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Analogue's Last Gasp

by **Ellen Pearlman** on April 25, 2012

Little Points: First Quadrant, Second Quadrant (2012) (All image used with permission of David Licht ©Licht Images/DSLicht 2012)

Though Micheal Wenyon and Susan Gamble's show *A Universe held up for Inspection* focuses on displays of holograms and other works, the real raison d'ete of this exhibit is to reveal the frisson erupting over the last gasp of the analogue picture. What I mean by analogue picture is an image that comes about due to physical and chemical means, as opposed to stored digital bits and bytes displayed on an electronic screen. This sharp distinction belies the seemingly pedestrian looking holographic prints of boxes and meteor rocks on display.

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The show contains three types of representations; holograms, silver halide emulsions on glass and photographic prints of astronomy observatories in India and Cuba during various stages of construction.

'Clouds in Motion, POSITIVES. 1. 1876.' from 'Album', Wenyon & Gamble, 1994, hologram of wooden storage box holding glass photographic plates recorded by Charles Piazzi Smyth, Astronomer Royal for Scotland. Hologram made by Susan Gamble and Michael Wenyon on the premises of the Royal Observatory, Edinburgh during their residency there in 1994.

A series of holograms of dull wooden boxes with terse scientific explanations inked on them such as “Three Cities in Russia,” “Cycle of Ferns,” “Moons and Various Subjects,” “Edinburgh 1875,” “Great Pyramid” and “Clouds In Motion” hover in the air. The holograms, all taken from originals exposed directly to the object they represent (the boxes) contained a once in a millennial secret. They housed stored photographic plates taken by Charles Piazzi Smyth, a nineteenth-century astronomer and close friend of William Fox Talbot, the man who invented the early photographic process known as the Talbotype or Calotype. The antique negatives housed in the boxes were produced on glass photographic plates. The holograms of those selfsame storage boxes are also displayed on glass plates, though etched by pulse laser light. This succinct double entendre references the last gasp of late 20th century analogue technology. By using a hologram, the final outpost of experimental analogue photographic processes, it displays Talbotype plates before both processes (chemical negatives and pulse laser prints) simultaneously disappear into the vast archives of a museum. It rescues, rehabilitates and redefines the medium (glass plate to glass plate) just it time for it to be extinguished, subsumed by the democratization of bytes and bits for all.

Gamble says she is “interested in the cultural representation of science … as it is influenced by the same taste and fashion as human concerns as other cultural artifacts.” Her point is that when first introduced in the 19th century, the photographic process was quickly used by many for scientific inquiry. Holograms, for the most part are not very popular, though they may produce outbursts of interest. But, if you cheapen, or democratize the means of production, their popularity soars. In terms of 3D viewing this is clearing demonstrated by the X-Box, which produces believable 3D depth scanning for a consumer style price.

“Little Points, First Quadrant” and “Little Points: Second Quadrant” are not holograms but are sliver-halide emulsions on glass, and tackle the issue of representation and optics. The images appear as distant red-tinged flares or stars. The optics of stars viewed through specially made super powerful telescope optics in an observatory only represents the refracted light of the stars, not the stars themselves. Gamble states it is an “optical allusion” not an “optical illusion.” The two glass emulsions reference this distinction by alluding to the stars, not trying to emulate them through tricks of vision or illusions.

"The Planetarium, Havana, Cuba" (2009)

Finally there are a series of pigment inkjet prints of astronomy observatories in various stages of construction in India and Cuba. They are both photos of incredible detail as well as comments on the social and cultural aspirations of the countries they portray. Though scientific inquiry likes to represent itself as totally neutral, it is beholden to the societal and cultural aspirations of the country of its origins. India and Cuba have great aspirations to join the world dialogue in researching the heavens, and these photographs represent their quest, often plunked down in the midst of rice paddies and slums, to gaze towards distant galaxies

Wenyon and Gamble, A Universe held up for Inspection *continues at the MagnanMetz Gallery (521 West 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) until May 25.*