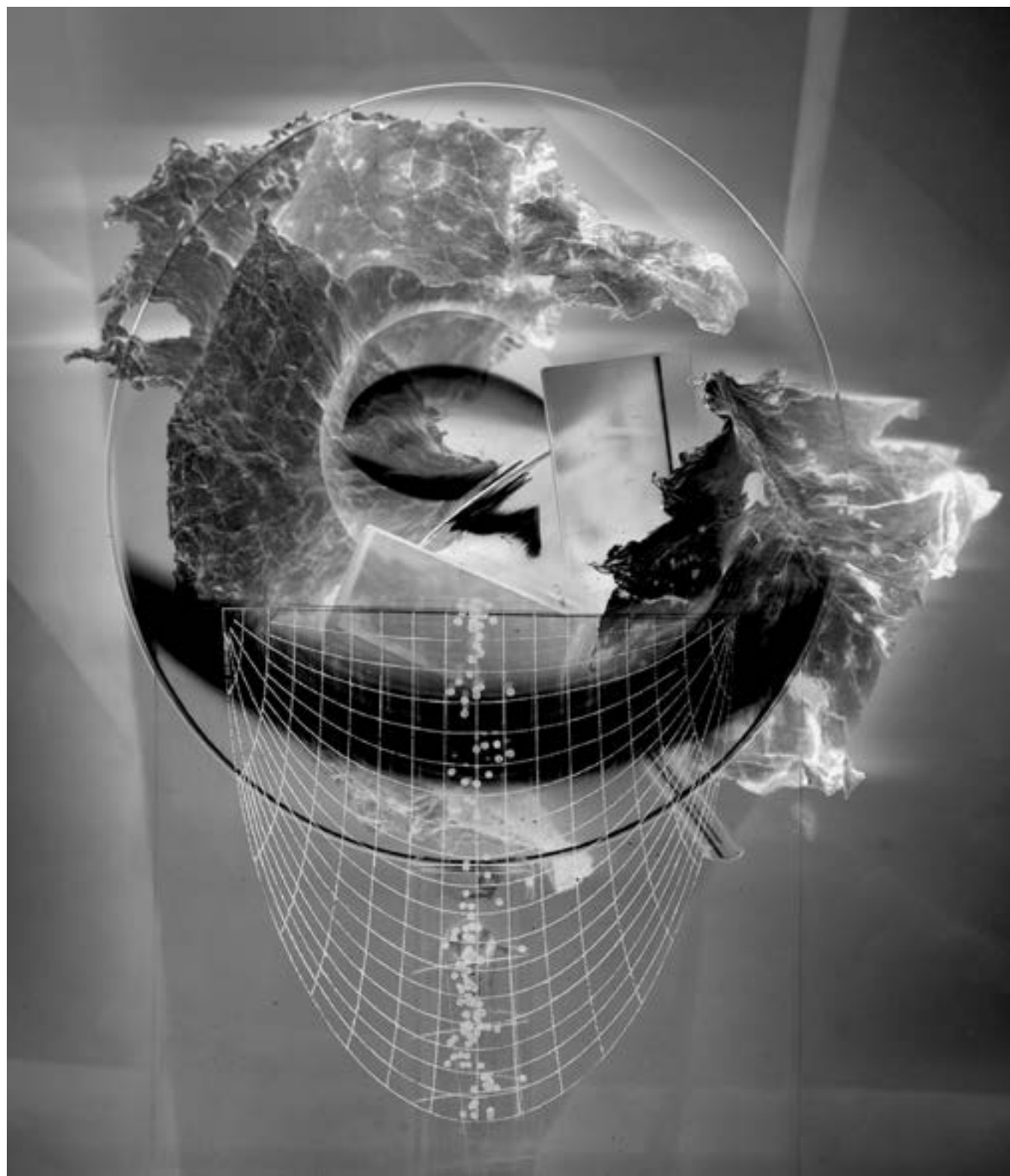


CHERYL CALLERI

Gathering Symmetry #7, 2017
Pigment print, 5 x 5 1/2 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

NICHOLAS DIGHIERA

Clam Beach, California

Life lessons from camping

I was nine years old, leaning with both my hands against a tree, when my mom said from behind me, “I’m sorry.” She was already crying.

She swung the stick she was holding, thick as her wrist and six feet long, and hit me across the ass. She did this again and again, the thwap of it echoing up into the mountains, until the stick broke into pieces too small for her to hit me with. When she was done I turned around. By then I was crying. She was still crying. She said, again, “I’m sorry.” There was no explanation of why.

Earlier in the day, I had gotten lost. My aunt and uncle, replete with my cousins, were camping in the mountains and we had decided, as a family, to spend the day with them. Through a series of miscommunications, I had trekked miles upstream on a snow-fed creek without letting my mother know. After hours of not being able to find me, she lost her mind with fear and panic; and after I returned, soaking wet and shaking, her fear had consumed her. She beat me with that stick and told me I couldn’t leave the car for the rest of the day.

My mother and I don’t talk about this. Her shame about how she responded is as fresh now as it was nearly thirty years ago. I feel completely ambivalent about the event, though. It’s air through my lungs.

I didn’t understand any of this until the summer of 2015.

* * *

I’m thirty-three now. I have two sons of my own, and we are spending the summer living in my van and driving across the American West. Dominic and Finn, eight and five, have never lived with me without their mother. We are about halfway through our fifty-three days on the road, and I am becoming aware that maybe we weren’t ready for this trip. Or maybe it’s just me.

We are on Highway 299 in California, driving west toward the Pacific Ocean. It’s just before lunch. The sun is high. No clouds can be seen. Dominic is reading a book in the back seat as we maneuver through corners that conform to the shape of the Trinity River. Finn is napping. The stereo is playing song after song and the air coming in the window is thick with humidity that’s holding on to the coolness of morning.

Finn wakes up. I see him feeling the seat in the rear-view. Feeling his crotch.