

# PAPERSAFE

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**The Swordfish Camera** was originally born as a proof of concept, to show that old pack film cameras can be really awesome, beyond their original design limitations. For a long time pack film cameras were in a kind of twilight zone. They did not survive as ubiquitously as one-step instant cameras that spit out an image after pressing the shutter button (film for which was sold at almost every convenience store and big box retailer), and they used a type of long-obsolete and hard to find battery. All this happened, of course, before the Internet age.

Pack film does not immediately produce an image like one-step integral film, which pops out a sheet of film, and an image slowly appears before your eyes. It needs to be manually yanked out of the camera, and after a specific amount of time for processing, the

positive needs to be separated from the negative (which is discarded in most cases). The resulting image is fairly fragile and delicate for the first few minutes.

While film for pack film cameras never actually stopped being made, it was mostly seen as a professional type of material, which was never really sold in consumer stores. The result was that these cameras, which are bigger and bulkier than the more common one-step instant cameras, largely fell into disuse by the masses and everyday shooters for whom they were originally intended.

We started by learning how these cameras worked, and how to refurbish them and refit them so that they can be used with more common and easy-to-find modern batteries. Amazingly, these cameras, many of which are 30 and 40 years old, really work with only



a bit of tinkering, but once we got them going again, the cameras revealed their limitations as they were designed to do something very specific. Much like one-step cameras, pack film cameras have little or no control on exposure settings which severely limits their creative use beyond basic "home use" of birthday cake candle blowing images, dad with his new old classic car, and out of focus landscapes.

Even Polaroid realized these limitations, and offered (for a fairly limited time), a fully manual version of the pack film camera, models 180 and 195. The main goal with the Swordfish was to offer the same type of manual control Polaroid did with the 180 and 195 model cameras, which are fairly scarce and command a high price in the used market, often as a collectible item rather than an actual user camera.

The solution was clear - install a high quality lens, with fully manual controlled settings, with an equivalent focal length to the

original (to retain the coupled rangefinder functionality). After 5 or so prototypes and many sheets of peel-apart film we ended up with a working model, which produced super sharp images, and had full manual control. To do this, the cameras are stripped bare, all the electronics are removed, and extensive modification is done to various parts, with machining, painting, baffling, and re-mounting.

Though the original Polaroid pack film camera model 360 we use as the basis for the Swordfish camera was a mass produced thing (more than a quarter of a million made), every Swordfish camera is unique. This is because of the extensive modifications and the fact each camera is hand built from the ground up.

No two are the same, each has its own feel, moves and moods.

It was a great honor to present these four photographers with Swordfish cameras and see what they can do in the real world. The results speak for themselves, perhaps as far as the camera goes, but the camera is nothing more than a hunk of metal without the photographers' talent and vision.

- Omer Hecht, Publisher

# Something to hold on to.

## Millee Tibbs

The daguerreotype and the Polaroid share a similar cultural heritage. Both satisfy a desire for an immediate representation of likeness. They are small, intimate items that assert their status as object as much as their station as image. While both were appropriated by artists and professionals, their primary use was as a wildly popular social commodity and vernacular vessel for memory and nostalgia. Both photographic processes also enjoyed a short-lived explosion of popularity which was eclipsed by newer, more in-demand technologies: the collodion process and digital imaging, respectively.

Most narratives of the history of photography present the daguerreotype as an anomalous process in the greater trajectory of the medium. The processes

that followed capitalize on one of the universally acknowledged characteristics of photography: its reproducibility. The evolution of the medium dictates its own historic landmarks, and for the first 150 years of photography's history it is easy to see the daguerreotype and the Polaroid as historic outliers. The rise in digital imaging, the Internet, and social networks, however, have redefined the possibilities and uses of photography. While images inhabit screens more often than paper these days, seemingly eradicating any linkage to the physical, the way that we look at, fetishize, and exchange images is a direct descendant of these anomalous processes.

Compared to the instantaneity that digital imaging affords us, the process of the daguerreotype is a slow moving train. But at its debut,

# The Contingent Print in Contemporary Photography

Darren Lee Miller

"Do you use film or digital?" is often the first question I'm asked by older artists, their judgment barely concealed by the tone of the query. While I also harbor suspicions that artworks made entirely on screens lack a certain ineffable craft-ness, the premise of the question is too romantic for the realities of our time. The truth is that many of us use both digital and film, and most of us use the cameras on our phones far more often than any other kind of image capture device. In Christopher Bonano's book, *Instant: The Story of Polaroid*, the author writes that Polaroid's inventor and founder, Edwin Land, predicted in a 1970 speech that we would eventually use cameras like a phone, "something that was always with you." It's a prediction that seems especially prescient considering it was made when everyone

was using rotary telephones. Landlines are not very portable, but cellphones are always in our pockets.

