

# Alec Soth's Archived Blog

July 23, 2007

## Circular Photos (or Views from the Convex Helmet Shield)

Filed under: circles n\` bunnies — alecsothblog @ 12:08 am



George Eastman on board S.S. Gallia, 1890, by Frederick Church

A few years ago I was lying in the grass staring up the sky when I made the seemingly obvious discovery that my vision is circular. Our eyes are round, the earth is round, even camera lenses are round – but after years of taking pictures I'd failed to notice that my vision was round too. After that I started telling friends that I was going to start taking circular pictures. I haven't followed up on this threat, but it still seems like a good idea. There was a time, after all, when this was perfectly acceptable:



Sir John Herschel's photogenic drawing of telescope at Slough, 1839



Portrait of boy and girl in colonial costume, ca. 1860, by Oscar Rejlander

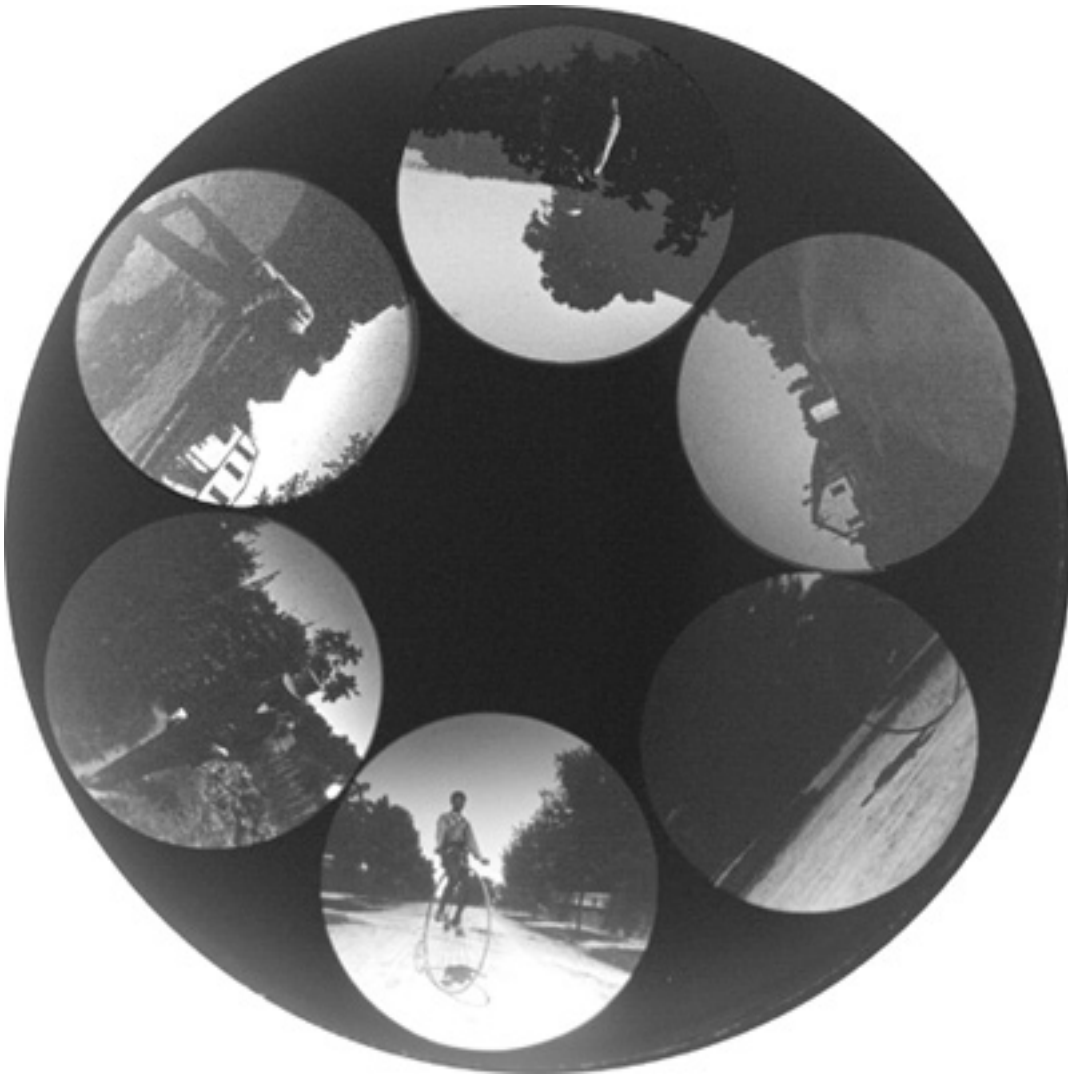


Telescopic View of Full Moon by Briggs Co. (active 1868-1930)





