

Photography
|Review|

Eruptions, explosions and a sexually explicit hoover: V&A Photography Centre review

Victoria & Albert Museum, London

Stretching from the 1840s to the present, this dazzling collection captures two centuries of art, war, disasters, transport, technology - and boasts some beautifully moving portraits

★★★★☆



📷 Run for your life ... Vinca Petersen's Riot Girl, 1998. Photograph: © Vinca Petersen. Courtesy Edel Assanti

Chloë Ashby

Mon 22 May 2023 08:11 EDT

Paul Trevor's [Constant Exposure](#), a patchwork print of black-and-white television stills, looks just like life in the age of the smartphone, quite a feat when you consider that it was created back in the 1980s. A news anchor, a war plane dropping bombs and bare breasts are among the multitude of jumbled images. Standing in front of it in the V&A's new [Photography Centre](#), I can't help but laugh - here I am contemplating a work about the everyday onslaught of pictures in a

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📷 Simone d'Aillencourt photographed by Richard Avedon in 1959. Photograph: Eksts, George/Victoria and Albert Museum

William Henry Fox Talbot's delicate depictions of leaves and ferns. My favourite: the ghostly sciagraphs of reptiles taken by [James Green](#) and [James H Gardiner](#) in 1897, soon after X-rays were discovered, presented in a glass vitrine as if they're real specimens ribbiting with life.

We go from froggy silhouettes to vast railways with soaring, whale-like roofs. Captured on camera are advances in cars, trains, planes. Disasters both natural (the eruption of Mount Vesuvius) and not (the atomic bomb). Moon landings. All hand in hand with advances in the medium: created without a camera, Man Ray's *Le Souffle* (1931) is an experimental type of photograph achieved by placing a fan on light-

sensitive paper. Unfolding chronologically, the display unravels the history of both photography and the world. Among the most poignant portraits are [Bill Brandt](#)'s sooty impressions of mining communities in northern England and Wales, and Dorothea Lange's images of migrant families forced to abandon dried and damaged land in dust bowl America.

See something that piques your interest? Delve deeper in a gallery dedicated to photographic books. Since they first appeared in 1843, four years after the invention of photography was made public, such tomes have provided an alternative, more intimate way of looking. More than 20,000 books from the Royal Photographic Society's library are available to visitors on request, while others are at your disposal on open shelves. I spy everything from Susan Sontag's seminal collection [On Photography](#) and monographs on Diane Arbus and Nan Goldin to Kodak data books and [Photo Lab indices](#).



📷 Brian Griffin's Big Bang, 1986. Photograph: Victoria and Albert Museum

My feeling is that it would have made sense to go straight from the opening galleries to the library, which takes so much of what we've seen so far and translates it to the page. Instead, we pass through a digital gallery housing a specially commissioned work that will change every six months. First up, *The Zizi Show* by [Jake Elwes](#), an all-singing, all-dancing deepfake drag cabaret that draws attention to the bias in AI. With a colourful cast of kings, queens and more, the artist celebrates community and difference.



That's a thread that runs through the contemporary galleries, too. Recent

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Libido Uprising, 1989, by Jo Spence and Rosy Martin Photograph: Victoria and Albert Museum

on the Highway depicts the temporary dwellings assembled by rural workers on major routes into Delhi. Protesting new laws that

threatened their livelihoods, and banned from entering the capital, they remained in lodgings fashioned from farming equipment for over a year, when eventually their voices were heard. Wrapping around a corner are carefully considered images of tarpaulin-topped trailers, camp beds, stoves. A bumper sticker behind an empty deckchair reads: "Good Luck."

If you're still not sure about how cameras work, you'll find out in the final room, where you can experience the camera obscura. Step into a light room and your image will be projected upside down on to the wall of a dark room for others to see. A neat way to wrap up, and a reminder that the things we encounter every day on our smartphones aren't exactly as they appear.

This article was amended on 25 May 2023. An earlier version omitted Rosy Martin's credit on the image Libido Uprising.

[V&A Photography Centre opens 25 May](#)

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