

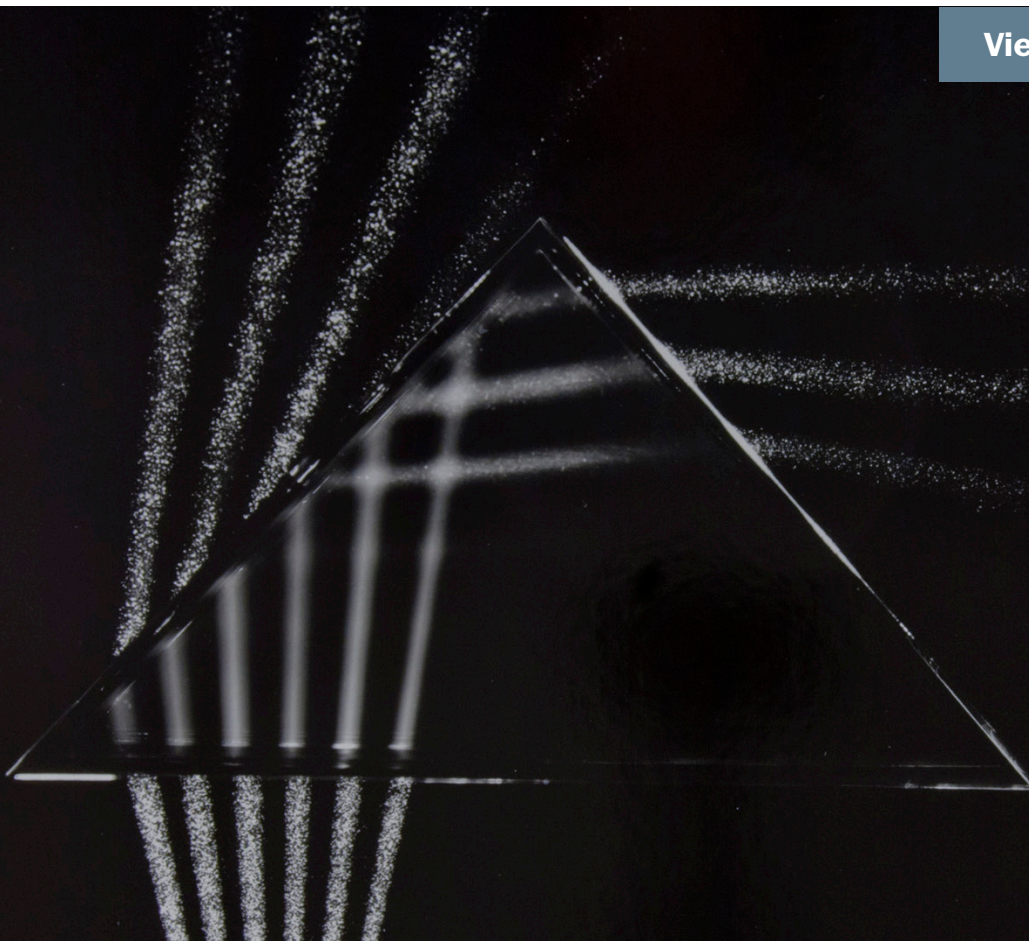
MOCP AT 40

JANUARY 25–APRIL 10, 2016

MoCP
Museum of
Contemporary Photography

mocp.org

Viewer's Guide



Berenice Abbott

Beams of Light through Glass
from *The Science Pictures Portfolio*, 1982

This guide serves as a viewer's supplement to the exhibition *MoCP at 40* and contains information about the works on view and questions for looking and discussion. You may download this guide from the museum's website at mocp.org/education/resources-for-educators.php.

A checklist for the exhibition can also be found there. To schedule a free docent-led tour, please complete the form here: mocp.org/education/tours-and-print-viewings.php.



