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EXPLORATION OF CONCEPTUAL PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE CREATION OF SYMBOLIC AND METAPHORIC IMAGERY

Pongky Adhi Purnama[1], Hendy Rosadi[2], Silviana A. A. Tahalea[3], Erlina Novianti[4]

[1 2 3 4] Universitas Trisakti, Jakarta, Indonesia
E-mail correspondence: pongky@trisakti.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This article discusses photography as a medium for expressing metaphysical and symbolic imagery in contemporary visual art. This research examines how conceptual photography conveys metaphysical meaning through visual symbols and aesthetic strategies. The study uses a qualitative, practice-based approach, supported by semiotic analysis and an examination of the visual aesthetics of the resulting photographic works. The results show that visual elements such as human figures, symbolic properties, color, lighting, and composition, shaped by the exploration of camera and film-processing techniques, play an important role in constructing metaphysical narratives and nonliteral symbolic meanings. The research concludes that photography has the potential to be a reflective and expressive medium capable of conveying inner experiences and transcendental ideas. This research recommends developing the study of art photography through cross-medium symbolic exploration and a more diverse approach to visual technology.

Keywords: conceptual photography; symbolic imagery; visual metaphor

1. Introduction

Since its inception, photography has often been understood as a medium for documenting visual reality, objectively recording events, objects and phenomena. However, this understanding has shifted significantly with the development of contemporary art discourse, where photography is no longer simply a tool for recording facts but also a meaningful medium for artistic expression (Barthes, 1981). Barthes explained that a photograph contains the informative studium and the affective or personal punctum, so that the creation and interpretation of photographs are no longer solely about what is seen. This perspective strengthens photography's position as a visual language capable of conveying the ideas and inner experiences of its creator.

In the context of contemporary art, conceptual and expressive photography are rapidly developing as forms of artistic practice that expand photography's

function beyond mere documentation. Conceptual photography emphasizes that ideas and concepts are the primary aspects of visual creation, while the visual itself becomes a medium that conveys complex meaning (Wells, 2015). Consistently, recent artistic research views photography not only as a recording tool but also as a reflective, subjective and symbolic visual narrative through composition, gesture and lighting (Batchen, 2004). Jauhari (2025) demonstrates that a photographic approach to performing arts can transcend the boundaries of mere documentation by capturing reflective aesthetic moments through conceptual artistic practices (decisive moments), resulting in works with aesthetic power and deeper visual interpretation.

This conceptualization is part of the evolution of contemporary art, which prioritizes not only visual representation but also ideas as the core of visual artworks (Bolkiah et al., 2024). Expressive contemporary photography broadens its scope by emphasizing the emotional connection between the visual and the viewer's perception.

In today's art photography landscape, this shift reflects how the medium of photography can function as a complex and multifaceted artistic practice, where creative ideas, aesthetics and personal expression come together to form a contemporary visual discourse relevant to modern art issues. Here, photography no longer simply records the visual world but becomes a means for dialogue between the creator, the work and the audience, while also encouraging interpretive and reflective readings of meaning.

In visual art, metaphysical and symbolic imagery are crucial elements that convey meaning beyond the literal representation of an object. This concept is rooted in the idea that works of art convey not only concrete forms but also contain hidden meanings that trigger inner reflection and aesthetic experiences in the viewer. As part of artistic practice, symbols and metaphors enable artists to visualize abstract and complex ideas through visible visual forms (Mujiyono, 2019). In this context, symbols in visual works serve as a bridge between physical reality and inner experience, allowing implied messages to inspire deeper interpretation by the audience. Semiotic studies in art also demonstrate that symbolic and metaphorical elements are important tools in interpreting visual

works. Symbols are not merely iconic representations, but involve an interpretive process that connects visual signs to specific cultural, emotional and philosophical meanings. A semiotic approach to understanding artworks demonstrates that visual symbols can function as sign systems that contain meanings beyond their formal appearance, making the interpretation of visual works a complex and multi interpretive process.

In this realm, metaphysical imagery refers to the representation of transcendental experiences that can encourage viewers to transcend surface visual perception and toward reflective understanding. This aligns with the approach of visual metaphor theory, which states that metaphors in art not only convey ideas aesthetically but also connect the audience's subjective and emotional experiences with the conceptual meaning within the artwork. Thus, metaphysical and symbolic imagery in visual art functions as an artistic strategy to communicate non literal ideas, enriching the aesthetic experience and opening up broader interpretative spaces for viewers. In the context of conceptual photography, this symbolic and metaphorical approach allows the medium of photography to represent inner experiences and abstract ideas through complex and interpretive visual language.

In the study of Indonesian art, symbols and visual meaning are also important aspects in reading artworks. Dharsono (2012) explains that symbols in visual art function as a medium for communicating meaning that is not singular but open to multiple interpretations. Sunardi (2014) adds that visuals in artworks are always situated in a complex relationship of meaning between the creator, the cultural context and the viewer. This perspective emphasizes that photography as a visual medium has great potential to convey metaphysical and symbolic imagery through suggestive visual language.

