Article: Approaches To Treating Contemporary Photographs
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APPROACHES TO TREATING CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHS

Peter Mustardo

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At The Better Image® we have been asked increasingly to help our clientele recover value, both monetary and aesthetic, from damaged contemporary photographs. As some contemporary photographs routinely sell for six figures and occasionally for seven figures at the major auction houses and in private sales, the level of concern for their physical well-being, their conservation and their preservation has risen accordingly.

Damage we have seen runs the gamut from catastrophic accidents such as works being pierced by forklifts to scratches so slight that only a trained eye, or the eye of an obsessive curator or collector or art consultant would discover or object to. Whatever the nature and extent of the damage, we are all called upon to provide informed responses in these cases, responses that are consistent with the high standards of our field and that will hold up to scrutiny over the coming years.

The focuses of this paper are images face mounted to clear or matte acrylic and photographs with thin surface laminates. To date most of these images have been chromogenic color and silver dye bleach prints but there is a definite increase in digital output images. Specifically not discussed are: light box installations, 'digital prints' and those tricky items, intentionally distressed works.

Some of the images used to illustrate this paper are less than perfect documentation of the damages under discussion. Neither do they communicate visually the often imposing physical presence of many of these contemporary works. When the traditional copystand is rendered useless due to the size and reflective surfaces of these works, documentation can be difficult and the resulting images very confusing.

The title of this presentation involves "Approaches" to treating Contemporary Photographs. So how do we approach such projects? In short: we approach contemporary photograph treatments with extreme caution and justifiable trepidation. To old school conservators used to treating black-and-white silver halide photographs, these new productions are essentially alien beings. Twenty years ago no photographs existed that were 132 inches long, completely flat and covered in plastic. No longer are we dealing with cellulose, gelatin and silver, substances that allow for some manipulation, flexibility and amelioration. The plastics we now face are far less forgiving and the longevity of the dyes used for many of these images is yet another cause for concern.

The first step therefore is to inform ourselves as conservators on the actual production materials and the methods involved in their fabrication. Some of us have made pilgrimages to Düsseldorf and the headquarters of the renowned Grieger Studio to witness firsthand the patented Diasec® process. There are a number of other mounting establishments in operation that approximate this patented process. Visits to any production facility where they are mounting contemporary photographs are strongly recommended.

It is encouraging that there is growing academic and scientific interest in these contemporary works, as evidenced by the growing number of talks and publications on the topic. It is an interest that will produce a body of published work very helpful to those of us whose task it is to actually intervene and treat these objects, usually under pressing deadlines. In particular I want to mention the work of Martin Jurgens and Sylvie Penichon, Bill Wei, Eric Breitung, and Sabine Zorn whose 200 page doctoral dissertation on the Diasec® process we sorely need translated. All of their work is timely and essential and more is urgently needed.

If the first step is to inform ourselves, the second step is to communicate with or clientele. We *must* help our clients understand the nature of these materials about which they are very often *completely* in the dark and about which they sometimes seem to care very little. Technical discussions can bring on glassy-eyed stares and obvious ennui although this information has such tremendous importance to the preservation of these images and in fact determines the limits of conservation intervention.

Whether or not a problem on the surface of a Diasec® mounted photograph is a shallow surface abrasion or a deeper groove-shaped gouge that can actually cast shadows on the underlying photographic print, makes a world of difference and has considerable impact on any treatment proposal that we might make. This can be an almost imperceptible difference on a macro-scale to most observers.

Close examination and an understanding of the materials are therefore critical to developing any treatment strategy. I should emphasize that this cannot be done via emailed jpeg images, as much as one might want to avoid considerable shipping costs or the inherent risk of damage during transit of such large and fragile objects. We try to impress upon our clients the need for *excessive* even *obsessive* caution in handling, packing, transporting and displaying these works to minimize the numerous risks involved. Prevention is always the best strategy and this is especially so with contemporary works.

