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Building Pictures

Working everywhere from Photoshop to the woodshop, a growing number of photographers shoot, appropriate, manipulate, print, paint, and sculpt their works, making objects that stretch the traditional definition of the medium
by Rebecca Robertson



Sam Falls's *Untitled (statue and shell)*, 2010, combines acrylic and pastels over a Photoshop-painted archival-pigment-print photograph. "If we're dealing with a contemporary medium where there's still room for experimentation and new printing processes, I think that should be leading to different esthetics," says Falls. COURTESY HIGHER PICTURES, NEW YORK

"In my mind, they're one-third photography, but the other two-thirds are just as important," says Sam Falls, looking at the poster-size compositions pinned to the walls of his Bushwick, Brooklyn, studio. From across the room, the works on paper resemble pastel abstractions, with creamy oranges and blues layered in thick bands over pink and navy grounds. But a careful look reveals a more complicated story.

"First I photograph something—for the more abstract ones, I'm photographing construction paper and backdrops," says Falls, 26, who shows at Higher Pictures in New York. "I scan the film and work on it in Photoshop, usually with the paintbrush tool, masking certain areas and sampling colors to apply digitally," he explains. Up close, some washes of color appear too precise, too perfectly transparent, to have been made by hand. Other places show marks of impasto brushwork. "I make the final print, and then I go back and

work on it with paint and pastel. It's like this pastiche or collage of mediums."

Falls is part of a growing contingent of studio-based photographers who have little interest in traditional distinctions between mediums and genres. Taking up whatever materials and techniques fit their needs, they work with Photoshop and the chemical darkroom and often shoot with large-format cameras. They also incorporate found imagery culled from books, magazines, and the Internet. They build their pictures with wood and mirrors, fabric and plaster, ignoring differences among mediums. While these artists don't adhere to a particular sensibility or look, they share a set of tools and are reacting to the same forces—including the changing nature of photography itself. "They're asking, What does it mean to see the world through a lens?" says Eva Respini, associate curator in the department of photography at the Museum of Modern Art. "Anyone looking at photography in the last several years has noticed artists increasingly working in the studio. They're collecting, assembling, manipulating materials," she says. Respini chose six artists working in this way for the museum's exhibition "New Photography 2009."

"I don't think artists today are asking themselves, Am I a photographer? Am I a sculptor?" says Tina Kukielski, a curator for the 2013 Carnegie International and former senior curatorial assistant at the Whitney Museum, where she organized contemporary photography shows. "It's more about fluidity and the flexibility it creates."

That fluidity is possible in part because of photography's mainstream status in the arts. "Before the 1970s, photography had a separate market value, separate galleries," says Respini. "For these artists, it's never been a stepchild."

In the '70s and '80s, Pictures Generation artists such as Richard Prince referred to images from magazines and advertising, pointing out their ubiquity and questioning the creative role of the artist. But for this new generation, says Respini, "appropriation is no longer a political act. It's a nonissue." Elad Lassry, who makes slick, magazine page-size C-prints and films of banal still lifes and publicity shots, has described his work as having a "post-Picture Generation approach." Lassry undermines the commercial quality of his shiny, kitschy objects, animals, and food by using frames painted to match each picture and employing subtle double exposures or Photoshop tweaks. Last year his work was included in MoMA's "New Photography 2010" show, as well as in solo exhibitions at the Contemporary Art Museum of Saint Louis and Luhring Augustine, his New York gallery.

Although they may not be recognized as a group or a movement, artists working in this way have been gaining recognition. For "New Photography 2009," Respini chose works by artists who work in a studio but have wide-ranging concerns. Her selections included assemblages made from historical and personal photos by Sara VanDerBeek and Leslie Hewitt, Daniel Gordon's pictures of figural sculptures he built with images of body parts taken from the Internet, Carter Mull's metallicized prints of newspapers and magazines, Walead Beshty's cameraless abstractions, and Sterling Ruby's hybrid pictures combining graffiti and Photoshop manipulations. Last year's "Greater New York" at MoMA PS1 included several artists bending the conventions of photography, as did Higher Pictures's survey of young artists, "50 Artists Photograph the Future," which featured Falls. A 2008 show at Gagosian, "Untitled (Vicarious):

Photographing the Constructed Object," exhibited young artists alongside some of their predecessors, such as Vik Muniz and Fischli & Weiss. "The Edge of Vision: Abstraction in Contemporary Photography," organized by the Aperture Foundation in 2009 and currently at the Cornell Fine Arts Museums in Winter Park, Florida, showed artists such as Barbara Kasten, who has been building and photographing abstract scenes since the '70s.

Kukielski, who curated VanDerBeek's solo show at the Whitney in 2010, had presented Corin Hewitt's *Seed Stage*, in which the artist worked in a combination laboratory-kitchen-studio, at the museum in 2008. During prime visiting hours, Hewitt could be seen preserving vegetables, composting leftovers, and composing still lifes of canned carrots arranged with colorfully patterned clothes. He photographed and printed the results and exhibited them on the gallery walls. As the audience watched, Hewitt acted out a form of studio-based photography, emphasizing how the finished images were the result of an elaborate process.

