EXHIBITION REVIEW

A Matter of Memory: Photography as Object in the Digital Age

GEORGE EASTMAN MUSEUM
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Photography is a substantial medium. From the technological apparatuses and chemical processes that produce it to the accumulation of metal, glass, plastic, paper, fabric, leather, and other supports that preserve the photographic trace for posterity, photography has always had a haptic, material presence. Moreover, as an indexical medium, photography also exists to preserve a physical imprint (via reflected light) of the people, places, and things it represents. Despite photography’s embeddedness within the realm of the concrete, the tangible, and the corporeal, however, critics and historians have routinely sidestepped or marginalized the materiality of the photographic image. Perhaps because of photography’s singular ability to offer a window into another time and place, many of the most foundational thinkers on photography do not see the window for the view. When they do address the photograph itself as an object with physical presence, scholars have imagined that physical presence as ephemeral, invisible, or barely there. In the nineteenth century, despite the comparative weightiness of the daguerreotypes, tintypes, and ambrotypes that were common in his day, Oliver Wendell Holmes described photography as a way to fix in time the “evanescent films” emitted by bodies in space, comparing the image to a reflection in a pool of water.1 In the twentieth century, Roland Barthes describes the photograph evocatively as a “weightless, transparent envelope”—the epitome of an object that has no presence in itself and exists only to convey its content.2 If photography’s materiality was effaced in its first 150 years, this repudiation has become all the more dramatic in the digital age. As photography increasingly abandons the indexical and material realm of photosensitive compounds on various kinds of physical supports for the realm of screens, pixels, and data files, the medium has seemed to many to become completely immaterial. It is in this moment that the need to understand the material presence of photography, then and now, becomes most urgent.

The current exhibition at the George Eastman Museum, A Matter of Memory: Photography as Object in the Digital Age, does precisely this, and does so in a thoughtful new way. Many museums over the past twenty years have explored photography’s material history. As professionals and amateurs have increasingly made the jump from analog to digital cameras, venerable institutions like the National Gallery, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Getty Museum have mounted exhibitions of the remnants of our analog photographic past. Compiling found photographs from a variety of processes, these exhibitions inspire a wealth of nostalgia (not just for vintage processes, but also for the clothes, cars, architectures, and cultures of the past) and an endlessly fascinating series of glimpses into past lives through the artifactual traces of Polaroids, Kodachromes, and old, black-and-white snapshots. It would be easy enough to mount such an exhibition at the Eastman Museum given its vast and impeccable collection of all things photographic, and indeed, there are, elsewhere in the museum, wonderful examples of this bygone image culture.

The current installation in the History of Photography gallery, for example, includes Mexican foto-esculturas, a carefully compiled travel album from the early twentieth century, and a handful of stereoviews displayed with a chunky handheld viewer for visitors to use. A Matter of Memory, however, takes this exploration of photographic substance in a different direction. In its selection and presentation of works, as well as in curator Lisa Hostetler’s thoughtful and philosophical exhibition catalog essay that accompanies it, A Matter of Memory offers a sustained meditation on the persistent materiality of photography in the digital age, as both an artistic and a social medium, and it grounds that meditation in a history of photographic materiality as a conceptual gesture, an expressive formal device, and a practical reality.3 As such, it reframes the concept of lost materiality by suggesting some of the ways that photography has been, and remains, both ephemeral and concrete.

The exhibition begins, appropriately, with a reflection on photographic history. Before one passes into the large main gallery devoted to the photographic object in the digital age, Untitled from the series My Ghost (1997) by Adam Fuss; © Adam Fuss; courtesy Deborah Ronnen Fine Art

