

One year ago, I was here at Penland teaching a workshop called “Photography in Reverse,” in which the students and I worked backward through the entire history of photography, stopping at key moments to experiment, play, and think about the nature of each technology. Starting with our smartphones and handheld devices—the very definition of today’s tech—we began to ask ourselves how photography has changed at this critical moment, now that almost all our daily photographic usage is created and printed digitally. At our first step backward in time, with the earliest digital cameras, we learned something crucial: although photography is becoming purely digital, like much else in our life today, we still live in a physical world, and there are artists who will always want to make physical things.

We had to scramble to find the right cords and batteries and software so we could use some early digital cameras from 2001, and it became evident how much harder it was to work with the obsolete technology of five or fifteen years ago than with the processes of 150 years ago. Most of our computers now can’t run the first version of Photoshop (ca. 1990) or read early Photo CDs or Zip drives. Even the standard color snapshot is being discontinued, since the machines required to make and develop color films are disappearing for good. The history of photography, like the history of technology in general, seems to suggest that every new system or process is an advancement on the last, making all older forms obsolete. And yet for every technique that has been pronounced dead, there seems to be an artist ready to explore

its particular expressive qualities. After all, decades after the invention of mass-produced ceramics, people still want to throw beautiful pots. The artists in this exhibition are each exploring the possibilities of physical and chemical photography to pursue their own contemporary aims, very much in the here and now.

Some are finding a wealth of new beauty in the simplicity of the photographic act—a permanent mark made by the meeting of light and chemistry. Others are deeply engaged with history, in how we look backward from the present or forward to the years ahead. Still others have realized how much can be revealed in the life of a physical photographic object. Any technology that can still be used by artists, whether it’s something that can be handmade or something produced from saved and scavenged machines, is going to have an ongoing parallel history through the work of these artists, not just as a period relic but as a technology carried along into the present with new developments and new meaning for the future.

A decade from now it will likely be easier to make a daguerreotype than to use the iPhone you bought in 2016; in 100 years that will be even more true. In the meantime, there will be artists like these to involve us in the material world in which we live, and to expand the possibilities of just what a photograph is.

Dan Estabrook | Studio Artist | Penland Instructor

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Front photo: *Heliograph #95*, 2015, Chris McCaw

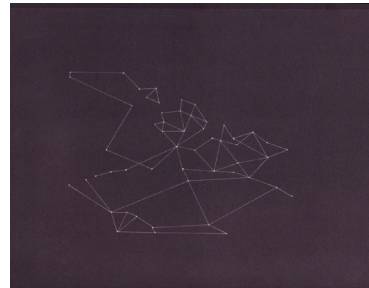


# THIS IS A PHOTOGRAPH

Exploring Contemporary Applications of Photographic Chemistry

**March 22–May 1** | Curated by Dan Estabrook

# THIS IS A PHOTOGRAPH



David Emitt Adams  
Christina Z. Anderson  
John Brill  
Christopher Colville  
Bridget Conn  
Danielle Ezzo  
Jesseca Ferguson  
Alida Fish  
Adam Fuss  
Mercedes Jelinek  
Richard Learoyd  
Vera Lutter  
Sally Mann  
Chris McCaw  
Sibylle Peretti  
Andreas Rentsch  
Holly Roberts  
Mariah Robertson  
Alison Rossiter  
Brea Souders  
Jerry Spagnoli  
Bettina Speckner  
Brian Taylor

Special thanks to  
Cheim & Read  
Edwynn Houk Gallery  
Fraenkel Gallery  
Gagosian Gallery  
Heller Gallery  
Kent Fine Art  
M+B  
Sienna Patti Gallery  
Yossi Milo Gallery  
and curator  
Dan Estabrook

This Is a Photograph, curated by artist-educator Dan Estabrook, considers the fascinating subject of chemical and physical photography in the digital age and how we might now define a photograph. Handmade images created through the complex alchemy of light and chemistry are the common ground of the artists invited by Estabrook for this exhibition. Each of these contemporary image-makers eloquently reaches forward with their ideas and imagination and back in time to retain their connection to historical processes. The works themselves speak volumes about creative minds that disregard boundaries or definitions and seek only to realize their visions.

Kathryn Gremley | Penland Gallery Director



Top row left to right: Christina Z. Anderson, Sally Mann (Edwynn Houk Gallery), Danielle Ezzo, Alida Fish  
Bottom row left to right: Alison Rossiter (Yossi Milo Gallery), Bridget Conn, Andreas Rentsch, Brian Taylor