

LIGHT PAPER PROCESS

Reinventing Photography

From its beginnings in experimentation by mid-nineteenth-century scientists and gentlemen of leisure, photography has been shaped by the desire to understand and explore the medium's essential materials. Taking that spirit of invention and discovery as its point of departure, this exhibition features the work of seven artists who focus their investigations on the light sensitivity and chemical processing of photographic papers, challenging us to see the medium anew. Matthew Brandt, Marco Breuer, John Chiara, Chris McCaw, Lisa Oppenheim, Alison Rossiter, and James Welling utilize an extensive array of practices to create their unique works. They may build cameras outfitted with specialized lenses or record an image on photographic paper without a camera or film; they may use expired photographic papers; they may hand coat, tone, or bathe paper in solutions that include ingredients taken from the subject photographed; they may load paper, rather than film, in the camera; or they may contact print from enlarged copy negatives using sources of light other than the enlarger. Whether created in the camera, darkroom, or studio, the images remain latent until developed, fixed, or otherwise coaxed from the paper. Trial and error contribute to an understanding of the materials and their potential, as do accident and chance.

The exhibition begins with an overview of experimental practices during the twentieth century, drawn from the Getty Museum's collection, and continues with an individual gallery dedicated to each of the seven artists. The works on view in *Light, Paper, Process* provide a glimpse into the continued interrogation and reinvention of the medium of photography by artists working today.

ALISON ROSSITER

Born 1953; lives and works in Navesink, NJ, and Manhattan

“Even though they don’t involve a camera, these are all photographs to me because they involve a light-sensitive reaction, which is the basis of photography.”

—Alison Rossiter in an interview with Virginia Heckert and Sarah Freeman, January 12, 2014

Alison Rossiter takes a minimalist approach to the materials she uses to create her photographs. She does not use a camera or film, nor does she use light. Since 2007 she has processed sheets of expired gelatin silver paper in photographic chemicals in the darkroom. Her work begins with collecting packages of commercially manufactured papers dating from 1900 onward, with a few rare examples from the nineteenth century, and is completed by the simple acts of immersing or dipping a sheet of paper in developer, or of pouring or pooling the developer on the sheet, followed by stopping and fixing the print. Her actions resuscitate the expired papers, giving them new life simply through processing.

Recognizing early on that the papers sustain two categories of images, Rossiter refers to her work in terms of “latent images,” which have already been more or less fully formed by use or neglect and must simply be developed and fixed, and “processing experiments,” which require more intervention to create images. She achieves a rich array of results, with some works suggesting the faint impressions of primitive mark-making, others resembling landscapes, and still others calling to mind mid-twentieth-century painterly abstractions.

MARCO BREUER

Born 1966; lives and works in upstate New York

“Stripping photography down to its bare essentials and eliminating the intermediate steps of standard photographic practice allows me to work in the present tense.”

—Marco Breuer in an interview with N. Elizabeth Schlatter,
www.flowjustflow.com, 2013

Working since the early 1990s without a camera or film, Marco Breuer subjects light-sensitive paper to various acts that abrade, burn, or scrape away the emulsion layer. Completely nonrepresentational, the resulting works have the immediacy of abstract drawings. Because they are made on photographic paper that has been processed with traditional darkroom chemistry either before or after his interventions, Breuer’s medium is, materially speaking, photography. Yet his “photographs” look like no others; they elicit the hues and textures of rare metals, mineral deposits, or oil spills, and display marks ranging from fine incisions and abrasions to scarlike burns and gashes.

Rejecting the traditional understanding of photography’s capacity to record the world, Breuer approaches the medium as a method of investigation. His deliberate misuse of materials and tools is “the starting point for a negotiation between the recording material, the hand, and the tool employed.” His diaristic, do-it-yourself way of working is enriched by skills gained from his study of printmaking, papermaking, and bookbinding.

JAMES WELLING

Born 1951; lives and works in Los Angeles

"I'm interested in finding new ways of applying materials to a surface. Photography is just a different way of applying material, and some of my works draw out this process." —James Welling, *James Welling: Monograph* (Aperture, 2013)

James Welling spent the first ten years of his career exploring painting, sculpture, performance art, video art, conceptual art, and installation before he committed to thinking of himself as a photographer. During the past four decades, he has explored various modalities of photography, from documentary to experimental, with and without a camera, using black-and-white, color, and Polaroid films and papers, as well as digital files and printing. His ability to incorporate such varied approaches into his practice reflects his understanding of photography as a medium that can be divided into two basic categories—images that are lens-based and those that are made without a camera.

Since 1995, when Welling moved to Los Angeles to head the photography area in the Department of Art at the University of California, Los Angeles, he has worked increasingly, though not exclusively, with color, filters, and camera-less photography, experimenting in ever more sophisticated ways to address questions of process and material specificity. Three bodies of recent work are presented here, variations on the photogram, chemigram, and printing-out process, each deriving from Welling's curiosity about what photographic materials will do.

LISA OPPENHEIM

Born 1975; lives and works in Brooklyn, NY

"My experience in film just sort of bled over to the way I work with photographs, as thinking about the material support."

