

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY



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1114
Sharon Harper
Sun Moon (Light to Sec through
ii Telescope) 2010 May 27 10:46:35
AM - 2010 May 27 11:00:54 AM
2010 Jun 19 8:16:30 PM - 2010 Jun
19 8:23:40 PM, 2010, No. 3

INTRODUCTION BY **EMILY JOHNSEN**

FROM ITS EARLIEST STAGES, photography has developed a symbiotic relationship with science, each advancing the other with the latest discoveries in their fields. Photography's unique ability to capture and record images that the naked eye cannot discern, preserving transitory moments and documenting initial findings for human observation, enabled scientists to prove and explain their theories.¹ Recognizing the importance of this dynamic exchange, photographic art historian Kelley Wilder asserts that, "Photography has in turn enlarged existing fields of scientific study, created new avenues of research, and connected science with the public in unprecedented ways."²

Photography and science collaborations of the past were extraordinary, due, in part, to the wow factor of what historian Jennifer Tucker calls a "first glimpse" image of natural or artificial phenomena such as solar activity, biological specimens, or geological formations.³ Scientists and photographers had the ability to captivate and mesmerize the public with a single image of something never before seen. However, as she notes, "[early photographs] also have a story to tell about the making, display, and sensationalizing of 'first glimpses' for mass audiences."⁴ It was as much about the process of acquiring the image as it was the end result. And for the most part, the same can be said of contemporary photography.

As both science and photography have evolved, so too has their relationship. Tucker argues that, "In our age of image inundation, there is perhaps no longer such a thing as a 'first glimpse'— or if it exists, the public's interest in it is quickly

¹ Kelley Wilder, "Photography and the art of science," *Visual Studies* 24, 2 (September 2009): 163.
² Kelley Wilder, "Science and photography," *Green Art Online*, Oxford Art Online, Oxford University Press, accessed December 17, 2015, <http://www.oxfordjournals.org/doi/10.1093/oxart/online/12228416>.
³ Jennifer Tucker, "Masses and Spectacles: Photography, Exposition and the 'First Glimpse,'" *Aperture* 211 (June 1, 2013): 40.
⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

diverted.”⁵ So how then, without so many “first glimpse” spectacles, are contemporary photographers incorporating science and still sparking our interest? It is because, rather than showing us the otherworldly, they are choosing to reveal new truths about what we thought we knew, and are making visual rediscoveries of theories that have already been explained. By shedding light on cycles and events in the natural world that we take for granted on any given day, they are providing us with “second looks” at what we have likely put aside in our minds as expected or commonplace. In this sense, their work is more spectacular and more thought-provoking than many of the never before seen images.

“First glimpse” images have, of course, been groundbreaking, but what sets the most successful images apart, to be revered and revisited as iconic moments in time, is their ability to engage the viewer, and to express complicated scientific thoughts into a meaningful artistic translation. When it comes to the elusive concepts of science, it is not enough for a photograph to show a rarity in order to attract and maintain an audience’s attention. Viewers must be able to relate and to internalize what they see for there to be a lasting impression and genuine understanding.

In *Photography Changes Everything*, photography curator Marvin Heiferman claims that, “Photographs don’t only show us things, they do things. They engage us optically, neurologically, intellectually, emotionally, viscerally, physically.”⁶ But to truly engage us, the photograph must ask us to do something. It must elicit a response from the viewer to fully carry out its intended meaning.

To support this notion, writer Stewart Brand provides an anecdote about the public’s reaction to the “first glimpse” image of Earth as a whole, taken in 1968 by the astronauts on the Apollo 8 mission,

“For the first time, humanity saw itself from outside...Humanity’s habitat looked tiny, fragile, and rare. Suddenly humans had a planet to tend to... It is no accident of history that the first Earth Day, in April 1970, came so soon after color photographs of the whole Earth from space were made.”⁷

This scientific photograph, arguably the first portrait of all mankind, transported the viewer to a position of self-reflection. Anyone and everyone could connect with this image in some way. There, floating in the mysterious, dark void of outer space was our sense of belonging. For viewers, it hit home. Home sweet home, to be exact. And the public’s response was to dedicate a day of spring cleaning to honor and care for this place that continually provides for us.

