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Nudes emerge from wads of chewing gum

By Kenneth Baker Published 4:00 am PST, Saturday, January 8, 2005

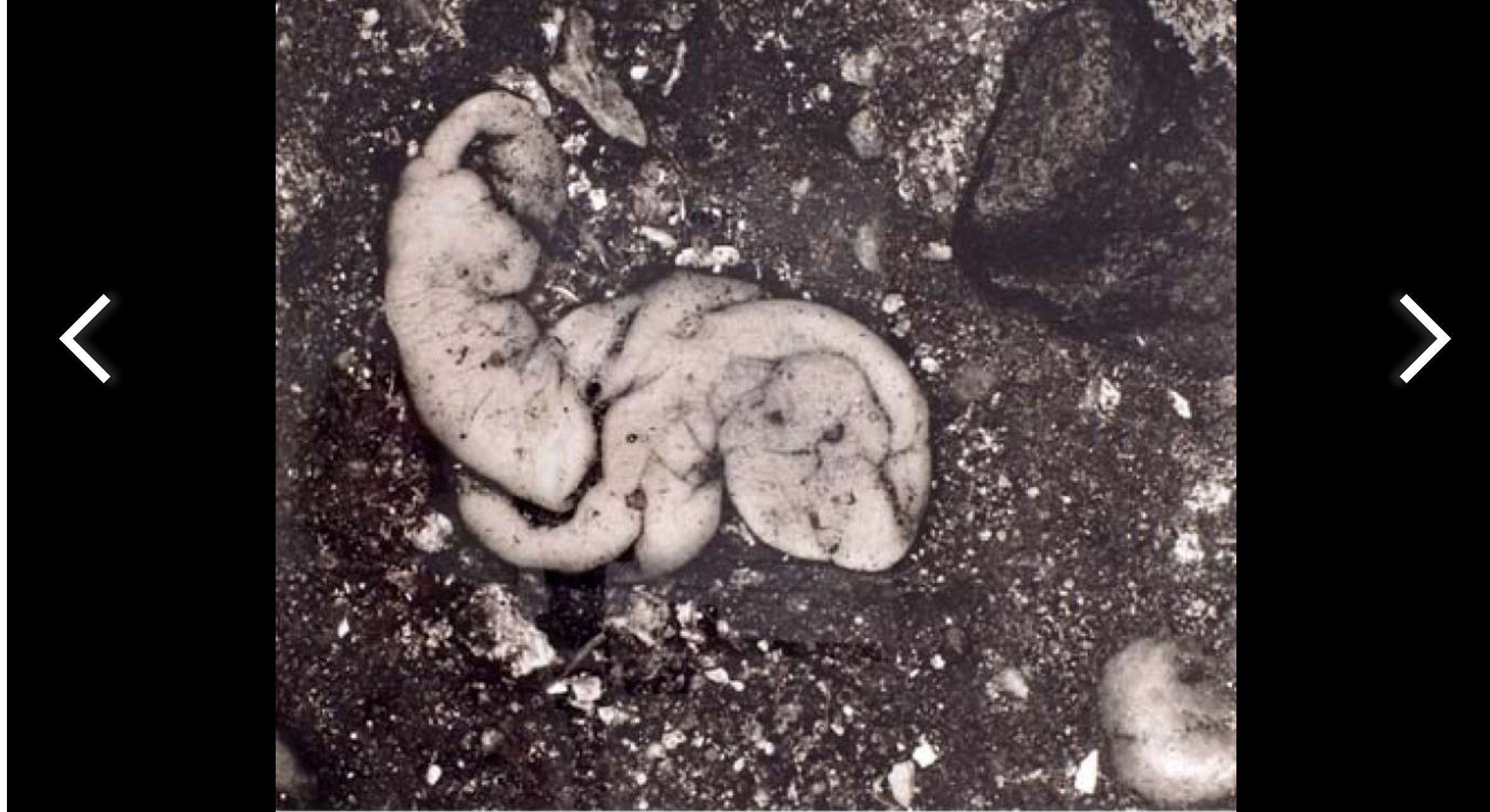


Photo: Courtesy Of Fraenkel Gallery

IMAGE 1 OF 3

"Underfoot XI, New York" (2000) gelatin silver print by Irving Penn.