Although the practice of conceptual and symbolic photography is growing, academic studies that specifically discuss photography as a medium for expressing metaphysical and symbolic images are still relatively limited, especially in the context of photographic art research in Indonesia. Most photography studies still emphasize social functions, such as research conducted by Kusrini (2023) who discussed how conceptual photography is used as a medium for representing the attitudes and anxieties of local communities regarding the phenomenon of "udan

salah mangsa" (unpredictable shifts in the rainy season due to climate change). Other studies of conceptual photography also often highlight the function of applied visual communication, such as that conducted by Sari (2024) who discussed the creative process of creating conceptual photography works that visualize the idea of self evolution through the integration of tape art media and photographic techniques to highlight body gestures and one color as the main expressive elements. A number of previous studies have focused on the interpretation of visual meaning and symbols in conceptual photography through an interpretative approach to the aesthetic visual elements in certain works, such as those discussed by Alrozan and Soeharno (2025) in a study of professional photographers' perceptions of the meaning of conceptual photography that emphasizes the symbolic and aesthetic aspects of visuals as a form of complex visual communication, but has not yet reached the realm of deeper metaphysical experience in the visualization of metaphysical images themselves. The existence of a more theoretical study in the book Philosophy of Photography (2010) which explores theoretical and philosophical discussions about photography also shows that scientific discussions that link photography to metaphysical questions are still a relatively new and developing arena in contemporary photography studies.

This indicates a research gap that needs to be filled, particularly in understanding how photography can represent non material experiences and metaphysical ideas through visual strategies. This article makes an artistic contribution by reaffirming conceptual photography's position as a medium of expression that is not solely oriented toward visual aesthetics, but also serves as a reflective means of representing spiritual, emotional and metaphorical experiences through visual language. This contribution lies in the formulation of a structured visual strategy through the use of large format camera (which can provide selective focus effects), film media (with crossed process technique in the lab), human figures, expressive colors, dramatic lighting and body gestures as primary tools in constructing meaningful symbolic images. Through a practice based research approach, the process of creating artworks is viewed not merely as a creative activity but as a systematic artistic research process, positioning photographic works simultaneously as aesthetic objects and the result of scientific study. Thus,

photography's function is expanded from mere visual representation to a contemplative space that opens up in depth interpretations for its audience and enriches the discourse on contemporary artistic photography practices in Indonesia.

The novelty of this research lies in its explicit focus on the formation of metaphysical images in conceptual photography, a realm relatively rarely explored in photography studies, which generally focus on symbolic and aesthetic aspects. This article not only states that photography can be symbolic, but also shows specifically how visual elements such as contrasting colors, dramatic light and body gestures can work to form metaphorical meanings. Furthermore, the formulation of the relationship between visual strategies and abstract ideas produces a conceptual framework that has the potential to be replicated in other conceptual photography practices and research, thus opening up space for the development of deeper photography theory and practice in the context of contemporary visual art.

Based on this background, the research questions in this article are formulated as follows: (1) How can photography represent metaphysical and symbolic imagery through a conceptual approach? and (2) What visual elements construct metaphysical meaning in photographic works? These questions are crucial for examining photography's role as a visual language that is not only representational but also reflective and contemplative.

This article aims to examine photography as a medium for expressing metaphysical and symbolic imagery through an analysis of conceptual photographic works. This research contribution is expected to enrich theoretical studies of art photography, particularly in understanding the symbolic and metaphysical dimensions of photographic creation. Furthermore, this article is expected to provide practical contributions for photographers and art academics in developing the practice of conceptual photography as a medium of artistic expression within contemporary visual arts discourse.

2. Literature Review

The study of metaphysical and symbolic imagery in visual art demonstrates that art does not merely represent the reality of form but is also capable of

visualizing inner experiences, abstract ideas and symbolic values that exist beyond the concrete world. A semiotic perspective on photography emphasizes that photographs capture not only objects but also visual signs capable of conveying symbolic meaning depending on the viewer's interpretation. Semiotic studies of photography demonstrate how visual elements such as color, shape and composition can function as symbols that trigger emotional and connotative responses, allowing photographs to function as symbolic language rather than mere literal representations (Nimitmai & Dechsubha, 2024).

In the realm of contemporary Indonesian art, research on expressive photography emphasizes that the medium of photography can be explored to construct narratives of inner and imaginative experiences, especially when visual elements are chosen to reflect ideas beyond visible reality. For example, studies of toy photography emphasize how visual imagination serves as the foundation for the experience of inner space, expanding the understanding that photography can be a philosophical artistic discourse and generate personal emotional resonance (Cinantya, 2024). In contemporary photography studies, photography is no longer understood solely as a technical practice of image creation, but rather as a medium of visual communication containing messages, meanings and symbolic constructions. Purnama (2020) emphasizes that the photographic process involves conceptual awareness in the selection of objects, lighting, composition and visual narrative to convey a specific message to the audience. This perspective demonstrates photography's potential as a medium for expressing meaning beyond literal representation, making it relevant as a theoretical foundation for discussing photography as a means of representing metaphysical and symbolic imagery.

