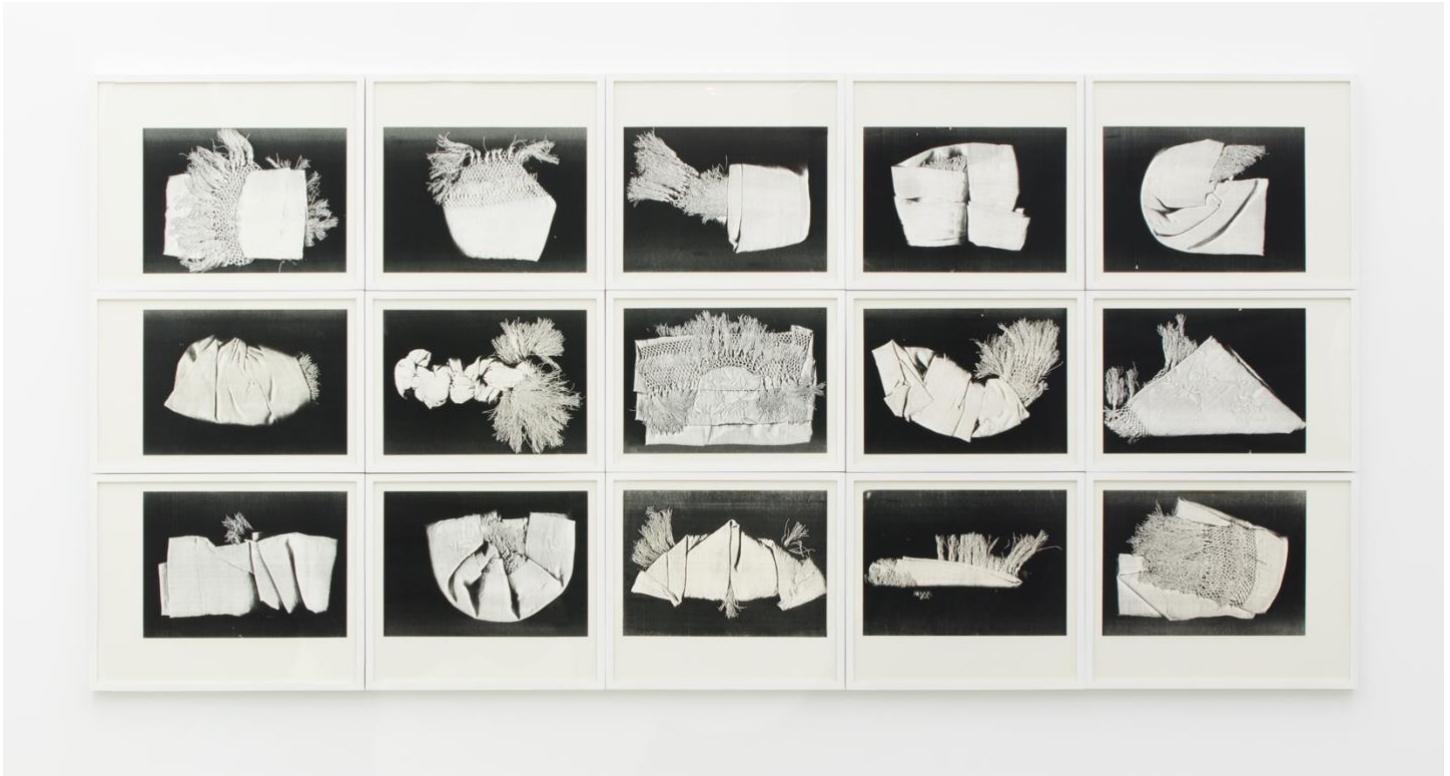March 2016

Pati Hill at Arcadia University Art Gallery
By Edith Newhall

It's not precisely known how Pati Hill began her long relationship with the copy machine. Some say Hill, a well-regarded writer for the first half of her career, was intrigued by images of her fingertips on the margins of a manuscript she was copying, but what is known is that she had realized its potential as an art tool by the early 1970s.

Having given up writing in favor of being a housewife and mother in Stonington, Connecticut, in the 1960s (her husband, Paul Bianchini, owned the Bianchini Gallery in New York), Hill came to realize that she could more easily part with some of the objects she'd been collecting if she photocopied them as mementos. She took a few to a nearby copy shop and found that the resulting images—a well-used bar of soap and an earring, for example—transformed their original subjects into objects of wonder. As Hill wrote of the copy machine, "It repeats my words perfectly as many times as I ask it to, but when I show it a hair curler, it hands me back a space ship, and when I show it the inside of a straw hat, it describes the eerie joys of a descent into a volcano."

Eventually Hill got her own photocopier for her Stonington house. It was a loan from IBM facilitated by the designer Charles Eames whom Hill had charmed on a transatlantic flight.

Those early experiments with Xerography are beautifully displayed in "Pati Hill: Photocopier, A Survey of Prints and Books (1974-83)" at Arcadia University Art Gallery just outside of Philadelphia, which presents more than 100 works on paper by Hill, as well as copies of her three novels, her memoir, and a book of her poems, illustrated by poet Galway Kinnell. There's also a hilarious collection of what she called "informational art," which she began in 1962, consisting of how-to diagrams for housewives, as well as advertisements and product-assembly directions and a display of pictographs that Hill developed in an effort to create a universal language of symbols.