

**SURVEY: TEXARKANA**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE  
UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF**

**MASTER OF FINE ARTS**

**IN**

**ART**

**MAY 2004**

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## **SURVEY**

## **History of Texarkana**

That day in 1542 (as legend has it) on which Hernando DeSoto ordered a mutinous follower hanged from an oak tree near an artesian spring in the Territory of the Grand Caddoes, little did he know that, less than a half-hour march to the South was the site of a city which, 400 years later would boast 50,000 population, would lie squarely in two states, would be named for three, would be the focal point of four and would be the crossroads of the entire Southwest.

Even before the coming of the white man, the territory around what is now Texarkana was traversed by the Great Southwest Trail which, for hundreds of years, had been the main trunk line of travel between the Indian villages of the Mississippi Valley and of the West and Southwest. On the lands around Texarkana, the Grand Caddoes, peaceful and sedentary, tilled their rich fields of maize, beans, pumpkins and melons and maintained six villages on the banks of the Red River.

Congenial relations with other tribes and with white men were rules of the Grand Caddoes. For example, they were hosts to the worn survivors of the ill-fated LaSalle Expedition in 1687 and, in 1691, greeted with friendship the military party under the Spanish general, Teran. By 1719, the French had infiltrated the Territory and set up a fort and trading post and, in ensuring years of that century, the Caddoes migrated slowly westward. Yet today, reminders of the Caddoes' occupation and culture are to be found within a radius of 30 miles of Texarkana.

As early as 1840, rudiments of a permanent settlement in the old Caddo Territory began to take form and, shortly thereafter, the stamp of official approval was awarded in the form of a post office. Location of this institution was at Lost Prairie, some 15 miles east of the present site of Texarkana.

Railroads were quick to see the possibilities of this vast new territory and, in the late 1850's, the builders of the Cairo and Fulton, railroad were pushing their railhead steadily across Arkansas. By 1874, they had crossed Red River and were at the Texas state line. Between February 16 and March 19, 1874, trains ran between the Texas state boundary and Red River, where passengers and freight were ferried across to Fulton, to continue by rail to their destinations. The Red River Bridge was opened on March 20, 1874, and from that date, trains have run directly from Texarkana to St. Louis.

Keen rivalry was the vogue among railroad builders in the 1870's. Among the pioneer railroads was the Texas and Pacific which stretched its steel ribbons across the vastness of the State of Texas to the Arkansas line. It was only logical that the point at which two railroads converged would be ideal for a city. Consequently, the Texas and Pacific Railroad sold the first town lots on December 8, 1873; the first of which was bought by a J.W.

Davis and on which the present Hotel McCartney stands, directly opposite from the Union Station.

Although many have contended for the honor, it's not known officially who gave Texarkana its name. One popular version credits a Colonel Gus Knobel who, surveying the Iron Mountain Railroad right-of-way from Little Rock to this section, came to the state line, marked the name "TEX-ARK-ANA" on a board and nailed it to a tree with the statement, "This is the name of a town which is to be built here." It was believed at the time that the Louisiana boundary was just a few miles to the south (actually it is only 25), and Colonel Knobel, in selecting the city's name, derived it from TEXas, ARKansas, and LouisiANA.

New counties are always created from other lands lying within the same state. Most have interesting origins. But it is doubtful that any can meet that of Miller county, probably the only county in the United States which, once created was "abolished" and made a part of a "more patriotic" county. Years later Miller County was re-established. In 1820 in honor of James Miller, a New Hampshire native who was Arkansas' first governor, Miller County was formed with a large degree of uncertainty as to the location of the line dividing the county and the Mexican boundary. Consequently, settlers felt that Arkansas levied and collected taxes on land which eventually might be held by Mexico. Moreover, many who resented the oppression of Texans by the Mexicans were openly declaring allegiance to the Texans. This led to general unrest and after the Texas Republic was created, it grew worse. So, in 1838, Governor James Conway proposed that the "easiest and most effective remedy is the abolition of Miller County to an area which is more patriotic." From that year until 1874, it was a part of Lafayette County. And its re-establishment sprung only from the sale of town lots in Texarkana in 1873. Efforts of the young town to be incorporated were not realized until October 17, 1880, nearly seven years after Texarkana, Texas (June 12, 1874) was formed. December 8, 1873, is generally recognized by both cities as the date of organization. Ask any school boy who Jim Bowie was, and he will tell you he invented the Bowie Knife, a lethal weapon whose prototype has been copied, in varying forms. Not many, however, will identify Bowie as the Texas hero for whom Bowie County, which was formed in 1840 and in which lies the western half of Texarkana, is named. Bowie made his first knife at what is now Washington, Arkansas. In Texarkana today, there is a large sculpture of James Bowie gripping a rifle and Bowie knife which stands as a memorial to the vision and spirit that conceived and nurtured this great city.