Similarly we always try to impress upon clients the preferability of living with minor damages. This might be called the *Peaceful Co-habitation* Approach. Given the size and the need, (to borrow a phrase from no less an authority than Philippe de Montebello, Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art), for "proper viewing distance," minor damages that do not appreciably interfere with the aesthetic enjoyment of these works nor threaten their chemical or physical stability, should be accepted as inevitable consequences of their size and of their presence in the real world.

If the damage is such that it does become distracting, then having a contemporary photograph reprinted, if at all possible, is an excellent option to pursue. This will only be possible if it was produced by a still living artist and if the representing gallery will consent to reprint. These are big IFs to be sure and reprinting is not always possible for a variety of reasons, including:

- The status of the artist in question.
- The status or leverage of the owner requesting that a reprint be made.
- The responsibility, willingness and ability of the representing gallery to reprint. (Some take hard line stances against the practice while others do not)
- Lost or misplaced negatives can make reprinting actually impossible.

Other complicating factors are:

• the costs involved in production of a new work.
• Determining responsibility for the damage that leads to a reprinting request.
• Changes in photographic materials since the original was produced. This is increasingly an issue as manufacturers cease production of traditional materials.
• Serious questions about what a reprint does to an artist's limited edition.

A brief word of caution to collectors is that one might get something very different from the original piece due to new materials or the artist's re-interpretation of the work.

The types of treatments we've undertaken at The Better Image® and will shortly illustrate include:

• Surface cleaning acrylic and Diasec® -mounted works.
• Surface cleaning thin plastic laminates.
• Repairing damage to the primary support after gouging from the verso.
• Removing damaged surface laminates.

In the surface cleaning category we have been aided by studies done by Erin Murphy and Lee Ann Daffner at the Museum of Modern Art, and by Camille Moore and others at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. (Here are some close up images of the texture of various cleaning cloths they researched in the search for the least abrasive material to clean these soft acrylic surfaces.)

Beyond removal of loose and accumulated dust we have been called upon to remove more tenacious, greasy films from face-mounted photographs.
With many of these works local treatments are often not possible and indeed, to even out a surface, the entire piece may have to be treated to ensure uniformity.

In many instances thin plastic laminates serve the photograph well by protecting it from deep scratches and various accretions and making surface cleaning easier than it otherwise might be.

Scratch reduction and hopefully their removal is a challenge often encountered with large face mounted photographs. Scratches both shallow and deep can be all too apparent and disfiguring. After consultation with artists and colleagues we have employed a commercial cleaning abrasive to reduce these scratches in acrylic surfaces by physically buffing, using considerable 'elbow grease, at the end of a microswab to keep the affected area to the absolute minimum. The final result in many instances can be very successful. This is especially true when the works are valued in the high six figures. As an aside more than one Diasec® mounted work by the contemporary artist Andreas Gursky has sold at auction for over two million dollars.

We have been less successful with face-mounted images that have had their photographic primary supports gouged from the verso. When the paperbase is left exposed and unprotected, as was initially intended by some artists, this type of damage becomes more likely. Unfortunately it is difficult if not impossible to remedy this type of damage, necessitating a form of 'reverse inpainting' that we have yet to master. Matching tonality and color saturation while reverse

painting on a non-reactive isolating layer while working on an oversized photograph is much easier said than done.

Thin surface laminates that become detached, abraded or otherwise clouded can be another problem altogether. Once a surface laminate is thus altered the defect is readily visible and the aesthetic value of a photograph can be severely compromised. In a few cases, after profound discussions with the clients about the nature of our proposed treatments and the changes they would inevitably entail *IF* things went well, it was agreed to proceed to attempt to strip the laminates, to uncover the underlying, undamaged print surfaces. The procedure is both exciting and quite hair-raising to say the least.

In cases such as these there is no room for innocuous spot testing, no hidden corners upon which to try one's hand. Once begun, the treatment has to proceed for there is no turning back from a failed or aborted attempt. The laminate dries quickly and becomes brittle as it is removed and exposed to the air. This is an "all or nothing" approach to dealing with these types of problems. It is a bit like playing Home Run Derby where one either strikes out ignobly like "Casey at the Bat" or preferably hits a home run over the wall and wins the ball game. If all goes well, the released dry, crinkled laminate, looking like the flayed skin of Michelangelo from The Last Judgment, remains in stark contrast to the now glowing, altered, and arguably improved upon work of photographic art.

