

# MUSÉE

VANGUARD OF PHOTOGRAPHY CULTURE

## *Matt Saunders: Capturing the Ephemeral*

by Greer Valaquenta (March 20, 2025)



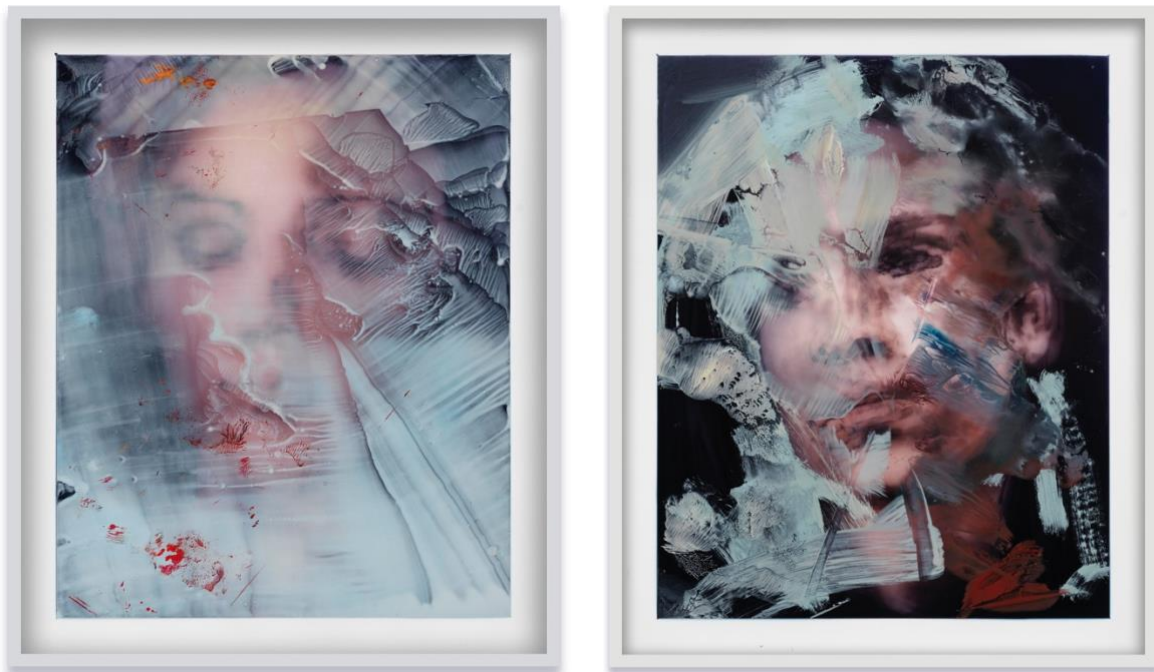
Matt Saunders, *Inondé 21*, 2016. C-print on Kodak Endura Premiere matte paper.  
© Matt Saunders & Marian Goodman Gallery.

*Whether through his hand-drawn animations, ghostly photographic prints, or richly layered paintings, Matt Saunders' art is a meditation on memory and materiality. His work, rooted in a long-time fascination with film history, reflects a dialogue between stillness and movement. In an age of mass production and digital saturation, Matt Saunders offers a different perspective. His works echo the delicate balance between preservation and transformation, a theme increasingly relevant in our changing environmental landscape. What draws him to the beautiful imperfections of analogue processes in a digital age? And how do cinema and his environment shape his evolving artistic language? Today Saunders answers these questions and more as he discusses his artistic process, the intersection of film and fine art, and how his work continues to evolve in an era increasingly defined by digital imagery and artificial intelligence.*

**Greer Valaquenta:** *Your work often blurs the boundaries between different mediums. Can you walk us through the process of how you decide which medium—photography, painting, or film—best serves your artistic vision for a particular piece?*

**Matt Saunders:** A lot of my work is about moving between spaces, about troubling or re-engaging an idea by bringing it into a new set of conditions. In other words, jumping media. I don't believe any image, even the most ephemeral, exists without its form. Meaning is always entwined with the how and of-what of things. I want to credit the late, great Mel Bochner, my professor and later friend, with insisting on this. And what my love of film taught me is that images can move. I'm always carting my obsessions from one medium into another, and this is how I disorient myself to find a new footing—to see and understand things differently—and hopefully to arrive at works that carry this energy to a viewer.

