

# **Southeastern College Art Conference**

October 20-23, 2010 (Richmond, Virginia)

## **Studio Sessions Panel**

### ***All That Was Old Is New Again: The Revival of Alternative Photographic Processes***

Digital photographic processes have all but eliminated the necessity of darkroom developing and printing. But in increasing numbers, artists including Sally Mann, Chuck Close, Lois Connor and Jerry Spagnoli, have turned to the techniques from the medium's origin, including the daguerreotype, calotype, tintype, cyanotype, ambrotype, platinum prints and collodion glass-plate exposures. This trend of shunning the control offered by digitalization in favor of reclaiming the handcrafted, explorative nature of photography is both an aesthetic choice and a practical one. Many suppliers have stopped making various papers and film, prompting photographers to prepare their own surfaces by hand. Today, these various approaches – as well as a blending of digital and alternative processes – are being taught in our studio classrooms. As such, they assuredly will be a part of studio practice for a new generation of artists. However, they are largely absent from our contemporary art histories.

This panel invited papers from a range of scholars and art practitioners who wish to address the revival of alternative and digital-hybrid photographic practices, and the meaning of such a thing for our histories.

## **Chairs:**

**Kris Belden-Adams, Kansas City Art Institute**

**and Amelia Ishmael, School of the Art Institute of Chicago**

Panelists:

Rich Gere, Savannah College of Art and Design

*Photographic Images in Printmaking: A Voyage Across History*

Carol Flueckiger, Texas Tech University

*Solar-Powered Paper Dolls*

Amelia Ishmael, School of the Art Institute of Chicago

*Sunburns and Shotguns: Contemporary Photographic Indexicality in Alternative Processes*

Paul Karabinis, University of North Florida

*When Nothing is Certain, Everything is Possible: Alternative Photography as Pedagogical Strategy*

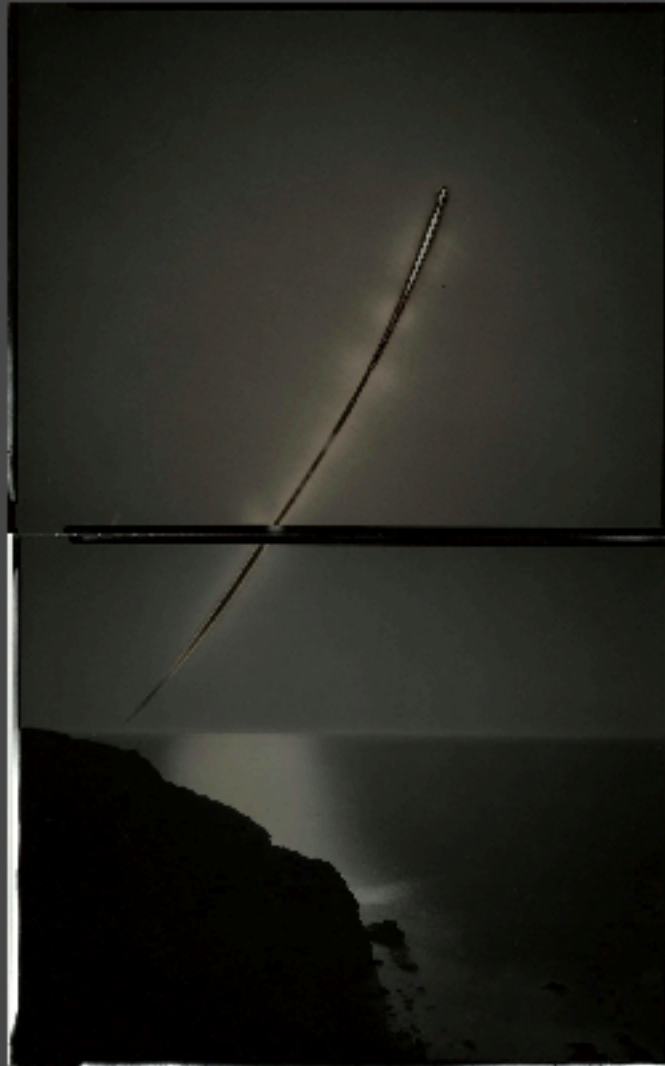
Joseph Mougel, Ringling College of Art and Design

*Teletypes: Tangible Connections in a Digital Age*

(My participation in this conference was partially supported by the Graduate and Goldabelle Finn Graduate Travel Grant, received through the department of Modern Art History, Theory and Criticism at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago.)