Ellen Terry at Age Sixteen, 1863, by Julia Margaret Cameron



Unknown photographer, circa 1890. These images were taken with a vest camera. Designed by R.D. Gray in 1885, the vest camera was a disc form fitted behind a rigid false shirt front with a lens that, disguised as a button, passed through the front. Six exposures could be made on the glass plate, rotated by a knob which also passed through the front.

In the late-sixties Emmet Gowin gave the circle another shot. In his 1976 monograph, *Photographs*, he writes:

About the circular pictures: I had quite forgotten that it was the nature of the lens to form a circle and in 1967 my only lens was a short Angulon intended for a small camera. I'd been given an old Eastman View 8×10 and brought the two together out of impatience and curiosity. After a while, I recognized the wonderful exaggeration near the edge. I began to use the camera with the lens, but for several years I would trim these prints so that the circle was disguised. Eventually I realized that such a lens contributed to a particular description of space and that the circle itself was already a powerful form.

Accepting the entire circle, what the camera had made, was important to me. It involved recognition of the inherent nature of things. I had set out to describe the world with my domain, to live a quality with things. Enrichment, I saw, involves a willingness to accept a changing vision of the nature of things – which is to say, reality. Often I had thought that things teach me what to do. Now I would prefer to say: As things reach us what we already are, we gain a vision of the world.



Danville, Virginia 1973 by Emmet Gowin

After Gowin, most circular photographs appear to be staged or experimental:



Little Children III, 1988, by Jeff Wall

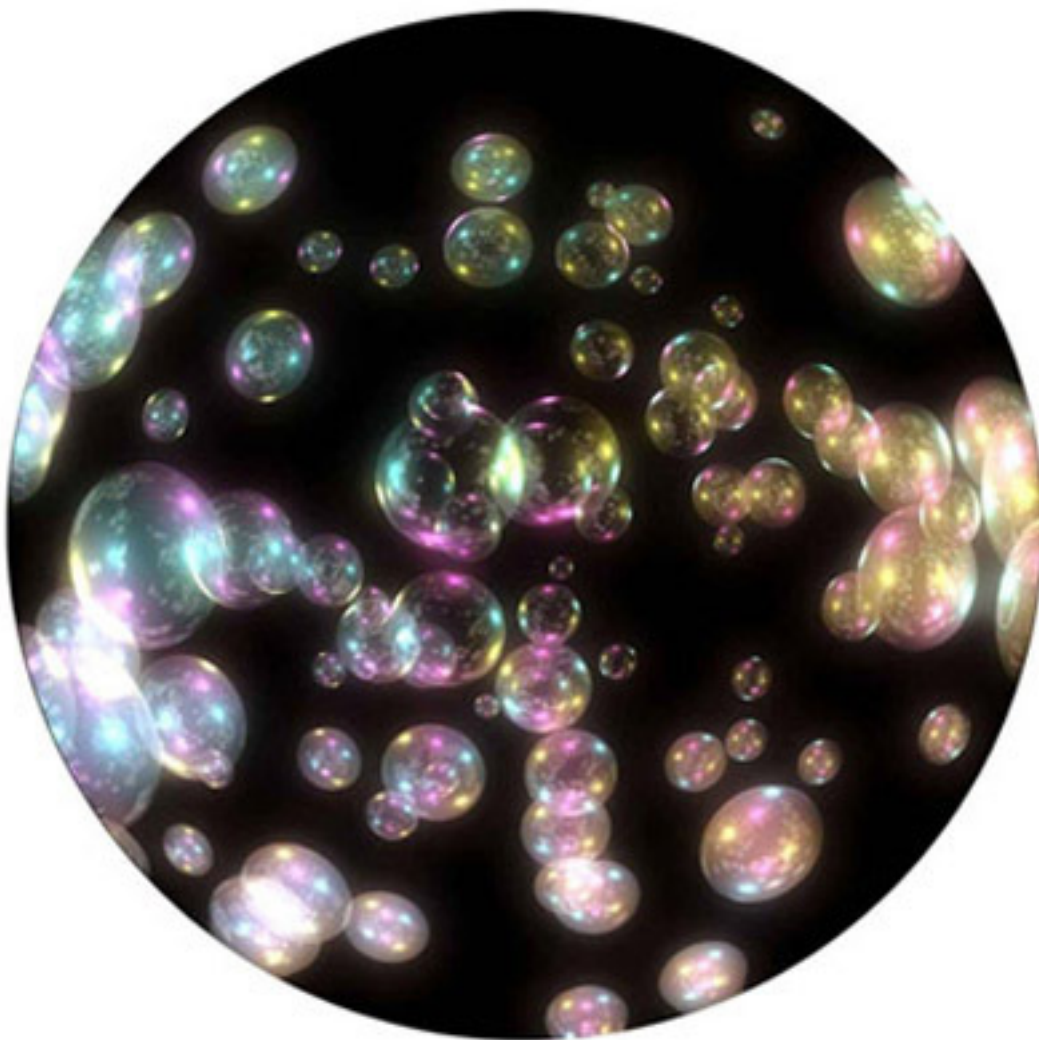




Man, 1993, by John Priola



Attracted to Light C, 1996-2000, by Doug & Mike Starn



Bubble, 2001, by Mariko Mori



Nachtphoto, 1992 by Thomas Ruff



Last Riot 2 (tondo #3), 2005, by AES + F

I'm looking for more circular photographs. Please send names, links or anything else that comes to mind.



## 56 Comments

1. Interesting... I was reminded of the intro to Gus Powell's website:

<http://www.guspowell.com>

*Comment by N — July 23, 2007 @ 12:33 am*

2. Alec,

When I first started trying to use my 8×10, I didn't have an appropriate lens, so the closest thing that was fast enough was only made to cover 5×7. I've only used it a handful of times, but I plan to eventually do wet-plate with it.

However, as somewhat of an experiment, I made the following three shots:

<http://www.beyondmonochrome.com/archives/2006/10/sidewalk.php>

[http://www.beyondmonochrome.com/archives/2006/09/front\\_yard.php](http://www.beyondmonochrome.com/archives/2006/09/front_yard.php)

<http://www.beyondmonochrome.com/archives/2006/10/security.php>

I suppose they qualify as circular as much as Thomas Ruff's image above does.

*Comment by Walker — July 23, 2007 @ 1:50 am*

3. Dan Winters.  
Kerik kouklis.

*Comment by jesus — July 23, 2007 @ 2:39 am*

4. Hi. I'm not a photographer but I enjoy reading your blog. As a birdwatcher, those round images immediately strike me as looking like the view through binoculars or a telescope. And since digital cameras have been around, birders have started using them to take pictures through their telescopes—digiscoping—and you do sometimes get pictures like this or this. (Obviously you could take pictures through a telescope with a film camera, but for various reasons it's a lot less convenient). I'm slightly wary of posting those links, because I make no claims for them as photographs; they're only taken for fun, with a compact camera handheld to the eyepiece of my old birding scope. But they give you the idea.

*Comment by Harry — July 23, 2007 @ 5:09 am*

5. I wonder how the circular format would affect how you compose the scene. Oddly enough I supposed it would be similar to shooting with the square format (6×6), which tends to force one to compose very differently than for 6×7, 135 etc.

On another note one thing I could never figure out is why the eyepiece on most viewfinders is square. Your eye is round and looking through some cameras feels like you are trying fit a round peg (your eye) in a square hole. Nikon figured that out a long time ago, as most of their viewfinders have a round entry. Obviously the area masking the 135 frame is rectangular, but the round eyepiece on something like an F3 just feels right.

Feli

*Comment by Feli di Giorgio — July 23, 2007 @ 5:32 am*

6. Steven Pippin—Laundromat Locomotion  
see Gavin Brown's enterprise  
Turner Prize shortlist 1999

*Comment by Joseph Montgomery — July 23, 2007 @ 6:36 am*

7. hello!  
about this... a toy camera that take circular images  
<http://shop.lomography.com/fisheycamera/>

bye & thank you for this blog

*Comment by Mirko — July 23, 2007 @ 6:52 am*

8. Hum, I wouldn't try to reduce photography to human vision. I mean, our visual system is extremely good at what it does, but works in a fairly different way to a camera. If we were able to take pictures through our eyeballs we would end up with lots of problems that would actually produce crap results: a) only the central 2 degrees or so of the image would be pretty sharp, as the fovea is quite reduced in size b) the further you go from the centre, less colour the image would have due to lack of cones. I mean, we experience the world as colorful, sharp, rich, but this is mostly due to the fact that we constantly move our eyes through it. What gets to the back of our retina is actually relatively poor (excepting the fovea) and focused on a relatively enclosed distance.

