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Dreaming in Analog:
The marriage of vintage photographic process and the contemporary world.

By
Lynn M. Lee

There is something artistic about the growth of photography over the past decade even if most of the images produced are not necessarily art-worthy. It is awe-inspiring. With an estimated 375 billion photographs taken every year, this once-promising, democratic and fact-based art form seems to be in a crisis of sorts. Images numbering into the billions per year are the white noise of a culture of people very interested in sharing everything about themselves and their interests in any way that they can and with whoever will look. The way we view the world and each other has been altered. It is fast, cheap and there is little commitment necessary in taking and posting digital images on blogs or social networking sites. The over-exposure results in popular culture familiarity with images once reserved for an audience that studied art history or visited galleries. In the midst of all of this technology are art, professional and casual photographers that are returning to film...slow, unreliable, quirky and mysterious film. Analog is still with us.

Now, with the digital age upon us, it is suggested that the vast possibilities of digital reduce the necessity or usefulness of analog photography. I believe it is possible that the very limitations of analog slow us down and help us to know our images better. Having a finite number of images on roll or sheet film causes the photographer to think more carefully; select more slowly. There is a sort of reverence in working this way. Photographer Ian Rhymer is working with huge collodian images on polished and blackened metal. Images that he captures in a van he has turned into a camera. He estimates that every click of the shutter costs him around \$500.

(<http://vimeo.com/39578584>) Careful reverence indeed!

Sculptor Alberto Giacometti once said "My view of the world was a photographic view, like I believe that it is for almost everybody, no? One never sees things; one always sees them through a screen." (Ritchin, p.) If I understand Giacometti, then simply *seeing* results in an image captured. How we interpret and express that image is bound up in our own personal and cultural histories. Things we have been exposed to in our past begin to tell the story for us even before we realize we are coming to understand the story at all. Photography has a strong power to direct our thoughts toward perceived truths. Stories seem to become real just because we believe in the images.

Black and white photographs often instill a deeper layer of trust in the viewer than color. I like what Fred Ritchin says in *After Photography* about analog emanating "from wind and

wood and trees, the world of the palpable". (Ritchin, p. 17) The world of the real... Regard photographer Pavel Maria Smejkal's FATESCAPES. She, like Sherri Levine and others before her, appropriates black and white images taken by other photographers. Smejkal's images of war and devastation, some from a century ago, show us the original photos' familiar landscapes with all of the human figures removed. Had we not seen the original photograph taken by Nick Ut for the Associated Press, the truth of Smejkal's photograph, *Vietnam*, would not even come into question. It is a landscape that actually existed just like this in 1972. At the exact moment this photo was actually taken by



Pavel Maria Smejkal, 1972, *Vietnam*, 2009

Ut, there just happened to be injured and terrified people running down the road. Like paparazzi photographs, the graininess and slight soft focus actually adds an element of validity or integrity to the image. Appropriation and digital manipulation allows the artist to show us this landscape with a fresh vision. Here, we are to call upon our memories to fill in the empty spaces of a familiar landscape with what we know to have been there. Smejkal is a photographer who had no reason to use a camera for her imagery. She did not have to visit the place where the photograph was taken. She only had to see, like Giacometti, not necessarily through a screen but *on* one.

Conceptual artists today work in many different combinations of mediums and very often one of the components is something that seems very much like photography. But does a photographic work, as Ritchin asks, need to have, as part of its make-up, the use of a camera or some type of lens? (Ritchin, p.30) Does there need to be something in front of that lens that gets transferred onto some sort of film or sensor? In my work, *de-constructed spaces*, I use no camera; I use no lens. It is space imagined. It is created. It is a reality that never could be.

I choose to explore the spaces in iconic paintings and re-represent them as either blueprint drawings or, as I will discuss here, contact prints made from hand made paper negatives. The whole process is very photographic in nature yet no camera is ever used. The texture of the paper negative that shows up in the finished print echoes both the grain structure of silver gelatin prints made from a negative as well as the look of Henry Fox Talbott's calotype images of the 1800's. The vision is both familiar and new. As we see the empty room where the Last Supper was represented by DaVinci, we recall the figures; almost allowing them to come alive in motion, assuming their places at the table. The stillness in this image...is it before, or is it after?



