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### Image sensor structure for reduced pixel pitch and methods thereof

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#### Abstract

A pixel cell for an image sensor including a first semiconductor substrate, a photodiode, and a transfer gate is described. The first semiconductor substrate includes a first side and a second side. The first side is opposite the second side. The photodiode is disposed within the first semiconductor substrate between the first and the second side. The transfer gate is disposed proximate to the first side of the first semiconductor substrate. The transfer gate includes a planar region. The first side of the semiconductor substrate is disposed between the planar region and the photodiode. A lateral area of the photodiode is less than or equal to a lateral area of the planar region of the transfer gate.

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**Background/Summary****TECHNICAL FIELD**

(1) This disclosure relates generally to image sensors, and in particular but not exclusively, relates to CMOS image sensors and applications thereof.

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

(2) Image sensors have become ubiquitous and are now widely used in digital cameras, cellular phones, security cameras, as well as, medical, automobile, and other applications. As image sensors are integrated into a broader range of electronic devices it is desirable to enhance their

functionality, performance metrics, and the like in as many ways as possible (e.g., resolution, power consumption, dynamic range, etc.) through both device architecture design as well as image acquisition processing.

(3) The typical image sensor operates in response to image light reflected from an external scene being incident upon the image sensor. The image sensor includes an array of pixels having photosensitive elements (e.g., photodiodes) that absorb a portion of the incident image light and generate image charge upon absorption of the image light. The image charge photogenerated by the pixels may be measured as analog output image signals on column bit lines that vary as a function of the incident image light. In other words, the amount of image charge generated is proportional to the intensity of the image light, which is readout as analog image signals from the column bit lines and converted to digital values to produce digital images (i.e., image data) representative of the external scene.

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## Description

### BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

- (1) Non-limiting and non-exhaustive embodiments of the invention are described with reference to the following figures, wherein like reference numerals refer to like parts throughout the various views unless otherwise specified. Not all instances of an element are necessarily labeled so as not to clutter the drawings where appropriate. The drawings are not necessarily to scale, emphasis instead being placed upon illustrating the principles being described.
- (2) FIG. 1 illustrates an image of patterned photoresist deposited on a substrate with corner rounding for explaining a problem faced by conventional image sensors.
- (3) FIG. 2A illustrates an example imaging system including multiple semiconductor substrates and a structure to enable reduced pixel pitch, in accordance with embodiments of the present disclosure.
- (4) FIG. 2B illustrates a cross-sectional view of the example imaging system of FIG. 2A, in accordance with embodiments of the present disclosure.
- (5) FIG. 2C illustrates a top view of a first semiconductor substrate included in the example imaging system of FIG. 2A, in accordance with embodiments of the present disclosure.
- (6) FIG. 2D illustrates a cross-sectional view of the first semiconductor substrate along line A-A' shown in FIG. 2C, in accordance with embodiments of the present disclosure.
- (7) FIG. 2E illustrates a cross-sectional view of the first semiconductor substrate along line B-B' shown in FIG. 2C, in accordance with embodiments of the present disclosure.
- (8) FIG. 2F illustrates a cross-sectional view of the first semiconductor substrate along line C-C' shown in FIG. 2C, in accordance with embodiments of the present disclosure.
- (9) FIG. 2G is a schematic diagram of a pixel cell included in the example imaging system of FIG. 2A, in accordance with embodiments of the present disclosure.
- (10) FIG. 2H, FIG. 2I, and FIG. 2J respectively represent cross-sectional views of the first semiconductor substrate along lines A-A', B-B', and C-C' shown in FIG. 2C for an alternative embodiment with increased full well capacity, in accordance with embodiments of the present disclosure.
- (11) FIGS. 3A-3G illustrate an example method for forming the first semiconductor substrate of the imaging system illustrated in FIG. 2A, in accordance with embodiments of the disclosure.

### DETAILED DESCRIPTION

(12) Embodiments of an apparatus, system, and method each related to an image sensor structure for reduced pixel pitch are described herein. In the following description, numerous specific details are set forth to provide a thorough understanding of the embodiments. One skilled in the relevant art will recognize, however, that the techniques described herein can be practiced without one or more of the specific details, or with other methods, components, materials, etc. In other instances,

well-known structures, materials, or operations are not shown or described in detail to avoid obscuring certain aspects.

(13) Reference throughout this specification to “one embodiment” or “an embodiment” means that a particular feature, structure, or characteristic described in connection with the embodiment is included in at least one embodiment of the present invention. Thus, the appearances of the phrases “in one embodiment” or “in an embodiment” in various places throughout this specification are not necessarily all referring to the same embodiment. Furthermore, the particular features, structures, or characteristics may be combined in any suitable manner in one or more embodiments.

(14) Throughout this specification, several terms of art are used. These terms are to take on their ordinary meaning in the art from which they come, unless specifically defined herein or the context of their use would clearly suggest otherwise. It should be noted that element names and symbols may be used interchangeably through this document (e.g., Si vs. silicon); however, both have identical meaning.

(15) FIG. 1 illustrates an image **100** of patterned photoresist deposited on a substrate with corner rounding for explaining a problem faced by conventional image sensors. Achieving a ninety-degree corner pattern remains challenging with conventional lithographic techniques used in complementary metal-oxide semiconductor (CMOS) technology. The corner rounding of patterned photoresist that results may lead to processing variance, which in turn may lead to performance variance in devices being fabricated on the same or different semiconductor wafers. For example, CMOS technology commonly uses ion implantation, in which ions (e.g., boron, phosphorus, or other dopants) are implanted within regions of the semiconductor wafer to selectively dope the regions of the semiconductor wafer. However, implantation near the corner rounding of patterned photoresist may be inconsistent or otherwise vary dependent on how much corner rounding is present. Additionally, the degree of corner rounding for the patterned photoresist may not be uniform across the semiconductor wafer, which may further contribute to variance in devices fabricated on a common semiconductor wafer and/or devices fabricated on different semiconductor wafers. Moreover, as devices with smaller feature sizes are fabricated, the influence of processing variance, due to patterned photoresist with corner rounding, on the performance of said devices may increase. Further still, as feature sizes decrease, the degree of corner rounding in patterned photoresist to support the decreased feature sizes may increase and result in feature size restrictions, which may be expressed as design rule requirements dependent on the technology node being used. For example, it remains challenging to fabricate image sensors with a pixel pitch in a sub-micron range (e.g., less than 0.6  $\mu\text{m}$ ) when utilizing a 45 nm technology node.

(16) Described herein are embodiments of an image sensor structure to enable reduced pixel pitch and mitigate the effects of corner rounding in patterned photoresist. Advantageously, the image sensor structure described in embodiments of the disclosure can be utilized to fabricate image sensors with a pixel pitch of less than 0.5  $\mu\text{m}$  with reduced process variance attributed to corner rounding of patterned photoresist while still maintaining a photosensitive area (e.g., relative to the total pixel area of the image sensor) of greater than twenty-five percent. In some embodiments, this is achieved in part by a multi-substrate image sensor in which multiple semiconductor substrates are utilized to form an image sensor package. However, it is appreciated that in other embodiments, an image sensor with reduced pixel pitch may also be achieved with an individual semiconductor substrate or wafer. It is further appreciated that the term “semiconductor substrate” throughout the disclosure may correspond to a part of or an entirety of a semiconductor wafer (e.g., a silicon wafer). In some embodiments, the semiconductor substrate includes or is otherwise formed of silicon, a silicon germanium alloy, germanium, a silicon carbide alloy, an indium gallium arsenide alloy, any other alloys formed of III-V group compounds, combinations thereof, or a bulk substrate thereof.

(17) FIG. 2A illustrates an example imaging system **200** including multiple semiconductor substrates and a structure to enable reduced pixel pitch, in accordance with embodiments of the

present disclosure. The imaging system **200** includes a first semiconductor substrate **201** and a second semiconductor substrate **251**, each of which may correspond to a part of or an entirety of a semiconductor wafer in accordance with embodiments of the disclosure. The first semiconductor substrate **201** includes a plurality of pixel cells **205** and periphery circuitry **206**. In some embodiments, each pixel cell included in the plurality of pixel cells **205** includes one or more pixels (see, e.g., FIG. 2C), which may share a common color filter (e.g., a group of four adjacent pixels arranged in a two-by-two pattern and optically aligned with a first color filter may form a first pixel cell included in the plurality of pixel cells **205**). The second semiconductor substrate **251** includes pixel cell circuitry **255** and periphery circuitry **256**. In some embodiments, the pixel cell circuitry **255** may be segmented into groups of components that are associated with respective pixel cells included in the plurality of pixel cells **205** to facilitate operation and/or readout for the imaging system **200** (see, e.g., FIGS. 2E-2H).

(18) In the illustrated embodiment of FIG. 2A, the imaging system **200** is a stacked complementary metal-oxide semiconductor (CMOS) image sensor formed, at least in part, by the first semiconductor substrate **201** (e.g., a first die) and the second semiconductor substrate **251** (e.g., a second die) that are stacked and coupled together (e.g., electrically and/or physically) in a stacked chip scheme achieved via bonding (e.g., oxide bonding, metal bonding, hybrid bonding), silicon connections (e.g., through silicon vias), other suitable circuit coupling technologies, or combinations thereof. It is appreciated that while only the first semiconductor substrate **201** and the second semiconductor substrate **251** are illustrated in FIG. 2A, the stacked chip scheme of the imaging system **200** may include additional substrates (e.g., one or more additional substrates, dies, or chips different from the first semiconductor substrate **201** and the second semiconductor substrate **251**) that may be integrated into the stacked chip scheme of the imaging system **200**.

Additionally, it is appreciated that the view presented in FIG. 2A may omit certain elements of the imaging system **200** to avoid obscuring details of the disclosure. In other words, not all elements of the imaging system **200** may be labeled, illustrated, or otherwise shown within FIG. 2A or other figures throughout the disclosure. It is further appreciated that in some embodiments, the imaging system **200** may not necessarily include all elements shown (e.g., when the imaging system **200** is not a stacked chip scheme, then the second semiconductor substrate **251** may be omitted while the pixel cell circuitry **255** and the periphery circuitry **256** may be disposed in or on the first semiconductor substrate **201**).

(19) Referring to the illustrated embodiment of FIG. 2A, the stacked chip scheme distributes components of the imaging system **200** across multiple substrates. Specifically, the first semiconductor substrate **201** includes photosensitive elements (e.g., a plurality of photodiodes such as pinned photodiodes or the like to form pixels) included in a plurality of pixel cells **205** while the second semiconductor substrate **251** includes pixel cell circuitry **255** associated with the plurality of pixel cells **205** (e.g., any one of or a combination of pixel transistors such as reset transistors, source-follower transistors, row select transistors, and so on, analog to digital circuitry, signal processing circuitry, or other circuitry to facilitate imaging an external scene with the pixels included in the plurality of pixel cells **205**). Put in another way, the second semiconductor substrate **251** offloads at least part of the circuitry associated with the plurality of pixel cells **205** from the first semiconductor substrate **201**, which advantageously provides additional space on the first semiconductor substrate **201** (e.g., to reduce pixel pitch, increase photodiode sensing area relative to total pixel area, and so on).

