

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

June 4, 2007

Tactile photography

Filed under: [aesthetics](#), [exhibitions \(not mine\)](#), [photo tech](#), [sculpture](#) — alecsothblog @ 11:42 pm

One of my frustrations with contemporary photographic technique, mine included, is the feeling of sterility. Digital processes have become so sophisticated that nearly every picture you see is dusted and anti-scratched to a state of frozen perfection. After awhile it all feels so airless.

So it was with pleasure that I observed evidence of a return to tactile photography at the recent Photo London exhibition. One of the best examples of this was the work of [Stephen Gill](#). In his recent project, *Buried*, Gill took pictures in Hackney Wick and buried them in the same area. Gill writes about the process:

When burying my first batch of photographs, a passing man spotted me and asked what I was doing. Not only did I not want to give the location away of some of my buried pictures, but it just sounded a bit weird to say that I was burying photographs so replied that I was looking for newts. As soon as I'd said that I looked down and saw a newt at my feet.

Not knowing what an image would look like once it was dug up introduced an element of chance and surprise which I found appealing. This feeling of letting go and in a way collaborating with place – allowing it also to work on putting the finishing touches to a picture – felt fair. Maybe the spirit of the place can also make its mark.

While I'm not sure I even noticed Gill's imagery, it felt good to experience a contemporary photograph that was overwhelmingly tactile:



I'm not sure how to deal with this hunger for photography that is physical and imperfect. Certainly only one photographer is allowed to bury his photographs. Is the problem photography itself? Maybe I just envy painting and sculpture.

On my recent trip to Tennessee I encountered two other artists who might share my envy. At the [Knoxville Museum of Art](#), I saw Tim Davis's flawless color photographs of the flaws and textures of painting:



A Passing Shower in the Tropics, by Tim Davis

And at the [Powerhouse](#) in Memphis I saw Matt Ducklo's large C-Prints showing blind people touching sculpture. For me, these pictures were about photographic frustration:



Seated statue of Hatshepsut, 2005 by Matt Ducklo

Yesterday I visited [Musee Rodin](#) in Paris. On view was a fantastic exhibition, [The Japanese Dream](#). Nearly half of the show was devoted to the Japanese dancer Hanako. Rodin made more sculptures of Hanako than of any other sitter. But these sculptures weren't exactly portraits. Hanako was best known for expressionistic plays ending with her performing hara-kiri. With his sculptures, Rodin tried to recreate her expressions of sorrow and horror.

These works left me speechless. They were everything I'd been craving. I went to the museum bookstore to buy a catalogue. But flipping through the book, I was disappointed. While technically refined, the clinical reproductions failed to communicate the spirit of the work:



The most worthwhile images in the book were those by Edward Steichen:



Steichen's photographs were able to get at the pain and sensuality of the original sculptures. Again I'm left with the question: Can contemporary photography find its way back to something physical?

64 Comments

1. I think a lot of photography is, knowingly or not, about the gap between ourselves and the world; the space of longing and desire towards an object or person; and the absence or loss of physical presence.

Comment by [guybatey](#) — June 5, 2007 @ [1:39 am](#)

2. out here in LA everyone is yammering about materiality. Walead Beshty crumples big mural sheets of black and white fiber paper, partially exposing them to light, then smooths it all back out, the results are intriguing although heavily indebted to James Welling's aluminum foil pictures from 25 years ago. Carter Mull pounds nails through his plexi mounted c-prints of flowers when he affixes them to the wall. Brenna Youngblood cuts up color photographs and affixes them to large-scale canvases. check out Mark Wyse's essay called "the materiality complex" for other interesting folks. here you're more likely to stub your toe on someone scraping the emulsion of kodak metallic paper or dripping hot wax onto 30x40 architectural photographs than you are to stumble into anyone with any ambition uttering the phrase 'contemporary photography'. its all about the 'critical discourse' surrounding issues of representation and how the work relates to Rosalind Krauss's 'sculpture in the expanded field' essay. or so i've heard.

Comment by [Chester McCheeserton](#) — June 5, 2007 @ [2:03 am](#)

3. this conversation reminds me of something i heard a professor mumble in school while i was studying photo. (he was , im sure quoting another) "its horrible that something so tactile as a human moment has to exist on something as shitty as photo paper"

Comment by [pds](#) — June 5, 2007 @ [2:41 am](#)

4. I remember seeing a print from an original glass plate taken by Frank Hurley during the expedition to the Antarctic with Earnest Shackleton. Hurley was allowed to take away only a limited number of plates during the crews amazing escape.

In one corner of the print was a heavy set of finger prints caused by Hurley as he held the plate and decided whether to keep the image or leave it behind. Shackleton ordered Hurley to smash the plates he left behind so that he wouldn't be tempted to come back on his own to save more.

Sometimes the marks on an image have as much history as the picture itself.

Comment by [Chris King](#) — June 5, 2007 @ [4:47 am](#)

5. hey- how to deal with the sterility? Return to analog process. Not necessary to turn back the clock as far as s.mann, making your own glass plates, but abandon the zeros and ones and recommit to silver halide alchemy, in a sheet, in a roll.

