



ARTnews

Expired Photo Materials Find New Life in Contemporary Photography

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By Rebecca Robertson

"I woke up one day and thought, 'I should have been a conservator,'" says photographer Alison Rossiter. "I thought, 'Things are disappearing, and I want to know about them.'"

That was in 2003, and the silver gelatin photo materials Rossiter had used since the 1970s were beginning to disappear. Rather than changing careers, Rossiter volunteered at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's photo conservation lab, where she learned everything she could about the history and composition of light-sensitive paper and film. In her own work, she began making photograms with old sheet film that she bought on eBay. One order contained a bonus: a box of Eastman Kodak Ektachrome paper that had expired in 1946. Running a few sheets through her darkroom chemistry, Rossiter was astonished to find that the paper, damaged by time and unusable for making regular prints, was instantly compelling when she finished developing it.

"It looked to me like a graphite drawing," Rossiter says in her Manhattan studio. "A completely finished abstract drawing. I couldn't believe it. From that moment on, I knew that there was something to go find in old, unused photographic papers."

Rossiter began hunting for expired paper online, collecting boxes of forgotten brands with exotic names such as Gravalux and Velox. Developing them, she discovered tones ranging from rich coffee to inky black, on paper that was velvety or slick. There were sheets with mirroring around the edges like tarnish, where the silver in the paper had oxidized. On some sheets, she found traces where fingerprints or mold had disturbed the emulsion, and faint marks where light had slowly leaked through the packaging, leaving the paper "roasted by time," she says.

Rossiter titled each sheet with the brand of the paper as well as the date it expired and the date she developed it, describing a finite span of time that alludes to the looming end-date of the silver gelatin process itself. If the history of photography is a succession of technologies, says Rossiter, "we get to witness the biggest one, where—whhhpp!—the whole light-sensitive thing was thrown out."

Rossiter is one of a growing number of artists using what's known as analog photography—photographs made using light-sensitive paper and film—as their subject, rather than as simply the means of reproducing an image. In part, this interest in the materiality of photography reflects the massive shifts brought on by the digital age, which has made traditional photographic methods increasingly obsolete in everyday life.

In response, artists are looking to the history of pre-digital photographic processes with a fresh interest in experimentation. They are recycling and breaking down analog materials, pushing them in unintended and unexplored directions, and mining old snapshots for new meanings. While this work is unabashedly rooted in the physical, the central question it prompts is often conceptual: what is photography today?

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Recent gallery shows such as “Unique” at Von Lintel Gallery and “Alchemical” at Steven Kasher Gallery, as well as museum exhibitions such as “Surface Tension” at the Center for Photography at Woodstock, New York, in 2012 and “What Is a Photograph?” on view through May 4 at the International Center of Photography in New York, are working to make sense of the growing interest in materiality. Carol Squiers, the ICP show’s curator, says she wanted to explore “what it might mean for the analog era to end in photography and the digital era to completely take over.”

What Squiers found was a sort of anarchic esthetic in which artists rebel against the prescribed uses of their materials. She writes in the show’s catalogue that “the more the digital seems to triumph, the more artists seem to turn away from it.” Using processes ranging from C-prints to tintypes, they break photography down “into its technological layers and then recast it in the materiality of the physical world.”

The demise of film is the subject in Brea Souders’s series “Film Electric.” She photographs fragments of her own film and prints she has cut into tiny pieces. Souders began the project while cleaning out her archives in preparation for a move. “I was cutting the pieces up so nobody would take them from the waste bin,” she recalls. Also in the trash was an acetate negative sleeve, a long plastic envelope used to protect film. When she pulled it from the bin, slivers remained attached to the plastic, held by static electricity.

“Some of them fell and others stuck, and I just thought that was really beautiful, the way my memories were clinging together. It was a metaphor for film trying to hold on, literally,” Souders says. She photographs arrangements of these pieces in poetic, airy forms against a pale background. Cut from negatives and contact sheets, each fragment is recognizable, at least to her. Pointing to a shard of film, “This is Belize, I can tell by the shape of those palms,” she says in her sunny studio in her Brooklyn apartment. “I think we all experience memory in a similar way, with little bits and pieces of things colliding in unexpected ways. We all remember things in snippets.”

Souders, who recently completed a residency at the Camera Club of New York where she will have a solo show opening February 20, continues to shoot occasionally with her Hasselblad to make new raw material for the project. She shoots mostly digitally. Still, she admits, “I do miss film.”

Brendan Fowler’s large framed prints also combine fragments from his past, but more violently. Hung from the wall, his stacks of large, framed ink-jet prints crash through each other, leaving ripped paper and broken glass where one image pierces the others. The photos themselves are studiously casual—they show friends and messy studios—but many include an emblem of photography or digital culture. In Summer 2010 (Computer on 20” Slingerland Bass Drum, Accident/The Wood Fell On Me In Studio May 20 2010 #5, “Poster For Dialog With The Band Aids Wolf” Screens in Studio, Flower in Patty’s Gazebo 2), 2010, the photo on top shows a computer monitor running Photoshop, resting on a drum. Other works depict a stack of photographs or a cell phone’s glowing screen. The series, included in the Museum of Modern Art’s “New Photography 2013” exhibition, is a sort of narrative mash-up, but it also emphasizes the physical, breakable nature of the photos—impossible qualities for a purely digital image.