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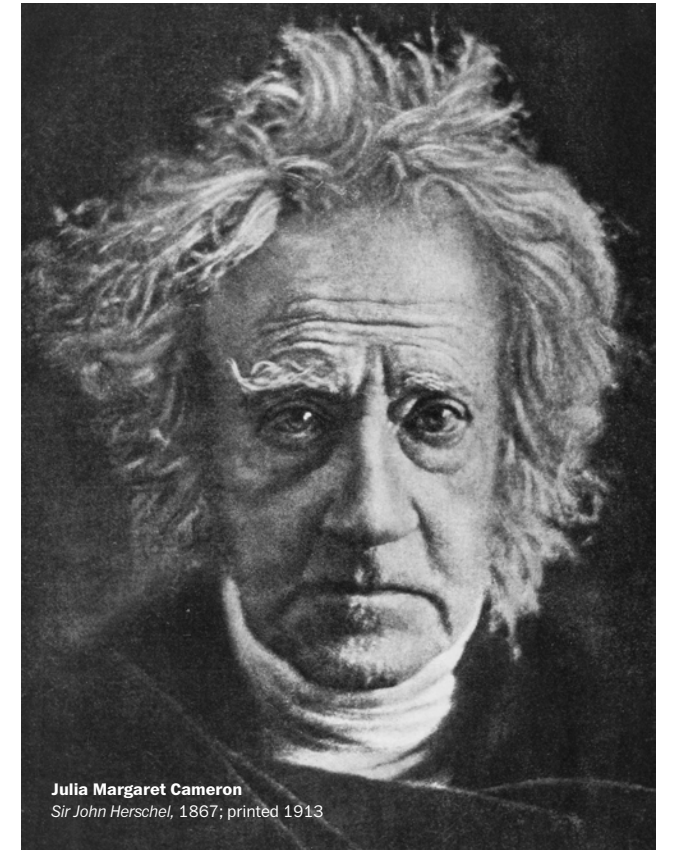
Columbia
COLLEGE CHICAGO

Introduction

MoCP at 40



Elliott Erwit
Jackie Kennedy at Funeral, 1963, printed 1980



Julia Margaret Cameron
Sir John Herschel, 1867; printed 1913

This year, the Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College Chicago turns 40 years old. In celebration, *MoCP at 40* explores the museum's history using works of art and related objects drawn from the permanent collection and institutional archives.

MoCP began collecting artworks in 1979, just three years after opening with its original name, the Chicago Center for Contemporary Photography. The Museum purchased 48 photographs in that first year, including works by Joe Jachna and Minor White. The following year would bring another 200 images into the collection, with important additions from artists Linda Conner, Lee Friedlander, Nicholas Nixon, Stephen Shore, and Henry Wessel. Today the MoCP collection consists of nearly 14,000 objects by more than 1,400 artists. These holdings have been amassed amid a range of other dynamic activities—exhibitions, publications, commissions, and educational programming—that together serve the MoCP's mission to promote a greater understanding and appreciation of the artistic, cultural, and political implications of the image in our world today.

West Gallery



Adam Schreiber
View from the Window at Le Gras, 1826, 2009

In this gallery, you will find a sequence of noteworthy works dated from the late 19th century to the present. The installation begins with the museum's oldest photograph, an image of scientist and photographer Sir John Herschel, made by Julia Margaret Cameron in 1867. The portrait is a fitting starting point. A prominent contributor to the development of the photographic medium, Herschel invented numerous photochemical processes, including the cyanotype, or blueprint process, in 1842. Cameron, too, was an important figure in early photography, known for her evocative portraits. Fast-forward two centuries to 2009, when artist Adam Schreiber created the photograph at the top of this page, titled *View from the Window at Le Gras, 1826*. The image depicts the oldest surviving photograph, taken by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, which is permanently housed under protective glass at The Ransom Center archive at the University of Texas at Austin. As Schreiber's image makes clear, technology and the surrounding world have changed drastically in the time since the sparks of photography's magic drove Niépce and Herschel's discoveries.

The West Gallery showcases some of the extraordinary ways photography has altered the experience of seeing the world. It also looks at the art form's aptitude for recording history and the many ways humans interpret the world around them. Distinguished artworks by celebrated practitioners are on view alongside works by lesser-known image-makers who are absent from the canonical history books. The exhibition traverses the MoCP's distinct history, and invites visitors not only to encounter compelling works of art but also to engage those photographic provocations—and to ponder the myriad meanings they contain.

