

Focus on Photography

Moments in time

By Anca Colbert



Cindy Pitou Burton – “Magnolia Heart,” 2012 – digital photograph printed on archival rag paper, 17” x 22”.

The annual January gatherings at the Art and Photo Fairs in Los Angeles clearly demonstrated the interest of the art world in photography as an art form. This is also confirmed by the sustained growth of the art market in vintage, modern and contemporary works. Classic and cutting-edge photos sell: it is a hot, exciting arena for artists, museums and collectors.

Meanwhile, photography as a hobby has exploded: anybody with a digital camera or a cell phone can take pictures now. And they do. We all do. Yes, anybody can press a button, but not everybody is a photographer.

Light is the essence of photography. On that ground alone, Ojai is a photographer's dream. The valley is blessed with a light quality that inspires visitors to capture its natural beauty and that has attracted photographers to make their homes and studios here: Horace Bristol, Guy Webster, Donna Granata, Cindy Pitou Burton, and others.

The small town is a secluded paradise, but quite close to the fabled Getty Center in Los Angeles — its illuminating exhibitions and stellar educational programs have informed and inspired us since 1997 — and the Brooks Institute of Photography established in 1945 in Santa Barbara — a school of international reputation. Both institutions have contributed immeasurably to foster and refine an appreciation for photography and to deepen connoisseurship in this region and far beyond.

Not even a bird's eye view of the history of photography could possibly be attempted here, but let's consider a few key moments in its development.

When compared to the long history of other visual art forms (painting, sculpture, ceramics), photography is still a child. But the last kid on the block is growing fast, at the blazing speed of today's technological advances.

Cindy Pitou Burton's work offers an interesting parallel to the recent shifts in camera technologies. Cindy moved to Ojai in 1992 after a significant career in New York in the 1980s working as a photojournalist on assignment for the *New York Times*, all major TV stations and corporate clients. At the time she was mostly shooting black & white film, only occasionally color.

Like most professionals, she resisted the digital revolution, "reluctant to let go of her five Nikons and a body of knowledge that she realized was becoming obsolete."

But then she started exploring "alternative photographic processes, at first working with large transfers of Polaroid prints onto watercolor paper as well as digitalizing and manipulating her black and white photographs, creating limited edition fine art prints." She now fully embraces the new tools at her disposal and considers photography "a big adventure" in her life.

While we are mostly focusing here on what the camera, the lens and the process do when used as creative tools through the eye and in the hands of artists, we have to consider that "taking pictures" has also had a vast popular appeal for anyone drawn to capturing moments in time and fragments of life. Given the revolutionary technical changes brought to the medium in its rather short history, and the quantum leap more recently afforded by the advent of digital media, instant gratification is now available to anyone with a cell phone.

Silicon Valley experts predict the number of active mobile phones will exceed world population in 2014. The majority of them have a built-in camera, so the technology for the most popular and democratic of all arts is now in the hands of billions. From sitting still for minutes in 1839 to seeing a selfie in a split second in 2014... quite a leap in time.

Born in the early 1800s, the technique gained popularity during the 19th century and developed into a passion with a public hungry for images, allowing for a speedy discovery of the world that until then was inconceivable. Waves of adventurous, traveling photographers covered the American continent and the Mediterranean basin, bringing back pictures of exotic people and faraway places easily shared by stereoviews and various printed means.

Huge progress occurred in 1839 with the advent of the daguerreotype. Invented by Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, it was the first patented and commercially available photographic technique.

A highly toxic silver plate process that required hours to produce, the daguerreotype was physically laborious and costly. It involved heavy materials, hours of preparation, setting-up and complicated chemical processing. Even one photograph was tedious to produce, but the medium took off like wildfire in the 1850s.

Luther Gerlach, an artist and teacher based at the Working Artists of Ventura (WAV) in Ventura, still works with large format historical cameras and lenses dating from 1840 to 1940, which he has been collecting and restoring. Later this year Luther's work (all wet-plate collodion shot in Santa Barbara County) will be shown at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. Luther presents occasional workshops on vintage techniques and technologies at the Getty Center.

