

Alison Rossiter

A conversation between two friends:

“So this is a photograph?”

“Well, it was made using photographic paper that had been exposed to light and then processed in a darkroom using standard photographic development processes, so yes, I guess it’s a photograph.”

“What is it a photograph of? I don’t think I’ve seen a landscape quite like the one captured here. The photographer must have used a strange sort of camera.”

“Well, it isn’t a photograph OF anything, really, and the artist didn’t use a camera to make it.”

“What do you mean, didn’t use a camera? Oh I know, the artist must have used some sort of digital manipulation. I know people can do wonders these days with Photoshop and iPhoto.”

“Nope. It was all done with analogue processes; you know, those techniques that are rapidly going out of existence as the world we live in becomes increasingly digital. You see, the photographic paper expired back in 1911, and, apparently, it had gotten moldy. The things that look like stars toward the top of the paper are really just the photographic remnants of mold spores. And the horizon line toward the bottom—that line that looks like hills? The artist made it by holding that portion of the paper in the development liquid for a long-enough period of time so it created that line and made it black.”

“That’s fascinating. So it’s a photograph, but also not a photograph, or at least not a traditional kind of photograph. And what we ‘see’ here is what we, the viewer, imagine is there. This isn’t a stormy landscape at all, really. It’s just some expired, moldy photographic paper that the artist developed in a way that makes us think of a stormy landscape. Right?”

“Exactly! You’ve got it!”

Alison Rossiter (b. 1953) is one of a small group of artists exploring the processes of analogue photography and using those processes in exciting, new ways. It is not a coincidence that these explorations are taking place at a time when analogue photography is disappearing, or at a time when billions of photographs are taken and uploaded to the web daily. In this proliferation of digital images, artists are asking questions such as, “What, exactly, is a photograph, and how can I create a personal, unique, aesthetic experience in a world overrun with images?” For these artists, the answers can be found by going back to the basics of photography and the sense of creative exploration that existed when photography was invented.

Think about it for a second. In circa 1826, when Joseph Nicéphore Niépce invented the first permanent photographic process, there were no cameras, no photography classes, no rules about how a photograph should be made. In that void, Niépce had the freedom to experiment and to manipulate chemicals and surfaces and processes to arrive at the result he wanted.

Over time, though, rules began to be imposed, conventions developed, and techniques taught such that there became a “right” way to make a photograph. In the analogue world, enough freedom still existed in the darkroom to allow artists to periodically deviate from the rules. So, for example, in the

1920s artists like Man Ray and Lázló Molohy-Nagy could create “photograms,” where they placed objects on photographic paper and exposed them directly to light, thus eliminating use of the camera.

This dialogue in photography between those making “conventional” photographs and those breaking the rules continued throughout the 20th Century, and into the 21st, with the pendulum swinging sometimes one way and then the other. The shift from an analogue to a digital world, though, is changing the stakes. The digital world is different. In a digital world, although images can be manipulated with ease, the process by which those images are made and captured is fixed since digital is a binary process in which, at its core, everything is reduced to a “0” or a “1”. As the analogue world is dying out, the ability of artists to create aesthetic effects from processes that have historically been at the core of photography is also dying out. In response, some artists are going back to the basics of photography, to a time when there were no rules, to explore how fundamental photographic processes can be used to create new aesthetic forms.

Museums have begun to notice and feature the new movement. For example, along with colleagues such as Matthew Brandt (featured on our 2013 holiday card), Marco Breuer, James Welling, and others, Rossiter’s work was included in an exhibition last year at the International Center for Photograph in New York titled *What is a Photograph?* and in an exhibition this year at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles titled *Light, Paper, Process: Reinventing Photography*.

Each of the artists exploring these questions has arrived at a different way to answer them. Rossiter’s answer is to use expired photographic papers, which she stumbled on by accident in 2007, when she was unexpectedly given some photography paper stamped with an expiration date of May 1946. Rather than throw the paper away, Rossiter developed a sheet to see whether it was still usable. What she found amazed her:

What came up was an image that looked as though someone had rubbed graphite over a rough sheet of paper, like a rubbing on a gravestone. I was astonished and dancing in the darkroom because I knew there was something to pursue in expired papers.

From that simple discovery, Rossiter has developed an astonishing array of work based on expired photographic papers, some dating to the late 19th Century. As to the fundamental question of whether these are photographs? Here’s what Getty curator Virginia Heckert had to say, in her essay about Rossiter in the book accompanying the *Light, Paper, Process* exhibition:

When Rossiter is asked if the works she creates should be described as photographs, she responds with a definitive ‘yes,’ both because of the materials she uses and because of her background. ‘Even though they don’t involve a camera, these are all photographs to me because they involve a light-sensitive reaction, which is the basis of photography,’ she has noted in one interview, and in another, ‘They are photographic prints. I am using my entire photographic education as a photographer to make them in the darkroom.’ It takes ‘the knowledge of a scientist’ to understand the potential of the materials and ‘the sensibility of a romantic’ to unleash that potential, celebrating the unique characteristics of the papers, flaws and all.

Alison Rossiter has become a major figure in contemporary photography, and her work is included in numerous public and private collections. A marvelous video produced by the Getty and showing Rossiter at work can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zyUh7kJEegI>