
Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Slow Photography Rebirth of the Tintype

Matthew Feitshans · Wednesday, June 11th, 2014

When we see vintage pictures from the 19th century, it's easy to understand the initial reactions of Native Americans to photography. They often refused to have their pictures taken because they believed the process could steal a person's soul and disrespected the spiritual world. This impression of the soul being captured was created not only by the novelty of the photographic event but also by the technique itself: the chemical process.

The democratization of photography from the 1960's Instamatic 100 to today's cameraphones has emphasized the "recording" of our memories to a greater and greater extent. More shots means more moments enshrined, each individual frame becoming less important than the aggregate power of its library. The amazing capability of the digital process has, in effect, made any one photographic event less potent.



But the passion to recapture the “capture” process is alive and well in alternative photography circles where partnerships like Los Angeles-based [Finley & Pollard Fine Handmade Photography](#) are creating physical, take-home pieces of photography art that demand both artist and subject to slow down and experience each step of a hand-crafted tradition.



Modern antiquarians and Living History buffs are rediscovering chemical wet plate photography known as “tintypes” (also known as a ferrotypes), a photograph shot on large-format (picture someone under a black cloth with their head stuck in a giant accordion camera) that creates a direct positive on a thin sheet of metal. The plate is coated with dark lacquer or enamel and binds with the photographic emulsion (known as wet plate collodion) that, when combined with silver nitrate, captures the particles of light directed through the lens... the light bouncing off you, the subject.

Tintypes enjoyed their widest use during the 1860s and 1870s and lesser use of the medium persisted into the early 20th century. Today’s revival is a reassertion of a photograph’s pride-of-place as a unique, one-of-a-kind image and a powerful testament to the wisdom of the initial reaction from those Native Americans. The wet plate process *does* capture our image and spirit and

the resulting photograph endures longer than the ones and zeroes in our phones likely will.



In this process there is no computer interpreting anything. No mechanics whatsoever. It's pure light, bending through glass and etching our souls upon the metal plate. A portrait generally requires the sitter to hold still for about twenty seconds. They must slow down their breath (sometimes hold it) and maintain a glance for an extended period. This makes it exceedingly difficult to present a fake smile. The ethereal and mysterious technique records our truest nature because we are required to simply “be” with the light, with the camera, and with the photographer longer than it takes to snap a hundred selfies.

Not even the photographers can predict exactly how the silver will behave from one exposure to the next. Capturing the essence of the human face is mercurial and challenging. But when you see it develop before your eyes in the darkroom (where many of today's photographers are happy to invite you) you know you have something special—something one of a kind.



As we take stock of our lives it becomes quickly apparent that most records of the last five years are hosted on websites that *we do not own*. Our most loving moments are easy to “share” but harder to experience. There is great joy in waking up on a Sunday morning and seeing the sunlight reflected off a real object – a framed tintype of us, our family, our pet. We cannot have this experience with an illuminated screen. And the Cloud can just as easily forget us as it can record our memories.

Wet plate photography is a real reminder that we were here at all. In this, the natives might have had it wrong. Once captured, we remain.



All images by Finley & Pollard.

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