Other studies in other journals highlight the shift in photographic aesthetics from merely realistic representation to visual expression that evokes subconscious and fantasy atmospheres, a principle dense with visual symbolism. This phenomenon demonstrates that surrealistic photography which often utilizes metaphysical imagery has become a valid form of artistic expression in the realm of contemporary photography, as it is able to convey meaning that is not only textual but also interpretive (Soedjono, 2019).

The theoretical contributions of semiotic and visual aesthetic studies provide a foundation for understanding that photography not only records what exists physically but is also capable of representing abstract ideas and symbolic values that invite inner reflection. This becomes particularly relevant when examining conceptual photography works nuanced by metaphysical imagery, where the visual elements in the photographs are presented not merely as literal signs but as signifiers that open up interpretive space for the audience. Therefore, the study of the medium of photography in the context of metaphysical and symbolic imagery enriches contemporary art discourse by emphasizing the aesthetic, semiotic and subjective experience aspects of visual appreciation.

Furthermore, several articles also address the theme of artistic and symbolic representation in other visual media such as painting, design, and performance art. For example, the work "Lelayu: A Symbolic Representation of Flower Portraits" (Permatasari, 2025) demonstrates how symbolic representation in visual art can give rise to new layers of meaning that are both reflective and metaphorical. The application of visual symbols in this work reinforces the understanding that visual elements function not only as markers of form but also as constructs of conceptual and emotional meaning. The findings in this journal are relevant to the study of conceptual photography, which seeks to express metaphysical and symbolic imagery, demonstrating that the visual elements chosen by the creator, such as composition, aesthetic moments, gestures or symbolic cues, play a crucial role in providing a deeper visual experience for the viewer. This demonstrates that, in contemporary artistic practice, photography can be an effective medium for representing inner experiences and abstract ideas through a visual language enriched with symbolism.

Thus, this literature review demonstrates that the study of photography in the context of contemporary art creation has evolved from a predominantly documentary function to a conceptually expressive medium. Works published in other journals demonstrate the significance of symbolic elements in creating more complex visual meanings, thus expanding the theoretical and methodological scope for understanding photography as a medium for expressing metaphysical and symbolic imagery.

3. Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with practice based research methods, a research approach that recognizes creative practice as an integral part of the research process itself. Practice based research positions the process of creating works as the primary means of generating valid artistic knowledge, where artistic practice (visual process reports) also serves as data and analytical tools. This concept has been described as an approach in which artworks are not merely products but also a methodology for generating and conveying creative insights (practice as research) that can be scientifically tested and reproduced. This approach is popular in contemporary art research because it allows artist-researchers to explore, produce and construct meaning through their own artistic practices. The practice based research paradigm differs from traditional social or scientific research paradigms because it places creative experience, subjectivity and aesthetic reflection as essential components of the research process. Knowledge in this approach is understood as the result of a dialogue between artistic practice and critical reflection documented throughout the process of creating works.

The research objects in this study are conceptual photographic works created to express metaphysical and symbolic imagery based on the photographs produced by the researchers. The characteristics of the objects are determined by artistic decisions regarding the visual theme, composition, symbols and narrative context of the photographs. In practice based research, the artwork itself acts as both a "data object" and a research document, not as a human participant. Therefore, the participant is solely the researcher themselves, as creator and experimenter, who carries out the entire process of conceptualization through to production of the work. This approach is common in the study of art creation, where creative practice is used as a scientific tool to generate new knowledge. The research location is the researcher's visual creation studio, a space where the researcher conducts ideation, photography, visual experiments and documentation of the work. This space is equipped with studio photography equipment that allows for the exploration of visual elements such as lighting, color, composition and gesture in photography. This research follows the following structured practice-based research stages:

3.1. Problem Identification and Idea Formulation

The researcher began with a literature review and initial visual exploration to formulate the focus of the creation, namely how photography can represent metaphysical and symbolic imagery. Literature related to conceptual and symbolic photography theory and arts based practices was used as a theoretical basis and empirical studies in art journals.

3.2. Visual Design

The researcher created visual sketches, mood boards and composition experiments as initial concepts for the work. At this stage, initial photography was conducted to test the visual and symbolic ideas to be expressed, including the selection of figures, settings, colors and lighting.

3.3. Photographic Work Production

Using photographic equipment (large format camera, studio lights and film), the researcher photographed with visual parameters consistent with the metaphysical and symbolic concepts being designed. Each photograph was recorded in detail, including camera settings, lighting, poses, objects and intended visual symbols, so that they could be reproduced.

3.4. Data Analysis and Interpretation of the Work

The analysis was conducted on the photographs and process journal entries based on the established symbolic theory and visual aesthetics. This data analysis technique follows qualitative interpretative principles with a semiotic and aesthetic art approach: 1) Visual symbolic analysis, examining visual signs and the meanings they evoke; 2) Critical reflection, rereading the creative process to generalize about the visual elements that form metaphysical imagery; 3) Visual narrative analysis, placing each work within a meaningful flow connected to the main idea of the research.

