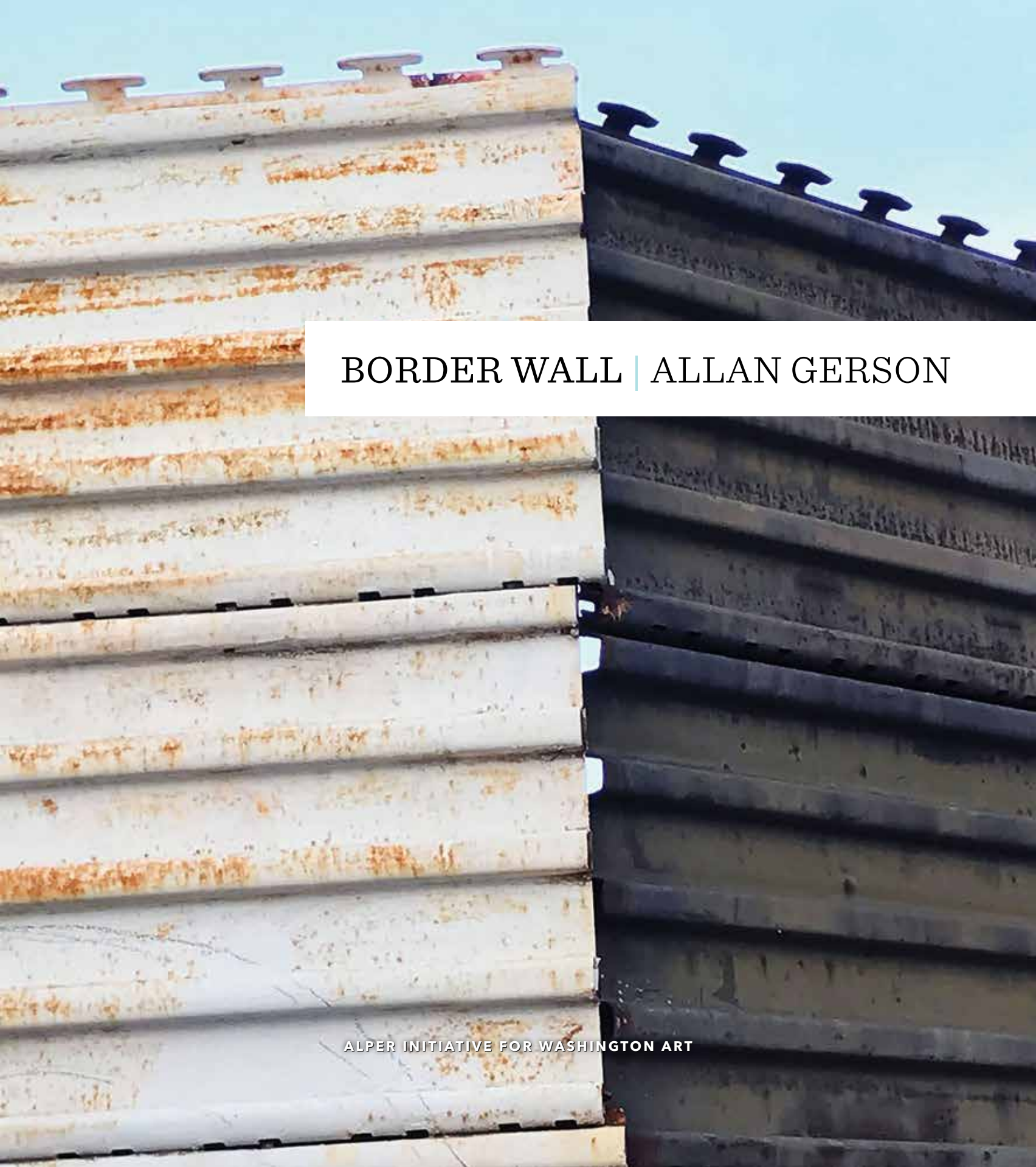

BORDER WALL | ALLAN GERSON

ALPER INITIATIVE FOR WASHINGTON ART

BORDER WALL | ALLAN GERSON

Curated by Jennifer Sakai

American University Museum
at the Katzen Arts Center

Washington, DC

ALPER INITIATIVE FOR WASHINGTON ART

Tecate, Mexico, US/Mexico Border Wall, 2018

Foreword

Every four years, the American University Museum dedicates its space to presenting artists in the run-up to Presidential elections who address some of the most contested issues. Our intention is to educate and provoke engagement in our civic life as we highlight the work of artists in our community. This year's election series, "Contested Space," is launching virtually, a transition necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Two artists in this series express concern for the weaponization of immigration policies. One is Mikray Pida, who reflects on the environmental and human impact of immigration to the Uighur territory. The other, presented by the Alper Initiative for Washington Art, features photographer and human rights attorney Allan Gerson (1945–2019). His mural-sized photographs make us witnesses to the perilous journey of individuals in Mexico dreaming of life on the other side of the US border wall, and risking everything to cross over.

As curator Jennifer Sakai points out in her compelling analysis of the photography, Gerson himself was an illegal immigrant. Brought here as a child of Jewish refugees from the Holocaust, he lived for many years under a false identity, narrowly escaping deportation. Perhaps that is why these photographs are so powerful, so poignant, as well as beautifully crafted and composed. We lost Allan last year to a terrible illness. Washington lost a wonderful man and great talent.