It's worth considering the ways in which our phones are even more revolutionary than Polaroid cameras were in their time, but we should also reflect upon the limitations of pictures on smartphones. Unlike film and digital SLR cameras, phones are discrete image capture devices that are constantly connected to what we used to call the World Wide Web. The most important change brought about by the digital/cellular revolution is not the instantaneousness of the image (we more or less had that with Polaroids, though digital is, of course, even faster, and we can send the images to anyone instantly), but that we hold the images as jpegs shining into our

faces. We very rarely touch an actual photograph, turning it over in our hands, seeing the traces of dyes and pigments and grains of oxidized silver that glint reflectively at an oblique angle so that the image switches from positive to negative when the surface of the paper is at the edge of vision. Instead, we usually gaze at light-emitting screens.

More than half of the information captured by digital devices goes beyond photons to include date, time, and other settings. Apps allow endless filters and effects, instant online self-publication, and the virtual adoration of a hundred likes. Smartphones record GPS information, the names of registered historical sites and businesses, searchable tags, and facial recognition, all of which can be revealed or suppressed when an image is uploaded. And I'm not even talking about the compositing options available via Photoshop, which are so commonly understood that the name of the software has become a verb. Stephen Mayes' August 25, 2015 article in *Time* magazine, *The Next Revolution in Photography is Coming*, talked about these changes as the death of "straight photographs." Mayes points out that these newer forms of information exist in layers of metadata that can be easily manipulated, and that as viewers we must learn to become even savvier about the images we see.

Technical advances have created opportunities for lens-based representations to be experienced beyond two-dimensions, but Mayes' essay seemed to miss an important point: the existence of "straight photography" has never been assumed by anyone with a deep knowledge of the medium. There has always been selective framing, selective focus, time-lapse and double exposure, dodging and burning, filters, solarization, photograms, staged shoots, and montage. The viewpoint of the photographer, both literally and ideologically, has always influenced what is (and is not) seen through the viewfinder and how it is presented to an audience. Besides, documentation is only one of photography's many uses. Even this caveat misses a more pressing concern of photography departments in academic Art programs, which is: Will we put down our screens long enough to recognize the unique syntax of silver halides, color dyes, and even inks on film and paper? Why does it matter?

In British artist Chris Barrett's 2014-15 exhibition, *Icons of Rhetoric*, a collaboration with writer, Gianluca Spezza, the artist used a digital-analog hybrid process to reflect upon our relationship with pop-culture, authorship, hegemony, and the ways we consume mass-media images. In this series, Barrett used his cellphone to photograph videos posted online from North Korea.

He then placed his phone into a Instant Lab Universal (a modified version of the thing we used to put our 35mm slides into to expose positive/negative film for emulsion lifts), and created a series of new "Polaroid" prints from his screen shots. As stills, the images are seen without their accompanying scripts, and instead they stand-alone from the larger narratives in which they were embedded. The images are slightly blurry, an effect of photographing a video in play. The artist is viewing one screen through another, re-presenting a representation, and then back-translating the captured moments with an old process made new. We are taken through concerns like appropriation, recontextualization, and (mis)communication, but the images also take on a campy, sit-com-style life of their own. Maybe some of the original videos were news broadcasts or PSAs filmed in explicit support of the government, but perhaps I'm operating under the misconception that North Korea is a tightly controlled propagandist regime where every image is made in service to the state. We see a female police officer smirking from behind the (falling? standing?) body of her male colleague. A rocket hovers a moment after lift-off. School children, pencils in hand, are bent over their desks. What becomes clear is only what I don't know about the closed nation and its unfamiliar culture. Layers of process not only hint at what is

lost in translation, but also remind us of our own preconceptions. Truth can be as malleable as the surface of a picture, transformed in a new context to serve the ends of whoever is able to push it the farthest.

The artist who literally pushed the surface of instant film as far as it would go was Lucas Samaras. The first time I saw one of Samaras' early-1970s *Photo Transformations* was at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art in January 2004. I had seen full-page reproductions of the images in my undergraduate photography textbooks, and so I was surprised that the real photos were only 3"x3", the size of the Polaroid SX-70 material he was using at the time. I had to stand very near to really look at them. Up close it was easy to observe the marks Samaras created when he used a stylus, or perhaps his fingernail, to push around the color emulsion while it was developing. Samaras was the hirsute, terrifying, performative figure in all the images, simultaneously emerging from and being swallowed by the damaged surfaces. To me, the reworked areas looked like quick sand, diaphanous curtains, galactic portals, or liquid walls. The distortions were disconcerting, and it was never clear to me whether the frightening figure of the artist was made more or less present by its own dissolution. There was a self-portrait where the artist's hand clearly reached in front of his own



melting, scratched-out, bearded face. The violent, rhythmic, patterned mark-making required to obfuscate everything except the hand, which appeared to be reaching out of the photograph toward my own face, made me take a step backward. For me, the power of the images was in the treatment of the surfaces, in what the artist allowed me to see clearly, and what was communicated by what he chose to literally rub out. The power was conveyed through the visible remains of the actions required to make the marks. The artist's hand was evident, and understanding the process allowed a deeper reading of the work.