3 Untitled from the series My Ghost (1997) by Adam Fuss; © Adam Fuss; courtesy Deborah Ronnen Fine Art
one must first pass through a smaller gallery that “lays the groundwork” by examining artists’ radical engagement with photographic materiality in analog formats. Included in this room are classic examples of photographic experimentation by masters of the medium: photograms by Robert Heinecken and Adam Fuss, scratched negatives and torn prints by Thomas Barrow, and luridly colorful multiple exposures from James Welling’s Hexachromes series (2006). While some of these images are from the recent past, they are all produced by artists who have been working with and exploring the materiality of analog photographic technologies since before the onset of the digital moment. The room is dominated by Ellen Carey’s arresting and absorbing Multichrome Pulls (2007), a work that challenges conventional conceptions of the photographic in both scale and appearance. The hulking forms and muted colors of her 20 x 24-inch Polaroid dye diffusion prints and negatives recall less the indexical photographic image and more an abstract expressionist painting by Robert Motherwell or Mark Rothko. Like many of the works in the “Laying the Groundwork” section, they also evoke themes that will be explored in greater detail in the next rooms: the painterly or sculptural potential of the photograph, experimentation with abstraction in a medium that seems to necessitate representation, the connection between materiality and process, and the photograph as a persistent but often unreliable stand-in for memory.

The second and largest gallery offers a variety of works by emerging and established artists that play on a series of distinct but intersecting themes: “the photograph as sculptural presence,” “material memories,” “photographic Babylon” (which explores the “overlapping visual languages of analog and digital technologies”), “the life of a photograph,” and “the photograph as talisman of recollection and emotion.” The exhibition catalog, by necessity, divides the works neatly into these four categories, but for me, one of the particular joys of the exhibition’s open layout is the slipperiness between these frameworks and the way the themes often blend together in a single work. At the crux of all of these themes is a tension between photographic form and its content. On one end of the spectrum are the works that engage a purity of formal experimentation, using photographic materials as malleable stuff for making, as opposed to taking, photographs. Marco Breuer’s geometric abstractions fuse drawing and photography, employing tools like X-Acto knives and heat guns to create luminous stripe and grid patterns that seem to smolder deep within the darkness of the photographic paper. On the other end of the spectrum are works that emphasize photography’s documentary relationship to the material world. Taryn Simon’s photographs from the New York Public Library’s picture files evoke both the utility and the absurdity of the photograph’s archival function. Bryan Graf’s deceptively simple trio of seascapes, titled Sea Journal (2013), reveals itself to be a chronicle of the deterioration of an object (the photographic cover of his journal) over a period of three years. And among the many works that make reference to photography’s vital role in charting domestic histories and memories, Vik Muniz’s Wedding, Album (2014), assembles a monumental, seven-foot-high wedding portrait out of torn and collaged old snapshots.

Another striking feature of the exhibition is its emphasis on process. Much of photography’s material presence emerges from the physical processes that create it: heat and light exposures, liquid chemical baths, the selection of frames and supports, the cutting and tearing of the print. Many of the artists exhibited use these processes to great and singular effect. Phil Chang’s unfixed gelatin silver prints from the series Cache, Active (2010–12), for example, fade before the viewer’s eyes, visibly at first (if the viewer is lucky enough to view a newly unveiled print), then more slowly, until the deterioration is imperceptible in the murk of brownish monochrome. In a similar vein, Chris McCaw’s Sunburned GSP#737 (Santa Cruz Mountains) (2013) is both emphatically material (recalling one of Lucio Fontana’s sliced paintings) and, in its echoes of Nicéphore Niépce’s View from the Window at Le Gras (c. 1826) and its dramatic harnessing of the physical properties of light, quintessentially photographic. And Antony Cairns’s interactive work LDN EI (2016) offers an instant reminder of the new materialities that digital images inhabit in the form of computers, smartphones, and, in the case of this work, e-readers, which require our physical engagement in different ways. Yet in certain cases, I found that the effect of the work was almost too dependent on an understanding of processes that were not always legible in the image. Visitors who neglect the detailed wall text describing an artist’s process run the risk of seeing certain works as merely interesting or pretty to look at, when in fact, there is much more at stake.

