

When, after, for the n th time, coming to a new photograph and asking an equivalent of “how was this made?” - how exactly some otherworldly tone was achieved - you begin to feel that that’s not quite the point - or it’s the wrong question - the discrepancy between the means and the representation of those means are so disparate (detached?¹). A photo exposed by lightning’s flash in a rainstorm leaves instead a gray fog whose slow quiet has little to do with the Flashbang Vicissitude of lightning. The Möbius bands running the length of another photo, appearing etched in copper, is explained as lotion applied to unexposed silver-gelatin and left undeveloped and unfixed. The word Alchemy comes to mind but you want to shut it down - the word appears, but feels wrong. And the problem is compounded by the photos’ confounding (magical?) (paradoxical?) (eccentric?) fabrication - ranging from brilliant to intensely dumb and the connection is never obvious. The abject banality of applying lotion to a piece of photo paper is slightly creepy (reminiscent of Ted Bundy repeatedly shampooing the hair of his victims, even while the body decomposed²) and does nothing to remedy disbelief over the mercurial (almost un-catalog-reproducible) photographic surface (pg. 25). (And like Bundy’s corpses Olson’s photo too is slowly decomposing, being unfixed - the color slowly slipping, “degrading” over time - no matter how clean the body.)

The tiring nature of the questioning is never that the answer, the “how,” isn’t interesting but rather *too interesting* - it only compounds and never brings us to an “understanding” - a subplot whose intricacy mirrors the main story’s own.

so then, a brief list of different approaches:

Lotion applied to unexposed silver gelatin paper
Silver gelatin paper under glass exposed by thunderstorm’s
lightning, rendering the raindrops
Inkjet print on silver gelatin paper
Flowers pressed onto silver gelatin paper
Flowers photogrammed
Scanned degrading silver gelatin prints inkjet printed indexing
of their state
Tape on negatives and then exposed
Tape on silver gelatin Paper
Photographs used as negatives themselves

And then all of these things are shuffled and there are great leaps made between “inventions” or processes. There seems little logical connection between smearing lotion and pressing flowers, besides a broad experimental materiality. (The question becomes, do we even ask why lotion?)

And then, the process gets confused, shifted and doubled. Multiple processes are used on the same photo; photographs themselves are used as contact negatives to reproduce themselves in a true printmaking style of photography. And unfixed photos are scanned and

reprinted archiving a static duplicate, a mirror of the analog version; freezing it while the first's ("original's") chemistry slowly degrades - slipping and rendering the imaged duplicate a doppelganger or shadow version. Even at this moment slowly moving apart.

(I am later told by Olson that lotion is an emulsion. I smile and nod realizing I am out of my league. Later: Emulsion being a subset of colloids or "two phase systems of matter" in which a microscopic substance is dispersed throughout another substance. Silver gelatin paper is a colloid of silver salts suspended in gelatin. Lotion: an emulsion-colloid of oil-in-water (or, less common, water-in-oil) generally stabilized through cetostearyl alcohol. Anyway the whole thing gets complicated but basically lotion allows the redistribution of silver-salt particles out of its microscopically dispersed photographic-mirror perfection and into a whole new gelatin-silver-lotion-suspension-colloid möboid photographic substrate-as-image-as-like-where-exactly-does-the-image-lay-or-lie questions that the whole thing gets like complicated, möboid. And but the real thing I think of real importance isn't so much the photographic questions, but this ability to say both are emulsions. To act on that. The ability not to say this is a photographic colloid, and thus can have photographic colloidal processes done to it, but that colloid is a thing in the world, in reality, in science, and thus can be manipulated as such; not simply by photographic process, and by that history and that name, photography, but by anything in the world that shares its properties, colloids, and that we can work outside of this thing named photography as photography and do not have to continually re-inscribe its parameters and can work in the world and not just art; and since Shampoo is also an emulsion (most often sodium lauryl/eth sulfate with a co-surfactant, most often cocamidopropyl betaine, in water) thus my leap to Ted Bundy wasn't so far afield.)

Hung next to this photo (lotion print) is a photo whose only similarity a few bands of colors which are analogous but closed graphic blocks cutting into a large blue inkjet square (pg. 29). In its matte graphicness it couldn't be more different from the silvered lotion print. The bands do repeat in a third photograph (pg. 2), and even in the same place, but the blue square is replaced with a green leaf texture that scars into the silver gelatin paper, and looks somehow collaged. To the right of that (now the fourth photo (pg. 11)) another leap to now cool sharp greys and stark whites with blushes of aqua blues and sunflower yellows blooming in and the whole thing looks almost expressive or like a painting by Simon Hantaï.

These things are firmly rooted in play but begin to slowly ontologically touch all points of photography and mine itself, its very being, as everything gets remixed recycled dredged repurposed placed in the toolbox, brought out of the tool box, fucked up, and stoned.

But it's not everything - it seems methodical - it seems both limited and yet somehow encompassing, planned - some blueprint unforeseeable, and but if one could see it would be a certain type of something. An invisible tactic that does not make historical/artistic sense.

The contemporary post-post-modern artist ostensibly, by collecting references and indexing its own history and decrying autonomy, claims (implicit and euphemized) truth, or if not truth perhaps a politically correct conceptualness (intelligence), simply by deferring away from itself. And thus contemporary artists everywhere endlessly reflect themselves off of references, if not claiming "truth", then to see themselves reflected in that symbolically powered history, culture whatever.

Why are contemporary artists limited to dealing with the forked ends of history's paths, claiming some historical antidote, or refresh, while implicitly re-strengthening those histories and at the same time claim them for themselves, totally ruttled. That in order to be photography or art, one must ostensibly operate under the realm of photography or art. Claiming for themselves the importance of the story they purportedly challenge yet reinscribe. It's an annoying claim, and also a cage of correct behavior, to be stuck in the very infertile ground of, and to actively claim to to remain firmly in lineage with, capital P-Photography proper. With Olson, there's never any clever "aboutness," or a conceptual coup of Photography to wear its importance, or any academic pomposity, or waving a magic wand of symbolic capital. They are far closer to Roe Etheridge than Walead Beshty - a scanning of photography's surface, rather than a mirror of its self-important history. Whereas Beshty refuses magic, these are totally magic, impossible. What happens to an artist who refuses to not operate under historical patronages but to simply prove all the fertile ground outside of it.

¹They can't be called detached because they are not. They are intrinsic. The image is congenital to its making.

²This metaphor is obviously over the top.

Kelsey Olson at Tony's Parent's House 2011

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