Comment by [bill emory](#) — June 5, 2007 @ [7:10 am](#)

6. yes i think these are some of the concerns that have fueled Sally Mann's work over the last decade or so. and also why so many are drawn to pinhole and toy cameras. or you could shoot polaroids where the result is a unique object/image.

Comment by [j zorn](#) — June 5, 2007 @ [7:57 am](#)

7. in a way this sounds like a case for re-secession, or at least giving some value back to the unique character of imperfection. in my mind this imperfection should be a derivative of the process though, and not the intent because otherwise it seems to lead to an unfair battle of 2D vs. 3D.

Comment by [corey](#) — June 5, 2007 @ [8:44 am](#)

8. I blame the current desire of photographers to blow prints up to such silly sizes, I think it's some kind of inferiority complex that photography needs still to keep proving itself, Have just seen a fantastic exhibition at the cornerhouse here in Manchester called "DO NOT REFREEZE" which is photography from behind the former Iron Curtain. powerful images, not always on the best materials analog and not one bigger than 16x20. looking at the work of your stablemate Koudelka his images appear so tactile, that I,m sure I could sand off the paint from my back fence with one of his prints!

Comment by [mark page](#) — June 5, 2007 @ [8:54 am](#)

9. I would think that the closer photography tried to get to being tactile, the more artificial the photograph would become. But the most interesting thing I've seen lately in that vein is Oliver Herring's "photo sculptures":

<http://hyaku.pair.com/~maxpro/main.html?id=8&show=14>

But, as I said, it only turns something artificial into something extra artificial to me.

Comment by [Nolan](#) — June 5, 2007 @ [9:50 am](#)

10. I think "Chester" makes the most salient points here. To really address the issues of materiality you have to disregard the representative qualities of a photograph. But that's a little scary for photographers and when they do it they usually end up getting called artists. Even though lots of people turn to things like Holgas and Polaroids to bring back an element of chance, this does not really address the issue and has become a cliché of it's own. I don't want to banish representation, I like it. But I don't think vignetting or scratchy glass plates have much to say about anything except process.

Comment by [Horton](#) — June 5, 2007 @ [10:03 am](#)

11. i agree with j zorn — the popularity of the holga (there are hundreds of thousands of holga shots on flickr alone) probably is one indication that a lot of people are grappling with this problem. do similar concerns arise after every major technological advancement in the medium?

Comment by [Matt W.](#) — June 5, 2007 @ [10:10 am](#)

12. Many contemporary photographers have been producing work that is more conceptual and less tactile. With the current trend of large color c-prints, often laminated with plexiglass for an entirely smooth surface, photographs have become observations or windows on the world instead of objects with any weight or presence. That's not necessarily a bad thing, photography has matured to the point that it can be used to communicate in such a way that the viewer can see only the content and not be preoccupied with the craft and technique involved.

Contemporary color photographers have largely focused on the conceptual issues in photography and the statements and observations they make about society. They have mastered the craft of photography to the point that the process becomes largely transparent.

I was thinking about this very subject the other day when I was looking at some of my old work. I found that my grainy black and white prints from a few years ago seemed much more like tactile objects than my new color c-prints. I've never been a big fan of work that was intentionally scratched up and destroyed, it always seemed gimmicky. But I do enjoy work where remnants of the photographic process are visible in the final print.

Comment by [Noah Addis](#) — June 5, 2007 @ [10:21 am](#)

13. Uh oh... When people start banging nails into photographic work to make it more interesting (what, again?!), you have to wonder whether we're stuck in "Groundhog Quarter Century" (First

they sell us "affectless" art, then they get bored with it (well, duh!), then they start us all off down the Krazy Krafts blind alley again; next they sell us "affectless" art, etc...)

Theory and a longing for tactility aside, you have to suspect that any move to render a gloriously and infinitely reproducible PHOTOGRAPH into a unique object (like, say, a stinkin' painting) is motivated by (a) the pressure to develop a 15-minute career based on a Unique Selling Proposition and (b) the potential value (as in "Collector's Cash") that accrues thereby.

Comment by Vinegar Tom — June 5, 2007 @ [10:25 am](#)

14. In contrast to contemporary perfected color photographs try to get to the Musee d'Albert Kahn on the western edge of Paris. I'm not sure which I love more, the gardens— there is a Japanese garden complete with koi, as well as French and English gardens or the 70,000 autochromes housed in the adjacent museum. Made shortly after the turn of the 20th century Kahn commissioned various photographers to make a 'record of the world'. Autochromes are quite particulate in nature and convey a sense of fragility: their own and the world's.

Comment by [David G](#) — June 5, 2007 @ [10:32 am](#)

15. I think "Horton" is on the right track. This question is not one of frivolous process/processes. Antiquarian processes or reverting back to silver halide is not the answer. These techniques are novelties, and their punch will fade. The only way that a process can help combat sterility is if that process is done in service of the work, like in the example of Stephen Gill. But like Alec mentioned only one photographer can bury their photographs, it is not a change that can be made across the board.