Matthew Brandt also destroys his pictures in the process of creating them. For his series “Lakes and Reservoirs,” Brandt traveled throughout the West and collected samples from the bodies of water he photographed. Back in his Los Angeles studio, he submerged the large C-prints in the water they depict until the paper disintegrated into a rainbow of lurid colors as its layers dissolved. In Wilma Lake CA 1, 2008, the edges of a rocky landscape have been eaten away by water, the sky has turned magenta, and the hills are red and yellow.

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“There’s only so much control you can get out of water,” says Brandt, who has nonetheless learned what to expect from the process. “If I leave them soaking for longer, I know it’s going to break down to the yellow or white layer. If I take it out earlier, it might be the red layer. There are a lot of nuances.”

For Brandt, the work is connected to the history of 19th-century photographers who recorded the West, such as Timothy O’Sullivan. He also references diminishing water supplies, and by extension, disappearing photo technology. “Sometimes I revisit a lake, and in the summer the water is almost gone. I like capturing those moments, being a witness to these falling water lines, and then thinking of that in relation to the dwindling C-print process,” says Brandt. “Pretty soon I won’t be able to make these. It is definitely getting more difficult to get the paper.”

While Brandt takes his prints out of their water bath before they disintegrate completely, the images in Phil Chang’s series “Cache, Active” disappeared almost as soon as they were shown, destroyed by the light needed to view them. Made on expired silver gelatin paper that has been left unfixed, the portraits, photograms, and landscapes faded to an eerie brown over the course of the opening of the exhibition at Los Angeles in 2012. Rather than referencing historical processes, Chang sees the work as a response to the Internet age. Unlike a digital image that can be sent across space and exist in multiple locations, the prints must be viewed in person, and quickly.

For John Cyr, the disappearing tools of analog photography are his subject. Since 2010, he has been photographing the developer trays used by black-and-white photographers ranging from Aaron Siskind to Sally Mann to Eddie Adams (a book of the images will be published by powerHouse next month). Some are scrubbed clean while others are stained black with silver salts, reflecting the habits of their users, living and dead. The curved edges of the basins, shot against a black background, give the plastic and metal trays a monumental, funereal air.

Anne Collier also used an image of a developer tray in her 2012 photo installation on the High Line in New York. From a billboard overlooking the elevated park, the artist’s eye stared out from a liquid-filled tray. Tinged with a look of anxiety or sadness, the eye watched over its viewers through a disappearing medium. Where Cyr considers himself a photographer, Collier’s approach takes a wider aim at the art world.

Marco Breuer’s work may have begun as reaction to his strict photographic education rather than to the approach of digital, but, he says, “for me the interesting part is the friction, interacting with a material in an unauthorized fashion.” He became interested in challenging the limits of photo materials after studying photography in his native Germany in the late 1980s and early ’90s, when digital photography was only a rumor, he says. At the time, the technically precise Becher School (“you know, the Ruffs and the Gurskys”—students of Bernd and Hilla Becher at the Kunst- akademie Düsseldorf), was the de facto official German school of photography.

“I thought, there has to be another way of working,” Breuer says, and he set out to unlearn the rules he had been taught. What would happen if he pressed photo paper between his teeth, for instance, or exposed it to flame?

“I placed objects on black-and-white paper in the dark room, and then I set them on fire, so the object would illuminate itself,” the artist says from his studio in Hudson, New York. The next logical step was to eliminate the object entirely. “If it’s just me and the paper, how can I extract images out of this material? So I got into sanding and scratching and scraping and heating, and all these other forces.”

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Breuer found that by starting from the simplest materials, “you could carve out your own space, and there was still discovery possible.” Since then, he has continued to work with the basic elements of photography, making photograms or disrupting the paper directly to create beautiful, rigorous abstractions, which he shows at Yossi Milo Gallery in New York (where Brandt and Rossiter also show).

Since 1990, Breuer has also collected snapshots, a passion he shares with a number of artists. The ones he likes most are those that have been altered because of some dissatisfaction. “People go in and write on photographs, or they cut a person out,” he says. What interests him is the “liberty taken with this object. Once you start taking the scissors to it, you have to deal with how it curls and how you’re going to paste it down. That’s sort of the material aspect of it.”

For Garrett Pruter, part of the appeal of old photographs is the access they grant to an otherwise private past. For a recent project, he bought a box of slides on eBay that depict the life of family in Indiana. “It’s very strange to have access to these memories,” he says. “It almost feels unnatural, because this is not the way we live anymore.” His show last year at Charles Bank Gallery (now Judith Charles Gallery) in New York incorporated the images in a number of forms. For him, old family photos offer a record that will be lost with the switch to digital. “It’s almost like going through someone’s hard drive,” says Pruter.

Among the works in his show were a series of melancholy monochromatic paintings in muted pinks and earth tones, made from scraped photo emulsions. From the box of 2,000 slides, Pruter selected a few and made around 20,000 drugstore photo lab copies. He collected the emulsion in bowls, making a sort of physical average of each image. “For each image, you basically have a different flat color that emerges. Some paintings are a single image,” he says, while others combine several, treating each photo as a kind of paintbrush. The result “almost becomes a monument that’s composed of all these thousands of images,” says Pruter. “It represents the complete decay of this moment,” from each original Indiana slide, while at the same time “breathing new life into it.”

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