In a similar fashion, the artists in this exhibition recognize the need to put science into perspective. They, at some point, approached their subject matter with the same curiosity and bewilderment you or I might have, and in doing so their work becomes more personal, and therefore, more enticing for public consumption. To comprehend the vast expanse of life in this universe, we must position ourselves at the center, to view the world in relation to oneself. Being part of an intelligent species means we strive to know our place in this world. And we measure time to understand our relationship to the past, present, and future.

3

⁵ Ibid, p. 45.

⁶ Marvin Heiferman, *Photography Changes Everything* (New York: Aperture, Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 2012), 36.

⁷ Ibid, p. 67-68.

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

LEFT
Christina Seely
MUTU, Dufur Glacier
Metoniska Glacier (detail)

These photographers help us grasp what we might otherwise miss. They use photography to make scientific concepts more accessible, understandable, relatable, and attainable, and as a result, their photography serves as a lens for the greater need of environmental awareness.

Embodying the scientific spirit, Caleb Charland's photography is prompted by his insatiable curiosity. Always eager to question what we think to be true, Charland insists, "that even in the well tested laws of science there are, and must always be, pathways to reinterpretation and discovery."⁸ He reexamines existing theories, stages new experiments, and interprets their findings, producing imagery best captured through the photographic process. While growing bacteria on the surface of film, he discovered that the growth patterns were transferring particles leaving behind microbial evidence of life, or what he calls his "BioGraphs." Each of his images depicts a bacterial "life-scape," scanned when its resources were depleted and the lifecycle complete. More meaningful and complex than a traditional microbiological slide, Charland's photographs contain a comprehensive, yet minute lifespan, depicted during its brief stint on Earth.

Although we may often view technology as an interruption of our personal experience with nature, Sharon Harper embraces its ability to create images that would otherwise go unseen, thereby enhancing our appreciation of the natural world. Using

the camera as a mediating device in her "Moon Studies and Star Scratches" series, she charts the relationship between the camera and the movement of Earth, illustrating our ever-present connection with our surrounding environment. By offering timestamps, geographic locations, and exposure times for each of her works, the artist not only maps celestial activity, but she provides a visual account of life at one particular place and time in the extensive history of the universe. For the artist, "These images are an attempt to record a realm we can hardly fathom, but within a framework of time we can readily understand, bringing the human scale into relationship with the cosmic."⁹

Christina Seely sets out on expeditions to the arctic and tropics to explore what it means to bear witness to environmental change on a global scale. The photographs and videos on view from her "Markers of Time" series focus on the effects of climate change and suggests, not only the gravity of the problem, but the urgency required to protect the planet's natural systems. As the artist presents us with imagery of individual species in their rapidly changing environments, the viewer cannot help but compare the animals' lives to their own. This personal association allows us to see ourselves and ultimately humanity as more than the problem, but as part of the potential solution as well. Seely explains that by, "Tying the viewer as individual to the global, this work generates an essential dialogue in a climate of growing uncertainty about our future relationship to the planet."¹⁰

5

⁸ Professional website of Caleb Charland, accessed September 3, 2015, <http://calbcharland.com/about>

⁹ Professional website of Sharon Harper, accessed September 4, 2015, <http://www.sharontharper.org/statements/moon.html>

¹⁰ Christina Seely, document sent to the author, November 6, 2015.

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RIGHT:
Rachel Sussman
/ Simon Sugi,
Japanese Cedar #1004-002
©2010 - 2000 years old;
Yukihiko, Japan;
©2011

6

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As both science
and photography
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so too has their
relationship.”

