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The Enduring Image

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The Enduring Image

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Interdisciplinary Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Artist Statement

In my work, I have chosen to pursue the antiquated, experimental, and alternative processes of photography. A digital image, a web page, an e-book all point to the current pace of a society concerned with the beauty it can access in a moment of instant gratification. It often has no regard for a process that requires personal discipline to capture a moment, a place, or an idea. I find little enjoyment in the immediate, when I can instead experience what happens when the combination of chemicals, glass, wood, and the environment turn a potential photograph into an inimitable encounter. It is through the older and more involved processes that I have been able to express my love of the moments and the places often unnoticed by the passer-by. It is in these moments when I feel the pace of the world slow, and I can think, pray, and work in a stillness unmatched by modern technology.
The Enduring Image

Introduction

I began teaching high school photography in the Fall of 2002. During that first term of teaching, I was encouraged by my colleagues to participate in a Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) course offered through Virginia Commonwealth University at the school where I taught. The content of the course was printmaking. I enjoyed the instruction and the work, and I soon found myself incorporating photography into printmaking through the use of image transfers and cyanotypes. After this course, I completed two more classes in transfer processes over the next year. I could see my work expanding and growing through photographic media, as well as drawing. I then decided to seek a graduate degree through the MIS program as a means to continue my education, provide motivation for my work, and learn about various processes that I could incorporate into my classroom.

Photography

The first person to teach me about the camera and film was my father. I loved to look at his images of Alaskan wildlife, my mother, and rows of fruit vendors in New York City. My father’s instruction and my love of painting and drawing intermingled, and I easily associated the use of the camera with other art forms. It was in undergraduate school when I decided to pursue a major in art with a concentration in photography.
During my participation in the MIS program, I have begun to realize exactly what I loved about the camera and film. I discovered that it is the unexpected outcome of photography that I find captivating. It is the personal discipline, the timing, and the anticipation of the effect of movement and light that create a unique experience. I found this experience to be more enhanced and more suspenseful when using traditional black and white film and pinhole cameras. They provide an element of surprise that simply does not exist with a digital camera and computer generated images. I am able to expose moments that often go unseen by the naked eye.

I found myself discarding my use of digital media altogether as I felt that the mystery of the unexposed image was lost using the digital camera. While reading Photography’s Antiquarian Avant-Garde, I discovered a statement made by photographer Sallie Mann (1951-). She stated:

The digital image is like ether, like vapor that never comes to ground. It simply circulates, bodiless. It has no material reality. The entire world of mechanized photography seems to me fundamentally mistaken as well, just too darned easy...You are not paying your dues. There is something that happens when you look at a potential picture and know that it is going to cost you dearly in time and energy. You have to make decisions. Collodion especially requires this discipline, this thoughtfulness. It forces you out of the time of the thing you are looking at and into the time of the picture itself.¹

Her words summarized what I had been feeling about digital media. Therefore, I devoted more of my time to the processes and techniques that would allow for a

greater margin of challenge and would require the use of darkroom printing. I felt that the pinhole camera would make for an interesting start.

**Pinhole Photography**

A pinhole camera is a camera that can be made from an enclosed container (i.e. a matchbox, an oatmeal can, a trash can). The inside is painted black and a hole the size of a pin or smaller is inserted in the container or drilled through a small piece of metal that is then inserted into the container. Film or sensitized paper is placed inside the container. A piece of black tape, board, or even the photographer's finger is used as a shutter over the pinhole to expose the film or paper to light.

This concept of the pinhole camera began with the practical use of the *camera obscura*. The term camera obscura is Latin meaning, dark room. Light coming through a small hole on a wall of a darkened room forms an inverted image of what is outside on the opposite wall. This principle was used for many purposes, including drawing aids, centuries before the invention of photography. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the camera obscura concept was adapted into a box with a lens and even a shutter, the forerunner of pinhole.

Over the last three years, I began to seek out other photographers, both historical and contemporary, who also have an admiration of or a preference for the camera obscura and other antiquated forms of photography. While reading through a copy of *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, I discovered a statement
written by da Vinci during the 16th century:

When the images of illuminated objects pass through a small round hole into a very dark room...you will see on paper all those objects in their natural shapes and colours. Who would believe that so small a space could contain the image of all the universe? O mighty process! ... Here the figures, here the colors, here all the images of every part of the universe are contracted to a point. O what a point is so marvelous!^2

I was excited to read about da Vinci's fascination with the camera obscura and learned from his notebooks that he used the camera obscura to understand the workings of the human eye, as well as a drawing aid to help him trace projected images. His enthusiasm inspired me to create pinhole images on sheet film, such as *By the Barn* (Appendix, 1). It depicts a man dressed in white, moving in front of an old barn. The man takes on a ghost-like appearance and the barn is illuminated on its left side due to the long exposure. The slight distortion of the barn is caused by the rounded curve of the pinhole.

