Art at Vassar



FROM THE DIRECTOR

An Exceptional Legacy



photo: Kasey Ivan

As the new Anne Hendricks Bass Director of the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, I feel privileged to join the staff at this venerable institution. The rich history and comprehensive collections are truly remarkable, and its record of exhibitions and programs for the benefit of students, faculty, alumnae/i, and other visitors is highly regarded. I very much look forward to working with my new colleagues, as well as campus and community partners, to build on the solid foundations established over the course of the past 155 years, since the origins of the Loeb date back to 1864 when Vassar College became the first college or university to open an art museum as an integral part of the academic program.

It is bittersweet to arrive here as we mourn the passing of the worldrenowned architect Cesar Pelli, who died at the age of 92 only a few weeks before I started. The Loeb, which opened in 1993, was designed by Pelli to provide modern galleries and amenities to enhance the College's capacity for teaching, research, collections care, and exhibitions, and to serve as a "symbol of Vassar's place at the top of the educational establishment," as it was described by the project's lead donor, Frances Lehman Loeb. By the time he was selected for the commission, Pelli was widely acclaimed for his practical approach in addressing the constraints of building sites, logistical requirements, and budgets. He was quoted as saying that "An architect never starts with a blank canvas... Architecture is not painting. It is about extraordinary creative responses to specific situations." In the case of the Loeb, on the exterior Pelli framed a unifying dialogue between the existing Taylor Hall and the new construction through the use of materials, colors, and appropriately scaled proportions, and connected the two structures with a glass-walled, colonnaded passageway creating a new forecourt for the complex. The simplicity of the indoor spaces—planned for maximum flexibility on a near-cubic module of twenty feet in every direction—provided an elegant setting for a variety of displays, exhibitions, and activities. In my estimation, the building itself is one of our most prized works of art.

Pelli designed a magnificent edifice in which to view different types of art from around the globe and engage in diverse learning experiences intended for all ages. I am still getting to know the building, the collection, and the community, and I look forward to working with the staff of the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center in exploring new opportunities for us to build on this exceptional legacy.

T. Barton Thurber The Anne Hendricks Bass Director

ON VIEW

Shape of Light: Defining Photographs from the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center

September 20 – December 15, 2019

Before Vassar College conducted its first classes in 1864, its founder Matthew Vassar acquired the first photographs for the Vassar College Art Gallery from his friend and College Trustee, the Reverend Elias Magoon, a Baptist minister and avid art collector. This early collection comprised 17 calotype prints, many of which depict scenes from English country life, and they remained some of the only photographs in the collection for many years. The next concentrated influx of photographs did not arrive until 1973, when an expendable gift from the Charles E. Merrill Trust was dedicated to the purchase of 91 photographs by 32 living American artists. After that seminal moment, the commitment to the medium grew at a steady pace thanks to the enthusiasm of several curators. Over the last four decades, gifts were encouraged and purchases were identified with the intention of shaping a comprehensive yet distinctive collection. Today, the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center holds approximately 4,500 objects and traces the history of photography from its beginnings in the mid-1800s until the present. During this period of expansion, the photography collection has become more and more

diverse and inclusive while at the same time more discriminating as necessitated by the enormous and rapid growth of the medium. As the collection deepened, it also broadened to include not just fine art but also the full spectrum of different but overlapping photographies including fashion, photojournalism, and vernacular photography (snapshots by unknown makers).

Since the 1970s, exhibitions featuring works from the photography collection have been organized periodically in order to highlight particular aspects of the collection. In April 1973 New Art from Photosensitized Materials was organized by then director Nicolai Cikovsky, Jr. and in 1974 two exhibitions, Vassar's Photographs and Photography: Vassar College Collection featuring new acquisitions purchased with the Merrill Trust, were shown in April and September respectively. A decade later, Vassar presented a comprehensive survey entitled Photocollecting at Vassar: 100 Years + 10, organized by guest curator Anne Hoene Hoy, class of 1963. In December 1989, to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the invention of photography, the gallery organized The Friends Focus: On Photography, an exhibition of 61 photographs from the permanent collection selected by Stephen Shore. The collection was featured again in Image Making: Photographic Selections from the Permanent Collection (1994) and Picture Windows: Photographs from the Permanent Collection (2001) just a few years after Vassar's Advisory Council for Photography was established in 1999. Over the last 20 years, thanks in part to essential support from the Council, photography has played a large part in the exhibition program at the Art Center with one exhibition dedicated to photography almost every year. Shape of Light is the first survey of the collection since 2001 and the first to be accompanied by a fully illustrated publication.