I would argue that a photograph gives you a better experience of seeing than what gets through your eyeball. If you take Soth's Utopia pic you have the whole room and all the characters in focus. If you were there, that's what you would experience. And you wouldn't realize that you have to move your eyes all over the room to actually see the people. If you tried to force your photography to work like your eyeballs, you would be forced to have only one character in focus and sharp, and everything else almost black and white. Instead of this, the photograph gives you a fairly good representation of reality.

Also, if you wanted to make 'realistic images', they wouldn't be circular, but more elliptic, as the visual field has more extension horizontally than vertically. And what about the two eyeball issue?

*Comment by Joni Karanka — July 23, 2007 @ 7:11 am*

9. "LET'S BUILD A  
STEREOSCOPE"

*Comment by einars o — July 23, 2007 @ 7:47 am*

10. Let's build a Lomo plastic stereoscope with heavy vignetting and screw the film a bit

*Comment by Joni Karanka — July 23, 2007 @ 7:55 am*

11. I have a small set of circular images. The fish bowl I use for the setup creates a nice circle by itself.

[http://jgould.net/media/svg\\_verticalstory/index.html](http://jgould.net/media/svg_verticalstory/index.html)

*Comment by Jay — July 23, 2007 @ 8:12 am*

12. Here's one I took through a terrace keyhole: <http://jonpack.com/index2.html>

For me, there's something satisfying about seeing the edges of a photograph, and even more so seeing them circular. It makes me want to get in inside and take a closer look.

*Comment by Jon Pack — July 23, 2007 @ 8:33 am*

13. Mike Chisholm, who left a post on Fridays poem has some great circular shots, he posted under mike c should anyone want to look..

*Comment by Mark Page — July 23, 2007 @ 8:57 am*

14. <http://images.google.com/images?q=fisheye>

*Comment by S. LIU — July 23, 2007 @ 9:13 am*

15. <http://www.julianapaciulli.com/> makes oval images.

*Comment by stefan abrams — July 23, 2007 @ 10:20 am*

16. I found these strange die-cut images, one of which is circular:



*Comment by pat — July 23, 2007 @ 10:33 am*

17. There is one circle photo in Jason Fulford's book Sunbird:



*Comment by Lester P — July 23, 2007 @ 10:42 am*

18. Twin Palms also put out a book on Henry P. Boss' photos of the Mississippi. Many of the images are circular cyanotypes.

"The cyanotypes reproduced in Mississippi Blue come from an album of photographs taken by Henry P. Bosse for the Army Corps of Engineers. They show the Mississippi River between Minneapolis and St. Louis, and were taken from 1882 to 1892 as part of the Corps' effort to document and understand the ever-changing river."

<http://www.twinpalms.com/?p=backlist&bookID=56>

*Comment by Adam B. Bell — July 23, 2007 @ 11:46 am*

19. Spencer Finch made an interesting sculpture to represent the shape of his field of vision as he looked at the night sky, an experience comparable to the one Alec is speaking of.

It is image #11 under the objects tab at his site. (sorry, I can not link directly to the image I am speaking of)

p.s. Sorry I e-mailed you about this earlier Alec – I was confused.

*Comment by Allison Grant — July 23, 2007 @ 11:48 am*

20. here is a much better link to Bosse's images of the Mississippi:

<http://www.mvr.usace.army.mil/PublicAffairsOffice/HistoricArchives/Bosse/bosse.htm>

*Comment by Adam B. Bell — July 23, 2007 @ 12:00 pm*

21. Thomas Gustainis makes oval photos

<http://www.bu.edu/prc/gustainis.htm>

*Comment by michael — July 23, 2007 @ 3:53 pm*

22. Sam Wang

<http://www.btzs.org/Gallery/SamWang/>

*Comment by Charles — July 23, 2007 @ 5:01 pm*

23. Hong Lei — in his After Song Dynasty Painting photos and his b&w landscape circle photos

<http://www.chambersfineart.com/en/contemp/hlei.html>

*Comment by Jim O — July 23, 2007 @ 5:03 pm*

24. I knew you would bring up this subject sooner or later. I posted this one awhile back...

[http://justinjamesreed.blogspot.com/2007/04/found-photograph-from-this-moment\\_19.html](http://justinjamesreed.blogspot.com/2007/04/found-photograph-from-this-moment_19.html)

Best.