Although I had learned about and worked with pinhole cameras made from simple cans and boxes, I soon became aware of just how many possibilities for other camera obscuras existed. I also discovered that my choice in materials and sizes altered the effect of the image on the viewer. I found that medium and large format film is my preferred means of recording pinhole images. I purchased a box pinhole camera that accepts a film size larger than 35mm and began to take images of water and light, as in *Yowell Meadow Stream* (Appendix, 2). In this particular image, the water has a soft and glowing appearance due to

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the long, thirty second exposure of the film in the box camera I used. The long exposure captured every movement of the water within the thirty seconds, creating highlights on the crests of the water, as well as the vegetation around the stream. The larger size of film also allows for a greater enlargement of the image. The larger film can also be contact printed onto paper that has been coated with forms of emulsion, such as cyanotype, thus adding to the mystery of the image.

Cyanotype is made from mixing light sensitive chemicals to create a liquid emulsion that can be painted onto specific paper and fabric. When the liquid is applied to the working surface and dried, the graphic arts film is placed on top, under glass, and the liquid emulsion is allowed to develop under the UV light of the sun. After it is rinsed and dried, the final positive image develops in blue tones as in Stoneybrooke I (Appendix, 3). I thought that the blue of the cyanotype formula was an appropriate and fitting hue for the waterfall.

The kallitype is a similar process to cyanotype but the resulting image develops in brown tones, as in Blue Ridge Window II (Appendix, 4). I began the exposure at sunset and allowed the film to receive three hours of continuous exposure. My goal was to capture both the brightness of the sun, as well as the darkness of the room after the sunset. I was excited to see the results, and I was pleasantly surprised by the amount of sunlight the curtains received, which worked to further frame the window. I first printed the image on black and white paper. It was weeks later when I decided to create a kallitype from this image in
order to emphasize the warm, inviting feel of the room, the window, and the setting sun.

As I continued to photograph with pinhole cameras, I began to incorporate pinhole media into much of my work. During a bookmaking class, I became interested in the possibilities of the altered book but soon focused my attention on altering old thrift store cameras for use as pinholes. I acquired an old medium format camera and began to change it. I took off the shutter and altered the opening of the lens to a pinhole size that would overexpose each image. I used the camera to photograph parks in and around the counties in which I lived and worked, as in Crockett Park (Appendix, 5). I also began to use other pinhole cameras made from wooden boxes, papier-mâché boxes, and metal cans. With careful metering and occasional guess work, I made many exposures with these cameras and I processed the film with great anticipation. I printed the most intriguing and mysterious images while noting mistakes in printing, exposure times, and contrast control. The mistakes became an important part of the entire experience. For example, the lighter and darker images on the roll of film from Crockett Park created inconsistencies that moved from image to image, just as I moved from space to space in the park. I felt that these mistakes in exposure gave the viewer a more accurate representation of my experience at the park such as shielding my eyes from the sun, running down a trail, and sitting beside the canoes.

Since I began to use pinhole cameras, I have been drawn to more
historical and natural themes. I find myself interested in the places and topics that captivated the early photographers, rather than the rhetoric of the post-modern photographer. As in the early photographic images of Niagara Falls, and other state parks, I continued to photograph places of geographical interest. One of my favorite public parks is the Maymont Estate in Richmond, Virginia. I photographed in the Italian and Japanese Gardens with pinhole cameras and usually printed one or two images from each roll. *Japanese Garden* (Appendix, 6) is an image that I found to be pleasing in composition and in its effects of light. The tops of the stepping stones, the water, and the plant life received the most amount of light, thus lifting the eyes of the viewer up to the top right of the image. The perspective of the stones receding into the left background balances the composition. I felt that this balance helped to recreate the tranquil feel of the pond, as well as create a more intimate setting than one may actually find in a public place.

**Wet Plate Photography**

While I have enjoyed the use of cameras without lenses, I decided to expand my exploration of alternative processes by taking a workshop on wet plate, ambrotype photography. An ambrotype is a positive photographic image on black, ruby, or clear glass that is backed with a black lacquer or a thick black paper. I have discovered that the unique qualities of wet plate chemistry result in a haunting, layered image with warm, rich values unlike any other photographic
process I have tried. As Lyle Rexer, art and photography critic, describes in *Photography’s Avant-Garde*: “To turn a purple-hued ruby ambrotype in your hand, to see that the image so complete and deep is nothing more than frost on the glass, is an eerie experience, like seeing a thought materialize.”

