CONTEMPORARY PLATINUM PRINTS
AND PHOTOGRAPHERS

Kent State University
School of Art Gallery
April 7 - 30, 1993
Foreword

Because there is no photography program in the School of Art, the Gallery has been particularly receptive to this important artistic area. Contemporary Platinum Prints and Photographers, our third photography exhibition in ten years, focuses on the dynamic interplay between creativity and technique. In fact, the very nature of the medium, which needs large field cameras to produce a large negative, has led to the production of images that are contemplative. However, as the artists in this exhibit demonstrate, contemporary photographers are producing platinum prints reflecting many ideas and concerns.

Dan Rohn, who served as guest curator, selected the artwork, refined the focus of the exhibit, and wrote the catalogue essay. His dedication, enthusiasm, and hard work deserve special recognition. I would also like to thank the gallery staff, especially Chad Dresbach, our designer. Without the artists, there would be no exhibit. Therefore, I am grateful for the cooperation of Dick Arentz, Lois Conner, Jeffrey D. Mathias, Walter Chappell, Gilbert W. Leebrick, Wendy Holmes, and of course Dan Rohn. Finally, I must express my gratitude to the Ohio Arts Council for making this project possible.

Fred T. Smith, Director
School of Art Galleries
The more experience and ability one gets, the more one gives up that furious determination to embellish and exaggerate Nature. There comes a time when one finds Nature so beautiful, so unified, so coherent in its defects, that one tends to prefer rendering it just as one sees it.

(written in 1769 by Quentin de la Tour, French Painter)

The platinum print is made by hand-coating a sensitizing solution of platinum, palladium, and an iron salt onto suitable paper. The negative and coated paper are placed in contact within a glass frame and exposed to an ultraviolet light source. The image, when developed, will never fade, since the platinum that composes the image is an inert metal.

Platinum printing was patented in 1873 by William Willis, and the platinotype became the preferred way of fine printing until 1937 when the high cost of platinum and the convenience of the silver printing process eliminated platinum paper from the market, although a few photographers continued coating their own paper.

The platinum image has an extremely full tonal scale. Unlike a normal photograph composed of silver particles floating on a gelatin coating, the platinum is imbedded within the fibers of the paper. This, along with a matte surface produces an image with an almost ethereal illusion of depth and clarity. Because of the beauty of the medium many great photographers made platinum prints, including Fredrick Evans, Alfred Stieglitz, Alvin Langdon Coburn, Edward Weston, Paul Strand, and Bernice Abbot.

The process remained dormant until the 1970s, when the quality of commercial photographic paper, which up until that time had been "silver-rich," was cheapened with the use of less silver. The result of this cut-back reduced the richness of the darks in the final print. George Tice, a contemporary photographer and technician, wrote an abbreviated description of how to produce a platinum print by hand-coating your own paper in Caring for Photographs, a volume of the Life Library of Photography published by Time Life Books in 1972. Since that time there has been a resurgence of interest in the platinum print, not the least reason being that the platinum print is a much more beautiful object than a silver print.

The making of a beautiful object is what it is all about. Photographers wanted to "render nature" just as Quentin de la Tour did. The first book to be illustrated with photographs was made by William Henry Fox Talbot in 1844. It was titled The Pencil of Nature, and the connection between drawing and photography was made. But with the decline of the quality of photographic paper during the 1970s, it became more and more difficult for modern photographers to make the "beautiful object." Photographers began to explore alternative printing processes from the past because, as Richard Benson, a photographer who has revolutionized the process of reproducing images in photographic books, said: "Photography has this slippery kind of nonexistence that makes it a minor art. Something's wrong with photography...I've got this idea that it's because the physical thing we end up making just isn't good enough."1

Platinum printing is one alternative process that not only gives beautiful prints, but uses less technology in doing so. The number of chemicals used are few. Coating and developing of the paper can be done in dim light. The sun and its ultraviolet light can be used for the exposure. But to produce this "physical thing" platinum printers make sacrifices. They lug around large and heavy field cameras to produce the negative needed for contact printing. That they hand-coat the light-sensitive solution introduces irregularities in the image. Temperature and humidity can have an effect as well. Printing is expensive, since platinum salts cost more per gram than gold. But these restrictions also lead to thoughtful images conceived with much love and care. The technology of photography is pushed back a little so that the work is more intuitive within a process sympathetic to the making of beautiful objects.

The photographers in this exhibit are travelers, going from place to place, aiming their lenses (and our attention) toward their particular concerns. As our natural areas shrink and our manmade world becomes more crowded and less satisfying, there is increasing interest in the vistas still left. Despite the cumbersome equipment, the artists in this exhibition are, with their specific points of view, recording with fidelity the beauty of the world in which we live.

Daniel Rohn, Associate Professor of Art
Kent State University

I have been a landscape photographer for twenty years. For the past five, I have walked the fine line between the need to create and the need for remuneration. Above all, I have maintained my integrity.

