

# In Richard Learoyd's Moody Photography, the Camera Obscura Returns

Joy Shan | Nov 29, 2018 5:31 pm



Richard Learoyd, *Live and dead poppies*, 2018. © Richard Learoyd. Pace/MacGill Courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery



Richard Learoyd, *Calypso, Red Dress*, 2015 Courtesy of Gallery

The camera obscura is a darkened box or room, with a pinhole opening in one side or wall that permits outside light to enter. Once the light strikes the opposite side, it forms an image of the external world—reversed and upside-down, but faithful in color, movement, and the distance between objects.

From antiquity, the device was used to track planetary movements and safely observe the sun, while Realist painters in the 16th and 17th centuries used the camera obscura as a way to reproduce scenes with dimensional accuracy. Some researchers even date its use to the paleolithic period, when a “natural camera obscura” may have inspired cave paintings, the earliest art form of all.



Richard Learoyd, *Big Sur 1*, 2018. © Richard Learoyd. Courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.

But the camera obscura has also functioned as a root metaphor for human cognition. For philosopher John Locke, it served as an analogy of the mind, while others were less trusting of the device's truthful mediation of reality. "The circumstances within which a man lives and works [are] a fabrication of his brain," Karl Marx once wrote. "Men go through their lives seeing as through a 'camera obscura'—an illusion."

The simple machine, then, came to animate an epistemological debate about the relationship between what we see and what we know. Such tensions slyly emerge in the works of Richard Learoyd, the British photographer who, since 2004, has made portraits, landscapes, and still lifes with his homemade, room-sized camera obscura, a selection of which are on view at San Francisco's Fraenkel Gallery. When you look at a Learoyd print, you absorb not only the subject pictured (a young woman; a bouquet of flowers), but also the process through which it was rendered. Each image, in other words, is an interpretation of a person or place through a specific technique of physics and optics.

Consider Learoyd's portraits of a woman named Agnes, taken between 2007 and 2014. Learoyd made these photographs using two rooms: one filled with light where his subject sits; the other, a dark chamber fitted with a lens. After composing the scene, Learoyd walks inside the camera and

attaches a large piece of silver-dye bleach paper onto the wall opposite the lens. He exposes the paper before feeding it into a color-processing machine.



Richard Learoyd, French Tulips with Cotton Grid,  
Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery



Richard Learoyd, Headless Man with Mirror  
Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery

What emerge on the other side of this process are painterly, larger-than-life prints of Agnes in isolation, wearing the haunted, melancholic expression of a woman turned inward. It's these faces—of not only Agnes, but Tatiana, Melanie, and Erika, too—that bore into the viewer's brain; at once cryptic and familiar, they make us feel privy to a moment so quiet, so fleeting, that not even those closest to them would be allowed a glimpse. It's almost as though, by withdrawing to another room, Learoyd can disappear from the photographic process, allowing the subject to forget that he is watching. In a room of her own, sitting beneath the heat of strobe lights, the woman's composure disintegrates (in several portraits, in fact, the models have dozed off). The process either forces a moment of true interiority, or a deceptively good simulation of one.

Part of the uncanniness of Learoyd’s prints has to do with their surface quality, which is entirely absent of the grain of film—each photograph is a contact print made from directly exposing paper with light. It results in prints that, as Learoyd put it, “are made of information, rather than grain.” The texture of his photographs has invited many critics to compare them to paintings—in particular the lush, sensual portraits of Dutch master Johannes Vermeer, one of the artists commonly thought to have used a camera obscura.

In the summer of 2018, Learoyd and two assistants spent two weeks driving around California’s Yosemite and Big Sur with a camera obscura—this one built so that it could fold up and fit inside a car. Upon finding a promising view, they stopped, set up the 8-square-foot tent, composed the shot from within the dark box, and once the desired light was constant, opened the lens.



Richard Learoyd, *Yosemite 4 (BPV)*, 2018. © Richard Learoyd. Courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.

The body of work—comprising 4-by-6-foot, black-and-white contact prints of coasts and valleys—is redolent of the works of masters Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, but marked an aesthetic break for Learoyd. But just as he was doing with the portrait series, he was looking for a specific way of seeing that only a camera obscura could facilitate. “It’s like camping, but

putting [up] your tent four times a day, and you can't drag it up a mountain," Learoyd said. "The physics, optics, and mechanics of moving around a very large camera—your mind and eyes get tuned to the limitations and possibilities that working in that way offers."

In process and outcome, Learoyd's landscape series harkens back to the early cartographic usages of the camera obscura. In the 17th century, Johannes Kepler attached a telescopic lens to a black tent, which he took with him into a field. As he turned the tent by various different degrees, Kepler traced on paper the shapes that came in through the hole; in doing so, he could survey the entire 360-degree view of his surroundings. The lens that Learoyd brought to Yosemite, an 1800mm Rodenstock Apo-Ronar, was an industrial tool once used to reproduce maps and engineering blueprints, before Xerox scanners rendered them obsolete.



Richard Learoyd, Freya, Nude horizontal, 2017, Courtesy of Pace/MacGill Gallery

It's little surprise, then, that Learoyd's large-scale landscapes have cartographic qualities. They're wide in scope, but encyclopedic in detail; like the digital maps on our touch-screens, these prints continue to offer more data the closer we zoom in. In one of the Yosemite prints, a

white car materializes in the corner only once you push your nose against the glass. (Learoyd waited for hours for a white car to move inside the frame; within the image, the vehicle functions almost like a scale bar, conveying the massiveness of the scene around it.)

“I was looking for an interpretation of this place through a process,” Learoyd said. “I wanted to create an experience that allowed the viewer to see multiple images within an image, to see eternal detail.” It’s these details, which extend limitlessly inside the frame, that vanish all too easily once the exposure has ended. The way a woman holds her body when she thinks nobody’s looking. A valley of trees in a state ravaged by a year of wildfires. Two weeks after Learoyd’s visit to Yosemite, the Ferguson Fire destroyed nearly 100,000 acres in the area—another chemical process, this one devastating on an ecological scale. Under his guidance, the oldest photographic technique has become an instrument against forgetting.

Joy Shan

*Correction: A previous version of this article incorrectly stated that the exposure time for Learoyd’s photos is eight hours long, which is incorrect. Additionally, Learoyd had two assistants while shooting the landscapes, not three.*