--Texarkana Chamber of Commerce

**EXCAVATE**

Your house is gone. Where your happy apple, your tricycle, your mudpies were once scattered, stands a wicker signpost that screams "WELCOME." Across the street the steps crawl up, up, up from street level to...well, nothing -- the unlikely bamboo forest replaced by a parking lot. The end of the street has grown glass walls, the 1100 block of Main now stands as an impenetrable fortress that no vehicle may cross without making complicated turns on Texas Boulevard or Beech Street. And always Wadley Hospital looms large and filthy, waiting to swallow up everything in its vicious urban sprawl, in a land that is not even urban. Yet. Your rental car idles in front of your used-to-be house, and you consider the century-old dirt in the cupboards, the crumbling walls behind the paper, the rats in the attic, and you curse the good people who now live there. They could never love this place as much as you. Your left eye twitches, and you realize the amount of time you have kept your foot on the brake is waxing neurotic. Driving away, you swerve to miss a lost possum, run the stop sign, and blink.

...

You would like to fancy yourself an authority on Texarkana. You probably even feel that it is your due, since you were born and raised here. But the truth of the matter is somewhat less comforting, is more that every time you return home, you feel that things have progressed beyond your control, are no longer within your schema of historical accuracy, so that you've had to invent a few segues and intervals, just to hold everything together. Just to make things continuous. Like filling in the lyrics to a song you can't quite remember, even though the tune replays itself endlessly in your mind. Oh, don't lie to yourself. You never really knew this place at all.

...

It's easy to forget that the white picket fence was not always there. You were at school, in your black patent shoes, memorizing alphabets and trying not to raise your hand too often, and you missed the whole thing. The yard on Main Street was small and rectangular, edged by a concrete wall that took nine cracked and peeling scarlet steps to descend to street level unless you decided to take the short cut down to the sidewalk. The secret to landing was crouching just before you hit, so the pain couldn't shoot up your shins, and it was usually worth any little twinges of shock to fly for a drawn-out second or two. With his shiny new tricycle little brother knew it would be easy to avoid any leg pain, that he could fly clear across the street if he pedaled hard enough, and so he backed all the way up and pushed his blond head down and *flew*.

When you got back from school, the sidewalk leaked blood and you were very surprised at how dark it was, how the cement had just sucked up the puddles and left only dark amoebic shapes punctured by tiny rocks embedded in the concrete. Thank GOD the emergency room was only a block away! Praise life-giving Wadley hospital for employing mother and saving brother! (But all the same curse them for stealing the excitement, they could have gone just a little slower...) As consolation prizes there were bloody gauze pads and beatific x-rays, and best of all missing teeth for little bubba. You wanted to ask him if it was worth it, how close Across-the-Street-Neighbor's yard looked from the air, if he really thought he might have made it if only gravity hadn't intervened, but his mouth was swollen shut. It seemed so unfair that a white picket fence would replace a few teeth, because you knew it couldn't anyway, and now the view to the sidewalk was spoiled. Now, you felt caged in like a native cat, the dreaded red steps the only way out. Now, there was a wall between you and the very air. No more flying: tethered to the ground like everyone else.



...

After that things were different, more grounded. Family contracted, expanded, to the tune of *"there's a tear in my beer,"* or maybe it was *"with a rebel yell..."* And then you were taken on weekend jaunts to the country, past field after field of innocent cotton, to the farm, where the fences were much much farther apart, and not picked but barbed. As jalopy truck lurched and jumped over hard-won ruts, you wondered how anyone had ever found this place, but you knew it was always found by someone, that Grandfather had always owned it, and before him great, and before him great-great, and before him, well, *somebody*.

Grandfather liked to sit in his orange velvet chair at home and tell funny stories, one of them about the very gate you now approached. He had worked all day in hot, hot sun, only to encounter some strange gentlemen later that night. *One of them was dressed all in black leather, imagine that, and he rode a MOTORCYCLE.* You think the motorcycle must have been unbearably loud in the quiet of farmland emptiness, brutally unfair. *That fella pushed his bike right up to the front gate and yelled "Old man, lemme in!" an I sed, "I willn't, thisis my land, and I don't have ta. Why don'tchu jus git on back ta where ya come from?" An wouldya believe that he sneered at me?* Grandmother leans forward in anticipation— *He said, "well then. Mebbe i's better that way. Iffin you ride with the Pink Flamingo, you ride with Death."* And he jus rode clear off into tha darkness! Grandmother slaps her thigh (*Well shoot a monkey!*) and laughs.

