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Getty Photo Show Features Works Made From Blood, Sweat and Tears

By Jordan Riefe
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When we think of photography, we naturally think of cameras and lenses. But as far back as Joseph Nicéphore Niépce's 1826 heliograph of the view outside his window, there have been experimental artists who worked without usual tools of the trade. Instead, they exposed a variety of chromogenic surfaces to light, and experimented with chemicals to tease out stunning images and patterns.

"We were all educated to photograph reality and print, reproduce it as best you can. It's a paint-by-numbers idea," artist Chris McCaw tells *The Hollywood Reporter*. He uses the sun's rays to burn its image into his photos, just as fellow artist Lisa Oppenheim uses sunlight to make heliograms of the sun, exposing photo paper to the sky for moments at a time. Matthew Brandt connects his subject to his work by using dust from fallen buildings to re-create archival images of those buildings. He also uses lake water to develop images of a lake, and breast milk from a mother to form an image of her baby son. They are just three of the seven pioneering artists featured in "Light, Paper, Process: Reinventing Photography," at the Getty through Sept. 6.

"I don't think it's accidental, and I don't think it's ironic that the interest in this increased since the digital world's become what it is. In the digital world, you can manipulate anything in any way you want," says Getty director Timothy Potts about the show.

As accustomed as we've become to doctored imagery, most of these artists remain strictly analog, using digital technology only to find images on the Internet to manipulate through printing, or to find rare photo paper that's no longer on the market. McCaw's work requires a specific type of paper that solarizes (reverses from a negative to positive image) when overexposed. In a wooden box the size of a Mini Cooper, he spreads a sheet of paper measuring 40-by-30 inches, and directs light on it through a lens. The box fills with smoke as the sun burns a line into the paper, tracing its trajectory across the sky.

"The smoke's billowing out. It's this real physical thing. It's like shooting in fog," he says about working with his homemade camera obscura. The end result could be characterized as a self-portrait of the sun. As it creates the image, it destroys it at the same time.

The same could be said of Oppenheim's Heliogram series, which began with placing a glass image of the sun (dating from 1876) atop a sheet of gelatin silver paper in a light-tight box. She then removed the lid for a few seconds, exposing the negative at various intervals throughout the day. "I was thinking of kilns and thinking of fire as a destructive force and a regenerative force that, in this case, makes ceramics or photographs," Oppenheim explains.

Brandt is the only artist in the group you might see with a camera in his hand. He uses images taken from the Internet, his iPhone, eBay or even a Polaroid as his starting point. For his Mathers Department Store, Pasadena, 1971, he took an archival image of a structure being demolished, and then reprinted it using dust collected from the structure's former location (now an AT&T parking garage), which incorporated into his gum bichromate print.

The process stems from Brandt's experiments with salt paper printing (dating to 1839), when the tears of a despondent friend inspired him to pursue a direct connection between subject and photo. Collecting his friend's tears, he introduced them into the printing process, knowing that their salt content would substitute for the usual saline solution.

"This was actually a bit of a surprise when this first worked. But I developed it and then it worked and I knew I was on to something, basically developing a kind of typology of fluids," he says, noting that all bodily fluids containing salt are usable in the process. He went on to use semen, blood, saliva, everything but spinal fluid.

An alumnus of the MFA program at UCLA, Brandt studied under another artist in the show, James Welling, whose work with developer and fixer on chromogenic paper yields compelling studies in tone and texture. When he began his career in the '70s, studying under artists like John Baldessari, he was bored with experimental photography. But it soon became his chosen form of expression.

"You can make a lot more interesting mistakes with analog photography than with digital," says Welling. "You can still do amazing things using digital photography, but it doesn't have the mistake of pulling it out of the trash can and going, 'This is pretty interesting.'"