Questions for Looking and Discussion

Looking at the entire room, what do students notice about the arrangement of the photographs on view? Are there changes and trends in photography that students can see over time? How do those changes correspond with world events, the history of art, and the progression of technology? Where can students see major shifts in photographic processes and trends?

IN GALLERY ACTIVITY & RELATED HOMEWORK

Ask students to locate a work of art that they are interested in but unfamiliar with. Why are they drawn to the chosen artwork? Looking at the image of interest, ask students to write down the following:

- Describe what you see. What are the formal qualities of the image (composition, lighting, color, scale)?
- What can you tell about the subject matter depicted by just looking? Use specific details from the image in your answer.
- Do neighboring images inform the meaning you take from your chosen work?

Further Research

After students leave the museum, ask them to further research the piece they described in the gallery using the MoCP's website (mocp.org/collections) and other resources.

Questions to Guide Follow-up Assignment

Now that you've read more about the artwork you selected at the museum, how accurate were your initial impressions? What surprised you during your research? How does knowing more information about the photographer and photograph change your impression of the artwork? Why do you think the museum chose the piece for this show? How do you think this piece fits into the history of photography/visual culture/cultural history?

East Gallery



LEFT:
Michael Wolf
The Transparent City (01), 2007

RIGHT:
Michael Wolf
Night #20, 2007

With a commitment to presenting a broad scope of visual arts, MoCP works with both established artists and those who have not yet garnered widespread attention. Materials representing some of the major exhibitions, commissions, and book projects that the museum has undertaken over the past four decades can be viewed in this gallery. Many of these projects were debuted or gained significant exposure when they were presented at the MoCP.

Questions for Looking and Discussion

Before reading the individual wall labels in the room, ask students, how they think museums work with artists. How do they think artworks are selected by museums to exhibit and acquire? At what point in an artist's career do students think a contemporary art museum starts working with an artist? Are all artworks finished before an artist plans an exhibition at a museum? Not necessarily. Now turn to the photographs by artist Michael Wolf.

CASE STUDY MICHAEL WOLF

Background information on the acquisition of Wolf's photographs

MoCP Executive Director Natasha Egan invited artist Michael Wolf to exhibit an installation of photographs and plastic toys about China's toy manufacturing industry at the MoCP in 2006 for a group exhibition titled *Made in China*. As Wolf rode the elevated train into the city, he was enamored by the glass facades on buildings, which allowed him to see interiors and the lives of the people who live and work there.

At the time, Wolf was photographing densely built residential housing complexes in Hong Kong. He composed those images without the horizon line visible, creating metaphorically potent photographs, like *Night #20* at the top of this page, which he dubbed "no exit architecture." He wanted to apply the same treatment to Chicago's skyline and upon arriving at the MoCP, he asked Egan for help in making the project a reality. Impressed with the

idea, Egan reached out to U.S. Equities, a longtime supporter of the MoCP, and suggested Wolf for their artist-in-residence program. Wolf returned to Chicago with funding from U.S. Equities and created a project titled *The Transparent City*, which debuted in an exhibition at MoCP in 2009. The MoCP co-published an artist monograph of Wolf's project with the Aperture Foundation. Three photographs from the project are on view and the published book is on a rack at the end of the East Gallery.

Ask students to explore another artwork or book on display.

What can students tell about how the museum worked with the chosen artist? Is it similar to or different from Wolf's work? Does knowing some backstory about the relationship between an artist and the museum change the way students interpret an artwork?

Mezzanine

The images presented on this floor illustrate many of the photographic techniques found in the MoCP's collection. Whether working with processes that are cutting-edge or obsolete, photographers carefully craft their artworks to convey specific meanings. The images exhibited here span decades and show different technical strategies. Together, they attest to an ever-expanding array of techniques embraced by artists working with photography.

CASE STUDY MYRA GREENE

On this page and the next, you will find two case studies of photographs on view that integrate process and meaning.

Look together at Myra Greene's photographs. What do students notice? Have students seen photographs like these before? What do they think it would be like to touch one of the pictures? What else comes to mind when they look at the works? List words or phrases.