No one has addressed the subject matter of contemporary photography, and seeing as how this is Alec Soth's blog, he seems like a good candidate to discuss. Alec attributes the feeling of sterility to new digital processes. I attribute the feeling to sterile photographs. Don't get me wrong here. I love Alec's work, but if he wants to get away from sterility he has to start taking a different type of picture. The style of picture-making that Alec employs and what also seems to be the trend in contemporary photography, is a sterile style. Formal, posed portraits, backed off from the subject matter, the photographer plays (or pretends to play) a minimal role in the photographs. I am not suggesting a solution here, nor am I suggesting a reversion back to the style of Nan Goldin or Mark Morrisroe. Although I would like to see some of that rawness and some of that emotion introduced back into contemporary photography. Can it be done in the face of the new digital processes? I don't know. It seems as though the kings of sterility are feeling the burn just like you Alec. Gregory Crewdson is combatting sterility with his new emotional b/w series "Fireflies," and Jeff Wall is returning to black and white.

Comment by Josh — June 5, 2007 @ [10:40 am](#)

16. I'm at work, and I can't get onto this as much as I'd like, but suffice to say, tactility in a photograph is as much about the content as the form that delivers it.

Comment by Sam Logan — June 5, 2007 @ [10:54 am](#)

17. Coincidentally, I spent yesterday evening looking through three (incomplete) decades of back copies of Creative Camera, starting in the seventies. I was left with an overwhelming sense of (a) the futility of work which was primarily "experimental" in a technical sense, (b) the strength of work motivated by the desire to see the world in a fresh, contemporary way, and (c) how totally I failed to tell the difference between (a) and (b) at the time. I suppose I should also add (d), a sense of a world not going in circles (pace Vinegar Tom) but ascending in a very shallow spiral indeed...

Which is just another way of saying: your job is to trust your own judgement as an artist, Alec, and if you want to print your work on slices of toast, go ahead and don't pay any attention to us (though we reserve the right to laugh).

Comment by [Mike C.](#) — June 5, 2007 @ [11:09 am](#)

18. Josh makes an important point here. Contemporary photographers cannot continue to cling to the idea that emotion somehow depletes a sense of ingenuity in a photograph. If anything, lack of emotion is the culprit behind contemporary photography's laughably iterative "look" — as heartless as bad fashion photography at this point. Blank-eyed expression elicits the same expression from its viewers, does it not? Goldin et al. were of a time and place that no longer exist. They are no more or less relevant than the analogue process or obsession with medium. The current ideasmithing and pointless noodling that seems poised to make the image in photography (even the dreaded digital) redundant should be tempered with photography's timeless goal: capturing and keeping life in the face of death. Too romantic?

Comment by [A.W.](#) — June 5, 2007 @ [11:46 am](#)

19. So much photography now is incredibly controlled — the lighting, the subjects, their expression, their pose, the backdrop — it's all controlled and so lacks feeling, emotion and context because whatever is shown, whoever is shown is determined entirely or almost entirely by the photographer.

The sense of sterility doesn't come from the process, be it analog or digital — it comes from the photographer/artist and also from the academic, commercial and media outlets that determine what is good.

Perhaps burying photographs or manipulating them in other non-digital ways in which the final result is undetermined is some way of responding to this control freakery of big print photography. But it's still a way of manipulating them and if the images don't have any depth, then they are still empty pictures and the manipulation just another novelty which can catch our eye for a moment before the next gimmick comes along.

Comment by [colin pantall](#) — June 5, 2007 @ [12:54 pm](#)

20. I'm wrestling with this ambiguity you've tossed out: tactile photography vs tactile photographs. In Gill's buried examples, the tactility of the photograph tends to overwhelm the photography. (Ironically, most of us are left to apprehend these tactile objects via "sterile" photographs presented on a monitor.)

On the other hand, the Steichen photo is relatively transparent. The question at hand then seems to be: Did the photographer record the qualities of the sculpture, or did he translate them? From here, it looks like clinical detail is sacrificed for expressive ends (compared to the catalogue shots), so I would lean toward translation, or a kind of empathetic collaboration.

Which makes me wonder how Steichen might go about photographing Gill's buried photographs.

Comment by [robert e](#) — June 5, 2007 @ [1:24 pm](#)

21. I think that if you can't manage to put life into a digital image, then your photography is lifeless to begin with. You must be pointing the camera at lifeless subjects. There is content and delivery.

Comment by [ncs](#) — June 5, 2007 @ [1:47 pm](#)

22. Last year I found over 500 deteriorated Kodachromes abandoned in a housing unit that was open to the elements. Time and moisture have really done a number on them — some are still recognizable, though with displaced colors, while others have deteriorated into complete stained-glass abstractions ...but no matter what the state of decay, each is amazingly beautiful.

I spent a long time wondering what to do with them. Prints from scans turn out okay but merely retranslate them back to a "steril" medium and leave me unsatisfied.

So I've concluded it's enough just to keep them as is and enjoy them privately as objects.