(20) In some embodiments, the plurality of pixel cells **205** may be coupled to the pixel cell circuitry **255** through one or more hybrid bonds, through-silicon vias, other suitable circuitry coupling technologies, or combinations thereof. In some embodiments, the space saved on the first semiconductor substrate **201** by offloading circuitry to the second semiconductor substrate **251** (or other subsequent substrates in the stacked chip scheme) may be repurposed to increase the size of individual photodiodes included in each of the pixels included in the plurality of pixel cells **205** to

allow for increased pixel size, density, sensitivity, combinations thereof, or the like. Additionally, or alternatively, functionality of the imaging system **200** may be facilitated as the second semiconductor substrate **251** may have room for additional components or circuitry that may not otherwise fit on an individual substrate that contains both the plurality of pixel cells **205** and the pixel cell circuitry **255** without affecting the performance and/or functionality of the imaging system **200**.

(21) In the illustrated embodiment, the imaging system **200** comprises the first semiconductor substrate **201** and the second semiconductor substrate **251** coupled to the first semiconductor substrate **201**. The first semiconductor substrate **201** includes the plurality of pixel cells **205**, which are arranged in rows (e.g., R1, R2, R3, . . . RY) and columns (e.g., C1, C2, C3, . . . CX) to form an array of pixel cells. Each of the plurality of pixel cells **205** may include any number of pixels (e.g., one, two, four, eight, or more pixels per pixel cell). In most embodiments, the number of pixels per pixel cell included in the plurality of pixel cells **205** is uniform. In one embodiment, each pixel cell included in the plurality of pixel cells **205** have a regular arrangement (e.g., a two-by-two arrangement of four pixels, a two-by-three arrangement of six pixels, a two-by-four arrangement of eight pixels, a four-by-four arrangement of sixteen pixels, or otherwise). In some embodiments, an individual pixel cell included in the plurality of pixel cells **205** may correspond to a minimal repeating unit of the first semiconductor substrate **201**, or more specifically, the plurality of pixel cells **205**. In other embodiments, a group of pixel cells included in the plurality of pixel cells **205** may correspond to a minimal repeating unit of the first semiconductor substrate **201** and/or the plurality of pixel cells **205** (e.g., a two-by-two group of pixel cells included in the plurality of pixel cells **205** may correspond to a minimal repeating unit). In some embodiments, the pixel cell circuitry **255** of the second semiconductor substrate **251** is arranged based on a corresponding arrangement of the plurality of pixel cells **205**. For example, in some embodiments, individual pixel cells included in the plurality of pixel cells **205** of the first semiconductor substrate **201** may be respectively coupled to individual groups of components included in the pixel cell circuitry **255** of the second semiconductor substrate **251** on a per-pixel or per-pixel cell basis, which may result in an arrangement of the pixel cell circuitry **255** being regular and/or repeating (e.g., in rows and columns as illustrated).

(22) As illustrated in FIG. 2A, the first semiconductor substrate **201** and the second semiconductor substrate **251** include various analog and/or digital support circuitry for the imaging system **200**, respectively corresponding to the periphery circuitry **206** and the periphery circuitry **256**. In some embodiments, support circuitry that may be included in the periphery circuitry **206** and/or the periphery circuitry **256** may include, but is not limited to, row and column decoders and drivers, analog signal processing chains, digital imaging processing blocks, memory, timing and control circuits, input/output interfaces, a vertical scanner, sample and hold circuitry, amplifiers, analog-to-digital converter circuitry, and any other embodiments of logic and/or circuitry that is appropriate for the function of the imaging system **200**.

(23) FIG. 2B illustrates a cross-sectional view **200-XV** of the example imaging system **200** of FIG. 2A, in accordance with an embodiment of the present disclosure. The imaging system **200** includes the first semiconductor substrate **201**, the second semiconductor substrate **251**, and optionally a third semiconductor substrate **291**. As illustrated, the second semiconductor substrate **251** is disposed between the first semiconductor substrate **201** and the optional third semiconductor substrate **291**. The first semiconductor substrate **201** is coupled to the second semiconductor substrate **251** at interface **240** via metallization layer **230**, which includes one or more metal layers **231** disposed between one or more intermetal dielectric layers **232** (e.g., in the form one or more hybrid bonds). In some embodiments, other stacking connection schemes may be utilized in addition to, or in place of hybrid bonding, such as through-silicon vias, a combination of hybrid bonding and through-silicon vias, or other suitable circuitry coupling technologies. It is appreciated that in the illustrated embodiment, the metallization layer **260** similarly couples the second

semiconductor substrate **251** to the optional third semiconductor substrate **291** at interface **270**. (24) As illustrated, the imaging system **200** further includes a plurality of photodiodes **204** (e.g., a first photodiode **204-1**, a second photodiode **204-2**, and so on until a Nth photodiode **204-N**, where “N” corresponds to the total number of photodiodes included in the plurality of photodiodes **204**) disposed between a first side **202** (e.g., a front side or a backside) and a second side **203** (e.g., a backside or a front side) opposite the first side **202** of the first semiconductor substrate **201**, a plurality of color filters **206** (e.g., a first color filter **206-1**, a second color filter **206-2**, and so on until a Mth color filter **206-M**, where “M” corresponds to the total number of color filters included in the plurality of color filters **206**), and a plurality of microlenses **208** to collectively form a plurality of pixels **210** (e.g., a first pixel **210-1**, a second pixel **210-2**, and so on until a Nth pixel **210-N**, wherein “N” corresponds to the total number of pixels included in the plurality of pixels **210**). As discussed previously the plurality of pixels **210** are segmented to form pixel cells included in the plurality of pixel cells **205** (e.g., a first pixel cell **205-1** as illustrated, which may be representative of any other pixel cell included in the plurality of pixel cells **205**). It is appreciated that in some embodiments, the total number of color filters (e.g., “M”) included in the plurality of color filters **206** may be equal to the total number of photodiodes (e.g., “N”) included in the plurality of photodiodes **204** (e.g., a one-to-one ratio of color filters to photodiodes). However, in other embodiments the plurality of color filters **206** may be shared by adjacent photodiodes included in the plurality of photodiodes **204** such that “M” is less than “N.” For example, in some embodiments each pixel cell included in the plurality of pixel cells **205** may include multiple pixels included in the plurality of pixels **210**. In some embodiments, pixels included in the plurality of pixels **210** for a common pixel cell included in the plurality of pixel cells **205** (e.g., the first pixel **210-1** and the second pixel **210-2** are included in the first pixel cell **205-1**) may share the same color filter or otherwise have a common color filter configuration (e.g., the first color filter **206-1** and the second color filter **206-2** may have a common spectral photoresponse).

(25) As illustrated, the plurality of color filters **206** are optically disposed between the plurality of microlenses **208** and the plurality of photodiodes **204** such that light **298** propagates through both the plurality of microlenses and the plurality of color filters **206** before reaching the plurality of photodiodes **204** (i.e., when the imaging system **200** is a backside illuminated image sensor). Each microlens included in the plurality of microlenses **208** is configured to direct or otherwise focus the light **298** through an underlying color filter included in the plurality of color filters **206** towards a respective one of the plurality of photodiodes **204**. The plurality of color filters **206** filter or otherwise attenuate the light **298** focused by the plurality of microlenses **208**. In some embodiments, the plurality of color filters **206** may include one or more red, green, blue, infrared, clear, transparent, cyan, magenta, yellow, black, or any other color filter to filter visible or non-visible light (e.g., the light **298**). Similar to the plurality of color filters **206**, the total number of microlenses included in the plurality of microlenses **208** may be equal to the total number of photodiodes (e.g., “N”) included in the plurality of photodiodes **204** (e.g., a one-to-one ratio of microlenses to photodiodes) and/or the total number of color filters (e.g., “M”) included in the plurality of color filters **206** (e.g., a one-to-one ratio of microlenses to color filters). However, in other embodiments the plurality of microlenses **208** may be shared by adjacent photodiodes included in the plurality of photodiodes **204** (e.g., a group of adjacent photodiodes included in the plurality of photodiodes **204**, such as the first photodiode **204-1**, the second photodiode **204-2**, and/or other photodiodes adjacent to the first photodiode **204-1** and the second photodiode **204-2**, may be optically aligned with or otherwise share an individual microlens included in the plurality of microlenses **208**).

(26) As illustrated in FIG. 2B, circuitry **254** is disposed in or on the second semiconductor substrate **251** and circuitry **294** is disposed in or on the optional third semiconductor substrate **291**. In some embodiments, the circuitry **254** includes the pixel cell circuitry **255** and the periphery circuitry **256** illustrated in FIG. 2A (e.g., pixel transistors such as reset transistors, source-follower transistors,

row select transistors, and so on, analog to digital circuitry, signal processing circuitry, and other circuitry to facilitate imaging an external scene). In the same or other embodiments, certain circuitry elements may be offloaded to the optional third semiconductor substrate **291** (e.g., analog to digital circuitry, signal processing circuitry, and other circuitry to facilitate imaging). It is appreciated that in some embodiments, certain circuitry elements may also be present in or on the first semiconductor substrate **201** that are not illustrated in FIG. 2A (e.g., one or more transfer gates, floating diffusion regions, and the like as illustrated in FIGS. 2C-2J).

(27) FIG. 2C illustrates a top view **201-TV** of the first semiconductor substrate **201** included in the example imaging system **200** of FIG. 2A, in accordance with embodiments of the present disclosure. More specifically, the top view **201-TV** is a schematic representative of a planar view extending through the metallization layer **230** illustrated in FIG. 2B looking towards the first semiconductor substrate **201**. It is appreciated that certain elements may be omitted (e.g., the intermetal dielectric layers **232**) or otherwise be obstructed from view (e.g., the plurality of color filters **206**, the plurality of microlenses **208**) to avoid obscuring certain aspects of the disclosure.