Inside the fence, at the tip-top of the mounded levee, you considered all of this while eyeing a giant black crow, gleaming and preening in the wan sunlight. Big enough to be a dog, you thought. Concerned that he was watching you, waiting for a performance, you climbed into the little red wagon and hurled yourself down the slope, hoping to end up intact. At the bottom, bones still

attached to tendons, you wondered why the Pink Flamingo balked. Was it the man or the fence that stopped him?

...

You are visiting at Grandmother's house, perusing the hall of nostalgia. Sharpie lines inch up the doorway, recording the growth of generations. Father and his brothers grew up tall and strong. Girl cousins stopped at appropriate heights, while boy cousins generally made it to the six-foot marker. Tiny nieces and nephews measure and are found lacking, but it's just a matter of time. All is as it should be. Next to the historic presidential button collection, corresponding records of corporal conformity are found in row after row of photographs, squares and rectangles formed by millions of tiny grains of silver, a thousand thousand points of light. Physics declares with confidence that everything is here: At the top, Grandfather thin and rambling, skin like the pecan trees in our orchards (*GOD rest his soul, he was one hard-workin' man*), and Grandmother black and white like a (white) movie star, beneath them Father and uncles look sharp in Roy Rogers regalia. Just below, there is Biggo cousin, back then small and innocent like a diminutive insect trapped in amber. Debutante cousins are picture perfect in every illuminated frame, glossy smiles painted on at early ages. Little brother and his missing teeth, Wild cousin posing with a shotgun (uh oh), Baby sister in her dalmatian-dotted sweater, and somewhere, yes, here, you are. Years and years ago, posed in the shadow of the 10-foot concrete Confederate soldier at State Line Photographer's Island (*he commands: step right up! have a picture made in two states at once!*), one foot firmly planted in concrete Texas and the other claiming cement Arkansas; orange and red, left and right, you are straddling two places, dimensions, times, at once. How can it be possible when one foot is

only inches away from the other? But here it is, PROOF by picture. You flip it over and there it is, kodakkodakkodakkodakkodak... stretched protectively across the plastic backside. Who took this picture? You don't even remember going to the Photographer's Island, although *Everyone* has been there. You wonder if the person who took this picture would remember without seeing it. You wonder how *anybody* ever remembered *anything* without photographs. The Hall of Nostalgia serves an important purpose, but aren't there other ways?

...

There are a few things you remember without pictures. There is the handkerchief, lost for years in the crevices of the ancient cupboards on Main Street. Scouting for some sugar, you found the brittle envelope with your shaky name scrawled on top. Yours, treasure, booty from some lost time. What a shock to find Nana's hankie, cheap pink lace expertly lashed to the sides of a white cotton square. Mother said it was in her hand when they found her with all the life just ... evaporated. It brought back the sickly sweet smell of nursing homes, and before that the trailer park that was Nana's home. Mother's Mother made you go; you didn't like the smell, but you appreciated the brown spots and wrinkles, and thought you understood the import of such things. Like the hankie, like the photos, the spots served as indicators of some mysterious past, meted out into livable segments, so the whole continuum did not overwhelm. The trailer segment was very long, and somewhat ironically linked to the covered wagon segment, when as you know: Young Nana and her Papa/Mama rode down from Oklahoma where she couldn't go to school because she was half Baptist, half Injun, and they were followed by a pack of wild wolves the whole time, so they just drove the wagon farther and farther and farther, all the way down to Wickes, Arkansas. No wonder

she is now tired. Old Nana lives in an anchored steel wagon, with no dogs, just her pea-green formica table and her blue/orange/yellow fiber optic clock and her loooong silver braids. Husband is dead, children are grown, and you are small and spotless and she just loves, loves, *loves* you. You do not need a photograph to remember this. The handkerchief is like a Shroud of Turin, and here and there are Nana's fingers.

...