We must thank the family of Carolyn Alper, and her legion of friends, for keeping alive her vision for the Alper Initiative for Washington Art. Even though the pandemic made a physical exhibition impossible at this time, gifts from The Wolpoff Family Foundation and many other individuals, have made this catalog possible. This catalog is a fitting tribute to Allan Gerson and to all of us whose roots were planted by immigrants. Thank you for your support.

Jack Rasmussen
Director and Curator
American University Museum
at the Katzen Arts Center
Washington, DC

Berlin Wall Collage, No 1, 2015

Berlin Wall Collage, No 2, 2015

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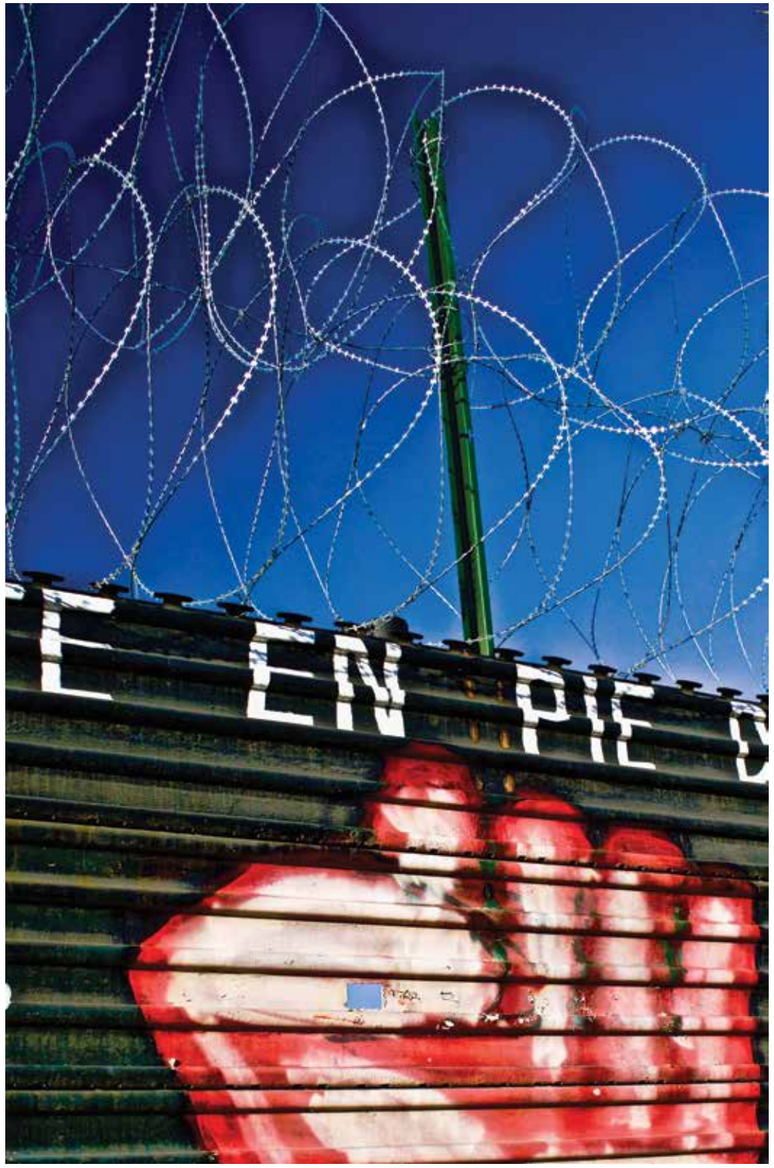


Border Wall | No.3

Border Wall

JENNIFER SAKAI, CURATOR

If we subscribe to Minor White's premise that "all photographs are self-portraits," then in exploring the artistic work of Allan Gerson there is much to be discovered. Gerson, known and lauded for a distinguished legal career, had another equally passionate absorption in the art of photography. In this medium he was an observer, seeker, and an artist. The searching aspect of photography, Gerson said, was not just the journey of an artist looking to fill a frame. It became for him more about the discovery of finding his sacred space in that ultimate relation—the eternal "Thou." As he described in a 2014 artist talk at the Cosmos Club in Washington, DC:

I began to read Edward Weston's daybooks…fascinated by the use of the word "trance" to describe his mental state at the time, I took a class in photography and my photography teacher would tell me about yoga and meditation as the road to enlightened photography. I asked, "Doesn't meditation make you too peaceful to photograph the bustle of life, its tragedies, its starkness?" And he said, "If the image is strong enough in your consciousness it will stay, and be carried through in a more graceful and yet still powerful way."

As Allan honed his craft, he became more fascinated by the use of reflection, repetition, and texture in his work. We bonded over our mutual love of abstract and landscape photography; it was the recognition and elation one has when you find someone who speaks the same visual language as you do. Over many months and studio visits we pored through his photographs and discussed not only the usual elemental aspects of the medium, but also symbols, subtext, and visual narratives. When considering his imagery, sometimes the meaning was the way the light refracts off pavement, with others it was the shapes contained within, divine geometry, and a more tacit connotation.

