



Two photographic camps have emerged in art, the realist and the interrogative. Realist photographers capture an image and by manipulating the photographic process, light, depth of field and composition they capture the most meaningful demonstration of what they want to express. Their creative choices largely end with the shutter. The prepared and awaited are now caught in a snap.

Realist artists prefer sharp focussed legs, faces extended as architectural lines, white teeth and dark hair creating bold geometries – the moment found crisp in formaldehyde, caught in time, unchanging and suggestive of static truth. But elsewhere, other photographic artists blur the definitive and open the borders between vision and viewer. Interrogative practitioners are less concerned with the process of photography than they are with the processes through which the viewer experiences the vision.

Exploring the ways in which an interrogative process heightens how people see images, Matt Saunders is a leading proponent of a practice that uses photography as a meta-material. (A meta-material is one which has a deep combination of physical and social properties able to be manipulated by artists to convey meaning.) In his works, all aspects are revealed to be material processes that have lived through a series of often ongoing and dynamic weathering events.

In Saunders' work the fidelity of the image might be eroded by being placed on a fragile or imperfect textured surface, a surface which itself has a legacy of meaning that adds to the overall effect. Against the idea of a pure reproduction, Saunders shows an outcome embedded in the process which, in turn, reveals processes that go beyond representing the already represented. Or, to put it another way, his work encourages a technical reading over visual immediacy, where content is a part of the technical process, to be read semiotically and equal to other properties such as light, surface and texture. With a practice like this the no-man's land between the reader and the vision is mined with reductive intellectual process, through which the viewer must trespass un-deconstructed.

In the end, great works are more than lectures on representation, iconography, and art history (that's what verbose articles are for) but immediate, undeniable and ongoing. The case for Saunders' work is that he manages to meet the ambitions of his practice while fascinating viewers with a summation of illusory vectors creating transportive sublime moments. The risk is that the informational

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All images courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery © Matt Saunders



All images titled: Haus Poelzig, 2016

Photography
Matt Saunders



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challenges he presents explode before the viewer reaches the side of the other.

"I am interested in the circulation, reception and emotional impact of image (as a nexus of comprehending activities). I guess if I think about a performance/image capture in a film, that exists as a documentary record on the filmstrip, is activated by the beam of light projecting it, but only becomes a resonant image when it lands with a viewer. There is a technical conversation there about the 'medium' of producing effect. And yes, I think about stories and content as a kind of medium in their own right."

Early pioneers of photography, Georges Méliès and the Lumière brothers (see Tai Shani in *Trebuchet 12*) could be considered as interrogative and realist respectively, and perhaps mirror the binary flow of artistic trends from the realist to the non-figurative existing from photography's very start (see Pierre Bourdieu's *The Rules of Art*, 1996). Philosophically, these trends have roots in a number of personal and political positions against the prevailing norm, newness being a statement of differentiation. The image in contemporary life is not only ubiquitous but also a currency through which we act, and are seen to act. It is the medium *du jour moderne* of historicity, presentation and future ideals. Where rappers and Shakespearean characters might say 'word is bond' to describe the integrity of an association, neither politicians nor businesses are particularly held to account (*passim*) for public statements. And yet the image (and the photographic image in particular) holds its virtue, despite the many, many accusations against its character. This lingering idea of truth is less important to Saunders than the processes whereby we make it true through experience:

"Photography is caught up with conversations about indexicality and truth. I'm young enough to have never really had much traction with the belief in the 'truth' of photography, but I am very moved by the 'space' of photography. It is such a powerful cultural form and still carries all that evidentiary promise, even if we know it's corruptible. The impulse to pick up these materials in the first place was about getting into that space, making marks that could live beneath that smooth surface."

The smooth character of these images is something we are wary of, the glib presentation of broadcast images are becoming seen more as documentary imperialism, unable to be divorced from the ideologies that present them. In his series *Haus Poelzig* (2016), Saunders presents a palimpsest

of visions of a public interior, plastic with painted elements. The materiality of the photographic source is emphasised with an X-rayed skeletal frame gleaming through superimposed layers, suggesting varying perspectives and various times. These ghostlike images feel burnt and reversed, as per a negative, but 'correct' or positive at the same time. The layering suggests a double exposure, but the edges of each layer blend without a definite hierarchy. Despite a clear order to the overall image, there is a sense of uncertainty in the viewer's gaze, a process that mirrors Saunders' own process of producing a meaningful artefact.

"I'm fascinated by photography and film, which is essentially a four-dimensional photograph, because some of the uncanny and emotionally evocative qualities of repetition, distance (from the source), surface and projection become apparent in this way. My imagination lives in this space. And photographs are a way of looking out at the world, whether they're found images or whether I made them myself."