Because this research is based on artistic practice, data collection techniques included: 1) Documentation of photographic results; 2) A reflective process journal written by the researcher containing notes on artistic decisions, the rationale for selecting visual symbols and their influence on the work's meaning; 3) A literature review, which served as contextual data to map the work's position within contemporary visual art discourse.

This approach aligns with arts based research practices, where creativity and artwork are part of the research instrument. Data analysis was conducted qualitatively with the following steps: 1) Visual data reduction to select photographs that most strongly represent metaphysical and symbolic imagery; 2) Thematic visual analysis based on the color, composition and symbols displayed; 3) Narrative interpretation, exploring the creative process and emerging meanings, then linking these to relevant aesthetic and semiotic theories. This analytical path enabled the researcher to connect the work's creation process with conceptual findings that can be presented as new knowledge in the art of photography.

4. Discussion

The creative approach in this study refers to photographic practices that simultaneously combine technical and conceptual aspects. As stated by Purnama (2020), photography as an applied practice requires visual planning that includes mastery of camera techniques, lighting settings and an understanding of the context of the meaning intended to be conveyed through the image. Therefore, this study applies a practice based research method by placing the creative process as part of data collection and analysis, where each visual decision is treated as a meaningful element in the formation of metaphysical and symbolic imagery.

4.1. Problem Identification and Idea Formulation

The development of contemporary art photography demonstrates a significant shift from a documentary function to an expressive and conceptual practice. Photography is no longer merely recording empirical reality but has become a medium for articulating ideas, inner experiences and visual symbolism. In this context, a fundamental question arises regarding how photography can represent metaphysical and symbolic imagery, namely images that refer to transcendental, spiritual experiences and non material meanings that cannot be directly represented. The photographic works that are the focus of this research will demonstrate a strong visual exploration of these areas. A review of art photography literature identifies the primary research problem: how photography, as an art medium, can represent metaphysical and symbolic imagery through the processing of visual

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elements and conceptual strategies. This problem also encompasses the question of which visual elements, such as color, light, composition, gesture and symbolism, play a role in constructing metaphysical meaning in photographic works.

The formulation of ideas in this research is grounded in the theory of conceptual and symbolic photography, which views photography as a visual language capable of conveying abstract ideas and inner experiences. Furthermore, an arts based research approach is used as the methodological foundation, where the process of photographic creation is positioned as the research method itself. This approach allows researchers to generate knowledge through artistic practice accompanied by critical reflection, as is commonly used in contemporary art and design research (Borgdorff, 2012; Jauhari et al., 2025). Therefore, the focus of this research is formulated as an exploration of conceptual photography to represent metaphysical and symbolic imagery through planned, reflective and practice based visual processing. This research straddles the boundaries between art photography studies, visual semiotics and practice based research, with its primary contribution being an understanding of photography as a medium for expressing non-material and transcendental experiences in contemporary visual art.

4.2. Visual Design

The visual design stage is the initial conceptual phase in the creation of a photographic work, aiming to translate the ideas of metaphysical and symbolic imagery into a structured visual form. At this stage, creation does not begin simply with taking images, but rather with the process of formulating ideas through visual sketches, moodboards and compositional experiments as a conceptual foundation. This process is important to ensure that the resulting visuals are not accidental, but are the result of conscious and reflective artistic planning.

4.2.1. Visual Sketches as a Mapping of Metaphysical Imagery

Visual sketches are used as an initial tool to map the relationships between figures, space, light and the symbols they wish to convey. They are not intended as detailed technical drawings, but rather as visual representations of body poses, the figures' perspectives and the placement of symbolic elements within the photographic frame.

In the first photographic work, the visual sketch depicts a female figure with red wing in a frontal pose with a calm hand gesture holding a flower. The floral element in the sketch is positioned as a symbol of life, purity and hope, while the red background is designed as a symbolic space representing inner energy, courage and emotional intensity. This sketch helps define the visual relationship between figure and symbol so that the metaphysical meaning is not reduced to a mere aesthetic portrait.

In the second work, the visual sketch emphasizes the silhouette of the body and blueish wing as metaphors for transformation and existential ambiguity. The figures are not designed to be entirely realistic, but rather exist within an imaginary space, emphasizing the shift in identity from the physical to the symbolic. This sketch serves as the basis for a visual experiment regarding how the human body can be treated as a symbolic medium.

Meanwhile, the visual sketch of the third work is designed with a figure with white wing dressed in white, in a frontal position and lighting resembling an aura or halo around the head. This sketch represents the idea of spirituality and transcendence, where light serves as a symbol of an invisible metaphysical presence.

The use of wings in all three photographic works is a conceptual and symbolic visual design decision, not simply an aesthetic ornament. Wings are positioned as a visual metaphor that bridges the physical and metaphysical realms, while also serving as a key signifier of the shift in meaning from material reality to an imaginary and spiritual reality. In the context of conceptual photography, this element functions as a visual language that activates symbolic readings of the work. Historically and culturally, wings are often associated with ideas of transcendence, freedom, transformation and the existence of non humans such as angels or spiritual beings. Thus, the presence of wings in photography directly disrupts the realistic perception of the photographic medium, which has traditionally been understood as a representation of the real world. This aligns with Barthes' (1981) view that photography not only records what exists but can also construct connotative meaning through deliberate visual construction. In all three photographs, wings serve as a visual symbol signifying a liminal state, the figure's

position between the human world and the metaphysical realm. The female figure, accompanied by wings, is no longer read as a realistic subject, but rather as a symbolic entity representing inner experience, spirituality or a specific existential state.

