

Forthcoming

The Great Picture: The World's Largest Photographs & The Legacy Project is an exhibition in three parts that tells the tale of the successful campaign to make the world's largest camera and photograph. The photo's mammoth scale of 32 x 111 feet earned it a place in Guinness World Records, and made it a photo history landmark. It is also an exploration of the 172-year-old conflict between painting and photography, and the more recent waning of traditional, analog, darkroom photography in the wake of digital dominance. Six well-known photographic artists, known as *The Legacy Project*, transformed an abandoned Southern California F-18 jet hangar at the Marine Corps Air Station El Toro (MCAS El Toro) in Orange County into the largest camera ever made, and then proceeded to make the world's largest photograph, known as "The Great Picture." The image is a panoramic view of a portion of the former Marine Corps Air Station, which is destined to become the heart of the Orange County Great Park. Curated by Tyler Stallings and accompanied by a uniquely designed 196-page book, with essays by Stallings and Lucy Lippard, published by Hudson Hills Press, <http://www.hudsonhills.com/>

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The World's Largest Statement on Photography

By Tyler Stallings



The Great Picture is the world's largest photograph produced by the world's largest camera. It is also the world's largest statement, literally and metaphorically, about the role that photography plays in our society.

On July 12, 2006, the six photographic artists of The Legacy Project unveiled this mammoth photograph. It is three stories high by eleven stories long and provides a panoramic view of a portion of the former Marine Corps Air Station El Toro that is destined to become the heart of the Orange County Great Park. It will be one of the largest urban parks in the United States.

The six members of The Legacy Project (Jerry Burchfield, Mark Chamberlain, Jacques Garnier,

Rob Johnson, Douglas McCulloh, and Clayton Spada) have made a complex and multi-faceted statement about the history of photography, photography's changing technology in a digital age, and the interchange between process and subject matter in the making of a photographic image. Any one of the following ideas deserves their own essay, but the aim here is to provide some historical context and to simply touch upon the many ideas that The Great Picture provokes in its viewers.

The Legacy Project's grand statement counters the extreme side of digital technology today that often relegates the photograph to a seamless, uncluttered surface that, in the world of fine art, is often discussed merely in terms of issues of representation. Conversely, the artists refocus our attention on the tactility of a photograph's surface, and re-embrace the imagination's expression through photography via analog, handmade, and chemical processes. Its scale and provisional status is also a statement that raises questions about a work being both art and monument. Lastly, as an object, The Great Picture expands upon, in a most gargantuan manner, a particularly California take on photography that asks, what is a photograph?

The Great Picture's "Ancient Way"

The camera was a converted hanger. It was transformed into a camera obscura, or pinhole camera; one of the oldest techniques for making images, discovered by the Chinese in the 4th century BC. It is apt that it was produced with lensless technology, only to be reproduced in the equally lensless digital realm of the internet. Its image spread around the world within minutes of completion; making it more permanent than in its original, physical state, only seen twice now.

The fact that The Great Picture and its airplane hanger-camera were the world's largest, and hence, the world's first of its kind (documented in the Guinness Book of World Records), there was a feeling of time travel when you stood within the cave-black camera, unable to see your hand. This initial experience, paired with the later one of walking the 111-foot length of the developed picture, created a sensation of being at the beginning of something new and wondrous, such as modern, chemical-based photography. The fact that the image was actually a negative and that it, like a painting on a stretched canvas, was produced by coating stretched linen with photographic emulsion, evoked the spirit of William Henry Fox Talbot, the inventor of the negative / positive photographic process, the antecedent to most photographic processes known today.

Aesthetically, The Great Picture's process and final, murky image, share a closer kinship to Alfred Stieglitz and the Photo-Secessionists. In the early 20th century, they were a group of photographers who felt that photography had arrived at a point when its easy mechanical means of reproduction had consigned photography to commercialism and to an emphasis on discussing only the merits of how well it documented the subject. Instead, the Photo-Secessionists developed a "pictorialist" aesthetic in which the treatment of the image during the process and an artist's subjective vision were paramount, thus raising such photographs into the realm of fine art. However, the motivations of The Legacy Group arose less from the romantic sensibilities of the Photo-Secessionists. Instead the image arose out of The Legacy Group's pioneering technological innovations with old techniques.

The Great Picture's use of an Olympic-swimming-pool-size tray with 600 gallons of developer and 1200 gallons of fixer, underlines the abiding interest of The Legacy Project in the chemical processes of making a photograph through what will soon be considered an "ancient, ritualistic technique that takes place in a darkened room."