Anna Atkins (English, 1799-1871) Ptelea trifoliata (Wafer ash), ca. 1845 Cyanotype Purchase, E. Powis and Anne Keating Jones, class of 1943, Fund, 1983.24



Diane Arbus (American, 1923-1971) Identical Twins, Roselle, N.J. 1966, 1966 Gelatin silver print: printed 1970 Purchase, Louise Woodruff Johnston, class of 1922, Fund, 1974.21.1

A carefully selected collection such as Vassar's, and even more, a focused exhibition selected from such a collection, allows for surprising comparisons and juxtapositions. The 125 photographs on view in Shape of Light were chosen for their part in defining this particular collection at this moment in time. Viewing an exhibition as varied as this one helps us gain a deeper understanding of photography, how we define it, and what it has to offer us in an age of image overload. The works included here offer lasting images made with imagination, intelligence, and insight and they possess a certain presence that is difficult to deny.

Such an eclectic medium is well served by an equally eclectic collection that includes a mixture of classical and unconventional photography that uses unusual darkroom techniques and digital alterations. The Art Center's rich collection traces the progression of the medium through significant works from photography's invention and initial stages until today, focusing on the aesthetic evolution of the art of photography and its technical innovations encompassing a wide range of styles, genres, and methodologies. In addition, the collection supports the educational mission of the Art Center through faculty and student use as well as an ambitious schedule of exhibitions and programs offered to all of our audiences. For that reason, the collection, and in turn the exhibition, aims to embrace the diversity of the medium. Shape of Light stands as evidence that the power of the photographic object has solidly withstood the test of time, even in the face of other advances in science, technology, and visual imagery. The exhibition includes numerous types of



Stephen Shore (American, b.1947) Kripplebush, New York, 1986 Chromogenic print, printed 1992, edition of 8 Gift of Ann Lawrance Balis Morse, class of 1959, 2008.13.1



Matthew Pillsbury (American, b. France, 1973) Tanya & Sartaj Gill, CSI Miami, 2002 Archival inkjet print, printed 2003 Gift of James Kloppenburg, class of 1977, in honor of the 20th anniversary of the Vassar College Advisory Council for Photography, 2018.24.3

photographic images from daguerreotypes to large-scale color prints created digitally as well as formats such as cased images, postcards, photobooth prints, pigment prints, Polaroids, and classic gelatin silver prints, among others. Examining photography as an essentially experimental endeavor, born from both science and art, the exhibition highlights the ways in which artists have used light and shadow, and in some cases color and abstraction, to explore the conceptual and aesthetic possibilities of the medium.

Considered together, the photographs in Shape of Light offer a new context for understanding Vassar's collection, especially in regard to the medium's import to viewers today. Given the Art Center's essential ties to campus, many of the exhibition's visitors are students, born at the turn of the century. Their generation is extremely fluent in the vocabulary of photography, and possesses a deep understanding of how photography acts as an essential tool for communicating ideas, emotions, and attitudes. Perhaps even more than older generations, they use some form of photography on a daily basis, as a convenient form of notetaking, communication, and recording their lives to share with others and save for posterity. These digital documents and archives, while in many ways different from the objects in the exhibition, provide the connective tissue that makes photographs—and their history—all the more relevant today. This exhibition of eclectic photographic objects allows us to appreciate the history of rapidly changing technologies and enormous varieties in style and purpose, as well as the individual viewpoints, curiosities, and idiosyncrasies of its makers.