Comment by [Michael](#) — June 5, 2007 @ [2:55 pm](#)

23. Gill has a gimmick: good for him, unfortunately the Artist's Statement may be the most interesting thing on the wall at the 'Buried' show.

Comment by [ross](#) — June 5, 2007 @ [3:17 pm](#)

24. Photobooks are tactile.

Comment by [Lester P](#) — June 5, 2007 @ [6:21 pm](#)

25. if you don't like what you are doing, Alec, try something new. You, out of all of us, have the opportunity to try that. ~ Burn your negs and print them backwards through a mirror.

I see no reason why you should dislike what is being done with photography though.

Digital is it all too smooth, I agree – and you, shooting with 8X10, will have the same effect, unless you print HUGE (which you should)

Grain is a beautiful thing. Photography is beautiful. Why do we need to be "artists"?, why can't we just take pictures ?

Maybe, if you want tactile, you should drop down a format, to 5x4, or 6x6....?

It isn't tactile or non tactile – it all comes down to whether people actually want to look at the pictures or not.....

But please don't tell us that clear, in focus, beautiful, pictures are dull.

Bob.

(ps- nice to meet you too.)

Comment by [Robert Phillips](#) — June 5, 2007 @ [6:22 pm](#)

26. making an interesting print is not like making interesting photographs. if you do the former, at least do the latter as well!

Comment by [aizan](#) — June 5, 2007 @ [6:22 pm](#)

27. The contemporary art museum that I work at is hosting a show right now that's in the vein of this line of questioning, I don't know if it's too much of a violation, but I've really enjoyed experiencing the show and the work. The show is called Photograph as Canvas, and showcases artists who paint or modify the surfaces of the photographs themselves. In one piece, Rob Fisher photographed a trailer in an empty field, but painted on flames and fire in a realistic style. This gives the piece not only a tactile sense, but literally makes it unreproducible. Any reaction to works like this? A link to the show: <http://aldrichart.org/exhibitions/photograph.php>

Comment by [Kyle Chayka](#) — June 5, 2007 @ [8:47 pm](#)

28. i think a lot of current photography just looks really over produced. when i look at flickr and just browse around randomly, i'm amazed at how the "perfect" image has become so common, it is the new normal. a simple photograph stands out for what it is not.

Comment by [kevin](#) — June 6, 2007 @ [12:13 am](#)

29. Alec – if you thinking about this in relation to your prints at the Host Gallery last week, I did think that, though I love the images, the prints seemed flatter and less involving than the only other prints of yours I've seen, the 'Mississippi' photos at The Photographer's Gallery. Different printing technique? Different size?

Comment by [guybatey](#) — June 6, 2007 @ [2:36 am](#)

30. [...] alec soth – blog » Blog Archive » Tactile photography 'One of my frustrations with contemporary photographic technique, mine included, is the feeling of sterility. Digital processes have become so sophisticated that nearly every picture you see is dusted and anti-scratched to a state of frozen perfection.' (tags: photography) [...]

Pingback by [Heraclitean Fire - Links](#) — June 6, 2007 @ [4:23 am](#)

31. [...] Alec Soth is onto something. Lomos and Holgas aside, so much of contemporary photography is dedicated to the perfect representation of the world, and these perfect representations of our world are missing something. They're missing the art. They're missing that part of photography which is about the camera letting us see something our eye's can't. Like motion blur, or grain, or flare. Those flaws that we are often trying to avoid are part of the photographic art. When we eliminate them entirely, we've left part of the art behind. Posted by matt Filed in Photos [...]

Pingback by ["Frozen Perfection" \(03750012\) | 1pt4 | B&W Rangefinder Photography by Matt Alofs](#) — June 6, 2007 @ [6:35 am](#)

32. "Part of the photographic art" can be, as well, the perfection of detail achieved by a large negative, which also lets us see things our naked eyes could not. In this respect, there are a couple of useful remarks made by Stephen Shore in Jay's movies. No, we don't see like 8x10s! (We don't see like cameras, period, and especially we don't see like large format ones).

As for "tactile", I think that category is more at home with painting and sculpture, and I'd leave it there. Why deny the medium's nature? I'm not interested in Gill's complicated strategy. And of course, there are other ways to overcome "sterility": content -and the artist's enthusiasm for and engagement with what he or she is doing.

Comment by [Federico](#) — June 6, 2007 @ [8:22 am](#)

33. Tim Davis' images of paintings' deteriorating surfaces is a fantastic idea. I cant wait to see them!

Ideas of photography and surface I think are incredibly relevant. i agree that a contemporary trend in photography influenced by new technologies has sucked out some air and life. the picture has become sanitized, so formal as to be didactic, a form of data collection, visually vacuous. its like photography has become the very product of technology, market and global interconnectedness Gursky was originally commenting on...has the current trend in photography become the 99 cent store?

but this makes me also think about how we now experience a lot of photographic work online, on blogs, and websites. this is another surface to the image. another experience of the medium. and although how well photography is suited for it, populist in nature and technological medium, i sometimes think we are too quick to put up images without the intent of them being made to exist online. we want to get the work out there. have people see it. and see it quickly. but what other artistic medium is so prevalent online? does Bill Viola make videos and put them on YouTube? does John Currin have a wesite?

