

## Today's Photography/Yesterday's Technology @ SJICA

Looking at photography these days, it's hard not to wonder if the medium hasn't been drained of aesthetic value. For nearly two decades, big, banal, theory-driven pictures have occupied a disproportionate amount of space in galleries and museums. Yet despite this apparent hijacking, there's a quiet counterinsurgency gathering force, composed of hundreds of photographers who are turning antiquated photographic methods to surprisingly contemporary ends.

Meet the [antiquarian avant-garde](#).

Fifteen of its exponents, on view in [Exposed: Today's Photography/Yesterday's Technology](#), make the case that remarkable photographic art can still be achieved through ancient chemical formulations that hardly anyone remembers, like collodion, carbon, platinum, palladium, silver bromide and potassium bichromate. These kitchen-sink concoctions, created at photography's inception, enabled daguerreotype, calotype, wet plate albumen, ambrotype, tintype, printing out paper, cyanotype, photogravure and other forms. To put this in some kind of perspective, the SJICA bookends *Exposed*



Stephen Berkman, "Songbird and the Sharpshooter", tintype



Baron de Meyer, "Shores of Bosphorus", c. 1905, photogravure, collection of Stephen and Connie Wirtz

with two companion exhibits: one of original examples of these processes, culled from the collection of [Stephen and Connie Wirtz](#) (*Captured: Photography's Early Adopters*), and another of family snapshots (*Liz Steketee: Reconstructing Memories*) that have been digitally manipulated.

Timed to coincide with [ZERO1](#) (Sept. 16-19), San Jose's tech-savvy, multi-disciplinary biennial, these three shows strike a contrarian pose, demonstrating how so-called archaic technologies can more than hold their own against their zipperier digital counterparts.

A good way to take all this in is to start with the Wirtz collection at the back of the building and then work your way forward chronologically — through the contemporary photos in *Exposed* — and then on to Steketee's digital forgeries in the library/lounge just off the lobby.

The Wirtz pictures in *Captured* span the years 1850 to 1908 and show what photography looked like in its infancy. The trove, which remains largely out of public view, is, according to [David Pace](#), "one of the best collections I've ever seen". Pace, a professor of photography at the University of Santa Clara, is in a position to know. Several

years back he curated a show of the SF gallerists' pictures at SJICA called *Photographer Unknown*. Where the mandate then was to pluck the best of Wirtz's anonymous photos, the task this time was simply to locate strong examples of the techniques mentioned above. Despite that limitation, Pace managed to find images that reflect the collection's overall strengths: its ingenious one-of-a-kind snaps by unknown amateurs; commercial images from now-obscure professionals; and iconic pictures by famous photographers like [Frances Frith](#), whose stunningly sharp picture of an Egyptian pyramid is on view here.

Other images that stop me cold include Baron de Meyer's 1905 portrait of an exhausted girl taken in the Bosphorus; two fin de siècle aerial photographs from Italy that could have inspired Mondrian's geometric paintings; and most impressively, astronomer Max Wolf's *Star Map*, a tonally reversed shot of the night sky from 1908 where the background is grey and the stars are black. Sectioned into grids for analysis, it looks like something that might have been painted 50 years hence. There's also a rare doubled-sided portrait of a young girl. One side is hand-colored — a commercial product of little artistic value; but the original calotype on the flip side is a wondrous thing: a constellation of mottled brown hues. In 1855, when this anonymous photo was created, the calotype's inability to register shadow detail was considered a killing flaw. Today, when clinically perfect images abound, it feels fresh.

Such polarities define the history of photography. During its lifespan, which began nearly 200 years ago, tastes have swung wildly — between transparency and artistry, clarity and suggestion and between pictorial articulation and approximation.



Joy Goldkind (L to R): "Dora", "Rose", "Contest 6", 2000-2009, bromoil, hand inked

Still, it's pretty clear from these images that we are looking at historic documents — documents that, whatever their artistic merits, were taken a long, long time ago. They exist in a realm between unimaginable antiquity and nostalgia, occasionally crossing over into modernity, as with the Wolf image. Beyond that, any such certainties dissolve. *Exposed* and *Reconstructing Memory*, the two companion exhibits, toss a monkey wrench into our reflexive system of historic dead reckoning.

A good example from *Exposed* is *Bridgeport Brass Panorama*, Nathaniel Gibbon's tintype of an abandoned factory. Its tonality telegraphs antiquity while the subject — a derelict factory with busted-out windows and late-model cars at the far left — tells us the scene is current. Gibbons, though, adds a visual twist which probably never appeared in 19<sup>th</sup> century tintypes: he bends the iron panels of the triptych into concave shapes, which when combined with the interlocking geometries of the scene itself, pull us into the deepest recesses of this ultra-wide (66") tableau of industrial obsolescence. Its narrative perfectly matches content to form and materials.

So, too, do the daguerreotypes of [Binh Danh](#). In several, he recreates photos that were originally taken by the Khmer Rouge during the Cambodian genocide that followed the Vietnam War. Daguerreotypes, which date to the medium's very beginning, are often anamorphic; that is they reveal themselves only from certain

viewing angles. Danh's, which are polished to a mirror-like sheen and look more like acid-bathed etchings than photographs, never fully reveal themselves from *any* angle; all we can make out are cloudy forms and indistinct shapes. Again, media and message converge to, quite literally, actualize the fog of collective forgetting.