While A Matter of Memory is provocative and insightful all around, the highlights of the exhibition, for me, are the works that fuse malleable photographic forms with the personal and often nostalgic content of the snapshot photograph. The exhibition includes a selection of works by Diane Meyer, who embroiders over portions of snapshots from her childhood. In the process, she lovingly embellishes them (making them more valuable) and at the same time obliterates key details, most notably faces, in a gesture that evokes both the pixelation of the digital image and the fragility of memory. The star of the exhibit, however, is undoubtedly Jason Lazarus, for his ongoing project T.H.T.K. (2010–present), which stands for “too hard to keep.” The idiosyncratic installation features old snapshots (some turned against the wall), albums, slides, and even some unprocessed rolls of film, all of which were donated to the artist by their owners because, for whatever reason, they were too difficult to hold on to. It is impossible to look at these photo-
EXHIBITION REVIEW

graphs without speculating about their backstories, and that speculation leads to narratives both heartbreaking (abandoned baby pictures) and utterly banal (a proliferation of snapshots of young lovers, sometimes defaced—predictable evidence of predictable romances gone sour). This mixture of the exceptional and the ordinary, however, is precisely what makes this work both engaging and important to the history of domestic photography. And with its proliferation of analog photo processes, it is also the perfect ending note to a show about digital images. Like all of the photographs in the exhibit, the snapshots of T.H.T.K. are an insistent and poignant reminder of photography’s material persistence, even in moments when we may wish it otherwise.

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Diane Arbus: In the Beginning
MET BREUER, METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART
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A black-and-white photograph of a woman in a pillbox hat and fur coat reflects an unmistakable era: the raised eyebrow, slightly parted dark-glossed lips—an insouciant look my mother and her childhood friends and we baby boomers practiced in our mirrors, imitating mid-twentieth-century movie stars. Yet this photo, one of more than a hundred in a recent exhibition of Diane Arbus’s early work (1956–62) at the Met Breuer, is light–years from the silver screen.

The exhibition, curated by Jeff L. Rosenheim, included stunning, previously unknown photographs depicting anguish and audacity. An old woman with gaping mouth and gnarled fingers is bound under sheets in a hospital bed; harsh light bleaches the scene to a cadaverous white. A “female impersonator” defiantly raises her chin at the camera, smooth chest vulnerable in a silk robe. Adults, fatigue or perhaps terror marking their faces, awkwardly carry sleeping children. Arbus eschewed sentimentality or a facile aesthetic: marginalized and ordinary people are rendered extraordinary by complex revealed emotion.

I grew up with the iconic photographs reproduced in Diane Arbus: An Aperture Monograph (1972), from the first large exhibit of her work at the Venice Biennale in 1972. Some of those photographs, part of a rare folio collection (A Box of Ten Photographs, 1970), were mounted in an adjacent gallery at the Met Breuer’s exhibition, as were works by Garry Winogrand, Helen Levitt, and others who influenced or were contemporary with Arbus. As a child, I was mesmerized by the heavy–faced, towering man (A Jewish giant at home with his parents in the Bronx, N.Y., 1970) and the twin girls in dark dresses (Identical Twins, Roselle, New Jersey, 1967). I also felt guilty because children were not supposed to stare at people who looked sad and odd. Entering adulthood, though, I merely disdained the photographs as sensationalist.

I was wrong, both as a child and young adult, and it was the Met exhibition’s design, by Brian Butterfield, that revived and transformed my appreciation of Arbus’s work. The well–known folio photos were large, framed, and conventionally hung on four walls in the separate gallery, with even, bright lighting. By contrast, the early works, the focus of the exhibit, were small prints without glass or frame, warmly lit, and mounted on narrow, free–floating, fabric–covered panels that stretched between the ceiling and floor. The tan–colored panels were hung in long rows within the gallery space itself, taking up the entire room.

Unlike the conventional plan for a retrospective, with photographs arranged chronologically in groups along walls and accompanied by wall text, this exhibit presented photographs individually at eye level, with only the barest labeling and with deliberate disregard for chronology. Except for a brief overview at the entrance, there was no historical or aesthetic commentary.

The rows’ narrowness allowed efficient viewing of the small photographs, but it also forced viewers close to the pictures, as if examining ourselves in a front hall mirror. At most, two or three visitors could view each photograph before passing a slim empty space to the next picture. This design encouraged an encounter...