New York photographer **Irving Penn** has flirted with surrealism occasionally in his 50-year camerawork career. But he finally makes it his own in a recent series he calls "Underfoot," sampled at the **Fraenkel Gallery**.

In these extreme close-up shots, he goes beneath the radar of habitual urban observation to look hard at mashed wads of discarded chewing gum and other bits of pavement litter.

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The resulting pictures satisfy **Man Ray's** requirement of a Surrealist photograph that it discover disquieting aspects of familiar and still recognizable realities.

Penn's "Underfoot" images bait the imagination into seeing all sorts of unintended figures and meanings in creased blobs on the sidewalk. Some suggest neolithic or biomorphic abstract sculpture, small organisms or something figdgeted into shape by **Francis Bacon**.

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A couple may bring to mind Penn's own radically cropped female nudes, shown in 2003 at the **San Francisco Museum of Modern Art**.

We might call Penn's "Underfoot" series by-product photography, for it finds images forming from oblivious social traffic and the eye's drive to decide upon what it sees. In this, his work realizes the Surrealists' program of bringing to light realities shaped and ordinarily discerned by the unconscious.

At another level, Penn's pictures have an undotored formal power as the surface designs that mark much of his most admired work.

Fraenkel has hung a small selection of his earlier work to make the point. It includes one of his famous studies in which flamed-out cigarettes appear monumental as ruined columns and a "Mud Glove" from the same trampled realm as the gobs of gum.

Such subjects are nearly as flat as they appear in the prints, the mottled concrete crust in the "Underfoot" pictures refiguring the very grain of the photographic image.

In the **-cigarettes** and several other subjects, Penn has periodically sought the opposite extreme from the glamour of his famous **fashion** photographs. With "Underfoot," he has finally arrived there.

Bavington's bars at Marx: If video color bars looked as good as **Tim Bavington's** abstract paintings, people would watch them for their own sake.

Bavington, who lives in Las Vegas, makes a good example of how younger abstract painters reinterpret the styles of an earlier generation.

**Gene Davis** (1920-1985) offers the obvious precedent. For many years he made paintings composed wholly of flat, vertical stripes of color.

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He and his advocates among critics saw rigor in his elimination of reference and his confidence in intuition as a guide to color choices. In theory, a successful Davis painting strikes a chord of aesthetic rightness that viewers recognize by a kind of nervous system resonance.

Artists of Davis' generation looked at his paintings and saw reminders of **Barnett Newman** and Piet Mondrian or, as one unkind critic said, swaths of awning fabric.

Bavington, born in 1966, more likely sees colorized bar code. With that, as well as video color bars and the Las Vegas Strip's waves of neon in mind, Bavington may well have wondered what Davis' patterns encode.

He has devised answers for his own stripe paintings, using tools never available to Davis.

Using the appropriate software, assigning a different hue to each pitch, Bavington analyzes guitar solos from rock band recordings.

He borrows the song titles for his corresponding paintings. For viewers with a good memory for music, this information probably adds a dimension.

In any case, a borrowed title sometimes detonates a little joke, as in "All Over Now." The phrase from the **Rolling Stones** classic also echoes the concept of "all-over" composition, a critical demand to which stripe painting appeared the answer in the decade after **Jackson Pollock's** death.

The optical luxury and dazzle of Bavington's work advertise the notion that aesthetics and rationale in abstract painting connect more tenuously and arbitrarily today than ever before.

Irving Penn: Underfoot: Photographs. Through March 5. Fraenkel Gallery, 49 Geary St., San Francisco. (415) 981-2661, [www.fraenkelgallery.com](http://www.fraenkelgallery.com).

Tim Bavington: Paintings. Through Feb. 12. **Heather Marx Galley**, 77 Geary St., San Francisco. (415) 627-9111, [www.heathermarxgallery.com](http://www.heathermarxgallery.com).

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