

Objects of Fascination

Any photograph has multiple meanings; indeed, to see something in the form of a photograph is to encounter a potential object of fascination. The ultimate wisdom of the photographic image is to say: "There is the surface. Now think—or rather feel, intuit—what is beyond it, what the reality must be like if it looks this way." Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy.¹

In 1973, when Susan Sontag wrote her controversial essay about photography, "In Plato's Cave," it is doubtful she could have imagined how "inexhaustible" the stream of photographic images would become. The revolutionary developments of the digital camera and the World Wide Web in the late twentieth century created an endless avalanche of readymade images.

In spite of the ubiquity of the photographic image, many artists recognize it as "a potential object of fascination" that can enhance or inform their art practices. Filtering photographs taken by others through their own aesthetic vision, these artists extend the invitation to us, the viewers, to deduce, speculate and fantasize about these images.

Vernacular photography can be loosely defined as photography of the everyday, or photography not originally intended as art. Snapshots, wedding photographs, news and advertising images, family pictures, travel albums, passport and ID photos, mug shots, historical archives, and school portraits all fall into this broad category. Websites like Craigslist and eBay have enlarged the marketplace formerly confined to flea markets and antique stores. News, social media and photo-sharing websites also provide limitless image sources.

While many people look at, collect and display vernacular photographs as cultural artifacts or aesthetic objects in their own right, the ten artists in *Picture Takers* re-use these images in ways that transform them. Some translate the images from photography to another medium—painting, drawing, sculpture, and video; others alter or rearrange photographs, changing the way they are presented. By "taking" pictures originally made by others and creating new contexts for them, the artists in this exhibition suggest alternate readings for the images, and in the process explore ideas about personal or collective history, memory, identity and longing.

¹ Sontag, Susan, "In Plato's Cave," in *On Photography*. (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., Sixth printing 1980), 23.

Gail Gregg's *Album Series* addresses the dual nature of the photograph as a physical object and an intangible idea. Working with found family photo albums and scrapbooks, Gregg removes the individual photographs, leaving the adhesive corners and any hand-written text. She replaces the missing pictures with "ghost images" in graphite or pastel, creating abstract place-holders for lost moments in time. Gregg imagines she is a collaborator with the anonymous makers of these family albums. "My hope is that this new 'non-photo' communicates a sense of loss, a sense of the tenderness with which important benchmarks in a life are recorded."

Attracted to "the visual autobiographies of others," Gregg invites the viewer to re-invent the missing people, places and events. "The forms are tragically empty — and yet, they also can stand as blank slates on which new futures, new lives can be written." Photographs are such powerful mementos that even the suggestion of a missing photograph may conjure up a picture in the viewer's mind.

Issues of absence and presence are also central to **Diana Jensen**'s work. The artist is interested in the people depicted in found photographs, like those in her *Baton Rouge Polaroids* series. By transforming them into paintings, she turns ephemeral snapshots into something substantial and permanent. Her goal is to "rediscover and resurrect the people I find in discarded photo albums acquired at flea markets... I like to think that my paintings are physical placeholders for the persons who are absent." Jensen uses the physicality of the paint to impart new meaning: "I counter the flatness and ephemeral quality of the original photographs, with a thick, visceral paint application. I impart a weight and physicality in depicting the persons in the lost photographs, restoring the presence of those forgotten."

While history and archival materials have always fascinated her, she is most interested in photographs from the eras she herself has lived through, specifically the 1970s and 1980s. The artist often works with related collections of photographs that may document a particular family or group of friends, looking for possible connections between individuals. The arrangement of the paintings by pairs may suggest new narrative threads.

Joy Garnett also transforms photographic images into paintings, although her sources and subjects differ from Jensen's. Based on images she gathers from various Internet sources, her paintings investigate the "apocalyptic sublime," a metaphysical condition of astonishment and awe. Garnett's *Boom and Bust* series is sourced from photographs of military events, but she suppresses the contextualizing details, purposely allowing her imagery to remain ambiguous, inviting multiple interpretations from the viewer. "What's important to me, from the point of view of someone who makes paintings, is to allow the viewer to come to any meanings – any interpretations of content – on their own. What matters most is contemplation."²

² <http://theoryculturesociety.blogspot.com/2010/04/interview-joy-garnett-with-ryan-bishop.html> (Thursday, 22 April 2010)

Like Jensen, Garnett relies on paint as a “de facto agent of transformation.” She suggests, “Perhaps perversely, the very unctuous medium of paint is an excellent tool to turn on the dominant form of the image today, which is electronic and photo-based. Paint offers us a real counterpoint as a material and as a mode of communication, and it packs a serious backlog of motifs, languages and genres...”³ Her paintings slow down the speed at which we “read” images, translating them from the rapidly moving mass media image stream of the Internet.