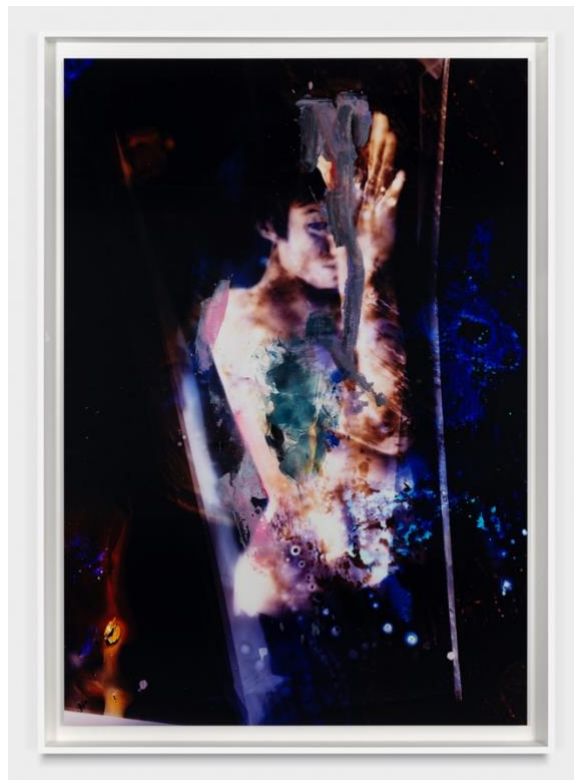
That's what I intend. What I often *do* is studio based. I believe in finding things through the struggle of making, so I often just start in one set of materials and see what comes up there. I'll bring a lot things into the darkroom, say, but not always have a clear plan going in. Weirdly I've found it generative to separate my work spaces: I paint in one studio and have both a color and a black and white lab separately. I guess *I'm* the one moving.



LEFT: Matt Saunders, *The Distances (Candy)*, 2021. Oil on unique C-print. © Matt Saunders & Marian Goodman Gallery.  
 RIGHT: Matt Saunders, *The Distances (Joe)*, 2021. Oil on unique C-print. © Matt Saunders & Marian Goodman Gallery.

**Greer:** *You've explored using analogue techniques, like hand-painting negatives and combining them with photographic processes. How do you see these traditional methods interacting with the digital age, and what role do you think they play in your work today, especially with the prevalence of AI?*

**Matt Saunders:** I was raised in the analogue world, so to some extent that's my native understanding. It's not something I'm adopting. But I think this is true: What's current is often too transparent for us to see it clearly. For me, as digital images started taking over—I mean the computer-native, more seamless kind we have now, not the sludgy video and early computer graphics of my youth, which felt so weirdly material—I think I turned to the analogue to understand things better. There are obvious examples—for instance, when I'm using a linen canvas to make my negatives, there's a structure in the weave that is not unequivocal of pixels—but I think more broadly there is something I'm pursuing about getting one's hands on images and how that feels in a (digital) image saturated world. When I think about AI, it's a little similar. There is an intelligence to making, some distinctly non-human thing you engage with when you work with materials, and I lean into this as a collaboration. (AI isn't a tool, it's a system and it's an other.)



Matt Saunders, *The Distances (Jane)*, 2024. Oil on unique C-print. © Matt Saunders & Marian Goodman Gallery.

**Greer:** *You have created many installations with environmental inspirations, such as your series Inondé. How does your background in environmental studies continue to inform your work today?*

**Matt Saunders:** I teach now in the same department where I studied. They changed the name pretty recently from "Visual and Environmental Studies" to "Art, Film and Visual Studies" because it was causing too much confusion with "Environmental Sciences." It's too bad because the idea of "Environmental Studies" that we had back when was quite inclusive, coming out of architecture and understanding "environment" through experience, space, context. It was already a little outdated and continuing to evolve away from current practice, but it opened up my sense of relations, atmosphere, ecology...

**Greer:** *The themes in your work seem to resonate with the idea of images as mutably ephemeral. How do you navigate the tension between the permanence of an image and the transitory nature of the experiences or emotions it conveys?*

**Matt Saunders:** You put this beautifully! And I don't know how to answer it. That navigation is my work. I'm interested in how we encounter things and how they move us. How artworks can capture and trigger experience.