(28) Referring back to FIG. 2C, the top view **201-TV** shows the first pixel cell **205-1** included in the plurality of pixel cells **205**. In some embodiments, the first pixel cell **205-1** is representative of any other pixel cell included in the plurality of pixel cells **205** (i.e., other pixel cells included in the plurality of pixel cells **205** may correspond to different instances of the first pixel cell **205-1**). The first pixel cell **205-1** includes a two-by-two group of pixels included in the plurality of pixels **210** (e.g., the first pixel **210-1**, the second pixel **210-2**, a third pixel **210-3**, and a fourth pixel **210-4**) disposed within the first semiconductor substrate **201**. As illustrated individual pixels included in the plurality of pixels **210** are separated from one another by a deep trench isolation (DTI) structure **215**. Similarly, individual pixel cells included in the plurality of pixel cells **205** are separated from one another by the DTI structure **215** (not illustrated). The top view **201-TV** further shows a plurality of transfer gates (TX) **220** (e.g., a first transfer gate **220-1** of the first pixel **210-1**, a second transfer gate **220-2** of the second pixel **210-2**, a third transfer gate **220-3** of the third pixel **210-3**, and a fourth transfer gate **220-4** of the fourth pixel **210-4**), a plurality of floating diffusion regions (FD) **221** (e.g., a first floating diffusion region **221-1** of the first pixel **210-1**, a second floating diffusion region **221-2** of the second pixel **210-2**, a third floating diffusion region **221-3** of the third pixel **210-3**, and a fourth floating diffusion region **221-4** of the fourth pixel **210-4**), a plurality of isolation regions (ISO) **222** (e.g., a first isolation region **222-1** of the first pixel **210-1**, a second isolation region **222-2** of the second pixel **210-2**, a third isolation region **222-3** of the third pixel **210-3**, and a fourth isolation region **222-4** of the fourth pixel **210-4**), and a plurality of ground contact regions (GND) **223** (e.g., a first ground contact region **223-1** of the first pixel **210-1**, a second ground contact region **223-2** of the second pixel **210-2**, a third ground contact region **223-3** of the third pixel **210-3**, and a fourth ground contact region **223-4** of the fourth pixel **210-4**), which are constituent components of the plurality of pixels **210** included in the first pixel cell **205-1**. It is further appreciated, that each one of the plurality of pixels **210** also includes a corresponding photodiode (see, e.g., FIGS. 2D-2F) covered in the illustrated view of FIG. 2C, by an associated transfer gate included in the plurality of transfer gates **220** (e.g., the first pixel **210-1** includes a photodiode covered by or otherwise optically aligned with the first transfer gate **220-1** when viewed towards the first side of the first semiconductor substrate **201**). Accordingly, the first pixel **210-1**, the second pixel **210-2**, the third pixel **210-3**, and the fourth pixel **210-4** each include respective instances of a photodiode (e.g., the plurality of photodiodes **204** illustrated in FIG. 2B), a transfer gate (e.g., the plurality of transfer gates **220** illustrated in FIG. 2C), a ground contact region (e.g., the plurality of ground contact regions **223** illustrated in FIG. 2C), a floating diffusion region (e.g., the plurality of floating diffusion regions **221** illustrated in FIG. 2C), and an isolation region (e.g., the plurality of isolation regions **222** illustrated in FIG. 2C) between the ground contact region and the floating diffusion region. It is appreciated that for a given pixel (e.g., any of the first pixel **210-1**, the second pixel **210-2**, the third pixel **210-3**, or the fourth pixel **210-4**)



included in the pixel cell **205-1**, the isolation region **222** provides physical separation (i.e., isolation) of the floating diffusion region **221** and the ground contact region **223** (e.g., the first isolation region **222-1** physically separates the first floating diffusion region **221-1** from the first ground contact region **223-1** of the first pixel **210-1**).

(29) It is appreciated that respective elements of the plurality of transfer gates **220**, the plurality of floating diffusion regions **221**, the plurality of isolation regions **222**, and the plurality of ground contact regions **223** are each disposed within or on the first semiconductor substrate **201** and arranged within each pixel included in the plurality of pixel cells **210** in a specific manner to enable reduced pixel pitch and mitigate performance variance due to process variation during fabrication. For example, the first floating diffusion region **221-1**, the first isolation region **222-1**, and the first ground contact region **223-1** are disposed proximate to the first transfer gate **220-1** of the first pixel **205-1**. Specifically, the first floating diffusion region **221-1**, the first isolation region **222-1**, and the first ground contact region **223-1** are aligned with a common edge of the first transfer gate **220-1**. Additionally, the first isolation region **222-1** is disposed between the first ground contact region **223-1** and the first floating diffusion region **221-1**. It is appreciated that a similar arrangement of elements that is mirrored (i.e., reflected) about an axis (e.g., axis **249** and **248** with respect to the first pixel **210-1**) also applies to other pixels included in the plurality of pixels **210** as illustrated in FIG. 2C (e.g., the second isolation region **222-2** is disposed between the second floating diffusion region **221-2** and the second ground contact region **223-2**, and so on). As illustrated, the plurality of isolation regions **222** are positioned to isolate the plurality of floating diffusion regions **221** from the plurality of ground contact regions **223** (e.g., the first isolation region **222-1** is positioned between the first floating diffusion region **221-1** and the first ground contact region **223-1** to physically and electrically separate the first floating diffusion region **221-1** from directly contacting the first ground contact region **223-1**). In some embodiments, the plurality of isolation regions **222** may be individually or collectively coupled to a ground or reference voltage.

(30) It is further appreciated that the plurality of transfer gates **220** each include one of planar regions **224** (e.g., first planar region **224-1**, second planar region **224-2**, third planar region **224-3**, fourth planar region **224-4**, or so on) and one of vertical regions **225** (e.g., first vertical region **225-1**, second vertical region **225-2**, third vertical region **225-3**, fourth vertical region **225-4**, or so on) to collectively form an individual one of the plurality of transfer gates **220**. As illustrated in FIG. 2C and FIG. 2D, the vertical regions **225** extend from a respective one of the planar regions **224** into the first semiconductor substrate **201** (e.g., first vertical region **225-1** extends from first planar region **224-1** to form the first transfer gate **220-1**). In the illustrated embodiment of FIG. 2C, the vertical regions **225** may not be viewable from the top view **210-TV**. However, to facilitate discussion of the illustrated embodiment, a dashed line is shown to represent the position of the vertical regions **225** that extend into the first semiconductor substrate **201** from the planar regions **224** (e.g., as illustrated in FIG. 2D). As illustrated, the vertical regions **225** are each disposed proximate to a corresponding one of the plurality of floating diffusion regions **221** of the first pixel cell **205-1** for charge transfer efficiency consideration. In some embodiments, the plurality of isolation regions **222** may each be formed of doped regions having an opposite conductivity type to an adjacent photodiode and floating diffusion region included in the plurality of floating diffusion regions **221**. Additionally, each element has a pre-determined lateral area, within manufacturing tolerances appropriate for the utilized fabrication technology node. In some embodiments, the pre-determined lateral area of each of the plurality of floating diffusion regions **221**, the plurality of isolation regions **222**, and the plurality of ground contact regions **223** are substantially equivalent (e.g., within 10% or less). In other embodiments, the pre-determined lateral areas of each of the plurality of floating diffusion regions **221**, plurality of isolation regions **222**, and the plurality of ground contact regions **223** are different. In the illustrated embodiment, the second floating diffusion region **221-2** has a lateral area based on length **241** and width **244**, which is equivalent to a lateral area of the second isolation region **222-2** based on length **242** and the width **244** and a

lateral area of the second ground contact region **223-2** based on length **243** and the width **244**. In some embodiments, each of the lengths **241**, **242**, and **243** may be less than or equal to  $0.3\ \mu\text{m}$ , less than or equal to  $0.2\ \mu\text{m}$ , less than or equal to  $0.1\ \mu\text{m}$ , or otherwise. In the same or other embodiments, the width **244** may be less than or equal to  $0.3\ \mu\text{m}$ , less than or equal to  $0.2\ \mu\text{m}$ , less than or equal to  $0.1\ \mu\text{m}$ , or otherwise. In the same or other embodiments, each of the lengths **241**, **242**, and **243** and the width **244** may have a minimum length in accordance with the design rules of a manufacturing node being used for fabrication. Accordingly, in some embodiments, a length of an individual one of the plurality of transfer gates (e.g., the second transfer gate **220-2**) corresponds to the summation of the lengths **241**, **242**, and **243**. In other words, the length of the second transfer gate **220-2**, or any other transfer gate included in the plurality of transfer gates **220**, may be approximately (e.g., within 10%) three times that of any one of the lengths **241**, **242**, or **243**. Similarly, in one or more embodiments, a width of an individual one of the plurality of transfer gates **220** (e.g., the second transfer gate **220-2**) may be approximately (e.g., within 10%) three times that of the width **244**. In the same or other embodiments, the separation distance between adjacent pixels (e.g., separation distance **245** between the first pixel **210-1** and the second pixel **210-2**) provided by the DTI structure **215** may be substantially equivalent (e.g., within 10%) to any one of, or a combination of, the lengths **241**, **242**, and **243**. Additionally, the center of each of the plurality of pixels **210** are separated from an adjacent one of the plurality of pixels **210** by a pitch pixel, which may be uniform throughout the plurality of pixels **210** (e.g., the distance between the center of the first pixel **210-1** and an adjacent pixel such as the second pixel **210-2** corresponds to pixel pitch **235**, which may be the same for each pair of adjacent pixels included in the plurality of pixels **210**). In some embodiments, the pixel pitch **235** is less than or equal to  $1\ \mu\text{m}$ , less than or equal to  $0.7\ \mu\text{m}$ , less than or equal to  $0.5\ \mu\text{m}$ , less than or equal to  $0.4\ \mu\text{m}$ , or otherwise. In the same or other embodiments, the pixel pitch **235** may have a minimum pitch in accordance with the design rules of a manufacturing node being used for fabrication.

(31) In the illustrated embodiment of FIG. 2C, the first pixel **210-1**, the second pixel **210-2**, the third pixel **210-3**, and the fourth pixel **210-4** collectively form a pixel cell of the imaging system **200**, which may correspond to a minimal repeating unit of the plurality of pixel cells **205**. In the same or other embodiment, a pixel cell may correspond to a group of pixels sharing one or more elements (e.g., color filter and/or microlens), but not necessarily correspond to a minimal repeating unit of the plurality of pixel cells **205**. For example, in some embodiments a group of pixel cells may form a minimal repeating unit of the plurality of pixel cells **205**. As illustrated in FIG. 2C, each pixel **210** included in the plurality of pixel cells **205** includes a corresponding one of the plurality of transfer gates **220**, the plurality of floating diffusion regions **221**, the plurality of isolation regions **222**, and the plurality of ground contact regions **223** that are collectively and laterally surrounded by the DTI structure **215**. In other words, the DTI structure **215** physically separates and electrically isolates adjacent pixels included in the plurality of pixels **210** from one another (e.g., the first pixel **210-1** is separated and isolated from the second pixel **210-2** and the third pixel **210-3** by the DTI structure **215**). In the illustrated embodiment, the DTI structure **215** is a contiguous element that extends continuously from the first side of the first semiconductor substrate **201** to the second side of the first semiconductor substrate (see, e.g., DTI **215** illustrated in FIGS. 2D-2F) to provide, for example, physical separation of the first pixel **210-1** from adjacent pixels included in the plurality of pixels **210** (e.g., the second pixel **210-2** and the third pixel **210-3**).

