

Work by Amanda Degener and Dean Ebben (detail). Gum Arabic printing and cyanotype tinted with black tea on Belgian flax paper. Full size 7" x 8", three sewn sheets. (All images in this article are from *Hand Papermaking's* portfolio, *Old Ways, New Views: Photographic Processes on Handmade Paper*).

# Reaching Back, Moving Forward: Photos on Handmade Paper

*John Risseuw*

*This article was adapted from the author's essay in Hand Papermaking's fourth portfolio, titled Old Ways, New Views: Photographic Processes on Handmade Paper. For more information about the portfolio, see Hand Papermaking Newsletter or contact us directly.*

In 1826, after several years of experimenting with silver chloride coatings on paper, Joseph Nicéphore Niepce oiled a printed engraving of Cardinal d'Amboise to make the paper transparent. He then laid it onto a pewter plate that had been coated with bitumen of Judea thinned with oil of lavender, and exposed it to a strong light. The light hardened the bitumen where it passed through the paper and was not blocked by the black ink lines of the engraving. The non-hardened bitumen was dissolved and the plate etched in acid to produce the first photo-etched reproductive printing plate in history. The engraving had been printed on handmade paper. The subsequent print taken from the pewter plate was made on handmade paper.

In 1839, when William Henry Fox Talbot experimented with the light sensitivity of silver nitrate by coating paper with it and variously exposing it to window light or photogramming objects laid on the surface, he worked on handmade paper. A year later, when Talbot waxed the back of a calotype negative photographic paper image to make it transparent, then contact exposed it to salted photogenic paper, he used handmade papers.

In 1843, when Anna Atkins first mixed ferric ammonium citrate with potassium ferricyanide and brushed the mixture (following the procedure discovered by Sir John Hershell in 1842) onto paper to make her cyanotype botanical studies by contact exposing leaves and plants to the sensitized paper, she used handmade paper.

In 1889, when Dr. W. W. J. Nichol mixed ferric ammonium citrate with silver nitrate and coated paper that—when exposed, washed out, and fixed—produced a rich brown photographic image, known then as a kallitype and now as a Van Dyke print, he was probably coating handmade paper.

Talbot wrote about using "a good writing paper" for his experiments, and a good writing paper in 1840 was handmade from rag fibers, sized with hide glue, and calendered. The literature actually contains few specific references to the papers used by the early photographic experimenters. Since the paper machine was invented in about 1800 and its spread was uneven and not rapid, we can assume that most of the papers used for photographic imagery in the first half to two-thirds of the nineteenth century were handmade. Dard Hunter tells us that as late as 1860 rags formed eighty-eight percent of the total papermaking material. Most likely, rags formed nearly one hundred percent of



Three Voices: Fiber, Filament, Photography, by Mary Leto. Cyanotype with tannic acid rinse on paper made from paper mulberry, red mulberry, white mulberry, abaca, and silk, 6" x 8½".



Work by June Bonner. Van Dyke on abaca and kozo, 6½" x 9".

the furnish for handmade papers. Thus we can also assume that even late into that century, rag paper was the material of photographic printing.

One point to be drawn from this is that artists in the past twenty-five years who have produced a myriad of images in photo media on handmade papers are often doing little that is new, at least physically. Technically, they have achieved some advances. Aesthetically and conceptually, they continue the evolution of creative ideas and are, of course, more than a century beyond the delightful probings and investigations of photography's own *incunabula*, its cradle era.

Of the seventeen works chosen for Hand Papermaking's portfolio, *Old Ways, New Views: Photographic Processes on Handmade Paper*, it is interesting that fourteen return to the nineteenth century for their methods (cyanotype, Van Dyke, and platinum print). Two use letterpress, which predates photography by around four hundred years.

The basic call for work in the portfolio was for photographic media on handmade paper. To some, the two may actually seem fairly incompatible. The rich fibrous surface, the deckled edges, the texture, and the irregularities that are championed by hand papermakers and paper lovers are all unwanted to the photographer who looks for a smooth surface that takes and carries the emulsion coating well and does not get in the way of the subtle tones of the image. But there is an interesting parallel here to the different aesthetics of fine printing.

