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International Center of Photography

Q&A WITH ICP-BARD ALUM SAM FALLS

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In a departure from the colorful still life photographs he is known for, artist Sam Falls brings together a series of black and white images for the first time in his limited-edition artist book [Visible Library](#). With a large format camera and a few boxes of expired film, Falls spent a day making these beautiful and haunting pictures in the stacks above the American Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Like "walking alone in the woods," as he refers to it, Falls created what can easily be considered his most intimate body of work, a personal meditation on art, history, preservation and the photographic medium.

Q: How did you decide to make pictures at the Met and why, specifically, in the American Wing? A:

I made the pictures at the Met because I am a frequent visitor and over time ended up in the visible stacks area at the back where there was a lot of material I hadn't yet seen. I had already photographed inside the Met a couple times for other projects and found it really meditative. Since moving to New York in 2007 I stopped photographing outside primarily because I'm not drawn to the natural landscape or cityscape of Brooklyn or Manhattan and have pretty much developed an exclusively studio/conceptual practice. I used to photograph in nature a lot when I lived in Oregon or visited my home in Vermont, and in an attempt to return to this way of working outside of the studio I turned to the Met because it was an environment I felt connected to—walking around and "finding" inspiring images I wanted to document. The visible stacks were a nice compounding of my conceptual interest with primary information with a calm environment to move around in.

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Q: The limited edition of *Visible Library* includes a hand-written poem. Can you tell us a little bit about the poem? Do you write or read a lot of poetry? A: I wrote this poem in direct correlation with the images, my experience with photography, and the nature of the museum; the idea that work can outlast the creator and speak to another era. I'm really fond of poetry and find it to be a nice outlet outside of my more conceptual art practice. Kind of a vernacular zone.

Q: Your recent work in the show at [Higher Pictures](#) was full of such bright, colorful layers, as much of your work has been. Did you purposely set out to go in a different direction with this work? By using expired black-and-white film, you seem to be layering, in the same way, with light and dark and the films "flaws," that you have been with color and paint? A: Yeah, on top of the film's own flaws from expiration I exposed it to light when I was processing it so that it would have leaks and bleeds and obscure the image. I wanted to add in a sense of time-lapse that is relative to historic artwork. I think it's important to alter the documentary nature of photography so that it's more available to the present moment, and in other words the viewer. The black-and-white decision was just a product of the film I had available, and the project suited it. I proceeded from there with this in mind.



Can you tell us a little bit about how you started out? Did you paint as a younger person? And when did you start using a camera in your practice? A: I did paint a lot growing up and in college. My mom's a painter and so I spent a lot of time in her studio as a kid, keeping busy with drawing and painting with her while she worked. I started using a camera more and more in college, more professionally than artistically—I worked at a design firm while going to school—and then from there I applied it to my intellectual interests in art.

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Q: It seems that making books/self-publishing has been a big part of your career so far. What is the importance of the physical book to you? What was the first book you ever made? Are you a collector? A: The first book I made was my undergraduate thesis at Reed College; it's about 80 pages of written work accompanied by images both my own and others. It's about the viewer's relationship to photographic imagery and video, and exploring the possibility of images transcending the difference in time from when they are made to the moment of viewing. This has remained a central concern in my work and pushes me in all sorts of directions and to new mediums. It also taught me to work around a central theoretically thesis without necessarily sticking to a uniform style. I love books because of their democratic nature. There's an intimacy in holding and looking at artwork this way that the Internet can't match, and they are affordable in comparison to the artwork itself. Someday I hope to collect art books, for now I mostly collect text.