Mary-Kay Lombino

The Emily Hargroves Fisher '57 and Richard B. Fisher Curator and Assistant Director of Strategic Planning

FACULTY CHOICE

Early Photographic Portrait Encounters: A Daguerreotype by John Adams Whipple

A John Adams Whipple photograph joined the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center collection this year, representing a notable example of daguerreotype studio portraiture, which flourished in the United States from the mid-1840s through the 1850s. Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre announced his invention—the first publicized photographic process, comprised of highly detailed images captured on silver-coated copper sheets—before the French Académie des Sciences in January 1839. Within months, by the following fall, the details of the process had crossed the Atlantic through a myriad of channels and enterprising American artists, entrepreneurs, and scientists began exploring the potentiality of the new medium. In the U.S., daguerreotyping was professionalized and naturalized to picture, above all, the citizenry and luminaries of the antebellum nation. Studios emerged throughout the country from metropolitan centers to small towns as establishments for obtaining one's likeness and for mingling in parlors that featured displays of daguerreotype plates of the period's celebrity personages.

Among these earliest of photographic practitioners in the U.S., Whipple maintained a successful studio on Washington Street in Boston, with various partners over time, from 1845 until the mid-1870s, where he



John Adams Whipple (American, 1822-1891) Woman in Mourning Attire, 1850s Whole-plate daguerrotype in oversized case and housing Purchase, gift of Mrs. Frederick Ferris Thompson, by exchange, 2019.24.4

imaged the city's elite. Here, in a whole plate daguerreotype (measuring roughly 21.5 x 16.5 cm), he pictures a woman adorned entirely in black, with hands folded in the foreground on a draped studio prop and head, along with gaze, turned slightly to her right. Daguerreotypes came in standardized sizes, with full plates (as opposed to half, quarter, or sixth, for example) reserved for more notable subjects and higher-paying clients. Within this monumentalizing format, we see the scrupulously rendered details of costume, bearing, and affect.

Practitioners such as Whipple often maintained studios on the top floor of buildings, working beneath skylights and manipulating the essential tool of light during exposure with reflectors and curtains. The artist's mastery of light dazzlingly renders the various forms of the sitter's black costume in graduated ruffles on the sleeves, beads and tendrils in the necklace, and swaths of gauzy lace framing her décolletage and neck. Along with showcasing this visual extravaganza of texture and pattern in attire, Whipple draws the viewer's eye to the woman's sensitively illuminated face. The brightest part of the image, her visage evocatively communicates interiority in a play of carefully modeled contours and detail, in contrast to the soft focus of her gloved, delicately folded hands. Ability to suggest psychological depth was particularly celebrated in American daguerreotype portraiture, especially poignant here as the woman's clothing might allude to a state of mourning. In this aspect of the medium, Whipple, who experimented with variable focus and made other "improvements" to the process, was rivaled in Boston only by the Southworth and Hawes studio.²

Contained within a sumptuous black leather case, Whipple's portrait both functions as image and multisensory object. In daguerreotypes, representations of self and other (often beloved intimates) were meant not merely to be seen but also held, interacted with, touched, and manipulated with the hands. Here, the material elements of the format take opulent shape with the image plate framed by an embossed brass mat with floral patterning, then covered with glass and nestled in the crimson velvetlined case. Direct-positive photographs, daguerreotypes are unique and were correspondingly presented during their heyday in modes conveying preciousness. While smaller plates might be carried easily in the pocket, Whipple's work functions more as a presentation piece, meant to awe. The image of the sitter emerges from within the tactility of this framing material and the surface of the object itself. Whipple applied rouge pigment on the woman's forehead, cheeks, and lips, creating a sense of presence commonly described as "uncanny" during the period.³ Polished to a mirror-like sheen before exposure, the plate also reflects the viewer's own body, which as a result appears layered atop the sitter's while leaning over to explore the picture's intricacies, creating a corporeal interaction in experiencing the work.

The object is included in Shape of Light: Defining Photographs from the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, on view until December 15, 2019.

Emily L. Voelker

Adjunct Assistant Professor of Art

¹ See Sally Pierce, Whipple and Black: Commercial Photographers in Boston (Boston: The Boston Athenaeum, distributed by Northeastern University Press, 1987).

² Ibid.

³ See Sarah Kate Gillespie, The Early American Daguerreotype: Cross-Currents in Art and Technology (Cambridge: The MIT Press, in association with The Lemelson Center, Smithsonian Institution, 2016).

