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Review 'Light, Paper, Process' an inventive subversion of photography

By Leah Ollman
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Ansel Adams famously likened the printing of a negative to the performing of a musical score. Performance is also key to the seven artists in the Getty's exhilarating new show, "Light, Paper, Process: Reinventing Photography," but not in the way Adams meant it. None is committed to the perfection of a predetermined vision. All use the basics of photography — light-sensitive paper, darkroom chemistry — in nontraditional, off-label ways.

Thoroughly fluent in the idioms, history and conventions of the medium, they set most of that assumed knowledge aside and improvise, avidly courting chance and accident. Works in the show feel slightly, thrillingly, out of control. Fearless and brilliant deviancy is at play nearly throughout.

Texture is more palpable here than in the ordinary photographic exhibition. Over and over, we are summoned to attend to surfaces, not merely to look through them at a represented scene or subject. The subject here is photography — its essence, capacity and expansive range — and the photograph itself, not as vehicle but as material object.



"Mathers Department Store, Pasadena," 1971, a gum bichromate print with dust from an AT&T parking structure, Level 2. (Matthew Brandt / The J. Paul Getty Museum)

Marco Breuer, one of the most captivating artists in the show, engages photographic paper as a stage for action. He scrapes, scores and sands it; he places upon it a live fuse or burns it with the heating element of a frying pan. The photograph's status as physical trace of its referent could hardly be more literal, more concrete, yet Breuer's work abounds in poetic possibility.

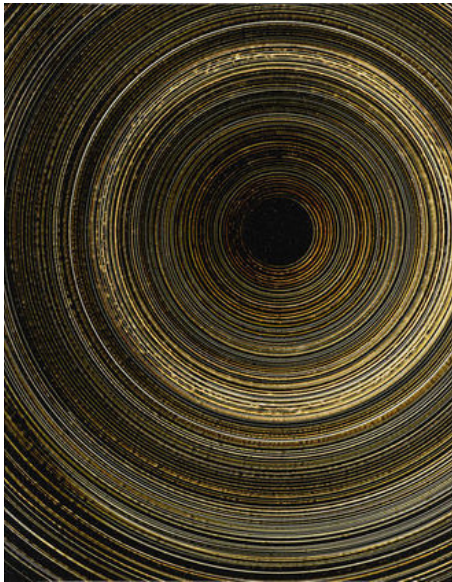
Each print registers the impact of its source while also metaphorically pointing elsewhere, beyond. For an untitled 1999 piece, Breuer laid a swatch of cheesecloth atop a sheet of gelatin silver paper and ignited it. The resulting image oscillates among darkness, blur and weave, slate and rust. It has the breathtaking presence and indexical power of a burial shroud.

For her 2010 series of "Lunagrams," Lisa Oppenheim made copy-negatives of an astronomer's glass-plate negatives of the moon from 1850-51 and exposed them by the light of the moon in the same phase as that depicted. She then toned her prints after developing, suffusing the images with a silvery gleam. Mesmerizing and magical, they invoke the awe that accompanied the earliest visual records of celestial phenomena as well as that generated by the earliest photographic images themselves, startling products of the marriage of art and science. Curator Virginia Heckert's working title for the show was, appropriately, "Darkroom Alchemists."

Matthew Brandt also adopts a self-reflexive approach, creating a closed loop between what a photograph is made of and what it portrays. He used a man's tears to develop a picture of him crying. He incorporated dust from the site of demolished buildings to print archival images of the razing of those buildings. Rendering destruction in the tonalities of dust, Brandt pushes the images back in time.

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He creates a stirring reciprocity between visual denotation and material form. In a recent series, he immersed his own landscape photograph in water from the lake depicted. Brandt includes it as part of the title/material information (chromogenic print soaked in Rainbow Lake water, for instance), so the information is available, but the image itself rather than the process is intentionally the first thing the viewer addresses. The subject undoes its own image, corroding the emulsion into eruptive spatters, bubbles and veils, skinning and pocking the surface. "Rainbow Lake" exuberantly overshoots its name.



"Spin (C-824)," 2008, created by incising fine concentric circles on photographic paper with a modified turntable. (Marco Breuer / The J. Paul Getty Museum)

The exhibition begins with an instructive and refreshingly deep dip into the historical precedents for this kind of experimentation. Spanning the 1910s to the 1970s, from Man Ray and László Moholy-Nagy up through Jay DeFeo and Robert Heinecken, the roughly 30 prints establish a context for rupturing photography's implicit compact with the external world. The selection illustrates how sensual and enigmatic, how deliciously ambiguous abstract photographs can be, given the medium's innate illusionism.

Rhymes and echoes between old and new work abound. Man Ray's photogram of a record album resonates with Breuer's "Spin (C-824)," made by incising fine concentric circles on photographic paper with a modified turntable. James Welling's recent "Chemical" series, a mildly interesting catalog of textural, tonal and spatial effects yielded from the brushing of developer and/or fixer onto chromogenic paper, harks back to an enchanting chemigram from the mid-'70s by Pierre Cordier. Using various unorthodox materials such as wax and nail polish as resists, Cordier painted an irregular grid onto photographic paper, a jaunty mosaic of translucency and opacity in sepia, ocher and umber.

The question of how the contemporary works were made thrums tantalizingly throughout the show and is deftly addressed in the catalog's technical notes on each artist, written by Getty conservators Marc Harnly and Sarah Freeman. They explain process, but they don't explain away the intriguing and idiosyncratic explorations these artists perform with their materials and methods: Chris McCaw's long exposures that scar and scorch the sun's trail onto and through paper negatives that read as positive prints; Alison Rossiter's extraction, through developing, of the evocative tonal and pictorial worlds latent within old, expired photographic papers; and John Chiara's emotionally driven

All seven artists don't just restore materiality to the photographic process, they revel in it. Whether they would describe themselves as reactive, they seek out the wet and messy, the tactile, the labor-intensive and (in most cases) the nonreplicable, in a moment when thanks to digital technology, it's never been easier — or cleaner — to make pictures by the millions. Starting in the '70s, and delightfully prevalent in the '80s and '90s, the so-called antiquarian avant-garde reclaimed obsolete, 19th-century photographic processes. This batch of artists also looks back but more in the interest of pushing the medium forward. They follow the spirit rather than the letter of the law.

Brandt, the youngest (born in 1982), studied at UCLA under Welling, the oldest (born in 1951). The artists are divided fairly evenly among L.A., the Bay Area and in and around New York. Five of the seven show with the same New York gallery, Yossi Milo, which might raise eyebrows, but it has avidly championed unconventional photography, so it seems more a matter of confluence than conflict of interest.

"Light, Paper, Process" is an illuminating and exciting exhibition, rare in its thoughtful balance of articulated theme, historical context and respect for the integrity of the individual artists. The work splays in diverse directions but stems from common impulses. Each artist honors the history of the medium by inventively subverting it. Reverent and irreverent in equal measure, they are redefining photography and ensuring its continual efflorescence.