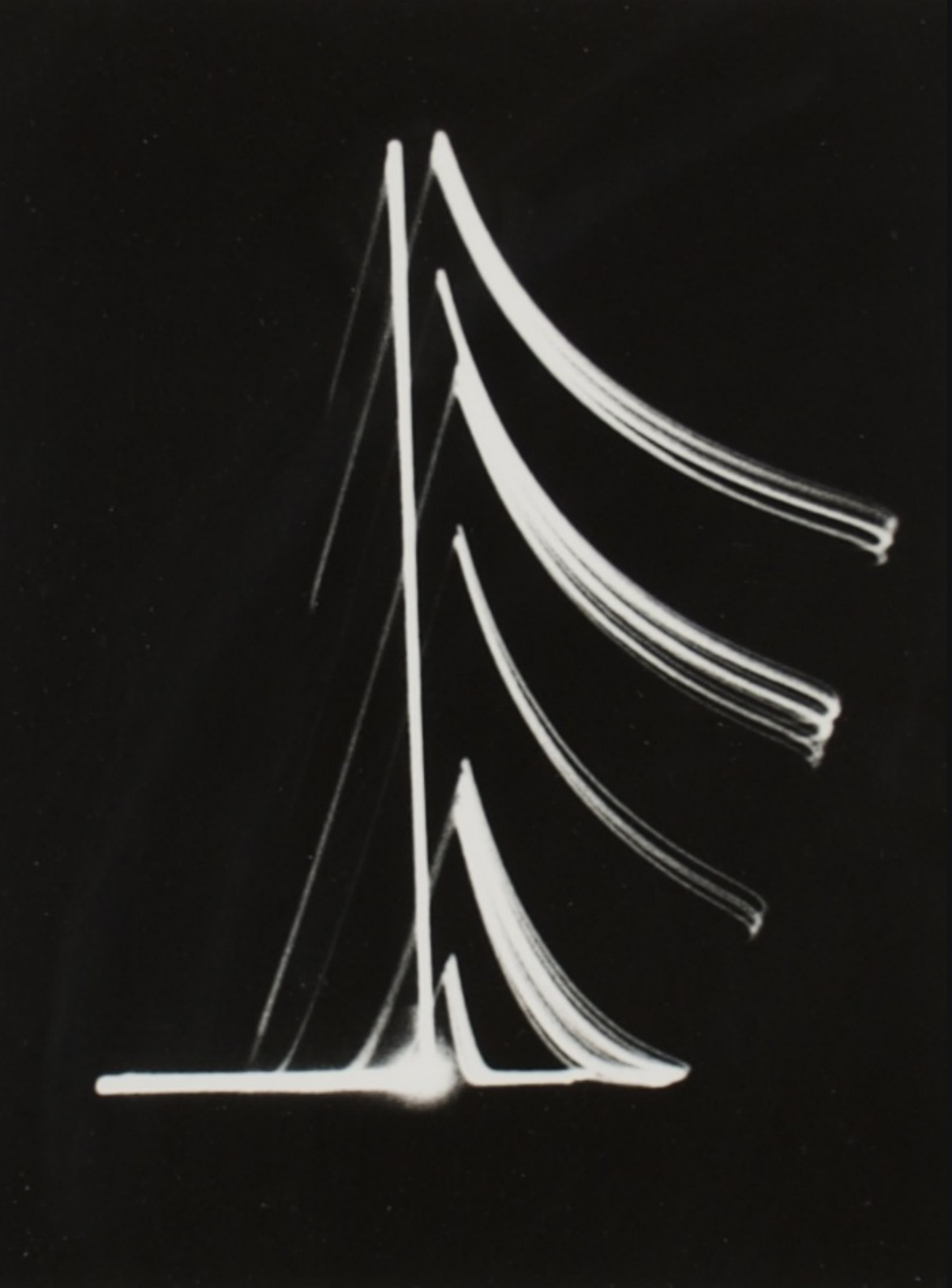


RCM GALERIE · PARIS

Ben F. Laposky

Oscillons

Four vintage gelatin silver prints, 1952
Cherokee, Iowa

Cover: Oscillon No. 44, 1952 (detail)

An originator of digital art

Ben F. Laposky is widely regarded as one of the earliest digital artists. From 1950 in Cherokee, Iowa, he photographed the screen of a cathode-ray oscilloscope, feeding sine waves and other signals through circuits he built himself and shaping the moving trace of light into compositions he called Oscillons, which he fixed on film before they vanished.