There are things more difficult to remember, things that tug at the edge of the mind only to disappear. It's funny, the way your memory works. Some pictures are so bright and clear, immutable really, and some are so hazy. Maybe you don't want to remember. The living room wallpaper on Main Street is like that; how many times did you stare at it trying to make sense of the hidden narrative? There's a little kid, and a woman with a jug on her head. Perhaps they are preparing for dinner. In another area of the paper forest, they have been separated. Wind tugs at little kid's clothes. Struggling to stay upright, arms are wrapped around an outlined tree. A chartreuse lantern sways and sputters; it's cold and you're scared. What will Little do in the night? How can Little sleep? Little has missed dinner already, and now has no choice, must set up a miserable dark camp. In a far corner, away from the organization of Mother's floral medallions and domestic curlicues, there is trouble. And you want to scream, go back while you can! Whatever you did, take it back!

What's happening? In your mind, you rewind over and over, and your mental tape is rewritten, transformed. And here is young wild cousin, silhouetted in front of the flowers, imploring you never ever to tell, to forget about blood leaking from dead hobo at newly vacant Hotel Grim, to uphold

your faith in the Order of the 22. How you adore wild cousin, how warm the glow of electric lights that surround his golden head. Loyally you whisper, *never ever*. Is it mutiny to reveal, or mutiny to conceal? And now you know what horrible things we concede just to be together, not to be alone in the wilderness.

...

Standing at the top of the levee, you surveyed the swelling Red River below, listening to the moans of drowning cattle. The longer it rained, the larger the unholy lake grew, swallowing the untended orchards and unlucky cows that had taken a wrong turn over the snaky mound, trapped by property lines and barbed fences, irrevocably mired in the valley's rich red clay. *The levee protects us from flooding, holds back the Red when she is angry, divides us from misfortune*. Funny, because it seemed rather unfortunate that the levee provided such a clear perspective to witness the waters rising to barn rooftops, to see the whites of cow eyeballs frantically reaching back into heads as if to blot out the horror of the moment, to hear those *noises* carrying across murky currents.

*Mmooooaaaaaaaaawwwww!* You took a step back into Father's coat, buried your ears against his warm stomach and tried desperately to hear sounds of life over screaming death. All those expeditions to the wrong side of the levee with trusty red wagon, scavenging for bones and teeth, constructing grisly teepees for personal enjoyment, and you never considered the flesh that once held them up with a sense of wholeness and purpose that you, after the fact, could not rival. With a nascent awareness of their hefty worth, you kept the bones of later digs, brushed off the ants and putrefied meat, polished them like sacred talismans, took them home so they could remind you

(*do this, in remembrance of me*). At night, you heard the skull speak to you, and it said,

*Mmooooaaaaaaaaawwwwww!*

Did you listen?

...

What are you doing back here anyway? What were you thinking? But home has called, and you have answered and that's that. Put on a pot of flavored coffee, examine the new Arkansas quarters atop the powder blue chipped and burnt formica counters, notice how hard well water has leached into sink and left green behind, look out the window and see the fence, half timber-staked, half chain-linked, that delineates the boundaries of THE YARD. Watch the purple martins swoop down from a home that teeters on the edge of the sky; they are out for blood and you know it. This is not really your home, just a familiar place to stay when visiting -- a place to escape from and return to at will. Nevertheless you find yourself pouring the laundry detergent into the side compartment, *not on the clothes, because the hard water will bleach them out*, and you scrub the dishes with the smelly washrag thingy even though you long for a sponge, and you carefully, carefully straighten little sister's curly hair, and even though she is very nervous (and so are you) you make no mistakes. It is easy to slip into routine, to just accept the flotsam and jetsam of the days and weeks and ...

...

You were so much angrier the first time around, when you never had the opportunity for escape, only for reprieve, and so you learned to drive. Driving in the dark blotted out the periphery, like putting on blinders. Only then could you focus on the lines ticking by, measuring time and space and breath. It was good to stretch out, to step down and see how fast you could cruise around the Wamby Shuffle without hitting anything. Occasionally beer cans left over from pasture parties or cow patties left over from the thousands of cows that populated the darkness on either side of the Shuffle interfered, but ultimately they were no match for a ton of metal and a restless mind (*Yippiiiiiee yiiii yoooooooo cow pattie, I ate the cow that was your Daddy*). If calmer and braver you ventured out into town, cruising State Line Cemetery (while everyone else cruised State Line) or surfing the concrete slopes of the Rose Hill Projects.

