

Light Quartet: Themes & Variations
Kate Breakey, Connie Imboden, Jerry Spagnoli, Robert Stivers

by A. D. Coleman

The diversity of contemporary photographic practice has become so extraordinary that, paradoxically, we tend to take it for granted. Today we experience not only a remarkable range of photographers' address to subject matter and content, but also endless variations in style, technique, and method. In the west, more actively than elsewhere, the "alternative processes" movement that began in the 1960s has recovered many of the early, obsolete technologies of photography and reintroduced them into the toolkit of current practitioners. Other photographers have added new approaches to this set of options. This results in the production of an unprecedented assortment of physical forms as the final embodiments of photographers' visions as we move into the 21st century.

No single show, not even a museum-scale exhibition, could encompass all of the ways in which present-day photographers around the world choose to work. This exhibition brings together examples of projects by four very different mid-career photographers, three of them from the U.S. and one of them from Australia (though now based in the U.S. southwest): Kate Breakey, Connie Imboden, Jerry Spagnoli, and Robert Stivers. They represent their generation of photographers in the freedom they feel to select at will from the available options for photographic practice, their willingness to move among multiple approaches to practice according to the demands of specific bodies of work, and their readiness to evolve idiosyncratic processes to serve the requirements of their distinctive creative visions.

Kate Breakey, the transplanted Australian, takes a 19th-century technique for the hand-coloring of photographic prints and puts it in the service of her creation of commemorative portraits of small once-living things and carefully arranged still lifes involving an assortment of objects. Breakey has chosen to work with a medium that particularizes, and then to particularize her subjects further by bringing them up to or

even past human size and caressing them lovingly with her paints and pencils. Of the media she blends in her work, Breakey says, "Photography is magic in its own mysterious chemical way, but I love pigment — the color, the smell, the whole tactile thing." Breakey's creative process constitutes a form of iconification, reminiscent in its patient, elaborate handwork and deep, lustrous hues of the making of Greek Orthodox ikons and illuminated manuscripts. Perhaps that is why the American curator Bill Wittliff says of Breakey that "[h]er pictures are so lovingly felt. They deliver the content of her heart."

Connie Imboden photographs people reflected either in water or in corroded and broken mirrors, working with them under rigorously controlled circumstances. (For the water images, she has her subjects float and submerge themselves in a black-painted pool in her Baltimore, Maryland home. The mirror images are made under studio conditions.) Initially she made her images exclusively in black and white, interpreting them in the classic tradition of gelatin-silver printmaking, but now works frequently in color and uses digital tools to make her prints. In both cases, she points out, "These images are seen through the camera; they are not manipulated in the darkroom or computer." She adds, "My intention has always been to explore the body, not to alter it," although her vision has sometimes moved far into the territory of the grotesque.

Jerry Spagnoli, based in New York City and best known for his revival of the daguerreotype process, makes one-of-a-kind images on polished, silver-coated plates using one of the two earliest processes in photography. "I think the daguerreotype was abandoned before it was even understood," Spagnoli has said, "so what we have now is a medium that for all intents and purposes is brand new. For me it was the exact medium for dealing with the particular issue of objectivity and subjectivity in the same image." He has also investigated the possibilities of making wall-sized enlargements of very small portions of black & white negatives of images of people observed from far away. More recently, he has begun to generate images of urban and rural vistas in full color with a large-format camera, relying on present-day digital tools to print the results.

Photography's practitioners — deeply if unconsciously affected by a western tradition of realism that defined itself by detailed depiction — have primarily emphasized

the medium's capacity for precise delineation of infinite tonal gradations, crispness of line, and sharpness of focus as not only options but requirements. Nonetheless, one can now look back at more than a century's worth of active photographic investigation of other approaches to photography as constituting a *de facto* lineage, if not quite a recognized tradition. Robert Stivers, who presently lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico, exemplifies a "less than sharp" tendency in contemporary photography. Coming to the medium as a dancer and choreographer, Stivers takes images made in direct contact with his subjects or captured with his still camera from his projected videotapes, interpreting them further during the printing process. He also uses photo chemistry and papers as a painting medium, producing lenless images in the darkroom through purely photographic means in an extensive series of "works on paper."

The situation in which all of these photographers found themselves as they entered their chosen medium in the 1980s and 1990s differed greatly from that of previous generations of photographers in the west, and certainly from the experience of young photographers in other cultures just emerging at that time (or since) from repressive political systems that subjected creative activity to extreme levels of censorship. By the middle 1970s the medium in the west had entered a phase that I have referred to elsewhere as an "open photography," the result of several interconnected forces at work there. One of these was the rapid expansion of the photo-education system within colleges, universities, and art institutes as a recognized component of liberal arts and fine-arts programs across the U.S. and, not long thereafter, replicated itself in other western countries as well.

This encouraged the revitalization of many early, long-neglected photographic processes that had played a role the medium's evolution from 1839 on. Instruction in these processes via full courses and short workshops, technical manuals explaining the methods, necessary tools and materials for production, and of course examples both old and new, made these into available components of contemporary photographic activity. As a consequence, we now have living practitioners of all of those earlier forms: working daguerreotypists, tintypists, platinum printers, pinhole photographers, and

more. And of course photographers continually hybridize existing approaches with new ones, which increases the possibilities exponentially.

Concurrent with that development, and in part as a consequence of it, a market for photographs as collectible objects emerged in the west and grew steadily wider, deeper, and stronger. That collector base — individual, corporate, and institutional — took an interest in and indeed welcomed not only the newly uncovered historical material made with the older processes but also new work created by the same means, as well as experiments that added to or built upon the techniques and ideas of the past. It's safe to say that the audience for photography in the west (which is at an all-time high and steadily expanding) has never enjoyed a greater variety of photographic objects as the physical embodiments of photographers' visions. And all of this energy finds ready acceptance from collectors, galleries, museums, and other segments of the distribution and display system for photographs.

So the demand for such work has increased dramatically, and may well increase further, even as digital imaging takes over many of the functions that conventional photography used to serve. In effect, a stable and expanding market for photographs as works of art exists. That market is healthy — or at least as healthy as a shaky global economy allows it to be. This leads me to assume that as long as there are buyers and an audience for work produced by a wide array of photographic means, and as long as these means of production prove attractive to practitioners, this situation will continue to flourish in the west, and will probably spread to other parts of the globe as well.

This is the context in which Breakey, Imboden, Spagnoli, and Stivers have emerged as notable voices in contemporary photography. Each of these visual artists has demonstrated a long-term commitment to the medium of photography. Each has established a substantial track record of solo and group exhibitions, book publications, the acquisition of prints by private and institutional collections, and extensive critical response. All of them have already created durable bodies of work, and all of them promise to continue and extend their already distinctive contributions well into the 21st century.

While Spagnoli makes some images that address social situations and current

events, the bulk of his work — and all the work of the other three participants in this show — engages with more inward concerns. They all function primarily as poets in their chosen medium, concerned less with the data and information that their images convey than with the transformations they impose on their literal subject matter and the metaphorical potential that they evoke from it. Perhaps Imboden speaks for all of them when she says, "I strive to make sense visually, and trust that the metaphor, the poetry, will follow."