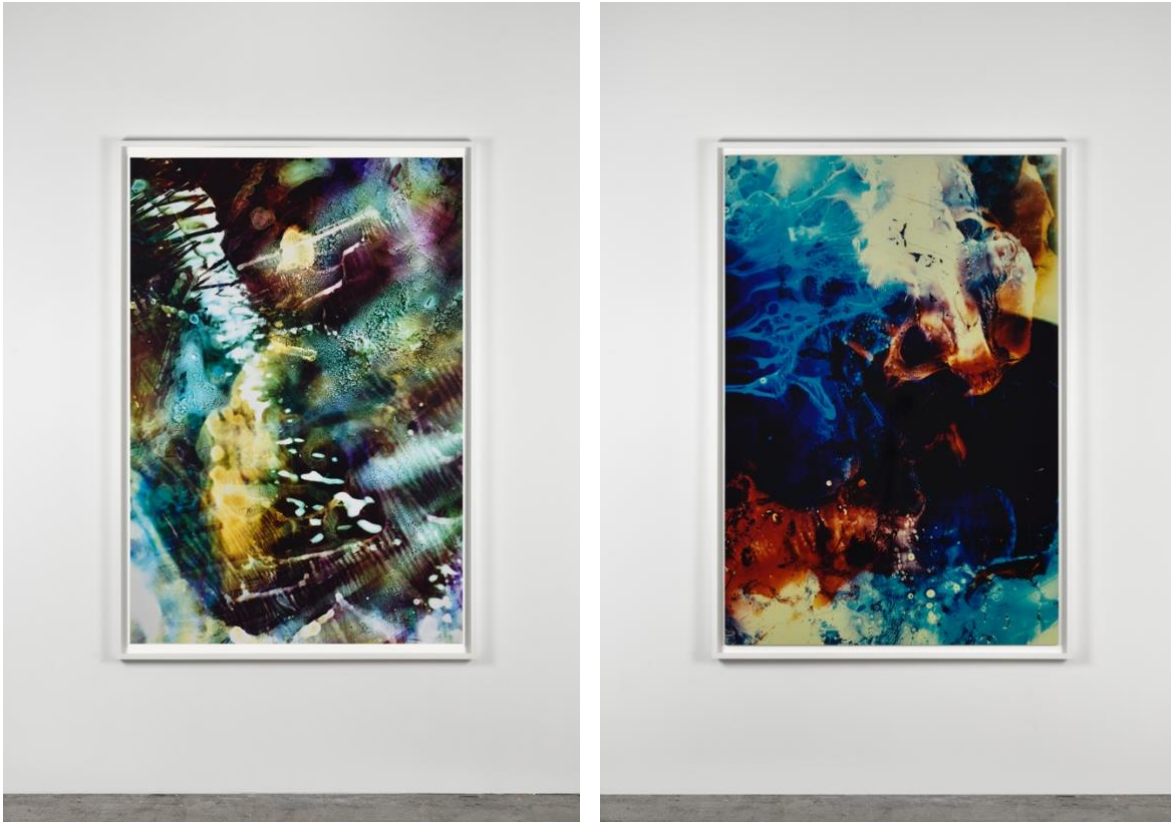


Matt Saunders, *Field, Version 1*, 2014. C-print on Kodak Endura Premiere matte paper. © Matt Saunders & Marian Goodman Gallery.

**Greer:** *Many of your pieces evoke a sense of cinematic storytelling. Can you speak to any filmmakers or cinematic movements that have had a significant influence on your artistic practice?*

**Matt Saunders:** I don't pretend to have any new ideas here. My film interests are slightly off mainstream, but they're far from obscure. Two obvious, iconic filmmakers, in particular, really changed my life. First, Jack Smith, who I first saw in a screening in college. "Incandescently amok!" That's a phrase from his journals, and that's how *Normal Love* rumbled me. Smith stitched together for me radicality, euphoria, film, performance, painting and the ecstasy of looking. It's overabundant and it drags its ass.

The other, who I saw first on crummy VHS, is Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Fassbinder is lush and overperformed—like the best history painting—but emotionally raw. I discovered many things through him—for instance Werner Schroeter who I'm thinking about again today—and most importantly he took me to Germany. I owe my Berlin decade to my love of Fassbinder. Both these filmmakers led me down twisting paths. Gratitude!!!



LEFT: Matt Saunders, *Inondé 14*, 2016. C-print on Kodak Endura Premiere matte paper. © Matt Saunders & Marian Goodman Gallery.  
 RIGHT: Matt Saunders, *Inondé 7*, 2016. C-print on Kodak Endura Premiere matte paper. © Matt Saunders & Marian Goodman Gallery.

