

Accident and Invention: The Wright Brothers' photography

Tim Daly. University of Chester. 2010

The discipline of photography unlike painting, has largely remained confined within the technological limitations of its complex production processes. Indeed, it could be argued that its innate reproducibility through digital data, mechanical print and mass-published photobooks, has now elevated the opposite: the unique print, the artists' book, the signs of hand, the vernacular oddity, the modern day naive. Does our increasing interaction with the virtual world heighten our nostalgia for finite physical artefacts? Is it only the materiality of analogue reproduction that delivers these 'lost' visual and tactile nuances? This nostalgic shift combined with critical interest in pre-20th century photography has paved the way for a different kind of practitioner: the self-patinating photographer.

Lurking on a virtual shelf at the US Library of Congress is an intriguing set of images presented for conventional documentary purposes. Of the 303 surviving photographs taken by Orvill and Wilbur Wright during the design and field-testing of their experimental aircraft, most are remarkable chronicles of their inventions, but as images they are crude and unsophisticated. Many are shot with the traits of a typical amateur photographer: hesitant framing, tiny subject matter which is interspersed with occasional formal portraits of the family (and pets). After their inventions had changed the face of aviation, the Wrights' collection of images were stored away, destined for an unremarkable future. This changed irrevocably after the 1913 Dayton, Ohio flood when the physical condition of the glass plate negatives was altered after being submerged for several days.

Most images suffered accelerated ageing during this catastrophic event. Yet, what remains from this event, the ripped emulsion, scratches and watermarks, pre-date the print style of Joel-Peter Witkin by at least 80 years and provide a watery grave counterpoint to Stephen Gill's *Buried* photographic prints. Now, the Wrights' pre-aged images look highly contemporary: vintage vernacular captured in a dreamy Holga style. Yet, in the Library of Congress, no critical or theoretical interpretation of this altered state is offered, instead, the value of these images remain tethered as documents to an engineering triumph.

Self-patinating practitioners now abound; in *The Architect's Brother* (Twin Palms, 2000) Robert

Parke-Harrison not only mimics the lens of Roger Fenton but paints layers of tinted varnish on his photo prints too, adding the discolouration of age at the very inception of the piece. Like Poundbury village, Parke-Harrison's work is 'modern infrastructure sheathed in fake medieval'.

Kiyoshi Suzuki's award-winning photobook *Soul and Soul* (Aurora Borealis/Nordelicht, 2008), is a book dummy-as-final piece, altogether more adventurous than Robert Frank's groundbreaking photobook *Come Again*. Suzuki's book is replete with fingermarks, rules, masking tape and various stains, not only showing the iterative journey taken by the artist in delivering the typical Japanese photobook narrative, but the evidence of its physical journey too. No doubt folded and crumpled in Suzuki's trouser pockets, the ruffled appearance of the book suggests that it's been around a long time, much like a dog-eared vernacular photo album. Largely ignored when first published in the 60's, only the dummy of *Soul and Soul* reached critical acclaim, seven years after the death of Suzuki. Has this kind of piece become more sought after because of its imperfect nature? Do we now see this *photo-brocante* as the antidote to predictable identikit, digital outpourings?

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