(32) The plurality of pixels **210** is arranged in rows and columns to form a pixel array representative of the plurality of pixel cells **205**. In the illustrated embodiment, the first pixel **210-1**, the second pixel **210-2**, the third pixel **210-3**, and the fourth pixel **210-4** are arranged in the rows and the columns to collectively form a two-by-two pixel array corresponding to the first pixel cell **205-1**. For example, the first pixel **210-1** and the second pixel **210-2** are in a first row included in the rows while the third pixel **210-3** and the fourth pixel **210-4** are in a second row included in the

rows. Similarly, the first pixel **210-1** and the third pixel **210-3** are in a first column included in the columns and the second pixel **210-2** and the fourth pixel **210-4** are in a second column included in the columns. It is further appreciated that the first pixel **210-1** is adjacent to the second pixel **210-2** and the third pixel **210-3** such that there are no intervening pixels disposed between the first **210-1** and the second pixel **210-2** or the first pixel **210-1** and the third pixel **210-3**. As illustrated, first pixel cell **205-1** is mirror symmetric about axis **248** and axis **249**. In other words, elements of the first pixel cell **205-1** are arranged such that there is reflective symmetry about the axis **248** and the axis **249**. It is further noted that in the illustrated embodiment, the axis **248** is orthogonal to the axis **249**. It is appreciated that the mirror symmetry facilitates coupling elements included in adjacent pixels for a given pixel cell and/or adjacent pixel cells (see, e.g., FIG. 2J in which the floating diffusion regions for a given pixel cell are coupled to one another and subsequently coupled to one of the individual groups of components of the pixel cell circuitry). However, in other embodiments, axis **248** and axis **249** may not be orthogonal to one another, or there may be additional or different axes about which the pixel cell is mirror symmetric.

(33) Referring back to FIG. 2C, it is appreciated respective floating diffusion regions of adjacent pixel (e.g., the first pixel **210-1**, the second pixel **210-2**, the third pixel **210-3**, and the fourth pixel **210-4**) included in a given pixel cell (e.g., the first pixel cell **205-1**) are separated from one another such that the DTI structure **215** is disposed between adjacent floating diffusion regions included in the plurality of floating diffusion regions **221** without other intervening elements. In other words, adjacent floating diffusion regions about the DTI structure **215**. For example, the DTI structure **215** is disposed between the first floating diffusion region **221-1** and the second floating diffusion region **221-2** without any intervening elements such that the first floating diffusion region **221-1** and the second floating diffusion region **221-2** abut opposite sides of the DTI structure **215**. Similarly, the DTI structure **215** is disposed between first floating diffusion region **221-1** and the third floating diffusion region **221-3** without any intervening elements such that the first floating diffusion region **221-1** and the third floating diffusion region **221-3** abut opposite sides of the DTI structure **215**. It is appreciated that the illustrated configuration is advantageous when coupling the plurality of floating diffusion regions **221** of a given pixel cell together (e.g., as illustrated in FIG. 3G, which shows a simplified layout when interconnecting floating diffusion regions of a given pixel cell). It is further appreciated that the number of pixels included in the plurality of pixels **210** for a given pixel cell may include more or less pixels (e.g., instead of the two-by-two pixel configuration for the illustrated pixel cell of FIG. 2C, there may be a two-by-four, two-by-eight, four-by-four, or other configurations which incorporate more or less pixels within a given pixel cell).

(34) FIG. 2D illustrates a cross-sectional view **210-AA'** of the first semiconductor substrate **201** along the line A-A' shown in FIG. 2C, in accordance with embodiments of the present disclosure. The cross-sectional view **201-AA'** includes a first pinning region **207-1**, a third pinning region **207-3**, a first doped region **209-1**, a third doped region **209-3**, a first deep doped region **212-1**, a third deep doped region **212-3**, the DTI structure **215** including an inner region **216**, and an outer region **217**, the first floating diffusion region **221-1**, the third floating diffusion region **221-3**, a first well **234-1**, and a third well **234-3**, each disposed between the first side **202** and the second side **203** of the first semiconductor substrate **201**. A gate oxide (e.g., an oxide layer **226**) is disposed proximate to the first side **202** of the first semiconductor substrate **201**. The cross-sectional view **201-AA'** further includes the first transfer gate **220-1** including a first planar region **224-1** and a first vertical region **225-1**, the third transfer gate **220-3** including a third planar region **224-3** and a third vertical region **225-3**, and an axis **247-AA'**. It is appreciated that elements are hyphenated with a "1" or a "3" to indicate respective association with the first pixel **210-1** or the third pixel **210-3**. For example, the first pinning region **207-1**, the first doped region **209-1**, the first deep doped region **212-1**, the first transfer gate **220-1** including the first planar region **224-1** and the first vertical region **225-1**, the first floating diffusion region **221-1**, and the first well **234-1** are all included in

the first pixel **210-1**.

(35) As illustrated the DTI structure **215** extends an isolation depth into the first semiconductor substrate **201** from the first side **202** towards the second side **203** of the first semiconductor substrate **201**. The DTI structure **215** separates the first pixel **210-1** from the third pixel **210-3**, which is adjacent to the first pixel **210-1**. In some embodiments, the isolation depth of the DTI structure **215** may be greater than 1  $\mu\text{m}$  but less than or equal to a substrate thickness (e.g., 2.5  $\mu\text{m}$  to 7  $\mu\text{m}$ ) of the first semiconductor substrate **201**. In the same or other embodiments, there may exist at least a 1  $\mu\text{m}$  thick region of the first semiconductor substrate **201** disposed between the second side **203** of the first semiconductor substrate **201** and the DTI structure **215**. As discussed previously, the DTI structure **215** provides both physical separation and electrical isolation for adjacent pixels included in the plurality of pixels **210**. The DTI structure **215** may also provide optical isolation between first pixel **210-1** and the third pixel **210-3**. In some embodiments, the DTI structure **215** is a monolithic structure with a uniform composition (e.g., an oxide material such as silicon dioxide, a dielectric material having refractive index lower than the first semiconductor substrate **201**, or a different insulating material). In the illustrated embodiment, the DTI structure **215** includes the inner region **216** (e.g., formed of polycrystalline silicon, a metal such as tungsten or aluminum, an insulating material with a refractive index lower than a corresponding refractive index of the first semiconductor substrate **201**, or an oxide material such as silicon dioxide) that is surrounded by the outer region **217** (e.g., an insulating material such as silicon dioxide, or high k material such as aluminum oxide, hafnium oxide, tantalum oxide, zirconium oxide, or other material). It is appreciated that in some embodiments the DTI structure **215** may correspond to an attenuation layer that may reflect, absorb, diffract, or otherwise impede electrical and/or optical crosstalk between adjacent pixels included in the plurality of pixels **210**.

(36) In the illustrated embodiment, the first pixel **210-1** and the third pixel **210-3** each include a respective photodiode included in a plurality of photodiodes **204** (see, e.g., FIG. 2B). For example, the first pinning region **207-1**, the first doped region **209-1**, and the first deep doped region **212-1** in combination with the first semiconductor substrate **201** collectively form a pinned photodiode corresponding to the first photodiode **204-1** of the first pixel **210-1** illustrated in FIG. 2B, which may be representative of any or each other photodiode included in the plurality of photodiodes **204**. In some embodiments, each of the first pinning region **207-1** and the third pinning region **207-3** may be coupled to a ground. Referring back to FIG. 2D, it is appreciated that the first pinning region **207-1** and the first deep doped region **212-1** may be optional elements (e.g., in an embodiment where the first photodiode **204-1** of FIG. 2B is not a pinned photodiode). As illustrated, the first pinning region **207-1** and the third pinning region **207-3** are each disposed proximate to the first side **202** of the first semiconductor substrate **201** to provide surface passivation for the underlying photodiodes. In the illustrated embodiment, the first pinning region **207-1** is disposed between the first side **202** of the first semiconductor substrate **201** and the first doped region **209-1** and the third pinning region **207-3** is disposed between the first side **202** of the first semiconductor substrate **201** and the third doped region **209-3**. In some embodiments, the first doped region **209-1**, the third doped region **209-3**, the first deep doped region **212-1**, and the third deep doped region **212-3** are each a first conductivity type (e.g., N-type or P-type electrical conductivity) while the first semiconductor substrate **201**, the first pinning region **207-1**, and the third pinning region **207-3** are each a second conductivity type (e.g., P-type or N-type electrical conductivity) opposite of the first conductivity type. It is appreciated that in some embodiments a first doping concentration of the doped regions (e.g., the first doped region **209-1** and/or the third doped region **209-3**) is different than a second doping concentration of the deep doped regions (e.g., the first deep doped region **212-1** and/or the third deep doped region **212-3**). In some embodiments, the doping concentration of the first pinning region **207-1** or the third pinning region **207-3** is configured to be greater than the doping concentration of the first semiconductor substrate **201**.

(37) As illustrated in FIG. 2D, the first transfer gate **220-1**, the third transfer gate **220-3**, the first floating diffusion region **221-1**, and the third floating diffusion region **221-3** are each disposed proximate to the first side **202** of the first semiconductor substrate **201**. Each of the plurality of transfer gates **220** include a respective planar region electrically coupled to a vertical region (e.g., the first transfer gate **220-1** includes the first planar region **224-1** coupled to the first vertical region **225-1** and the third transfer gate **220-3** includes the third planar region **224-3** coupled to the third vertical region **225-3**). For example, the first vertical region **225-1** extends from the first planar region **224-1** of the first transfer gate **220-1** into the first semiconductor substrate **201** towards the second side **203** of the first semiconductor substrate **201**. Disposed between the plurality of transfer gates **220** and the plurality of photodiodes (e.g., the plurality of pinning regions **207**, the plurality of doped regions **209**, and the plurality of deep doped regions **212**) is the oxide layer **226**, which provides an insulating barrier (e.g., to form a plurality of transfer transistors). In some embodiments the oxide layer **226** is silicon dioxide, hafnium oxide, aluminum oxide, or any other insulating material with suitable properties for forming the plurality of transfer transistors.

