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In Huntington, an Exhibition of Pioneering Photography Through the Ages

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By Jane L. Levere

"Modern Alchemy," a small gem of an exhibition at the Heckscher Museum of Art in Huntington, is a good reminder that experimental photography did not begin in the age of the digital camera, although technology has certainly helped it evolve. A selection of diverse images, accompanied by thorough explanations of how various photographers worked, starting with Man Ray in the 1930s, supports this idea.

"Today, with digital photography and the iPhone, we're inundated with images all day long," said Lisa Chalif, curator of the Heckscher, who began putting the show together about 12 months ago after pondering it for several years. The process, she said, was fun but also quite a challenge. "There's so much experimental photography," she said. "How do you define the term?"

The word "photography" comes from the Greek "photos," for light, and "graphos," for writing. The show traces the evolution of photography, beginning with the invention of the daguerreotype in 1839, which resulted in 19th-century efforts to shorten exposure times and streamline the process. In the early 20th century, there was "a remarkable exploration of photographic image-making, in keeping with the experimental, modernist aesthetic that influenced all the arts," wall text at the exhibition says.

Enter Man Ray, represented here by images from his portfolio "Électricité." It was commissioned in 1931 by a Paris electric company to promote domestic uses of electricity, and three photos from it are part of the Heckscher's permanent collection. In "Cuisine (Kitchen)," a photogram — a photographic image made without a camera — of a coil is superimposed on an image of a roasted chicken on rice.

Among the other images in the first of the exhibition's two galleries — there are 54 works by 37 photographers — are three by Jerry Uelsmann and two by his wife, Maggie Taylor. Mr. Uelsmann constructs his images from layers of multiple negatives. His "Undiscovered Self" (1999) consists of layered photos of a nude woman holding up a ghostly image of herself. One of Ms. Taylor's color photos, "Small Boat Waiting" (2012) seems as though it could have been made by the Belgian surrealist painter René Magritte, had he been a photographer. It depicts a rowboat in a lake that mirrors the snowy clouds in the scene's bright blue sky, while the shore is lined with mysterious, dark buildings. Ms. Taylor uses a flatbed scanner, a computer and Photoshop to manipulate 19th-century photographs and prints, as well as her own photographs, into images like this.

Another photographer featured in the first gallery, Dan Burkholder, takes pictures with his iPhone and then prints them on vellum, a translucent, parchment-like paper; the back of one in this show is painted with gold leaf, creating an ethereal glow. Subjects range from rowboats in Central Park to hay bales in Tuscany.

The first gallery also contains a photograph and a video by the Swiss photographer Andreas Rentsch, who lives in Huntington and has conducted workshops at the Heckscher. A 2007 photo from his "Entangled With Justice" series — photographs of Iraqi prisoners being tortured at Abu Ghraib — features images he took with a 4-inch-by-5-inch Polaroid camera and later manipulated. His video, "The Wanderer," was compiled from 2,600 still images, each made with a digital camera equipped with a pinhole lens.

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Many works in the second gallery are larger than those in the first. Perhaps the most striking is Mariah Robertson's "222," a unique color print on a full roll of photographic paper that measures 100 feet long and is festooned over rods hanging from the gallery's ceiling and on a low platform on the floor. To create works like this, Ms. Robertson wears a hazardous-material suit and a special breathing apparatus and then pours and sprays developers and fixer directly onto the paper; the interaction of these chemicals — a chance-based process — morphs into colorful, magical, abstract patterns of color. The exhibition describes "222" as a "hybrid of photography, sculpture and installation, challenging our traditional approach to viewing a photograph."

Fittingly, in "Camera Obscura: The Cloisters at Lacock Abbey" (2003), Abelardo Morell uses the optics of the oldest known camera, the camera obscura, to create a homage to William Henry Fox Talbot, one of the earliest photographers. Talbot lived at Lacock Abbey, in Wiltshire, England, in the early 19th century and conducted some of his first photographic experiments there.

Damion Berger, a contemporary British photographer, creates a different kind of magic, shooting pyrotechnic celebrations around the world for his "Black Powder" series, which includes "Fiac I, Jardin des Tuileries, Paris" (2009). Mr. Berger uses a large-format camera with the lens stopped to its smallest aperture; exposures timed in sync with each fireworks launch record the paths of multiple bursts on a single negative.

"Photography has a broad array of aesthetics and ways you can relate to the world," Mr. Uelsmann said from his studio in Gainesville, Fla., adding that he appreciates "these kinds of exhibits that celebrate the fact that photography is not a competitive sport."

To Mr. Burkholder, what matters most is the actual photograph, not the technique used. "No one cares how hard you work to take your photograph," he said from his studio in Palenville, N.Y. "All they care about is if the final print takes your breath away."

"Modern Alchemy: Experiments in Photography" is at the Heckscher Museum of Art, 2 Prime Avenue, Huntington, through March 15. A version of this article appears in print on February 15, 2015, on page L19 of the New York edition with the headline: Experiments in Images.