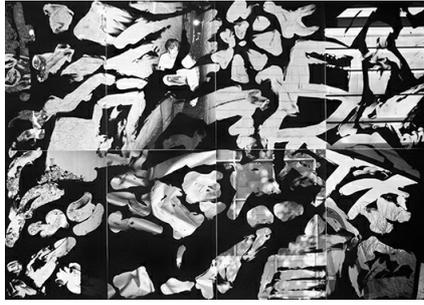


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Benjamin Lichtenstein, *It's like a brothel in here*, 2015, unique state silver gelatin print, 84 x 119 cm.

FEATURE

The Alchemists

by [Megan Backhouse](#) | Posted 29 Oct 2015

It might be the age of the JPEG but Martyn Jolly is dropping terms like “daguerreotype”, “photogram” and “pinhole camera”. The head of photography and media arts at the Australian National University School of Art enthuses about obsolete emulsions, optical experiments and dark-room chemistry like a potion-brewing scientist.

One of three curators currently putting together an exhibition that looks at “the nexus between analogue and digital photography”, Jolly says that all around the world photographers “born digital” are being swept up in the sheer pleasure of seeing “elemental, chemical, optical processes at work”.

The Alchemists: Rediscovering Photography in the Age of the JPEG, at the Australian Centre for Photography, hones in on a trend that has been building over last 10 or 20 years but has, according to Jolly, now reached a peak. At a time when photography has become an “endless iteration of separate optical scenes” – often rendered on a phone – Jolly says a wave of artists are instead approaching the medium as a “process of chemical and visual becoming”.

“A whole bunch of photographers have been returning to things like dark-room processes and handmade cameras to get back to the physical, elemental nature of photography,” he says. “Against a background of digital photography, which has become the primary way to think about the medium, they are returning to the fundamental drivers of light and touch.

“Five billion rectangular JPEG pass before our eyeballs every day; it’s such a homogenous kind of look and we are becoming desensitised to the imagery. They are all equalised in the same program and one JPEG basically looks like any other JPEG.”

By contrast, *The Alchemists* brings together work by 25 artists with a reputation for pushing boundaries. New Zealand artist [Dane Mitchell](#), for example, once scraped dust from the inside of Auckland Observatory’s astronomical telescope, asked a microbiologist to cultivate bacteria from the dust and then made inkjet prints documenting the transference of “matter and energy” from one form to another.

Adelaide-based [James Tylor](#) makes daguerreotypes referencing Australia and New Zealand’s colonial past. For the past decade [David Haines](#), who lives in the Blue Mountains in New South Wales, has managed to incorporate aroma into his work. And then Melbourne artist [Danica Chappell](#)

has been relying on a sense of touch to manipulate materials in the blind space of the dark room.

Jolly says the diversity of works being made by these artists is indicative of the scope of *The Alchemists*, which will dwell on the process rather than the 'picturing' side of photography. A lot of the photographs are not of things, but are themselves a tactile, physical object. "It's not someone taking a picture of nature," he says, "it's nature manifesting itself in a photograph. Some of these artists are working almost sculpturally."

Exhibitions along similar lines have already been held in London, New York and Los Angeles, but by limiting the work to that being made in Australia, New Zealand and Southeast Asia, Jolly says the Sydney show will look at how this region of the world approaches the matter differently. The use of redundant photographic processes to engage with our colonial history and our local environment is, he says, one point of difference.

"I think this generation of photographers don't just see themselves as being photographers. They see themselves as creative artists. When I went to art school I trained as a photographer in the photographic tradition but many of these artists use a whole range of different processes. They are working across both the chemical-dark-room-emulsion space and the digital space. We have cast our net very wide."

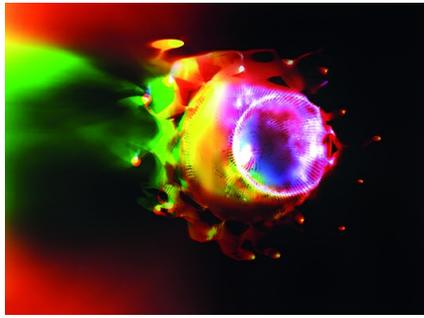
The Alchemists: Rediscovering Photography in the Age of the JPEG
Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney
31 October - 6 December 2015.



Sarah Mosca, *Untitled Walk #2 (vague silence)*, 2014, pigment print, 110 x 90 cm, edition of 3 + 1 AP. Courtesy of the artist.



Ashleigh Garwood, *Hawkesbury River*, 2014, silver gelatin print, 117 x 93 cm, edition of 3 + 1 AP. Courtesy of the artist.



Lisa Clunie, *Untitled (after Edgerton)*, 2011, type-C print, 40 x 32 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Danica Chappell, *Distances #1*, 2014, unique duration photograph, 189 x 450 cm. Courtesy the artist.

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