The "crystal goblet" theory so forcefully and elegantly stated by Beatrice Warde in 1955 says that the only purpose of printing is to enable the communication between the writer and the reader. Typography should be invisible and must never intrude or get in the way. This position is admirable from the perspective of writers and literary critics, leading some printers to so minimize their presence on the page that the result is understated to the point of boredom. Design may become so blah or recognizably traditional that it does, indeed, sink below the surface of consciousness. Yet many respected fine printers, from William Morris to Walter Hamady, have broken that rule to create masterpieces of visual and literary coexistence. The expressive potential of the printed page is great and ranges from a complementary addition of color or fleuron to a bold yet effective in-your-face use of ink, paper, and image to intellectually challenge the reader/viewer in a manner more complex than text alone could ever have done.

Similarly, one traditionalist school of photography proposes that the image as a replication of nature is everything. Any manipulation of the image as taken, any subtraction in cropping or dodging, any addition to it in the form of tone conversion, paper surface, or other noticeable material usage is wrong, or at least less than desirable. And throughout the history of photography there have been those on the other end, manipulating and experimenting to beat the band, trying new things and, in recent years, trying old things. Such was the case in 1984 when Catharine Reeve and Marilyn Sward published their book detailing the use of the nineteenth century processes of cyanotype, Van Dyke, gum bichromate, salt paper, platinum printing, photomechanical methods, and others, with many examples on handmade paper. It was called, *The New Photography!* How interesting.

Whatever we call them, the processes and ideas in that book of fifteen years ago are in large part the basis for the concept behind Hand Papermaking's portfolio. It is therefore fitting that Sward was one of the jurors and became one of the participants. Her work provides a classic modern example of the combination of these old processes—hand papermaking and early photographic techniques—at the same time that she explores the application of new methods and conceptual ideas.



Work by David Carruthers and Wendy Simon. Cyanotype on all-cotton paper, 7½" x 7½".



Work by Prim Young. Van Dyke on two layers (one pigmented) of unbleached abaca, 10" x 8".

It is interesting to see what Hand Papermaking's call for works of "photography on handmade paper" brought in and what it did not. Following the jury's choice, we have eight cyanotypes and five Van Dyke prints. Two use photo relief, one is a platinum print, one incorporates a Polaroid image lift, one piece uses an inked photocopy print, one has inkjet printing, and one is a heat-transferred, laser-printed photo image. Six artists used digital manipulation of photo images. There is one photogram. Five works are content-specific in their paper. At least eight actually use some aspect of the paper process to integrate their images and concept.

It is perhaps curious that only one work refers to the early history of photography and none specifically pay homage to the time when the processes they are using come from. One does refer to and reflect the history of art: Inge Bruggeman's Russian Constructivist-derived piece. Constructivism as an aesthetic movement did affect photography, but it is more the graphic quality that is respected here.

There are no gum bichromate prints, one of the more popular alternative photographic methods, perhaps because creating a handmade paper that can hold up to the repeated washings is difficult. It is also interesting that there is no photo lithography, photo etching, nor, easiest of all for editions of this size, any photo screenprinting. Perhaps the printmakers who do these things see their work as printmaking, graphics, or just art and not "photographic processes on handmade paper," which they certainly can be. It is a pity they are not represented.