# Sunburns and Shotguns:

*contemporary photographic indexicality  
in the alternative processes of Chris McCaw and Marco Breuer*



**a presentation by Amelia Ishmael for SECAC 2010**

**Sunburns and Shotguns: contemporary photographic indexicality in alternative processes**

\*\*\*Slide 1: title slide\*\*\*

The history of photography is primarily the story of the camera-based image. This sequential trajectory—from the daguerreotype and calotype, to the glass-plate negative, from the brownie camera to the cellphone digital camera—favors the immediately captured image, and the mechanical over the hand-made. But what this history leaves out is the continuity of artistic interest in alternative photographic processes. Whether as an independent interest or a reaction to new technologies, alternative processes continue to thrive regardless of criticisms against it.

The term “alternative processes” was used in the 1960s as a “slogan of opposition to Kodak” and its threat to dominate materials and processes of photography.<sup>i</sup> It celebrates the use of photographic materials to *document* the experience of reality, *as well as* to intervene in that experience. It supports “not a looking at or a looking through but a *looking with*.”<sup>ii</sup> It maintains a place for the artist’s hand, (which has also recently regained value in contemporary art theory with the rise of craft arts). Alternative processes consistently inspire artists to use photographic materials in experimental, intuitive, and sometimes simply *illogical* and *contradictory* ways.

Today, I will present two contemporary artists of photography—Marco Breuer and Chris McCaw—who use alternative processes, specifically “photogenic drawing,” in their oeuvre. Initially instigated during the 19th century, their experimental use of “photogenic drawing” processes intervenes concepts regarding the indexicality and medium-

specificity of photography. Breuer and McCaw's process highlights artistic interventions into analogue photography's fundamental qualities: light, time, and photosensitive chemistry.

But first, my fellow Talbot fans will recognize this antiquarian term, coined during the infancy of photography. William Fox Talbot used "photographic drawing" to describe how "the pencil of nature" reproduced her likened-ness. It is rarely used by contemporary photographers and sounds both overly romantic, and complexly like an early denouncement of authorship. I'm going to align myself with photo historian Carol Armstrong in using "photogenic drawing" to draw attention to the indexicality and medium-specificity of photography. This use is not a relapse, but an opposition to standard trajectories of the camera-based photographic images realization. As Armstrong explains,

We assume, forget, critique, and negate the particular authenticity effect—the "photogenic drawing," "natural illustration," and "nature print" aspects—of the photograph, while also assuming that its iconicity, its mechanicalness, and its reproducibility are simply other, better names for its root indexicality.<sup>iii</sup>

By invoking this term, I am challenging assumptions about contemporary photographic-based media, as well as suggest a lapse of time—and thus the possibility for a quality of performance that both McCaw and Breuer's photographs involve. In repositioning the way we talk about alternative processes, the new directions in the history of photography that their work instigates will come to light.



\*\*\*Slide 2: Left, McCaw. Right, Breuer\*\*\*

Chris McCaw is a Californian photographer who specializes in alternative processes such as platinum palladium printing. His current series *Sunburn*—a sample of which is featured on the left—features unique large-format paper negatives scorched by long exposures of the sun's concentrated light through the camera's lens.

On the right—is a sample of Marco Breuer's practice, which includes small-edition and bookmaking, pinhole photography, Xerox manipulations, and photographic drawings created directly onto light sensitive paper. His techniques include scratching, slicing, exposing, burning, and shooting at photographic paper with a 12-gauge shotgun.

Their resulting prints are both representational and abstract. They are photographic according to this medium's earliest definition, and are coded with the syntaxes of the process that elicited them. The images are direct remnants impressed by the interaction of the artist with the medium itself.

Let's look a little closer.

\*\*\*Slide 3: McCaw\*\*\*

Here, we have McCaw's *Sunburned, GSP #405 (Pacific Ocean)* from 2009. This image is comprised of four 11 by 14 inch gelatin silver paper negatives laid side by side with a large, dark continuous slice sweeping across their surfaces. It's difficult to tell in this document of the work—which was shot face on rather than from an angle—but the paper around this long slice is slightly jagged, and undulates forward and backwards, creating a

depth to the otherwise 2-D image which is emphasized in their frequently shadow-box frame. Immediately outlining this mark, the burnt chemistry of the paper produces orange and red hues—certainly abnormal for a black and white photograph. Beyond these hues, the surface area surrounding the mark is noticeably lighter in tone. Below the mark, a faint, dark, jagged form stretches horizontally across the bottom of each image.

The horizontal stretch of the composition implies a landscape. This reading is supported by the commonality of the western landscape within the tradition of American photography, as well as the fact that, even though this is a negative, due to the polarized effect—which results from the unusually lengthy exposure—the negative image is brought back into a positive.<sup>iv</sup> With these narrative clues, it becomes clear that the long arc is a tracing of the sun's movement across the sky across several hours. Its path scorches across each negative, as the photographer replaces the paper—one by one—in the camera back.