I have recorded both the natural and, more frequently, the socially altered landscapes. Over this time, I gained a degree of maturity that has allowed me to see distinctly with a vision appropriate for the platinum/palladium medium. I exercise subtlety rather than relying on the "quick fix" provided by simplistic imagery. My compositions are structurally complex. I choose my subject matter carefully to convey a meaning which demands, equally, an amount of maturity from the viewer. I am not interested in following trends. Above all, I view the landscape with respect. I have no use for "cuteness" or the adulteration of imagery which editorializes single issue political persuasions of the photographer.

My political statements, if any, are a gentle reminder that we are all a part of this earth. I am concerned with the natural landscape and our need to preserve it. I do not romanticize the human-altered landscape, but record it, both good and bad, with dignity.

Dick Arentz
(born 1935, Detroit, Michigan)

Dick Arentz is a traveler, and this fact has resulted in limited edition portfolios on Death Valley and the American Southwest as well as a two-year photographic essay of Kentucky, West Virginia, and other regions of the mid-South which he toured in 1990-1992. In 1986 Four Corners Country was published by the University of Arizona Press. His work is in many important collections including the Museum of Modern Art, the George Eastman House, the Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, and the Fotografis Landerbank in Vienna, Austria. He is a technician and teacher of platinum printing, and his Outline for Platinum and Palladium Printing is in its second edition. But Arentz is also our conscience. He writes: "The distinctions between photographs and other media have become blurred in an avalanche of multimedia art. Photography has plunged headlong into the art world of trends, gimmick and glitz. The documentary photograph is in danger of being replaced by computer imaging. I can imagine future historians trying to evaluate our society, not knowing if the photographic records are true or falsified."
DICK ARENTZ

Gondolas, Venice, Italy 1992
(7 x 17 - Platinum-Palladium Print)
LOIS CONNER

Queens, N.Y., 1991
(7 x 17 Platinum-Palladium Print)
Born in New York in 1951, Lois Conner received a B.F.A. from Pratt Institute in 1975, and an M.F.A. in Photography from Yale University in 1979. She received a National Endowment for the Arts award in 1979 and a New York State Council on the Arts grant in 1983. A Guggenheim Fellowship to photograph in China in 1984 began her long association with this country and has resulted in the publication of a limited edition gravure book: *The River Flows into the Heavens* in 1988 and a catalogue of this work: *In the Shadow of the Wall* published by the National Museum of Art in Taichung, Taiwan. Her work has been exhibited nationally as well as in Asia and Europe and is represented in public collections including the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Smithsonian Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C.; and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Before her appointment as assistant professor of photography at Yale in 1991, Ms. Conner taught in the New York metropolitan area at Cooper Union, Fordham University, School of Visual Arts, Pratt Institute, Parsons School of Design, and Sarah Lawrence College.
Beginning with the Chinese, folding screens have appeared throughout history. Not only are screens functional objects, they have also been used by artists to strengthen their statements. Within a folding screen, space may be manipulated by the concave and convex positioning of the panels. In this way the space may be closed or opened, joined or spanned, fixed or set in motion. The audience becomes aware of and must reevaluate the panels as they are moved into various positions. In 1989 I began to look for a better way to represent the interrelationship between the culture and its environing space, and decided to apply the concept of the folding screen to my photographic work. Since my first screens, I have tried combining multiple images taken of the same view from different positions in order to better relate what I am photographing to its space.

Jeffrey D. Mathias
(born 1951, Chicopee, Massachusetts)

Jeffrey Mathias earned a bachelor of science degree from the Rochester Institute of Technology. He spent more than ten years as a physicist researching photovoltaics, and in 1986 he began working as a full-time photographer. Studying platinum-palladium printmaking with Sal Lopes in the mid-1980s, he chose to work in this medium exclusively "because these prints convey the textures and substance of the image with more feeling than any other photographic technique."

Before his screens, Mathias worked on two large projects. The first was in 1986 photographing textile mills in the North Canal area of Lawrence, Massachusetts. Then in 1987 he tried, through his photography, to stimulate awareness of the former inhabitants of Casa Grande Ruins National Monument in Coolidge, Arizona. His work is in many collections, including the Center for Creative Photography in Tuscon, Arizona, and the Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover, Massachusetts.
WALTER CHAPPELL

Bleeding Heart Leaf, 1976 - 1990
(24 x 30 Platinum - Palladium Print)
Chappell uses electro-photography to reveal the fluorescent emanations of energy systems integral to living things. Technically, to do this he places plants or parts of them on the surface of the photographic plate. When this living organic matter is introduced into a high voltage field, its electrons are changed into photons, and for a sparkling instant, they produce an image of the plant's life force. Even though achieved in complete darkness without lens or camera, these are not surface images, like an x-ray or photogram, but rather a record of the energy field within the plant's organic structure. Chappell refers to these images of life's radiance as his 
*Metaflora Series* to suggest a documentary that is both objective and spiritual. "Discovery is unrepeatable/Being here/All we see creates/This presence in a/Living Stream of Energy." For him these ephemeral experiences captured on film are "equivalents" simultaneously merging his own energies with those of the plant to, which according to Chappell, "create a new image of understanding for my senses, and to unify my discovery of nature with the growing discovery of my inner being."