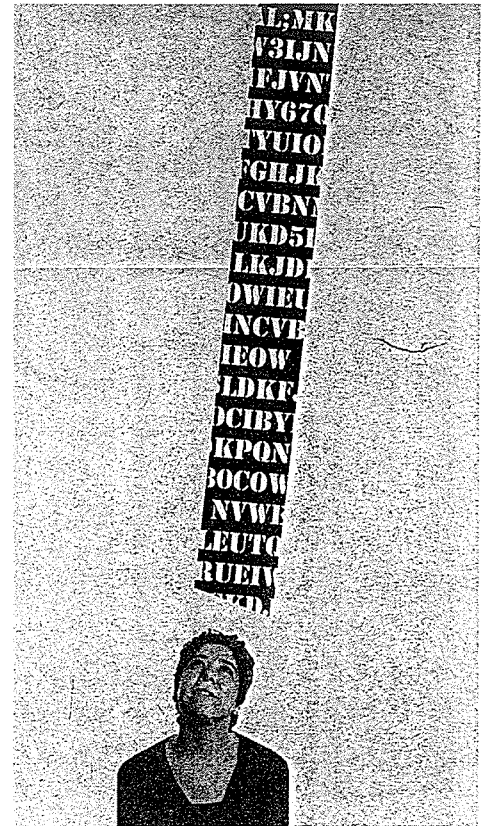
Further, we find no photo-watermarks or embedded photographs. And, although a few entrants reference the use of sizing, no one piece is an especially sizing-intensive study for allowing photographic emulsions on handmade paper. Perhaps a few years down the road someone will assemble another portfolio like this, hopefully attracting an entirely different but equally valid set of entries.

Yet, despite the absence of some techniques, the portfolio includes a most interesting selection of ideas, images, processes, and papers.

Concept and material are primary in Mary Leto's work. The mulberry is more than a tree or fiber source for her, so her patient and respectful extraction of the fiber with Eastern pulp preparation and Western sheet formation provides a means to cherish



Work by S. Gayle Stevens. Van Dyke on paper made from kudzu and soil with mica, 8" x 10½".



Work by Inge Bruggeman (detail). Letterpress printed from photopolymer plates on paper made from cotton worker's uniforms. Full size (open), 15" x 6½".

and celebrate the paper on which her imagery is placed. Combining postage stamp images of strong women with both strong mulberry fiber and fragile-yet-strong silk fiber, she achieves the metaphor and "spiritual alchemy" she seeks.

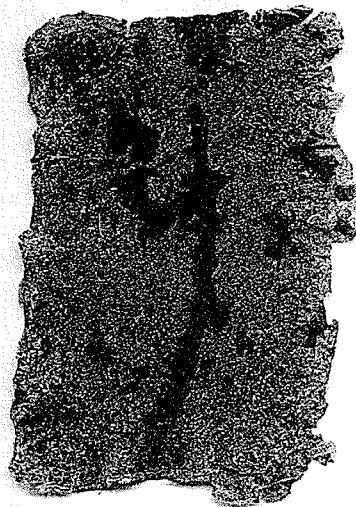
June Bonner chooses to make very thin sheets of unbleached abaca paper, with small amounts of hand-beaten kozo added, for use with Van Dyke. This choice sets her piece apart from the other Van Dyke images in the portfolio by its translucency and delicacy. Not just a nice, handmade, responsive paper surface, her thin, warm, waterleaf abaca sheet becomes integrated with the image and participates with it in communicating with the viewer.

The piece by Amanda Degener and Dean Ebben approaches a complexity of content worthy of the potential of this media. The materiality of the paper is an integral part of the experience of the image. The physical layering of the sheets begins the sequential picture-plane idea of the "book" while echoing the layered meanings of the content; inner and outer universes suggesting the place of self in universe and the effect of action upon world and universe. Degener's paper and Ebben's images perfectly complement each other to become an integrated whole. In this strong piece one can savor the material of the paper as the images are revealed, especially through return viewings.

Wendy Simon seeks to explore the mystical expressions of Eastern philosophy and culture through the use of the ritual Japanese paper doll image and the "symbolically celestial" blue cyanotype "made visible by the sun." David Carruthers has, in turn, created a beautiful and functional paper—sized cotton is, of course, excellent for use with cyanotype.

For some, the beauty of the right process with the right paper (and image) is enough. This is true for Prim L. Young's work here. The Van Dyke on the warm, natural abaca paper could not be a better visual combination. The warmth continues into the glowingly domestic subject matter as two boys eat their soup. Simple, but enough.