Trips into town rarely fared well, and often left you stuck in the mud. One such time you were hanging out in the cemetery, trying to count the stars blotted out by the Angel of Mercy, listening to the downwind tempo of Fat Jack's Honky Tonk. You felt so alive there among the waxed flowers and preserved bodies, and you were grateful, for once, not to be one of them. So, it really killed your buzz to discover that State Line Cemetery had pooled its prodigious resources to keep you there, mired in the wet earth. You sat, waited, thought about who to call at this unholy hour, and just as you got up to walk about, two shitkickers ambled down the path. Said they were *lookin' fer someone to beat up, but why not hep a LADY instead?* And what crossed your mind? Hate. Disgust for violence, and contempt for redneck chivalry -- couldn't they see you weren't a lady? You smirked when one of them leaned in to ask a favor *Would you hold my hat, ma'am*, so ridiculously old fashioned sounds like Grandfather, and you did nothing as they freed you from the cemetery, from certain death, just returned the hat and drove away and laughed.

The second time you got stuck, it wasn't so funny. It's night again. Rose Hill Projects have sprung up like mushrooms beneath the shadow of Grim Stadium, and deep in the penumbra *there are welfare people, people who sell drugs, people with clotheslines instead of dryers, hundreds of babies, gold-rimmed cars with tinted windows, guns, LOUD music, and even colorful clothing, for GOD's sake.* How well you know the song, so sing along: *jungle bunny, spear chucker, telephone operator, porch monkey, jigabooooooooo!* Too bad you took a 90-degree curve going at least 60 and ran your Mazda (666) right through a chain link fence and into their territory, and wouldn't you know it's a swamp. And the fence has devoured your car like a giant mouth, steel teeth dug deep into the roof, and you are feeling a little like Jonah, sure that the ghetto has swallowed you up and you will never be freed. Before long two very large black men come walk the corner and you know what they are called (     ), and you are really scared. One of them politely tips his head at you, slips off his huraches and hands them over; both crawl on their knees under the fence and begin to dig, dig, dig, unearthing your car. You are trying feverishly to just Back UP! and the mud is spinning, the men are choking on it, and then magically the fence lets go. They want nothing, only their shoes back. What unexpected redemption, and you are truly grateful and ashamed.

You did not want to remember this, but home is not always made for forgetting.

And anyway, you now realize how beautiful shame can be.

...

The farm is always the last place you visit before leaving. Breathe in the pecan-soot air, the cowpatties, the over 450 acres of sheer nothingness. Winter is your favorite companion; the hornets are in their nests, the snakes are cold and slow, the sole alligator in Second Ole River



(lake) is hiding. And the *trees*! Spindly, bare, huge and majestic, and so incredibly lonely. Atop the levee, looking down at the orchards, you feel their age, their amazing will to power, to reproduce, transgress, ignore the feeble old men, beetles, and mechanical monsters that threaten their very being. Far, far away you see the tiny figures of Brother and Father, living dots in a vast landscape of estrangement. You should join them, connect, but instead you turn around and view the beachfront of the Glorious Red River, the over 60 acres of sediment your farm has slowly accrued through flooding. Despite its tumultuous past, and the civilizations that called it home for a thousand years before it was your home, the sand is soft and golden sugary, so unexpected. It is not bare, but thick with watery detritus as well as bottles and bones, tiny fossils, shards of ancient pottery, even the barely visible (but still shiny) black truck Uncle lost to Jealous Red. You admire her voracious record keeping.

Bitter winds twist your hair; it is cold at the top. Hop-sliding down the levee, you sigh in pleasure as dirt mounds block the air. Walking out to Second Ole, the soft ground sucks at your feet, and you think about the cow patties, and how Father's Mother would say they smell earthy, but you just think they smell like plain old shit. Anyway, it's home and it still smells like home.

The wrought iron lake chairs don't seem so silly in front of the fire, and then (finally!) it's family time.

Brother has the guitar, Father has the vodka, and Mr. Huddie Ledbetter has the song:

*Well, ever since I was a little bitty baby, my momma done rock me in that cradle,*

*in them old cotton fields back home,*

*it was down in Louisiana, just about a mile from Texarkana,*

*in them old cotton fields back home.*

*Well, when them cotton fields get rotten you don't piiiiiick too much cotton,*

*in them old cotton fields back ho-ome!*

*Wellllll, it was down in Louisiana, just about a mile from Texarkana,  
in them old cotton fields back home.*

*Goddamn that woodpecker!* Funny, you didn't even hear it, but now you do, peck-pecking away back around the cabin. Father grabs a 22, and you are sure his Vodka tremble will miss such a tiny, sprightly thing. *KKKAAAAPPPPPPOOOOWWWWW!!* The noise is tremendous, echoing across the Second Ole River, and you wait for the curse, but Father appears with an enormous bird in his hands, not like the little red headed thing you imagined, oh no, not at all. Oh my GOD, it's lifeless, somehow boneless, then flopped down on the ground for inspection. You are crying for such a beautiful animal, all spotted chest and yellow underbelly, and blue-black wings and shockingly redredred head. It's amazing, and you have never seen anything like it, and probably never will again, and... Well, somewhat guiltily you realize that if it weren't dead, you would never have gotten to pull up its feathers and look underneath, to stare into its still liquid eyes, to measure out its size with your camera. Nothing in nature would ever lay so *still* under a human gaze. You are sorry, so sorry for this animal, but grateful to just look, examine. Tomorrow it will lay underground, covered in dirt and hungry insects, and if ever unearthed, will have a leaner, gaunter beauty.