Part of the appeal of the ambrotype lies in the silver nitrate used to create the image embedded in collodion. The silver crystal deposits in a positive image on glass (an ambrotype) create vibrant, glowing highlight areas when backed by black, as shown in *The Writer’s Tools* (Appendix, 7). In this image, I set up a still life of apothecary bottles, a quill, a brush, and writing paper on a window sill. The image is designed to be a representation of the various tools used to create a written work. While arranging this still life, I decided to photograph a series of images dealing with the creative writing process. In the ambrotypes in this series, I included some of my handmade books, as well as myself in some of the images. I wanted to create the environment of a writer, perhaps even a poet or a musician, and the tactile and experiential things that influence the writer’s work.

This concept is continued in the image, *Writer’s Block* (Appendix, 8). This image is another in *The Writer* series. I included dried roses in the image as a classical early photographic representation of love. I also photographed myself in the image. The photograph took five minutes to expose, and I decided to move my arm halfway through the exposure. I did this to give a ghost-like appearance to my arm and to show movement in the image. I did not want to

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3 Rexer, Lyle, p. 72.
suggest something specific but rather to give the viewer a chance to conjure ideas about the writer and the objects around her. One year later, I photographed a self-portrait that included several of my handmade books, as well as writing tools. In The Writer Resumes her Work (Appendix, 9), I made the exposure outside in the grass with a very shallow depth of field so that my hands became the primary focus. Photographing outside resulted in a brighter exposure, and the image became the resolution to Writer’s Block (Appendix, 8).

The Collodion Process

The wet plate process is ideal for working with subjects of great importance to the photographer because the process itself involves so many handcrafted tools and materials. Wet plate photography is about the interaction of materials working together to create the image. In this process, I begin by cleaning, filing the edges, and polishing the glass plate. Then, I coat the plate with a carefully mixed solution of collodion. Collodion is produced by dissolving pyroxylin in a solution of alcohol and ether. During the American Civil War, collodion was used to close wounds on the skin as a type of liquid bandage that would dry in place. After the collodion is applied to the plate, I sensitize the plate in the darkroom in a solution of silver nitrate. Finally, I load the plate into a wooden wet plate holder or an adapted film holder and place it in the wooden view camera for exposure. A view camera is a large format camera with bellows between the lens and the back. The lens forms an image directly on the ground-
glass viewing screen in the back of the camera where a film or wet plate holder can be inserted for exposure.

After the exposure, the delicate developing, stopping, and fixing process is carefully achieved completely by hand. Then, the plate must be dried and varnished over an open flame. There are a vast number of problems that can occur in these stages. I find the most problematic stage to be the varnishing. If the temperature is too hot, the glass will burn or crack. If it is too cool, the varnish will not adhere smoothly. If the plate is not rotated properly during the coating, the varnish will run or clump in areas. If the varnish is not heated to the same temperature as the plate, it will leave air bubbles on the surface.

Sometimes, I incorporate the inherent problems associated with the process into the final image. In another image from *The Writer* series, 421 (Appendix, 10), there is a lighter swirl of grey tones on the left side of the image. This could be caused by an uneven application of collodion or by the longer exposure that was used to create the image. During a longer exposure, the collodion may begin to dry too soon before development. I felt that this mistake appeared as a vapor and thus, added to the ethereal quality of the rest of the objects in the image: the glass bottles, the silhouetted figure, and the light coming in from the door.

I conceptualized and photographed much of *The Writer* series when I attended a wet plate collodion workshop in Rochester, New York for additional experience credited to my MIS degree. I spent much time over the following year
adapting, building, and rebuilding a turn-of-the century camera prior to using it for wet plate photography. The time and the personal discipline required for the process far outweighs any technical problems once I see an image formed on a glass plate. Whether it is a highly precise image or an image in which the mistakes are a part of the aesthetics, the final result is worth the struggle.

The New Old Photographers

In the past three years, I have examined the work of many photographers currently working with older processes. I have found some that are an encouragement to me in my own work. One such photographer is Eric Renner (1941-). Eric Renner is a pinhole photographer who has constructed unique cameras, such as molded plaster face cameras as well as cameras with over 300 pinholes. He provides tips for exposure control, lighting, and suggestions for teachers as he serves on the advisory board for the photographic supply company Freestyle Photo. His willingness to share ideas and teach others his techniques has helped me to build better cameras and develop my own ideas for cameras. I am impressed with his tenacious pursuit of ideas, as well as his treatment of the camera as a work of art itself. This places a greater value on the photographic process from conception to completion, rather than on just the finished product.