(38) It is appreciated that the first side **202** of the first semiconductor substrate **201** is disposed between the first planar region **224-1** and the underlying photodiode of the first pixel **210-1** (e.g., the first doped region **209-1** as well as the first pinning region **207-1** and the first deep doped region **212-1**). Additionally, the first vertical region **225-1** of the first transfer gate **220-1** is disposed between the first pinning region **207-1** and the first floating diffusion region **221-1** of the first pixel **210-1**. The first vertical region **225-1** of the first transfer gate **220-1** is also partially disposed between the first doped region **209-1** and the first well **234-1**. In the illustrated embodiment, the first vertical region **225-1** of the first transfer gate **220-1** is also disposed between the first planar region **224-1** of the first transfer gate **220-1** and the first doped region **209-1**. Additionally, the first vertical region **225-1** is disposed between the first doped region **209-1** and the first floating diffusion region **221-1** of the first pixel **210-1**. The first well **234-1** and third well **234-3** are disposed between an adjacent photodiode (e.g., the first doped region **209-1** and the first deep doped region **212-1** of the first pixel **210-1** or the third doped region **209-3** and the third deep doped region **212-3** of the third pixel **210-3**) and the DTI structure **215** (i.e., a portion of the DTI structure **215** that is disposed between first pixel **210-1** and first pixel **210-3**). In some embodiments, the first floating diffusion region **221-1** of the first pixel **210-1** is disposed in the first well **234-1** and the third floating diffusion region **221-3** is disposed in the third well **234-3**. In some embodiments, the first well **234-1** corresponds to a doped well region having an opposite conductivity type relative to a conductivity type of the first doped region **209-1**, the first deep doped region **212-1**, and/or the first floating diffusion region **221-1** of the first pixel **210-1**. In the same or other embodiments, the third well **234-3** corresponds to a doped well region having an opposite conductivity type relative to a conductivity type of the third doped region **209-3**, the third deep doped region **212-3**, and/or the third floating diffusion region **221-3** of the third pixel **210-3**.

(39) To facilitate reduced pixel pitch and mitigating performance variance due to processing variation, the structure of the plurality of pixels **210** is further configured such that the planar region (e.g., the first planar region **224-1** and the third planar region **224-3**) laterally extends over the underlying photodiode (e.g., any one or more of the first pinning region **207-1**, the first doped region **209-1**, and/or the first deep doped region **212-1** for the first pixel **210-1**) to protect the underlying photodiode from contamination and/or damage during processing steps subsequent to the formation of the underlying photodiode (see, e.g., FIG. 3A-3G) on the first side **202** of the first semiconductor substrate **201**. Accordingly, the transfer gate associated with the underlying photodiode (e.g., the first transfer gate **220-1** in the case of the first pixel **210-1**) is optically aligned with the underlying photodiode (e.g., any one or more of the first pinning region **207-1**, the first doped region **209-1**, and/or the first deep doped region **212-1** for the first pixel **210-1**) such that the planar region (e.g., the first planar region **224-1** for the first pixel **210-1**) of the transfer gate laterally extends over the underlying photodiode to cover an entirety of a lateral area of the

underlying photodiode when the first semiconductor substrate **201** is viewed from the first side **202** (e.g., as shown in FIG. 2C, the underlying photodiodes do not extend beyond the lateral area covered by the plurality of transfer gates **220** and thus are not visible in the top view **201-TV**). In some embodiments, the lateral area of the underlying photodiode is less than or equal to a lateral area of the planar region of the transfer gate. For example, in one embodiment, a lateral area of the first doped region **209-1** is less than or equal to a lateral area of the first planar region **224-1** of the first transfer gate **220-1**. In the illustrated embodiment, the lateral area of the first doped region **209-1** is based on a width **229** of the first doped region **209-1** and a length of the first doped region **209-1** (e.g., corresponding to the combination of the lengths **241**, **242**, and **243** illustrated in FIG. 2C) while the lateral area of the first planar region **224-1** of the first transfer gate is based on a width **227** of the first planar region **224-1** and a length of the first planar region **224-1** (e.g., corresponding to the combination of the lengths **241**, **242**, and **243** illustrated in FIG. 2C). Thus, in some embodiments the width **229** of the first doped region **209-1** is less than or equal to the width **227** of the first planar region **224-1** of the first transfer gate **220-1**. In the same or other embodiments, the length of the first doped region **209-1** is less than or equal to the length of the first planar region **224-1** of the first transfer gate **220-1**. Consequently, the first planar region **224-1** of the first transfer gate **220-1** extends over the first doped region **209-1** to cover an entirety of the lateral area of the first doped region **209-1** when the first semiconductor substrate **201** is viewed from the first side **202**. It is further appreciated that the first pixel **210-1** is mirror symmetric to the third pixel **210-3** about the axis **247-AA'**. In other words, in some embodiments there is reflective symmetry through the first semiconductor substrate **201** about the axis **247-AA'**, which is orthogonal to both the axis **248** and the axis **249** illustrated in FIG. 2C.

(40) FIG. 2E illustrates a cross-sectional view **201-BB'** of the first semiconductor substrate **201** along the line B-B' shown in FIG. 2C, in accordance with embodiments of the present disclosure. The cross-sectional view **201-BB'** is similar in many regards to the cross-sectional view **201-AA'** illustrated in FIG. 2D and includes the same or similar features. One difference is the line B-B' shown in FIG. 2C extends through the first isolation region **222-1** and the third isolation region **222-3**. Accordingly, the cross-sectional view **201-BB'** illustrated in FIG. 2E shows the first isolation region **222-1** and the third isolation region **222-3** disposed within the first semiconductor substrate **201** proximate to the first side **202** and between the first side **202** and the second side **203**. In some embodiments, the first isolation region **222-1** and the third isolation region **222-3** correspond to shallow isolation well regions where portions of the first semiconductor substrate **201** have been doped to have the second conductivity type (e.g., P-type when the first doped region **204-1** is N-type). In the same or other embodiments, the first well **234-1** disposed proximate to the first isolation region **222-1** also corresponds to a doped region of the first semiconductor substrate **201** that has been doped to have the second conductivity type. In the same or other embodiments, the first well **234-1** and the third well **234-3** correspond to deep isolation well regions. Dopants forming the first well **234-1** may be implanted into the first semiconductor substrate **201** at a depth greater than the first isolation region **222-1**, for example with greater implantation energy and/or with multiple implantation steps with varying implantation energy, in manner that the first well **234-1** abuts and extends from the first isolation region **222-1** toward the second side **203** of the first semiconductor substrate **201**. In other words, the first isolation region **222-1** and the first well **234-1** may be electrically coupled and structurally connected (e.g., via diffusion). In some embodiments, each of the first isolation region **222-1**, the third isolation region **222-3**, the first well **234-1**, and the third well **234-3** may have a dopant concentration greater than a dopant concentration of the first semiconductor substrate **201**.

(41) It is appreciated that the first isolation region **222-1** may be representative of any other isolation regions included in the plurality of isolation regions **222** (e.g., the third isolation region **222-3**) and include the same or similar features, in accordance with embodiments of the disclosure. It is further appreciated that the first pixel **210-1** is mirror symmetric to the third pixel **205-3** about

the axis **247-BB'**. In other words, in some embodiments there is reflective symmetry through the first semiconductor substrate **201** about the axis **247-BB'**, which is orthogonal to both the axis **248** and the axis **249** illustrated in FIG. 2C.

(42) FIG. 2F illustrates a cross-sectional view **201-CC'** of the first semiconductor substrate **201** along line C-C' shown in FIG. 2C, in accordance with embodiments of the present disclosure. The cross-sectional view **201-CC'** is similar in many regards to the cross-sectional view **210-AA'** illustrated in FIG. 2D and includes the same or similar features. One difference is the line C-C' shown in FIG. 2C extends through the first ground contact region **223-1** and the third ground contact region **223-3**. Accordingly, the cross-sectional view **210-CC'** illustrated in FIG. 2F shows the first ground contact region **223-1** and the third ground contact region **223-3** disposed within the first semiconductor substrate **201** proximate to the first side **202** and between the first side **202** and the second side **203**. In some embodiments, the first ground contact region **223-1** and the third ground contact region **222-3** correspond to heavily doped portions of the first semiconductor substrate **201** to have the second conductivity type (e.g., P-type when the first doped region **204-1** is N-type). It is appreciated that in some embodiments, a dopant concentration of the plurality of ground contact regions **223** (e.g., the first ground contact region **223-1** and the third ground contact region **223-3**) is greater than a dopant concentration of the plurality of isolation regions **222** (e.g., the first isolation region **222-1** and the third isolation region **222-3** illustrated in FIG. 2E). In the same or other embodiments, the first well **234-1** disposed proximate to the first ground contact region **223-1** also corresponds to a doped region of the first semiconductor substrate **201** that has been doped to have the second conductivity type. In some embodiments, the first ground contact region **223-1** is a doped region (e.g., a heavily doped region) disposed in the first well **234-1** and the third ground contact region **222-3** is a doped region disposed in the third well **234-3**. In some embodiments, a contact may be disposed in direct physical contact with the first ground contact region **223-1** to couple the first ground contact region **223-1** to a ground reference voltage via a metal interconnect structure (not illustrated). In some embodiments, the ground reference voltage may be located on the second semiconductor substrate **251** or the third semiconductor substrate **291** illustrated in FIG. 2B. Referring back to FIG. 2F, it is appreciated that the first ground contact region **223-1** may be representative of any other ground contact regions included in the plurality of ground contact regions **223** (e.g., the third ground contact region **222-3**) and include the same or similar features, in accordance with embodiments of the disclosure. It is further appreciated that the first pixel **210-1** is mirror symmetric to the third pixel **210-3** about the axis **247-CC'**. In other words, in some embodiments there is reflective symmetry through the first semiconductor substrate **201** about the axis **247-CC'**, which is orthogonal to both the axis **248** and the axis **249** illustrated in FIG. 2C.

(43) FIG. 2G is a schematic diagram **299** of a pixel cell (e.g., the first pixel cell **205-1** illustrated in FIG. 2C) and pixel cell circuitry (e.g., a group of individual components included in the pixel cell circuitry for a given one of the plurality of pixel cells) included in the example imaging system **200** of FIG. 2A, in accordance with embodiments of the present disclosure. In particular, the schematic diagram **299** is one possible representation of the pixel cell illustrated in FIGS. 2C-2F (e.g., the first pixel cell **205-1**). The schematic diagram **299** illustrates elements included in or on the first semiconductor substrate **201**. Elements PD1, PD2, PD3, and PD4 correspond to respective photodiodes included in the plurality of photodiodes **204** illustrated in FIG. 2B (e.g., the first photodiode **204-1**, the second photodiode **204-2**, and so on) are respectively associated with the plurality of pixels **210** included in the pixel cell **205-1** illustrated in FIG. 2C (e.g., PD1 corresponds to the first photodiode **204-1** associated with the first pixel **210-1**, PD2 corresponds to the second photodiode **204-2** associated with the second pixel **210-2**, and so on). Elements TX1, TX2, TX3, and TX4 correspond to respective transfer gates included in the plurality of transfer gates **220** illustrated in FIG. 2C (e.g., the first transfer gate **220-1**, the second transfer gate **220-2**, and so on) are respectively associated with the plurality of pixels **210** of the first pixel cell **205-1** illustrated in

FIG. 2C (e.g., TX1 corresponds to the first transfer gate **220-1** associated with the first pixel **210-1**, TX2 corresponds to the second transfer gate **220-2** associated with the second pixel **210-2**, and so on). Elements FD1, FD2, FD3, and FD4 correspond to respective floating diffusion regions included in the plurality of floating diffusion regions **221** illustrated in FIG. 2C (e.g., the first floating diffusion region **221-1**, the second floating diffusion region **221-2**, and so on) that are respectively associated with the plurality of pixels **210** included in the first pixel cell **205-1** illustrated in FIG. 2C (e.g., FD1 corresponds to the first floating diffusion region **221-1** associated with the first pixel **210-1**, FD2 corresponds to the second floating diffusion region **221-2** associated with the second pixel **210-2**, and so on). Additionally, each of the unlabeled grounds coupled to the plurality of floating diffusion regions (i.e., FD1, FD2, FD3, and FD4) correspond to the plurality of ground contact regions **223** illustrated in FIG. 2C.