"My intimate relationship with photography is based in the photochemical darkroom. I think of it in terms of a series of procedures: setting up paper, dealing with the 'negative', the settings on the enlarger, the moment of exposure, the steps of development, the weeks and months outside of the darkroom in which I pin up dozens – if not hundreds – of prints and see what's there and make up my mind. Each of the processes is a little open-ended. This gets into my relationship with painting and what felt so exciting about starting to work with the two mediums in tandem."

"As I often say, when I finish working on a painting, it's still only the *potential* for a work. I take it to the darkroom and see what I can make with it. Often, I'm wrong. Canvases I expect to be interesting turn out to be dead, while at other times, weird things come to life. For me, the photographic darkroom is the space where I bring all these things together and see how they interact and where they can arrive; and the photographs I make are the speculative objects that result from that search. It is like looking into possible future pictures."

"Very early in my career I would say that I used films as a through-line for thinking and experience in the way that stories and books and published ideas functioned for previous generations. That seemed like the inheritance of the 20th century. Let me back up and clarify that every time I say 'film', I'm thinking of it as a kind of photograph. There is also the narrative of the medium itself, which is very

important for me. I am clearly interested in early photographic techniques, the odd infancy of the form before the materials became more fixed. You could also say that a lot of my work is empowered by the end of the analogue era. Photographic paper is outdated technology. I can buy it and misuse it 'as a painter' and don't have to work correctly 'as a photographer'. So there are meta-narratives of invention and obsolescence that book-end the history of analogue photography."

The two aspects of Saunders' practice are concerned with the materiality of the production process and the materiality of content. Does his work risk sublimating its reception in order to hone his practice as an end in itself? Does it disappear into the darkroom of ambitious artistic pretension? A counter to this would be that Saunders' process puts him in the place of the viewer early on, and more than just the viewer he prioritises the role of viewing in the process itself, creating ways of seeing as a character within the work.

"The things many of my materials assume or even 'ask for' may be counteracted in the work. For instance, the reproducibility of the photos. Or the painting. Besides all the inversions of colour, there is the fact that what the paint is being asked to do is to be transparent. What matters is seeing *through* (the light passing through) and not seeing the thing itself. When I talk about them being inseparable, the example that comes to mind is when brightness or darkness are determined by the opacity of the pigment or the thickness of the paint. The ways of working also blend qualities, like a liquid mark ends up reading like liquid light. I think there is more to say about this, but I don't want to get sidetracked into too many small technical examples, as the metaphorical aspects are also important.

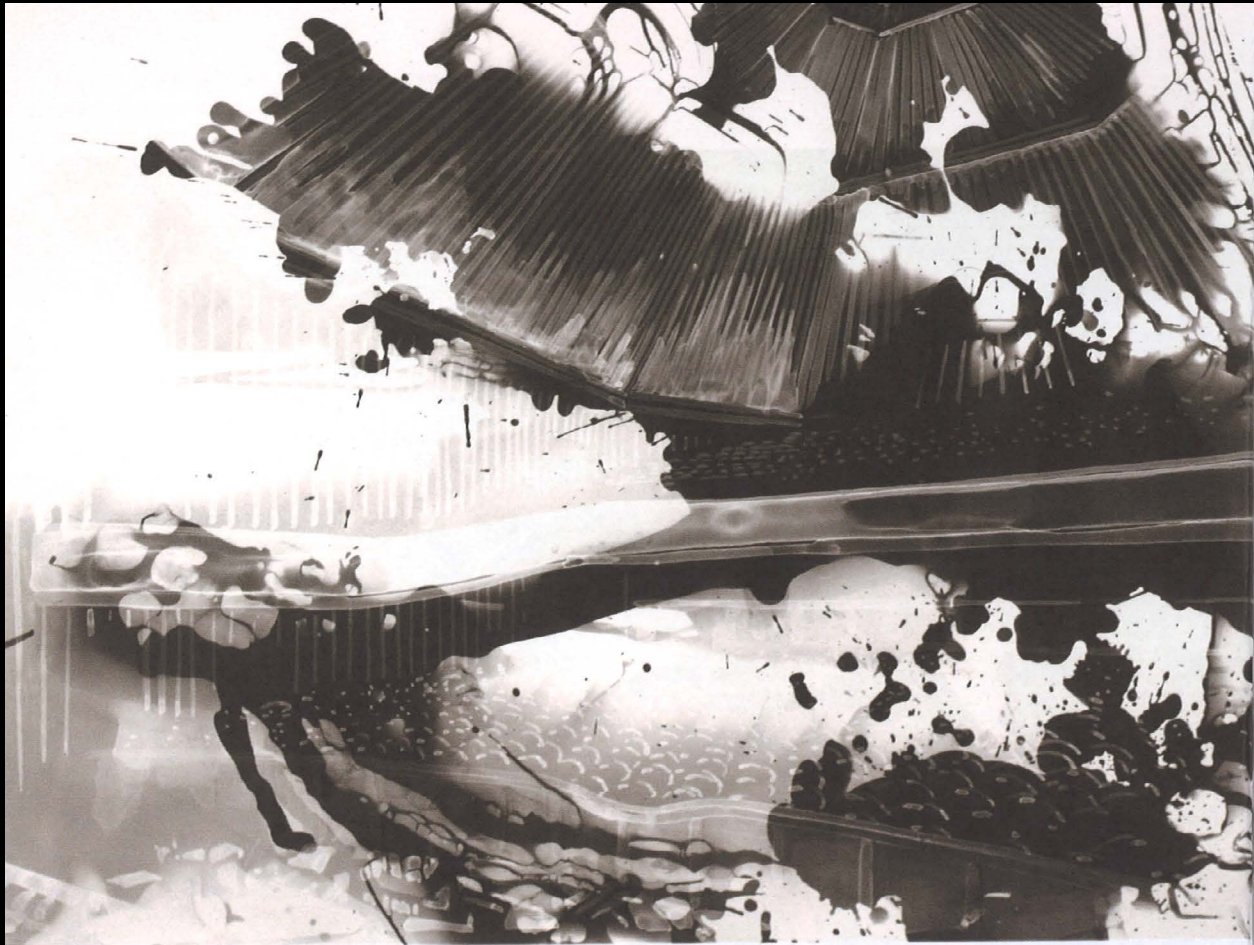
By 'metaphorical' I am thinking about how I see people and identities as always some kind of performance. I think people manifest themselves and there is something to the idea that any picture you see of mine is a material picture. An image is given substance, whether it is in a glossy or a matte photograph, whether in paint or in ink. Which says something about how I think about the subjects.