4.2.2. Moodboards as Visual Atmosphere Builders

Moodboards are used to summarize visual references in the form of color, texture, lighting and emotional nuances that will be presented in the artwork. The moodboard is compiled by referring to works of art photography, symbolic paintings and visual aesthetics related to metaphysical and spiritual themes.

In the first photograph, the moodboard is dominated by red and black, with soft accents on the figure's skin. Red was chosen to symbolize vitality and inner strength, while also creating an emotional contrast with the figure's serene expression. Visual references in the moodboard include conceptual photography that utilizes color as a symbolic language (Barthes, 1981).

The moodboard in the second work displays dark tones with sharp light contrasts, rough textures and ambiguous visual elements. This atmosphere is designed to support the idea of metamorphosis and the uncertainty of identity, in line with the conceptual photography approach that places ideas at the center of the artwork's creation (Soedjono, 2019).

In the third work, the moodboard is dominated by white, light gray and soft light. Visual references are directed toward spiritual imagery and symbols of purity, with lighting that creates a sense of transcendence. This moodboard helps ensure the visual atmosphere aligns with the metaphysical ideas being conveyed.

4.3. Photographic Work Production

The approach to creating the artworks in this study draws on photographic practices that simultaneously combine technical and conceptual aspects. As stated by Purnama (2020), photography as an applied practice, demands visual planning that encompasses mastery of camera techniques, lighting settings and an understanding of the context of the meaning conveyed through the image. Therefore, this study employs a practice based research method, placing the artwork creation process as part of data collection and analysis, where each visual

decision is treated as a meaningful element in the formation of metaphysical and symbolic imagery. The photographic artwork production in this study was conducted as part of an arts based research approach, where the technical process of photography is used as a method for exploring metaphysical and symbolic imagery. All three artworks were created using a 4x5 inch large format camera with slide film (E6) cross processed into color negatives (C41). This technique was chosen to produce color distortion, extreme contrast and tonal instability as a visual strategy for representing a non realistic metaphysical reality.

The use of a large format camera allows for precise compositional control and visual acuity, while cross-processing serves as an artistic intervention into the photographic reality. Each work is produced using relatively uniform technical settings to maintain visual consistency, with an aperture between f/16 and f/32, a shutter speed of 1-5 seconds to add ambiance and an ISO of 100. Focus is achieved by tilting the camera upwards, focusing only on upper body, with the model's head in sharp focus, while other areas are blurred to emphasize the figure's presence as the center of symbolic meaning.

The lighting was conceptually designed using studio flash with different color filters for each work. Red is used to emphasize vital energy and life potential, blue and green to create a sense of unworldly space and yellow to white to create an atmosphere of enlightenment and transcendence. The placement of frontal, side and backlighting is arranged to create silhouettes, halo effects and separate the figures from the background. The resulting work is a print from a scanned contact print, so the quality of the digital work reflects the characteristics of the analog photography process. Overall, the production process is positioned not only as a technical stage, but as an integral part of the formation of meaning. Every photographic decision, from medium selection and film processing techniques to lighting and figure poses, serves as a visual tool to represent metaphysical and symbolic imagery in art photography.

4.4. Data Analysis and Interpretation of the Work

4.4.1. Analysis of Work 1: Figure with Flowers

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Figure 1. *Figures and Flowers*
(Photo: Pongky Adhi Purnama, 1998)

The analysis of this work was conducted using a qualitative interpretive approach within the framework of visual semiotics and art aesthetics, to examine how visual elements shape metaphysical and symbolic imagery. This photograph depicts a female figure with red wings standing frontally against a red background, holding a flower in the center of her body and illuminated by unnatural colored lighting resulting from cross-processing techniques. Symbolically, the human figure with wings serves as a primary signifier representing consciousness or a spiritual subject. The upright, frontal and symmetrical body position conveys an impression of stability and stillness, which in symbolic traditions are often associated with contemplative or meditative states. The flower held at the chest serves as a symbol of life, growth and spiritual potential. Its placement in the chest area, symbolically related to the emotional and inner center, reinforces the flower's meaning as a manifestation of internal consciousness, not simply a decorative object. The flower's contrasting color with the background emphasizes its role as the focus of visual meaning. The red background dominates the entire visual field and serves as a symbol of vital energy, courage and existential strength. In a metaphysical context, red can also be read as a metaphor for the initial stages of spiritual transformation an intense and driven phase of life. The color distortion

caused by cross processing reinforces the impression that the space presented is not realistic, but rather symbolic.

