## art on paper

prints drawings photographs books ephemera



## The Demise of an Art Medium

"They took all the trees
Put 'em in a tree museum
And they charged the people
A dollar and a half just to see them

Don't it always seem to go That you don't know what you've got Till it's gone"

-- Lyrics from "Big Yellow Taxi" by Joni Mitchell

Joni sure saw it coming! Then there's Adam Gopnik, who pleads with Mayor Bloomberg to take action to preserve New York's identity, it's soul, before it disappears, in an essay on urban development in the January 8 New Yorker. Closer to home, in the realm of photography, Kenneth Baker, art critic for the San Francisco Chronicle, recently spelled out the irreversible course of conventional photography in his tribute to the late photographer Ruth Bernhard. He writes, "The history of photography has evolved in directions no one could have imagined . . . as the range of available films and photographic printing paper continues to shrink." As once familiar materials vanish in favor of more modern ones, the disposition of the market shifts, and the earlier context of use is lost.

The making of traditional chemical photographs is coming to an end as it is continuously superseded by newer digital technologies. If you can't quite comprehend the finality of this, just try purchasing a plain, old-fashioned camera, film, or photographic paper.

For all of us invested in the medium of photography, the magnitude of the change is equivalent to a language or a species dying, in part because of a widespread lack of documentation of photographic materials and processes. The primary manufacturers of photographic papers, films, and chemicals-Agfa, Kodak, et al.-did not consistently save batch samples of their products, and photographers who have experimented with various techniques and materials by and large didn't keep darkroom studio records. As a result, we don't know what we have, how long it will last, or necessarily how to care for it.

In an effort to stem the complete loss of more than 168 years' worth of material history, the Boston-based conservator Paul Messier and the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI) are both scrambling to build comprehensive photographic-reference collections. The two projects—one private, the other public—are analogous in scope and purpose to the Svalbard International Seed Bank, an agricultural seed depository being assembled in



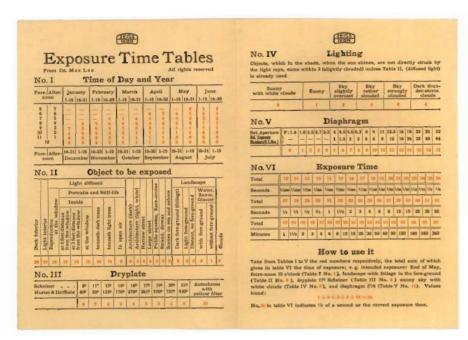
Handbook, Photography at Home: The Use of the Camera in the Home for Pleasure and Profit; With Working Methods and Reliable Formulae.

New York: Tennant and Ward, 1911. Courtesy Amanda Doentiz

a vault in a frozen Norwegian mountainside to protect the world's food sources in the event of a catastrophic disaster.

Messier is best known for his investigative research and authentication in 1999 of the fake Lewis Hine photographs that were constantly on the market selling as rare, vintage prints for huge sums of money. Together with private collector Michael Mattis, who had bought some of the expensive fakes, Messier devised an

empirical method for determining the dating of twentieth-century photographic papers. Where conservators had once relied on tests for optical brighteners and paper fibers to date vintage works, Messier recognized the need for a reference library of photographic materials. He got a head start on the GCI and currently has the largest private holding of dated photographic papers—3,500 samples, identified by manufacturer, brand, and sur-





Pamphlet, Exposure Time Tables for Zeiss Ikon Cameras, circa 1910. Courtesy Amanda Doentiz

face finish.

Now, a year after the GCI hosted a symposium entitled "Understanding Twentieth-Century Photographs: The Baryta Layer Research," it has announced efforts to establish a similar reference bank. The project, led by GCI senior scientist Dusan Stulik, takes a more grassroots approach. On the Getty website you will find an utterly unexpected "How You Can Help" solicitation to the general public for old photographs, negatives, films, and papers. I use the word "unexpected" for a couple of reasons. First, there is a tendency to think that the richest nonprofit institution in the world is capable of buying anything. (Why reinvent the wheel? Buy Messier's archive!) Second, the fact that the GCI has turned to the public in its plea for old snapshots hints at the urgency of gathering what was once

common to us all but is now scarce. Also surprising is that the GCI is the only American institution building an archive of this kind, although funding of such an unglamorous project is surely an issue for most museum board members in this emphatically short-sighted art market.

If the GCI can duplicate a reference collection like Messier's it will be a practical, cost-effective step in aiding the field in untold ways, allowing interested parties to match papers and date works more accurately, and helping them trace provenance, which will in turn strengthen market value. Going forward, it would be prudent to formulate a standard terminology for photographic processes, and, while we're at it, for condition reports. These suggestions are hardly original, but over the years they have yet to be put in



Packaging, Dassonville medium contrast photographic paper, circa late 1940s. Courtesy Richard Moore Photographs, Oakland, California

practice. Photographers could annotate the prints with the brands of supplies they used and their processing details, and dealers could include that information in their invoices to collectors. A systematic buildup of information will only aid those trying to preserve these irreplaceable artworks.

Whether it's a forest-cum-

parking lot, an historic hotel turned luxury condo, or an art medium, change is inherent with growth; we can't save everything. But we have to balance our preservation and knowledge of the past and present with our propensity to make money. Few in the art market these days want to openly address the long-term effects of mounting large color photographs on Diasec or Sintra, materials whose compounds—PVCs, plasticizers, flame retardants, and lead-are all inherently damaging to works on paper, if exposing such market practices might hold down another potential record price! Long-term all this knowledge is critical. For a change, value might just lie in a collection of material history.

—Amanda Doenitz