

# Liminal Elements

## Alison Nordström

Lauren Bon's *Silver and Water* depicts and interprets the contemporary American landscape in nineteen very large gelatin silver prints, conventionally hung and presented, accompanied by a sculptural installation of an oversize print and its paper negative afloat in a washing tank, with a shelf of objects garnered from mining sites in the Sierra Nevada mountains of California. Bon and her Metabolic Studio team have designed and realized what they have named the *Liminal Camera*, an adaptation of primitive photographic technology to specific artistic ends. This enormous one-of-a-kind machine produces beautiful and thought-provoking images in a distinctive material form that comment on our continent and its core elements, thereby telling one of the major tales of the twentieth century. With its clear awareness of past photographic practice, *Silver and Water* asks to be considered within that context, one that George Eastman House is perhaps uniquely able to provide.

In 1888, the Eastman Kodak Company introduced the first simple camera to the American public. Easy to use, it was supported by a complex infrastructure, controlled by Kodak, that processed and printed film, reloaded the camera, and returned it to its owner ready to use again. Kodak's catchy slogan, "You press the button. We do the rest," made a virtue of this new separation of the camera operator from the technology that produced his or her product: an image in the material form of a paper print. The industrialization of photography had soon made it a cheap, democratic, and widely popular activity. Camera clubs appeared in every American city and town; the Kodak girl and the camera fiend were as ubiquitous as the bicycle.

(figure 1)

Worlds apart from this popular craze, a small number of self-styled artists had rejected the common and easy in favor of laborious, handcrafted processes that could be undertaken successfully by only a patient and sensitive few. Led by such articulate and cosmopolitan aesthetes and intellectuals as Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Steichen, Alvin Langdon Coburn, and Gertrude Käsebier, the Pictorialists, as they called themselves, made photographs that resembled the high art of the time. Moody, evocative, serious, and painterly, made to be hung in salons and carefully reproduced in specialized art journals for elevated and discerning audiences, they were the antithesis of the snapshot. (figure 2)

Today's technology has created circumstances reminiscent of that earlier time. Even the once quick-and-easy Brownie now seems unimaginably cumbersome and complicated compared to the ease of image-capture now. Since the digital turn, almost everyone carries a camera and it seems that nothing goes unphotographed. Images are made instantly and disseminated in seconds. Unbounded by the constraints of materiality, most of today's images are effortless, immediate, spontaneous, ubiquitous, and very often taken for granted.

As the Pictorialists' gum prints and gravures were to the mass of contemporaneous popular casual snapshots, so are the products of Lauren Bon's *Liminal Camera* to the deluge of tiny images on our phones and computer monitors. Like the Pictorialists more than 100 years ago, Bon has asserted a way of making and understanding photographs that stands apart from common practice. By returning photography to its simplest technology and the photograph to its first form of paper bathed in watery chemical solutions, Bon creates objects of gravitas and grandeur that demand our attention. The epic scale of the prints and their distinctive tactility give them an almost ritual presence that is particularly suited to the ambitious and literally elemental story told by their subjects. The prints in this series exist simultaneously as object, image, and metaphor.

The paper negative was first used successfully in 1839 by William Henry Fox Talbot. The soft grain and

irregularity of the prints he called *calotypes* (from the Greek *καλός* [kalos], “beautiful,” and *τύπος* [tipos], “impression”) produced an aesthetically appealing positive print, though the search for sharpness and precision persisted and paper negatives were soon replaced by glass and later by celluloid. (*figure 3*)

Bon’s decision to employ this primitive technique grants the images in this series a spectral, ambiguous visual quality that is exactly suited to her story of water, silver, Westward Expansion, industrialization, and decay. Furthermore, the *Liminal Camera* that makes, processes, houses, and transports these photographs and the camera’s operators is a *camera obscura*, one of the earliest optical devices known to humankind, but it is housed in an iconic marker of our times, a shipping container: common, anonymous, invisible, interchangeable, and in constant movement from place to place. A container with a lens, it is both a camera and a room. It can hold its own processing and storage facilities within its walls, as well as the four operators from Bon’s Metabolic Studio Optics Division: Tristan Duke, Rich Nielsen, Guy Hatzvi, and Josh White.

It is worth noting that a significant subset of the photographic community today is devoted to so-called alternative processes that recapitulate the technological history of photography. Today, we find both amateurs and professionals who undertake their image-making using daguerreotype, calotype, cyanotype, platinum, van Dyke, gum bichromate, and more, and these processes are not uncommon offerings still in numerous university programs dedicated to teaching photographic art. Indeed, the gelatin silver print, the mainstream process for most of the twentieth century, is now regularly taught as something archaic and alternative. For some of these practitioners, the appeal of these difficult ways of working is the satisfaction of controlling a print from start to finish, the joy of making something by hand, or immersion in a fantasy nineteenth century. For others it is an aesthetic or intellectual decision more closely linked to the specific visual properties of each different process. The daguerreotypes of Chuck Close and Nancy Burson are dependent for their mystery on the mercurial shifts from positive to negative inherent to the medium; the wet plate collodion work of Sally Mann evokes a Deep South of memories, dreams, and nightmares, underscored by the prints’ rich tonality, soft focus, and the blurred edges of long exposure. It can be argued that the range of photographic choices available to photographers today is greater than it has ever been. There is no longer a single best process any more than there is a single aesthetic or notion of subject.

