

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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ART REVIEW

'The Polaroid Project: At the Intersection of Art and Technology' Review: Beauty, in an Instant

The Polaroid camera provided fertile ground for creative invention.



Guy Bourdin's 'Charles Jourdan 1978' (1978) PHOTO: © THE GUY BOURDIN ESTATE 2017 / COURTESY OF LOUISE ALEXANDER GALLERY

By William Meyers

Nov. 5, 2019 2:32 pm ET

Cambridge, Mass.

The history of photography is the history of technology: Every new device or process calls forth new creative possibilities from its users. "The Polaroid Project: At the

Intersection of Art and Technology,” at the MIT Museum, shows us just how fertile Edwin Land’s invention proved to be for decades of artists.

The Polaroid Project: At the Intersection of Art and Technology

MIT Museum

Through June 21, 2020

The idea for the Polaroid camera came to Land in 1943 during a family vacation, when his daughter Jennifer asked him why she couldn’t see a picture

he had just taken immediately. In an hour he had figured out what would be necessary to create a camera that made instant—or almost instant—pictures. It took five years of experimentation to realize what he had imagined.

Soon after the camera was made available to the public, Land hired Ansel Adams as a consultant: a brilliant choice. Not only was Adams a great landscape photographer—he also wrote authoritative articles and books on photographic equipment and processes. As the Polaroid camera evolved, Adams submitted extensive reports evaluating the changes. And it was Adams who suggested the creation of the Polaroid Collection, the corporate acquisition of artistic photographs made with the company’s products. The collection would eventually comprise 16,000 artistic works.



The Polaroid Automatic Land Camera Model 100 (1963-66), photographed by Deborah Douglas PHOTO: COURTESY MIT MUSEUM, CAMBRIDGE, MA

“The Polaroid Project” contains 237 photographs, many from the collection, and more than 100 artifacts from the MIT Museum’s store of close to 10,000 Polaroid objects. The show required five curators— Barbara Hitchcock, Polaroid’s former director of cultural

affairs; William A. Ewing, curator, Foundation for the Exhibition of Photography and Foundation Carène, Switzerland, which has large holdings of Polaroid prints; Rebecca Reuter, chief curator, Westlight Museum of Photography and the OstLight Gallery for Photography, Vienna, which also has large holdings; Deborah Douglas, the MIT Museum's director of collections and curator of science and technology; and Gary Van Zante, the MIT Museum's curator of architecture and design.

To protect the sensitive prints, 116 are on display only until Feb. 23, 2020; after the show closes briefly for rehangings, they will be replaced by 121 different photographs from March 9 through June 21. The many cameras, production models, films and accessories used to illustrate the technology will remain the same.

Adams distributed free Polaroid cameras to distinguished photographers, most of whom were under no obligation in return. One of the first was his protégé Marie Cosindas, who became another consultant to the company and one of the most accomplished Polaroid photographers, famed for her portraits and still-lives. In her portrait "Barbara" (1976) the turquoise color in the subject's dress is set off against the burnt umber of the paisley material hanging behind her; the skin tones vary with the lighting, but all seem natural. Ms. Cosindas's experiments—e.g., letting exposures develop longer than recommended—resulted in product improvements.

Among Part I's works by well-known photographers are Dawoud Bey's "Josef" (1994); Fazal Sheikh's "Gabbra tribal matriarch with Gabbra women and children, Ethiopian refugee camp, Walda, Kenya" (1993); Robert Mapplethorpe's "Untitled (Diane)" (c. 1974); Chuck Close's "Hillary Rodham Clinton" (1999); Robert Rauschenberg's "Untitled" (1987); and Walker Evans's "Junked Car Door" (1973-74). Mr. Bey and Mr. Close took their portraits using huge 20-by-24-inch studio cameras Polaroid made available to professionals; the large format gave the works great immediacy. The 20-by-24-inch camera presented to Land on his retirement in 1982 is on display.

Many photographers took rather conventional pictures using their Polaroids because they prized the saturated colors its film produced. Arno Bauman's "Untitled" picture from 1980 of a green glass cup and saucer is in that category, as is Lawrie Brown's 1984 photograph of the African plant "Orange Dotted Morea." André Kertész's "January 1979" (1979) depends on the varied blues of the sky for its effect. But other photographers tweaked their Polaroid prints: Andrea Wolff hand-painted her stunning "Giant Jewel Beetle (*Euchroma Gigantea*)" (2005), a technique borrowed from the 19th century. Lucas Samaras assembled strips from 33 overlapping photographs to create "Serpent Green Reclining Nude" (1984), a very elaborate self-portrait.



Ellen Carey's 'Pulls (CMY)' (1997) PHOTO: © ELLEN CAREY, JAYNE H. BAUM GALLERY, NYC, NY AND M+B GALLERY, LA, CA

The six goldfish in Sergio Tornaghi's "Still Life" (1990) are seen against a background of several intense shades of blue; the very irregular border of the blue is set against plain white. I learned from Ms. Hitchcock that Mr. Tornaghi put his print in hot water until the emulsion separated from its substrate and then manipulated the image, making it look like a fragment torn from some larger work. I didn't know the film for the 20-by-24 cameras came on rolls until she told me that was what made it possible for Ellen Carey to produce the three very long components of her triptych "Pulls (CMY)" (1997).

Polaroid, once the second-largest camera company in the world, went into bankruptcy in 2001. And while instant photos continue as a niche market, the development of digital photography makes it hard to imagine that such images will ever again have the cultural and artistic impact evident in this show.

— ADVERTISEMENT —



—Mr. Meyers writes on photography for the Journal. See his photographs at www.williammeyersphotography.com.

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