(44) In the embodiment illustrated by FIG. 2G, the first semiconductor substrate **201** is coupled to the second semiconductor substrate **251** (e.g., as shown in FIG. 2A). The second semiconductor substrate **251** includes pixel cell circuitry associated with the plurality of pixel cells of the first semiconductor substrate **201**. In the illustrated embodiment, the pixel cell circuitry includes a reset transistor RST, a source-follower transistor SF, and a row select transistor RS. As illustrated by the schematic **299**, each of the plurality of floating diffusion regions for the pixel cell (i.e., FD1, FD2, FD3, and FD4) are coupled together and subsequently coupled to the second semiconductor substrate **251** via a pixel-level hybrid bond (PLHB). In some embodiments, the PLHB is achieved, at least in part, by forming a corresponding floating diffusion region within the second semiconductor substrate **251** that can be coupled to the reset transistor and source-follower transistor of the second semiconductor substrate **251**. Thus, in the illustrated embodiment, the pixel cell circuitry of the second semiconductor substrate **251** is coupled to the plurality of pixel cells of the first semiconductor substrate **201** on a per-pixel cell basis. However, in other embodiments, the individual floating diffusion regions (i.e., FD1, FD2, FD3, and FD4) of a given pixel cell are not coupled together and thus may be coupled to the pixel circuitry of the second semiconductor substrate **251** on a per-pixel basis.

(45) It is appreciated that during operation, image charge photogenerated in response to incident light by the plurality of photodiodes (i.e., PD1, PD2, PD3, and PD4) can be selectively transferred to their respective floating diffusion regions (i.e., FD1, FD2, FD3, FD4) in response to a signal applied to plurality of transfer gates (i.e., TX1, TX2, TX3, and TX4), which may subsequently turn on the source-follower transistor SF supplied by AVDD of the second semiconductor substrate **251** and enable readout to the bit line via the row select transistor RS. It is appreciated the floating diffusion regions (i.e., FD1, FD2, FD3, FD4) and the plurality of photodiodes (i.e., PD1, PD2, PD3, and PD4) can be reset to a pre-determined potential (e.g., RSVDD) via the reset transistor RST. It is appreciated that while the schematic **299** is similar to the 4-T pixel driver circuit, other configurations may also be used (e.g., 3-T, 5-T, or other pixel driver configurations), in accordance with embodiments of the disclosure.

(46) FIG. 2H, FIG. 2I, and FIG. 2J respectively represent cross-sectional views of the first semiconductor substrate **201** along lines A-A', B-B', and C-C' shown in FIG. 2C for an alternative embodiment with increased full well capacity, in accordance with embodiments of the present disclosure. More specifically, FIG. 2H illustrates cross-sectional view **201A-AA'**, FIG. 2I illustrates cross-sectional view **201B-BB'**, and FIG. 2J illustrates cross-sectional view **201C-CC'** that respectively correspond to the cross-sectional view **201-AA'** illustrated in FIG. 2D, the cross-sectional view **201-BB'** illustrated in FIG. 2E and the cross-sectional view **201-CC'** illustrated in FIG. 2F, which may include the same or similar features, elements, and the like. One difference between the views illustrated in FIGS. 2D-2F compared to the views illustrated in FIGS. 2H-2J, is that deep doped regions extend under the adjacent wells to increase the full well capacity of the associated photodiode. In the embodiment illustrated in FIGS. 2H-2J the first deep doped region **212-1A** extends under the first well **234-1A** and the third deep doped region **212-3A** extends under



the third well **234-3A**. It is appreciated that the “A” suffixed to the deep doped regions and wells indicates that the suffixed element is an alternative to an already discussed element (e.g., first deep doped region **212-1A** of FIG. 2H is an alternative to first deep doped region **212-A** of FIG. 2D). In some embodiments, the first well **234-1A** is disposed between the first floating diffusion region **221-1** and the first deep doped region **212-1A** (as illustrated in FIG. 2H) and similarly, the third well **234-3A** is disposed between the third floating diffusion region **221-3** and the third deep doped region **212-3A**. In the same or other embodiments, the first well **234-1A** is disposed between the first isolation region **222-1** and the first deep doped region **212-1A** (as illustrated in FIG. 2I) and similarly, the third well **234-3A** is disposed between the third isolation region **222-3** and the third deep doped region **212-3A**. In the same or other embodiments, the first well **234-1A** is disposed between the first ground contact region **223-1** and the first deep doped region **212-1A** (as illustrated in FIG. 2J) and similarly, the third well **234-3A** is disposed between the third ground contact region **223-3** and the third deep doped region **212-3A**.

(47) FIGS. 3A-3G illustrate an example method **300**, which includes process steps **300-A** illustrated in FIG. 3A, **300-B** illustrated in FIG. 3B, **300-C** illustrated in FIG. 3C, **300-D** illustrated in FIG. 3D, **300-E** illustrated in FIG. 3E, **300-F** illustrated in FIG. 3F, and **300-G** illustrated in FIG. 3G, for forming an image sensor structure with reduced pixel pitch, in accordance with embodiments of the disclosure. It is appreciated that the image sensor structure resultant from the method **300** is one possible process for fabricating the first semiconductor substrate **201** of the imaging system **200** illustrated in FIGS. 2A-2G. It is appreciated that while the process steps of the method **300** illustrated in FIGS. 3A-3G are provided in a specific order, in other embodiments a different order of steps **300-A** through **300-G** may be utilized. Additionally, process steps may be added to, or removed from, the method **300** in accordance with the embodiments of the present disclosure. The process steps illustrated in FIGS. 3A-3G may utilize conventional semiconductor device processing and microfabrication techniques known by one of ordinary skill in the art, which may include, but is not limited to, photolithography, ion implantation, chemical vapor deposition, physical vapor deposition, thermal evaporation, sputter deposition, reactive-ion etching, plasma etching, wafer bonding, chemical mechanical planarization, and the like. It is appreciated that the described techniques are merely demonstrative and not exhaustive and that other techniques may be utilized to fabricate one or more components of various embodiments of the disclosure.

(48) FIG. 3A shows providing a first semiconductor substrate **301** including a first side and a second side, wherein the first side (e.g., a front side or a backside) is opposite the second side (e.g., backside or a front side). In the illustrated embodiment, the first semiconductor substrate **301** has a deep trench isolation (DTI) structure **315** fabricated, which may be analogous to the DTI structure **215** illustrated in FIGS. 2C-2F and include the same or similar features. The DTI structure **315** may be formed of or otherwise include polycrystalline silicon, an oxide such as silicon dioxide, a dielectric material with low refractive index relative to the refractive index of the first semiconductor substrate **201**, or other insulating material. In some embodiments, the DTI structure **315** includes an inner region and an outer region (see, e.g., FIGS. 2D-2F). It is appreciated that the DTI structure **315** is structured to form a plurality of intended pixel regions **370** arranged in rows and columns that serve as intended locations for a plurality of pixels (e.g., the plurality of pixels **210** illustrated in FIGS. 2B-2G included in the plurality of pixel cells **205** illustrated in FIG. 2A) to be formed within the first semiconductor substrate **301**. In some embodiments, the DTI structure **315** extends continuously from the first side to the second side (e.g., entirely through) of the first semiconductor substrate **301** and forms a trench grid structure surrounding each individual pixel cell and separating adjacent pixel cells to define a pixel cell area for each one of the plurality of pixel cells. Accordingly, the DTI structure **315** laterally surrounds and physically separates both pixels and pixel cells from one another. Additionally, edges of the DTI structure **315** may be utilized for alignment of one or more elements to be formed in or on the plurality of intended pixel regions **370** (e.g., an edge of the DTI structure **315** may be aligned with an edge of at least one of a

ground contact region, an isolation region, and/or a floating diffusion region as illustrated in FIG. 3F). Additionally, or alternatively, edges of the planar region of a transfer gate (see, e.g., FIG. 3F) may be aligned with an edge of at least one of a ground contact region, an isolation region, and/or a floating diffusion region.

(49) In the process step **300-A** illustrated in FIG. 3A, a patterned photoresist layer **380** has been formed over the first semiconductor substrate **301** (e.g., proximate to the first side **202** or the second side **203** illustrated in FIG. 2D-2F). The patterned photoresist layer **380** has openings **381** with a rectangular shape that are positioned such that corners of the openings **381** do not land over the plurality of intended pixel regions **370**. More specifically, the stripe pattern of the patterned photoresist layer **380** mitigates the issue of corner rounding within the patterned photoresist layer **380** due to the corners of the patterned photoresist layer **380** being positioned over the DTI structure **315** (e.g., instead of over the plurality of intended pixel regions **370** and/or an interface where the DTI structure **315** meets the plurality of intended pixel regions **370**). As illustrated, for each region included in the plurality of intended pixel regions **370**, a first portion **372** is positioned outside of the openings **381** while a second portion **374** is positioned within the openings **381**. It is appreciated that the first portion **372** of each of the plurality of intended pixel regions **370** will be utilized to form a plurality of photodiodes and a plurality of transfer gates (see, e.g., FIG. 2C and FIG. 2D). Additionally, the second portion **374** of each of the plurality of intended pixel regions **370** will be utilized to form a plurality of floating diffusion regions, a plurality of isolation regions, a plurality of ground contact regions, and a plurality of wells (see, e.g., FIGS. 2C-2F). However, during the process step **300-A**, the patterned photoresist layer **380** will be utilized to form wells (e.g., the first well **234-1** and the third well **234-3** illustrated in FIG. 2D) via ion implantation through the openings **381**. In some embodiments, the ion implantation may include one or more implantation steps (e.g., a first ion implantation step of a first energy to form a middle depth well and a second ion implantation step of a second energy to form a deep depth well, which collectively may form the wells). In some embodiments, the first semiconductor substrate **301** is the second conductivity type (e.g., P-type electrical conductivity) and the one or more ion implantation steps may further increase the degree of the second conductivity type (e.g., increase dopant density) within the second portion **374** of each of the plurality of intended pixel regions **370** to form the well (e.g., first well **234-1** or third well **234-3** illustrated in FIG. 2C-2F) in the first semiconductor substrate **301** for photodiode isolation and circuit element formation.