Bon’s choice of this way to make these pictures succeeds on multiple levels. It does, to be sure, produce singular objects that stand apart from other contemporary photographs because of their roughness, heft, and scale, while evoking the expeditionary survey masterpieces of the American West made in the 1860s and 1870s by such photographic adventurers as Timothy O’Sullivan, Alexander Gardner, and William Henry Jackson. (*figure 4*) However it is as a more immediate symbol that the very materiality of these objects embodies their subject. In myth and folklore, silver is a purifier that wards off evil, while water in every culture is a symbol of life. Traditionally, many have believed that silver turns water into a magic potion. For Bon, that magic makes a photograph.

There is a poetic appropriateness to using a traditional positive-negative process to record the American sites and journeys of silver and water, two of analog photography’s basic elements. As Bon has noted elsewhere, the mountains that form the Owens Valley in California were discovered to be rich with these desirable commodities, both of which were moved across the continent to facilitate some of the most ambitious ventures of the time. The water was moved west by aqueduct and pipeline where it made the Los Angeles of today possible. The silver was transported east, where the Eastman Kodak Company was second only to the U.S. Treasury in its consumption.

By the mid-twentieth century, Kodak was using two tons of pure silver a day and the once-greener Owens Valley was barren desert. Although both sites have changed dramatically in the last few decades, they remain historically linked. This connection between upstate New York and Southern California

is not obvious or clear until one considers the land between them as the material reality that simultaneously separates and connects the two places.

The images captured and expressed by the *Liminal Camera* are abrupt and spare: buildings, mountains, and monuments loom spectrally from their rectangles, the fall-off of the lens framing them in murkiness and ambiguity, imposing an air of mystery and timelessness onto the mundane. Many of the images focus on elements of the infrastructure that enabled the movement of silver and water from place to place: roads, bridges, train tracks, pipelines, canals. At both ends of the journey we see the coda of processing plants, one in Los Angeles that turned water into industrial and agricultural bounty, one in Rochester that turned silver into evidence and memories.

It was, then, both physically and intellectually necessary for this project to take the shape that it has, for the *Liminal Camera* to move across the country by road and canal, connecting two coasts and documenting its own journey, echoing the road trips of Robert Frank and the New Topographers on highways built on explorers' trails. It was essential that this grand and unlikely container-camera physically traverse the continent that is its subject. Though the images look more like dreams than like photojournalism, elements of evidence and witness resonate in them. The Metabolic Studio describes the *Liminal Camera* in terms of secret watching: It "captures an image without drawing attention to itself as most cameras and camera equipment do. The camera body is a shipping container which makes it hard to recognize as an image-making machine. Its size means that camera operators are able to be inside the camera." This quality of neutral invisibility reminds us of Ralph Waldo Emerson's metaphor of the transparent eyeball before which outer and inner vision merge to overwhelm the senses, quiet the intellect, and reveal God in Nature.

The photographs of *Silver and Water* are significant as works of art in their own right, but they can also be understood as the final products of an epic time-based performance. The making and moving of the *Liminal Camera*, as well as its act of witness, become symbolic events in the pilgrimage from California to Washington, DC, to New York and finally up the Erie Canal to Rochester: America's first boomtown, city George Eastman built, city a river runs through, city built on California silver. It is one of the ironic truths of this performance that the work that it leaves behind, so determinedly outside the world of the quick digital snap, does not reproduce well and cannot be experienced on a monitor. Only with the physical experience of these prints do we have a chance to have our senses overwhelmed, to forego language for a more immediate experience.

It is impossible today for us to look at any photograph with the innocence and wonder that must have met Fox Talbot's discovery. We are used to pictures; in many instances we know them better than that which they depict. That magical action by which a bit of the world is framed, isolated, extracted from both space and time, and turned both into something we can touch and a story could be taken for granted because of its very familiarity. Lauren Bon's photographs give us some of this back. Her ambitious story of the American land is told by moving across it, and by picturing it: a process that transforms it, and us if we are sufficiently single-eyed, into bodies filled with light.

**—Allison Nordström**

*Senior Curator of Photographs*

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(figure 1) Unidentified Photographer. *Drive—Prospect Park*, ca. 1890. Kodak #1 snapshot. Albumen print. George Eastman House.

(figure 2) Gertrude Käsebier (American, 1852–1934). *Road to Rome*, 1903. Gum bichromate print. George Eastman House.

(figure 3) William Henry Fox Talbot (English, 1800–1877). *The Tower at Lacock Abbey*, 1844. Salted paper print. George Eastman House.

(figure 4) Timothy H. O'Sullivan (American, 1840–1882). *Alpine Lake, Cerro Blanco Mountains, Colorado*, 1874. Albumen print. George Eastman House.