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Computer Technology in Photography

Combining traditional methods with digital computers



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Jane Alden Stevens, associate professor in the fine arts program at the College of Design, Architecture, Art and Planning, is a photographer interested in the new computer technologies available in her field. But while new electronic imaging and photo developing techniques can offer exciting new art forms, Stevens says they can never, and should never, totally eradicate the old, traditional methods. She believes the two approaches can work together to create a new visual language that could never be achieved by using either approach exclusively.

Birth, Death and Aging

Stevens is currently engaged in creating a series of photographs concerning birth, death and the aging process that is produced using traditional and electronic collage methods. Up until recently, she used the traditional wet darkroom process to create her pictures. It is the process most of us envision when we think of developing film on paper. These materials are run through various trays or tanks of chemicals and hung or laid out to dry. Now, computer technology allows for what is known as digital darkroom processing, that is, computers "develop" the pictures. Not only that, new software programs can manipulate the image in order to change it.

All the Difference

A URC grant allowed Stevens to get the training she needed to use the digital equipment. "I bought the computer system myself," said Stevens. "I just needed some help in learning how to use it. The grant made that possible. I would never be where I am without the help of the URC. It has made all of the difference in the world." Stevens began the training in January and finished in June.

According to Stevens, the electronic world certainly adds to the visual vocabulary of photography but it needn't necessarily replace the traditional methods. "Some fields need to use computer technology most of the time," she explained. "For example, sports journalism and graphic design rely heavily on digital imaging because of speed, the ability to clean-up or alter pictures and, in some instances, ease of use. But while many people believe that digital photography will make the traditional methods obsolete, that just won't happen. Both can co-exist quite nicely."

Its Own Signature

Stevens cites the example of cyanotyping, a print process from the 19th century. "While you can certainly create a blue print with a computer printer, it will not have the same kind of signature or foot print as it will if you do it using

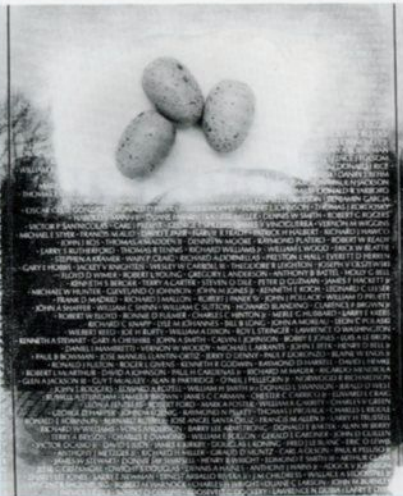


Figure 1.

the traditional method. There, you mix your own chemical, coat paper by hand and process it. This approach is going to produce something different, every time."

Stevens is particularly pleased because the College of Design, Architecture Art and Planning has chosen not to convert completely to digital darkrooms and computer technology, but instead, has integrated it into the curriculum along with the traditional processes and procedures. "I think it is wise to integrate the traditional with the new. It is our duty as teachers to present students with a variety of information and approaches to the medium so they can make informed, creative choices."

A Pioneer

Stevens considers herself a bit of a pioneer because of her fondness for mixing the old and new. For example, she is now working with a 19th century panoramic camera that utilizes 5" x 14" negative sizes. "While I'm working with the 19th century camera, I'm also working with the digital equipment," she explained. "I integrate the old and new to

find out when it makes sense to use conventional methods vs. electronic methods. It feeds my creativity in ways that are stimulating and exciting."

Integrating Both Systems

What Stevens particularly likes about the new digital system is that it can revert back to the old, if she needs it to. "I can take the pictures on film, digitize them and make whatever changes I want from a variety of options, in this case, collaging images. Then, I can take the digital information to what is known as a service bureau. They take the digital information and convert it back into negative or slide form which I can use to print in the wet darkroom setting, enlarging the picture on paper I want, the sizes I want and so forth." Stevens demonstrated several prints that were digitally collaged, put back on to film, and printed in a wet darkroom on huge linen sheets. "A digital printer would not have done that," she said. "Integrating both systems has cut costs and allowed me to extend my options. It's a perfect illustration of what I mean when I say we need the old and new."

