

EXPERIMENTAL PHOTOGRAPHY: An interview with Lucas Blalock

Charlotte Cotton: Your work and writing has been a guiding light for many - including me - for experiencing and thinking through what photography can mean and do in the 21st-Century, in one of its most mercurial phases. Do you remember your motivations to work with a new medium to be back in the mid. 2000s and whether you think that your approach and enquiry has shifted (as the image context has done so) since then.

Lucas Blalock: By the time I got around to using Photoshop as an evident part of the pictures I was making, I had already been using it as a kind of surrogate darkroom for a number of years. I was living in the southern U.S. and didn't have access to traditional darkroom facilities so was scanning my film and looking at my work on the screen. During that time, I would periodically do most gestural things in the software but couldn't quite figure out how it related to the work I was making. I could make things that I was interested in looking at but couldn't quite grasp how they might be folded in. The 'aha' moment came in 2009, I believe, when I had just read Bertholt Brecht's Brecht On Theater: The Development of An Aesthetic and started to see photoshop as a kind of offstage labor that I could then bring on stage and into the pictures. But this of course is only part of the story. So much of the art I have been influenced by is not photographic and this reimagining allowed me so much more space to explore a more authored, reflexive kind of picture that was able to speak to things that I was chasing.

Charlotte Cotton: I also think you channel the enduring possibilities that photography as a medium - it is idiosyncratic and paradoxical. The title of this exhibition - Experimental Photography - intentionally speaks to both the creative license that you and the other participating artists bring into our contemporary digital image environment but also the 'DNA' of photography and the terrain. How would you describe your relationship with photography's histories, do you identify with them?

Lucas Blalock: Photography is certainly paradoxical but these paradoxes get folded into common sense relationships that can make writing or talking about photography feel wooden and pedantic. We know these things already and yet the language we use around photography doesn't support all of this ambiguity. For example, a still life picture presents objects that aren't there. It makes present its subject but it also makes conspicuous the absence of that subject, leaves us speaking about a thing that isn't there. Of course, we know this but when we engage with photography these both/and or neither/nor relationships tend to collapse into a more notational framework leaving little room to explore the translations going on in the picture. We see a photograph of an apple and immediately the word apple comes to mind.

My interest in the history of photography falls more or less along a line of thought developed in Surrealism. The Surrealists were interested in the photographs of Eugene Atget but also in the darkroom experiments of Man Ray and Dora Marr and others. But on both sides, it seems to me that they were interested in the false positivism of photography—a complicated, industrial, subjective picture of the world rendered as simple fact. My work, by making space for labor and humor and oddness asks the viewer to hold two spaces in mind at the same time—the translated image and the pre-translated world in front of my camera. I think this 'weirding' opens up photography to some form of being seen while seeing. You might think about it the way poetry opens up written language to being seen in its own

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right, and I do think that this has been a concern for many people thinking about photography since the birth of the medium.

Charlotte Cotton: In your writing, you also frame photography within a longer history of mark-making and rendering our imaginations. And, in terms of your own practice, your reference points and even the language you use to describe your own actions and gestures are as connected to drawing and painting as they are to photography. Can you say more about this?

Lucas Blalock: I wrote a short essay about photography as a drawing machine some years back and still feel compelled by the ideas about photography that are foregrounded in human desires to describe and relate. Thinking about photography as a machine for making drawings opens up all of this adjacency to other picture-making techniques. I have been interested in painting as a mirror for photography—a medium where abstract marks can become representational—where in photography we are making insistently representational pictures that are being translated through various valances of abstraction. I have learned so much from looking at painting and owe painters so much in terms of how I approach things but at the same time the tolerances of each medium are so different and my work has remained explicitly caught up in questions of photography.

Charlotte Cotton: One of the potential pitfalls of image-making today is that the software/pixel realm automates so many of the steps that in analogue and chemical photography are points of decision and consequence. Even though you are an artist who makes no direct distinctions between analogue and digital ideation, processes and rendering of photographic works, I am curious to know whether you think there are greater restrictions or freedoms to be found in digital processes.

Lucas Blalock: I am not sure I would say it is a central creative space. For me, the work starts in making photographs which I incidentally still do with a film camera and continues through to the print. But I think your question is really salient. I feel like making art is about trying to draw an image into specificity and in making that specificity feel almost inevitable. This is very challenging in a digital environment that has so many, many myriad options. 'Freedoms' is a funny word. In some ways, I certainly have that but in another sense there is much more noise in the digital system. Maybe 'pleasure' or 'nervous feeling' are better arbiters? How can you squeeze something with energy out of any given set of constraints? Or even, with digital, how might you make enough pressure to produce specificity out of a rather flabby, undifferentiated endlessness. I think of my work as shared or connective, and I guess I am just perpetually bouncing off my own wants and tolerances. I am using myself as a kind of first viewer and hoping that I have stayed connected enough for that signal to make it out of my space into someone else's.