Lynn Lee, *Paper Negative Contact Print after DaVinci's Last Supper*, Gelatin silver print.

My work is not fooling anybody into believing that they are real images of real places. I have never been to the places in my photographs and yet the fact that they are fuzzy black and white silver prints can almost serve to convince me that I *have* been there. I have spent a lot of time "in" those spaces. Their familiarity, like seeing family photographs of events that happened before we were born, connects us to a reality we only know through the photograph. They are a perceived truth; historically accurate but personally removed.

With the internet's extensive cache of information, access to history, imagery and opinions is readily available to people worldwide. My work, because of the common reproduction of iconic artwork, is easily recognizable as something familiar. Viewers often sense a feeling of déjà vu, experiencing a familiar twinge they sometimes can't quite put their finger on. Here, popular technology plays an active role in a photographic project that uses no contemporary technology in its production. Creating the negatives by carefully cutting and layering shapes of paper gave me time to truly explore the space in the paintings. I noticed things I never would have considered had I photographed the painting in a fraction of a second. Yet, we often take little more time than it takes to snap a picture when looking at a painting that took hours, months or even years to complete. However, without the ability to capture things photographically in a fraction of a second, we would miss many details in life that our eyes aren't quite quick enough to grasp. It is a compliment of one to another. Technology assists art that looks anew at things made visible by technology.

I remember being told that "there is no original [new] thought" by photography professor Susan Ressler in a history of photography class. Clement Cheroux, curator at the Pompidou Centre / Musée National d'Art Moderne, in a recent manifesto entitled *From Here On* suggested that the issue is one not of newness [or originality], but of intensity. Artwork that causes us to take a new look at something familiar calls for this intensity. It is what creates the visual tension between the image and the viewer, drawing them into its lair. In order to accomplish this, photographers today seem to be ever-expanding the idea of what, exactly, *is* photographic art. I went through graduate school in photography without ever using a camera but did print images in the darkroom. Others work in video or construct new, imagined spaces within software programs. Sometimes the base images are appropriated from some of the billions of images available on the internet.

Currently there is a trend to return to film. Is it a fad? Just hype? Cell phones can, with a click of a button, take an image that appears as if it was shot on vintage film. Many desire the look...at least for now...of the old film. Artists and amateur photographers alike are purchasing newly marketed Diana, Holga, or Lomo cameras in both 35mm and 120 film formats. Users are willing to pay the extra cost for film and development. The anticipation of waiting to see what the film reveals is exciting and addicting.

Even the Polaroid is making a comeback with programs like the Impossible Project (<http://www.the-impossible-project.com/>) which launched in an old Polaroid factory in the Netherlands in 2008. Their website literally states that the future is analog. Currently they are trying to raise money to fund a new project...a machine that captures images from iPhones and processes them and prints them as Impossible instant prints (their version of Polaroid). Andy Hancock, a photographer for Sports Illustrated, recently started working with a 4x5 view camera and is shooting portraits of major athletes onto instant film that creates a negative as well as an instant image. He then scans the negatives at a high resolution, and presents them for publication. It is a marriage, again, of vintage process and contemporary technology. He has purchased some of his film through online sources such as eBay and Craig's List. When these reserves of Polaroid film run dry, owners of instant cameras will be able to purchase new film from Impossible. When I asked Andy why he chose to undertake a project like this he said, very simply, "I wanted to slow down". This is understandable when he has just finished editing over 3,000 photographs digitally shot for a Sports Illustrated assignment.

Where do we go from here? I'd like to think we could step back and slow down. Immerse ourselves in our art and its process. I don't see that happening. Hopefully analog will always exist as a vintage process embraced by a nostalgic few. With our demand for speed, the immediate gratification of capturing, manipulating and sharing digital images has too big a hold on us. Think of the clamps that used to hold the heads of the portrait sitters in the early years of photography...how the clamps controlled their ability to move while they waited for their portrait to be exposed onto the film. Now we sit at computers and spend countless hours with our head in a steady position, viewing and working with images that were made with incredible speed and almost without effort. It seems the medium of photography is still controlling us; holding us in a position now to view and manipulate images rather than to capture them.

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