In the past few years, there have been several exhibitions and books that have recognized artists retrieving early techniques of photography for their expressive qualities. Exhibitions include *Lost & Found: Rediscovering Early Photographic Processes* at the Fisher Gallery at the University of Southern California in 2001 and *Secret Victorians: Contemporary Photographers Working in 19th Century Processes* at the Museum of Photographic Arts in San Diego in 2003. In between them, Lyle Rexer's book *Photography's Antiquarian Avant-Garde: The New Wave in Old Processes* was published in 2002, which features sixty artists working with the time-consuming and seemingly alchemical "pouring of chemicals" amidst the instantaneity of digital technology.

Tellingly, the exhibitions and book were produced at a major point of transition as torrents of consumers exchanged 35mm film cameras for those using charge-coupled devices (CCD). It was also the time when art departments in universities and colleges were decommissioning their darkrooms and installing computers and large format, ink-jet printers. In addition, it was when the predecessor to the instantaneous abilities of the digital camera and printer, Polaroid, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in 2001, unable to compete.

The aforementioned exhibitions and book from the early 2000's highlight artists who create calotypes, ambrotypes, daguerreotypes, cyanotypes and tintypes. The list of chemicals unique to each procedure is long and the final results can be unpredictable. However, it is the irregular outcomes that attract artists to their use.

The most notable contemporary artist whose work has brought attention to this new wave of antiquarians is Chuck Close with his daguerreotype portraits. Other artists, such as Sally Mann have used the wet plate collodian process to explore the heady subjects of life and death and what remains thereafter, literally, metaphorically, and spiritually.

It was perhaps not the intention of The Legacy Project's photographers to embody the chemical process within their subject to the degree that it did in the end. The 31 x 111 foot image is a panoramic view of a part of the former Marine Corps Air Station El Toro, which was closed in 1999, and depicts a control tower and runways. It is a desolate, lonely, and foreboding image; qualities that are emphasized by its grey tones from the gelatin silver process. It seems that part of the motivation by The Legacy Project with The Great Picture's process was an attempt to capture the nostalgia and melancholia associated with the passing of the air station, a ubiquitous, man-made mark in the heart of Orange County, California.

Lately, a desire for the tactile in conjunction with a recognition of the prevalence of the lens-based image in our society has led artists to treat the printed image as simply another material to manipulate. This is due in part to the affordability and accessibility of home printers. The cost of a print is not exorbitant and the object is thus not precious. My own curated exhibition, *Truthiness: Photography as Sculpture*, organized for University of California, Riverside's California Museum of Photography in 2008 explores this trend. It surveys how a new generation of artists in California is using photographic prints as the basic medium in the creation of sculptural works in an effort to expand the use of the media and to examine the nature of the photographic image. The exhibition follows in the footsteps of earlier generations of artists working in California who, in the 1960's through the late 1980s, began to use the photograph in radically new art contexts. John Baldessari, Wallace Berman, Robert Heineken, Susan Rankaitis, Edward Ruscha, Ilene Segalove, and Alexis Smith are key among them.

This challenge to modernist aesthetics in photography has been a particularly Californian pursuit, reinforced in part by the predominance of experimental art schools, such as California Institute of the Arts, and art departments, such as UCLA. They are still gathering spots for experimental artist-teachers and graduate students who carry forward this spirit.

Within this California challenge to modernism, the subject matter of The Great Picture, an abandoned air base, can also be traced to the New Topographics aesthetic from the 1970s. Unlike Ansel Adams' reverential images of California's landscape, other California-based photographers such as Lewis Baltz and Joe Deal found new subject matter in an industrialized, tract house landscape clearly affected by human alteration. It was a fresh focus but also a reflection of the shift in California's mythology from an Eden state to a failing, indulgent, and less virtuous one.

Presently, The Great Picture also ups the ante on the significance of scale in photography, exemplified by the internationally famous Andreas Gursky and the "Düsseldorf School" of photographers from the late-1990s. They carried forward the aesthetic of their German teachers Hilla and Bernd Becher; a team of photographers who, like the New Topographics photographers, developed a detached style for taking images of industrial architecture. It was both a new documentary aesthetic and a commentary upon a post-World War II urban landscape in Europe and the U.S. Gursky raised the level by producing never before produced large-scale prints, possible in part because of accessible and affordable technology. Though his images often featured anonymous, consumerist

landscapes, such as a 99-cent store, or the atrium lobby of a hotel, their scale and glossy surface inspired some critics to describe the work in terms of the sensuality of painting and the sublime. They reinvigorated the ongoing debate between the aesthetics of paintings and photography, and their influence on one another since photography, as we know it now, came on to the scene in the 1830s. The Legacy Project then went beyond Gursky-big to a cinematic scale, but without the aid of digital manipulation or billboard-size printers. Instead, The Legacy Project opted for the idiosyncratic qualities of the hand-made and the chemical.

