

SPOTLIGHT ON**Selena Kimball**Filed in [Arts & Culture](#)

Artist Selena Kimball, who works primarily in the medium of photo collage, operates at the intersection of the visual arts and the social sciences. Her large-scale wall pieces are usually made up of materials from a single documentary source—a book, a website, or a manuscript that she has extensively researched. In addition to her studio output, Kimball has collaborated on films with the visual anthropologist Alyssa Grossman and on collage novels with the art historian Agnieszka Taborska. Here, Tricycle interviews Kimball about her current project, “The Flowers of J. F. Rock,” which was inspired by photographs of Tibet from the 1920s and ‘30s.

The first piece of yours I ever encountered, in 2011, was an enormous, irregular, mostly white field of glued-together scraps of glossy paper, in the middle of which fragments of black-and-white photographs formed a kind of scribble. It knocked me out with its scale, its sheen, its tactility, its calligraphic qualities, and most of all, its

mysteriousness—what was it? *Untitled (Phenomena of Materialization 1923)*, 2011, was a collage made of the photographic contents of the book *Phenomena of Materialization* by Baron Von Shrenck Notzig, which was first published in 1914. It documented, through notes and photographs, a series of séances conducted by a female French medium.

The first epic collage I ever made was created out of the photo pages from three copies of the 1914 edition of that book. The collage you saw was the second I made from it, and is from the 1923 edition. And there is always a second set of found material that I'm looking at when I make a piece, so that scribble in the middle of the work was something I saw once on a bathroom wall.

Do all of your collages begin with something in the real world? Yes, something other than my own subjectivity. This is related to my attempt to find a middle ground between art and ethnography. For me it is important that there is a real subject, even if it is filtered through my own experience. I can't imagine doing studio work without that. It allows me to get outside myself.

And your current projects? At the moment I'm working on two series of collages concurrently. The first series, "Night Vision," uses images from blogs written by US Army personnel. The most interesting pictures on these blogs are posted by official Army photographers—not embedded journalists, but soldiers on the ground. Each of the "Night Vision" collages reconstitutes the form of the Hindu Kush as seen in a black-and-white photograph from the 1940s.

The second series is called "The Flowers of J. F. Rock," and it is based on photo-essays by the botanist and photographer Joseph Francis Rock published in *National Geographic* between 1924 and 1935.

J. F. Rock was an Austro-American botanist, photographer, and geographer, and an eccentric autodidact. He lived in the Lijiang Valley in China, off and on from 1922 to 1949, and this became the base for his travels along the Tibetan border. Here he collected seed and plant specimens for various United States agencies, including the US Department of Agriculture and the Arnold Arboretum. At the same time, Rock was the National Geographic Society's "Man in China" for over 20 years, and his popular photo essays about the borderland between China and Tibet came to define the region in the Western imagination. In 1949, shortly after the Chinese takeover, he was forced to flee Lijiang, and left China.

I first encountered Rock's work when I stumbled across a stack of *National Geographic* magazines featuring his pictures at my parent's house over a decade ago. It turned out my parents had been collecting them. My mother and father were part of the first generation of American Buddhists to become students of Tibetan scholars and monastics living in exile after 1949. Their teacher is from Kham, one of the regions that Rock documented, and they had tracked down these magazines out of curiosity about the place, now irrevocably changed, that their teacher had come from.

The collages are made up of fragments of Rock's images taken from the original *National Geographic* magazines (and, in at least one instance, a piece from the cover of one of the magazines), correct? Yes. In fact, all of the collages so far have been made from just two of Rock's photo essays from 1924 and 1925. In beginning where he began, I will be following his own deepening experience as I work through the series.

At the same time, when I look at the actual shapes of the collages, I think I can see familiar forms—a bowl or a statue of a bodhisattva, for instance. You would be right. Many of the shapes in the Tibet collages are loosely based on photographs of objects in the collection of the World Culture Museum in Frankfurt.

So once again it seems that for you, the process of arriving at a work, or series of works, has involved a secondary or hidden piece of information. Yes. What happened is that I was working on a project with the visual anthropologist Alyssa Grossman at the same time that I was conceiving this work about Tibet. My collaborations with Alyssa, a friend from high school, started when she was working on a BA in anthropology and I was working on a BFA in sculpture. Even before we knew there was a language around it, we saw our job as finding common ground between art and ethnography.

I had been looking at catalogs of the collections of various ethnographic museums, and the Frankfurt catalog of its holdings really excited me. The photographs in it were very amateurishly done and visually interesting. I wanted it to be the basis of a collaborative project with Alyssa. In the end we did cut-ups. I would take a photo page from the catalog, cut it up, and make a new object out of it; she would take a page of text from the book and do the same thing to make a new piece of writing.

Working on a book of fake cultural artifacts got me thinking about how a landscape can become a cultural object. Rock's photo-essays were a view onto a place, parts of which were then still terra incognita on European maps. The fact that this view was framed exclusively through Rock's lens (and by his editors at the Geographic Society) is both interesting and problematic. What would the Tibetans on the other side of his camera have had to say about these pictures? Would Rock's photographs have squared with their own mental image of their homeland?


If not, it might have been more a function of Rock's own idiosyncrasies than of any cultural differences between photographer and his subjects. Many of Rock's photographs are technically poor and awkwardly composed, leaving room for Western viewers to project their own imaginings. In fact, Rock's articles are said to have inspired James Hilton's best seller *Lost Horizon* and to have helped give geographical specificity to Hilton's fictional country of Shangri-La.

Apart from having its origins in your parents' experience, and your own interest in landscape as a cultural object, does this project in particular, or your work in general, have any bearing on Buddhism? There is that meditation on emptiness focusing on the object that must be refuted—the object with inherent existence—that starts with the chair and the definition of the chair. If you pull the legs off the chair, is it still a chair? The exercise of taking an image, pulling it apart, and having all those pieces that can no longer be called a picture or a book or a document spread out on a table starts to feel like that.

The sense of objects (or people, or places) as existing as independent, “whole,” and lasting entities is a deeply ingrained in me. But playing with cut-ups creates a slippage between categories. If a thing is made up of parts, and those parts are put in dialogue with other kinds of things, or parts of things, at what point does it cease to be the thing I started with? In a small and simple way, collage pokes fun at those object-categories that we drag around with us and apply to everything we see.

—Anne Doran

Image: Selen Kimball, Untitled (National Geographic 1924, with tent), 28.5" x 20.75", digital silkscreen on dibond, 2013.

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