As this issue of Loupe gets ready for press, all of us here at the PRC (staff, board, interns, volunteers, and members) are extremely busy getting ready for the New England Portfolio Reviews (May 11-12), PRC in NYC (May 16-20), EXPOSURE 2012 (June 5-July 18), and all of the other programs that we do over the course of the year—including Loupe.

In April, we sent out a survey to Loupe readers, and I want to thank everyone who replied. The responses have been overwhelming, encouraging, and enlightening. In addition to much praise and some criticism, the more common responses included: a) publish more frequently, b) include more members’ work, c) add more pages, d) incorporate more in-depth and substantive essays, and interestingly, e) decrease the size. We liked the design of an oversized publication but apparently our readers find it difficult to shelve. While we cannot accommodate all the suggestions we received, we will do our best to be responsive to our readers and members.

One suggestion we have received frequently is to show more diversity of work. To that end, in this issue, we are focusing on alternative and non-traditional processes. Of the three portfolios in this issue, Jesseca Ferguson’s work is the most traditionally alternative, using large format pinhole cameras, handmade papers, and found objects to make photo sculptures. Michael Kolster uses an 8 x 10 inch view camera and a wet-plate collodion process to bring us a compelling social and ecological narrative of the Androscoggin River in Maine. And finally, Richard Sobol pairs up with Dominican painter and poet Riccardo Toribio to combine digitally captured inkjet prints and applied oil paint to create exotic photo paintings of traditional ways of life in the Dominican Republic. As the photo world becomes more digital, we are finding a greater interest older traditional methods. At the PRC we are committed to exploring all types of serious investigations of photographic practice.

My heartfelt appreciation goes out to Janelle Lynch, guest editor of this issue and author of our feature essay, “A Digital Legacy: Christine Elfman in Context.” Lynch recently exhibited her own masterful photographs at the PRC in Los Jardines de México this past winter. (see www.bu.edu/prc/exhibit/exhibit2011_lynch.htm)

Glenn Ruga
PRC Executive Director & Loupe Publisher
Contemporary photographers are exercising an enhanced freedom to realize their visions, as seen in the work by Jesseca Ferguson, Michael Kolster and Richard Sobol, featured in this issue. Today’s image-makers are liberally experimenting with the latest tools and materials, introducing new working methodologies and revitalizing historic practices. Technological advancements have energized the field and are inspiring innovation that evokes the spirit of the medium’s early years.

Allison Nordström, Curator at George Eastman House and juror of the PRC’s 2012 juried exhibition, recently explained, “It seems the digital turn has expanded the field for photographic artists. In addition to the new technologies, artists can now draw from all the media, methods and imagery of the past, suit ing the way of making an image to the desired look and implications of the work.”

As Nordström alludes, another outcome of the technological developments is the revival of alternative processes—a return to a handcrafted, more intimate approach to making images. I asked Dan Estabrook and France Scully Osterman, both master practitioners and teachers of alternative processes, about the renewed interest.

Estabrook said, “I do see a hunger in young artists that may be related to the rise in digital media, or it may be related to the fact that something is being lost as we watch it disappear—that chemical photography, even the black and white print, is really a dead technique.”

Scully Osterman said that she finds some people choosing alternative processes because, “They think that it’s going to be what makes their work interesting. We understand why our students fall in love with it—we try to push them further.” She also sees students choosing them for the same reasons that she and her husband, Mark Osterman, did for their own practices in the early 1990s. “You’re making everything, it’s very tactile, you have ultimate control and, in some ways, there’s serendipity, which plays a role. Every time you handle it, you’re affecting the final outcome. Every step...
is visual. It’s a sensual process. But the process is just a tool. The image is what’s most important. Finding the right marriage is essential.”

Mark Osterman is also the Process Historian at George Eastman House where, for the last ten years, he has been researching 19th century processes ranging from Niépce’s heliographs to gelatin emulsions. To Osterman, “Every one of them is magical. A digital image is also magical. They all require things that are beyond our scope to understand.”