Through reflection on the creative process, it can be concluded that technical decisions such as the use of a large format camera with selective focus, cross-processed slide film, color-filtered lighting and a plain cloth backdrop directly contributed to the formation of metaphysical imagery. The effects of the large format camera's selective focus and cross-processing techniques produce instability in visual sharpness, color and texture that aesthetically rejects naturalistic photographic representation. The unnaturalness of skin tones and background emphasizes that the figures are positioned not as real individuals, but rather as symbolic representations. This suggests that visual elements such as extreme color, rough texture and high contrast play a crucial role in constructing metaphysical meaning, creating a visual experience that lies between physical reality and the imaginary. From this reflection, it can be generalized that metaphysical imagery in photography is not solely constructed by symbolic objects, but also by technical interventions within the medium of photography itself.

Within the narrative flow of this research, this work can be read as the initial stage of a metaphysical journey, namely the phase of consciousness and potential. The figures, still bound to the human form, holding symbols of life, represent a state before transcendence. The absence of elements of movement or extreme physical transformation indicates that the metaphysical meaning remains in the internal and reflective realm. Narratively, this photograph serves as an introduction to the main idea of the research that photography is able to represent metaphysical images through symbolic language and visual aesthetics, without having to abandon the medium of photography as a figurative representation. Based on the stages of analysis, this work shows that the representation of metaphysical images in photography is constructed through; 1) Visual symbols (figures, flowers, colors); 2) Technical interventions of the medium (cross processing, colored lighting), and 3) Contemplative compositional arrangements and body gestures. These findings form the basis for the analysis of subsequent works that will show the development of visual narratives towards a more transcendental metaphysical form.

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4.4.2 Analysis of Work 2: Figures in Imaginary Space



Figure 2. *Figures in Imaginary Space*
(Photo: Pongky Adhi Purnama, 1998)

This work's analysis uses a qualitative interpretive approach within the framework of visual semiotics and art aesthetics to examine the formation of metaphysical imagery through visual symbols, photographic technical strategies and visual narrative. This work features a human figure with winged elements, holding plans with cool colored lighting and a dark background that resembles a cosmic or non worldly space. Wings are the main symbolic sign in this work. In the tradition of iconography and visual symbolism, wings are consistently associated with transcendence, spiritual freedom and the transition from the material world to the non-physical dimension. The presence of wings on the human figure indicates a liminal state, namely being between the human state and a metaphysical entity. The figure's upright posture with one hand raised holding plans and gaze directed upwards reinforces the aspirational and transcendental meaning. This gesture can be read as a symbol of searching for or connecting with a higher dimension. The green and blue colors that dominate the lighting serve as symbols of serenity, depth, and infinity, often associated with spiritual or cosmic space. The dark background with elements of points of light resembling stars creates the impression of an imaginary space detached from the context of the real world. This confirms

that the visual space in this work is not a representational space, but rather a symbolic space where metaphysical experiences take place. Symbolically, plants are often associated with the life cycle, regeneration, and vital energy. When the plant is held by the human figure, a symbolic relationship is formed between the human body as a spiritual subject and the plant as a representation of cosmic life force. This relationship emphasizes the metaphysical notion of humans as part of the universal order, not an entity separate from nature. In this context, the plant functions as a medium between the material world and the immaterial meanings conveyed in the work. From a visual aesthetic perspective, the plant's position in the center of the figure's body strengthens the central composition and makes it a visual focal point. The plant's color contrasts with the background and colored lighting, creating visual emphasis and layers of symbolic meaning. This contrast reinforces the impression that the plant is not a passive object, but an active element in the visual narrative being constructed. Aesthetically, the plant balances the composition between the figure, the wings and the cosmic background, creating a harmonious and meaningful visual unity.

Reflection on the creative process shows that the choice of wings as a visual prop, the selective use of focus on a large-format camera, cool-toned lighting and cross processing techniques are interrelated conceptual decisions. The tilt up camera movement on a large format camera results in selective focus on the model's waist and above, blurring other areas. The cross-processing produces an unnatural shift in skin tone and background, thereby losing its realistic identity and functioning as a universal symbol. The use of backlighting forms the silhouette of the wings and creates a clear separation between the figure and the background. This strategy visually emphasizes transformation and transition, while reinforcing the sense of a metaphysical presence that cannot be fully explained rationally. From this reflection, it can be generalized that metaphysical imagery in photography is constructed through a combination of iconic symbols (wings), non-realistic visual atmospheres, and technical interventions within the photographic medium. Through critical reflection on the creative process, it can be concluded that the selection of plants as visual props is a conceptual strategy to present metaphysical imagery in a non literal way. Plants become symbols that open up

interpretations for the viewer, allowing for multi layered interpretations from ecological to spiritual to existential. Thus, this element contributes significantly to constructing the metaphysical atmosphere that is the primary focus of this research.

