

DOCUMENT

# Scott Fortino



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845 w Washington  
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## A Variety Show

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Scott Fortino / B. 1952 Chicago, IL

lives and works in Chicago, Illinois. He received his BA from Columbia College Chicago, and an MFA from the University of Illinois at Chicago. His solo exhibitions include, Devening Projects + Editions, Chicago, IL; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL; and The Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago, IL. His work is in the collections of The Art Institute of Chicago, Milwaukee Art Museum, Worcester Art Museum, The Museum of Contemporary Photography, and numerous public and private collections.

Cover / Untitled(paperwork #2), 2013  
 Inside L / Untitled(glasswork #41), 2013  
 Inside R / Untitled(golden #29), 2013

It is difficult to discuss Scott Fortino's art without also referencing his other career as a Chicago police officer. The intersection of the two lifelong pursuits was particularly evident in his early work documenting the unsuspected beauty of municipal spaces – spaces to which he had privileged access as a member of the police force. And yet, the emphasis on privileged access – so often elevated in discussions of Fortino's early work – unwittingly diverts attention from Fortino's discerning eye, sense of composition, and technical precision. These qualities are evident across Fortino's extensive and varied body of documentary work, which includes an arresting and critically acclaimed series of photographs of the lakefront, bizarrely composed close-ups of flowers, and most recently, provocative and sometimes disquieting images from the interiors of military schools.

In many cases, Fortino's documentary work has taken him far afield, requiring hundreds of miles of travel and the navigation of elaborate bureaucratic labyrinths to secure access to its subject matter. After nearly fifteen years of working in this way, Fortino was ready for a change. "My body felt it, my eyes felt it," Fortino recalls. Coincident with this acknowledgement, Fortino met the woman who soon became his wife. Together they created a home, which they share with two dogs rescued from a local shelter, the motley assemblage of cats that each brought to the union, and a congregation of close friends who routinely gather there. Both personally and professionally, forces were converging toward a more anchored, more intimate and personally grounded existence. Fortino's studio practice was borne, and with it came an entirely new approach to art-making.

Where his documentary work is dispassionate, removed, and almost clinically formal, Fortino's studio work is sensual, visceral, and immediate. Where his documentary process is methodical and controlled, his studio practice involves an uninterrupted flow of actions and reactions, a dynamic flow of creative expression – a collaboration between himself, the materials, the space, the light. It is the record of this collaboration that Fortino presents in A Variety Show.

Like the one-time staple of prime-time television, A Variety Show presents a diverse assortment of

theatrical acts – scenes carefully staged (in this case, for the camera rather than a live studio audience) that incorporate a range of materials, manipulated and lit in distinct ways, eliciting a wide-ranging set of reactions.

Reminiscent of James Welling's crumpled sheets of aluminum foil and elaborately draped fabric, Fortino's new work hovers between sculpture and photography. Neither outright abstractions nor entirely literal representations, the images are charged with a sometimes unsettling indeterminacy. A dramatically illuminated cascade of undulating silver-toned paper evokes the sumptuous stage curtains of a majestic opera house, or the rippling silk gown of a leading lady, or the curvaceous titanium walls of a Frank Gehry creation. This ambiguity lends the photographs an open-endedness – further extending the collaborative nature of the work to include the viewer. The photographs are designed to permit spontaneous and unguided responses.

Although frequently indeterminate, the images are nevertheless exacting. Fortino's studio work is marked by the same rigorous technical precision and extraordinary sense of composition for which his documentary work has long been lauded. Further harkening back to Fortino's earlier work, some of the new pieces are distinctively architectonic, capitalizing on the play of light on the angled surfaces of his materials to create a sense of literal space. And the spaces he creates are intimate, lush, richly atmospheric – in some cases invoking the haunting aesthetic of the 1940's and 50's film noir classics and the German Expressionism that preceded them.

Breaking with the formality and the measured restraint of Fortino's previous body of work, the new photographs are considerably more improvisational, more experimental – and more exper-

iential. The images convey a visceral energy and a dynamic immediacy that reflects the performative nature of the work. It is not the materials themselves but Fortino's manipulation of them that is documented in these photographs. As Welling said of his own work, Fortino's images record "both the thing in front of the camera and the conditions of its making."



Shards of glossy yellow paper – scraps harvested from the studio floor – are collaged with neatly clipped squares of the same material. Their brash reflectiveness is amplified by the more muted modulation of light rendered by the soft bends, deep creases, and feathery ripped edges of white paper that lies contorted beneath. In this photograph (pictured above), as in the others, Fortino records not an object so much as an event – the process as much as the product of his studio practice.

- Penny Visser-Wu, is a faculty member at the University of Chicago in the department of psychology.