As photography gained increasing popularity, the technical advances multiplied and simplified the process, making cameras lighter and more affordable. Eastman Kodak introduced their first Brownie camera in 1900 at the price of \$1 with a catchy slogan: "You push the button, we do the rest." A black cardboard box with simple controls, it popularized low-cost photography and the idea of the snapshot. By the late 1960s, the Brownie was in the hands of millions.

Fast forward.

At the February 21, 1947 meeting of the Optical Society of America, Edwin H. Land, a visionary engineer specializing in the study of polarized light, introduced the latest improvement of his Polaroid camera featuring black & white film that fully developed itself within 60 seconds. To make his brilliant marketing point (an approach which very much inspired Steve Jobs) Land snapped a picture of himself and showed the audience the portrait. It's a historical turning point: instant photography was born. I like to think of that moment as the original instant "selfie!"

Amazingly enough, the idea of instant photography actually came from a child, Land's daughter, Jennifer, who was three years old at the time. It was 1944, and this is how Land remembers the moment:

"I recall a sunny day in Santa Fe, N.M., when my little daughter asked why she could not see at once the picture I had just taken of her. As I walked around the charming town I undertook the task of solving the puzzle she had set me. Within an hour, the camera, the film and the physical chemistry became so clear to me." (source:



Luther Gerlach in his studio



Edwin Land with his Polaroid-generated self portrait.

The Rowland Institute at Harvard)

And so goes the wonderful story of how legendary Edwin H. Land invented the Polaroid, truly the first instant camera, which became commercially available in 1948. The seduction of immediacy worked its magic long before the digital age. It opened the door to providing a new thrill to its users and gave a new tool to the artists always eager to

push the boundaries of innovation. Land himself and The Polaroid Corporation supported artistic creativity, and artists passionately embraced Polaroids. Color Polaroids appeared in the '70s, and while some curators were questioning their lasting quality (and yes, there are issues about their conservation) Polaroids by David Hockney and Andy Warhol are now rare, pricey and avidly sought after by collectors.

Back on the ranch, in Ojai, white and pink magnolia trees are in magnificent bloom at this time of year. Their luscious flowers with shapely petals offer distinctly different shades of iridescent whites, which attract photographers to explore the way light reflects on surfaces to create definition, textures and shadows. Cindy Pitou Burton has also been fascinated with the flower, and photographed it with every camera she owns, in various seasons and light environments.

Magnolias have also captured the imagination of Julia Margaret Cameron, Imogen Cunningham and Johan Hagemeyer, to name just a few artists.

As with Edward Weston's bell peppers or Alfred Steiglitz's

nudes, the closer you get, the more abstracted the subject becomes, and the more open to interpretation by the viewers.

Meanwhile, photography is becoming the medium of choice for a new breed of artists, venturing to explore and alter the visible through the alchemy of their vision. The challenge is far greater, now that millions relate to the illusion of capturing "reality" with their cell phones.

Jeff McLane, a young photographer whose experimental work I recently discovered at an installation he curated for Photo L.A., articulates the question well: "How does a photograph's precious nature continue to endure in a post-analogue society? At what point does our privileged abundance of images fail to become a true reflection of our visual language?"

Photography is undoubtedly the most popular art form of our times. But can photography as art survive the onslaught of images in which the world is drowning as a result of the democratization of technology?

The history of photography continues to develop (pun intended) before our very eyes: an engaging adventure and seductive story. To be continued. ☺



Above, "Through the Oaks" (McNell Road) 1994, original photograph on Tri-X film, limited edition archival print, 17"x22". Cindy Pitou Burton in her studio.

'My Neighborhood, On Foot'



(Top left) "Leaning Palms," 2009, Hipstamatic app on iPhone, 6"x6" archival print.



(Center) "Dew Rose," 2013, Instagram app on iPhone, 9"x9" archival print.



(Bottom left) "Meditation Mount," 2010, Hipstamatic app on iPhone, 6"x6" archival print.



Cindy Pitou Burton uses various apps to manipulate her iPhone photographs. "Knowing your equipment is what matters. The iPhone is just another tool you use to get the effect you want."