In addition to Renner's work, there are three particular wet plate photographers whom I also find interesting. Mark and France Scully Ostermann
are a married couple who taught the wet plate technique to Sallie Mann. All three share a love of wet plate photography but work with three very distinctive styles. The Ostermanns have traveled all over the world with their portable wet plate darkroom. Sallie Mann worked out of the back of her pickup truck when photographing her collection of images entitled, *Deep South.* I was inspired by their determination to take their work into the field just as the early Civil War era photographers had done, thus identifying themselves with the preservation of the entire wet plate process.

Since the wet plate needs to be developed and fixed before it dries, the early photographers had to carry a portable darkroom (usually on their backs or on carts) with black boxes, bottles, glass plates, a camera, and chemicals. As cumbersome as it could be, this gave the photographer a means to photograph outside of the studio. The possibilities for subject matter became more extensive. Following in the same tradition, I am also continuing my own work in the field and I am building my own mobile darkroom. I have already acquired and modified equipment, such as a portable enclosed dark room with light safe walls, a silver bath tank, and a wooden view camera. With help, I have been able to make glass cleaning vises, plate holders, and glass storage boxes. I am now planning to take my portable darkroom on many adventures.

Both Sallie Mann and the Ostermann’s speak of their love of the process but both have different approaches. Sallie Mann pours the collodion quickly and embraces the swirled pours and the other flaws. Mann said of her process, “I
have never been a slave to technique... When I shoot collodion, I embrace the accidents, the serendipity of the process."⁴ Mark Ostermann is extremely precise in his method of pouring plates and strives to achieve a perfect plate, exposure, and processing. From my observations of her work, France Scully Ostermann will work both ways, often choosing an approach more like Sallie Mann when working with landscapes and using a method more precise when working with portraits or still life.

I have found that a balance between the Ostermanns' and Mann's approaches is most effective in my own work. As I practice the pouring of collodion, adjust exposure time, and use different development methods, my image quality is improving. However, I embrace many of the mistakes, as they add to the element of surprise but I am unimpressed with those that hinder the objective of the image. I also strive to maintain a high level of craftsmanship by carefully burnishing, varnishing, and housing the final ambrotypes. Although this takes much time, the result is a highly archival image that becomes a treasure to hold.

**The Image Content**

In an attempt to allow the viewer to become more personally involved in the image, I have recently begun to solder pieces of glass with ambrotypes to create small, personal boxes. Some of these boxes are empty and some contain

⁴ Rexer, Lyle, p. 81.
hand-bound books that are either blank or contain text and images. The boxes invite the viewer to touch, to look inside, and to take out the book within.

In *Biogenesis* (Appendix 11), I soldered six pieces of glass and two joints together to create a small box with an ambrotype image on the top. The ambrotype image consists of a group of broken eggshells resting on an antique scale. Inside of the box is a hand-bound book I created that consists of small images of eggs, with a progression of words on each page. Each image of the egg is slightly different and each page of the book has a word with one letter that is different from the word on the page preceding it. The text uses fourteen words to express the law that states that life can only come from other life. The word progression moves from *life* to *live* to *love* and eventually back to the word *life* again. As the viewer experiences the book and the images, he can personally identify with the stages of life in his own way.

I believe that the contents of an image and the image surface itself can be personal and even nostalgic. It is my hope that my work will be a visual representation of something valued. In one of my more recent ambrotypes entitled *Freedom* (Appendix, 12), I photographed my friend in her wedding dress. I wanted the folds of the fabric in the dress and the positioning of her hand to display a sense of anticipation and delight in what was to come. This image, while valuable to my friend and her fiancé, represents emotions and ideas that can be known by others as well. In this way, I believe I have created an image that will endure both socially and physically.
Conclusion

Through the MIS program, I have been able to learn new processes for use within the classroom and for personal enrichment. I have been exposed to new techniques and ideas, and I have been encouraged by others to pursue new photographic possibilities in my own work. I have seen my students become excited about learning both old and new processes and have been able to witness their excitement in the process. My classroom has become a combination of both the old and the new processes.

My own portable darkroom is taking shape as well and I am beginning to expose wet plate images on tin (tintypes), as well as glass. The exploration of such antiquated processes has taught me the importance of preserving these techniques so they will not become lost in the sea of modern photographic technology. Finally, I have a deep desire to teach the old processes. I would like others to have the opportunity to fall in love with the older methods as I have. I would like to encourage others to create images that become treasured pieces of their life experience. In this way, those who want to learn may be able to walk away from a class or a workshop with their own enduring image, and continue the processes that should not be forgotten.
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