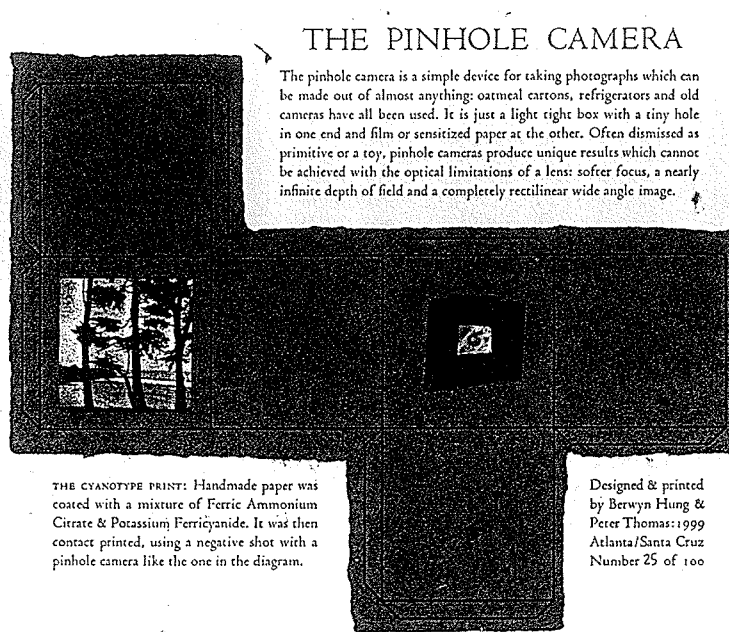
One great opportunity available to the hand papermaker creating visual art is the possibility of making content-specific paper. This is paper in which the fibers chosen for the substance of the sheet have some direct connection to the concept of the work



Work by Irene Chan. Cyanotype on lemon peel paper, 4½" x 6".



Work by Peggy Conlon and Jared Porter. Platinum print on unbleached abaca paper, 7" x 10".



## THE PINHOLE CAMERA

The pinhole camera is a simple device for taking photographs which can be made out of almost anything: oatmeal cartons, refrigerators and old cameras have all been used. It is just a light tight box with a tiny hole in one end and film or sensitized paper at the other. Often dismissed as primitive or a toy, pinhole cameras produce unique results which cannot be achieved with the optical limitations of a lens: softer focus, a nearly infinite depth of field and a completely rectilinear wide angle image.

THE CYANOTYPE PRINT: Handmade paper was coated with a mixture of Ferric Ammonium Citrate & Potassium Ferri cyanide. It was then contact printed, using a negative shot with a pinhole camera like the one in the diagram.

Designed & printed by Berwyn Hung & Peter Thomas: 1999 Atlanta/Santa Cruz Number 25 of 100

Work by Berwyn Hung and Peter Thomas. Cyanotype contact print; sensitized, unexposed surface; tape; metal; letterpress printing—all on two layers of pigmented paper made from cotton half-stuff, cotton linter, and abaca, 10" x 8".

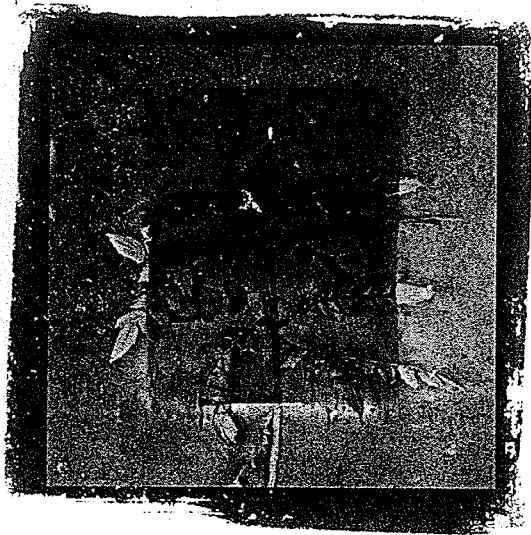
of art. (In 1991, for example, we printed a broadside at the Pyracantha Press commemorating the bicentennial of the Bill of Rights on paper made from cotton American flags and blue jeans. Other artists have included plant fibers and soils from specific locations in their paper to honor, almost in a spiritual sense, the place and the process.) Five works in the portfolio utilize this idea, and Inge Bruggeman's piece is much more enjoyable because of it. The paper is made from cotton workers' uniforms and printed with image and text to mimic the style of Russian Constructivist art at the beginning of this century, with its glorification of the worker. This just touches the concept, perhaps, since the uniforms are simply what was available to the artist—medical uniforms, mechanic's shirts, etc.—rather than relating specifically to the text or to the historical period referenced, yet the *idea* is there and that is enough to add extra zing to the piece. Bruggeman's use of photo polymer is also unique. A relatively modern application of photo processes to relief printing as opposed to the predominant return to the nineteenth century in the portfolio, this method connects with her Constructivist time and models. This is a clever piece, with content that goes beyond the personal and has an appropriate use of both the papermaking and printing processes.

