

# **Photographic Possibilities in the Face of an Expanding Digital Technology: Selections from Several American Artists**

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## **Abstract**

Art has inherently pushed the limits of the materials that have been available to the artist. As digital technology rapidly improves, the number of users escalates too. While traditional practices have not been abandoned totally, the opportunities and techniques offered in the digital fields encourage new pursuits and alternative (fast becoming mainstream) methods of printing and output. Additionally the ease of disseminating the production to other users or the use of websites to showcase work that previously depended upon print or gallery exhibitions. This article will examine the digital approach of eight photographers whose individual approach is distinct from the others represented here.

*Keywords: Photography, Digital Photography, Contemporary Photography, Color Images, American Photography*

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The invention of photography in the first half of the 19th century gave rise to significant developments in the manner in which visual elements were communicated. The impact was immediate and profound. Historically, printmaking, whose various methods relied upon drawing processes, was the source of the images that were published. Following its establishment, photography became the dominant means for providing images and there seemed to be no subject that was unworthy of recording. Subject matter included portraiture, images of exotic places, documentation of current events (e.g. U.S. civil war). Early processes could be complex and potentially deadly as for example the heating of mercury to produce a Daguerreotype. Exquisitely detailed, these photographs were produced and acquired by many individuals in all walks of life; here now existed a technique that made it affordable to produce representations of oneself and ones family. The admiration for photographs and their common usage inevitably demanded the implementation of syntax, that is, rules that make it possible to have meaning. In photographic terms the syntax is technology, which is, “... whatever combination of technical elements is in use.” (Crawford, 1979). The acceptance and consensus further enhanced the importance that photographs held for their viewers. This aspect has continued virtually uncontested to the present as demonstrated by the common use of photography as a source of factual data in legal system. Despite the historical ability to alter a photograph, it was the digital image that brought the veracity of the photograph into question.

Color photography did not achieve a mainstream status until the 1990's. William Eggleston's photographs were among the first to be accepted by audiences, represented by galleries and collected by museums (Cotton, 2004). Manufacturing research and development in color production coupled with the improvements in the stability of the dyes created greater demand which was filled by professional photofinishers and niche markets springing up in pharmacies, grocery and discount stores. The popularity and availability caused a seemingly endless market for cameras and photographic materials.

The advent of the computer and laser printer (and subsequent inkjet printers) opened up new doors not previously available. Relatively primitive by the then current film based processes, imaging and output

using the computer offered opportunities that suggested alternatives. The early inkjet printers produced images that I have likened to the historical Gum Bichromate processes which were contact images made with watercolor pigment in a light sensitive solution. Both methods afforded a relatively soft image whose colors were not accurate but which had an appeal due to the nature of the process. While the laser printer, like the Xerox copier it was based upon, allowed in-house publishing and dissemination, the desire for color printing continued to grow. Simultaneously a few sources like Nash Productions utilizing an IRIS printer, began printing fine artwork on traditional papers which created needs and expectations for readily available methods. Eggs and chickens began to cross the roads with increased frequency and rapid developments enhanced the visionary prospects that were occurring. In fact, major manufacturers, who directed research and development funds to find a niche in which to compete, have found themselves floundering instead. Due to the extremely high cost of entering the marketplace and the reality that upon release of a product, it was immediately improved upon and/or became obsolete even before it had paid off the debts incurred in its development. This has had a very negative impact on the traditional photographic industry although it would have seemed to be a simple transition from traditional to digital or even to replace the one with the other; but this has not proved to be as easy as it appeared; nor has the convenience of digital allowed the industry to abandon traditional.

In 1991, in a conversation with a professional photo lab, I suggested that the computer and digital photography would replace traditional methods somewhere around the 2015 to 2020 period. The reaction was overwhelmingly opposed to my observation; they closed their doors two years ago after more than three years of struggle to survive. In the past eighteen months, we have seen the closure of AGFA Corporation, Contax photographics, Minolta Optical being sold to SONY Corporation, DURST leaving the American marketplace, Ilford Photographic being sold to private investors (who incidentally have retained their commitment to traditional materials and have had a profitable first year), and Eastman Kodak Co. announced the termination of black and white photo papers, Nikon has essentially discontinued manufacturing film based cameras and Mamiya announced that they

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are selling the optics division, to name but a few. The transition is very rapid at this point and the quality of the digital materials is excellent overall. New software to process and archive digital images is improving the ease of adopting digital photos and software, especially Adobe's Photoshop CS2, which is so sophisticated that both the ease of use and long learning curves are universal truths. Despite the attraction to technology, there is no clear indication that traditional film-based procedures are disappearing although memorial services that are being conducted everywhere. The commitment to film-based materials by dedicated individuals and groups demonstrates a demand necessary to keep manufacturing active. While this continues, users will find sources for their supplies.

