altering them by cropping and painting out parts of the image. It feels more accurate to say that he has added shadows, or solicited an encroaching darkness. To call this collection of (mostly) 8 x 10-inch photographs enigmatic is an understatement. What could have been a contrivance totally transformed the images, adding a cinematic intensity to these “incidents” that was often almost unbearable.



Steel Stillman, *Black Point Staircase*, 2014. Courtesy Show Room and the artist.

The tactic suggested the obvious analogy of memory's loss of information and the gradual effacement of past experience, but that reading seems far too

simplistic for the emotional and visual impact of the work. On a formal level, every picture was different, in some cases creating intriguing new patterns, in others revealing latent formal structures that the full-frame original would likely have obscured. It suggests that one way not to be bound by the past – its losses and regrets – is to intervene unapologetically in its representation.