
Assembly: Eight Emerging Photographers From Southern California

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ASSEMBLY presents recent work by eight significant photographers—Nicole Belle, Matthew Brandt, Peter Holzhauer, Whitney Hubbs, Matt Lipps, Joey Lehman Morris, Asha Schecter, and Augusta Wood—who have emerged from the Southern California region in the last decade. Approaching the making of photo-based arts in a number of different ways, they create work that both reflects the cultural heritage of the region as well as suggests important trends in current American photographic practice.

Over its relatively short course, the cultural history of Southern California has been one of ongoing dialogue between utopian ideals and apocalyptic apprehension—the boosterism of the “end of the road” state, heralded for its promise and abundance, in tension with concerns about the fragility of its natural and built environment.

Photographers working in Southern California have long responded to its exceptional physical terrain, as well as the presence of its entertainment industry with the liminal lure of image sundered from reality to generate a dream realm for consumption. The region’s artistic output in particular has been marked by an emphasis on the materiality of production and innovative attention to conceptual experiment, supported by a strong and sustained academic network.

Building upon a photographic tradition drawn alternately to the region’s daylight or to its klieg light, the photographers assembled here reckon with the radical changes now posed by digital production and emerging social media. In diverse and highly personal ways, their work suggests common interests in examining the physical make-up, presentation, and dissemination of photo-based art; a greater acceptance of the mediated experience a photo-driven world offers for the formation of contemporary identity; and a greater interest in the possibilities for curating one’s own understanding of the world. Some of the photographers revisit the inherent fragility and provisional materiality of historic photographic processes, while others engage the indexical possibilities of performance—self, appropriated image, altered environment—to open new realms of attention and meaning. All engage, in various ways, with the relationship of memory to the formation of personal experience and understanding. In total, the assembled achievements of these eight photographers do not offer any

Matthew Brandt

The desire to create new meanings through an emphasis on the physical properties of photographic production is vividly present in the work of Matthew Brandt. His series

Lakes and Reservoirs (2006–2008) suggests the lengths the artist will go in his investigation. Photographing water bodies in the western United States, Brandt has soaked each chromogenic print in the water of its depicted subject for varying times, from days to weeks to months. He monitors the soaking prints until the breakdown of color material achieves a desired, unique look. By emphasizing the materiality of the print—not as a finely finished, indexical record of a subject, but rather as one that is as much at the mercy of physical forces as any other object in the world—Brandt embraces the anticipation of decay. Underscoring the transformative properties of the photographic registration itself, Brandt writes, “When a photograph becomes more blurred or scratched, an invisible veil or screen emerges between viewer and subject. This veil, which is always present but conventionally repressed, is allowed to breathe in my work.”¹ If photographers once sought solace in the landscape as a place where nature’s eternal processes reside, Brandt focuses on a more immediate presence in the photographic production itself. “I often leave prints out in the sun, or buried in the soil, simply to see how they change. [Because] many of my works are made with non-archival materials, the outcome of their passages is still undetermined. They exist in a natural system of decay and transformation.” Exploring the critical notion of “aura” elicited by photographic reproduction, Brandt suggests that “using organic material helps highlight a uniqueness that is often lost in the industrial gloss of photography.”² By embracing their deterioration, Brandt thus reclaims the uniqueness of his photographic works.

Eschewing contemporary conventions of digital printing, Brandt returns to more unpredictable historical processes. Rather than emphasizing the interaction with light as a fundamental component of the photographic process, his use of such processes as salted paper printing and gum bichromate (an archaic color process typically pigmented with watercolor and valued for its density) serves to highlight the role of liquids in photographic printing. “Liquid is essential for all forms of life. It reflects a particular shapeless freedom with a multitude of transformational properties, as water to ice, milk to cheese, or metal to photograph.”³ Such an interest in the evolution of photographic printing necessarily engages with history. Brandt’s interest as a young artist in reckoning with decay as an inherent component of transformation is notable. He suggests that this awareness comes from his grappling with the Buddhist beliefs he was exposed to in childhood.

In still another series, Brandt has explored the material process by adding residue drawn from the subjects he depicts in his photographs. In *North, East, South, West* (2007), Brandt added dust collected from the high-rise office buildings seen in his images; the dust thus served as the pigment base for the representation of its source. “In essence, the building’s dust was used to portray its image,” he says.⁴ For his image *Bees and Butterfly* (2007), Brandt incorporated the grounded up remains of twenty-three dead bees and a butterfly he found washed up onshore. A recent series of

1
Matthew Brandt,
Artist Statement, 2008.
2
Ibid.
3
Ibid.
4
Ibid.

portraits similarly employs liquids that are uniquely related to its individual subjects. *Dennis* (2007) depicts a prostrate infant; the five by five-inch image was printed on salt paper with the aid of his mother's breast milk. Another portrait is even smaller, its poignantly miniature size dictated by the use of its subject's tears for its printing. In all of his work, Brandt discovers anew that from the limitations of the physical world emerge bountiful possibilities for generation.