...

Weeks later you develop the photograph, only to find it is dark and murky, and the bird looks shrunken, smaller than it was. This is your record, what you have left to remember by, and you are both disappointed and relieved. It's not so bad, this puny, diminished animal. You can live with this.

## **CATALOGUE**

## Introduction

Our lives are built on an elaborate architecture of multiple and often contradictory foundations. As we slide between what may or may not have really occurred, our memories insist on a sense of continuity. In a similar sense, history is often written retroactively as a kind of chronological outline that leads, teleologically, to a foreshadowed end. The purpose of this survey is to examine, from varying perspectives, the form and position of these ideas.

The exhibition *Survey: Texarkana* searches for meaning in the ways that we construct ideas of time, place, and history, and proposes the idea that what we take for granted as familiar is not necessarily what it appears to be. The exhibition combines daguerreotypes, silver gelatin mural prints, and digital video in the same space, emphasizing the vastly different ways a single place can be rendered, remembered, and understood. Filtering the history of a place through photographs allows me to reveal variance instead of singularity, as memories and images multiply to create a complicated coexistence. To stand in the vortex of this constructed space is to recognize history as uncanny, and how we have come to rely on the familiar shortcuts of memories and photographs to represent the past. By providing a survey of 19<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> century imaging processes, this exhibition highlights the failure of the photograph to record a singular version of history, and instead offers several partial versions of the past. Collectively, they only begin to tell what happened.

I use photography in this exhibition for the very reason that we often take it to be representative of “the real.” In many ways, photography’s relationship to our culture has

been one of documentation and proof. We count on the photograph to supercede our flawed memories, to tell us exactly what we looked like when we were younger. This is partly due to photography's relationship to what Roland Barthes termed the "That-has-been" (76). Barthes explains that the photograph does not "*optionally*" index the referent it depicts, but refers to the "*necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens" (77). Logically, we expect the photograph to serve as an imprint or repository of the actual physical stuff that comprises the past.

Yet, there is a huge gap between a photograph and the object, person or place photographed. To hold a photograph of my house up to the house itself is uncanny. Compared to the "real" house, the image is vacant and lifeless, petrified. Freud described the uncanny as "in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression," (241). Uncanniness arises from the collision of two situations, one of which was assumed to be familiar, but upon comparison is found to be unfamiliar.

Thus, a photograph is much more akin to a memory than to scientific proof, not truly empirical, but subjective due to human error, manipulation of time, and alchemical interventions. As Susan Sontag notes, "It is not reality that photographs make immediately accessible, but images" (165). And although the photograph is eminently capable of transporting us to some other place or time, of excavating a memory or reminding us of something we once experienced, perhaps that is largely dependent on the viewer's state of mind as opposed to the photograph itself. Thus the photographic object comes to be "not so much an instrument of memory as an invention of it or a replacement" (164/65). In this manner, the photograph can operate as a double, possibly

the insidious creator of a memory, which leads to the snaky suspicion that maybe we don't even remember the original event. Maybe we only remember the photograph of it. In other words, it becomes part of the narratives that we spin to hold the past together.

### **Daguerreotypes**

The daguerreotype section of the installation is formed by 10 daguerreotypes configured to mimic the organizational system of a family genealogy. Each image is printed on a 2 ¾ x 3 ¼ silver plate according to 19<sup>th</sup> century methods of daguerreotyping, and then housed in an antique case. The subjects of the daguerreotypes are a range of objects, many of which have acquired symbolic value through their association with repeated histories. The objects are centered on different surfaces that extend from exterior to interior, from natural to domestic, and they are meant to evoke a kind of materiality that references the evolution of sentimental ownership. As an object already associated with sentiment, the daguerreotype *itself functions somewhat differently than an ordinary photograph*. To the 19<sup>th</sup> century people who first viewed them, their incredible detail and mirror-like sheen lent them an appearance that was uncannily near to the subjects pictured. The elaborate framing of embossed copper and plush velvet hinged together by a hard case was meant to protect the delicate surface of gilded mercury and silver, but it also created a packaged remnant of the subject that could be easily carried close to the heart. The daguerreotype installation exploits these inherently sentimental objects to ironically equate family history with family heirlooms.