ARTIST SPOTLIGHT

Tanya Marcuse

Tanya Marcuse's Woven No. 1 is one of three works by the artist in the Art Center's collection. Measuring over 10 feet wide, this recent work is included in the exhibition Shape of Light and featured in the accompanying publication. Mary-Kay Lombino, curator of the exhibition, interviewed her about the work and about her related series of photographs taken in the Hudson Valley over the last 15 years.

MKL: You have lived in the Hudson Valley for many years now and your recent works, such as Woven No. 1, are made outdoors in your backyard. Can you talk about living here and how that ties into your inspiration for the work?

TM: Absolutely. I was living in New York City after completing my MFA at Yale, but I had an intuition that it would be better for my work to leave the city. I moved to the Hudson Valley in 1991. I had never had a garden. I was exploring ideas of the body and archive in serial, conceptual projects (Bodies, Museum Series, Material, Undergarments and Armor and Wax Bodies) that usually involved travel. But gradually, living in this region, watching the seasons, and becoming a gardener changed my work. I drove past orchards on my way to teach. In the monochrome landscape of snow, there was one tree that held its fruit (Fruitless No. 1). This photograph marked the beginning of a deepening relationship with the region in my work that has grown more and more central and intimate over time.

In Fallen and Woven I went out in the woods, finding streams and swamps, and into orchards, collecting material for the work. My garden expanded and the experience of participating in the seasonal cycles, as well as of growth and decay, became part of the work. I started growing things for the work: Queen of the Night tulips, pole beans that I grow far beyond their harvest, blue cornflowers. I searched for monarch eggs and raised caterpillars, using their living chrysalids in Woven No. 27. I harvested icicles from the Sawkill for Woven No. 31. I featured live



Tanva Marcuse (American, b. 1964) Woven No. 1, 2015 Pigment print, edition of 3 Purchase, Milton Bellin Fund, 2016.16

cicadas in Fallen No. 496 when in 2013 the area was blanketed by the cicadas' 17-year cycle. In Fallen No. 306, sunflowers that were pulled down by Hurricane Sandy lay in a mossy swamp. The work became intimately connected to the beauties and tragedies of our area and time.

MKL: You began photographing the transformation of nature in the area as early as 2005. Can you describe the bodies of work that led you to your Woven series? How do the earlier series Fruitless and Fallen relate to your current work?

TM: Great question. I see Fruitless, Fallen, and Woven as a triptych, where each of these five-year-long projects share the underlying concept of imagining the Garden of Eden after the Fall. The work became progressively more allegorical and elaborate; the melancholy of Fruitless and Fallen became more ecstatic and immersive in Woven.

MKL: After Fruitless, what made you switch gears from landscape to still life and at the same time from black-and-white to color, and how does that affect some of your decisions in framing, lighting, and other considerations?

TM: This transition began while I was working on Fruitless. In the fall of 2009, I was out photographing with my view camera, hunting for the particular vantage point that individuates a particular tree from the orchard, where its branches and form are delineated from the larger landscape. (This almost always leads me to lower the camera—often on my knees in mud and snow—to lower the horizon.) The trees were tightly planted, and I considered packing up and moving on; I looked down and saw the fallen apples beneath the tree—ready-made vanitas still lifes beneath my feet. They had always been there, but this vision came as a shock. I moved from singular trees to the many apples, from vertical to horizontal. The horizon disappeared. My framing changed and now suggested the landscape extending beyond the boundaries of my frame. This scene was right in front of me; but I also imagined the Garden of Eden after the Fall. Adam and Eve are expelled and the ground of Eden is lush with overripe fruit from the untended Paradise.

Over time I began collecting dozens of rotting apples, freezing them to preserve the spectacle of their decay. I began setting up the scenes and the pictures changed again; I discovered the frost on the apples when they moved from my freezer to out of doors. I took two identical frames, one in black-and-white and the other in color, and that marks the hinge between Fruitless and Fallen. In fact, in my new three-volume book, Fruitless | Fallen | Woven (Radius Books), the last photograph in the Fruitless volume (Fruitless 45a) is the same frame as the first photograph in Fallen (Fallen 45). I'm not certain if Fallen and Woven are still lifes or landscapes, and enjoy the ambiguity.