Christine Elfman is a San Francisco-based artist who employs an innovative approach to her work, using historic materials to contemplate timeless themes. Elfman took her first alternative processes course as an undergraduate at Cornell University in 2003. Following that, she worked for a year as Scully Osterman’s intern, assisting with workshops and tutorials at Scully & Osterman Studio in Rochester, NY. Today she uses the wet-plate collodion and anthotype processes, painting, film, as well as emulsion-based and digital photography to investigate remembrance and the desire to preserve the ephemeral.

In Storydress II, Elfman explores the relationship between photography and memory, which have been inextricably linked since the medium’s inception. The series was inspired by Elfman’s relationship with her great-grandmother and her autobiographical reminiscences, old family photographs, as well as found images of anonymous people for sale at flea markets.

During my conversation with Elfman, she described an experience looking at photographs with her great-grandmother that evoked Roland Barthes’ personal account, in Camera Lucida, of engaging in the same ritual following his mother’s death. Elfman’s and Barthes’ quests, however, are conceptually distinct. Elfman’s is a contemplation of the universal desire to remember and be remembered, despite life’s ephemeral nature, while Barthes’ is an ontological investigation of the medium and a meditation on the absence inherent in it. What binds them is the emotional intensity of their respective pursuits, as well as their steadfast confrontation with loss.

“My great-grandmother was unable to clearly see the photographs because she was losing her sight, and she couldn’t remember every detail, even if she had been able to see the images. It was difficult to remember who it was, where it was, or when it was. It was a bittersweet experience for both of us. Her advancing blindness revealed the underlying futility of the attempt to capture things in time. I felt compelled to make photographs about the feeling of wanting to remember and wanting to be remembered, all the while embracing the constancy of change.”

Elfman recorded and transcribed her great-grandmother’s stories, then shredded them—leaving some text in tact—to make a dress for the

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Global Health in Focus

This spring the PRC undertook an enormous three-part global health project, the brainchild of Executive Director Glenn Ruga. The project consisted of an exhibition entitled Global Health in Focus, a catalog publication, and a panel discussion on “Why Global Health Matters” held on March 7. This project aimed to educate our New England community about critical global health issues, utilizing documentary photography to offer direct insight into the individuals and communities affected.

From February 9 – March 24, 2012, Global Health in Focus, featuring the work of Kristen Ashburn, Dominic Chavez, and David Rochkind, occupied the PRC’s main gallery. The exhibition focused on three of the greatest health challenges the world faces today: HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and access to clean water. Ashburn’s provocative yet intimate photographs of people with HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa were presented in Duratran light boxes causing the images to glow from the inside, providing a truly haunting effect. The images Chavez took in Africa and Haiti of streams and rivers polluted with obscene amounts of garbage—and the people whose lives are affected—struck right to the heart and mind of the viewer. Rochkind’s poignant and colorful photographs of the tuberculosis epidemic in South Africa, India, and Moldova provided an educational component in addition to an emotional understanding of the faces behind the statistics. Each photographer noticed the humanistic and commonplace parts of daily life that transcend ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion, and health: bathing, playing, sleeping, thinking, hugging, surviving. Global Health in Focus did not portray cold, impersonal statistics of global disease; instead the featured photographs made the remote and abstract into a vital and urgent call for action.

The Global Health in Focus exhibition catalog features an essay by Stefanie Friedhoff, Director of Special Projects for the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University, in which she explores the history and current state of “global health” and discusses the role of photojournalism in securing a way forward for these international concerns. The 32 color page catalog is still available for purchase. If interested, please contact the PRC.

