

a crack in everything

The pictorial act as efflorescence

Almost two centuries ago, most likely during summer solstice of 1827 - a period when the sun was at its most powerful - the French inventor Joseph Nicéphore Niépce created in his house in Saint-Loup-de-Varenes, near Châlon-sur-Saône, in Burgundy, the first stable and permanent picture in the history of photography. He named it « *Point de vue du Gras [View from the Window at Le Gras]* », and did not yet describe it as “photography” – i.e. light script – but “heliography” - literally sun script. The process required an exposure of several days, during which time the sun’s rays impressed a permanent image onto a tin plate covered with a photosensitive emulsion made of *bitume de Judée* - natural tar used by the Egyptians to mummify the bodies – and then rinsed in a bath of lavender essence. In 1828, he improved his technique and obtained higher precision with half-shades of gray by using a base of polished silver and iodine vapors on the layer of impressed bitumen. This early photograph is currently on view at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, Austin, preserved in a helium container to protect the image from corrosion or blackening.

The painter and theater designer Louis Daguerre, who had been corresponding with Niepce since 1826, perfected the formula after Niepce’s death in 1833. Using the photosensitive properties of iodine, Daguerre coated a copper plate with silver, followed by treatment with mercury vapors to develop the image, and finished with hot water saturated with sea salt to bind it.

Daguerre called his process the “daguerreotype” and it became an international success, the exposure time being less than an hour. Still long enough, however, that in 1838, while photographing a wealthy man having his shoes waxed on Boulevard du Temple, the wealthy man appears in the picture while the shoe polisher, busy at his work, remains invisible - as do the passersby and automobiles traveling on the urban Parisian boulevard. And yet, they are contained in the material of the image, even if the photosensitive layer does not return them to our gaze yet.

Of the challenges within photography, the most tenacious is making visible everything that happens in the real world. Thomas Fougereol knows this perfectly. In 2017, in a collaborative project with Jo-ey Tang at Lyles & King in New York, he referenced a photograph by Harold Edgerton, « *Bullet Through Glass* » (1962), which not only captures the bullet in full power, but also the glass shards and dust projected

albertz benda

515 w 26th st | new york, ny | 10001
tel 212.244.2579 | www.albertzbenda.com

into the air. The image emphasizes the materiality of the particles circulating in the air all around: what the eye cannot see.

Today, for this joint exhibition with Carrie Yamaoka at albertz benda gallery, a much older image by Gero Bonnet has been chosen. The photographer has not tried to capture the smallest visible reality, but instead depicts the secrets of the invisible: fluid, magnetic body waves, that supposedly emanate from the body, in this case specifically from a hand. No one has proved the veracity of this shot but it does not matter, the force of the image and the strength of the composition are sufficient in themselves.

Today, in the conservation field, « efflorescence » is defined as a powdery crust formed on a surface when the substances migrate from the inside to the outside and crystallize in contact with the air. In painting as in photography, there would therefore be particular internal substances that would produce unsuspected emanations and metamorphoses of matter, and that the artistic act makes visible to our eyes.

The emergence of photography, and its considerable progress in just a century, has liberated painting from realism. In 1890, at the age of just twenty, the French painter and champion of modernity Maurice Denis wrote his famous formula: “Remember that a painting – before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or an anecdote of some sort – is essentially a flat surface covered with colors, assembled in a certain order”. But we have not yet measured the fact that painting after photography can be considered a photosensitive surface, where the different elements that compose it interact in order to provoke new states of representation. We can define painting, after Maurice Denis, as “an epidermis – a live surface – covered with evocative impressions engaged in spatial relations in temporal disorder.”

Voluntarily shifting away from traditional pictorial principles, the works presented together for this exhibition are the perfect demonstration of a living surface. Thomas Fougérol and Carrie Yamaoka do not aspire to redefine contemporary painting, but rather to reconsider painting for what it is: a dense and responsive material, constantly in flux, each of them attempting to stabilize it even as it irrevocably slips away from them. And their parallel explorations aim to make us feel what passes through the painting before it becomes an image or figure, from all the potentialities contained in the heart of processes they have studied and with which they have experimented. For Carrie Yamaoka, with resin on reflective mylar, for Thomas Fougérol with the liquidity of the paint like a barely fixed skin on the canvas, the laden membrane on the verge of bursting on a still fresh ground. Thomas Fougérol evokes “a space that would exist between radiography, photo negatives, painting, and imprinting; [...] a kind of sensitive machine that defeats expectations”. From the most concrete materiality comes the most volatile immateriality, from the

albertz benda

515 w 26th st | new york, ny | 10001
tel 212.244.2579 | www.albertzbenda.com

most tangible consistency the most elusive fluidity, from the action captured in flight the impression of boundless energy.

To refer again to Edgerton, the artistic act in full force breaks down the pictorial boundaries in order to destabilize our gaze as well as our way of thinking about painting. Consequently, the spectator is, on the one hand, attracted by the physical and chemical reactions exploding in front of their eyes and, on the other, by the desire to apprehend the forms emanating from the fleeting and unstable state of the pictorial matter. As for the image of Gero Bonnet, there is no truth to seek, nor any mystery that should be unveiled, but on the contrary the acceptance that the invisible of the painting, like the invisible of the body, conceals unlimited potentialities and evocative qualities capable of perpetually renewing the open field of representation.

Marc Donnadieu

Chief Curator, Musée de l'Elysée, Lausanne, Switzerland

albertz benda

515 w 26th st | new york, ny | 10001
tel 212.244.2579 | www.albertzbenda.com