

A Digital Legacy: Christine Elfm

by Janelle Lynch

Contemporary photographers are exercising an enhanced freedom to realize their visions, as seen in the work by Jesseca Ferguson, Michael Kolster and Richard Sobol, featured in this issue. Today's image-makers are liberally experimenting with the latest tools and materials, introducing new working methodologies and revitalizing historic practices. Technological advancements have energized the field and are inspiring innovation that evokes the spirit of the medium's early years.

Allison Nordström, Curator at George Eastman House and juror of the PRC's 2012 juried exhibition, recently explained, "It seems the digital turn has expanded the field for photographic artists. In addition to the new technologies, artists can now draw from all the media, methods and imagery of the past, suiting the way of making an image to the desired look and implications of the work."

As Nordström alludes, another outcome of the technological developments is the revival of alternative processes—a return to a handcrafted, more intimate approach to making images. I asked Dan Estabrook and France Scully Osterman, both



Mark Osterman and France Scully Osterman, *View from Talbot's Grave*, from *The Light at Lacock* series, pigment print from photogenic drawing negative. 38 x 48 inches. © Scully & Osterman, Courtesy of Tilt Gallery, Phoenix, AZ.

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Allison Nordström
Curator, George Eastman House

master practitioners and teachers of alternative processes, about the renewed interest.

Estabrook said, "I do see a hunger in young artists that may be related to the rise in digital media, or it may be related to the fact that something is being lost as we watch it disappear—that chemical photography, even the black and white print, is

really a dead technique."

Scully Osterman said that she finds some people choosing alternative processes because, "They think that it's going to be what makes their work interesting. We understand why our students fall in love with it—we try to push them further." She also sees students choosing them for the same reasons that she and her husband, Mark Osterman, did for their own practices in the early 1990s.

"You're making everything, it's very tactile, you have ultimate control and, in some ways, there's serendipity, which plays a role. Every time you handle it, you're affecting the final outcome. Every step

Janelle Lynch is a large-format photographer, teacher, and freelance writer about photography based in New York. The PRC recently exhibited work from her monograph, *Los Jardines de México* (Radius Books, 2011). Forthcoming exhibition venues include the Southeast Museum of Photography, Daytona Beach, FL and Robert Morat Galerie, Berlin.

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is visual. It's a sensual process. But the process is just a tool. The image is what's most important. Finding the right marriage is essential."

Mark Osterman is also the Process Historian at George Eastman House where, for the last ten years, he has been researching 19th century processes ranging from Niépce's heliographs to gelatin emulsions. To Osterman, "Every one of them is magical. A digital image is also magical. They all require things that are beyond our scope to understand."

Christine Elfman is a San Francisco-based artist who employs an innovative approach to her work, using historic materials to contemplate timeless themes. Elfman took her first alternative processes course as an undergraduate at Cornell University in 2003. Following that, she worked for a year as Scully Osterman's intern, assisting with workshops and tutorials at Scully & Osterman Studio in Rochester, NY. Today she uses the wet-plate collodion and anotype processes, painting, film, as well as emulsion-based and digital photography to investigate remembrance and the desire to preserve the ephemeral.

In *Storydress II*, Elfman explores the relationship between photography and memory, which have been inextricably linked since the medium's inception. The series was inspired by Elfman's relationship with her great-grandmother and her autobiographical reminiscences, old family photographs, as well as found images of anonymous people for sale at flea markets.

During my conversation with Elfman, she described an experience looking at photographs with

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Christine Elfman

her great-grandmother that evoked Roland Barthes' personal account, in *Camera Lucida*, of engaging in the same ritual following his mother's death. Elfman's and Barthes' quests, however, are conceptually distinct. Elfman's is a contemplation of the universal desire to remember and be remembered, despite life's ephemeral nature, while Barthes' is an ontological investigation of the medium and a meditation on the absence inherent in it. What binds them is the emotional intensity of their respective pursuits, as well as their steadfast confrontation with loss.