Some paper art work is intriguingly self-referential. Irene Chan's vegetable paper magnified through an enlarger to print fiber pattern onto cyanotype-coated vegetable paper is a process based in Taoist philos-

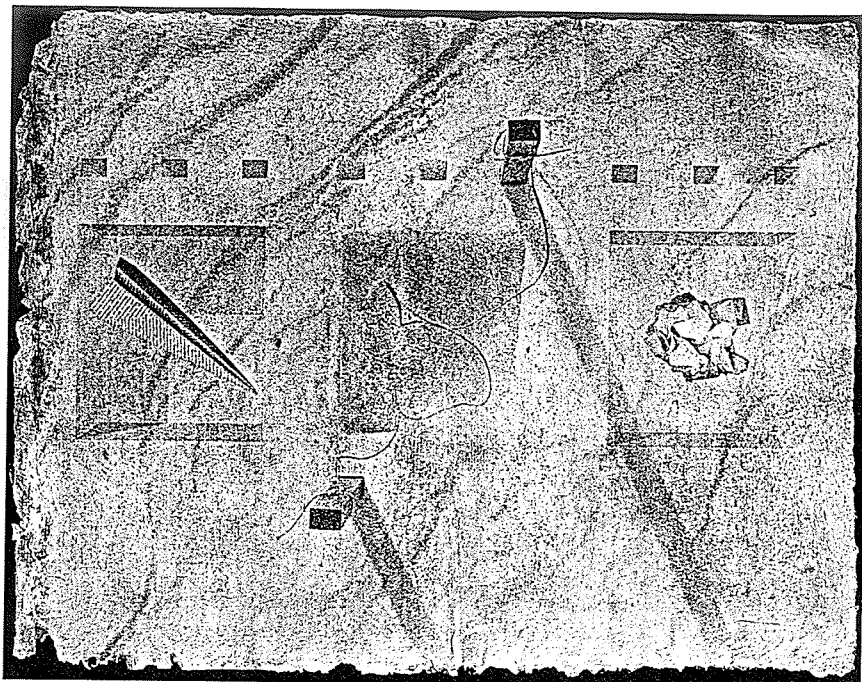
ophy; it follows the "cycle of life" by creating "another element of its own image onto itself." It can also be seen as interesting for placing in front of us the images of basic, microscopic, fractal structure found in nature and seen, through Chaos Theory, to connect to all pattern and structure in nature, suggesting an underlying order (or Order, for those seeking philosophy, meaning, or, possibly, theology). Self-referential and yet successful in its intent and use of the media, Chan's paper is both content-specific and conceptually complete.

S. Gayle Stevens has also chosen a content-specific piece, in which a Van Dyke photograph of a kudzu-covered house is printed on paper made from kudzu fiber, cotton, and red soil from South Carolina. The rough surfaced paper that results interrupts the subtlety of tones in the photo image in the same way that the kudzu vine, once thought to be a solution for erosion and a nitrogen source to soil depleted by cotton farming, has insidiously invaded and disrupted the ecology of the South. The metaphor is also the object.