\*\*\*Slide 4: black\*\*\*

McCaw came across this technique by chance in 2003 when capturing an all night exposure of the star filled sky. McCaw—apparently a whisky drinker— inadvertently left the lens cover off during the sunrise. As he describes on his website, McCaw found that the negative had been burnt straight through and thought that the photo was ruined. Yet, he went ahead and carried out the developing and fixing process to explore his results. This experience was pivotal, and McCaw claimed that it “creat[ed] a new way for [him] to think about photography.”<sup>v</sup>

\*\*\*Slide 5: McCaw at work\*\*\*

Since 2003, McCaw has continued his use of the sunburns to draw arcs across his paper negatives. He began using vintage fiber-based gelatin silver black & white photographic paper for its ability to withstand longer exposures, and he created special boxes to hold the photo paper and heavy specialized lenses, which were better apt to give McCaw the extreme focus of the sun's heat that he needed. This spread from the late *Art on Paper* shows McCaw with his camera on site near Santa Monica. As with a great number of alternative process photographers, it is the case that his unique procedure is highlighted just as much, if not more so, than the effects of the technique. In this feature, for example, readers do not encounter his art prints until the third page of the article.

It is too often the case, I think, that photographic artists who use alternative processes are requested to "explain the magician's tricks" rather than enjoy the complex formalistic and conceptual innovations of their creations. What makes McCaw's images especially exciting, for me, \*\*\*Slide 6: McCaw (back to slide 3)\*\*\* is that "Not only is the resulting image a representation of the subject photographed, but part of the subject (the sun) has become an active participant in the printmaking."<sup>vi</sup> The subject matter of the image is the sun, and its presence in McCaw's photographs is that of a direct footprint of the event. The direct impression of the sun as a mark-maker, inspires me to referring back to Talbot's concept for "photogenic drawings." McCaw's photographs are exactly what Armstrong claims: the authentic presence of the sun is so strong here that its index has penetrated directly through the photographic medium that attempted to hold it.

It is this type of surface alteration that has inspired critics to ask, “is this photography as all.” This is not so much a question of the post-photograph symptom that occurred after digital photography, but rather the heavy use of syntaxes and processes of sculpture and drawing—which were both syntaxes facilitated in photography at its complex infancy but since omitted—that seems to diverge from what we know as photography.

Receptive to finding other photographers who used alternative processes in ways that was paradoxically self-referential and reflexively-destructive lead me to Marco Breuer.

\*\*\*Slide 7: blank\*\*\*

Breuer is a New York-based photographer.—Who, by the way, does not allow photographs of his image to be used. He has comment that he is concerned because of the way his appearance might influence the reception of his work.— Breuer went to school in his native Germany and his training was heavily influenced by the influences of Bernd and Hilla Becher, through their students. The concentration on objective photography at the Dusseldorf Academy in Germany during the 1980s and early 1990s led Breuer to feel an “aesthetic claustrophobia.”<sup>vii</sup> As opposed to the more liberal photographic educations that American studio programs enjoy, Breuer’s training at Lette-Verein and Darmstadt was extremely technical. As part of his education he was strictly taught the chemical and technical photographic procedures that had also produced contemporary photographers such as Thomas Ruff, Andres Gursky, and Thomas Struth. After being trained in photography’s rules regarding photo chemistry, the zone system, the use of large format, lighting, optics, and emulsions, Breuer found inspiration in the potential to “misuse” the medium. He responded with a desire to intervene, to undermine default photographic

procedures and settings to embrace chance, and to be “physically involved with the image”<sup>viii</sup> by burning, shooting, and otherwise assaulting traditional photographic materials.

\*\*\*Slide 8: Breuer\*\*\*

Using his titles to aid the viewer in deciphering what they see, Breuer’s *Shot (C-917)*, from 2009, was created by shooting chromogenic paper with a shotgun. The image is a unique print nearly two feet tall and one-and-a-half feet wide. It features an expansive white surface, stippled with a colorful splatter of dots, from the bullet’s spray. As with McCaw’s image, the experience of this image is enhanced by actual proximity to the photograph, as the abrasion of its surface results in a nearly 3-D quality. Each dark puncture is surrounded by golds, auburns, and reds, where part of the shell burnt its way through the paper. The abstract color effects that we see here are results of the intense heat and patterning of the shotgun shell as they drew, through burning, a chance visual image on the paper’s surface. They are also the result of the chemical reactions of the heat with the special chemical preparations of chromogenic paper.