The essential point of this article is not to address the demise of the traditional processes but instead to commend the prospects that have been created in the wake of digital technology. The visionaries of the digital applications recognized that they held the key to new opportunities and that this technology could provide alternatives. William Crawford (1979) wrote in his book on historical processes, "*The Keepers of the Light*", which was published when a re-emergence of interest in alternative photographic processes and printing techniques was arising, that it was the technology of any given period that limited the imagery produced and not the artists; the artists in fact pushed all limitations in an effort to produce work that reflected their vision. It is this mentality that causes the industry to accommodate the needs of visionaries and not the industry that drives the artists. The premise that *need is the mother of invention* remains as contemporary as when it was coined.

The balance of this article will examine the imagemaking practices of eight artists who utilize digital aspects in their production. These individuals have been selected by me for the purposes of this article and do not intend to suggest that they are more important or their work more recognized than others. Rather they provide a relatively diverse view of the potential that the digital production offers and are either friends or acquaintances whose work I am familiar with. My ultimate goal is to provide a menu of options that reflect a sampling of work produced in this manner.

Thomas Payne began his exploration of imaging on a Commodore

computer in 1989. He created animations and various composite images during this early period. By the time that he had a stint as a visiting assistant professor at the University of Oklahoma, he had switched to Apple Macintosh computers. During this period, he completed a series of photographs that were composed of scans of old medical books, family photographs and photos found in flea markets. He then scanned and manipulated PC boards, wiring, and other electronic paraphernalia to form images that referenced the technology of the historical and current periods as well as the impact that technology plays in contemporary settings. It should be noted that this work was a precursor to subsequent developments including cell phones, ipods, pda's, email and internet connections to list a few. His work was then delivered to a service bureau where a negative was made from the digital files. The final output was a C-print produced by traditional RA-4 color chemistry. Tom's sense of humor is clearly represented in these images and in his subsequent works. He also explored interactive media in a fabulous piece titled *Sometimes*. This piece relied on the educational potential of interactive multimedia but was developed in such a way as to utilize random elements; the combination proved to be innovative and entertaining.

"*Gatherings*" is one of the current bodies of work that Payne is exploring. This series evolved from one of his early girlfriends who was an actress and his discovery that he struggled with the uncertainty of whether she was role-playing or "being real" in their relationship. Coupled with the adage that '*all the world is a stage*', the images capture the drama of real life experiences that seem to create a tableau with what appears to be a main actor performing for an audience. He plays with the concept of personalities who can be induced to act out in given situations. (Figure 1 and Figure 2) Caught in the act, the subjects



Figure 1



Figure 2

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interact with their surroundings in a comedy about life.

In the late 80's, Kelly McFadden photographed pop culture television shows like the Andy Griffith show, which portrayed a sheriff and his deputy in small town comedy. Kelly recognized the impact that television has and the role of media on determining values for an audience. His work was produced traditionally and often cut and pasted onto large boards with multiple elements playing off from each other. During his graduate program, he expanded his use of computer imaging where he would combine language, image and performance activities to create new and complex meanings in what appeared to be relatively simplistic phrases that were unconnected to other components. After receiving his MFA, he was hired to do computer design and animation for the computer gaming industry and continues to work in related fields.

With his latest series, collectively titled *“Los Hermanos de Destrucción”*, (Figures 3,4,5,6) the artist provides a pop-art take on the mythology of Nature, using new media to explore ancient themes of humanity's relationship to Nature's destructive forces. All of the art work was created digitally, combining scans, images captured

with a digital camera and objects created using 3-D modeling software. The effect makes the images both monumental and imposing even on a monitor.

