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## Into the Darkroom, With Pulleys, Jam and Snakes

Back when Andreas Gursky was on the rise, the art world buzzed about the supposedly unfair advantages of digital photography. Photoshop and other computer manipulations were seen as performance-enhancing drugs, an impression fostered by Mr. Gursky's gargantuan, hyperdetailed prints.

We have since learned that these processes need not poison the medium. Some young photographers have made a point of going digital in unorthodox ways. Others have disappeared into the darkroom, emerging with works that bear legible traces of chemicals. Abstract photographs are everywhere, sidestepping the whole truth-in-representation issue.

These current shows, at two major museums and a steadily art gallery, outline the manifold choices available to contemporary photographers. They might even provoke the kind of debates about genres, process and intent that used to ensue around painting.

"New Photography 2009," at the Museum of Modern Art, is an excellent place to begin. The curator, Eva Sangui, veers this installment of MoMA's annual series away from street and documentary photography, a refreshing departure from tradition. Ms. Sangui has also expanded it to include six artists rather than the usual two or three.

Experimental abstraction merges with a back-to-basics ethos in Walter Dreyer's large photographs. Mr. Dreyer

generates his "Thin Color Curls" by exposing rolled photographic paper to cyan, magenta and yellow light. The result is an irregular stack of polychromatic bands, basically a Color Field painting with darkroom bona fides.

For other artists photography is the final stage of a process that might be called sculpture or collage in a different context. Before he pulls out the camera, Daniel Gordon makes crude figurative sculptures from cut paper and Internet printouts. The body (often a female male) slips back and forth between two and three dimensions. Mr. Gordon has a gift for cruel-comic exaggeration that's reminiscent of Cindy Sherman and the Dada photomontage artists John Heartfield and Hannah Hoch.

Leslie Hewitt and Sara VanDerBeek also make photo-sculptures, but of a more solemn variety. Ms. Hewitt constructs still lifes of civil-rights era artifacts, like a tattered copy of "Ebony." Ms. VanDerBeek's five-part "Composition for Detroit" appropriates riot scenes and a Walker Evans photograph of a decaying house. Both artists seem to believe in the camera's power to preserve, or perhaps emulate, bits of history.

That is not the case with Carter Mull and Sterling Ruby, who dip away at photography with digital (and some analog) techniques. Mr. Ruby starts with photographs of graffiti. It is Aaron Beckel, and then there adds his own touches of vandalism in Photoshop. Mr. Mull reworks the front page of The Los Angeles Times, his local newspaper, in ways that acknowledge the more general threat to print media.

If "New Photography" strikes you as too far afield, head up town to "Presented: Considering Recent Photographic Practice" at the Bertha and Karl Lindskorff Art Gallery at Hunter College, 68th Street at Lexington Avenue, (352) 772-4961, hunter.cuny.edu. "Surface Tension: Contemporary Photographs From the Collection" continues through May 18 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, (212) 224-7734, metmuseum.org.

organized by Annie Sobly, the deputy director and curator of the downtown alternative space White Columns, the



"Red Headed Woman" (2008), a color print by Daniel Gordon, on view in MoMA's "New Photography 2009" show.

elementary original, is simple but inspired.

It's harder to figure out the process behind Curtis Mattheis's "Meltdown." The imagery and the title suggest a blast, but no fire was involved. Mr. Mitchell rigged a gallery system to move photographic paper through a vat of chemicals. More mysterious are the vaguely gestational prints titled "Mental Pictures" by Wolfgang Tillmans, who has not revealed his methods.

Organized by Annie Sobly, the deputy director and curator of the downtown alternative space White Columns, the

show generously includes "Direct Films" by Jennifer West. Ms. West makes abstract shorts by dosing film stock with substances like strawberry jam and body glitter. She also rigs it up with skateboards and sledgehammers. The films are as goofy-looking as they sound, but they remind us that cameraless photography is a messy affair.

Farther north, "Surface Tension: Contemporary Photographs From the Collection," at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, runs some of the "new" photography in perspective. Accompanying works by Ann Hamilton and Lucas Ra-

### Surface Tension

Contemporary Photographs From the Collection  
Metropolitan Museum

### New Photography 2009

Museum of Modern Art

### Presented

Considering Recent Photographic Practice  
Hunter College

more are 19th-century photography books by Anna Atkin and Roger Fenton.

There is some overlap between this exhibition and the one at Hunter, in works by Mr. Tillmans and Maria Bremer, but the Met's show, organized by Mia Fineman, a senior research associate, isn't limited to abstract photography. Any photographic subject that doesn't pretend to be a "window on the world" is fair game.

That includes Christian Marley's prototype of unspooled cassette tapes (his one is sold in Soul collections), which narrates various analog technologies at once. Also here is Tim Davis's close-up of the Thomas Edison painting "The Dentist"; the military route disappears in a flash of light caused by Mr. Davis's deliberate light-angle shot.

By the time you get to Vik Muniz's photograph of dust mixed with scrap metal, look like a famous minimal artwork, or the photograph Adam Fuss made by letting snakes loose on a powder-covered sheet of paper, you may be tempted to flash across the hall for a repeat viewing of Robert Rauschenberg's "Actants." (I recommend one anyway.)

What is certain is that you will emerge from these three shows feeling energized about the past's role of photography. Artists in the post-Gursky era aren't feeling the need to scale up, because they're branching out.