His titles, such as *Shot* consist largely of verbs. Rather than representing a subject, this implies that Breuer’s intent is to record a procedure, these photographs are documents left from an action, or event, that occurred between himself and the photographic substrate. Images such as *Shot* capture the “immediacy of the mark and the interaction between the artist’s body and surface.”<sup>ix</sup> In this case, the subject and index shifts, the subject is the act, the index is the mark that resulted from that act.

\*\*\*Slide 9: Both (same as slide 2)\*\*\*

As the other panelists today have discussed, there are many attractions that contemporary artists have to alternative process images. One of the aspects that impresses me the most about the works of McCaw and Breuer is how these unique photographic objects embrace their materiality in ways similar to drawing or sculpture. the edges of the penetrated material, which record the direct contact with its subject matter. In these two images, the medium of the photography paper is activated through the performance of the artist. Rather than being the assumed silent syntax of the process, it becomes an acknowledged and active aspect of the image. Whereas the *camera*-produced photograph *assumes* an authentic relationship with its subject, the alternative processes used by McCaw and Breuer use physical idiosyncrasies of the analogue medium to become an opportunity to—as Armstrong states, to “prove and prove again.”<sup>x</sup>

Although both of these photographs document the results of their interactions—here: the heat of the sun or shotgun shells which goes through and beyond the confines of the medium—the resulting images are not icons of these subjects. Both artists create a context for their images—McCaw with the representation of landscape, Breuer with his title—which helps to prevent these marks from indistinguishable abstract gestures. Thus the index of each piece “is less the representation of an object than the effect of an event.”<sup>xi</sup> Rather than representation an icon as has become a standard mode of photographic imaging [think of Sekula’s images from yesterday, and desire to get away from iconic news image], these works present real indices, proofs of the assault on the

photo paper, experienced in the same reality as the viewer and not open to doubt, made known through title and landscape. In McCaw's images, it is the positive value representation of the landscape that grounds the image into a recognizable image, with Breuer's it is the title that he gives each piece that corresponding to the act that created it. In both cases *the direct interaction of the artist*—of the improvisational performative act that contributed to its creation becomes a unique quality of their alternative processes. One that examines the unique advantages of alternative processes to conceive of photographic indexicality.

Thank you.

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<sup>i</sup> Antiquarian Avant-garde, 10

<sup>ii</sup> Lyle Rexner in The Edge of Vision

<sup>iii</sup> Armstrong, Carol and Catherine de Zegher, Eds. *Ocean flowers: Impressions from Nature*. [exhibition catalogue: Drawing Center, New York, N.Y., Mar. 26-May 22, 2004] Princeton : Princeton University Press, 2004. 160

<sup>iv</sup> artist's website. <http://www.chrismccaw.com/SUNBURN/SUNBURN.html>

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.chrismccaw.com/SUNBURN/SUNBURN.html>

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.chrismccaw.com/SUNBURN/SUNBURN.html>

<sup>vii</sup> Essay by Mark Alice Durant. *Marco Breuer: Early Recordings* New York: Distributed Art Publishers/Aperture. 2007.

<sup>viii</sup> Essay by Mark Alice Durant. *Marco Breuer: Early Recordings* New York: Distributed Art Publishers/Aperture. 2007. v

<sup>ix</sup> Essay by Mark Alice Durant. *Marco Breuer: Early Recordings* New York: Distributed Art Publishers/Aperture. 2007. v

<sup>x</sup> Armstrong, Carol and Catherine de Zegher, Eds. *Ocean flowers: Impressions from Nature*. [exhibition catalogue: Drawing Center, New York, N.Y., Mar. 26-May 22, 2004] Princeton : Princeton University Press, 2004. 161.

<sup>xi</sup> Hollier, *Surrealist October* 1994: 115.



Chris McCaw, *Sunburn GSP #269 (Pacific Ocean/Summer solstice)*, 2008.

2-8"x10" unique gelatin silver paper negatives. Image courtesy of [www.chrismccaw.com](http://www.chrismccaw.com)

Marco Breuer, *Shot (C-917), #269*, 2009, 23 x 19 1/4," unique chromogenic paper, shot.

Image courtesy of [www.vonintel.com](http://www.vonintel.com)





Chris McCaw, *Sunburned GSP #166 (Mojave/Winter solstice full day)*, 2007.