In a related but different way, Peggy Conlon and Jared Porter's piece contains either irony or dead-on appropriateness in treating imagery that gives evidence of human activity, usually in the past and usually being reabsorbed by nature. Ironic, since they use processes to do this in which natural fibers are "meanly manipulated" (one description of the Western method of papermaking) to become paper, then coated with chemical extractions responding to UV light



Work by Joan Kopchik and Keith Sharp. Van Dyke on internally sized cotton rag paper, 8 1/2" x 10".



Work by Michael Sean Fallon and Patrick Thomas Kelley. Cyanotype on paper made from raw flax with sisal and yucca, 10 1/2" x 8".

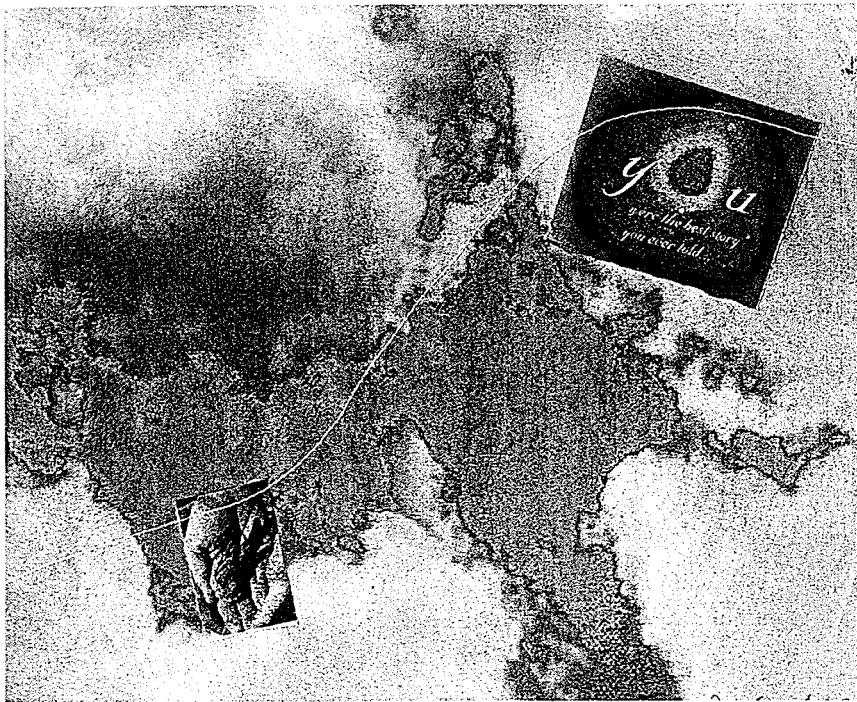
supplied by a constructed device to reproduce a digitally-manipulated image taken with a complex recording tool (a camera) in a moment of human controlled decision, etc. Their art is also evidence of human activity, though perhaps without the mystery.

If you put an idea out to an educated public, you will always be surprised by someone demonstrating an entirely different perspective on the subject than you expected. Responding to Hand Papermaking's call and taking their statement seriously—that the seminal act of photography is not in the choice of chemistry or the process of image development but in the conception, composing, and exposing of the image in the camera device—Berwyn Hung and Peter Thomas have given us a conceptual "photograph on handmade paper." Although a cyanotype pinhole photograph is included, it is the letterpress-printed diagram of a pinhole camera on the paper, which could be cut out and constructed to become a camera, that gives us photography on handmade paper. It is a beautiful twist on the theme and appropriately referential to its process.