Who are these mysterious figures that present a menacing appearance

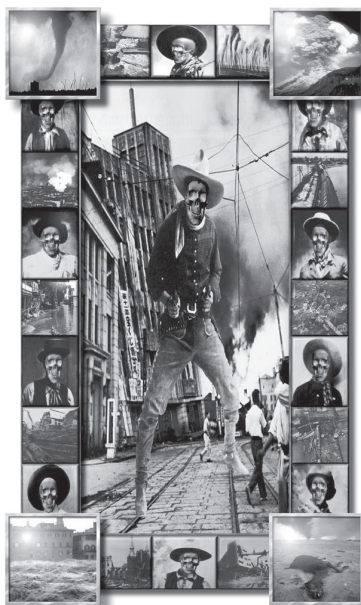


Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

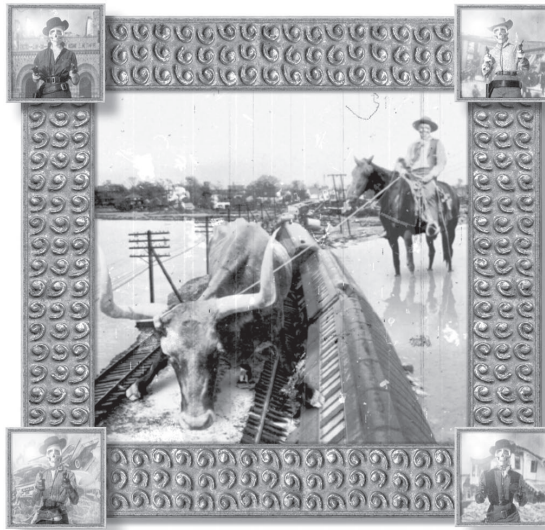


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much like Paul Bunyan? McFadden cites such influences as Pecos Bill and other American folklore characters, spaghetti western movies and Jose Guadalupe Posada's (1852–1913) *"Day of the Dead"* cartoons as well as recent news reports of various natural disasters.

Kelly (email April 5, 2006) goes on to state, "These giants suggest 19th Century versions of the mythical Titans, unleashed upon us in a 20th Century apocalypse such as the San Francisco quake of 1906. The giants of the old myths had to fall to create our present universe, but they've always been with us. The earth was created from the body of Ymir in Norse mythology. Adam Kadmon of the Kabbala supposedly contained heaven and earth within his limbs. Prometheus was martyred by Zeus for giving Man fire. They're all these powerful earth forces. I'm sure every culture has some variation on the Titan story. This is my personal variation."

The significance of installation as a means of expression has its roots in the church where sculpture, paintings and objects were collected together to strengthen the meaning of the individual components. The intent was (and remains) to confirm the spiritual foundation and to strengthen values as the source of faith. Ron Jackson asks the viewer to reflect on, and perhaps challenge, their values with his large-scale pieces. Represented are Figure 7 and

Figure 8, which are selected from the thirteen completed altars, each of whose dimensions are 59 inches tall and 75 inches wide. Each altar contains three large images printed on canvas and depicts an historical or current topic regarding politics, civilization, the church, etc. Three smaller canvases provide additional images that suggest relics or like objects. Although Jackson wants us to confront our values and encourage dialog, humor (occasionally dark) is critical to the discussion. The humor helps to minimize the intimidation that might arise in the response to the work. Ron's does not intend to challenge or to negate the values but rather to enhance one's sense of their own values through understanding.

Not all imagemakers are primarily photographers even when their images utilize photographic elements. A painter by training, Gregory Scott identifies himself as being both painter and photographer. Scott stretched his early use of photography as a source for his images when he decided to incorporate the photograph into his paintings. Represented by two pieces, "*Bounded*" (Figure 9) and "*Framed*" (Figure 10), Gregory writes of his work (email April 19, 2006):

The images of my *'Impositions'* work explore different approaches for imposing paintings within photographic images. Some of the artistic issues I am exploring include: dimensional perception as viewed in a painting vs a photograph; the demarcations between photography and



Figure 7



Figure 8





Figure 9

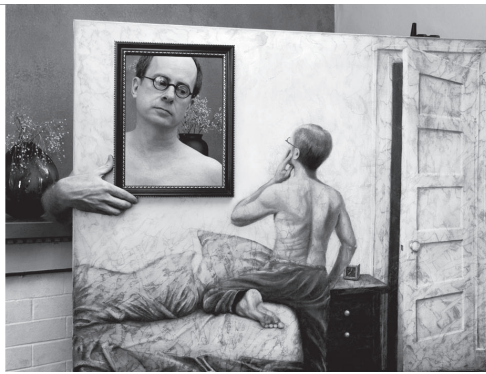


Figure 10

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painting; perceptions of photographic truth; and introducing the artist's hand and imagination into the world of the literal photograph. The set staging in *'Impositions'* is often self-consciously visible. It is important for the viewer to see the mechanical apparatus that supports the canvas. The purpose is to bring a sense of honesty to the finished piece and avoid the realm of digitally manipulated images as well as the over-produced sterility of commercial studio shoots.