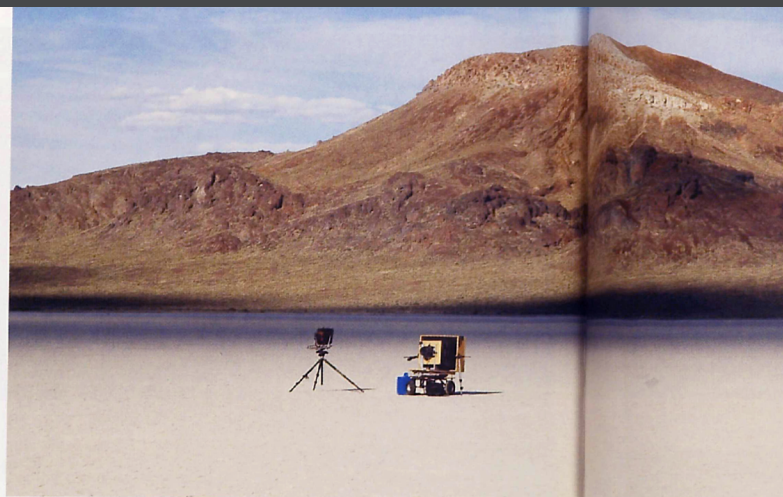
4- 11"x14," unique gelatin silver paper negatives. Image from collection of the New York  
Metropolitan Museum of Art.

how it was done

## BLACK HOLE SUN

Chris McCaw  
burns a photograph

by Leah Ollman



Left: Exposure being made on the playa, Black Rock Desert, 2008

Right: 40 inch aerial reconnaissance lens on an 8 x 10 inch view camera, Santa Cruz mountains, 2008

Below: 16 x 20 inch camera, Mojave Desert, 2008

Opposite bottom: McCaw with an 11 x 14 inch camera and a 24 inch aerial reconnaissance lens, Treasure Island, San Francisco, 2007. All images courtesy the artist

how it was done



Quite a few people strolling a bluff near Santa Monica stopped to gawk at Chris McCaw's camera on a warm, windy January afternoon. It was perched on the wrong side of the safety fence, three hundred feet above the Pacific. Not just its location but its size and scrappy construction got their attention. "It's not a pretty camera," McCaw concedes. "No mahogany or nickel plating."



The San Francisco-based artist, who also works as a platinum/palladium printer, built the device himself out of ordinary plywood, affixing drawer handles to the sides for easier lifting. The camera's old aerial reconnaissance lens alone weighs approximately thirty pounds. A small hand-drill controls the focus, sliding the reclaimed bellows in and out. The whole homely thing sits low to the ground on the base of a garden wagon. McCaw's exposures are often several hours long, so he's not averse to a little conversation with the passersby, but his standard response is abbreviated: "It's 20 x 24 inches. I'm taking pictures of the sun."

The "Sunburn" series evolved from an accidental, all-night exposure McCaw made on a camping trip in 2003. He intended to record the paths of the stars but overslept after too much whiskey, leaving the shutter open long into daylight hours, and the sun literally burned through the negative. Intrigued, McCaw made prints from the scorched film and experimented with more intentional burns over the next few years. The work didn't satisfy. The immediacy and

physicality of the sun's actions didn't come across. As he puts it, "There was generation loss."

In 2006, the artist tried placing old, expired photographic paper in the camera's film holder, and the whim delivered what he was after. The sun's concentrated rays charred the paper, and the extreme overexposure caused a reversal of values, a true solarization (unlike those more commonly generated in the darkroom when a partially developed print is exposed to bright light). McCaw



has been making direct paper positives ever since, one-of-a-kind prints bearing direct evidence of the sun's creative energy and destructive force.

The images are as elegant as they are disorienting, the sun an ashen dot nevertheless casting a luminous reflection upon the sea, or a black-rimmed void hovering bleakly over a serene desert expanse. Ansel Adams made an anomalous "Black Sun" photograph, at once harmonious and haunting, in California's Owens Valley in 1939. McCaw acknowledges the precedent. His work of the past few years operates on a similar premise pushed into the realm of the visceral. In his longer exposures, the sun's trail slashes through the paper, tearing the illusionistic fabric of the scene with what amounts to violent grace. Whether insistent point or irrepressible line, puncture wound, or scar, the sun's trace infuses McCaw's otherwise meditative tone poems with a wild, wondrous energy. The work is simultaneously sculptural, painterly, and fundamentally photographic.

McCaw has been exploring photography's quirky outer reaches since he was a self-described skateboard-punk kid, shooting with a fish-eye lens. For almost a decade, he chronicled his



Chris McCaw, Detail, *Sunburned GSP #166 (Mojave/Winter solstice full day)*, 2007.  
4- 11"x14," unique gelatin silver paper negatives. Image from collection of the New York  
Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Marco Breuer, *Shot (C-840)*, 2009, 23 1/8 x 19 1/8," chromogenic paper, shot.  
Image courtesy vonintelgallery.com