Not the Norm

Stevens mentioned that she's always been a pioneer, even in her younger days. She attended St. Lawrence University in upstate New York and graduated from a multifield program where the curricula of study was proposed by the student and his or her advisor. "It was a great program for someone who didn't fit into the norm," explained Stevens. She enmeshed herself in all disciplines of the 19th century, with emphasis in English and German. After working for a time in Germany,

she returned to the US to earn her graduate degree from the Rochester Institute of Technology. "I became obsessed with photography," she said. "It was all I cared about or thought about." By accident, Stevens moved into the area of photo illustration which uses photographs to illustrate a point of an article. "*Ohio Magazine* saw some of my work, and asked to use one of my photographs for their article on the Wright Brothers," she said. "I agreed, and I've enjoyed doing this kind of work ever since."

Metaphorical Expression

Several years ago, Stevens became interested in artistically illustrating, through photographs, the aging process. What evolved was a series of photos metaphorically expressing birth through death. "I became interested in the subject after experiencing a year of tumultuous life events with friends and relatives," she explained. "There were suicides, miscarriages, children's deaths and births; awful and wonderful events that touched me deeply somehow. I knew I needed to express my thoughts and observations about this through the series."



Figure 2.

Overwhelmed by the Names

Stevens's work has taken shape from some of the places she has visited. One such place was the Vietnam Memorial. "I was overwhelmed by the number of names," she said, "and I thought about all of the children these people never had." An image popped up in her mind and she went about putting the pieces of the picture together like a puzzle (see figure 1).

Another place that struck Stevens was a grave stone in Spring Grove Cemetery. "I superimposed the inscription from the grave with a picture I found of a photograph of a little boy standing next to another figure which had been cut out of the picture. It struck me that the two images, superimposed together, would make a great piece for the series," (see figure 2).

Collaging the Images

Stevens says that she takes many photographs of things that catch her eye or imagination, not really knowing how she'll use them later on. "While I may have a general idea about my subject, in this case the aging process, I really don't go looking for things to photograph. Something just strikes me. I'll shoot it and set it aside. Then something else will strike me, I'll remember the former photo and know that the two would make an interesting picture, if put together." Stevens pointed out a photo of a calendar which she really liked because the full, new and quarter moons were all in alignment. "That was so unusual," she said, "so I shot the piece and put it aside. Later I collaged it with a picture of a pregnant woman. I think it makes a great image," (see figure 3).

Stevens compares her series work to putting together a puzzle. "I walk through the world seeing things in bits and pieces as opposed to a whole picture. I then take those pieces and invent a whole, different picture. It represents a multi-dimensional approach, which I like."

A Constant Challenge

Stevens has another passion: teaching. "I just love teaching," she said. "As long as I'm scared before the first day of class, and there are butterflies in my stomach as I walk into the room, I'll teach." She considers herself extremely lucky because she can combine her love for photography and art with teaching. "This job allows me to do both, and has been very good to me. It also constantly challenges me because I have to keep up with all of the new technology not only so I'll be able to use it in my own work, but also so I can provide my students with the knowledge they'll need in their professions."

Right now, Stevens is particularly challenged because in June, she gave birth to twins. "I'm definitely going to be having a new perspective on life," she said.

Leaving It All Behind

Perspective was also the word Stevens used to describe how she can stay refreshed and excited about her work. "Every summer, my husband and I go to the Adirondacks and I can leave all of the technology behind," she said. "We pump our own water, live in a cabin that has no electricity and is not winterized. We have to get in a boat to get to our car to drive to town. I can peaches, tomatoes, pickles and other produce. We get back to basics. I

deeply value that time because it puts my life into perspective." She said that she takes lots of pictures without really knowing how they will turn out until much later when she returns to Cincinnati.

Terminally Curious

Stevens summed up her philosophy by saying that she has an insatiable appetite to find out about the world. "My Father has told me I am terminally curious," she said. "But I believe by observing things around you, and by asking questions, you can learn, no matter where you are or what you are doing. I think that's a good lesson for everybody."

Stevens will continue work on her series.



Figure 3.