"My great-grandmother was unable to clearly see the photographs because she was losing her sight, and she couldn't remember every detail, even if she had been able to see the images. It was difficult to remember who it was, where it was, or when it was. It was a bitter-sweet experience for both of us. Her advancing blindness revealed the underlying futility of the attempt to capture things in time. I felt compelled to make photographs about the feeling of wanting to remember and wanting to be remembered, all the while embracing the constancy of change."

Elfman recorded and transcribed her great-grandmother's stories, then shredded them—leaving some text in tact—to make a dress for the



Christine Elfman, *Cabinet Card #1*, from the series *Storydress II*, 2008, albumen print from wet-plate collodion negative, 4.25 x 6.5 inches. © Christine Elfman, Courtesy of the Artist

Christine Elfman, *Untitled #1*, from the series *Storydress II*, 2008, albumen print from wet-plate collodion negative, 6.5 x 8.5 inches. © Christine Elfman, Courtesy of the Artist

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presented the third Master Lecture of the spring, discussing SSP's role in monitoring human rights abuses in Sudan and Syria by utilizing satellite imaging. Raymond analyzed some of SSP's recent images, which can often be quite beautiful despite featuring horrific atrocities. Additionally, his talk outlined the relationship between human rights advocacy and photography. The use of satellite imaging is literally changing the face of war photography in the 21st century.

The Staying Power of the Photobook

Building on the momentum of the Indie Photobook Library's exhibition and Book Night at the PRC (both held in the fall), the PRC decided to expand programming based around the photobook by inviting Harvey Stein, a well-known New York City-based photographer and author of six photography books, to present a workshop at the PRC. On April 21, Stein discussed information needed to create a convincing presentation to a publisher and other pertinent topics in a morning seminar. During the afternoon session, Stein worked specifically with ten individuals, evaluating each participant's book project in a small, interactive group setting.

Workshop Assistantships

Last fall, the PRC began a new program to give emerging photographers the opportunity to work closely with master photographers through our Workshop Program. For our regularly scheduled workshops, we seek assistants who will serve as a representative of the PRC and the right-hand person of the presenter. These assistants not only handle administrative and audio/visual tasks, but they also photograph the workshop and write commentary for the PRC's blog (www.bostonphotographyfocus.org).

This program has been quite a success, and as a result, the workshop assistant positions have become quite competitive. We'd like to thank our most recent workshop assistants from the fall and spring: Paris Visone, Andrew McFarland, Stephanie Robb, David Finks, Bruce Wahl, and Michael Ruggiero.

Christine Elfman

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life-size sculpture she constructed using plaster casts and papier mâché. Although it's a female figure, it doesn't necessarily symbolize her great-grandmother, but perhaps the viewer, or Elfman herself.

Storydress II epitomizes a recent statement by Ariel Shanberg, Executive Director of The Center for Photography at Woodstock. "Photography has been freed from the responsibility of 'depicting images' and 'telling stories.' Increasingly, artists are exploring the ontology of the processes and establishing new languages. This dialogue within alternative practices is one of the great legacies of the digital revolution."

To create *Storydress II*, a poignant meditation on ephemerality, Elfman's grandfather built her a replica of an antique 6.5 x 8.5 inch field camera. With it, Elfman made wet-plate collodion negatives and then gold-toned albumen prints that she burnished onto antique cabinet card mounts. That was the most common process for portraiture in the 19th century. Appropriately, albumen prints tend to fade over time.

In addition to Barthes' writings, Elfman cites as influential to her practice Early Renaissance paintings of Mary Magdalene, Ingmar Bergman's and Andrei Tarkovsky's films, and the artist Tacita Dean's multi-disciplinary practice. Elfman also acknowledges the importance of her own work among conservators at George Eastman House and the Image Permanence Institute. "There I became interested in how I could make something that was about the desire to preserve things and the inherent futility in that. I think of it as taking time to make things that time takes away."

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