Recovery

Concurrent with Global Health in Focus, the PRC showcased the work of Willard Traub, a longtime PRC member, in our Members’ Gallery. Recovery serves as a photographic meditation on affliction and rehabilitation, reflecting the artist’s own experiences battling a rare form of blood cancer, and drawing on the strength of his talents as a photographer. Accompanied by poetry written during his recovery process, Traub’s work offers an intimate view into a personal health crisis. This quiet yet evocative exhibit carefully examined the complications behind the healthcare industry of the United States by providing a private glimpse into the life of someone who relied on it.
2012 Student Exhibition
From April 12 – May 5, 2012, the enormous and exciting annual Student Exhibition took over the PRC. This year’s showcase featured 19 photography programs of the PRC's Institutional Members. The PRC’s Institutional Membership is designed for universities and institutions that would like to fuel the creative process by taking advantage of the PRC’s wide range of unique offerings. With this membership, the institutions’ students have free, unlimited access to the PRC's gallery and library, in addition to free admission to all lectures and discounts on workshops. The PRC is thrilled to foster and maintain strong relationships with its participating Institutional Members. As in past years, each school was given the chance to select the specific pieces to be included in this exhibition in order to best represent its photography program. This year’s Student Exhibition was comprised of 129 pieces of work, including two digital presentations.

New Thematic Approach to Programming
The PRC’s January board meeting unveiled a new strategic plan for the organization. As the “new” PRC continues to find ways to offer unique opportunities for the New England photography community, the strategic plan calls for the implementation of a thematic approach to programming. These cross-program themes reinforce big picture ideas about contemporary photography as well as strengthen the organization’s focus within its exhibitions, lectures, workshops, and Nights at the PRC.

Women in Photography
To kick off our spring Master Lecture Series, the PRC was absolutely thrilled to host renowned photography critic and historian Vicki Goldberg as the first speaker. On February 22, Goldberg lectured on the influence of women in the 20th century photography world, from Margaret Bourke-White to Nan Goldin to Barbara Kruger. Her presentation delighted the sold-out crowd and provided an interesting analytical and historical perspective on work produced by female photographers. In conjunction with Goldberg’s lecture, the PRC held Women in Photography Night on March 14 to celebrate work by contemporary female photographers. Hosted by local photographer and educator Lisa Kessler, five women presented their work to a warm and supportive audience. As the first Night at the PRC for the spring season, Women in Photography Night was also dedicated to the memory of Paula Lerner, a beloved member of the New England photo community.

Applied Creativity
Local architecture photographer Peter Vanderwarker presented a lecture on March 22 offering advice on how to break through mental and artistic blocks. His talk ranged from sharing the best food to eat during creative breakdowns, to analyzing some of his successful images, to discussing the best ways to enhance potentially un-creative projects. Additionally, Vanderwarker offered a weekend workshop expanding upon the ideas from his lecture and providing shooting assignments to the attendees to pump up their creative muscles. Vanderwarker’s energy and enthusiasm encouraged participants to look for new ways to apply “learned” creativity to their daily lives as photographers.

Cutting Edge Technology
On April 18, Nathaniel Raymond of the Satellite Sentinel Project (SSP)
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life-size sculpture she constructed using plaster casts and papier mâché. Although it’s a female figure, it doesn’t necessarily symbolize her great-grandmother, but perhaps the viewer, or Elfman herself.

Storydress II epitomizes a recent statement by Ariel Shanberg, Executive Director of The Center for Photography at Woodstock. “Photography has been freed from the responsibility of ‘depicting images’ and ‘telling stories.’ Increasingly, artists are exploring the ontology of the processes and establishing new languages. This dialogue within alternative practices is one of the great legacies of the digital revolution.”

To create Storydress II, a poignant meditation on ephemerality, Elfman’s grandfather built her a replica of an antique 6.5 x 8.5 inch field camera. With it, Elfman made wet-plate collodion negatives and then gold-toned albumen prints that she burnished onto antique cabinet card mounts. That was the most common process for portraiture in the 19th century. Appropriately, albumen prints tend to fade over time.

In addition to Barthes’ writings, Elfman cites as influential to her practice Early Renaissance paintings of Mary Magdalene, Ingmar Bergman’s and Andrei Tarkovsky’s films, and the artist Tacita Dean’s multi-disciplinary practice. Elfman also acknowledges the importance of her own work among conservators at George Eastman House and the Image Permanence Institute. “There I became interested in how I could make something that was about the desire to preserve things and the inherent futility in that. I think of it as taking time to make things that time takes away.”