

Chris McCaw

Sunburn

— Text by Allie Haeusslein

In 1826, French inventor Nicéphore Niépce created the earliest known photograph made by a camera—a view from the upstairs window of his house—an exciting development from his ‘extensive research on the manner of fixing the image of objects by the action of light...’ He termed the work a heliograph, or ‘sun drawing.’ With his *Sunburn* works, Chris McCaw references the birth of photography by combining the medium’s most essential elements—light, lens and time—to create ethereal photographs that image the sun’s movement across the sky.

Through years of experimentation and refinement, McCaw has developed an elegantly simple process and set of tools. He explains, ‘the principle is the same as using a magnifying glass to burn a hole in a leaf.’ His hand-built cameras of sizes of up to 30×40 inches are equipped with powerful military optics that flood the camera with light. McCaw creates ‘direct positive’ images in-camera—with no intervening negatives—by directly shooting onto expired silver gelatin paper. Extended exposures, ranging from several hours to over three days in length, deliberately overexpose the paper, producing solarized, otherworldly landscape pictures. The intensity of the sunlight can burn the paper’s surface, leaving behind beautiful traces embodying blends of fragility and strength, combined with creation and destruction; results range from precise, minimalist crescents to violent, sculptural gashes.

A sophisticated understanding of material, timing, and environment is evident in the remarkable control evinced in these photographs. This is epitomized by a monumental work like *Sunburned*



p. 101

GSP#492 (2013) made in the Arctic Circle. Here, McCaw seamlessly stitches together 13 pictures of the sun’s undulating path over 24 hours. Such precise alignment requires diligent monitoring of the sun’s movement and quick work under pressure. Even under more straightforward circumstances, McCaw’s practice verges on performative, his careful movements choreographed in response to his materials, equipment and weather. Despite the complexity of this approach, these photographs retain a sense of effortlessness and quietude—an amalgam of abstraction and landscape.

McCaw’s work lies in the tradition of distinguished predecessors such as revered landscape photographer Carleton Watkins. In 1861, Watkins hired a cabinetmaker to create a camera capable of accepting 18×22 inches plate negatives to document the vistas of Yosemite Valley. Watkins prevailed despite the

many obstacles inherent to picturing the landscape, from the technical (i.e. his camera) to the practical (i.e. trekking through backwoods carrying roughly 2000lbs of glass plates, chemicals, and equipment). Despite the 150 year separation, McCaw’s challenges have been remarkably similar. He has traveled extensively to remote locations from the Galpagos to Alaska, chasing eclipses, equinoxes, and other extraordinary solar events with abundant equipment in tow. If, as curator Maria Hambourg writes, ‘Watkins made most of his great pictures when he enjoyed the challenge of devising a shape for the previously undepicted,’ the same can be said for McCaw who, against formidable odds, has learned to depict one of the most difficult subjects to articulate and capture in motion in a photograph—the sun.

In 2009, photographer Richard Benson suggested, ‘[t]raditional chemical photography is an extraordinarily flexible field, which, even as it disappears, has hardly been touched.’ Through the use of traditional photographic materials and a working process deeply rooted in analogue technology, McCaw’s practice suggests the continued vitality of these tools. In many cases, McCaw’s approach and mentality aligns him more strongly with his nineteenth-century predecessors—equal parts adventurers, scientists, and artists—than with his contemporaries. He extends this lineage into the twenty-first century, relishing the endless challenges wrought by the unique physical realities of his practice and his limitless curiosity about the medium’s possibilities.

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