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Installation views, Markus Elbaus



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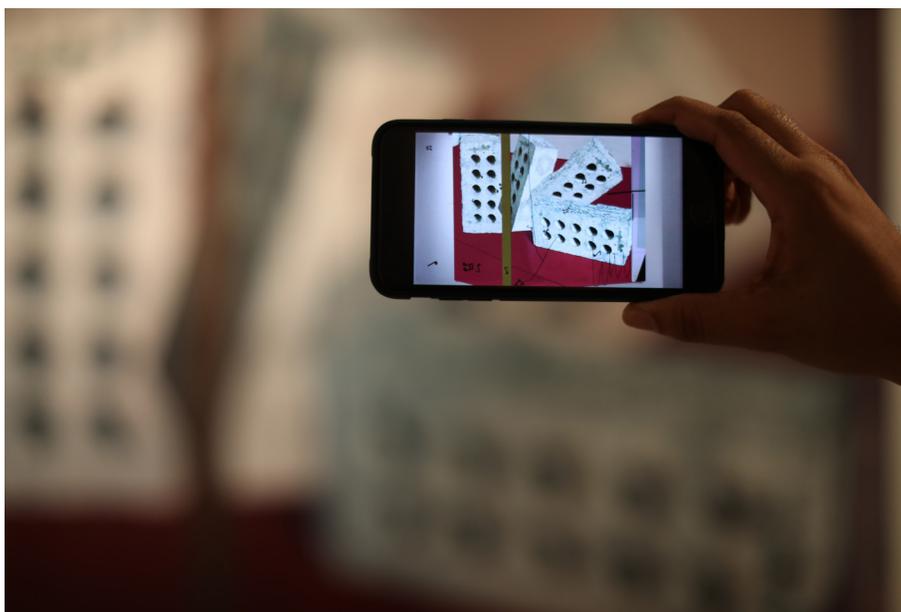


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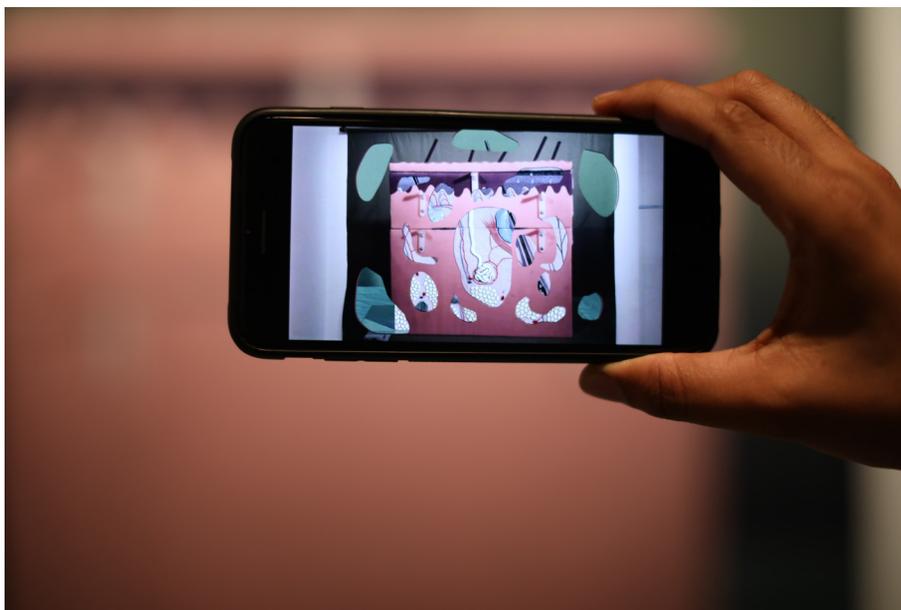


Installation view, Markus Elbaus

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Installation views



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Experimental Photography draws together six innovative contemporary American artists who are re-shaping photography's 200-year history of experimentation with new ideas and processes. Their photographic practices include fusing analogue traditions and materials with pixel-based software and new printing and image-rendering technologies. Within a contemporary creative context, the material presence of photographs is an ever-changing experience - the scope of which is set well beyond the confines of artistic practice per se, and in the realms of Web 2.0 and the 'cloud' of networked images. This exhibition offers up a range of active and subjective choices made by artists to transform and translate images into tangible objects, harnessing the experimental potential of a collective 'image environment'.

In this era of unprecedented compatibility and transparency between viewers and artists, the artists presented here are at the forefront of a dynamic facet of contemporary art photography that intentionally speaks to the universality of digital image capturing and sharing which permeates daily life. Through their work, we experience the physical implications of operating in this utterly new media environment, where the origination, behaviour, and reading of photographs have been culturally upended, and we are invited into the experimental terrain that extends before our eyes.

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