For her series “The Oldest Living Things in the World,” Rachel Sussman consulted biologists, scoured scientific journals, and set out on fieldwork expeditions to photograph continuously living organisms at least 2,000 years of age on all seven continents. Inspired by the concept of deep time, which the artist describes as “a framework in which to consider timescales too long for our shallow, physical experience, and too big for our brains to process meaningfully,” Sussman sought to create a visual archive that puts into perspective the human lifespan.¹¹ By personifying her subject matter as individuals rather than elements of a landscape, she is able to emotionally connect her viewers with these portraits of life, and prompt us to want to extend these lives. With environmental conservation in mind, the artist asserts, “The more we access deep time, the more easily accessible it becomes, and the more likely we are to engage in long-term thinking. The more we embrace long-term thinking, the more ethical our decision making becomes.”¹²

These four artists reframe the significance of life in this unique, expansive, yet delicate world. Their work answers the call set forth by photographer, educator, and activist Subhankar Banerjee, who proposes a new role for photography:

“We need a new aesthetic vision that is attuned to the ideas of ecology and sustainability. ...I think photography must also play a critical role in establishing our relationship to the environment and all other species with whom we share this planet.”¹³

Moving forward, Jennifer Tucker suggests that we ask a new question of photography, “Are we capable still of experiencing the exhilarating shock of amazement that once accompanied images of discovery?”¹⁴ I would venture to say so, for these artists are inspiring new ways of thinking and encouraging us to act. Their photography ignites within us a desire to experiment, to explore, to educate, and to preserve. But most importantly, their work continues to make us wonder. •

¹¹ Rachel Sussman, “Wataz 2,000-Year-Old Tree Tangle Me,” *Nanopus*, March 19, 2015. <http://nanopus.com/2015/03/19/wataz-2000-year-old-spruce-tree-tangle-me/>

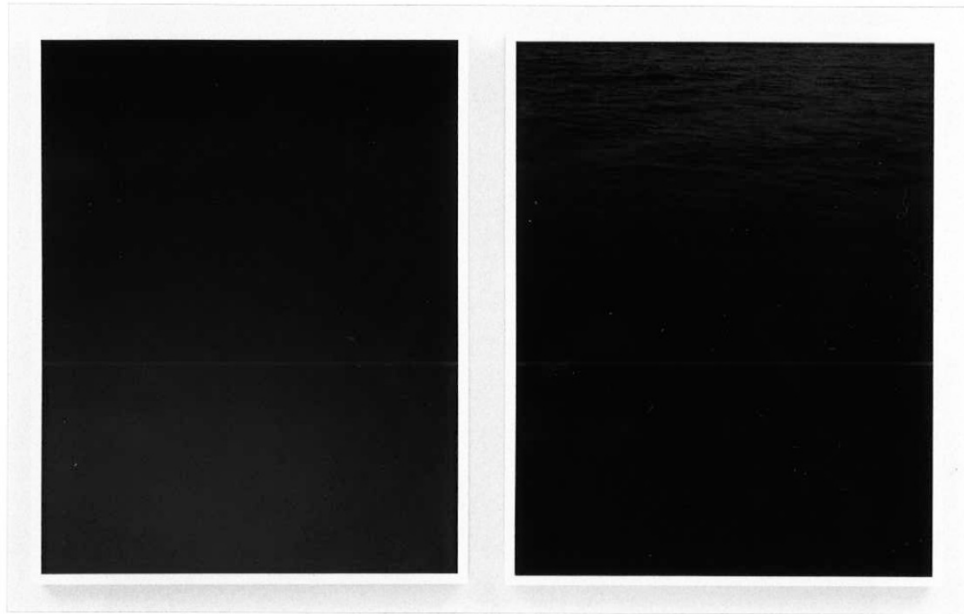
¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Hoferman, *Photography Changes Everything*, 66.

¹⁴ Tucker, “Marches and Spectacles: Photographic Exploration and the ‘Fast Glances,’” 45.

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SHARON HARPER



10

Halsnøy, Norway, 10 Jun 10:50 PM and 10 Jun 10:46 PM, 2012

Archival pigment print on Harman fiber-based paper, printed 2014

40 x 30 inches each (image size) • © 2016, Sharon Harper

Courtesy of Rick Wester Fine Art, Inc., New York; and Bridgette Mayer Gallery, Philadelphia

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11

Moon Studies and Star Scratches, No. 8, November 16, 2004 – May 21, 2005
Luminage print on Fuji Crystal Archive paper, mounted to Gator Board, printed 2009
40 x 50 inches (image size) • Edition 3/5 • © 2016, Sharon Harper
Courtesy of Rick Wester Fine Art, Inc., New York; and Bridgette Mayer Gallery, Philadelphia