When you meet someone in person, there are all these material realities – the air in the room, the shine on their skin – it's always an encounter, and that encounter is embodied, on both parts. I may 'meet' the same character in my work again and again, but they've got different qualities, inseparable from their materials. For example, the two different versions I made of *Back* which is the actress Kitty

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**A PALIMPSEST OF VISIONS OF
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WITH PAINTED ELEMENTS**

Photography
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Winn seen from behind in a red coat, were painted more or less simultaneously, but one is on glue-primed linen while the other is on unprimed fabric (so the paint soaked into the threads like dye). Both are printed as photographs in the same way, but they come out quite differently, all because of the ways the image is embodied. You could compare this to "Door" which is also Kitty, but there the work, the fabric-ness, is even more present.

I don't just mean the materials of photography, as all of my photographs are essentially photograms (with all their indexical quality) of materials like paint, fabric, ink or plastic. There is no image except as it is held in (or built by) these materials, and you can't think of one without the other. As you say, the pieces work against the take-for-granted ideas of the materials, but at the same time are still very material.

There was also a quality in that early show (*sleep*) of false simultaneity. All these images from different eras all in a common dream, all asleep at once. You probably heard or read me say this somewhere, but until I saw the Warhol film *Sleep* [1964] I thought it was all about unedited, straight-forward time. But of course, it's completely edited together into that illusion, which kind of doesn't work. The question of time (and simultaneity) has always fascinated me in history painting, where every detail is instantaneous in the illusion, but seen by the viewer in time."

In contrast to realist art where there is an presumption that the view gets to see, unalloyed, all the information that the artist wants them to see, Saunders uses a technique similar to that of the 'unreliable narrative' where the storyteller leads the traveller astray by massaging details of the narrative to support a self-serving or noxious conclusion. In Saunders' work, the materials are unreliable in a structural sense, they are unreliable as a dilapidated building, girder or bridge are unreliable, they are liable to collapse if put under too much stress (or asked to carry too much meaning-filled baggage). Saunders talks about using 'uncertainty' in process, but aren't all artists working towards a surety of transmission?

"Absolutely not. My pet peeve with paintings I find dull is this: make a mark, make a mark, make a mark until the image is complete, then you're done. To me, there is no point in making an image as an object (as a painting) unless it gets into an interesting tension between, say, the desire to resolve optically and the desire to resolve physically.

I'm into the glitch or the static or the reverb as a sign of transmission, an articulation that things are in motion and never arrive at a destination exactly how they were when they left their origin. I worry that anything less is just illustration.

Clarity of purpose is good. And I like artists with passion and urgency and clear-eyed thinking. I guess my clear thinking is to involve the materials in a process that always translates intention through the conditions of making."

Saunders' work refutes the immediacy of photographic realism, by presenting the operational realism through the moments he creates. By presenting several partial experiences he connects us with the reality of the image, of the conscious process of parsing information as meaning, by forcing the viewer to recognise their part in the image making process.

When we perceive images we are in the process of assemblage. Nothing is truly, wholly, accurately given. Like adverbs, they are active fragments related to other pieces, but between those shadows the viewer resides. Not in the callow form of nostalgic symbolic readings or the dull recognition of personal history overlaid on resonant facades, but how we find ourselves in situations. That awakening is the crux of art, when we find ourselves seeing with the humility of a being feeling through the mechanical... and finding something magical turning the cogs.

Matt Saunders is represented by Marian Goodman Gallery