



New Getty Photo Exhibits Show Early French Work and Contemporary Learoyd

By *Dyanne Weiss* on August 30, 2016



Two photography exhibits opened today, Aug. 30, at the J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Center in Los Angeles. At first glance the Getty exhibits appear dissimilar, showing early French work when the first negatives emerged and contemporary photos by Englishman Richard Learoyd, but the realism and style are complementary.

The first exhibit, “Real/Ideal: Photography in France, 1847- 1860,” contains approximately 140 works, about 100 of which come from the Getty Museum’s extensive photography holdings along with important international loans, some of which previously had never left France. It highlights four photographers who were important in the early days of paper photography: Édouard Baldus, Gustave Le Gray, Charles Nègre, and Henri Le Secq.



The second exhibit introduces Learoyd's work to U.S. audiences in his first monographic exhibition in an American museum. The show focuses on his studio work over the past decade in creating visually compelling still lifes, figure studies and portraits. The Getty acquired its first image by Learoyd, which is included here, for its photography collection in 2014.

The 19th century French shots showcase the early days of photography when people were experimenting with the camera as a medium of record or art form and the new process developed then of using negatives, according to Timothy Potts, the museum's director. Noting that the Getty's collection allows them to highlight the 12-year period in the early history of photography, Potts

also pointed out their efforts "to balance the 'real' recording of the world as it is with the 'ideal,' creative possibilities of the medium."

Potts then noted that Learoyd's work is 150 years later, but he is one of a group of artists looking back to the processes, camera obscura and techniques in the 19th century.

"Richard Learoyd's work nicely complements and engages with the Getty's renowned collection of nineteenth-century photography, as the process he employs to capture an image is based on one of the oldest methods employed by those pioneering figures," he added.

French Realists

The four photographers included all came to Paris in the late 1830s to become painters. (The show does include some of their paintings and drawings.) But the development of the paper negative (creating an image in camera and using that to make positive prints) became their livelihood.



The Second Republic (1848-1852) and Napoleon III (1852-1870) commissioned photos of architectural renovations and new construction taking place. A list of 175 key buildings or historic sites was identified and five photographers (including three in this exhibit) spread out to a different section of France. Photos shown here include many buildings familiar today if they were printed in sepia tones. For example, Le Gray's 1859 shot of the Louvre look like ones 100 years later of the grounds before the Pyramid was added and Negre's 1853 image of Notre Dame reflects the detailed visage. Le Secq's 1851 shot of the Reims Cathedral shows a dentist office next door.

They also shot new construction and captured everyday life. Baldus made a series of images of the new train tracks connecting Marseille and Paris. Negre also focused on street merchants, such as the pierce showing chimney sweeps and organ grinders in the exhibit. Additional early subjects include the Forrest of Fontainebleau, which was commonly used in paintings in the period, including works in the Getty's current exhibit on Théodore Rousseau.

Learoyd's Retro Realism

Unusual in today's Photoshop age, Learoyd's studio-based practice eschews digital technology and emphasizes the creative potential of working under self-imposed realism restrictions. The photographer's use of direct positive photographs made with camera obscura techniques makes each work a unique print.

His subject matter and works are precisely controlled and calibrated. This is particularly true in his still-life compositions, which are eye-catching in their use of common items in complex layers or positioning. His figure studies emphasize physical imperfections and subtle items that draw the viewer's attention.

The artist explained, "I don't want to rush toward an image. I try to show its nature in detail." He then acknowledges that it is "the dilemma of contemporary art: Do I whisper or do I shout?" Learoyd also explained that he wants his still lifes and figure studies to "mean something. He tries to portray a real reading of the object itself versus a (photo of a) person engaging the viewer with their expression."

The new Getty photo exhibits showcasing early French prints and contemporary work by Learoyd will be on display through Nov. 27, 2016. The museum is closed on Mondays and major holidays.

Written and Edited by Dyanne Weiss

Exhibit visit Aug. 29
The Getty: Current Exhibitions



Photo of "Seascape with a Ship Leaving Port," 1857 by Gustave Le Gray, Albumen silver print from a glass negative, courtesy of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

Photo of "North Transept, Chartes Cathedral," by Henri Le Secq, negative 1852, print 1870s, photolithograph, courtesy of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

Photo of "Man with Octopus Tattoo II," 2011, by Richard Learoyd, silver-dye bleach print, Wilson Centre for Photography, © Richard Learoyd, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

Photo of Learoyd talking in front of his pieces "Erika," 2005 (left) and "Jasmijn to the Light," 2010, by Dyanne Weiss

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