Undeniably the image will have undergone a profound visual change. Questions to be answered are: Has the artist's original intent been changed? What affect does this have on the work if it was editioned? Can or should this work be done if the artist is no longer around to approve such a treatment? Can it be 'reversed'? Although theoretically the piece could be re-laminated in reality there are other factors that might prohibit this, such as an aluminum backing, mounting cleats and other physical obstacles. Where the photograph was laminated originally in order to protect it for glass-free viewing, a protective alternative must now be sought after treatment. The use of glare-free glazing materials is becoming more and more attractive to artists despite the costs involved and could be employed to provide the needed protection.

These and many related issues are raised by such a treatment and they need to be discussed and agreed upon *in advance* of the intervention procedure. We need to emphasize the extensive client/artist/conservator interaction prior to treatment and the need to secure a signed authorization acknowledging the possible negative impact or at least the altering influence of such a treatment.

I did want to mention that over the years The Better Image® has been slowly building up what can be called our *Hall of Photographic Horrors*. These works come to us after insurance companies, owners and artists have all agreed that they are complete losses, without remaining commercial value and beyond any restorative aid. Our corporate lawyer has drawn up a transfer agreement whereby the artist or agent signs over the photograph to TBI for purposes of experimentation with the mutual agreement that the work is not to be resold, transferred or otherwise see the light of day ever again. To date we have received contemporary works from artists including: Vera Lutter, Ellen Carey, Sandy Skoglund, Richard Misrach, Thomas Ruff and Tracey Moffat.

It is a horrific collection but also a very useful learning resource. These donated materials, present us with bodies for autopsy, so to speak, upon which we can push the envelope of physical treatments without regard to any damage we might inflict.
Thin plastic laminates can be attacked with various solvents, physically stripped without fear of additional damage. Surface mounted works can be scrubbed and rubbed to ascertain the limits of treatment. In this manner we at The Better Image® are trying to build up a practical body of experience that may be of service to our field, and to the collectors and institutions that are acquiring these large, interesting, confusing, demanding, exciting, frustrating and sometimes even beautiful works of Contemporary Photographic Art.

To conclude, in our private practice we have definite and certain limitations. We have neither the analytic equipment, the staff, nor the financial resources to design, initiate and conduct the scientific studies needed to answer the many questions we have about these new materials and the consequences of our treatment of them. Although we strive to adhere to the Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice as per the A.I.C., much of what we do to contemporary materials is by nature experimental and irreversible. We find ourselves too often in unchartered territory.

For the much-needed quantitative studies *and their published results* we must rely on our institutional brethren and sisters, as well as on related professionals in the crafts of mounting and framing and in Industry with a capital "I". What we do have in private practice are needy clients. When damage occurs to a contemporary photograph valued at six or seven figures, as you might imagine, clients are eager, *even rabid*, to have something, *anything*, done to rectify the damage they see on their art and their investment. And they usually have a definite deadline in mind.

Those of us in private practice are literally on the front lines in this battle to develop strategies for "Victory" and sometimes it feels like the "Insurgents" are gaining. Perhaps a "Surge" of research, funding and attention to these pressing issues could be called for by the highest levels of our PMG governance? Perhaps 21,000 new troops could be enlisted in this pressing battle rather than in others...

I want to thank the current TBI staff of Richard Stenman, Alison Rossiter and Michele Kloehn. and former staff and interns Sylvie Penichon, Toshiaki Koseki, Tina Tan, Martin Salazar and Sarah Freeman for their contribution to this paper through their research and hard work. And I especially want to thank a very special co-presenter, Nora W. Kennedy for her ceaseless support and encouragement.

Interested parties are invited to visit us in scenic New Jersey on the banks of the Delaware River and come to our studio within The Milford Opera House and/or to our smaller satellite studio on West 25th Street in the Chelsea District of Manhattan.

Papers presented in *Topics in Photographic Preservation, Volume Twelve* have not undergone a formal process of peer review.