

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE FUTURE

Dan Estabrook

My long-standing passion for early photographic processes may have begun with the simple joys of alchemy and arcana – a way to let a frustrated painter make photographs by hand – but after more than 20 years I have come to believe that the work creates the worldview. The further I explore the methods of the nineteenth century, the more I find a new perspective on time, and my place in it. The photographic past is relatively close (think of the painters and the caves of Lascaux!), but already much of it is gone and fading fast. As we move rapidly into a new form of the medium, one which favours impermanence and speed, I have discovered that I am not, in fact, the one left behind. Far from being lost in the past, I am facing the future with the clearest eye.

It has never been in my interest simply to revisit or revive the processes of the nineteenth century – to make a 'perfect' calotype or albumen print, for instance. Nor do I wish to build a completely believable fiction of the past, each actor in a tableau seamlessly costumed and coiffed to match the period. No, the past I want to evoke is the broken one I first saw with my own eyes – the small boxes of found tintypes fondled and scratched at the flea market, or the odd groups of eclectically framed photographs in the pass-through galleries of the museum, barely saved from disappearing. This is a history that has decayed and fallen into disrepair in the intervening century and a half, and it seems to hold secrets worth working out. I like to imagine I could scan the nameless faces in those old tintypes for lost knowledge, or find codes hidden in the arrangement of foxing on the surface of a *carte de visite*.

Yes, the desire to find a readable pattern in the stains and spots of an old print seems absurd at first, but isn't this a closer approximation to our subjective experience of time? We sift through the slippery facts of the past, piecing together an incomplete puzzle from fragments, looking for order and using our best guesses to fill in the blanks. We call this History, and it shifts behind us, changing course with each new theory, each new scrap, dependent as much on our present and future biases as on any artifacts uncovered. It is not solid ground.

My work starts here, trying to make evident the passage of time, not only in evoking a past that slips and sways, but in acknowledging the fact that things fall apart and fade. Using the techniques and formulae of the nineteenth century, I create my own imaginary studies and still lifes, fabricated from an incomplete history. They are like strays from the canon, too imperfect to keep, too personal to show. With fake stains and rips and folds, these objects aim to make clear just how far we are now from those early times. My past didn't actually exist in the past: it is a re-invention of a time that never was. I want you to be fully aware that you're looking at a fake relic, in order to see that history itself is artificial. Surprisingly, a credible illusion is enough. Browned paper says 'old' just like a photograph says 'real,' no matter how much we know this to be false. Some visceral trigger is pulled nonetheless, and when it works, time shifts around us.

One of the fundamental flaws with a digital lifestyle is simply this: we have bodies, and these bodies age and die. It seems easy to forget that computers and hard drives and circuits are also physical things, just as subject to decay, and sometimes more so. By keeping our heads in the clouds we risk a wider and more evanescent loss – one hard drive crash and your archive could be gone. On the computer, our artwork is constructed from the same irreducible bits of information as our emails, to-do lists and taxes. The snapshots from a friend's birthday become equal to our most profound images, as well as to the spam in our inbox, flattening the meaning and importance of it all, and all

at once. Anyone who's seen an old science fiction film with its wild predictions about the future – our present – knows how old ideas about what is to come quickly seem ridiculous. Chasing the apparent future with each new technological advancement means constantly becoming obsolete: in fact, you've just bought the past. Should we be chasing obsolescence or accept the simple fact that the only thing sure to come is entropy? What better way to speak of the future, than in the only language it speaks?

As I work, each piece becomes a sort of *vanitas*, created as a reminder that I live in a physical world (despite some digital claims to the contrary) and that as long as I have a physical body, I will be interested in physical things. Even a paper photograph has weight. The materials I use – raw chemistry on paper, paint and pencil marks – are designed to exist as our bodies do, and they will last even longer than us. For many years after today's newest technology becomes an inert pile of plastic and metal, these images will continue to recall my time and my pleasures, linking not only our present moment but the knowledge of 175 years, passed forward to our ancestors in the future, where they belong.

POLAROID SX-70: AN ERA OF INSTANT PHOTOGRAPHY

Gary Blackman

In 1972 the Polaroid Corporation released its SX-70 camera and integral print film which, within a few minutes of pressing the button and without further intervention by the photographer, created a colour print in full daylight. This astonishing process not only captured the public imagination, it also attracted seriously inclined photographers and artists who saw its potential as a means of expression. The eight centimetre square image, framed within a white plastic surround, and with its enamel-like surface and distinct colour quality, was in the hand a unique object to be treasured like a small icon or magically coloured daguerreotype. And curious photographers soon discovered and exploited the initial susceptibility of the image to manual manipulation.

SX-70 cameras arrived in New Zealand in 1973-74. I bought a used camera in 1978 and relished the experience of seeing a full colour image emerge within minutes before my eyes, potentially a work of art in miniature. The square format suited me. The challenge was to create imaginative images within a small compass. By 1977 SX-70 photos were being shown in photo galleries in New Zealand, and soon in one or two public galleries – in 1982 the National Art Gallery invited Janet Bayly, Jane Zusters and me to show SX-70s under the title "Polaroids." Instant photography had been established as a niche medium of photography. At the end of 2003 McNamara Gallery surveyed the Polaroid SX-70 in New Zealand by exhibiting work dating from 1977 by 13 photographers in a show entitled "Tracing Polaroid SX-70." This survey did not foresee the obsolescence of this form of instant photography when in 2008 Polaroid ceased making SX-70 print film, 36 years after its introduction. Thus, as with other innovations in photographic technology, an era of photography has ended: the era of Polaroid SX-70 instant photography.