Clockwise, from top: *Abstract No.20, Abstract No.5, Abstract No.8*

Detail from *Border Wall*

Detail from *Border Wall*

Border Wall is comprised of a suite of 11 images selected from a greater whole examining the post-graffiti street murals Gerson discovered while traveling in Mexico. It's no accident that the nuance of the work, the symbols of freedom, the graphic figures of parents running holding their children's hands, is one that struck a chord with him. Allan referred to himself as a dreamer: "I was brought here illegally…and I'm lucky I wasn't deported." Gerson and his family were refugees, part of a group of Holocaust survivors who arrived in America on the USS Pershing in December 1950. Gerson's own immigration story is so compelling it reads as a modern political thriller: false visas, assumed identities, and family secrets. It is a truly gripping narrative. As he described in an article for the *Washington Post,* if not for a sympathetic judge and legal system which allowed him and his family to become legal residents—his story could have been a much different one.

Border Wall is a body of work that bridges these two sides of his being; his devotion to his artist practice and his passion for social justice and humanitarian work. The beauty and impact of the painted murals with their vivid color, grand scale, and saturation are alluring on their own as color fields, but their content also speaks to the position of the individuals making the marks and their perilous situation. Their plight and dangerous circumstances are ones that Gerson himself felt when immigrating here. Although based in a different time and place, the *Border Wall* mural work was a visual touchstone to his own immigrant experience. Where others may have passed by the graphic street tableaux, Gerson stopped, investigated, and saw their true nature and narratives held within. As Romare Bearden, another artist whose work touched on themes of civil rights and migration, wrote:

If you're any kind of artist, you make a miraculous journey, and you come back and make some statements in shapes and colors of where you were.

This is precisely what Gerson did with his *Border Wall* series. The color-drenched images draw you into the larger narrative, one of seeking and

belonging. *Border Wall* examines the question of citizenship from the point of view of the other—the individual yearning for access to a space they're told they cannot occupy and are consistently denied. Gerson, concerned with treatment of these dreamers, wrote:

Deportation is treated as less than punishment. But of course deportation is terribly punitive, especially for the young who have known no home other than the United States and did nothing worse than hold on to their parents' hands.

For those who dream of life in America, there is no shortage of deterrents, yet the desire and will for a life here still remains. The symbols, tones, and motifs contained in *Border Wall* present the talismans for what could be, for belonging, and most importantly of hope. In this series of photographic work Gerson was true to himself with this moment of "Thou" in *Border Wall*—found not only for himself, but unsurprisingly for others.

JENNIFER SAKAI is a fine art photographer, professor, and curator who resides in Washington, DC. She received her MFA from Virginia Commonwealth University in Fine Art Photography. In addition to *Border Wall,* she also curated *The Gifts of Tony Podesta* at the American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center in Winter 2019. Ms. Sakai has served on committees for Transformer Gallery, IMF/World Bank Photographic Society, and juried for ExposedDC and VCU School of Art thesis program. She was selected as an artist for Charcoal Publishing Review for 2021.

Rising, 1984

A Hunt for Divinity in the Abstract

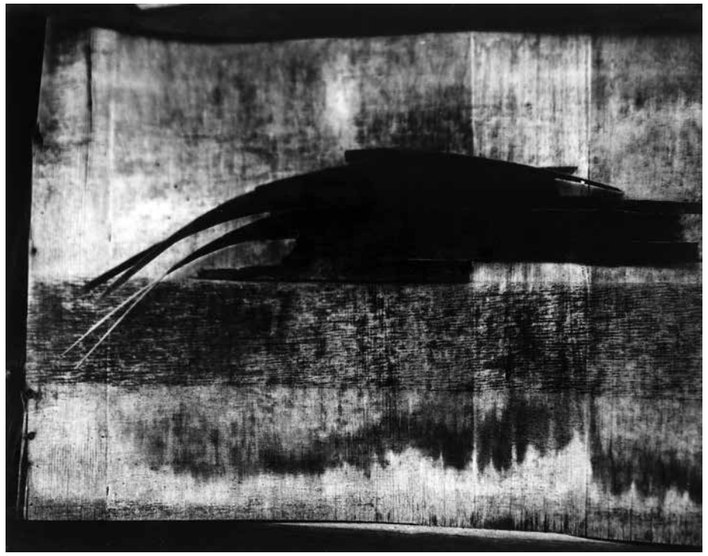
DAVID HENRY GERSON

My sisters Daniela, Merissa, and I have been asking each other a question since our father died—did he use the word "Um" or the traditional Hindu "Om" when he meditated? "Um" suggests a pondering, a questioning, "Om" a wholeness, a unity. Regardless, the memory of my father that clearly sits amongst all three of us kids was of him sitting on our porch in the morning, meditating. He used to tell me he was waiting to hear whispers from God.

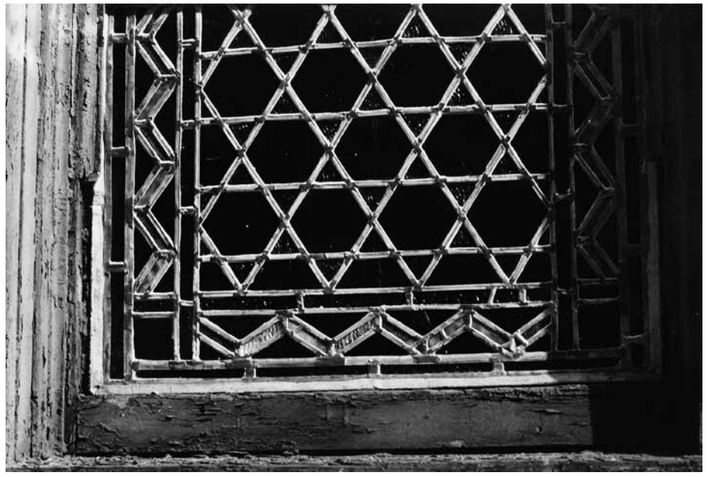
While his meditation practice waxed and mostly waned over the years, and regardless of whether codified as "Um" or "Om," his more consistent search for the whispers of the divine emerged with his camera in hand. On every walk around the block, on every trip to a new land, we often walked and then wondered: where had Allan gone? This was my mother's frequent refrain on family trips. Undoubtedly, he would be a few paces behind with his camera, lost in abstractions, looking for those whispers.