What really drives my creative process is my desire to evoke intriguing emotional narratives within beautiful photographs. The work explores humor, play, desire, loneliness, and melancholy. In most cases the titles are an integral part of the communication and have been carefully considered to add meaning without constricting interpretation. Guiding the whole process is my goal of making this work accessible to all audiences.

The implications that can be derived from Scott's images encourage the viewer to consider additional facets to the role of photographic process that is such a common component of photographic practice. When we are confronted with altered realities, we are frequently uncomfortable although we are simultaneously drawn to the enigma of the presentations.

One of the most sophisticated graphic programs available with extremely wide appeal is Adobe Photoshop, especially in its current rendition which is Creative Studio CS which combines Photoshop with drawing program, layout program, Image Ready for preparing web images, and Bridge which is a fabulous tool that allows access and changes to be made within each of the different components. Of all

the artists that I have represented, Charles Rushton seems to place the heaviest reliance on the software. He describes his approach this way. “I regard my images as being about time, change and the ephemeral nature of life. They derive from my subconscious and are autobiographical and personal in nature. Most do not have precise meanings any more than dreams or myths have precise meanings. Some deal with issues that have become important to me in recent years—aging, health and mortality—and some deal with issues that have been important to me most of my life—the nature of identity, faith, meaning and purpose.” If you will examine either of the images he presents, *“Man Remembering his Childhood”* (Figure 11) or the second *“Modern Icon”* (Figure 12), it is easy to recognize the concerns her expresses in his statement. Further consideration reveals the extent of his skillful use of Photoshop filters and options to create the intensity of his vision to reveal similar questions for which we are all seeking answers. His solutions are contrasts between the bright appealing colors and textures and the disintegration of detail and information.

Diametrically opposite in the approach are the works of my colleague Todd Stewart and former student, Sara Brooks. Each approach retains the original intent of the image in much the same way that traditionalists made their photographs. Both artists produce images



Figure 11

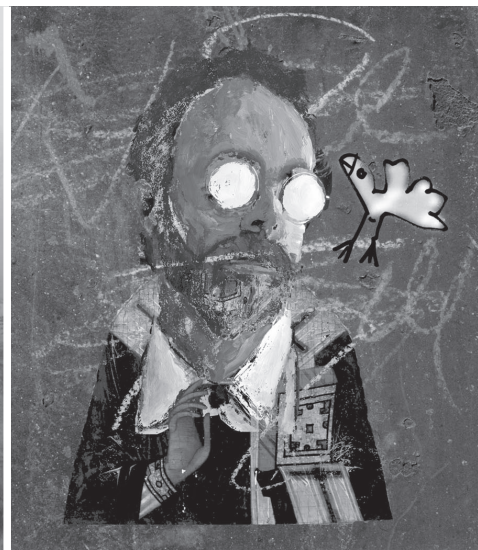


Figure 12

that explore the nature of the environment that they are intent upon exposing and rely on their vision to convey the message rather than manipulate the source images to produce new contexts as Rushton and McFadden have done. Both of them work in a style that would be characterized as Dead Pan (Cotton, 2004) as interpreted in her writings about contemporary photography.

Sara's subject draws upon the most common thread— the home. Her photographs reveal the relationship between the preferences for furnishing a home (that is the individuality of rooms within the home) and the cultural upbringing as a factor of “economic status, class, race, and religion”. She further concludes that culture is defined as “an entity, an assemblage of items including ideas, taste, artifacts, values, ways of life and behaviors; house types are considered cultural artifacts and are therefore manifestations and indicators of a larger configuration of cultural traits.” Compare her two images “*Galway 2*” (Figure 13) with “*Kernan 4*” (Figure 14). The pinks and polka dots are reflective of the dreams and taste of young girls while the dinosaurs are more likely representative of male conquest and discovery of the wild nature of the world as it once existed. There is clearly a gender stereotype that is uncovered in these conventional children's bedrooms. The essence of American culture transcends into common objects that are used to shape our opinion and serve as messages to inform our desires even outside our own cognizance.

