

Shadows and Traces: The Photography of John Reuter

John Reuter is an artist. He makes photographs and videos, draws and paints, and yet he is perhaps most well-known as the individual behind the hands-on magic of the giant Polaroid 20x24 camera; a person who sets aside his own aesthetic and artistic practice in order to help his fellow artists realize on film what each envisions in his or her imagination. His creativity, technical abilities and generous spirit are gifts that he shares to insure their success.

When Reuter turns his energies to creating his own artwork, he often photographs cabinet cards, tintypes, antique paintings and similar items from his collection. As these images made with SX-70 films develop, he cuts, peels apart, pushes, scrapes, paints, and collages the film's interior surfaces, transforming his subjects into newly conjured images with reconstructed narratives. These final SX-70 miniatures pay homage to the giants of Surrealism and Expressionism – Herbert Bayer, Max Ernst, Lucas Samaras and Moholy-Nagy, among others – the luminaries who influence Reuter's unconventional artistry.

The landscape which has been classically portrayed for centuries in art — crosses from traditional perspectives to unexpected, dreamlike impressions when Reuter mixes digital infrared “film” with his idiosyncratic view of botanical gardens. Have we entered Alice's Wonderland?

Using various formats of Polaroid Polacolor film, Reuter takes advantage of the exposed instant film's characteristic transfer of dyes from the negative to watercolor paper that he substitutes for the film's standard positive. The color dyes don't always transfer completely, a flaw that Reuter seizes as an invitation to fashion what he sees in his mind's eye. In Reuter's hands, oil pastels, airbrushed acrylics and dry pigments facilitate the image's metamorphosis from traditional photograph to fresco-like artifact. Consequently, straight photographs of family members, funerary statues, Renaissance maidens and religious figures are reimagined. Harkening back to the ideals of Romanticism, what was corporeal is no longer; it has become ethereal and transient, diaphanous and mutable.

“Shadows and Traces: The Photography of John Reuter” celebrates the artist's innovative exploration of film technology, photography and painting coupled with his imaginative reinterpretation of people, places and things that have populated the real world. Reuter reinvents the past, stimulates our imagination, and encourages us to enjoy this flight into a familiar, yet somewhat unconventional, alternative universe.

BARBARA P. HITCHCOCK
*Independent Curator and former Curator,
The Polaroid Collections*