



Medusa, unique gelatin silver print photograph © Adam Fuss, 2010 / Timothy Taylor Gallery, London

Playful Minds

by Katherine Matthews

As essential as the desire to create, is the innate desire to experiment with our creations: to use playfulness, technology, or artistry to make something entirely new and unique.

The technological advances in photographic imagery are improving quality at an exponential rate, yet it's not megapixels alone that create the experimentation, it's what is done with them. Take the RED EPIC, a cinema camera the size of a Hasselblad, capable of capturing up to 120 frames per second, each frame at 14MP. With its capability to make the distinction in quality between still and moving images negligible, it is hard to say if a photographer's main challenge, capturing the decisive moment, is relevant anymore. Currently in development, the Lytro 'Light Field' camera captures the entire field of light around the subject, allowing the shot to be re-focused in post-production. The question becomes, as skill with a camera loses its importance in the field of photography, how will these technical shifts awaken creativity in the new craftsmen?

Meanwhile, playfulness is in full-swing as photography enters an analogue renaissance, brought on by both the pre-digital photographers who will never let go of the chemical smell on their fingers as well as the young photographers who embrace film with the same enthusiasm as they do vintage clothing. The re-vitalisation of Lomography has helped in no small part, creating a culture of cool around cameras with crappy lenses and burnt out light and candy colours. Similarly, the rescue of Polaroid instant film through the efforts of The Impossible Project can be seen as a massive collective declaration of love for a print medium on the verge of extinction. The value of instant film disappeared with the introduction of playback on digital cameras, yet the playfulness of the product, the tactile magic of holding a developing print in your hand, makes it a medium that people aren't finished exploring. Not yet.

The mass availability of equipment creating technically perfect imagery has a lot of artists turning the other direction, towards the less sterile, more idiosyncratic aesthetic. While flaws in photos used to be symbols of the naturally imperfect photographic process (dust or scratches, light leaks and vignetting, for example), now 'flaws' are manufactured into the process, calculated into the imaging for a sense of style and atmosphere.

The paradox of these experiments is that, in many cases, they also limit control over the resulting photograph. In a somewhat similar way as Polaroid did before, the popular phone app Hipstamatic allows photographers to outsource some of the creative process to software and chance. While some aim for accidental treasures, their growing presence makes others fear the end of photography-as-art. Regardless, the widespread democracy of the medium represents a challenge for artists to constantly push the medium in new ways, whether through technology, playfulness or artistry. With more working hands, it may become more difficult to produce something truly unique, but it also means that more hands are working towards creating more possibilities.