A camera pointed at a subject will, generally speaking, take a picture of the subject. The picture and the subject are not the same thing. The materials used to make the photograph have their own connotations, properties, and limitations. It's not so much about the image of an object captured by a lens, as it is about how the resulting print looks. Value, color, line, shape, and texture are organized within the two-dimensional pictorial plane of a photograph, just as in any other work of art, so that the viewer has the kinds of experiences the maker hopes for. I believe the artist's intention matters, that materiality and process are important, and that all conspire to raise questions and make meaning in a photograph. It's not that using (instant) film is more "authentic"

or "artistic" than digital capture, it's that it offers its own set of contingencies to the resulting object that are worth considering.

Without the transformative manipulation of the emulsion, the strange, performative self-portraits taken in Samaras' tiny New York apartment might have looked more like the Polaroids being made by Warhol at the time. Through experimentation, Samaras learned how to achieve predictable results while working with the emulsion in a way that was neither intended nor envisioned by its inventors. Likewise, by appropriating and recontextualizing discrete moments in videos, divorcing them from their stories, and making them into Polaroid prints, Barrett creates just enough room for us to recognize that we are always filling in the gaps in our understanding with what we assume. Did this happen then or now? Did it ever really happen at all? Is this a dream? How do we know what we (think we) know? The Polaroid SX-70 prints of Samaras and Barrett don't offer facile answers, but instead invite us to plumb the depths of their malleable surfaces to face questions of our own.

## NOTES

Barrett, Chris. *Icons of Rhetoric: Reading North Korea Through its Images*. <http://www.iconsofrhetoric.com>  
Images courtesy of the artist.

Bonano, Christopher. *Instant: The Story of Polaroid*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press. 2012. Print.

Mayes, Stephen. "The Next Revolution in Photography is Coming." *TIME* 25 Aug. 2015. <http://time.com/4003527/future-of-photography>

**Millie Tibbs'** work derives from her interest in photography's ubiquity in contemporary culture and the tension between its truth-value and inherent manipulation of reality. Tibbs' exhibition venues include the Blue Sky Gallery – Oregon Center for the Photographic Arts, Portland, OR; the Museum of Photographic Arts, San Diego, CA; Mary Ryan Gallery, NYC, NY; David Weinberg Photography, Chicago, IL; the DeCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, Lincoln, MA; Brown University, Providence, RI; and Notre Dame University, IN. Her work has been published by the Humble Arts Foundation, Blue Sky Gallery, and *Afterimage: The Journal of Media Arts and Cultural Criticism*. Tibbs' work is in the permanent collections of the RISD Museum, the Portland Art Museum, and Fidelity Investments, and is also held in the Midwestern Photography Project at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago, and in the Pierogi 2000, Brooklyn flat file. She has been awarded residencies at the MacDowell Colony, YCCA, the Wurlitzer Foundation, Jentel, the Santa Fe Art Institute, and LPEP, Buenos Aires, Argentina. Tibbs grew up in Alabama, completed an MFA at RISD in 2007, and is an assistant professor of photography at Wayne State University.

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**Darren Lee Miller** is an artist, instructor, gallery director, and curator at Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania. In 2015, he worked with nine artists to create *Performing Blackness::Performing Whiteness*, an exhibition that examines constructions of racial identity by destabilizing the often unexamined position of "whiteness." The themes to which Miller returns – power, identity, control – inform both his curatorial work and his artwork. Taking his cues from the old tales and contemporary culture, Miller creates works that undermine the power dynamics and roles that exist within depicted relationships to remind the viewer of familiar stories, but that also challenge expected meaning and create new spaces for empathic connection. His work has been recognized through residencies at Blue Mountain Center, the Vermont Studio Center, and the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras. Miller holds a BFA from the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University, and an MFA at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

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**Paige Mazurek** (b. 1989) was raised in Reisterstown, Maryland and currently lives in Boston, Massachusetts. Her interest in photography began at the age of six with a Polaroid camera she received from her grandparents. The framework of Mazurek's approach to photography was influenced by her education at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts / Tufts University, where she earned a BFA in 2011. Her work has been exhibited in the US and abroad, and she has received various awards across media including film, sculpture, and photography. Paige enjoys spending time wrenching and riding motorcycles that further accelerate her adventures.

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**Brooke Mazurek** (b. 1989) was raised in Reisterstown, Maryland and currently resides in Brooklyn, New York. She became interested in storytelling at the age of six and won her first writing contest at the age of seven for a poem entitled "When Cupid Comes To Town." Brooke graduated from Barnard College in 2011 with a B.A. in English and currently works as an Associate Editor for *Billboard* magazine.

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