Within the overall narrative flow of this research, this work represents a stage of transition or metaphysical transformation. While the first work represents internal potential and awareness, the second demonstrates the process of breaking free from the limitations of the human body and moving toward a more liberated spiritual state. Narratively, the winged figure marks a shift from contemplation to movement and from internal awareness to a relationship with a broader metaphysical space. The dark and cosmic space serves as the backdrop for this symbolic journey, connecting personal experience with a universal dimension. In a visual narrative analysis, the plant held by the figure can be positioned as an initial or central marker of the work's meaningful flow. It connects the human figure, the wing element and the visual setting in a symbolic narrative of transformation, protection and the search for inner meaning. The presence of the plant reinforces the research's main idea that photography can represent metaphysical and symbolic imagery through the deliberate and conceptual processing of visual elements. Based on this analysis, the second work asserts that the representation of metaphysical imagery in photography can be achieved through: 1) The use of transcendental iconic symbols (wings and body gestures); 2) The creation of a non realistic visual space through lighting and color, and; 3) The transformation of human figures into symbolic entities through experimental photography techniques. This work strengthens the research argument that photography not only records visual reality but is also capable of constructing metaphysical reality through symbolic language and visual aesthetics.

4.4.3 Analysis of Work 3: Figure with a Circle of Light

This work was analyzed using a qualitative, interpretive approach through the framework of visual semiotics and art aesthetics to examine how visual elements function symbolically in representing metaphysical imagery. This work features a winged human figure dominated by bright colors and the presence of a halo behind the body, visually referencing spiritual iconography. The most dominant symbolic element in this work is the halo behind the figure. In religious and spiritual art

traditions, the halo is a symbol of purity, enlightenment and transcendental presence. The halo serves as a visual sign that the figure is no longer in an ordinary human state but has attained a higher level of metaphysical awareness. The wings worn by the figure remain a symbol of transcendence, but in this work, their meaning shifts from a process to a state of achievement. The wings no longer signify an attempt to fly or move but rather become an integral part of the figure's identity as a spiritual entity. The hand gestures, open to the sides and forward, signify acceptance, openness, and union with a broader dimension. The white and yellow colors that dominate the figure and the light symbolically relate to purity, enlightenment and spiritual energy, while creating a strong contrast with the surrounding dark background.



Figure 3. *Figure with a Circle of Light*
(Photo: Pongky Adhi Purnama, 1998)

Reflection on the creative process reveals that the use of intense frontal lighting, combined with strong unfiltered backlighting was deliberately designed to produce overexposure and halo effects. This effect is enhanced by the selective focus achieved by the large-format camera, using a tilt up method with cross-processed slide film, obscuring the realistic details of the body and making the figure appear as a light form. The decision to reduce textural detail and increase the

dominance of light demonstrates an aesthetic strategy that positions photography as a medium for metaphysical expression rather than as a tool for representing empirical reality. From this reflection, it can be generalized that the element of light, both technically and symbolically plays a central role in constructing metaphysical meaning in art photography.

Within the overall narrative structure of the study, this work represents the final stage of the metaphysical journey: enlightenment or complete transcendence. While the first work presents a phase of potential and internal awareness and the second a phase of transformation and transition, the third visualizes the state of attainment and union with the metaphysical dimension. Narratively, the figure is no longer bound to a dark or ambiguous imaginary space, but rather appears as the center of light itself. This confirms the research's main idea that photography is capable of gradually constructing a metaphysical narrative through a series of works utilizing visual symbols, experimental photography techniques and aesthetic composition.

A critical reflection on the three works, however, reveals that the conceptual effectiveness is not equally dependent on the symbolic objects represented in the frame. The first work, *Figure with Flowers*, establishes the relationship between the human figure, the flower and the red environment as symbols of consciousness, life and inner potential. Its strength lies in the relatively direct relationship between symbol and concept. Nevertheless, this directness can also become a limitation because the symbolic reading of the flower and red colour may appear predetermined. The work therefore demonstrates an important tension in symbolic photography: visual symbols can provide conceptual clarity, but excessive reliance on established symbolic associations can reduce ambiguity and limit alternative interpretations. The second work, *Figures in Imaginary Space*, develops the visual language further by introducing wings, plants, cool-coloured illumination and a dark, non-realistic environment. The work is more successful in creating an ambiguous visual space in which the viewer is encouraged to construct meaning rather than simply identify individual symbols. This finding is consistent with research on conceptual photography that emphasizes the role of visual signs and metaphors in creating meanings that extend beyond literal representation (Cheng &

Park, 2024). Nevertheless, the work also reveals that the use of recognizable metaphysical conventions, particularly wings and cosmic imagery, risks positioning the photograph within an already familiar visual vocabulary. A stronger future development would therefore investigate less conventional symbols or culturally specific visual metaphors. The third work, *Figure with a Circle of Light*, represents the culmination of the visual narrative through the dominance of white and yellow light, the halo like form and the reduction of physical detail. Its principal strength is the integration of photographic technique and conceptual meaning. Overexposure, backlighting, selective focus and cross-processing do not merely produce an aesthetic effect; they actively transform the photographic representation of the figure. The image therefore demonstrates that metaphysical meaning can emerge from the photographic medium itself rather than only from objects placed before the camera. This supports the broader argument that photographic meaning is shaped by deliberate decisions concerning framing, technology and visual construction rather than by the camera's supposedly neutral recording of reality (Sontag, 1977).