The intimate scale of these objects lures the viewer into a very close scrutiny of the things pictured. Through a combination of objects and surfaces, the daguerreotypes form a loose chronology that surveys a timeline of land and how it was understood and controlled as it was increasingly mediated by the domestic sphere. Beginning with the dual images of a deed and an arrowhead, both pictured on dirt, the genealogy opens with the purchase of already inhabited land. The next image features a cotton boll, which in Texarkana, as in much of the South, was king of cash crops. At this point, the separation between interior and exterior begins to widen. Plantations grew up around cotton into feudal systems that maximized profits through free labor, while landowners were able to purchase larger tracts with their nascent wealth. The land itself was harnessed, as fields grew and soil was pushed to produce ever-greater yields. An image of a barbed wire fence recalls the demarcation of land, and how ownership was used to retain some people while keeping others outside. A daguerreotype of a crushed flower on the seat of a chair signifies how families turned inward toward the domestic as a substitute for nature, and interest shifted towards obtaining material properties; land, fenced off and without intimate connections, became just another object. In the daguerreotypes, nature becomes increasingly stylized, forming floral textiles and a bird's-eye-view map as background elements. An image of a gun depicts violence as an enforcer of boundary lines, as well as a contributor to the appropriation and protection of money. Referencing my own position as inheritor, the last daguerreotype is a self-portrait with a miniature house worn as a necklace. Ultimately, parcels of land and the histories of their acquisition are passed down from generation to generation with the hope that family can retain property in

perpetuity. The mediation of this history through telling is parallel to and supported by the photograph as “proof.”

## Video

Projected on a wall that faces the daguerreotypes, the video acts as a counterpoint to the daguerreotype installation. The projected image size of 12’x16’ disrupts the intimate viewpoint that the daguerreotypes demanded; instead, it enforces a bird’s-eye perspective that references the map perspective in one of the daguerreotypes. The video suggests that despite distancing ourselves from events by depending on ever more sophisticated technology to record them, we cannot arrive at an unadulterated history. By exploiting 21<sup>st</sup> century technologies available in digital media, it works to expose the inherent fallacy of objective photographic truth. Based upon a piece of raw footage that slowly pans over a piece of wallpaper from my childhood home, the video is re-filmed, re-recorded, and rewritten so often that the original is irretrievable. Contrary to Barthe’s connection of the photograph to the referent, the original footage becomes so decayed that it suggests there never was an original to retrieve.

The camera’s eye acts as a tracking device that attempts to unearth a memory, but ultimately fails to uncover the original referent. The continual transfer and re-recording of the original footage acts both literally and metaphorically to convey that idea that history, like memory, may be built around forgetting, then overwriting the original so often that it can no longer be unearthed. The wallpaper itself is analogous to this process of forgetting and covering. The floral patterns of domestic interiors have come refer to



inside as a separated, artificially reduplicated, version of outside, and reiterate in a metaphorical manner the evolving interior landscape that the daguerreotypes depict. Both the daguerreotypes and the video also survey the land in visual/spatial forms to depict domestic and natural landscapes as repositories of history. Because the daguerreotypes are positioned across from the flickering video, their mirrored surfaces reflect the slowly moving images. This echoing directly implies the methodology with which history/memory becomes part of the genealogy, and uncannily reenacts the engineering of the prosaic through multiplicity.

### **Murals**

Whereas the daguerreotypes and video rely on material objects as pictorial subjects, the murals, positioned on adjacent walls, picture the landscape of Texarkana. In conjunction with mundane, everyday subject matter, the 3.5'x5' images rely on a shift to the two-point perspective and near life-sized scale we are accustomed to viewing in real life in order to produce a feeling of the uncanny. Silver gelatin prints do not hold the unique weight of the daguerreotype, or the constant flow of video imagery. They are the motionless medium that we have looked on for decades, nearly transparent because we have been inundated with them for decades. It is an apt medium for a landscape that seems both familiar through its mundane iconography and historical repetition, and also strangely archaic.