(50) FIG. 3B illustrates process step **300-B** for forming a plurality of photodiodes disposed within the first semiconductor substrate **301** and then forming a plurality of transfer gates to cover the plurality of photodiode within the first portion **372** of each of the plurality of intended pixel regions **370**. It is appreciated that the plurality of photodiodes and the plurality of transfer gates may respectively be analogous to the plurality of photodiodes **204** illustrated in FIG. 2B and the plurality of transfer gates **220** illustrated in FIG. 2C. Similarly, the wells **334** were formed during the process step **300-A** illustrated in FIG. 3A and may be analogous to the plurality of wells **234** illustrated in FIGS. 2D-2F.

(51) Referring back to FIG. 3B, a patterned photoresist layer **382** is formed over the first semiconductor substrate **301**. The patterned photoresist layer **382** includes openings **383** for forming the plurality of photodiodes and the plurality of transfer gates. It is appreciated that the first portion **372** of each of the plurality of intended pixel regions **370** is exposed while the wells **334** are covered. It is further appreciated that the stripe pattern of the patterned photoresist layer **382** mitigates the issue of corner rounding within the patterned photoresist layer **382** due to the corners of the patterned photoresist layer **382** being positioned over the DTI structure **315** (e.g., instead of over the plurality of intended pixel regions **370** and/or an interface where the DTI structure **315** meets the plurality of intended pixel regions **370**).

(52) During the process step **300-B**, one or more ion implantation steps (e.g., ion implantation at different implant energies to form at different depths within the first semiconductor substrate **301**)

to dope the first semiconductor substrate **301** within the first portion **372** of each of the plurality of intended pixel regions **370** may occur to form the plurality of photodiodes. In one embodiment, the multiple ion implantation steps may be made with alignment to the DTI structure **315** to form a deep doped region, a doped region, and a pinning region for each photodiode included in the plurality of photodiodes, which may be respectively analogous to the plurality of deep doped regions **212** (e.g., the first deep doped region **212-1** of FIG. 2D), the plurality of doped regions **209** (e.g., the first doped region **209-1** of FIG. 2D), and the plurality of pinning regions **207** (e.g., the first pinning region **207-1** of FIG. 2D). Once the plurality of photodiodes is formed, a trench may be etched within the first portion **372** of the plurality of intended pixel regions **370**, an oxide layer may be formed on the first side of the first semiconductor substrate **301** (e.g., corresponding to the oxide layer **226** illustrated in FIGS. 2D-2F) lining the trench conformally and then planar and vertical regions of the plurality of transfer gates may be formed (e.g., by depositing polycrystalline silicon, a metal such as gold, aluminum, silver, copper, or other conductive material). In some embodiments, the same photoresist pattern (e.g., the patterned photoresist layer **382**) is utilized to form both the plurality of photodiodes and the plurality of transfer gates. Accordingly, a lateral area of an individual one of the plurality of photodiodes is less than or equal to a lateral area of the planar region of an individual one of the plurality of transfer gates. Moreover, once the plurality of transfer gates has been formed, each transfer gate included in the plurality of transfer gate covers an underlying one of the plurality of photodiodes to protect the plurality of photodiodes from being contaminated during subsequent ion implantation steps.

(53) FIG. 3C shows process step **300-C** for forming a lightly doped region for the plurality of floating diffusion regions within the first semiconductor substrate **301** via one or more ion implantation steps to implant dopants through openings **385** of patterned photoresist layer **384**. As illustrated, the openings **385** overlap with a portion of the wells **334** and the plurality of transfer gates (e.g., TX1, TX2, TX3, and TX4). However, the plurality of transfer gates blocks the ion implantation from contacting the plurality of photodiodes underlying the plurality of transfer gates. Accordingly, during the ion implantation step for the process step **300-C**, the plurality of floating diffusion regions is formed in the portion **321** for each of the plurality of intended pixel regions **370** above the well **334** (see, e.g., FIG. 2D), for example, self-aligned with respect to an edge of the planar regions of each respective transfer gate and corresponding segments of DTI structure **315**. It is further appreciated that the stripe pattern of the patterned photoresist layer **384** mitigates the issue of corner rounding within the patterned photoresist layer **384** due to the corners of the patterned photoresist layer **384** being positioned over the DTI structure **315** (e.g., instead of over the plurality of intended pixel regions **370** and/or an interface where the DTI structure **315** meets the plurality of intended pixel regions **370**). This is because the openings **385** extend beyond an intended location of the floating diffusion regions (e.g., the portion **321** of the first semiconductor substrate **301** for each of the plurality of intended pixel regions **370**) such that corners of the openings **385** do not overlap with any of the plurality of transfer gates or the intended location of the plurality of floating diffusion regions.

(54) FIG. 3D illustrates process step **300-D** for forming a plurality of isolation regions (e.g., shallow wells of the second conductivity type) within the first semiconductor substrate **301** via one or more ion implantation steps to implant dopants through openings **387** of patterned photoresist **386**. In some embodiments, the plurality of isolation regions is analogous to the plurality of isolation regions **222** illustrated in FIG. 2C. It is appreciated that the plurality of isolation regions may be formed via a patterned photoresist layer **386** with openings **387**. As illustrated, the openings **387** overlap with the wells **334** and a portion of the plurality of transfer gates (e.g., TX1, TX2, TX3, and TX4), but do not overlap with the plurality of floating diffusion regions (e.g., FD1, FD2, FD3, and FD4). During the ion implantation of the process step **300-D**, the plurality of transfer gates blocks the ion implantation from contacting the plurality of photodiodes underlying the plurality of transfer gates. Accordingly, during the ion implantation step for the process **300-D**, the

second conductivity type may be implanted above the well **334** with alignment to an edge of the planar regions of respective transfer gates to form the plurality of isolation regions for each of the plurality of intended pixel regions **370** (see, e.g., FIG. 2E). It is further appreciated that the stripe pattern of the patterned photoresist layer **386** mitigates the issue of corner rounding within the patterned photoresist layer **386** due to the corners of the patterned photoresist layer **386** being positioned over the DTI structure **315** (e.g., instead of over the plurality of intended pixel regions **370** and/or an interface where the DTI structure **315** meets the plurality of intended pixel regions **370**). This is because the openings **387** extend beyond an intended location of the plurality of isolation regions (e.g., above the wells **334** for each of the plurality of intended pixel regions **370**) such that corners of the openings **387** do not overlap with any of the plurality of transfer gates or the intended location of the plurality of isolation regions.

(55) FIG. 3E shows process step **300-E** for forming a plurality of ground contact regions (e.g., highly doped regions of the second conductivity type with a dopant concentration greater than the first semiconductor substrate **301**) within the first semiconductor substrate **301** via one or more ion implantation steps to implant dopants through openings **389** of patterned photoresist layer **388**. In some embodiments, the ground contact regions are implemented with alignment made with respect to at least one of an edge of the planar gate region of respective transfer gates and corresponding segments of the DTI structure **315**. In some embodiments, the plurality of ground contact regions is analogous to the plurality of ground contact regions **223** illustrated in FIG. 2C. As illustrated, the openings **389** overlap with portions **335** of the wells **334** such that the plurality of ground contact regions may be formed above the wells **334** within the regions **335** of the first semiconductor substrate **301** (e.g., as illustrated in FIG. 2F, which shows the plurality of ground contact regions **223** disposed, at least in part, between the first side **202** of the first semiconductor substrate **201** and the plurality of wells **234**). It is noted that the openings **389** overlap with the portions **335** of the first semiconductor substrate **301** above the plurality of wells **334** and respective portions of the plurality of transfer gates (e.g., TX1, TX2, TX3, and TX4), but do not overlap with the plurality of floating diffusion regions (e.g., FD1, FD2, FD3, and FD4) or the plurality of isolation regions **322**. During the one or more ion implantation steps of the process step **300-E**, the plurality of transfer gates blocks the ion implantation from contacting or otherwise reaching the plurality of photodiodes underlying the plurality of transfer gates. Accordingly, during the one or more ion implantation steps for the process **300-E**, the second conductivity type may be implanted with a high concentration (e.g., P<sup>+</sup> dopant concentration such that the portions **335** become sufficiently conductive) above the wells **334** to form the plurality of ground contact regions for each of the plurality of intended pixel regions **370** (see, e.g., FIG. 2F). It is further appreciated that the stripe pattern of the patterned photoresist layer **388** mitigates the issue of corner rounding within the patterned photoresist layer **388** due to the corners of the patterned photoresist layer **388** being positioned over the DTI structure **315** (e.g., instead of over the plurality of intended pixel regions **370** and/or an interface where the DTI structure **315** meets the plurality of intended pixel regions **370**). This is because the openings **389** extend beyond an intended location of the plurality of ground contact regions (e.g., above the wells **334** for each of the plurality of intended pixel regions **370** within the portions **335** of the first semiconductor substrate **301**) such that corners of the openings **389** do not overlap with any of the plurality of transfer gates or the intended location of the plurality of ground contact regions.

(56) FIG. 3F shows process step **300-F** for ion implantation to form heavily doped region of the plurality of floating diffusion regions (e.g., doped regions of the first conductivity type to form the plurality of floating diffusion regions in the previously formed lightly doped region denoted as FD1, FD2, FD3, and FD4) within the first semiconductor substrate **301** via one or more ion implantation steps to implant dopants through openings **391** of patterned photoresist layer **390**. In some embodiments, the plurality of floating diffusion regions is analogous to the plurality of floating diffusion regions **221** illustrated in FIG. 2C. As illustrated, the openings **391** overlap with

the floating diffusion regions formed during process step **300-C** illustrated in FIG. 3C such that heavily doped regions can be formed over, or partially within, the plurality of floating diffusion regions. It is noted that the openings **391** overlap with the plurality of floating diffusion regions of the first semiconductor substrate **301** and respective portions of the plurality of transfer gates (e.g., TX1, TX2, TX3, and TX4), but do not overlap with the plurality of isolation regions (e.g., denoted as “ISO”) or the plurality of ground contact regions (e.g., denoted as “GND”). During one or more ion implantation steps of the process step **300-F**, the plurality of transfer gates blocks the ion implantation from contacting or otherwise reaching the plurality of photodiodes underlying the plurality of transfer gates. Accordingly, during the one or more ion implantation steps for the process **300-F**, the first conductivity type may be implanted (e.g., N-type dopant) to form the source/drain of the plurality of floating diffusion regions of the intended pixel regions **370**. It is further appreciated that the stripe pattern of the patterned photoresist layer **390** mitigates the issue of corner rounding within the patterned photoresist layer **390** due to the corners of the patterned photoresist layer **390** being positioned over the DTI structure **315** (e.g., instead of over the plurality of intended pixel regions **370** and/or an interface where the DTI structure **315** meets the plurality of intended pixel regions **370**). This is because the openings **391** extend beyond an intended location of the plurality of floating diffusion regions or their respective source/drain such that corners of the openings **391** do not overlap with any of the plurality of transfer gates or the intended location of the source/drain for the plurality of floating diffusion regions.