Todd has a very different sense about place and the environment. His images step outside of the protected nurturing home and into the outdoors. However he



Figure 13



Figure 14

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captures the contradictions that have settled into our way of life. Unlike Payne who is clearly drawn to the comedic elements in his images, Stewart is not seeking out the humor as much as he is observing the dynamics of the various elements within the frame; primarily he reflects on the human presence in an imposing environment that is impacted by tourists. *“Death Valley Pan”* (Figure 15) presents a triptych view at Zabriskie Overlook. The quiet, clear light reveals a panorama of mountains and wide-open, blue sky. Distributed across the frame are several tourists whose back are turned to us and they are engaged in watching the landscape before them. The figures serve to break up the space and to disturb our interaction with the same space, thereby visually littering our experience; or mediating the experience as Todd is inclined to express. His second image is another one of the works exploring similar themes but from a slightly different vantage point. In this, Stewart has moved the experience inside where he records the efforts of museums and commercial businesses to replicate the wilderness in order to preserve the experience in a safe haven. In his artist statement about this work (e-mail April 12, 2006) he wrote:

...for most Americans a true encounter with wildness is nonexistent or rare at best. Two hundred years ago the natural world could be a frightening and dangerous place. Contemporary experience is something quite different. Today it is virtually impossible to encounter a landscape that has not in some way been constructed, packaged, or interpreted by others. Take for example the national park system. For most visitors the parks represent nature on display. They are a collection of natural oddities - the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone’s geysers, South Dakota’s Badlands, Death Valley, etc.. Tourists drive the designated scenic roads stopping at each overlook parking area. Walk to the proscribed place for obtaining



Figure 15

the “best general view” and then return to their cars to drive to the next stop on the tour. This experience is typical of American encounters with land and with nature. We visit municipal parks, arboretums, botanical gardens, and natural history museums where we can study nature often without actually having to encounter wildness.

As an imagemaker I am concerned with the cultural constructs that inform our relationships with the natural world and through a combination of examination and exploration I hope to gain an understanding of the complexity of contemporary wilderness experiences.

The final digital images that I discuss are my own. While not unique in its concept, it differs from the other works represented here because language also serves as an element of visualization. The work under consideration is from the series “*Newark: New Work*”, which is itself a play on the similarity of sounds that words make and of the divergence of meaning from each word. Additionally, the contextualization that occurs when images and text are united provokes more inquiry rather than serve as clarification. While language is generally intended to provide information and details, it often fails due to its misuse, whether intentionally as in the case of propaganda for example, or inadvertently as arises in media broadcasting when time and speed are essential. The piece “Space Available” (Figure 16) combines an image of a red tree in front of a mountain with what appears to be considerable landscape surrounding and extending out of the image frame. But is this an offer of open space for sale or lease or is it a misplaced litter. No clarification is offered and in fact the juxtaposition suggests more information is necessary to understand the

intent. While not fully realized in the works presented, onomatopoeia amplifies the potential that varying aspects play when text and image are directly connected but not defined. It is this conflict regarding the symbiotic or parasitic relationship of each component to the other that



Figure 16

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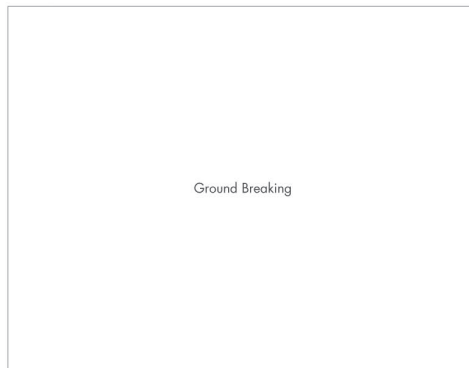


Figure 17

seems to be at play; and that is my intention. “Breaking Ground” (Figure 17) utilizes the approach but arrives at an alternate conclusion. The text effectively complements the image but the dissonance of the image and text together reinforces the dilemma that the other work in the series also allude to.

Reflecting on the forgoing article and the images represented herewith, it is critical to recognize that neither these artists nor their works are indicative of all styles being explored with digital technology. Rather this select group represents only a very limited range of possibilities that are underway. Just as traditional photographic practice continues to expand the vision of its operators, digital opportunities are only in their infancy; but its big brother is willing to share all his own experiences with his sibling, thereby spurring the development and maturation along the way.

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