

SAN ANTONIO CURRENT

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Arts

Feeling negative

BY ELAINE WOLFF

Photography has never been more widely accepted as an art form. So why is it having trouble with the digital revolution?

Given photography's red-headed stepchild history in the fine arts, you'd think Photoshop and similar technologies would be welcomed as liberators, tools that allow photographers to demonstrate once and for all that they are full-fledged creators of their work, not mere documentarians or journalists. But public awareness that photographic images can be almost endlessly manipulated has created some jadedness among viewers and, more interestingly, a brewing identity crisis in the field. If a photographer can use a computer program to darken an over-exposed image or create special effects with the click of a button, is there real skill involved? Perhaps more importantly, if photography can "lie," what is its value relevant to painting or any other art form?



Images from *Dance of Communication*, Mimi Kato's one-person show at C-Art Gallery.

Ironically, the prejudice that kept photography out of museums and major collections for so long - the belief that the camera objectively recorded whatever was presented to the lens with little input from the operator - has never been true, as a matter of fact or philosophy, but in the face of art-world rejection photographers came to rely on their consolation prize: veracity. While 19th-century critics rejected the medium's use for art, they lauded its imagined passivity. "Let it, in short, be the secretary and record-keeper of whomsoever needs absolute material accuracy for

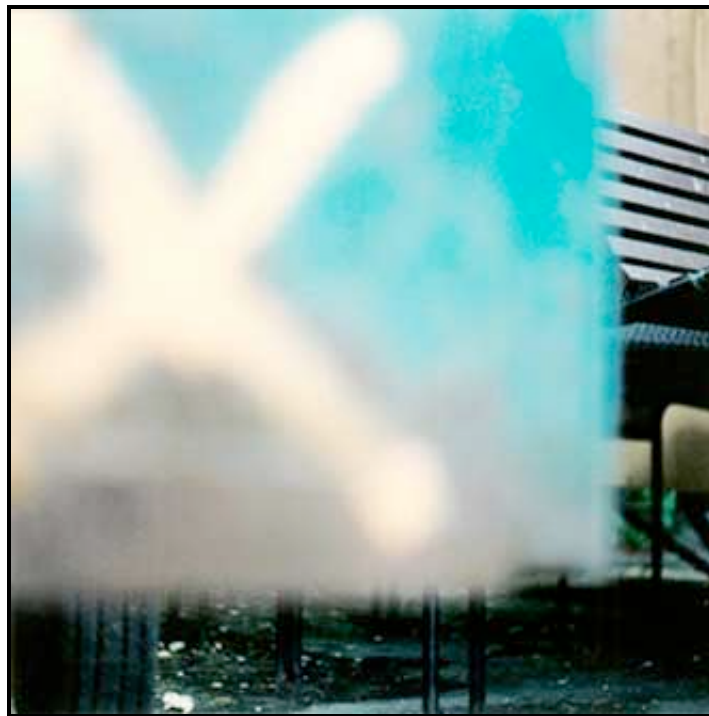
professional reasons," wrote Charles Baudelaire. Like a good stenographer.

But elements that are avidly discussed in classrooms and galleries today as evidence of skill and vision - lighting, composition, and framing - were used from the very beginning to tell stories and convey emotions, notes René Paul Barilleaux, curator of art after 1945 at the McNay Art Museum. "What was interesting is that there were artists who were doing a lot of special effects, combining negatives [for instance]. So they were sort of playing already on the aspect of the element of truth in photography."

Nonetheless, while photography triumphed in tabloids, newspapers, and family portraits, the better part of a century would expire before the art world allowed something more profound might be afoot. "It really wasn't until the late '70s, when artists like William Eggleston and Joel Meyerowitz started showing color photographs and there was kind of a renewed interest in color photographs that changed the critical perception. From there it just escalates," says Barilleaux. He remembers the 1981 Whitney Biennial as a turning point when he became aware of a groundswell of artists who were beginning to exploit the potential of color "in a good way; not trying to replicate nature per se, but using color as a painter would use color."

Barilleaux lists a handful of other significant developments including large-format prints and the inclusion of photography in exhibitions of other mediums. "As objects, [photographs] are competing with paintings and sculpture."

But just as that bridge was crossed, another appeared on the immediate horizon: the advent of digital photography raised a slew of new prejudices, promulgated nowhere so rabidly as among photographers: Digital images could never compare with negative-derived prints. There is no hierarchy of originals in digital photography. Anyone can use a digital camera because so many functions are automated. (Distinctions without a difference, as far as the general public is concerned.) And, most damning, the photographer can readily manipulate the original image in a number of computer programs, making substantive changes that are invisible to most eyes.