I had the great fun of venturing with him several times on photographic expeditions. My own aesthetic eye was born of his, literally of course, but also metaphorically. I grew up with his early abstractions on our walls—and always loved them. *Ping Pong,* a stroke of grain on wood, as well as *Rising,* birds fluttering on a wire, or an untitled church steeple against a grey sky in a perfect composition—these simple abstractions caught my imagination. They were clear signs that Allan Gerson found beauty in all places.

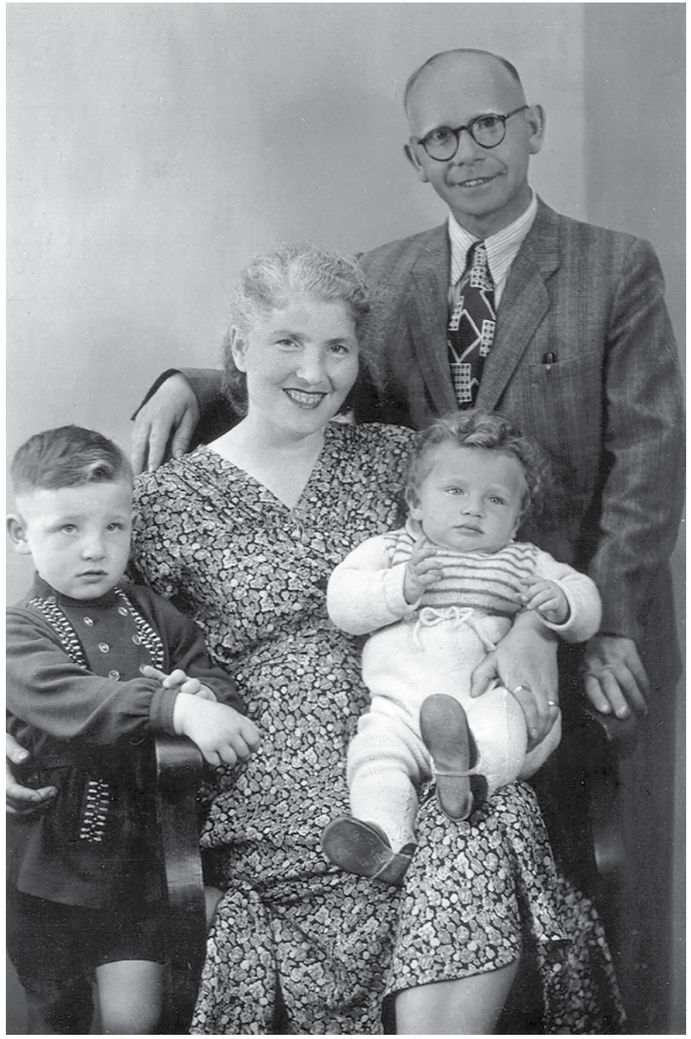
My father was born a refugee and grew up ghosted by the pain of the Holocaust. It was ubiquitous. The loss, the shadow of grief, the mandate to "Never Forget" was everywhere growing up. These were mandates that he, of course, took into his legal work in the Office of Special Investigations as a "Nazi hunter" in the Justice Department, and on to his work in bringing accountability to the families of the Pan Am 103 bombing. But beyond law, photography seemed a broader way to wrestle with the painful legacy he was born into. I remember asking him when I was very



Ping Pong, 1984



Fences of Pain, 1983



Gerson Family Portrait, Föhrenwald Displaced Persons Camp, 1950.

617689

UNITED NATIONS
DP IDENTIFICATION CARD

Name GERZON Elik
Date of birth 19.6.1945 Age 4 Height 0,85
Weight 14 Hair blond Eyes blue
Nationality Jewish(?) DP Registration No. NONE
Signature
Scars or identifying marks
NONE
Date of entry US Occupied Zone
Issued at
Repatriated to
Validation date
Official stamp

TRANSIENT

Allan Gerson (Elik Gerzon), UN Rations Card.

Allan Gerson with dog Blackie, Föhrenwald Displaced Persons Camp, 1950.