The Great Picture as Painting

One of the most striking features of the final print on the stretched fabric is its painterliness. It results from the hand application with a stain applicator of the gelatin silver black and white photo emulsion. Again, the paint-like quality harkens back to pictorialism's aims for fine art status at the beginning of the 20th century. Its subject matter, a vacant, military complex, along with the painterliness, also references the deadpan, industrial and commercial imagery of Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, and Ed Ruscha's pop art paintings from the 1950s to the 70s that used hardedge techniques, silk-screening, and/or light sensitized canvas surfaces. Exhibitions such as *Painting into Photography/Photography into Painting* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami in 1996, and then ten years later, *Painting on Photography: Photography on Paintings* at the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago in 2005 have updated the dialogue between photography and painting. Together, these exhibitions surveyed artists such as Uta Barth, Chuck Close, Tim Gardner, Gerhard Richter, Jeff Wall, and Joel-Peter Witkin, among others. Written earlier, a seminal text that investigates the relationship between painting and photography, is Peter Galassi's exhibition and accompanying book from the Museum of Modern Art in 1981, *Before Photography: Painting and the Invention of Photography*. In it, he discredits the notion that photography was merely a scientific and technical invention that disrupted "the cause of painting." Rather, Galassi states that it is not only a technical achievement but also an aesthetic one. He traces the motivations for photography's invention to the 15th century invention of linear perspective—a practice from drawing and painting.

The Great Picture's scale does bear some comparison with a uniquely Californian encounter, especially in Los Angeles: its numerous outdoor, painted murals. Located in neighborhoods, school playgrounds, freeway underpasses, and the sides of office buildings, they include the social realist work of José David Alfaro Siqueiros in the 1930s to The Citywide Murals Project established in 1974 to the Los Angeles Olympic Committee that commissioned a host of commemorative murals in 1984. But the difference with The Great Picture is its transitory state—as it can be rolled up and never seen again. It has been on exhibit only once more in 2007 at the Art Center College of Design's wind tunnel building. In this respect, its grand gesture and bringing together of community shares a muralist's sensibility, but its equally grand "disappearance," at least physically for the moment, shares kinship with conceptual art's preoccupation with ideas and dematerialization of the art object. It is a conceptual mural.

At a distance, the scale of The Great Picture's grayish canvas and hazy image also possesses the minimalist monumentality of the two black granite walls that form Maya Lin's 1982 Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. The Great Picture's military-related subject reinforces this reference. But The Great Picture is more an anti-monument. It is temporary and less commemorative of historical figures or events, and more about the passing of time. This is embodied literally in the process of its making, in the gestural markings, and in the subject matter of the Marine Corps air base, a scene that no longer exists.

The passage of time as an ongoing subtext is underlined by the fact that The Great Picture is only one phase of the much larger Legacy Project. The six artist involved have and will continue to employ all manner of photographic processes and techniques to document the changing landscape of the air base's footprint. Their techniques range from traditional photography to innovative digital methods, including video, aerial, and GigaPan. The Great Picture is part of a minimum fifteen-year

commitment by the Legacy Project members to leave a dynamic record of the air base's change as it transforms from a military base into an urban park.

The Great Picture embraces and challenges many questions that have surrounded photography in its 150-year-plus history. By embodying the exchange between photography and painting, it demonstrates that it is not important to determine whether it is a painting or a photograph in today's world, but to realize that lens-based images are thoroughly ingrained in our society. In essence, the boundary (previously a source of friction) between photography and painting/painterliness has become porous. In an image-soaked society, it does not matter about the precise pedigree of the image. Hybrids are everywhere.

The Great Picture is both a photograph and a painting. The Legacy Project members equate the importance of the artistic process behind its making and its final objecthood. The viewer's experience of tactility and presence amidst its scale were paramount at first, later to exist in the internet for the most part. The artists' use of old, photographic printing methods yet taken to a scale in which the darkroom becomes a public arena. Lastly, that it has become an object and experience so monumental and expansive that it now exists beyond walls. These amalgamated methods and intentions, combined with its present intangibility, have instilled The Great Picture with an affecting resonance in our image-burdened way of life.

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