To create this series, Greene creates self-portraits using the wet-plate collodion process, a labor intensive 19th-century photographic method where emulsion is coated onto the surface of a sheet of glass. This and other 19th-century processes were once used in pseudo-science to create dubious ethnographic studies of race. Scientists would photograph subjects and compare the features of White Europeans to Black Africans, aiming to prove the superiority of whites based on physiognomy. A period example by J. T. Zealy taken for scientist Louis Agassiz can be seen to the right. Greene's work is a commentary on this history and also on persisting forms of racism that the artist has experienced in her own life. She photographs her own nose, lips, ears, and skin, which she describes as "the features of race."



Myra Greene
Untitled #49, 2007

The project is titled *Character Recognition*. Greene has identified questions that she wants her photographs to ask. "How do we look at black people and recognize their character? Do we recognize character just by looking at the shape of a nose or the color of skin?"

- Ask students to ponder and react to these questions.
- Why do students think Greene chose a 19th-century process for her works? Do students think their conclusions about the works relate to process?
- Ask students to imagine photographing themselves in a similar fashion. How might their images be similar to or different from Greene's?

Greene is working with a historical process that evokes a complicated and disconcerting past. Her intention is to reorient that history in a number of ways. Do students see that reorientation at work?

- Note that by making self-portraits, Greene willingly stands before the camera and controls the process. She attempts to use her body to "speak back" as she reacts to and rejects previous modes of classification.
- Ask students if they feel these works displace or reinforce the photograph's role in quasi-scientific ethnographic studies of black bodies. Does photography continue to perpetuate stereotypes based on race? Does the medium work against stereotypes?



J. T. Zealy
commissioned by Louis Agassiz Renty, Congo.
Plantation of B. F. Taylor, Esq, Columbia, S.C., March 1850

CASE STUDY BEATE GÜTSCHOW



LEFT:
Beate Gütschow
LS #4, 1999

RIGHT:
Claude Lorrain
Veduta of Delphi, with a sacrificial procession, c. 1645

Look closely at Beate Gütschow's photograph. What do students notice? Ask students to describe the color, framing, and scale. What else comes to mind when they look at the works? List words or phrases.

Students may notice crop marks and text in the margin of the photo. Why do they think the artist left these visible?

- Gütschow's photograph was made in 1999 before digitally composited photographs were common. These markings reveal the fact that the image is printed from a digital file rather than a negative. Why do students think this detail might be significant?
- Note that Gütschow's landscapes are assembled digitally from up to a hundred different photographic elements drawn from the artist's enormous collection of her own images of trees, buildings, clouds, hills, and people.

Gütschow was originally trained as a painter. Do students see a relationship between this photograph and painting?

- Gütschow is influenced by artists such as Claude Lorrain, John Constable, and Nicolas Poussin.
- Traditional landscape paintings are organized with three distinct spaces: the foreground serves as the viewer's entrance into the picture, usually framed by trees; the middle ground contains a river or path and people looking outward; and the background vanishes in the far distance. Using these rules, Gütschow creates an idyllic landscape by mixing elements of pictures taken from parks, construction sites, pristine nature, and people engaged in leisure activities. The deliberate inclusion of familiar 21st-century elements like garbage, trees cut by chainsaws, and people in T-shirts interject into an otherwise romantic landscape.

- Why do students think Gütschow chose to digitally stitch her artworks instead of using straight photography or painting? How do students think process and meaning are connected?
- What do students think these pictures say about the relationship between photography and reality? Do real landscapes follow the rules of traditional landscape painting? How would excluding the text and crop marks in this image change its meaning? Would students mistake the picture for a real place?
- How do landscape painters and photographers use idyllic imagery to present particular expectations of the natural world? What if any truths or fictions can students draw out of this photograph? Do we perceive nature differently because we see so often see it represented in idealized landscape photographs and paintings?

3rd Floor / Print Study Room

The stairwell and print study room contain projects by five artists selected from the MoCP's Midwest Photographers Project (MPP). Inaugurated in 1982, MPP is a rotating collection of portfolios by regional photographers. Each portfolio represents a current body of work from a recent or ongoing project, and is loaned to the museum for a three-year period. Spanning a diverse array of media, subject matter, and styles, MPP is a unique and expansive resource on contemporary photography. MoCP patrons can access works by MPP artists online and see physical prints in the print study room, allowing for in-depth engagement with recent work by over 84 photographers living in the Midwest region.