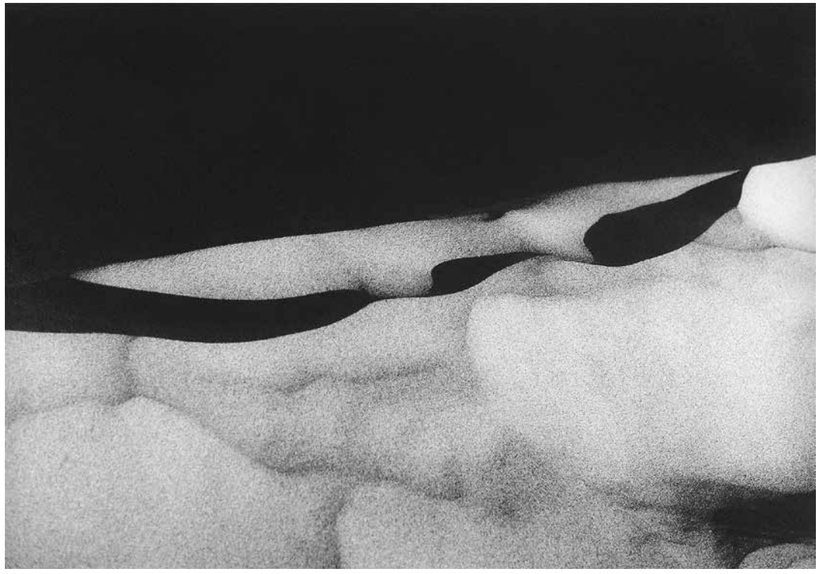
young, on a walk home from synagogue, how he could believe in God, given all that had happened to our people? While his parents would say "feh!" to the idea of God watching over their shoulders, he had found a different understanding of the divine. Perhaps out of necessity for his survival, he sought a cosmic interconnectedness in the world.

And so through his camera, he was searching for this mystical interconnection of all things. With playfulness, with somberness, with striking abstract images, and with the balance between form and formlessness, he was always searching with his lens for that which unifies and that which gives a "Wow." As he scribbled in his copy of Martin Buber's *I and Thou,* "Wow as thou!" While at times exuberant, he also photographed the dissonance between grief and hope. An image from *Fences of Pain* (1983), shows a window of a synagogue, Jewish stars wrought in iron next to the rough-hewn texture of peeling paint. This was the stuff that could not be expressed in writing or law, but only in the purity of abstractions. He hunted it as if his camera was a tool in the mystical realm of the Office of Very Special Investigations.

Abstract No.91

In sorting through the tens of thousands of photographs he took there are a wide array of subjects: trees, vistas, flowers, writings on walls, construction sites, and mannequins. Constant through it all is this keen eye for abstraction, and a precise sense of composition. He was a lover of great black and white photography, from Ansel Adams to Paul Caponigro. We often spoke of Brett and Edward Weston—his heroes, and now of course mine too. I grew fond of lines, often photographing wires—and so he would shoot wires abstractly, calling them "David's wires." I would photograph water reflecting and think of his love of reflections—how he morphed humans in the Red Square in Moscow, morphed branches in Central Park, morphed his own reflection.

His work was not without the occasional sense of humor, finding faces in the sand or stone, delighting in mannequins. One photograph in particular that I enjoy, for example, is a window display of Boschian Barbie dolls, and in the reflection is his face gleefully snapping the photo above the microcosm of dolls. Yet still, he was often sincerely spiritual in his creation of images. His photographs of the Hussein II Mosque in Casablanca are simple, gorgeous images of light reflecting in recently polished floors. His abstractions of the Sahara, in black and white, a series called



Sahara No.13

Sahara No.12

Musée d'Orsay No.10

Abstract No.9

"The Sacred and the Serene," to me are iconic. His photographs of the inside of the Musée d'Orsay clock are simple proclamations against the finiteness of time. He captured an arrow, seemingly fleeing the Roman numeral symbols of numbers. In his constant inventiveness with the form of the photograph, working with a jeweler, he printed this shot in silver, making pendants, cufflinks, bracelets, and belt buckles of this image of time being pushed aside. In the workings and unwindings of a clock—he found the eternal. We've chosen to etch this image of his on his gravestone. He was always searching for the cosmically interconnected through his lens.

At his shiva, a neighbor approached and told me one of my now-favorite stories of my father. She had come out of her house in the morning, new to the neighborhood, and saw a man's feet poking out from under a bush. As she approached closer, she saw it was my father lying on the ground beneath her Japanese bonsai-like, purplish hued tree in her front yard. She rushed over, concerned, only to find him joyfully pointing his

viewfinder upwards, photographing the abstractions of the dancing branches against the sky. This, precisely, was my father. The hunter of beauty, high and low, in all places.

So, with both the pondering "Um" and the unifying "Om," my family and I are very grateful to the American University Museum, to Jack Rasmussen and to Jennifer Sakai for making this catalogue possible. To see here, all in one place, forty years of his hunt for abstractions, a hunt for answers, a hunt for home and a hunt for God, from roughly 1980 to 2020, is a great joy. As his son, I was struck in the days after he died of what a true gift he gave me. Whenever I walk outside and see beauty in trees or flowers blossoming, in the fluttering of birds, or the peeling of paint, the wisps of the clouds or the symphony of grasses—I get to see Allan Gerson. I get to have the comfort of being close to him wherever I see beauty. I hope this catalogue invites you to do the same.

DAVID HENRY GERSON is Allan Gerson's son. He is a filmmaker whose work has won prizes from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the Sundance Film Festival, and has been acquired into the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. He is a graduate of Columbia University and the American Film Institute, where he was the recipient of the AFI Richard P. Rodgers Award for Creative Excellence.

www.davidhenrygerson.com

Abstract No.36

An Energy That Wouldn't Quit

EDWARD KEATING

I'm honored to have been asked to comment on the photographic works of Allan Gerson. A big, open, barrel-chested man taken from us too suddenly and too soon—less than one year ago. He loved life, loved his family, loved art, and especially loved photography. He might have played football or rugby in another life, but I trust he used his bear-like physique to his advantage in the courtroom, along with his booming voice. As a friend, though, he was not that kind of man, not intimidating or imposing, but open and inviting, always beckoning one closer.