**Greer:** *So many of your pieces are colourful and vibrant. What is your relationship with colour in your work and how do you utilise it to convey emotion or elicit a response from the viewer?*

**Matt Saunders:** Honestly, as a painter I think I'm a poor colorist. I've never really said that aloud before, but I know it's only in the darkroom that I truly found color. In that space it's unruly and transgressive and made of light. I love how it spills. Since you've got me thinking about color in my work, I'll add it's not only the lush and electric moments. One favorite group of work is about coaxing color out of silver gelatin prints—theoretically "black and white" materials—so all about restraint. A kind of blush in the shadows.

**Greer:** *Your exhibitions at the Marian Goodman Gallery often incorporate video installations alongside traditional photographs. How do you think the context of a gallery space influences the way people engage with your work, especially in a time when digital platforms and virtual exhibitions are becoming more prevalent?*

**Matt Saunders:** First, one thing I appreciate about the growth of digital platforms is that it's becoming more and more like publishing: an opportunity to tell stories and weave text with image. But I do love exhibitions more and I feel that they let you interweave works in complex, non-linear ways. (I'm back to my themes of encounter and experience.) In video installation, I'm always thinking of how a viewer can be aware of something happening *behind* them. I hope the video breathes a transitory feeling into the still image and the still image gives weight to the fleeting.



Matt Saunders, *Inondé 12*, 2016. C-print on Kodak Endura Premiere matte paper. © Matt Saunders & Marian Goodman Gallery.

**Greer:** *In your work, there is a recurring theme of images being incomplete or in flux. How does this play into your view of the role of the viewer in constructing meaning or experiencing your art?*

**Matt Saunders:** Building off what I just said, the viewer carries one experience into the next and each work in a show informs all the others. Some associations are clarion while others are more like undercurrents. I especially like to work in series because I don't believe there's such a thing as a definitive form. Even the most fixed idea looks different in different light! Thinking itself is about associations and movement. I don't know any other way. So that's how the work leads me, and there's a flow and potential energy in the studio that I try to carry into exhibitions.



LEFT: Matt Saunders, *The Distances (MZ)*, 2021. Oil on unique C-print. © Matt Saunders & Marian Goodman Gallery.  
 RIGHT: Matt Saunders, *The Distances (Fukase)*, 2021. Oil on unique C-print. © Matt Saunders & Marian Goodman Gallery.

**Greer:** *Considering the ongoing evolution of art and technology, how do you see the role of new technologies, like VR or AI, shaping the future of your practice or the art world in general?*

**Matt Saunders:** I can't and won't speculate about the art world in general. We'll all have to experience these changing times. Some artists—Pierre Huyghe I particularly admire—boldly stage these spaces of speculative potential in their work. As you said, I've tended to work with analogue materials, to embrace, in a way, the counter-current. But I'm curious. Something might happen.

**Greer:** *You've worked with several mediums in an experimental fashion. Looking ahead, do you have any new mediums that you're excited to explore in your work?*

**Matt Saunders:** I haven't shown this work yet, but I've recently been working combining photogravure with woodblock and also returning to very large-scale silver gelatin printing with different materials. I do get that that answer sounds retro. New? Well... Sound, perhaps. I worked with the sound in a new animation in a way that feels raw and scary to me, which is usually the first sign I might jump all the way in.



Matt Saunders, *Inondé 10*, 2016. C-print on Kodak Endura Premiere matte paper.  
© Matt Saunders & Marian Goodman Gallery.

**Greer:** *Do you ever get inspired by your students or discussions that you have within the classroom?*

**Matt Saunders:** Absolutely! This is why I accepted the invitation to teach in the first place. I often call it a "busman's holiday" the way one stays alive to making by helping other people. And of course intellectually it's invigorating. A very important part of my life.



Matt Saunders, *Inondé 19*, 2016. C-print on Kodak Endura Premiere matte paper.  
© Matt Saunders & Marian Goodman Gallery.



**Greer:** *If you could only show one piece of your work to someone who's never seen your art before, which piece would you choose and why?*

**Matt Saunders:** What a hard question—and one I've never gotten before! If I were sitting with the person, I suppose I would choose one of the animation installations. They're the hardest to understand from photographs, and they are dense with turns of thought and association. Plus, they would keep us together and talking the longest. One of the real pleasures of looking at work is trying to see through someone else's eyes, and I would learn the most from that time together.