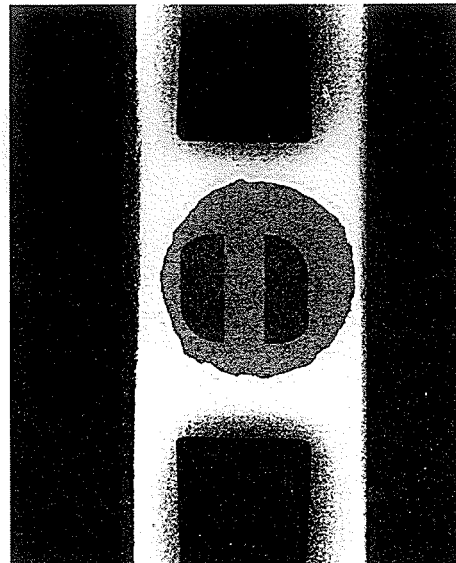
Keith Sharp's photo image on Joan Kopchik's paper is very referential to its process: brush strokes in the coating (not uncommon in alternative photography) may even seem a little heavy-handed relative to the subtleties of the image. The paper is soft and has its deckles, even formation, and whiteness to recommend it. The work has interest as image on paper, and reminds us that contemporary artworks in or on handmade paper are often more successful as whole objects than in their specific crafts or techniques. This is frequently the positive result of collaboration.

Michael Fallon and Patrick Kelly's striking collaboration is a union of its elements. The photo image is digitized, altered, halftoned, and cyanotyped onto the handmade paper. It is an intriguing visual puzzle that is increased in effectiveness by the gray color of the paper (to modulate that intense cyanotype blue) and by bleeding off the nicely uneven deckles. The standard "window" effect of a photo with a black or white border, or straight bleed edges, is eliminated here, allowing the image its own context.

Tom Leech and Melanie Walker's contribution is both a tribute to Walker's late father, photographer Todd Walker, and a continuation of her personal artistic conver-



Work by Tom Leech and Melanie Walker. Ink jet printing and stitching on paper made from abaca and hemp fiber, with ground mica, 10" x 8".



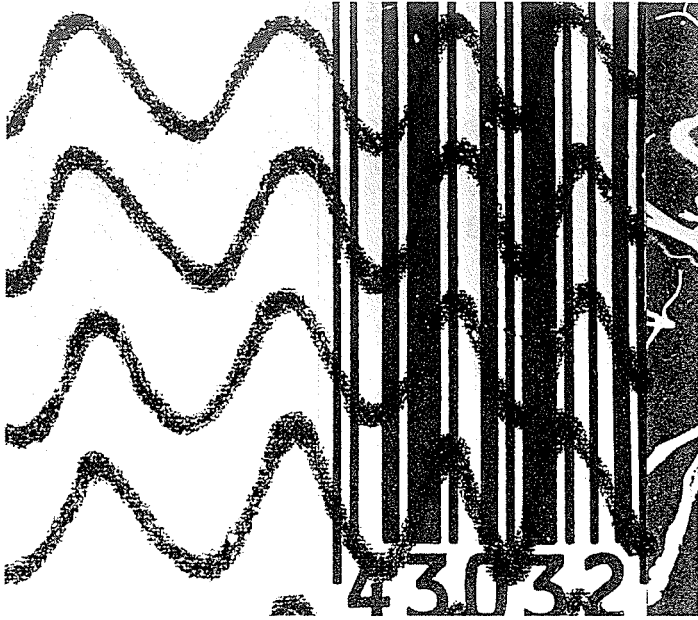
Level by Mina Takahashi. Cyanotype photograph on cotton linter paper with pigmented, pulp-painted central image made from linen rag and cotton linter, 4½" x 5½".

sation with him. Picking up on the quality of Todd Walker's work that placed luminescent photo images on and in the paper surface, Leech created a translucent abaca pulp. Using visual elements and ideas that she and her father had traded in their work, Walker keeps the dialogue going by recycling his images through computer manipulation, attaching them and her own images using inkjet printing to Leech's handmade paper.

This reaching back to go forward may be found in other works as well. "Saving Memory from Oblivion" by Blair Ruth Rainey is deceptively simple at first glance. Looking further, one sees the work's successfully rich complexity as it examines memory and our reaching back to preserve and understand it. It functions like an application of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle to the brain. Paper contributes the necessary objectness, the physical presence that makes the photo-manipulation work and sing. The imagery is strong, the theory speaks meaningfully through the work, and the paper presence completes the work, creating a unity. The fourth generation image, moving from live event to TV to 8mm film to color photocopy to heat transfer on handmade paper, is perfect for its intended effect, reflecting the many filters of time, culture, and memory that affect our perception and recollection.