Instant friends once we were introduced on the island of Martha's Vineyard over ten years ago, I would always look forward to those few weeks every summer when we would spend time talking of life, politics, and art, among other things, often over a chess board. Ultimately, though, he would come most alive when we would discuss photography. He would catch me up on his recent efforts, breaking open the black portfolio boxes and going through his most recent cache of prints.

From the very beginning though, Allan was a very good photographer and, like most people, he hoped I would like his work. I had spent a few years as a *New York Times* photographer, and he was sincerely interested in what I had to say. So, similarly to how I conducted my classes in the teaching gigs I'd had over the years, where I was toughest on the best students, I let him have it. For the photos I liked, I would explain why, and I'd do the same for what I thought were his lesser photos. And he was grateful. I had no ax to grind and knew I'd be doing him no favors if I simply said "it's all good," and left it at that.

Instagram struck me as a game changer for Allan. Unfettered, he had a variety of ways of seeing things and could shift from one to another seamlessly in the blink of an eye. His strong palette and bold use of color, often used sparingly, was matched by an equal comfortability with

Abstract No.29

Abstract No.3

black and white. He was not much of a fan of symmetry, but preferred corralling messy scenes into a chaos that gave his work an edginess, an energy that wouldn't quit. Still, there was a sense of order in all his photographs, so even if the viewer is left hanging, the works were definitive and felt "finished."

In spite of all the valid criticism of Instagram, its original sin of pandering to peoples' impatience and need for instant gratification (plus, a reward for a general lack of technique), the platform suited Allan well. It allowed him to work untethered. It seemed to get him in the zone of pure thought, or pure non-thought… to just shoot from the gut. And it showed, usually in a positive way, but not without complications. No longer forced to wait for film to be developed, edited, and printed, he was able to edit

Abstract No.00

and publish his work in the heat of the moment, when he was most connected to the work. Publishing in real time did away with the weeks and months of thought and deliberation, but allowed him to keep moving and to stay ahead of his thoughts. To follow his feed was to follow his mind in real time. SHOOT, POST. SHOOT, POST. SHOOT, POST. His energy and enthusiasm were palpable. And he was profuse.

Allan had a brilliant mind, though that was something you were going to have to find out on your own. Unless you pressed him, he didn't try to dazzle you with what he had done or what he could do. But his photography was different. THAT he wanted you to know about. THAT he wanted to share. If he had five pictures he liked of a lamppost, he'd show you all five. Often, he wouldn't edit them down. And it's while looking at those series I so wish I could see him in action, and be able to experience his excitement firsthand. And occasionally, like with all great photographers, one of them would be exceptionally good and he would have come full circle.

Abstract No.22

Allan's work shows many twentieth century influences, artists who broke down subject matter, chopped it up, often smudged out detail to get to shape and color and line. Mondrian, Klee, Miro, Kertész, Pollock, Ernst. They dissected the world, abstracted it, looked for patterns or chaos, all in a palpable need to get to the bottom of something. He was searching for something, some meaning in the details of life that might shed light on the larger truths of the world. And in the end, it was a big trick, because in the end it had much less to do with the world than it had to do with him and who he was. You knew what he believed in and what he thought about things. Allan Gerson: world traveler, at the border, at the concentration camp, family man, lawyer, illegal immigrant, a lover of silly sunsets. He was a fighter, but had mastered the rules of engagement so that everything worked for him in the end, except for that goddamn disease he faced in the end that neither he nor anyone else saw coming.