MKL: The large scale and lush detail of Woven are a remarkable achievement. Would you be willing to reveal some of the behind-thescenes aspects of your work and talk about your process?

TM: I'm not secretive about the process. The method of making the Woven pieces evolved over a year of trial-and-error experiments. I compose the scene on a 5' x 10' wooden frame that's positioned at a 45-degree angle. The frame is terraced with pieces of wood and bark so that stuff doesn't just slide off. I cover it with dirt.



Tanya Marcuse (American, b. 1964) Fruitless No. 1, 2005 Courtesy of the artist

Often, I burn dry leaves to black and gray ash and then wet the whole thing down. This hastens the sense of time, makes a convincing ground or canvas or garden bed. I build a foundational structure, whether rocks or roots or ice formations, and gradually become more intricate, drawing from my collection of plant and animal material, from my garden, and sometimes borrowing living creatures (that I treat with the utmost care—"no animals are harmed in the making of this work"). A piece can take two weeks or three months to create. It's never what I expect. I become utterly obsessed as I work on these. I photograph the finished scene from a scaffold such that the camera is exactly parallel to the frame. All this is happening under a canopy that has become my outdoor studio. The white translucent canopy creates a huge even lightbox, and protects the set and gear from the elements. To get the luscious detail I am after, I need to take numerous frames that I stitch together later in Photoshop; that is the start of an equally long post-production process.

I fell in love with photography for its descriptive powers, and this method evolved to quench my desire for nuanced description of even the tiniest stick or bug within the allover immersive experience I'm trying to create. It's a way of inviting the viewer up close.

MKL: Turning our attention specifically to this large-scale work, Woven No. 1, I want to point out that looking closely and spending some time in front of it is very rewarding. As one observes the intricacies, the amazing color, and the richness of the composition, it becomes clear that you are addressing some overarching themes in the work. Can you discuss some of the symbolism and art historical references one can discover in this piece?

TM: In Woven No. 1, I'm playing with the opposition between the seduction of summer cherries and the danger of serpents—a kind of postlapsarian vision of the wonder and richness made possible by death and by time. The singular serpent in Eden has somehow multiplied and shed. I'm thinking of an Abstract Expressionist-scale seventeenth-century Dutch vanitas still life, and the psychedelic Adam and Eve by Fred Tomaselli; of the allover compositions of Jackson Pollock and Joan Mitchell, of the Unicorn Tapestries, of the visions of Hildegard von Bingen and Hilma af Klint. I'm thinking of the three canticles of Dante's Divine Comedy, and of Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights with the three panels (or canticles)—paradise, the lusty earth, and hell—woven into one.



Tanya Marcuse (American, b. 1964) Fruitless No 45a, 2010 Courtesy of the artist



Tanya Marcuse (American, b. 1964) Fallen No 45, 2010 Courtesy of the artist

Caleb Stein, Vassar Class of 2017 IN THE FIELD

Caleb Stein '17 is a photographer living in Hanoi, Vietnam. We asked him to tell us about current and past projects and how his time at Vassar has influenced his work.

I came to Vassar to study art history because I wanted to understand how photography sits within a larger conversation. From the beginning, I was fascinated by Poughkeepsie. Every day after class I would wander around town, in particular along a three-mile stretch of its Main Street. I grew up in big cities and my conception of small American towns came from things like Norman Rockwell illustrations, so I wanted to see how my photographs matched up with those inherited, almost mythologized ideas of Americanness.

For years I walked obsessively throughout Poughkeepsie and got to know its community. After the 2016 elections, there was a palpable tension as I walked along Main Street. The election was neck and neck in Dutchess County; you could almost have fit the difference into a crowded bar on a Saturday night. At this point, my work took on a new direction. It wasn't only about understanding this mythologized conception of America, but it was also about grappling with this conflict through photography.