In her simple yet engaging work, Mina Takahashi reaches back, perhaps unknowingly or unconsciously, to the photograms of Atkins (cyanotypes on handmade paper) for process and form, and to the photograms of Moholy-Nagy (everyday objects transformed by the process to become the concept). Her use of stenciled colored pulp in the sheetmaking, in preparation for the image to come, truly adds the papermaking to the creative process. The paper is not just a nice surface, or just the artist's own surface, or just a controlled, archival surface; it *must* be there as part of the creative process of making the work. Takahashi presents a unity of concept and process.

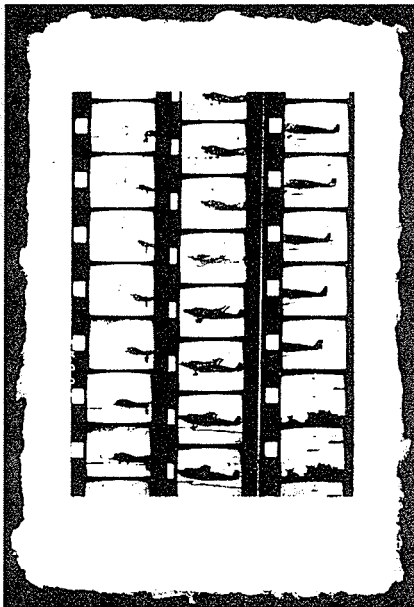
Like Takahashi, Robbin Ami Silverberg inserts the papermaking process into the image creation, in this case by stenciled, calligraphic pulp painting that visually complements and completes the photo image applied later by cyanotype. Silverberg is another mature papermaker who knowledgeably uses the medium for an intended



Work by John Laudenslager and Robbin Ami Silverberg (detail). Cyanotype on cotton half-stuff paper, with cotton rag pulp painting. Full size (open), 16" x 8".



Work by Marilyn Sward. Van Dyke and Polaroid 669 film on paper made from abaca and esparto, with kaolin and sizing, 8" x 9".



Work by Blair Rainey. Laser transfer from color laser photocopy on sized cotton rag paper, 6" x 9".

effect, the way a master lithographer draws on stone, knowing how it will work later into the layering of a complex image. The knowledge of process and the conceptualization of the work become integrated, inevitably creating stronger art in the end. This integration of medium and concept is something to be respected and promoted. Finally, John Laudenslager's linear photo images on the front and inside add a layer of response to the imagery, deepening the concept and expanding the aesthetic.

Marilyn Sward's effort at "capturing time" gives us another excellent example of what experience in the field and aesthetic maturity can produce. With the Van Dyke print and the Polaroid image lift, she combines the old and the new, especially using digitally created and manipulated images. This is appropriate for Sward, who is grounded in the history and tradition of paper, book, and photo techniques but who has not shied away from attempting new combinations or new processes. The paper is practical for the process: it contributes a warm, natural color as the perfect complement for both the Van Dyke and the colored images; it is direct from the artist's hand, becoming part of a total creative statement; and it is archival, giving the piece long life. Like a few other works in the portfolio, this integration of materials, process, imagery, and concept is a model much to be admired.

What would Niepce, Talbot, Atkins, and Nichol think? Would they enjoy the portfolio? Would the techniques knock them out or encourage them to newer innovations? What would they think of our reaching back, touching them, and then moving forward? Photography on handmade paper. In a sense, the portfolio is a thank you card to them.

In this selection we have history and innovation, a reaching back technically and conceptually, yet looking inward and forward. These artists are referential and reactive but also introspective and challenging. Some explore collaborative creation as a means to make art, technically and conceptually, that they could not make on their own. Some are using their maturity and knowledge of the medium to produce artworks with complexity and an integration of idea, form, material, and presentation. The best pieces stand with the best in any medium. These are inspiring uses of hand papermaking and inspiring pieces of art.