

LAWEEKLY

Turning a Negative Into a Positive

Three new photography exhibits explore the accidental artistry of pre-digital techniques

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Photo courtesy of Florian Maier-Aichen and Blum & Poe Gallery



Florian Maier-Aichen restaged an old photo of La Brea Avenue, taken during a rare snow in 1921, using a Los Feliz street with houses that resemble those in the original and adding snow digitally.

Anyone who's mistakenly exposed a roll of film to

sunlight has felt that weird push and pull between stabbing frustration — human error is a bitch — and the thrill of seeing what light can do. Those gorgeous reds and yellows that bleed across images exposed too soon to light make you feel in touch with the nitty-gritty workings of the physical world. A photograph is, after all, a collision of light and paper, but it's only gotten sleeker and further from its tangibility since the onset of the digital revolution.

When L.A. artist Walead Beshty went to the former East Berlin in 2006 to photograph the abandoned Iraqi Embassy, he had no agenda. The embassy had stood deserted for more than a decade. Berlin authorities couldn't legally repossess it and, due to political upheaval, the Iraqi diplomatic mission would probably never recommence.

It was a nowhere space, a zone of obsolescence and a monument to bureaucratic idiosyncrasy. But its metaphoric weightiness meant any photo Beshty took of its littered floors or peeling walls had the potential to come off as self-important, inflating these banalities into a political treatise.

Thankfully, Homeland Security saved him from that fate. The X-ray machines through which Beshty sent his film before his arriving flight (inadvertently) and returning flights (deliberately) left him with hazy, purplish, greenish images that harkened back to that pre-digital, less precise era of image making. The photographs became documents of the damage that border crossing and exploratory missions can cause, and they worked so well, in fact, that Beshty continued to send film through airport security. While his embassy photos were still (barely) discernible as real-life locations, his subsequent experiments with exposure weren't images of anything.

Beshty's show at Regen Projects in West Hollywood, called "ProcessColorfield," is one of three current L.A. exhibitions that troll the results of material collisions. Unlike Beshty's subject-free works, the others — Florian Maier-Aichen's exhibition at Blum & Poe Gallery in Culver City and Carlo Van de



Roer's at M+B Gallery in West Hollywood — take on familiar subjects, such as iconic vistas or public personalities. But all three artists play with chance in a way that feels specific to old-fashioned, analog technology.

All three artists were born in the mid-1970s, just after the first color images of war were publicized, and just before the Museum of Modern Art's first exhibition of color photographs. Their generation was the last to go through school when photography was thought of as an analog procedure.

The most compelling photographs in "ProcessColorfield" (a title that sounds like a trend-ready Kodak product out of 1939) are those that were created via mishap-prone physical processes. The series of works known as Curls is perhaps the most extreme example. Made in total darkness (no darkroom safelights work for Beshty's materials), using industrial CMYK photo paper that comes in tightly curled rolls, the images are about 9 feet long — difficult for one person to wrestle with alone in the dark. As he uncurled the rolls, Beshty exposed them to light, creating a final print that looks like crisscrossing strips of color. When magenta and cyan chance to cross, for instance, exciting stripes of deep blue appear.

Like Beshty's early embassy pictures, New York artist Van de Roer's portraits have the bleeding effect of images prematurely exposed, except they've neither been X-rayed nor sun-seared. For the photographs on view at M+B, Van de Roer used an Aura camera, the photographic equivalent of a mood ring. Manufactured to use Polaroid film, it was designed in the '70s by the pseudoscientist and engineer Guy Coggin to, in theory, "show" psychic energy by surrounding a subject with a blurred halo that reflects both the subject's essence and the world's perception of it.

Not many of the early machines exist, but Van de Roer found one on eBay. He calls it "The Portrait Machine" because it's uniquely suited to exploring portraiture's typically knotty subject-artist-camera interplay.

"The cameras are riddled with ancient wires, and the hand plates are what make the process innately uncomfortable" for the subject, says Van de Roer, who places his subjects' hands on metal sensors in a way that gives their poses a certain 19th-century stoicism.

At first, Van de Roer shot people he knew. But when he realized his interest in the camera's read couldn't be shared by a viewer who didn't know the subjects' personalities, he sought higher-profile people. He photographed Miranda July, the director of *Me and You and Everyone We Know*, in 2008, and, in 2010, author James Frey, of *A Million Little Pieces* notoriety.

July's aura, a fog of violet, was "mystical" and "unifying," according to the descriptive chart the camera prints out with each image, while Frey's was "creative" and "artistic," full of vague, obscuring reds and yellows. With Frey, Van de Roer tried to manipulate the camera's read, hoping to create a portrait that registered a gap between the writer's aura and other people's perception of it. But, he explains, "The interpretations were uniform and steadfast no matter what we did to try to control them."

A comparable push and pull between relinquishing and reclaiming control shows up in the work of Maier-Aichen. He took most of the images in his Blum & Poe exhibition with 8x10 cameras, unwieldy machines that can weigh upward of 10 pounds, including an aerial one he sometimes takes up in helicopters to shoot postcard-friendly vistas.

"When you use that big of a camera, it's very mechanical. ... It's really the opposite of a snapshot," he says. "Detail ... doesn't show that much, and it's very precious. You can just take one or two images."

The 8x10 often leaves him with nostalgic-looking images; Maier-Aichen draws back into them, using Photoshop and other digital tools. The result is imagery that seems both antiquated and futuristic, as in the Östersjön prints in his current show, named after Sweden's Baltic coast but taken in the studio, with an abstract, painted triangle standing in for mountains and dark dye as waves. Made using an early tricolor process (B&W photos are taken with red, blue and green lenses and then superimposed over each other), the images have a crisp color palette that contrasts with their mechanical imprecision. He used the same technique for his photo of Geiranger Fjord, an iconic Norwegian landscape, in which a veil of red and green floats above a slightly marred and dotted surface. "I think there is hardly any room for screwups when you take digital photographs," says Maier-Aichen, "and that's why I still like to stick to film."

Probably no other medium has become as produced and packaged as photography, which is why these three exhibitions feel muscular in the way they make space for collisions. "The idea of a [medium's] zero point was never that interesting to me," says Beshty, who prefers to focus on how photography, or media in general, reinvent themselves.

His work, like Maier-Aichen's and Van de Roer's, uses strategy and technology not to assert an authorial vision but to build a history made up of accidents, bringing process and product together in a way that feels vulnerable, visceral and seductively honest because it can't be fully controlled.

Walead Beshty's "ProcessColorfield" at Regen Projects, Carlo Van de Roer's "The Portrait Machine" at M+B Gallery and Florian Maier-Aichen's self-titled exhibition at Blum & Poe all are on view through May 14.