Although Chappell's early pursuits were music, painting, and writing, he met and became a close friend of Minor White in 1942. As his creative interests turned to photography, he wrote and edited for *Aperature* in the late 1950s and assisted White in early intensive workshops. Recurring themes in his work have been the nude and the landscape, Indian ceremonial life and culture, and his experimental work with electro-photography that began in the 1970s. He now lives in the remote village of El Rito, New Mexico, from which he continues to exhibit, lecture, and give workshops. In addition, he is preparing a retrospective monograph on his work in photography, entitled *Collected Light*.

I am interested in the photograph as an expression of transformation—where the subject not only reads as an object, but creates an atmosphere within the frame which invites us to live briefly on light and spirit. The creative process is so private and fragile... giving form to the kind of delicacy that often gets crammed out of our lives. I'm pleased if my prints bring a chance for a quieter contemplation. Still life has always offered me a sanctuary-like work space, the most patient of subjects. The hand-sensitized palladium print compliments this process through its subtlety of tone and rich expression of atmosphere.

Wendy Holmes
(born 1946, New York, New York)
WENDY HOLMES

Wild Roses, 1984
(8 x 10 Palladium Print)
Gilbert W. Leebrick

Cliff Palace, Mesa Verde, 1991
(8 x 20 Platinum-Palladium Print)
Our land, the planet Earth, is not a commodity, a resource to be depleted. It is a living organism - part of us, as we are part of it.

The work speaks about the small recognitions, the value of all, even the most insignificant; about the balance of order/chaos and the illusions of an objective reality.

The challenge, then, is to communicate this through the photographic medium.

Gilbert W. Leeblick (born 1946, Brooklyn, New York)

Gilbert Leeblick earned his B.F.A. in Photography and Sculpture (1971) and his M.Ed. in Photography (1975) at the University of Hawaii. He earned his M.F.A. in Photography from Clemson University (1987) where he is now on a year’s appointment as associate professor and visiting artist. From 1984 to 1992, he was director of the Appalachian Environmental Arts Center in Highlands, North Carolina. The center was a unique photographic center located on the grounds of the Highlands Biological Station which is a research facility of the University of North Carolina. The center’s purpose was (through the photography program that Leeblick conducted) to bring scientists and artist photographers together in the course of their daily routines. Workshops with visiting artists were offered weekly during the summers, along with lectures, exhibitions, and evening classes for the residents. The craft of photography was taught, along with vital lessons about the fragile environment and how photography could play a part in making people more aware of their world. The center closed at the end of 1992, a victim of cuts in state appropriations.

Working with major grants from the Southwestern Center for Contemporary Arts and the North Carolina Arts Council, Leeblick has been photographing native American ceremonial sites since 1990 in the Southeast and the Southwest. From his early years in Hawaii, Leeblick became aware of the Eastern philosophy of man’s relation to the earth, and this has become an important part of his ideas and his life, and is, in fact, reflected in his work.

(Gilbert Leeblick’s grandfather was a former president of Kent State University, and so the connection between the photographer’s name and Leeblick Hall is no accident).
I use this beautiful medium to record the light, the texture, and the geometry of nature. My antique camera and lens and the process I use lessens the technological intrusion upon my frame of reference, and is sympathetic to the kind of images I want to make.

Daniel Rohn
(born 1932, Wadsworth, Ohio)

A retiring professor of art at Kent State University, Daniel Rohn has taught in many areas of art, but never in photography. He received his B.F.A. at the Cleveland Institute of Art and his M.F.A. in painting and printmaking from the Yale University School of Art in 1964. Rohn specializes in stone lithography. Early in his career, he was a printer for Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns at Universal Limited Art Editions on Long Island. He also studied music and for a brief time was a tenor with the Robert Shaw Chorale and other select choral groups. Although Rohn exhibited a photograph as early as 1954 in the Cleveland Museum May Show, he did not actively pursue the medium until 1972, and in 1981 he began working exclusively in platinum printing. His work has been shown in national exhibitions on both coasts. More recently his photography has won him many awards in this area. His most recent one-person exhibitions were held at the Akron Art Museum and Otterbein College. His platinum prints are in many collections, including Hiram and Otterbein Colleges, and in 1990 Rohn was commissioned by the Ohio Arts Council to make prints to be given as the Governor’s Awards for the Arts.
DANIEL ROHN

Valley Morning Fog, West Stockbridge, Massachusetts, 1984
(8 x 10 Platinum - Palladium Print)
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AND PHOTOGRAPHERS
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