Paul Chiappe’s tiny meticulous drawings resemble black and white vintage photographs, but the artist makes them with pencil, acrylic and sometimes airbrush. He collects his source material from Google image searches, books, postcards, and photographs. Chiappe alters the found images, often combining elements from several photographs and blurring selected portions. The addition of surprising elements and the unexpected scale of the drawings give them a Surrealist edge.

In his *Yearbook* series, Chiappe incorporates differing levels of sharpness and blurriness, creating portraits of schoolchildren that look slightly out of focus. They seem a perfect metaphor for memory, with their hazy edges and imagery that sharpens and fades; like memory, these drawings sometimes seem to play tricks on us. The non-specificity of the faces invites us to invent identities for them, and may even allow them to stand in for our own friends and family.

While Chiappe scales his drawings down to miniature size, **Anne-Karin Furunes** does the opposite, dramatically magnifying the scale of her source images. And although the two artists use vastly different scales, both successfully create a sense of intimacy between the subject and the viewer.

Furunes turns photographs from historical archives into haunting large-scale portraits by hand-punching thousands of different sized holes into the surface of black painted canvas. The resulting image, which resembles a halftone black and white newspaper photograph, coalesces in the viewer’s eye when seen from the proper distance.

The artist is drawn to visual archives that reveal shameful or hidden truths. Her subjects have included Communist women fighters in the Finnish Civil War, Norwegian Jews deported by the Nazis and people lost during and after World War II. *Portraits of Archive Pictures, III* uses images derived from a Swedish racial purity archive that categorized citizens into groups like Gypsies, criminals and Jews and earmarked candidates for sterilization.

Furunes notes that while each of the people she depicts was important to someone in the past, that context is lost or hidden from today’s viewer. Her work attempts the “historical recovery” of these anonymous people. Their faces are elusive images that come in and

³ Bishop interview

out of focus according to the viewer's perspective, making them perfect embodiments of memory, which is always fleeting and subjective.

Whitfield Lovell is known for work that associates two-dimensional portrait drawings with found objects. His imagery evolves from vintage photographs of African Americans, hand-drawn with Conte crayon. By juxtaposing three-dimensional objects with drawings he creates sculptural “tableaux” layered with meaning.

In Lovell's *Kin* series a purchased cache of identification photos—mug shots, employment IDs, photo booth images and passport photos—provides the inspiration for the drawn portraits. Making the heads life-size in scale, he attaches found objects directly onto the drawings. The change in scale and medium recontextualizes the original photographs; the addition of a single, enigmatic object to each drawing creates a tension between the physical presence of the real object and the intangible image of the absent person. The combination of portrait and object invites the viewer to imagine personalities and narratives for each character.

“My project has been inspired by my fascination with history, by stories told to me by my grandparents, and a desire to signify the lives of the people who inhabited those stories. Focusing primarily on images of anonymous black people from the period between the Emancipation Proclamation and the Civil Rights Movement, I attempt to illuminate the humanity and richness of these ordinary people.”

Aaron Williams is interested in the photograph as a found object. By manipulating and altering mass-produced posters and stock photographs, he explores differences between the hand-made mark and the mechanically reproduced image.

Williams' source material comes from what he calls “populist” imagery: “It's all cheap materials, used books and bargain posters, things that have very little physical value but have great cultural or emotional currency.” Using ubiquitous images like pop star Justin Bieber or bucolic Alpine landscapes, Williams “interferes” with them by crinkling or cutting the paper, and sanding and airbrushing the surfaces. In his sculptural work he creates fractured wood constructions that provide an equally interrupted context for the cut and pasted images.

Williams explains: “I'm working in the intersection between the image and the material; the space between the emotive capacity of the image and the physical reality of the paper and printing process. There's a lot of questioning of the validity and reality of the images I work with, particularly in light of them being so broadly disseminated.”

Like Williams, **Willie Cole** also sees the found photograph as an object weighted with cultural currency. Best known for his assemblage sculptures that transform ordinary found objects like shoes, irons and telephones into powerful works of art, Cole is also a prolific producer of two-dimensional works. His sculptures and images often carry

references to the African-American experience and West African spirituality and mythology.