—Lisa Oppenheim in an interview with Virginia Heckert and Sarah Freeman, January 13, 2014

For the past decade Lisa Oppenheim's work has demonstrated an increasingly complex and layered interest in the history and theory of photography as a medium that, more than others, "engages with the world." Her background in structural/materialist filmmaking has led her to explore the ways in which a photograph can record both its subject and the process by which it was made. This is most evident in three bodies of work dating from 2010 forward that enlist as the means of exposure the very entities depicted in images she has culled from historical archives or from the Internet. She creates enlarged negatives the size of the desired prints, then contact prints the negatives using light from the sun, the moon, or a flame. She then develops, fixes, and tones the prints in the darkroom.

Oppenheim's multipanel works merge past and present, subject and means of exposure, and notions of original and replica. The titles of two of the bodies of work on display, *Heliograms* and *Lunagrams*, combine the name of the camera-less photogram technique and the source of light by which the prints were exposed.

CHRIS McCAW

Born 1971; lives and works in Pacifica, CA

"[My photographs take] the ideas of what photography is all about to a very primal level. The sun is both the subject of the image and an active participant in the printing process. It goes back to the basics of what photography is: writing with light."

—Chris McCaw, *Los Angeles Times*, May 25, 2008

Chris McCaw establishes an immediate, visceral relationship between his subject—the sun—and his process—unique paper negatives loaded directly into the camera. The photographs in his *Sunburn* series, begun in 2006, record the sun's movement, which literally sears its path into photographic paper in the form of dots, lines, or arcs, depending on its position, the weather conditions, and the length of the exposure(s).

McCaw uses customized cameras outfitted with vintage military lenses that he points directly at the sun. The lenses function like magnifying glasses that intensify the sun's light so that it burns through the emulsion layer and paper base, leaving behind single marks and solarized passages. He uses expired gelatin silver papers from the 1970s and 1980s, testing each to determine its "threshold for solarization." Ranging from 4 x 5 inch sheets to rolls 40 inches wide, the size of the paper determines the size of the camera he uses. McCaw's heavy equipment and use of his van as a paper-changing room with safelight conditions reintroduces the arduousness of nineteenth-century landscape photography into his practice.

JOHN CHIARA

Born 1971; lives and works in San Francisco, CA

"I hope they touch on memory—not a longing type of memory...a visual memory, a personal narrative, a memory of place."

—John Chiara in an interview with Kim Bennett, articlejournal.net, 2007

John Chiara's large-scale color prints convey a hands-on, rather than a mechanized, aesthetic. He works with custom-built cameras that he loads with photographic paper instead of film negatives. He cuts the paper in the dark and affixes it with tape inside the camera. His "Big Camera" can accommodate sheets of paper measuring 50 x 80 inches and is transported on a flatbed trailer hitched to his SUV. A makeshift system allows him to process the color paper himself by pouring chemicals into a six-foot-long section of PVC sewer pipe, sealing the tube, and then rolling it back and forth on the floor. Irregular streaks and drips characterize his prints, as do areas of overexposure and underexposure, flare from light leaks, and unevenly saturated colors.

The subjects of Chiara's prints for the past decade have been both uninhabited landscapes and the built environment. While neither grand nor iconic, the vistas he selects nonetheless reveal the essential character of the area's natural and man-made elements and, often, where they converge. The result of careful observation, previsualization, and a sound technical understanding of craft, Chiara's images are imbued with a sense of place.

MATTHEW BRANDT

Born 1982; lives and works in Los Angeles, CA

“Instead of taking your image, can I take some of your dust?”

—Matthew Brandt in an interview with Virginia Heckert and Sarah Freeman, February 28, 2014

Matthew Brandt has created diverse bodies of work, some of which are realized with photographic means and others that are more tangentially related to photographic images, techniques, or ideas. He may begin with a photograph that he has made with a 4 x 5 inch view camera, a digital camera, or his iPhone, one that he has sourced from archives in public libraries, or one that he has clicked and dragged from eBay. The origin of the image is less important than the way in which he thinks it through as an object. His fascination with early photographic processes has led him to experiment with salted paper prints, gum bichromate prints, and heliographs. He also uses commercially available chromogenic paper and expired Polaroid film.

Brandt's interest in forms of representation that are both photographic-visual and physical-material has led him to bring the two together, incorporating physical elements from his subjects into his photographic representations of them. These relationships are always conceptually grounded, often in response to social and environmental issues. Guided by a sense of wonder, Brandt's fearless, often playful exploration of subjects, materials, and processes reinvigorates the medium of photography.

INTERROGATING THE MEDIUM

"This century belongs to light. Photography is the first means of giving tangible shape to light." —László Moholy-Nagy, "Unprecedented Photography" (1927), reprinted in *Photography in the Modern Era* (Aperture, 1989)

The spirit of invention and discovery that characterized photography's early years continued into the twentieth century. Photography had gained widespread acceptance as a mechanical medium capable of expanding the way we view the world, and many practitioners were intent on capturing the dynamism of modern life with the camera. Others turned to the darkroom as a laboratory for experimentation, revisiting techniques that had been discovered earlier, such as camera-less photograms, or inventing new techniques, such as chemigrams. The first is achieved by placing objects directly onto light-sensitized paper, exposing the paper to light, then developing and fixing; the second by applying chemicals and other substances selectively to light-sensitized paper, then exposing to light or to further chemical development. Still others harnessed photography's capacity to record light by transforming ordinary objects into bold, abstract compositions or utilizing the technique of solarization, the process of flashing the negative or print with light during development, to create a partial reversal of tonal values and imbue the images with mystery.

Many of the photographers whose work is on display in this gallery were sources of inspiration for the contemporary artists featured in the exhibition.

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