Ground: Killed Negatives from the Farms Security Administration

William McDowell
Art and Art History

Abstract:
I plan to produce an exhibition portfolio of photographs and an inkjet-printed book maquette (or book dummy). The portfolio and book maquette would be used to secure exhibition venues and publications for my project, “Ground: Killed Negatives from the Farm Security Administration”. The killed negatives were created between 1935-1939 when Roy E. Stryker, the director of the photographic division of the FSA, routinely used a hole punch to destroy photographic negatives he considered unsuitable for publication. My primary interest in the killed negatives resides in their potential for abstraction. When enlarged, the hole in a killed negative prints a deep black circle. Depending on the placement of the hole within the picture frame and the tonal value of its surroundings, the black circle dominates the photograph and thus alters its reading and comprehension. The photographs in Ground have a dual temporality, with the black hole suggesting a recent intervention and the background harkening the past. In concert with the subject matter found in the photographs, the black hole poetically draws parallels between our current environmental, economic, and agricultural challenges and those of post-Depression America.