Fifty of them were shown at the Sanford Museum in Cherokee in 1953 as Electronic Abstractions, the first exhibition given over to art made by electronic means, and the show circulated to more than two hundred venues in the United States and abroad, France among them, until 1961. Herbert W. Franke placed Laposky at the head of the lineage in Computer Graphics, Computer Art (1971), and LACMA opened Coded: Art Enters the Computer Age on the year 1952 for the same reason.

The Victoria and Albert Museum holds Oscillons in black and white and in colour, given through the American Friends of the V&A from the collection of Patric Prince, and a 1952 Oscillon is the earliest work in the museum's digital art collection. The Sanford Museum retains the original touring set in Cherokee. Laposky said he had exposed some ten thousand negatives, and none of them has been found.

The four prints presented here date from 1952. Each carries the artist's Cherokee stamp on the verso with his pencil references, and period prints of this kind are the principal form in which the Oscillons of the early 1950s can be held privately.

IN RECENT EXHIBITIONS

Electric Dreams: Art and Technology Before the Internet
Tate Modern, London, 2024–25

Coded: Art Enters the Computer Age, 1952–1982
LACMA, Los Angeles, 2023

Chance and Control: Art in the Age of Computers
Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 2018

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Victoria and Albert Museum, London
Sanford Museum and Planetarium, Cherokee, Iowa



BEN F. LAPOSKY

Oscillon No. 12

1952

Vintage gelatin silver print
25.4 × 20.3 cm (10 × 8 in.)
Electronic Abstraction, Cherokee, Iowa
Shown framed



verso

INSCRIPTIONS

Artist's ink stamp verso: “OSCILLON NO. 12 / ELECTRONIC ABSTRACTION / Composed & Photographed By Ben F. Laposky / Cherokee, Iowa / All Rights Reserved”, with the artist's waveform monogram.

Annotated in pencil: 12, 7-14-53-1, P37-2.9.

NOTE

Printed in tonal reversal, with a dark trace on a pale ground, the figure is a lozenge of folded planes whose crossings read as translucent sheets. Laposky printed certain compositions both ways, setting the figure against its own negative.



BEN F. LAPOSKY

Oscillon No. 15

1952

Vintage gelatin silver print
25.4 × 20.3 cm (10 × 8 in.)
Electronic Abstraction, Cherokee, Iowa
Shown framed



verso

INSCRIPTIONS

Artist's ink stamp verso: “OSCILLON NO. 15 / ELECTRONIC ABSTRACTION / Composed & Photographed By Ben F. Laposky / Cherokee, Iowa / All Rights Reserved”, with the artist's waveform monogram.

Annotated in pencil: 15, 7-14-53-12, P76-3.9.

NOTE

Also printed in tonal reversal. Two interlocking hooked forms sweep across the sheet, their outer contours softening to grey where the beam moved fastest, so that the speed of the trace is registered as tone.



BEN F. LAPOSKY

Oscillon No. 44

1952

Vintage gelatin silver print
25.5 × 20.5 cm (10 × 8 in.)
Electronic Abstraction, Cherokee, Iowa
Shown framed



verso

INSCRIPTIONS

Artist's ink stamp verso: “OSCILLON NO. 44 / ELECTRONIC ABSTRACTION / Composed & Photographed By Ben F. Laposky / Cherokee, Iowa / All Rights Reserved”, with the artist's waveform monogram.

Red stamps “PLEASE RETURN PHOTOGRAPH” (twice), numbered 44.