The three works can also be critically positioned in relation to the practice of Duane Michals. In *Paradise Regained* (1968), Michals used staged photography, symbolism and sequential narrative to explore the human condition and the relationship between material existence and transformation. The Cleveland Museum of Art describes Michals as a pioneer in combining symbolism, metaphor and narrative in photographic sequences. The present research shares this concern with Michals in treating photography as a constructed narrative rather than a neutral record. However, the distinction lies in the present project's emphasis on the photographic material itself particularly large format photography, cross processing, colour filtered lighting and selective focus as an active component of metaphysical meaning. While Michals frequently relies on sequential storytelling and symbolic transformation, this research places greater emphasis on the material and technical intervention of the photographic medium.

The works may also be compared with Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–1980). Sherman constructed fictional identities through staging, costume, gesture and cinematic visual conventions, demonstrating how photography can

produce ambiguous narratives rather than simply document existing reality. MoMA notes that the series deliberately mimics staged film stills while leaving the situations open to interpretation. Recent scholarship similarly identifies imitation, appropriation and theatricality as important strategies through which Sherman challenges the apparent authenticity of photographic representation. The comparison is relevant because the present works likewise reject the assumption that photographic truth must correspond directly to empirical reality. However, whereas Sherman primarily uses constructed identities to question cultural and media representations, this research uses constructed figures and metaphysical symbols to explore spiritual, existential and transcendental ideas. The comparison therefore clarifies the distinctive contribution of the present works: staged photography is employed not primarily to critique popular visual culture but to construct an alternative metaphysical reality.

The self critique also identifies several weaknesses in the research. *First*, the three works rely on relatively conventional metaphysical symbols, particularly wings, flowers, plants, halos and dramatic coloured light. Although these elements are effective in communicating the intended concepts, they may encourage predictable interpretations. *Second*, the interpretation remains strongly controlled by the artist researcher's conceptual intentions. The existing analysis explains what the symbols are intended to mean, but it provides limited evidence of how independent viewers actually interpret them. This is significant because photographic meaning is not produced exclusively by the artist. *Third*, the research places considerable emphasis on analogue techniques and cross-processing. This produces a distinctive visual character, but it also limits the scope of the investigation because contemporary digital and hybrid photographic processes are not explored. *Fourth*, the three works are presented as a coherent narrative of consciousness, transformation and transcendence, but the progression is primarily constructed by the researcher rather than empirically tested through audience interpretation. Future research should therefore incorporate viewer responses, comparative interpretation and possibly collaborative discussion to examine whether the intended metaphysical narrative is actually experienced by audiences.

These limitations do not weaken the contribution of the research; rather, they clarify the knowledge generated through the artistic practice. Practice based research is particularly valuable when the process of making, reflecting and revising becomes a means of producing knowledge that cannot be fully obtained through conventional textual research. Research on practice-based methods emphasizes the importance of looking, creating, re-seeing and critically reflecting as interconnected stages of artistic inquiry (Al-YahYai, 2014). Similarly, research on creative practice argues that the artistic artefact and its critical exegesis need to be understood together because the knowledge generated through making becomes explicit through critical reflection. This principle is demonstrated in the present research because the technical experiments themselves particularly cross processing, selective focus, coloured lighting and controlled exposure became part of the conceptual investigation.

Consequently, the principal contribution of this research is not simply the production of three metaphysical photographs, but the identification of a relationship between symbolic intention, photographic materiality and sequential visual narrative. The research demonstrates that metaphysical imagery can be constructed through three interconnected strategies: first, the deployment of symbolic figures and objects; second, the transformation of photographic reality through technical intervention; and third, the arrangement of individual photographs into a conceptual narrative. This expands the understanding of conceptual photography by demonstrating that metaphysical meaning can emerge simultaneously from what is represented and from how the photographic medium itself is manipulated.

5. Conclusion

This research confirms that photography can function beyond the documentation of visible reality and operate as a conceptual and symbolic medium for expressing metaphysical ideas. Through a practice based research approach, the three photographic works demonstrate that metaphysical meaning can be constructed through the interaction of visual symbols, photographic technique, lighting, colour, composition, gesture and sequential narrative. The creative process

therefore becomes not only a means of producing photographic images but also a method for generating knowledge about how photographic form can communicate ideas that cannot be represented literally.

The research therefore concludes that photography can operate as a space between representation and imagination. The camera does not simply reproduce an external world; through staging, symbolism, lighting, colour, focus, processing and sequencing, the photographer can construct a visual reality capable of suggesting experiences that are otherwise difficult to represent. In this sense, the works contribute to contemporary photographic practice by demonstrating how artistic experimentation and critical reflection can operate together as a form of knowledge production.

Future research should expand the number of works, introduce less conventional and culturally situated symbols, compare analogue and digital processes than incorporate audience interpretation. Such developments would allow the research to move from an artist centred interpretation toward a more dialogical model in which meaning emerges through interaction between artist, artwork, photographic technology and viewer. The continuation of this approach may strengthen the position of practice based photography as both an artistic practice and a legitimate form of research capable of generating theoretical, technical and experiential knowledge.

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