In his large-scale pinhole photographs of Buchenwald, the former Nazi concentration camp, Andreas Hablutzel approaches the issue of war memories from a different perspective. His soft, point-blank pictures of sites where war crimes took place appear neutral. Like the stories of [W.G. Sebald](#), the author who walked across Europe narrating the history of places where terrible or momentous events occurred, Hablutzel's pictures assume things can talk. Sometimes they do. But mostly they don't, and as a result, these images rely more on what we bring to them than on what they bring to us. Thus, their neutrality feels manipulative. (Contrast that with the deliberately nondescript approach of Luc Tuymans who, in his paintings of notorious people and places, uses erasure and blurring to demonstrate how memories of the most egregious human acts can be wiped away.)



Andreas Hablutzel, Untitled, 2001, archival pigment ink print

Elsewhere, less weighted subjects emerge. Some of the most powerful images in this show come from [Joy Goldkind](#) whose pictures of her husband – made up as a bride, nun, fortune teller and cross dresser – fly straight past their contrivances and into the fantasy world the artist and model envision. No doubt, Goldkind's background in fashion design helps with poses and props, but it doesn't explain the mesmerizing quality and physical beauty of these hand-tinted bromoil prints. That we entertain their veracity while simultaneously viewing their obvious conceits testifies to the alchemical power of photography in its nascent state, where volatile quirks of chemistry and deliberate acts of craft combined to create a heightened state of unreality that we believe in – never mind the “facts”.



Ben Nixon, “Falcon’s Den, City of Rocks”, 2009, collodion negative, silver print

[Walter Benjamin](#) wrote about the optical unconscious, by which he meant the camera's ability to see things the eye cannot. [Michael Shindler's](#) backlit tintypes – all very raw-looking portraits – demonstrate this phenomenon, showing how pictures taken with relatively short exposure times of four to five seconds can reveal an intensity of character that the mind can't detect in the same span.

Artifice played a large role in the early years of photography, particularly in portraiture where backdrops and props allowed photographers to sidestep (or at least simplify) the complexities of what we today call environmental portraiture. [Stephen Berkman's](#) elaborately staged wet plate collodion

images, of people in inexplicable situations and habitats, reference that history. They feel like headlong

dives into fantasy. But rather than lodge in memory, they register as curios, postcards, taken from a Victorian-era theme park.

Landscapes also figure prominently in the exhibition. Most of those here operate within established conventions, but they still generate interest. [Ben Nixon](#) pours wet collodion unevenly across his glass plates to produce blurry artifacts that at one time would have been considered undesirable process accidents. While he mostly plays it straight, the liquid puddles that appear around the edges of his preternaturally sharp prints give off a hallucinatory tinge – much like Sigmar Polke’s pictures of Afghani hashish smokers did in the mid-’70s. [Brian Taylor](#)’s is the most complex process on view. His forest pictures are built from four exposures layered on cyanotype-coated paper. Before each imprint, he coats the paper with a layer of gum bichromate, each mixed with a different color of pigment. This reduces his palette to a brackish brown-green that flattens the pictures, making the scenes feel both ethereal and haunted.

By contrast, the simplest, most elemental approach to landscape photography comes from [Chris McCaw](#). He allows the sun to burn holes and gashes in silver gelatin-coated paper negatives, which he uses in place of film in an 8 x 10” view camera. He records these images in full sun, but through some unexplained reversal of tonal relationships, they appear dark and burnished, like tanned hides. The effect is primal, like seeing one of [Lucio Fontana](#)’s slashed canvases.



Chris McCaw, “Sunburned GSP #277”, 2008, unique gelatin silver paper negative

In the botanical realm, it’s hard to top [Karl Blossfeldt](#) (1865-1932), but [Beth Moon](#) does a credible job. Her photographs of carnivorous plants (Venus Flytraps and the like) appear to be half organic and half otherworldly, with hermaphroditic features that could easily qualify them for a role in a [David Cronenberg](#) film. Also operating in the realm of science is [Robin Hill](#) who attempts to photographically represent a



Liz Steketeer, photos from “Reconstructed Memories”

mathematical algorithm that predicts snowflake growth. In recent years, such visualizations of data have become something of an art world trend. Problem is, they often wind up yielding very boring public art installations. Hill’s wall-sized cyanotype print has no appreciable geek factor. As the exhibition brochure explains, “The cyanotype records the quality of translucence and opacity in the material and also the distance the material is from the paper and any shadow it casts.” The result is a 3-D picture that doesn’t require special glasses. Stand close and you feel like you’re staring into an abyss.

Better living through chemistry? *Exposed* makes a convincing case. So does Liz

complement the different eras of original pictures. While her alterations won't pass a forensic test, they faithfully reproduce the look and feel of every photographic technology available to consumers throughout the past century, replete with age-appropriate fading, yellowing and cracking. No doubt, these revisions of personal history helped the artist settle a few scores, and spotting her forgeries is an engaging parlor game. If there's a larger point, it's that photography, throughout its history, has always lied and told the truth simultaneously.

Whether it does so by digital or chemical means is beside the point. Photography, like every other art form, is about realizing a vision. The pictures in these three shows do that. They stand as object lessons in what photography can be when artists are materially engaged and allowed to create — free of mind-numbing theoretical and ideological constraints.

—DAVID M. ROTH

*Exposed: Today's Photography/Yesterday's Technology; Captured: Photography's Early Adopters; and Liz Steketee: Reconstructed Memories* through September 19, 2010 @ [Institute for Contemporary Art](#), San Jose.

*Exposed* also includes works by [Linda Connor](#), [Rachel Heath](#), Kerik Kouklis and [Ron Moultrie Saunders](#).

Cover: Michael Shindler (3) all untitled, tintypes, 2010