

ARTFORUM

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“Light, Paper, Process: Reinventing Photography”

J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM

“Light, Paper, Process: Reinventing Photography” marks another signpost in the ongoing debate about the nature of photography in the wake of the digital turn. The show, which follows neatly on the heels of “What Is a Photograph?,” Carol Squires’s 2014 exhibition at New York’s International Center of Photography (which focused on experimental photographic practices going back to the 1970s), was organized by Getty curator Virginia Heckert, who has mobilized her institution’s mighty resources to effectively broaden and deepen our understanding of the historical and technical underpinnings of contemporary photography. The tightly focused exhibition, complemented by a selection of precedent-setting photographs from the museum’s collection, highlighted seven exemplary artists, all living and working in the US and spanning multiple generations—James Welling, Alison Rossiter, Marco Breuer, Chris McCaw, John Chiara, Lisa Oppenheim, and Matthew Brandt—whose photographic practices test the physical attributes of photochemical processing at a time when this means of image generation threatens to disappear from the photographic landscape.

The exhibition thus proposes a highly *material* conception of photography, underscored by the catalogue’s inclusion of technical expositions from Getty conservators Sarah Freeman and Marc Harnly. It additionally supplants the common notion of the photograph as an image composed according to the photographer’s discerning eye, privileging instead an almost retrogressive notion of the photograph that calls upon viewers to imagine artists experimentally groping around in the darkroom, mucking up papers and chemicals to unintended results on their way to becoming masters of their own unique, self-invented processes.

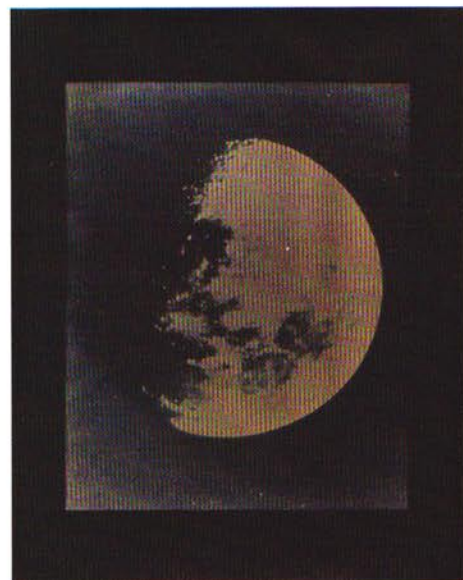
Upon entering the exhibition hall, visitors must walk through a section of photograms, light abstractions, and diverse forms of cameraless photography from across the twentieth century by, among others, Christian Schad, Man Ray, Edmund Teske, László Moholy-Nagy, Chargesheimer (a revelation), Robert Heineken, and Henry Holmes Smith. Most of these works are framed under mats such that the edges of the photographic paper are obscured, all the better to present the photograph as pure image. In contrast, the vast majority of contemporary works are mounted floating in frames, all the better to be seen as paper objects. Indeed, of the exhibition’s three themes (announced in the title), particular attention seems to have been paid to photographic paper. Featured first after the historic prints is Rossiter’s work, typically developed from a personal archive of expired commercially

manufactured photo paper, vintage packages of which are displayed nearby. There are examples of her “found photograms,” revealing previously invisible traces of fingerprints, mold, and abrasions captured on the salvaged paper, as well as of her equally captivating quasi-figurative abstractions created through skilled application of photo-processing chemicals.

Other practices on display literalize in poetic ways the very definition of photography as light-writing, achieving modes of site-specific imagemaking that go well beyond the Barthesian “that has been” to index the photograph even more tightly to its place and time of capture. McCaw, who, like Rossiter, works with vintage papers, uses a custom-built camera that functions like a magnifying glass in that, at the same time that it projects images of Northern Californian landscapes directly onto light-sensitive surfaces, it sears the photo paper with sunburned streaks. Oppenheim’s ghostly heliograms and lunagrams on view are reproductions of nineteenth-century photographs of the sun and moon, developed by way of those very light sources and then treated with shimmering metallic tones. Brandt’s visually arresting yet conceptually flat-footed chromogenic prints of Rainbow Lake, Wyoming, are soaked in water drawn from that site. The most radically process-oriented works, mainly by Welling, Breuer, and Chiara, embrace effects one typically encounters only in cast-off test prints: chemical drips and splashes, buckled and scratched paper, unevenly cut edges, and general evidence of handling. In the case of Breuer’s burned, scratched, folded, and abraded works, physical treatment verges on the abusive.

Again and again, the didactics and catalogue texts for “Light, Paper, Process” compare artists’ processes and works to abstract painting, from Russian Suprematism to Color Field, with many of the artists themselves appealing to a language of essentials, going back to the basics, and working in the present. If this exhibition is indeed indicative of the current discourse of fine-art photography, this dialogue remains in the thrall of a high-modernist logic in which analog processing, far from being displaced, is alive and well. And like contemporary painting in the wake of its many (albeit merely conceptual) ends, photography too, it seems, will continue to be “reinvented” by a supremely devoted sect of practitioners.

—Natilee Harren



Lisa Oppenheim.
Lunagrams #5. 2010.
toned gelatin silver
print, 19 3/4 × 15 3/4".
From “Light, Paper,
Process: Reinventing
Photography.”