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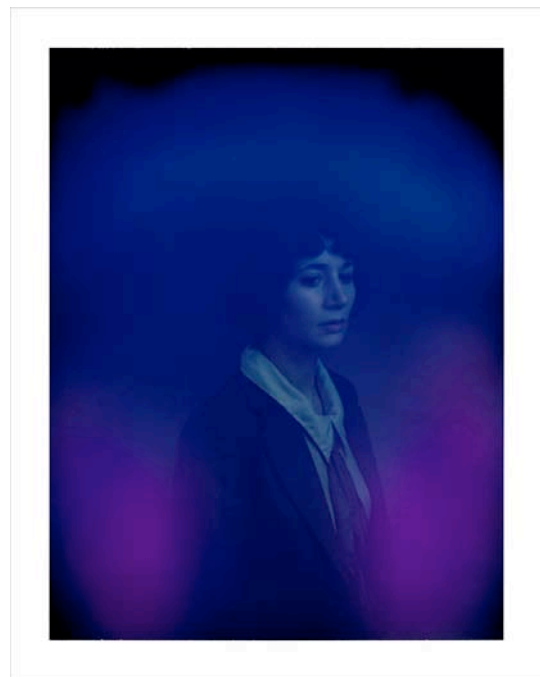
WIRED

Aura Portraits Make Good Art, Bad Science

By Pete Brook

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At first glance, Carlo Van de Roer's fuzzy color portraits appear to fall in line with the dreamy aesthetics of art-college photo portfolios, or fashion shooters playing around with bokeh, sun spots and toy cameras. But all is not as it seems.



Van de Roer's *Portrait Machine Project* is shot with a piece of controversial new-age technology called an AuraCam. The resulting "aura portraits" may be more at home in psychic fair stalls than in Soho studios.

"The manufacturers of these cameras make the claim that their technology can depict what a psychic might see," says Van de Roer, "a claim that's difficult to objectively prove. It's an excessive example of a familiar idea — that a camera can provide an insight into the unseen."

Portrait Machine continues Van de Roer's flirtation with photography's spiritual intersections. With Baldessari-esque vandalism, his portfolio *Orbs* mocks the interpretation of backscatter (usually dust or precipitation) on camera lenses as spectral matter. For *Blinded by the Light* Van de Roer uses his flash's reflection on the glass cases of dioramas to make the animals contained within appear to be fixated on a floating ball of light.

The seeds of aura photography were sown in 1939 by Russian scientist Semyon Kirlian. Kirlian accidentally discovered that an object placed on a photographic plate connected to a source of voltage produced an image of that object surrounded by some mysterious energy. It's a similar effect to putting your hand one of those plasma spheres full of pink lightning.

What Kirlian photography actually depicts and what it can be used for is uncertain. Many acupuncturists, chi-channelers and even a few credible doctors believe in its diagnostic potential, while doubters point out that these "auras" do not show up in a vacuum and therefore are simply interactions between electricity and particles on the skin and in the air. Insofar as our emotions are manifested as condensation on our skin, perhaps there is some common ground between the two camps.

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In the early '80s, among the many Silicon Valley garage startups was an idealistic engineer more interested in cosmic energy than personal computers. Dr. Guy Coggins (who has the implausible middle name 'Aura') rode the California culture of crystals and mood rings and adapted existing imaging technology to bring the first aura camera to mass market. The camera gave new-age acolytes the chance to see their "auras" in a photograph. The first incarnation, the AuraCam3000, was later replaced by the AuraCam6000, which will set you back \$10,000 new.

Aware of the AuraCam's quirks, Van de Roer initially photographed people he knew well, people whose auras he thought he could predict. He was intrigued by the tension between the camera's interpretations and his own expectations. Later, Van de Roer decided to expand the project to subjects — mainly New York artists — familiar to his audience to make the photos more accessible. It remains the viewer's responsibility to decide what exactly the portraits mean.

We enjoy Van de Roer's portraits and the odd element that the AuraCam introduces, so please check out his work. If your curiosity is piqued, like ours was, by this unique piece of camera equipment, read on to learn more.

How the AuraCam Works

During a 10-second double exposure, subjects place each hand upon one of two boxes fitted with biofeedback receptors. According to claims, the receptors measure the sitter's electromagnetic field by monitoring acupuncture points that correspond to energy channels in the body called Ayurvedic meridians.

An attached data box converts the energy readings into frequencies that correspond to certain colors. The first exposure of two seconds makes a straight Polaroid portrait. Then, based on the biofeedback data returned to the camera, a second exposure of six to eight seconds superimposes the color clouds.

According to a color key, red people are joyful, orange auras connote happy and creative moods, disciplined folk turn up yellow, green is the color of healing, sensitive and solitary individuals are blue, violet is the hue of relaxation, and spiritual people glow white.

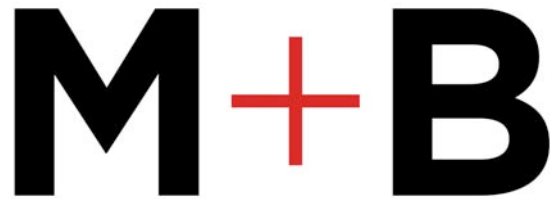
The AuraCam can use Fuji FP-100C, Polaroid 108 or Polaroid 669 film stock.

Dr. Coggins

On the AuraCam website, Coggins proclaims, "When we realize that everything originates from within, we'll see that all the love, peace, and happiness in the universe is inside. We can have that. It's really so simple and easy when you learn about the unique splendor of your own energy."

Despite his promotional zeal, Coggins clarifies that "[the AuraCam] does *not* photograph the actual aura. There's nothing that exists which can do this."

Further legalese defines the scientific uselessness of the AuraCam: "Our technology is not designed to reveal physical or mental sickness. Our camera is to be used for viewing the spiritual aura state only." Known over the centuries by many names (*chi, prana, karnaeem, Illiaster*), the human aura is central to



many mystic beliefs. To witness and capture auric energies, also referred to as bioplasmic fields, is something of a holy grail for people who need to see to believe. After nearly 30 years, the AuraCam remains the industry leader for these types of images. Coggins encourages buyers to use the AuraCam for aura consultations at bookstores and fairs; he even supplies profitability tables.

Coggins also built a custom aura-measuring device for L. Ron Hubbard, the founder of Scientology.

Auras for the Home?

If you haven't got ten grand to splurge on the AuraCam 6000, Coggins has an affordable alternative. WinAura computer software brings aura photography into the 21st century and into the living room. The WinAura program unleashes "real-time biofeedback technology" so you can interact with your aura on your computer screen. The battle for market share between Coggins' WinAura and its main competitor, The Aura Video Station, has begun.

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Carlo Van de Roer's Portrait Machine Project will be on show at the M+B Gallery, 612 North Almont Drive, Los Angeles, from the 16th April onwards.

For the easiest read on the history of aura photography, Wired recommends C.E. Lindgren's Auras and Aura Photography: Is It Real?