*Comment by Justin — July 23, 2007 @ 5:30 pm*

25. Jo Longhurst

<http://www.naimad.co.uk/studio1-1/longhurst/images.html>

Regular non circular ones are real nice too.

[http://www.rca.ac.uk/pages/research/jo\\_longhurst\\_954.html](http://www.rca.ac.uk/pages/research/jo_longhurst_954.html)

*Comment by Stuart Whipps — July 23, 2007 @ 5:33 pm*

26. my first real interest in photography came from looking at records. the obvious here being the picture disc but also many times a picture will appear on the insert label ( gets fixed to the record in the center) these are always screenprinted so if the source material is photo it always has a dot pattern. but with the picture disc its actually a photo of some sort in there.

here is a link to one but really just type "picture disc" into ebay and its endless.

[http://cgi.ebay.com/metallica-only-1000-of-these-picture-disc-rare-bootleg\\_W0QQitemZ320139477194QQihZ011QQcategoryZ306QQrdZ1QQcmdZViewItem](http://cgi.ebay.com/metallica-only-1000-of-these-picture-disc-rare-bootleg_W0QQitemZ320139477194QQihZ011QQcategoryZ306QQrdZ1QQcmdZViewItem)



the glam era was big into these. the metal dudes like them too. if you search you can find it dating pretty far back, early johnny cash and such.

sadly i have never seen any by blue note or factory. i wonder?

*Comment by pds — July 23, 2007 @ 6:39 pm*

27. Funny how the least interesting is the most recent...

*Comment by Stan B. — July 23, 2007 @ 7:09 pm*

28. The fisheye lens was quite popular in the late sixties and 70's. A classic example is the work of Thomas Weir (Bob's brother) such as the portrait on the back of the Dead's album Anthem of the sun. (this predates pictue discs – chemicals provide the special effects back then).  
[http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/customer-images/B00007LTIH/ref=cm\\_ciu\\_pdp\\_images\\_2/104-7377133-2330331?ie=UTF8&s=music&index=2#gallery](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/customer-images/B00007LTIH/ref=cm_ciu_pdp_images_2/104-7377133-2330331?ie=UTF8&s=music&index=2#gallery)

The impoverished student technique to approximate this was to purchase an apartment door viewer and mount it in a lenscap – it worked ok.

*Comment by Marc Freidus — July 23, 2007 @ 7:12 pm*

29. Helen Chadwick has done a few different series of circular images–The Bad Blooms and some more anatomical stuff.

*Comment by jennifer — July 23, 2007 @ 8:18 pm*

30. I guess we all come “around” at one time or another. My first thought was, boy, there are going to be hard to frame. Decisions, decisions...

Pitchertaker

*Comment by Frank Armstrong — July 23, 2007 @ 8:47 pm*

31. Josiah Hawes, (one half of famous duo Southworth and Hawes) toke some really great circle pictures of downtown Boston, after he parted ways with Southworth. The Boston Athenaeum has a bunch, they are quite good – all i could find online was this book.

[http://cgi.ebay.com/Boston-MA-Photographs-Photography-Architecture-Boston\\_W0QQitemZ4608890182QQcmdZViewItem](http://cgi.ebay.com/Boston-MA-Photographs-Photography-Architecture-Boston_W0QQitemZ4608890182QQcmdZViewItem)

*Comment by Chester McCheeserton — July 23, 2007 @ 8:51 pm*

32. We see not in complete circular vision but our two orbs combine the scene creating a long rectangular shape with sides that fall off into infinity. Perhaps this is why film frames became somewhat square or rectangle. As much as I adore circles they seem incomplete as a print and unsatisfactory – limiting almost.

*Comment by Christine — July 23, 2007 @ 8:53 pm*

33. Please look at Joni Karanka's entry in the beginning of this thread. Shout out to you.

*Comment by Christine — July 23, 2007 @ 9:01 pm*

34. Arthur Tress's new book, *Planets*, from Lodima Press are all circular images made by photographing with his lens shade on backwards.