(57) FIG. 3G illustrates process step **300-G**, which is an example back end of the line design for a first metal (M1) layer, which is formed by a pattern of photoresist (not illustrated). In the illustrated embodiment, the M1 layer shows floating diffusion regions for a given pixel cell coupled together (e.g., FD1, FD2, FD3, and FD4 for a first pixel cell are coupled together via contact and metal interconnect FD\_1, FD1, FD2, FD3, and FD4 for a second pixel cell are coupled together via contact and metal interconnect FD\_2, FD1, FD2, FD3, and FD4 for a third pixel cell are coupled together via contact and metal interconnect FD\_3, and FD1, FD2, FD3, and FD4 for a fourth pixel cell are coupled together via metal contact FD\_4). Similarly, ground contact regions of adjacent pixel cells are coupled together (e.g., via contact and metal interconnect GND **396**). However, it is appreciated that in some embodiments, a subsequent metal layer (e.g., a second metal layer “M2”) may couple all ground contact regions of all pixel cells together. The M1 layer also includes metal traces **392**, **393**, **394**, and **395**, which respectively couple the plurality of transfer gates for a respective row together. In some embodiments, metal trace **392** couples transfer gates included in the plurality of transfer gates of a given row denoted as “TX1” together while metal trace **393** couples transfer gates of the given row denoted as “TX2” together. Similarly, in the same or other embodiments, metal trace **394** couples transfer gates included in the plurality of transfer gates of a given row denoted as “TX3” together while metal trace **395** couples transfer gates of the given row denoted as “TX4” together. In other words, transfer gates included in the plurality of transfer gates along a common row may not necessarily be coupled together (e.g., TX1 and TX2 of the common row may not be electrically coupled together via the metal traces **392** or **393**). In other embodiments, transfer gates included in the plurality of transfer gates of a common row may be coupled together.

(58) The above description of illustrated examples of the invention, including what is described in the Abstract, is not intended to be exhaustive or to limit the invention to the precise forms disclosed. While specific examples of the invention are described herein for illustrative purposes, various modifications are possible within the scope of the invention, as those skilled in the relevant art will recognize.

(59) These modifications can be made to the invention in light of the above detailed description. The terms used in the following claims should not be construed to limit the invention to the specific examples disclosed in the specification. Rather, the scope of the invention is to be determined

entirely by the following claims, which are to be construed in accordance with established doctrines of claim interpretation.

## Claims

1. A pixel cell for an image sensor, the pixel cell comprising: a first semiconductor substrate including a first side and a second side, wherein the first side is opposite the second side; a photodiode disposed within the first semiconductor substrate between the first side and the second side; and a transfer gate disposed proximate to the first side of first semiconductor substrate, wherein the transfer gate includes a planar region, wherein the first side of the first semiconductor substrate is disposed between the planar region and the photodiode, and wherein a lateral area of the photodiode is less than or equal to a lateral area of the planar region of the transfer gate.
2. The pixel cell of claim 1, wherein the transfer gate is optically aligned with the photodiode such that the planar region of the transfer gate laterally extends over the photodiode to cover an entirety of the lateral area of the photodiode when the first semiconductor substrate is viewed from the first side.
3. The pixel cell of claim 1, wherein the transfer gate further includes a vertical region extending from the planar region into the first semiconductor substrate towards the second side of the first semiconductor substrate.
4. The pixel cell of claim 3, wherein the photodiode includes a pinning region disposed proximate to the first side of the first semiconductor substrate, and wherein the vertical region of the transfer gate is disposed between the pinning region and a floating diffusion region.
5. The pixel cell of claim 3, wherein the photodiode includes a doped region of a first conductivity type opposite of a second conductivity type of the first semiconductor substrate, wherein the vertical region of the transfer gate is disposed between the planar region of the transfer gate and the doped region, wherein the lateral area of the photodiode is based on the doped region, and wherein the planar region of the transfer gate laterally extends over the first doped region of the photodiode to cover an entirety of the lateral area of the doped region when the first semiconductor substrate is viewed from the first side.
6. The pixel cell of claim 1, wherein the photodiode and the transfer gate form a first pixel included in a plurality of pixels of the pixel cell, wherein the pixel cell further comprises a deep trench isolation (DTI) structure laterally surrounding the first pixel, wherein the DTI structure extends continuously from the first side of the first semiconductor substrate to the second side of the first semiconductor substrate to physically separate the first pixel from adjacent pixels included in the plurality of pixels of the pixel cell.
7. The pixel cell of claim 6, wherein the adjacent pixels included in the pixel cell includes a second pixel adjacent to the first pixel, wherein the first pixel includes a first floating diffusion region, wherein the second pixel includes a second floating diffusion region, and wherein the DTI structure is disposed between the first floating diffusion region of the first pixel and the second floating diffusion region of the second pixel.
8. The pixel cell of claim 7, wherein the first floating diffusion region of the first pixel abuts the DTI structure, and wherein the second floating diffusion region of the second pixel abuts the DTI structure.
9. The pixel cell of claim 1, further comprising a ground contact region, an isolation region, and a floating diffusion region, each disposed within the first semiconductor substrate proximate to the first side of the first semiconductor substrate, wherein the isolation region is disposed between the ground contact region and the floating diffusion region, and wherein the photodiode, the transfer gate, the ground contact region, and the floating diffusion region collectively form a first pixel included in a plurality of pixels of the pixel cell.
10. The pixel cell of claim 9, wherein pixels included in the plurality of pixels are arranged in rows

and columns to form a pixel array, the pixels including at least the first pixel, a second pixel, a third pixel, and a fourth pixel that collectively form a two-by-two pixel array of the pixel cell, and wherein the two-by-two pixel array is mirror symmetric about a first axis.

11. The pixel cell of claim 10, wherein the two-by-two pixel array is mirror symmetric about a second axis, and wherein the second axis is orthogonal to the first axis.

12. The pixel cell of claim 10, wherein the second pixel, the third pixel, and the fourth pixel each include respective instances of the photodiode, the transfer gate, the ground contact region, and the floating diffusion region, wherein the floating diffusion region for each of the first pixel, the second pixel, the third pixel, and the fourth pixel are separated by a deep trench isolation (DTI) structure and electrically coupled together, wherein the DTI structure extends continuously from the first side of the first semiconductor substrate to the second side of the first semiconductor substrate.

13. The pixel cell of claim 9, further comprising: a second semiconductor substrate coupled to the first semiconductor substrate, wherein the second semiconductor substrate includes a pixel cell circuitry associated with the plurality of pixels of the first semiconductor substrate, and wherein pixels included in the plurality of pixels are coupled to the pixel cell circuitry on at least a per-pixel cell basis.

14. An image sensor, comprising: a pixel cell formed in or on a first semiconductor substrate, wherein the pixel cell includes a plurality of pixels, each pixel included in the plurality of pixels including: a photodiode disposed within the first semiconductor substrate between a first side and a second side of the first semiconductor substrate; a transfer gate disposed proximate to the first side of first semiconductor substrate, wherein the transfer gate includes a planar region, and wherein the first side of the first semiconductor substrate is disposed between the planar region of the transfer gate and the photodiode; and a ground contact region, an isolation region, and a floating diffusion region, each disposed within the first semiconductor substrate proximate to the first side of the first semiconductor substrate and the photodiode; and pixel cell circuitry formed in or on a second semiconductor substrate, wherein the pixel cell circuitry is coupled to the plurality of pixels on at least a per-pixel cell basis.

15. The image sensor of claim 14, wherein the isolation region is disposed between the ground contact region and the floating diffusion region for each pixel included in the plurality of pixels.

16. The image sensor of claim 14, wherein the pixel cell is mirror symmetric about a first axis.

17. The image sensor of claim 16, wherein the pixel cell is mirror symmetric about a second axis, and wherein the second axis is orthogonal to the first axis.

18. The image sensor of claim 14, wherein for each pixel included in the pixel cell, the transfer gate is optically aligned with the photodiode such that the planar region of the transfer gate laterally extends over the photodiode to cover an entirety of a lateral area of the photodiode when the first semiconductor substrate is viewed from the first side.

19. The image sensor of claim 14, wherein for each pixel included in the pixel cell, the transfer gate further includes a vertical region extending from the planar region into the first semiconductor substrate towards the second side of the first semiconductor substrate, wherein the vertical region of the transfer gate is disposed between the photodiode and the floating diffusion region.

20. The image sensor of claim 14, further comprising a deep trench isolation (DTI) structure laterally surrounding the pixel cell to physically separate the pixel cell from one or more additional pixel cells adjacent to the pixel cell, wherein the deep trench isolation structure extends continuously from the first side of the first semiconductor substrate to the second side of the first semiconductor substrate.

21. The image sensor of claim 20, wherein the DTI structure further surrounds each of the plurality of pixels included in the pixel cell to separate the plurality of pixels from one another, wherein the ground contact region, the isolation region, and the floating diffusion region are disposed between the transfer gate and the DTI structure for each pixel included in the plurality of pixels of the pixel cell.

22. A method for forming an image sensor, the method comprising: providing a first semiconductor substrate including a first side and a second side, wherein the first side is opposite the second side; forming a photodiode disposed within the first semiconductor substrate between the first side and the second side; and forming a transfer gate disposed proximate to the first side of the first semiconductor substrate, wherein the transfer gate includes a planar region, wherein the first side of the first semiconductor substrate is disposed between the planar region and the photodiode, and wherein a lateral area of the photodiode is less than or equal to a lateral area of the planar region of the transfer gate.

23. The method of claim 22, further comprising: forming a deep trench isolation structure extending continuously from the first side of the first semiconductor substrate to the second side of the first semiconductor substrate, wherein the deep trench isolation structure laterally surrounds the photodiode and the transfer gate to physically separate a pixel cell including the photodiode from one or more additional pixel cells adjacent to the pixel cell; forming at least one of a ground contact region, an isolation region, or a floating diffusion region disposed within the first semiconductor substrate proximate to the first side of the first semiconductor substrate via implantation, wherein an edge of the at least one of the ground contact region, the isolation structure, or the floating diffusion region is aligned with at least one of an edge of the planar region or an edge of the deep trench isolation structure, and wherein the forming the at least one of the ground contact region, the isolation region, or the floating diffusion region includes: forming a photoresist layer with at least one opening on the first side of the first semiconductor substrate, and wherein the at least one opening extends beyond an intended location of the ground contact region, the isolation region, or the floating diffusion region such that corners of the at least one opening do not overlap with any of the transfer gate or the intended location of the ground contact region, the isolation region, or the floating diffusion region.

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