I have made similar long winded comments recently on Kevin Sisemore's blog <http://kevinsisemore.wordpress.com/> about a Jesse Chehak photograph i like (and the same bill viola joke..) but it does make we wonder. i its all interrealtd. and it all comes down to speed and

time. the process of the physical deterioration of a photograph, like Gill's, the flattening of that surface, like Davis, whose own physical print will deteriorate in time, or the immediacy and vacuum packed, timeless digitized image existing on the interweb that never grows old, never deteriorates, never changes.

Comment by [stewart](#) — June 6, 2007 @ [9:46 am](#)

34. acutally now that I think of it, Jen Beckman took it a step further by putting a virtual photography gallery on Second Life. novelty aside, where or what is the photograph in that case? do you have new surface or even a new medium?? it raises some interesting questions. it won't grow old. if you don't like it or get tired of it, change or delete it.

Comment by [stewart](#) — June 6, 2007 @ [10:07 am](#)

35. Obvious differences in Steichen's view versus the museum catalog views include the lighting (natural versus artificial) and the focal length (Steichen is in close to the head). The museum catalog photos are just that — distanced, museum-lit, static — proper, formally-enforced dullness. The background of the artist's workspace has been replaced by prim seamless paper. Steichen's view is probably more like what Rodin saw in the light of his own studio, while making the piece — while it was still "alive," if you will.

Being aware and true to the experience of a thing — sounds like good old-fashioned photography to me.

Comment by [bjorke](#) — June 6, 2007 @ [11:21 am](#)

36. I do feel that with all the amazing papers available now that the tactile experience is in full bloom. I love matching a very "toothy" paper to a subject that is rigid. Or using a delicate handmade paper for flora.

I love the photo of the blind feeling the sculpture. It's quite moving. Burying pix -huh well okay for an experiment to see what happens. But from the picture here it looked unremarkable and it must have if you didn't even notice it at first.

I love discovering textured surfaces to photograph. They look like found sculpture, paintings and sometimes pottery.

And with all the bad photographs out there I applaud perfection.

Comment by [Christine](#) — June 6, 2007 @ [11:56 am](#)

37. Thanks to the gods that I can enjoy photography for what it is. Concept and technique do not need to be two polar opposites and I believe that in the best photography they are not. At the same time to ridicule technical skill as irrelevant reeks of jealousy.

Personally I would not trade all of the c-prints in the world for a single Weston or Bravo or Stand or Adams or White. Texture? The texture is in the detail, the pores or wrinkles of a face, the grain of wood, the almost touchable roughness of a granite rock. I have yet to find "texture" in 30x40 c-prints made with 10 or 12MP digital SLR's. What I find instead is blur and concept that sadly lacks emotion.

Comment by [Mike Davis](#) — June 6, 2007 @ [12:31 pm](#)

38. For her last show this Hickey-trained painter (Jacqueline Ehliis) photographed paintings then showed the photos, mounted on top of colored plexi as paintings... all are unique, no editions and she never showed the source paintings as she preferred the physical photos as paintings.

link: <http://www.jacquelineehlis.com/paintings/violet.htm>

Comment by [JJ](#) — June 6, 2007 @ [12:42 pm](#)

39. I've got a couple of knacked 6x6's if anyone want's to make me an offer!

Comment by [mark page](#) — June 6, 2007 @ [2:00 pm](#)

40. <http://utopia.knoware.nl/users/philippe/invitation.html>

Comment by [edward](#) — June 6, 2007 @ [3:24 pm](#)

41. is physicality the same as sensuality? im often left feeling jipped, even when looking at the photographs that move me the most, the images that make me feel that giddy euphoria that good art makes one feel. but never am i as moved by a wall hanging as i have been by great music, even a great pop song. can photography reach that same kind of sensuality? ive never cried looking at a photograph, though ive almost cried. but there are certain voices, certain notes, that have made me crumple up and give in..

Comment by [andres](#) — June 6, 2007 @ [4:43 pm](#)

42. In danger of sounding like a kook, sometimes I quite seriously wonder if the chemical explanation of light acting on a light sensitive surface isn't all just hokum, and photographs in fact produced by a form of telepathy... To put it another way, JD Salinger said: 'a fat faced peony will not show itself to anyone but Issa – not to Buson, not to Shiki, not even to Basho'.

Whereas Issa said:

In these latter day
Degenerate times
Cherry Blossoms everywhere!

Comment by [Amy de Wit](#) — June 6, 2007 @ [6:13 pm](#)

43. after reading your comments about tactile photography and Stephen Gill's buried photographs, i was reminded of filmmaker David Gatten's work "What The Water Said", in which he placed unexposed rolls of film crab traps and tossed them in the Atlantic Ocean, back in the late 1990's. The resulting film was a record of the sounds and movements of the water, rocks, sand and underwater creatures interacting with the emulsion. This kind of work takes the tactile approach even further, by eliminating the camera all together...