Since the mid-1980s Cole has explored the domestic iron as both an aesthetic object and a cultural symbol. His *Diviners* series derives from found archival photographs of students at the Manual Training and Industrial School for Colored Youth, which operated as a segregated boarding school in Bordentown, NJ from 1886 until 1955. Working digitally, he manipulates and distorts the photographs, which show uniformed female students engaged in the activity of ironing clothes. The women fill the frames of the photographs, creating a simultaneous feeling of constriction as well as monumentality.

Cole recontextualizes two iconic images from popular culture, pairing them in a lenticular photograph titled *It Takes a Tribe*. Each picture illustrates an adult female (a black mammy and a white movie star) holding a baby of a different race. Lenticular printing allows both images to be seen by shifting the viewpoint, and also melds the images together in a hybridized mix. The new pairing poses questions about race and stereotypes, and creates a new and more powerful context for each of the individual images.

Cassandra C. Jones' *Lightning Drawings* are digital collages made from stock photos available on the Internet. By digitally cutting and pasting sections of lightning bolts Jones "draws" circles with lightning. Each drawing showcases a different quality of line—for example, serrated, fine, or meandering. In order to make a cohesive overall arrangement Jones must reorient each image, turning it sideways or upside down; her process creates a new context for each photograph.

In her video, *Wax and Wane*, Jones strings together nine hundred downloaded photographs of the moon in various phases and transforms them into a time-lapse video of the waxing and waning cycle, effectively turning each photo into a video still. Jones collected the images from many sources, including friends, family, and acquaintances as well as photo-sharing websites, stock photography agencies, thrift stores, eBay, and public domain archives of the US Army, NOAA and NASA. The aggregated images form a collectively authored story of the moon's movement. While the position of the moon remains in a fixed arc on the screen, the images created by nine hundred photographers flash in the background, creating a virtual slide show of moon photographs.

Jones speculates that picture takers may see something more appealing in images of the moon's waxing phase because she found more photographs of that phase posted online. The technology used by photo sharing websites makes it possible to search for specific subjects and to gauge their popularity by tracking the sheer number of images shared.

Penelope Umbrico has pursued this idea in great depth, investigating subjects that are collectively photographed: "I take the sheer quantity of images online as a collective archive that represents us - a constantly changing auto-portrait." Umbrico, who considers photography both the medium in which she works and the subject of her work, is

interested in the ways in which we as a culture make and use photographic images. Her well-known (and ongoing) series, *Suns (From Sunsets) from Flickr*, began in 2006 when she searched the word “sunset” on the image hosting website, Flickr and found 541,795 pictures of sunsets. Cropping the suns from the pictures, she displayed a large grid of 4 x 6 inch copies, a practice she continues. Each time the work is displayed publicly she re-titles it to reflect the number of “sunset” search results on Flickr for the day she prints the piece, “the title itself becoming a comment on the ever increasing use of web-based photo communities, and a reflection of the ubiquity of pre-scripted collective content there.”

TVs from Craigslist, are images of the screens of TVs for sale on Craigslist that Umbrico downloads, crops and prints. The surfaces of the television screens subtly reflect the sellers and their personal spaces, revealing glimpses into the private lives of the anonymous television owners. She observes, “These unconsidered images almost seem like pleas for attention. If you look closely you can find, hidden in them, little gestures of private exposure to the great anonymous ‘out there.’ I isolate the site of these gestures to expose the promise, and ultimate absence, of intimacy that the Internet fosters.”

There are interesting formal and conceptual relationships between Umbrico’s TV screens and Gregg’s album pages: both comprise arrangements of dark rectangular forms, contain spatial ambiguity, and reference the idea of the photograph as a visual autobiography or self-portrait. These works also convey an intrinsic sense of mystery and remind us of Susan Sontag’s advice to look at the surface and then to *feel* what might lie beyond it.

Her advice is especially relevant for vernacular photography. Because the viewer lacks the context of the original “picture taker” there is always a distance that separates the two, and the artists in *Picture Takers* operate within this gap, helping us to fill the space between reality and photographic image. When we look at anonymous wedding portraits or ubiquitous sunset snapshots, we never really see a true picture; removed from the original contexts we can only guess at their full meanings. They may prompt memories, thoughts and longings surrounding our own experiences of weddings and sunsets, or lead us to invent new stories.

As Sontag noted, it is this very inability of photographs to “explain anything” that makes them “inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation and fantasy.” In this sense it empowers the viewer receiving the invitation. One might argue that the “multiple meanings” Sontag ascribed to every photograph include those that originate in the memory and imagination of the viewer. Perhaps what is most fascinating about other people’s pictures is what they reveal about us.

Unless otherwise noted, quotes are from artists' statements or conversations with the author.