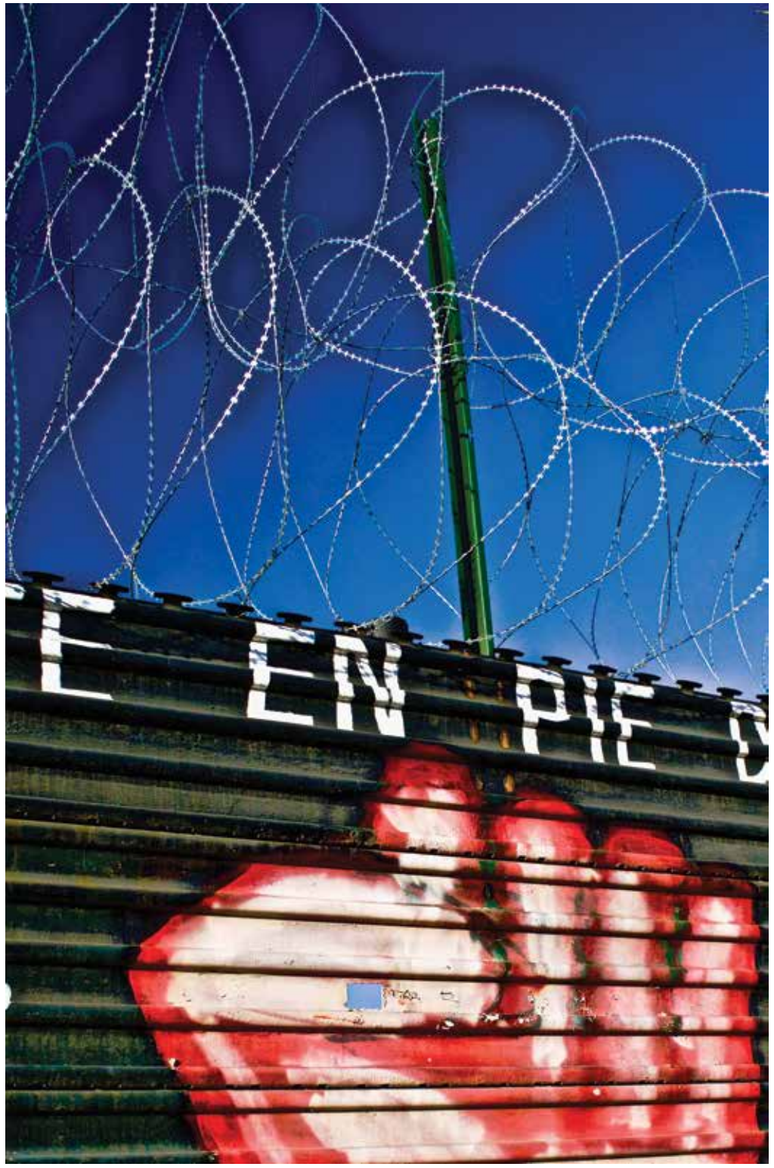
Abstract No.49

He didn't photograph people as much as he photographed places important to people. The Border. The Wall in Jerusalem. Auschwitz. He was interested in the world people lived in and delighted in other peoples' creations, even while he turned them on their heads and made them his own. His approach to the range of situations and challenges he faced with his camera required flexibility and ingenuity. Every issue or difficulty would require a different answer or resolution, which informed me of a certain kindness and acceptance in Allan. He had lots of stories to tell and did that beautifully in so many ways.

I miss the steady stream of Allan's photography and I will remember them. But I will remember him more. His life was truly kaleidoscopic which was reflected within the reflections and the distortions and the compositions that made up his work. So, while I will miss his new work, I will miss him more.

Pulitzer Prize–winning, former *New York Times* photographer Edward Keating is a regular contributor to *Time, Rolling Stone, W,* and *New York Magazine*. Keating's work is in the permanent collection of The Museum of Modern Art in New York City, and he exhibited his collection "New York" alongside Robert Frank's "The Americans" at The Pingyao International Photography Festival.

BORDER WALL | ALLAN GERSON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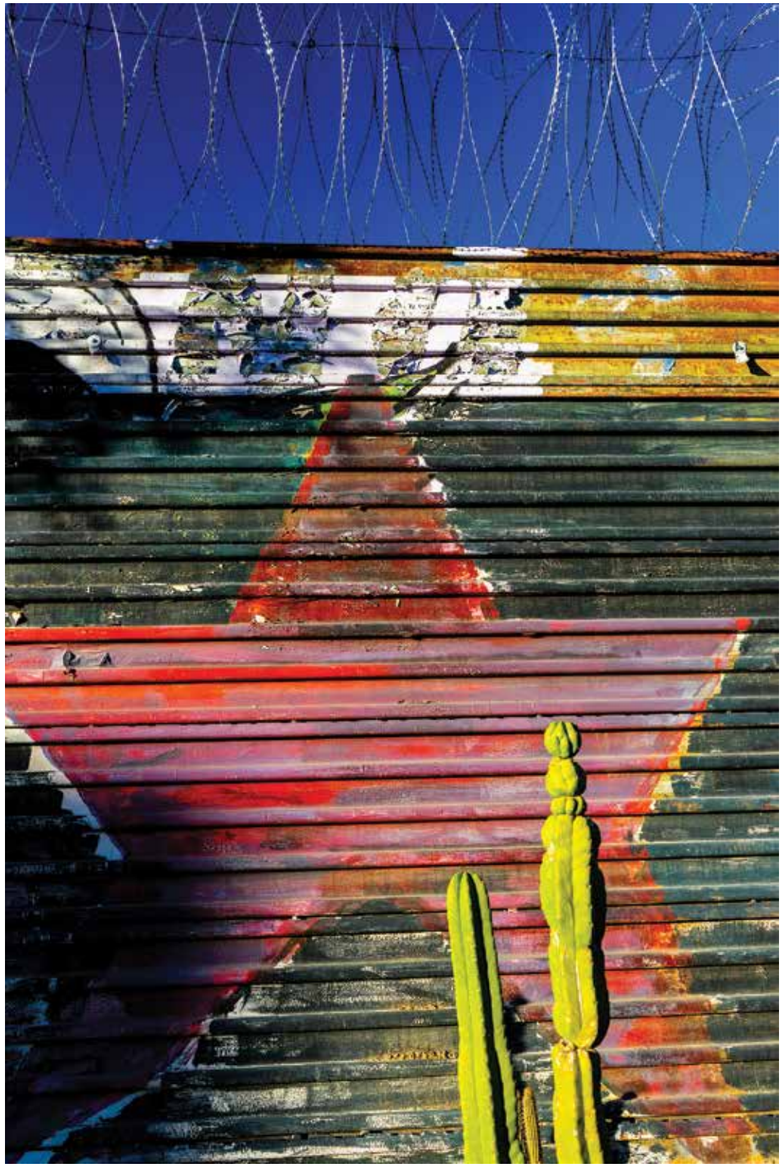