Comment by [chris testani](#) — June 6, 2007 @ [7:58 pm](#)

44. The last post leads quite perfectly to another artist who had some work on show at Photo-London. Susan Derges, who had two or three pieces up in the Ingleby Gallery stand, also uses cameraless photography.

<http://www.inglebygallery.com/artistsDetail.php?imageID=750&id=34>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Susan_Derges

"For the 1997 River Taw series she worked at night, placing photographic paper on the river bed and allowing the images to be exposed through ambient light, aided by the use of a flash gun."

The prints are really incredibly beautiful – and large. I wonder if you saw those, Alec ?

Comment by [Robert Phillips](#) — June 6, 2007 @ [8:23 pm](#)

45. Since I am a photographer I am unhappy about the unsensuality of the photographic process. But there are photographs which just touch me, works of photographers I love, and then I forget about the lacking materiality of the whole process. But there are two more aspects I am thinking of. Presentation and content. I first saw Jochen Lempert prints and work as a student. He is a biologist and a photographer-artist. His black and white prints were lousy and lovely. He just didn't stick to the rules: how to make a perfect print. For his work, full of humor, curiosity, full of surprises, he found the right form to make his pictures visible. (I never could make a print like he does)

Is there anybody who thinks Diane Arbus pictures are sterile? Or Boris Mihailows photos in "case history"? Exploring the links through your blog, I get the impression, there is a lot of very high quality, very professional photography, and to come to an end, very clean photography in the U.S.

When soul is lacking, the clean becomes sterile.

Burying pictures is an interesting idea, but the outcome in Gills case doesn't really convince me.

Comment by Zoltán Jókay — June 6, 2007 @ [10:28 pm](#)

46. One issue with digital is that there is no physical presence – I recently picked up a digital camera, and most of the images I have taken have been deleted: there is no waste. The other camera I use is a Polaroid – and there is lots of waste, all of which, eventually gets recycled into other works (and yes, as sculpture). So it is not just a reaction against the 'perfect' print void of any trace of physical interaction, but against the digital as digital.

Heidi Morstang, many years ago now, produced a number of prints, the process I have forgotten, that consisted of embossed text: all white. The text itself was derived from interviews conducted with individuals blind or visually impaired. Alas, exhibited, they were placed behind glass; but they were beautiful to touch if you got the chance.

For added interest see: Photographs Objects Histories: On the materiality of images. Edwards, Hart. Routledge. 2004.

Comment by [Sean](#) — June 7, 2007 @ [2:46 am](#)

47. A few extra points on the relationship between the looking and touching (from an essay I am trying to write for uni!).

...to examine the photograph – in this case the integral Polaroid – as an object, necessitates a visual examination: thus inspection requires both an optic and haptic approach (Edwards, Hart: 9). Image and object are 'grasped in one act of vision' (Langer 1957: 93, quoted in Un beau Souvenir du Canada: Object, image, symbolic space. Schwartz: 19).

Mavor (Pleasures taken: performances of sexuality and loss in Victorian Photographs) states, in regard to the photograph 'Holy family' by Julia Margaret Cameron: 'I better understand what I see through the sense of touch even if I am not actually touching them.' (P68) and goes on to quote from a text by Cameron's husband, Charles Hay Cameron, 'An essay on the sublime and beautiful' (1835) which affords a primacy to the sense of touch:

'... which originally explained to us the modifications of light, is neglected, like the dictionary of language with which it has made us familiar.' Mavor concludes: '... we still understand vision through the haptic; it is only because we have become so firmly entrenched in the connection that we no longer realize it.' (P69).

Comment by [Sean](#) — June 7, 2007 @ [3:02 am](#)

48. I once saw Lee Jung Jin's beautiful liquid light prints on rice paper.. there were gorgeous.. the prints felt sculptural, asked to be touched to be fully understood.. you can see some poor reproductions here

http://www.kukiegallery.com/old_eng/past_view.php?ex_no=49

Comment by [andres](#) — June 7, 2007 @ [8:19 am](#)

49. Can contemporary photography find its way back to something physical?

Yes.

Comment by [Zoe Strauss](#) — June 7, 2007 @ [9:56 am](#)

50. Joachim Schmidt's show at the Photographers' Gallery in London had a whole load of found photographs – as well as those ripped and torn by Schmidt. They were tactile and rippled with the contingency of the image and life. Nice ideas, but after a while the pictures do get incredibly dull – tactile and dull.

Comment by [colin pantall](#) — June 7, 2007 @ [10:31 am](#)

51. I think that most photographs that have meaning, that have a worldly presence are from hard labor of an artist. Prints where the photographer carefully thinks about how to set up a scene to best convey the message they want to convey. Then with utmost care, dedication, and for obvious reasons, passion, finally creates a print from the materials. A labor of love, a labor of passion, and a strong urge to show the viewer something important.