NOTE

A single luminous figure, one vertical axis released into a fan of decaying curves, among the most graphically economical of the early Oscillons and the closest in feeling to brushed calligraphy.

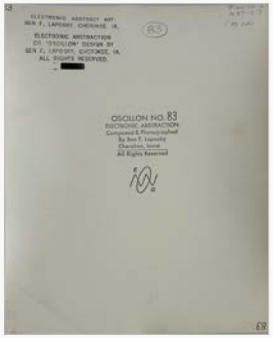


BEN F. LAPOSKY

Oscillon No. 83

1952

Vintage gelatin silver print
25.4 × 20.3 cm (10 × 8 in.)
Electronic Abstraction, Cherokee, Iowa
Shown framed



verso

INSCRIPTIONS

Artist's ink stamp verso: “OSCILLON NO. 83 / ELECTRONIC ABSTRACTION / Composed & Photographed By Ben F. Laposky / Cherokee, Iowa / All Rights Reserved”, with the artist's waveform monogram.

Second stamp “ELECTRONIC ABSTRACT ART / BEN F. LAPOSKY, CHEROKEE, IA. / ELECTRONIC ABSTRACTION OR 'OSCILLON' DESIGN BY BEN F. LAPOSKY, CHEROKEE, IA. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.”

Annotated in pencil: 83 (circled), 9-22-52-6, N97-3.7, (PS DUP).

NOTE

Rotated quadrilaterals are superimposed until the traces stack into the illusion of a solid volume suspended in the dark field, the effect Laposky described as forms hanging in space.

Four Oscillons, 1952



Oscillon No. 12, 1952
Vintage gelatin silver print
25.4 × 20.3 cm (10 × 8 in.)



Oscillon No. 15, 1952
Vintage gelatin silver print
25.4 × 20.3 cm (10 × 8 in.)



Oscillon No. 44, 1952
Vintage gelatin silver print
25.5 × 20.5 cm (10 × 8 in.)



Oscillon No. 83, 1952
Vintage gelatin silver print
25.4 × 20.3 cm (10 × 8 in.)

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Prices on request

BIOGRAPHY

Ben Francis Laposky, 1914–2000

Ben Francis Laposky was born in 1914 on a farm south of Cherokee, Iowa. After finishing high school in Colorado Springs in 1932 he returned with his family to Cherokee, where he worked as a sign painter and draftsman, taught himself mathematics and took extension courses in drafting from the University of Chicago.

Inducted into the United States Army at Fort Des Moines in 1942, he served in the Pacific as a map draftsman with the headquarters of the 43rd Infantry Division. He was wounded in a Japanese bombing raid during the New Georgia campaign in the Solomon Islands in July 1943, received the Purple Heart and spent ten months in army hospitals in New Zealand and Alabama before his discharge in May 1944. No longer able to climb ladders for large signs, he turned to lettering cards and to drafting, and supplied magic number squares to Ripley's Believe It or Not!

In 1950 he began working with a cathode-ray oscilloscope, combining sine waves and other electronic signals through circuits of his own design and photographing the traces of light on the screen. He called the images Oscillons, or Electronic Abstractions, and over the following years built up an apparatus of several dozen instruments.

His one-man exhibition Electronic Abstractions opened at the Sanford Museum in Cherokee in 1953 and travelled to more than two hundred venues in the United States and abroad until 1961. From the mid-1950s he introduced colour with motor-driven filters. The Oscillons reached a wide audience through an advertising campaign for Kennecott Copper and a colour feature in Fortune.

In 1968 his work was included in Cybernetic Serendipity at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, which toured to the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington and the Exploratorium in San Francisco. In 1969 he published Oscillons: Electronic Abstractions in Leonardo, the journal founded by Frank Malina, and he corresponded with Studio International and with the video artist Woody Vasulka about the place of his work in the history of electronic art. Herbert W. Franke opened Computer Graphics, Computer Art (1971) with him.

Laposky died in Cherokee in 2000. The Sanford Museum holds his original touring exhibition together with fifty-two colour images, and his work is in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.