My project Down by the Hudson is an ode to Poughkeepsie and to my time there during and after Vassar. After graduating in 2017, I stayed in Poughkeepsie and worked for Magnum photographer Bruce Gilden as a studio assistant. One of the best things he said to me was that there are no geniuses in photography, there are only people who work hard with heart. It was during this time that I discovered the watering hole, an Eden tucked away behind the local drive-in movie theater on the outskirts of town. Here, people came together and let their guard down. I was inspired by this place during this tense political moment. The more time I spent at the watering hole, the more I wanted to convey the struggles and beauties of this town with care and tenderness.

I feel grateful for the fascinating perspectives that coexisted in such a dynamic way at Vassar. Here I found mentors that gave me so much and helped shape my thinking and my work. Notably, writer Amitava Kumar (Department of English) pushed me to think about story, and to see

photography as a body of work and not only single images. Curator Mary-Kay Lombino shared her discerning eye with me while we looked through hundreds of vintage prints made by my heroes. I will always remember the overwhelming feeling of looking through Diane Arbus's portfolio A Box Of Ten Photographs with Mary-Kay at the Loeb and then walking out into the street to work on my project. Critic Molly Nesbit (Department of Art) taught me how to be in love with photographs while simultaneously questioning them.



Photo: Andrea Orejarena



Caleb Stein (b. London, 1994) The watering hole. Poughkeepsie, NY, 2018 Silver gelatin print © Caleb Stein



Caleb Stein (b. London, 1994) The watering hole. Poughkeepsie, NY, 2018 Silver gelatin print © Caleb Stein

Medievalist Andrew Tallon (Department of Art) had an insatiable curiosity and understood that you could talk about stained glass windows in the same breath as photographs or skyscrapers. He taught me that it wasn't a betrayal of photography to love other mediums.

Today, I'm working on a new project. The inspiration for it goes back to 2015 when I visited Hanoi for the first time with Andrea Orejarena '17. We went to Làng Hữu Nghi, an establishment for Vietnamese veterans and their descendants affected by chemical weapons used by the U.S. during the war. We were struck by their gracefulness and resilience, and when we returned to

Poughkeepsie, this visit stayed with us. It made us think about being American, the nature of forgiveness, and what it means to participate in telling someone else's story.

In 2018 we moved to Hanoi and returned to Làng Hữu Nghị to work on a project exploring the memory of the Vietnam War. We're working on a multimedia collaboration with Vietnamese veterans and their descendants. The project is an effort to deconstruct the oftenrigid divide between "subject" and "author" by bringing together a multiplicity of perspectives and media. The product is a fragmented collection of memories and impressions expressed through photographs, paintings, and videos.

The photographs primarily focus on the people living at Làng Hữu Nghị. In some ways this work is a continuation of Down by the Hudson because it continues to explore community and the dynamic and energetic interactions that occur within it. The paintings are made by young Vietnamese artists in a workshop we're hosting at Làng Hữu Nghị where we take on the role of artist as facilitator, activist, and curator. Their work ranges from intimate self-portraits to large-scale depictions of the aftermath of war. For the videos, we work with veterans to co-direct often dream-like vignettes. They choose how to present themselves. Each video is its own world and requires a different approach, whether it's sourcing found footage, recording our own footage, or using animation. In a way we're thinking of these videos as wish fulfillments that blur the lines between memory and dreams.

This project has made me realize that each different body of work requires its own approach. Andrea and I continue to work closely with the people at Làng Hữu Nghi to develop this project with plans to exhibit it in Hanoi in December.

Caleb Stein '17 Hanoi, Vietnam

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P'84 P'88

Mengna Da '15

Mark L. Darby '76

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Carol Nipomnich Dixon '57

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Nancy Belle Swan Douglas '48

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Louise Bourgeois: Ode to Forgetting, From the Collections of Jordan D. Schnitzer and His Family Foundation January 24 – April 5, 2020



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Fall / Winter 2019 / 20



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Stanley William Hayter (English, 1901-1988) Sun Dance, 1951 Engraving, soft ground etching, offset color on beige paper Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd (Blanchette Hooker, class of 1931) 1953.1.3

On the cover: Adam Fuss (English, born 1961) *Untitled*, 2007 Unique gelatin silver print photogram Purchase, Friends of the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center Func 2017.10