The photographs from the catalog are commercial photographs. They are just literally showing the piece as 'accurately' as they can. There is no artistic urge behind it, just the quest for accuracy. The photograph by Steichen proves that if you have the guts and the brains to pull it off, you can with photography react to the emotional content of the artwork, but it comes from within the person, that person's intelligence, and that person's understanding and interpretation of the message. Steichen's photograph is also interesting in the fact that it is materially a much less accurate incarnation of the original than the rest of the dull catalog work shown.

Try hard, very hard, to think about what you want to say, and then do everything in your might to convey that message. Don't give up until you're happy with the results. Now, how other people react to it is a different story, but I believe that it has to come from within, it has to be subject matter you're passionate about. It cannot just be process. Add blood, sweat, and tears. Then it becomes real.

Photography, compared to sculpture, painting, drawing, wood turning, etc, is a process that is fairly simple, yet most of all quick. Especially so with digital caption. Consider a sculpture: the stone, wood, metal, or whatever it was made of, has imperfections that are incorporated into the design. Same with painting, drawing, wood turning. Photography is much more precise, it's too easy to create a 'perfect' print. It doesn't stop us, hold us back, make us think as much while we create. There isn't enough time. We have to purposely make that time, and I don't think enough photographers do, including myself. Even hauling a big view camera around is a quick process by comparison. That's why I believe that the hard work and struggle to get to the 'right' end product is so important. Interpretation of a negative, making the vision come alive. That to me is true artwork, making your vision come alive. For any medium.

Comment by [Thomas](#) — June 7, 2007 @ [11:10 am](#)

52. Quite the chicken or the egg as to the sterility of digital and subject matter. "Artists" have often added their "artifice" when using photography as a medium; photographers, for the most part, got their tactile quotient (and then some) when they got their hands wet and cursed the darkness before getting the end product of their desire.

Comment by [Stan B.](#) — June 7, 2007 @ [12:02 pm](#)

53. [...] To give a last example, Alec Soth wrote in his recent article about 'Tactile Photography' that he discovered the work of Stephen Gill and shortly after that the work of Tim Davis and Matt Ducklo, all working in some way about limitations of photography. [...]

Pingback by [The Sonic Blog - künstlerische Fotografie & mehr - art photography & more](#) » [Blog Archive](#) » [Ein Kamel im Dunkeln / A Camel in the Dark](#) — June 8, 2007 @ [3:43 am](#)

54. Alec, yes, I think you envy painting and sculpture. Question is what the cure is. One is tackling the problem from the outside, i.e., working on the print or the slide, doing things with them to show that something has "happened" to them. Is that the problem? The flawless, sterile photograph looks as if nothing has happened to it. It just is, there is nothing to suggest process, i.e., passage of time. When there is grain, this suggests process, it shows that somebody has done something to bring about this picture. Burying the picture and digging it up later takes this to extremes, the passage of time becomes ever more visible. Same thing with the slides that have been exposed to rain. Maybe it makes a picture seem more human if we sense passage of time behind it. After all, time passing is a pretty elementary human experience.

But I suspect that this physicality is a dead end for most photographers because it means to surrender what photography does best, which is the opposite, namely to accurately record a moment, a fraction of a second and make it immutable. In that sense, the sterility of digital photography (is this really a function of digital?) takes its strength to new heights. The perfection exacerbates the feeling that the picture is just a picture, not the real thing. So, the second cure would be to forget about the outside, to get ever deeper into the picture, work from the inside rather than the outside. And that, incidentally, is one of the things I like so much about your photography.

Comment by Karsten S-H — June 8, 2007 @ [5:36 pm](#)

55. I just want to mention work of Ernestine Ruben (<http://www.ernestineruben.com>) – her portfolio Rodin

Comment by Igor — June 12, 2007 @ [7:50 am](#)

56. The more you are involved in the process of making your images, the better they will be.

I shoot primarily on B&W film for that reason. I roll the film myself, shoot with manual cameras and develop and print it in my small darkroom. (I also scan the negatives and upload to Flickr.)

In the shooting, I often use meterless cameras and only manual focus. I carry an incident meter, but rarely use it, as the film has so much latitude that I really need to screw up to get an unusable image.

Focusing manually is key, as is using only manual settings. The more you have to think about these things, the more the image becomes expressive of you as an artist and the more satisfying it is. The images that you gather and the photographic objects you make from them become REAL THINGS that you and you alone were capable of making.

The idea that you need to distress your images physically is one that doesn't sit well with me. "Be good to the things you create" someone told me once and I agree.

"Tactile"... Interesting notion...

The more tactile your processes are, the more tactile the result will be.

Think of your images, scans, digital files, negatives as "potential pictures" that may or may not become objects, artifacts, if you will, as prints. This gives you dozens of more choices to make, every one that affects how tactile the finished object will be. Do that and I doubt you'll be tempted to bury them in a field.

I used to despise the painter Wassily Kandinsky because I only knew his work through reproductions in books or posters, where his style became little more than flat, abstract patterns. Seeing the originals blew me away. My estimation of his work went from "gimmicky hack" to genius.