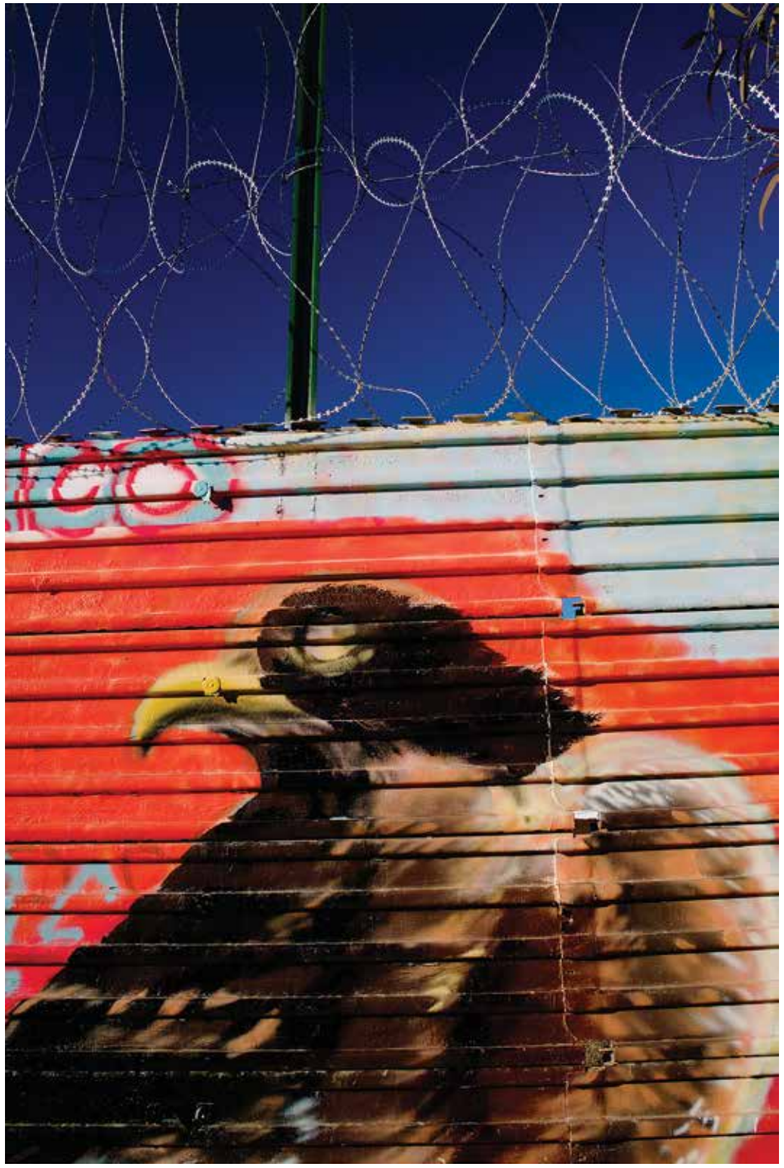

LIBERTAD

EL VALOR DE UNA IDEA
NO TIENE NADA QUE VER
CON LA SINCERIDAD DEL HOMBRE
QUE LA EXPRESA
O.WILDE

Allan Gerson

Photographer and longtime Washington, DC resident Allan Gerson (1945–2019) explored the hidden structure and character of our natural and man-made environment. He compared his artistic method to meditation: becoming one with the subject he captured so that a doorway, for example, was no longer merely an object one takes for granted, but the entry point to a higher consciousness. The results were striking, imbuing the breath of life into the inanimate.

For Gerson, who understood much of his family's history through photos recovered during his parents' escape from Nazi-occupied Poland, photography was also the connecting point to a life story. He was born in Samarkand, Uzbekistan at the end of World War II.

Gerson's works are held in prominent permanent and private collections across the globe, including the International Photography Hall of Fame Museum, the University of Mississippi Art Museum, and the Morocco Royal Palace in Rabat. His photographs of the Sahara and the two great clocks at the Musée D'Orsay and the King Hassan II Mosque were featured in exhibitions at the embassies of France and Morocco. This series led him to experiment with reproducing photographs on jewelry.

Apart from photography, Gerson had a prominent international law practice which evolved from his work as a senior counsel at the US State Department and Department of Justice. He is widely recognized as the first American attorney to successfully sue a foreign government for complicity in acts of terrorism. His experience on behalf of the Pan Am 103/ Lockerbie families is recounted in *The Price of Terror: How the Families of Pan Am 103 Brought Libya to Justice*. The distinguished author and photographer Jay Dusard has remarked that Gerson "consistently cuts to the most fundamental elements of complex legal issues and he approaches his photography with the same precision."

He was married to the award-winning food writer, Joan Nathan, and was the father of their three children, Daniela, Merissa, and David.

Abstract No.35

Of dancing trees
Of golden spools
Of design everywhere
Of god as shorthand for good
And in As You Like It,
Brooks that sing,
And sermons from stones
My daily fix
As I like it.

– AG

ALPER INITIATIVE FOR WASHINGTON ART

MISSION STATEMENT

The Alper Initiative for Washington Art promotes an understanding and appreciation of the art and artists of the Washington Metropolitan Area. We provide and staff a dedicated space located within the American University Museum, to present exhibitions, programs, and resources for the study and encouragement of our creative community.

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