

VISUAL ART

The Fast and the Frozen

Photography, Past and Present Tense

by JEN GRAVES



The *Darkroom Series*, at Zeitgeist Coffee, is pictures taken on mobile devices. "The easy access," Boohi Bronson writes, "makes for capturing every stupid beautiful little thing." Bronson is a member of Juxt, the Seattle "mobile arts community" that organized the *Series*—Juxt was founded to explore the possibilities of making art while moving, speed being a source of chance. Written profiles of members extol the democracy of the form: busy mothers becoming practicing photographers, for instance.

It's curious that most of the photographs on display are street pictures, taken in public or exterior places. For all the directness and intimacy of having a phone in your hands at all hours, not much of this group's shooting is taking place, say, at home, or directly on the body, as in early video from the late 1960s after the development of the mobile Portapak. A few images involve my favorite mobile-device-photo tic: pictures taken at arm's length, facing up. Mobile devices seem to produce more heavenward images than any other technology ever has.

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surFACE, at Photographic Center Northwest, is portraits made using a technique invented in the 1850s. The five photographers here, brought together by curator Ann Pallesen, are, in contrast, earthbound, immobilized. They create impressions on glass (ambrotypes) and tin (tintypes) by preparing a plate with a wet chemical (collodion), inserting it into the camera, then requiring that subjects remain still for up to 60 seconds for shooting.

Ellen Susan uses the Civil War-era process to make varied portraits of active-duty US soldiers. Some hold their children, or their ancestors—fathers and grandfathers in the service, traditions represented in antique photographs the soldiers have chosen as companions. In two portraits lovingly framed alongside soft gray velvet pillows, Susan positions the camera so that the metal arms that stabilize the subjects' necks in the studio become visible, like dreaded spinal prosthetics after war injuries.

Jenny Sampson works in the field, and her field is skate parks: She carts her equipment around the Bay Area and asks subjects to pose right there. The plates are small and the images have a fast, crackling feeling, like their subjects. It's hard to make antique images look warm and unprecious, but Sampson does. By contrast, Joni Sternbach's images of surfers are neoclassical. Bikinis never looked so staid.

Robb Kendrick aligns form with content, demonstrating the persistence of an old-time way of life in the American West, Mexico, and Canada: cowboyism. In one picture, two boys wearing cowboy hats pose under a basketball hoop in the middle of a dusty landscape. One holds the basketball, the other a lasso. A city rises in the far distance. The corners of the plate are blacked out because of the way Kendrick's camera holds the plate, giving the effect of a cartoon fade-out.

The best-known practitioner of wet-plate collodion portraiture in Seattle is Daniel Carrillo, who uses the arty process to capture the arty people of the city—painters, performers, writers. Going to visit him has become a rite of passage. Carrillo, who was born in Mexico, raised in California, and settled in Seattle in 1997, carefully paints varnish on the surfaces of the plates once they dry, in order to preserve them. In Seattle, wet-plate collodion portraiture might be seen as especially poignant: The process was invented the same decade as the city. For a frozen moment, each of Carrillo's subjects is made to be as old as our young urban idea. ★