Cheers,
Jim O'Connell

Comment by [Jim O'Connell](#) — June 13, 2007 @ [3:37 am](#)

57. I think the technological achievements of contemporary digital photography are still very new to all of us. I suspect that somewhere, somehow, we're still getting use to it both in using it and reading it. The softwares are also allowing immense latitude in image manipulations. Those very manipulations are not necessarily obvious to the viewer but they do contribute to reading of the work. So in that way I would argue that the possibilities of digital photography are indeed very tactile...

Comment by Eric — June 13, 2007 @ [10:02 am](#)

58. It's a performance piece reproduced as a sculpture reproduced as a photograph – so there's some point missing going on here.

Comment by steven — June 14, 2007 @ [8:12 am](#)

59. I didn't mean to come across sounding as though film is better than digital, though for me it is, for the reasons outlined above. I need to have my hands in it to make it work.

People are doing terrific things with digital cameras and printers. Tactile stuff too, I suppose. I haven't had any success with that though.

Years ago, I had a Brancusi show catalog from 1926 that had photos by Steichen. Simply wonderful and much like the one you reproduced above, though they were photogravures, I believe.

Jim O'Connell

Comment by [Jim O'Connell](#) — June 14, 2007 @ [10:51 pm](#)

60. I think the quandary arises from the seductive "promise of perfection" offered by the photographic tools of the day versus the inevitable distance between capture and recollection. It's too easy to get caught up in pursuing some shared ideal of perfection at the expense of personal expression. Rather than reaching into our souls to be in touch with what seek to express, we fetish the technology to seek promised answers to our unexamined needs.

Feeling this unsatisfying gap between an increasingly hands-off process, the results of that process, and what one was trying to convey, is the (re)awakening of the artist within the technologist. Whatever the technology, the artist within seeks ways to intervene, to be as hands-on as necessary to capture one's feeling as well as the image.

Simply jumping wholesale on some alternative process bandwagon takes us back to where we started; imperfection for its own sake, disconnected from the subject, isn't necessarily any more expressive. For most it's just another fun club to join, but it can also be a means of challenging our assumptions and may contribute to the path of self-expression. The quest is to recognize and take the tools at our disposal, and to bend them to our artistic will in such a way that the viewer is able to empathize with the artist's journey. So again and again we have to start within and free ourselves from our self-imposed, often invisible, constraints to reconnect with the artist.

Comment by [Henning Riebe](#) — June 19, 2007 @ [5:27 pm](#)

61. [...] Another thing that struck me was how much space was reserved for photography made with the aid of historic processes such as tintypes, collages, cyanotypes, photogravures or collodion wetplate. Must we see this as the slow aftermath of the waves of exhibitions celebrating 150 years of photography in 1989, as this article suggest? And, has this wave of interest died out in the decade that followed or do we see a slow but steady increase of interest in this type of photography? Not really, if one were to judge by the sequels of this annual on American photography. The last few editions seem focussed more and more on color photography. But what to make then of Alec Soth's longing for less sterile, more tactile photography? [...]

Pingback by [another fine art photography book | Mrs. Deane](#) — June 30, 2007 @ [5:13 pm](#)

62. Hope I'm not too late to say something about the issue, but together with the tactile element of photography that Alec find as missing, I think that the point is also the lack of a true 'perceptive' dimension of a lot of contemporary photography. I mean pictures to be seen with the eyes and not with the brain, if this can explain. The tonalities in a picture can evoke worlds and ultimately 'be' the picture, make it live. So more than a picture whose surface is full of material meaning to me, what I often find lacking is pictures that 'touch' my eyes, and this maybe for two main reasons: pictures that just focuses on the thing which is actually photographed, or picture which just focus on composition in order to be arty, leaving us in front of a mere graphic and not fully visual result. hope I made myself clear, hard to say these things in a few words and in another language...

Comment by Fabio — July 16, 2007 @ [9:30 am](#)

63. Glad I found this thread, you hit on a 'problem' i keep returning to regularly. Good to see there are photographers who feel the same. For some reason, the 'tactile' is associated with process and authenticity.

Just a general point, it's interesting to observe how, as technology moves on, outdated processes that once were considered soulless and sterile, move up in the appreciation because they are now superseded by even more sterile processes. That doesn't just apply to photography, it's the nature of progress I think, guided by various interests.

I believe though, that there are ways to maintain the integrity as a photographer, there just can't be a universal recipe...

Comment by [christoph](#) — July 19, 2007 @ [5:22 am](#)

64. [...] Philip-Lorca diCorcia 'Ike Cole, 38 years old, Los Angeles, CA, \$25' 1990-92 Obviously this push and pull of subtle cinematic staging has become worn-out in contemporary photography. Alec Soth wrote a little about this subject this week. Nonetheless, I feel that diCorcia with some restraint in the amount that he contrives his images compared to other photographers working in similar ways comments on how photographs function in our society as puzzle pieces rather answers. For a new museum such as Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art the Philip-Lorca diCorcia show represents it's ability to put together a major show on a very large scale. [...]

Pingback by [Jon Bakos | Blog » Blog Archive » Philip-Lorca dicorcia at the ICA](#) — August 7, 2007 @ [8:33 pm](#)