John Steck Jr.
Pathway to the Shire, 2012



3rd Floor / Print Study Room

In-Depth Investigation

Instructors can use this section to lead an in-depth discussion about portfolios by three of the MPP artists on view.

AIMÉE BEAUBIEN

Begin by looking closely at Beaubien's installation. What do students notice? Ask students to describe the sculptural forms, color, imagery, and scale. What else comes to mind when they look at the works? List words or phrases.

Students may notice shapes that look like dishes and vessels. What does this arrangement remind them of?

- The alcove display is based on photographs by William Henry Fox Talbot. Talbot discovered the first stable and reproducible photographic process, the calotype and published a book of his prints titled the *Pencil of Nature* in 1844. Many of his pictures show fine china, dishes, and other arrangements from his home and daily life. Beaubien's installation nods to one image in particular, *Articles of China* (pictured right).

- Ask students to compare Talbot's image to Beaubien's interpretation. What changes? What remains the same?

Many of the actual photographs that served as raw material in Beaubien's sculpture were taken at the Roger Brown Study Collection. Roger Brown was a well-known artist and eccentric collector who gave his Chicago home and collection to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, as his Artists' Museum.

- Have students ever heard of this type of museum? What is the difference between a personal collection and a museum's collection? Do objects have a different status when they are placed into a museum? Why?



What drives people to collect and organize particular belongings? Do students have objects or displays in their homes that are similar to Brown's or Talbot's?

- The types of objects influencing Beaubien are common in many domestic settings. The artist underscores this fact by including images taken by her great-grandmother, grandmother, mother and herself in her installation.
- Mixed into the arrangement are whisky jugs created by the artist's husband, Steven Rapp, that have accumulated in the couple's home.



LEFT:
Aimée Beaubien
Collection Within, 2016

RIGHT:
William Henry Fox Talbot
Articles of China, ca. 1844

With these various reference points, Beaubien pays homage to the act of organizing domestic spaces and to the mementos that mark one's passage through life.

- How does the meaning of treasured items change over time? When does an item gain importance with age? When does it lose importance?

LOIS BIELEFELD

In her series *Weeknight Dinners* (2013–ongoing), Lois Bielefeld explores the nightly ritual of eating a meal in the American home. How do students see these images as alike or different from their own experience of dinner?

- Do students think Bielefeld's examples are representative of a full spectrum of dining in the American home? Ask students to justify their answers.
- Do students think these photographs are staged? To what extent? Do the images represent a reality or are the people in them simply acting for the camera?
 - » Bielefeld asks her subjects to proceed with dinner as they normally would and to avoid doing anything out of the ordinary. The subjects are aware that they are being photographed but Bielefeld attempts to remain true to their dinner rituals.
- Ask students if they feel dinner is reflective of values and norms in a society? What do they think these images say about being American?
- Many of the installations in *MoCP at 40* include only one image per artist. How important do students think multiple images are to the meaning of Bielefeld's work?
- Do the interiors and personal items in these photographs help shape our impression of the people? How so?



Lois Bielefeld
Wednesday: Glynis, Liam, Jorin, and Mona, 2013



Lois Bielefeld
Wednesday: Leo and Michael, 2014

JOHN STECK JR.

Ask students to look closely at John Steck Jr.'s artworks. An image may be faintly visible. Can students see images in some of the works and not others? Why do students think this is the case?

- Steck's photographs will continuously fade over the course of the exhibition until they completely disappear because the prints were never fixed and remain light sensitive.
 - Have students ever experienced faded photographs? How does discoloration and evidence of a photograph's age influence its meaning?
- Steck's prints are pictures related to his own emotionally charged life events. Wanting to forget the difficult memories that the images recall, he decided to create artworks that metaphorically fulfill his wish by disappearing over the course of only a few weeks.
- What role do students think photographs have in preserving memory? Do we remember situations differently/better through photographs?



John Steck Jr.
Stone window in a cold building, Ireland, 2012