[http://www.lodimapress.com/html/arthur\\_tress.html](http://www.lodimapress.com/html/arthur_tress.html)

*Comment by Richard Boutwell — July 24, 2007 @ 12:47 am*

35. has anyone ever removed the ground glass on the back of their camera and w/ their eye focused on the image circle, kind of have to focus in space. squint.

*Comment by w robert angell — July 24, 2007 @ 3:32 am*

36. alec-

re your blog entry about circular photographs, you should know about the late jim pomeroy's work. he was a photographer/performer and a philosopher in wack job's clothing. at the time of his death he was working with a perversely convoluted set-up involving two facing convex mirrors with a camera in between, the entire contraption connected to a long pole (this description may or may not be correct, as it's been a while since i've thought about it, and i don't know if i understood it to begin with. but it was great fun in a trippy sort of way trying to figure out the pictorial space).  
here is a link.

<http://www.art.uh.edu/DIF/pomeroyArtworks.html>

*Comment by Karl Baden — July 24, 2007 @ 8:25 am*

37. Jeff Wall / Dan Graham

<http://www.skor.nl/popup.php?id=1075&label=FIG01>

*Comment by Cameron W — July 24, 2007 @ 9:27 am*

38. Oops. Was already there.

*Comment by Cameron W — July 24, 2007 @ 10:10 am*

39. Who needs to take circular pictures when you can make circular frames?  
(Paste favorite Soth photo here):

<http://www.photoshopgraphics.co.uk/circularframes.shtml>

*Comment by Annabel Clark — July 24, 2007 @ 11:33 am*

40. I jumped on the blog and saw that you were engulfed in circles. It reminded me of when I used to work at a place in Oak Ridge, TN called IPIX. I think I told you about it once. The company made 360 degree photos using software that stitched two circular photos together seamlessly and let you view them on the computer using software. Using a computer, you could control the frame of view in any direction. The idea was pretty great and was an exciting new visual sensation when I first saw it. The effect had kind of a novelty to it and you had to have a computer to view them so that made distribution of the photos more difficult than a conventional photo. The company went out of business recently because of cumulative bad business moves and probably changing trends. I believe it was at its peak during the internet boom. I believe Sony bought the rights to the technology in the end. When I first started there way back in 1999 or 2000, I had to learn how to take photos in this circular way that I hadn't ever done before. I used an 8mm fish-eye lens that pushed everything really far away from the camera. You had to be right up on things to see them so taking pictures in a wide open space was very difficult and usually boring. You also had to frame things all around you because every angle of view had to be interesting and filled with

something. Maybe this is where part of the "Phil-it-up" syndrome started. I was the youngest photographer and the low man on the totem pole so I would always get sent to the places that no-one else wanted to go. Columbia, South Carolina; Macon, Georgia; Second Harvest food bank in Knoxville, TN... these weren't the exciting touristy hot-beds and commercially absorbed paradises that some of the other photographers went to... but looking back, it was perfect for me because it let me go to places that were a little more hardened and average. Places that I would have probably never been. I'm sure I got a little education from that. After I had gotten the photos I was sent there to take, I would take the camera out to go shoot whatever caught my eye. Hope all is well. – Phillip

Waffle House at Midnight. Franklin, TN 2000

*Comment by Phillip Carpenter — July 24, 2007 @ 2:15 pm*

41. 'Held' by Graeme Miller:

*Comment by christoph — July 24, 2007 @ 4:33 pm*

42. Recent SFAI M.F.A Grad Aaron Rosenstreich made some circular images for his Vernissage exhibition. Here is the link:

<http://www.aaronrosenstreich.com/portfolio14373.html>

*Comment by grant ernhart — July 24, 2007 @ 9:15 pm*

43. This guy was ahead of the game:

<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/exhibitions/dutchportraits/slideshow/6.htm>

and reminds me of your most recent poem+inspiration

*Comment by Alex Edouard — July 25, 2007 @ 5:45 am*

44. Not quite circular, but photographer Michelle Bates celebrates the rounded vignettes of Holga images by hand-cutting negative carriers to follow the irregular curves of the edges. She then trims her prints to accentuate the shapes. She recently published a book about the joy of playing with Plastic Cameras. You can see some examples of her work, and listen to an audio interview with Michelle, at (["a href="http://www.lensculture.com/mbates.html" target="\\_blank">Lens Culture.](http://www.lensculture.com/mbates.html)