Many of these artists call attention to how their images are made. "Photographs are odd because, unlike a sculpture or a painting, when you do something to a photograph, people are going to retrace your steps," says Lucas Blalock, who was included in the Higher Pictures show. Blalock makes pictures of household objects with a view camera and Photoshop that he hopes "can't resolve easily." In a recent work, the image of a football-shaped sports cup was repeatedly copied and pasted in Photoshop until the object became unreadable. "The viewer is going to have to walk back out to make it a natural picture again."

To retrace the steps that Jessica Eaton takes to make her large C-prints requires patience and an understanding of photographic technique. The Canadian artist explores the fundamentals of optics, color theory, and illusion in photographs that refer to painting and film. Experimenting with custom-built camera equipment and props, she sometimes works for six or seven hours on a single negative from her large-format camera. For her series "108," which can be thought of as an analog-film approximation of digital pixels, Eaton made a set of 108 metal plates to use as dark slides. Whereas a normal dark slide protects film from light, Eaton's slides each contained a small square hole. When the slides were inserted one at a time in the camera's back, adjacent patches of film met the light, creating a negative made from 108 separate exposures. For *108_21* (2010), Eaton aimed her camera at a wall of multicolor blocks. Between each exposure, she knocked the blocks down and restacked them, making a picture that looks like a wild rainbow plaid. It's a record of chance over time and, according to Eaton, enacts Sol LeWitt's remark that the "idea becomes a machine that makes the art."

Before going to work in the studio, Eaton sketches her ideas for prints using a computer program such as Adobe Illustrator, trying out compositions and color combinations before re-creating them on film. But the textures and imperfections inherent to film and wood and paper are essential to the final piece. In her digital models, "everything is so cold," says Eaton. "They lack spirit."

The influence of digital photography, whether photographers like Eaton use it or not, is front and center. "I see it reflected in their retreat to the studio, in this hands-on, tactile approach to photography," says Respini. "They're interested in the materiality of photography, in light, paper, process."

In contrast to Eaton, who sketches with a computer but makes her finished works on film, Falls uses Photoshop in a way that is "very painterly," he says. For Falls, working as a retoucher during graduate school at the International Center of Photography—Bard changed his approach. "When it came time to work on my own photos, I really didn't want to keep doing what I'd been doing. I realized how inane it was to take pimples out of someone's face. I wanted to sort of do the opposite using the same tools." Retouching had meant removing supposed imperfections, so Falls instead began adding elements to his pictures. Aside from the abstractions built from colored paper, his recent series, which will be on view at Higher Pictures through March 19, consists of sunny Southern California landscapes, still lifes, and portraits that are all treated with a mixture of Photoshop brushwork and real-world paint and pastel.

For Falls, the unexplored possibilities of these materials push his work. "If we're dealing with a contemporary medium where there's still room for experimentation and new printing processes, I think that should be leading to different esthetics. I'm interested in archival-pigment printing and painting on the photograph, being loose with Photoshop, and incorporating it all—in using all the tools."

If Falls is looking forward with his materials, Sara VanDerBeek, 34, is more concerned with the past. With scaffolding and armatures built to hold images culled from magazines, books, old newspapers, and her own portfolio, VanDerBeek's elegant works function like diagrams of memories. *A Composition for Detroit* (2009), which she made for "New Photography 2009," consists of four large prints, each showing a series of tall interlocking frames against a dark blue background. Set within them are sections of glass dripping with white paint and images that refer to sunlight and darkness: a solar eclipse in pink and blue or patterns of light through blinds. The structure of the work was inspired by a bank of broken factory windows, says VanDerBeek, who shows at Metro Pictures in New York and will have an exhibition this fall at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. "A lot of the images were taken from publications that were distributed during the time of the riots. They were quite frail and yellow, and I really wanted to convey that texture, to get a sense of this fading image. The images might be folded up in someone's drawer and kept as a marker of this particular event," says VanDerBeek. For her, the work is about "how one image may loom larger than another, and how things shift in memory."

"To Think of Time," her 2010 exhibition at the Whitney Museum, consisted of 29 cool-toned photographs, arranged in sections named for poems from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Many showed vertical, architectural plaster forms that VanDerBeek cast and then photographed in the warm light of dusk and dawn; these were interspersed among blue and gray photographs of the scraped cement foundations of houses destroyed by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. VanDerBeek cites the structure of Whitman's work as an influence, noting the way it moves "back and forth, with these shifts of scale, from personal, internal perspectives to larger, universal views." She is also interested in American history from the time Whitman was writing. "I went to New Orleans because that was such a formative place for Whitman," says VanDerBeek, "but also because it was rich in the development of the history of this country." For her, the plaster structures refer to classical forms, especially Greek

and Roman friezes and sculptures and Greek Revival architecture from Whitman's time.

While she was constructing the casts, VanDerBeek would ask herself why she shouldn't simply put the objects themselves in the gallery. "Why is that act of photographing them so important?" she recalls wondering. But the process of turning her plinths into two-dimensional renderings proved necessary to preserve the light in the studio she set up in her family's 1868 Baltimore home, which she felt was essential to the work. "Something about capturing them at a particular moment—an hour in the afternoon or morning—really changes the situation and changes the object. I think they function better in their photographic form than they do just sitting there."

Like her peers, VanDerBeek stretches the definition of the medium. "What I think is amazing about photography is that it can be so expansive. It can take all of these different forms. I wanted to explore the idea of breaking my practice open."

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