"Depot 09" by John Darwell, who uses color and depth of field to create abstract painting-like images, on display at safotofestival.com.

"The fact that [photography is] so fluid and malleable - you've always been able to manipulate a photograph, but you've never been able to do it so easily," says artist John Pilson, who will give a public talk titled "Disappearance: Optical Anxieties Before and After Photoshop," at Artpace on September 22. Pilson teaches and lectures on digital photography at Bard College and Yale University. He says many of his students, who come to his digital photography class with a background in traditional darkroom techniques, find it disturbing to erase a figure from a photo, for instance. "At what point in process and manipulation does it cease to be a photograph?" he asks. "It's kind of a joke, but I sometimes think that we all have become photo-realist painters after the fact. Our medium now sort of floats on a substrate of goo, and in a strange way, instead of making a conscious decision not to manipulate, we're more in a

position of trying to preserve the photographic integrity."

What's left of it, anyway. Pilson recounts the audience's reaction to Andreas Gursky's 2001 Museum of Modern Art show. Viewers, he said, would try to guess whether an object had been removed or whether a figure that appeared in one image was also transplanted into another. "People go to galleries today or they flip through magazines and they're squinting, going, Do you think something was there? Do you think her breasts are really that big?" Any objections to digital manipulation are even funnier (strange funny and ha-ha funny), when you consider that *New York Times* critic Hilton Kramer protested William Eggleston's MOMA retrospective in 1976 as "banal." In less than three decades, photography has gone from being suspect because the artist couldn't do enough to craft the image to being suspect because the artist might be doing too much.

The art world can often seem like a dysfunctional family and photography has responded to its upheaval, this late adolescence, by taking it out on its younger sibling (and, in some respects, its challenger), video.

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Take FotoSeptiembre, the 10-year-old city-wide festival celebrating the medium. Organizer Michael Mehl confesses to being "suspicious" of video, and the few video works that are included in the more than 50 exhibits are sidebars, not main features. This, even though Pilson's current one-man Artpace show, for instance, demonstrates that many artists are now fluidly incorporating video in their oeuvres, confirming that the two mediums have a lot to say to and about each other. But as video becomes a regular feature of biennials, galleries, and renowned museum collections - Bill Viola and Sam Taylor-Wood, whose work derive heavily from photography's language and aesthetic, come to mind - photographers have been among its chief critics, leveling a familiar charge: It's all about the content; there's no real "art" involved.

"Photographers have had it real rough; it's been a long climb" says Pilson, who earned a masters degree in photography before he began to work with video. "A lot of the great works, the indisputable masterpieces of the medium, were made in that atmosphere of complete hostility ... now for photographers it's the same criticism [of video]: It's too easy; it's more like mass culture, popular entertainment."

This reactionary attitude isn't confined to the moving image, either. Barilleaux says he knows several artists who have worked successfully with digital technology but who have returned to traditional photographic processes, "going back to the more tactile quality of the work."



Luly Sosa's work, on view at the Instituto de México during FotoSeptiembre, echoes the work of Surrealists René Magritte and Salvador Dalí.

"What I've seen more in general in the last decade, not just in photography but across the board in all kinds of materials, is the return of the handmade, making work that really evidences the feeling of the artist's hand and the craft of creation," says Barilleaux, a trend that can be seen in FotoSeptiembre in Robb Kendrick's exhibition of contemporary tintypes at the Witte Museum, and Mandy Hayes' *Camera Obscura - A Pinhole Perspective of San Antonio* at Artistic Endeavors Gallery.

But photography continues to move forward, too, and examples of this also are evident in FotoSeptiembre (although not as evident as some of us might like). In a series of conceptual portraits, Mimi Kato examines cultural stereotypes and specificity against a rapidly homogenizing global culture. The power of the photograph in Henri Cartier-Bresson's age was to universalize experience, to give the local and specific a global context; Kato uses it to abstract what we consider universal experience - the consumption of Asian culture; the displacement felt by immigrants - so that it has to be re-examined and given a new context. Luly Sosa proves Pilson's observation that "The conceit is always that we're doing it at all," with a series of energetic images that play with the medium's implicit narratives, some in which post-aperture meddling is purposely apparent.

If any of this non-documentary photography makes us squirm, we've only ourselves to blame. Discussions of technology tend to cast the doohickey as the protagonist and us as the unsuspecting lab rats. "New machinery is normally presented as the agent of social change, not as the outcome of a desire for such change, i.e. as a cause rather than a consequence of culture," writes Liz Wells in *Photography: A Critical Introduction*. Considered from the opposing viewpoint, it seems inevitable that a creature so enamored of recreating itself and its story at every turn would come up with tools to thwart a seemingly mechanical documentary function. •

By [Elaine Wolff](#)

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