<http://www.lensculture.com/mbates.html>

*Comment by Jim Casper — July 25, 2007 @ 8:32 am*

45. Don't know which was the bigger shock, getting a name check on this blog (argh) or seeing Arthur Tress's Planets work (double argh — a whole set of work goes straight into the "Oh Well" file — same idea, same title, more or less same damn pictures...). A salutary lesson, though: for what it's worth, I conclude that the "circular image" is a good example of the danger of form driving content: the circle is a shape it's actually quite hard to see through or past — it insists "planet", "porthole", "telescope", "petri dish", etc. (heart-shaped pictures would be a bigger challenge, I suppose). Perhaps that's why the best circular photographs are often trimmed off, top and bottom, as Emmet Gowin's usually were. Suggesting the circle may be more powerful than actually showing it.

*Comment by Mike C. — July 25, 2007 @ 10:49 am*

46. Dan Winters did a series focusing on Downtown LA called "La Ciudad". He shot 4×5 with a circular mask in the inside the camera. The project was shot on 4×5 Tmax 100 glass plates and hand developed in pyro.

*Comment by Jason Campbell — July 25, 2007 @ 11:20 am*

47. Your blog software cut off the html I included in the last post. Here is the link to Dan Winters La Ciudad.  
<http://www.jankesnergallery.com/jkgartists/winters-dan.html>

*Comment by Jason Campbell — July 25, 2007 @ 11:23 am*

48. Thanks for the enjoyable read.

[http://www.flickr.com/photo\\_zoom.gne?id=471742744&context=photostream&size=o](http://www.flickr.com/photo_zoom.gne?id=471742744&context=photostream&size=o)

[http://www.flickr.com/photo\\_zoom.gne?id=471754310&context=photostream&size=o](http://www.flickr.com/photo_zoom.gne?id=471754310&context=photostream&size=o)

*Comment by vicky — July 26, 2007 @ 6:19 am*

49. Thanks Alec for the interesting post and Michael as well for the PRC/Thomas Gustainis mention above (<http://www.bu.edu/prc/gustainis.htm>).

I wanted to share a link to my post on oval photographs and the oval (pre-photographic) views of the Claude Glass:  
<http://lesliekbrown.blogspot.com/2007/07/non-rectangle-non-square-and-oval.html>

*Comment by Leslie Brown — July 26, 2007 @ 7:30 am*

50. I am thrilled to see all that you have posted about circular photographs. I began photography fulltime in 1970 after two previous failed attempts to come to terms with cameras. The first was in the mid 1950s with a very small camera that took circular pictures. I never saw the pictures. The camera had an unfortunate voyage thru a washing machine with my first roll of film. Some of my circular photographs after 1970 are at

<http://www.lightwavephoto.com/plurb4.html>

*Comment by Paul Light — July 26, 2007 @ 9:22 am*

51. I did a series of circular images about 10 years ago using a an 8×10 view camera and a home-made, hand-held 8×10 camera. Here are a few of them:

[http://kerik.com/pt\\_circles/index.html](http://kerik.com/pt_circles/index.html)

*Comment by Kerik — July 26, 2007 @ 11:06 am*

52. Once again, schtick trumps intelligence, content and awareness.

*Comment by arty — July 28, 2007 @ 6:00 pm*

53. Is your vision really circular? Mine doesn't seem to have any distinct boundary.

*Comment by Sam Sanford — July 29, 2007 @ 4:54 pm*

54. Hi Alec,  
A circular self-portrait, inspired by your post:  
<http://www.flaneur.albanogarcia.com.ar/2007/07/30/st-206/>  
Regards

*Comment by Flaneur — July 30, 2007 @ 9:50 pm*

55. Today I came across a circular collotype to add to your collection. I found a reproduction in IMAGE magazine (v. 34, n. 1-2) and then found it online here:  
[http://www.baxleystamps.com/litho/brink\\_15/f.shtml#albumen](http://www.baxleystamps.com/litho/brink_15/f.shtml#albumen)  
(See Flower Collotypes (Color) by Ogawa Section X)

*Comment by jenn — August 22, 2007 @ 3:25 pm*

56. I found some circular photos in a magazine taken by a Chinese photographer named Xu Yong. I can't find any on the web but I thought it was worth noting.

*Comment by Dave — September 1, 2007 @ 6:38 am*