Texarkana appears as both the place that images of home are based on, and also a place that is tailored to match images of home. Although these photographs are as

unmanipulated as photographs can be, they nevertheless look staged through already present human manipulations of architecture and landscape. The out-of-frame, artificial lighting produced by tall pole lights that come on at night in rural areas emphasizes the space between natural and artificial elements to produce a feeling of alienation. There is a disconnect between the familiarity of the landscapes and the feelings they provoke.

One pair of murals is formed by a lone chair and an image of a fenced backyard that is occupied by a birdhouse on a pole. A backlit playhouse and a metal farm gate form the facing pair. The gate and chair reference the ease with which we can occupy space, while the false houses blown up to a discomfiting scale lie at the heart of the *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* is the origin of the word uncanny, which Freud translates, paradoxically, as both homelike and unhomelike. Built in the archetypal image of The House, the eeriness of the bird house and play house lies dually in their close relations to a “real” house, and also in their inescapable fakeness. To see them as constructed artifacts is to reevaluate the commonness of the image of the house on which they are modelled. Perhaps what is disturbing is the comfort we all take in the well-known, agreed upon, cookie-cutter, reproduced, and widely disseminated, images of history, identity, and home.

### **Influences**

There are infinite alternatives for rescuing history, for bringing it to the present tense. With the advent of postmodern viewpoints that often deal specifically with subjective narratives, the multiplicity of voices has grown. While many have sought to

speak for groups, few have managed to speak poignantly about themselves in a way that is not exclusionary, that allows space for a viewer. I am always inspired by multi-valance -- works that oscillate delicately among multiple meanings. I find them to be uncannily extant in a visceral sense. *Survey: Texarkana* is rooted in an investigation of material history, and the work of the following photographers provides a context for some of the ideas that the project encompasses.

John Priola's photographs of objects rise above the kitschy objects he captures. With the camera's gimlet eye, he somewhat unsentimentally picks over objects and exposes time, love, and loss as secret material histories. His objects are no less ordinary than the knick-knacks you have collected and arranged upon your shelf, but the incessant cataloguing, equalizing gaze he casts upon them reveals something intangible, so unexpectedly discovered in a solid state. His concern with the thingness of the objects, and the thingness of the photograph is evident, as humorously manifested in photographs of worm-eaten photographs. Every bowl, every bit of peeled wallpaper, very broken dish, he photographs dies under the camera's gaze, only to be resurrected in the manner Barthes wrote about so eloquently.

Luis Gonzalez Palma's images seem decidedly rooted in the past; tinted with sepia and depicting figures draped in various forms of mememto mori, they exploit photography's inherent association with death. His work speaks of a sadness that touches his native country of Guatemala and the individuals who inhabit it, but never plumbs the depths of despair. The figures emerge triumphant, mythologized, like a pantheon of gods that control the gaze of the viewer. For all the bric-a-brac that trims his images, there is a concern not so much with collecting, but with owning. Not the owning of material

property -- the juxtaposition of material artifacts to portraits makes that painfully clear -- but with owning the self.

Finally, I would be remiss without counting among my influences the nameless contemporaries of every famous daguerreotypist. Behind Southworth and Hawes there stood legions of alchemists, eager to magically capture something of the world. I love the angry babies, stalwart Quakers, unhandsome men, deceased and barely visible children, that no one else cares to collect. No one wants them because they are not pristine things -- blurry, scratched, corroded, forgotten; but they are still depth and depthless records of a time past. Somehow, it is accessed through a gilded mirror, not in a reverential way, but in a religious, plain-old everyday way. These images are far from cultural treasures. They are not monuments, but the sentimental histories of everyday people.

## Appendix A: Exhibition Checklist

Survey: Texarkana

December 7-12, 2003

Commons Gallery

Art Building, UH Manoa

Works completed by Erin Williamson in partial fulfillment of an MFA degree in photography at the University of Hawaii at Manoa.

### A) Daguerreotypes

Hidden behind a wall that blocked visual access to the gallery upon entry, ten daguerreotypes were configured to mimic the physical arrangement of a family tree.

A survey of objects made symbolic through their associations with repeated narratives in Southern history formed the genealogical history of land in Texarkana.

Each daguerreotype was printed on a 2 ¾ inch by 3 ¼ inch plate and housed in an antique case. Please see Appendix C for an in-depth explanation of the contemporary daguerreotype process. From top to bottom and left to right order the images were:

- 1) The deed.
- 2) The arrowhead.
- 3) The cotton boll.
- 4) The bird's claw.
- 5) The barbed wire fence.
- 6) The crushed flower.
- 7) The gun.
- 8) The coins.
- 9) The ring.
- 10) The self-portrait with miniature house.

### B) Video

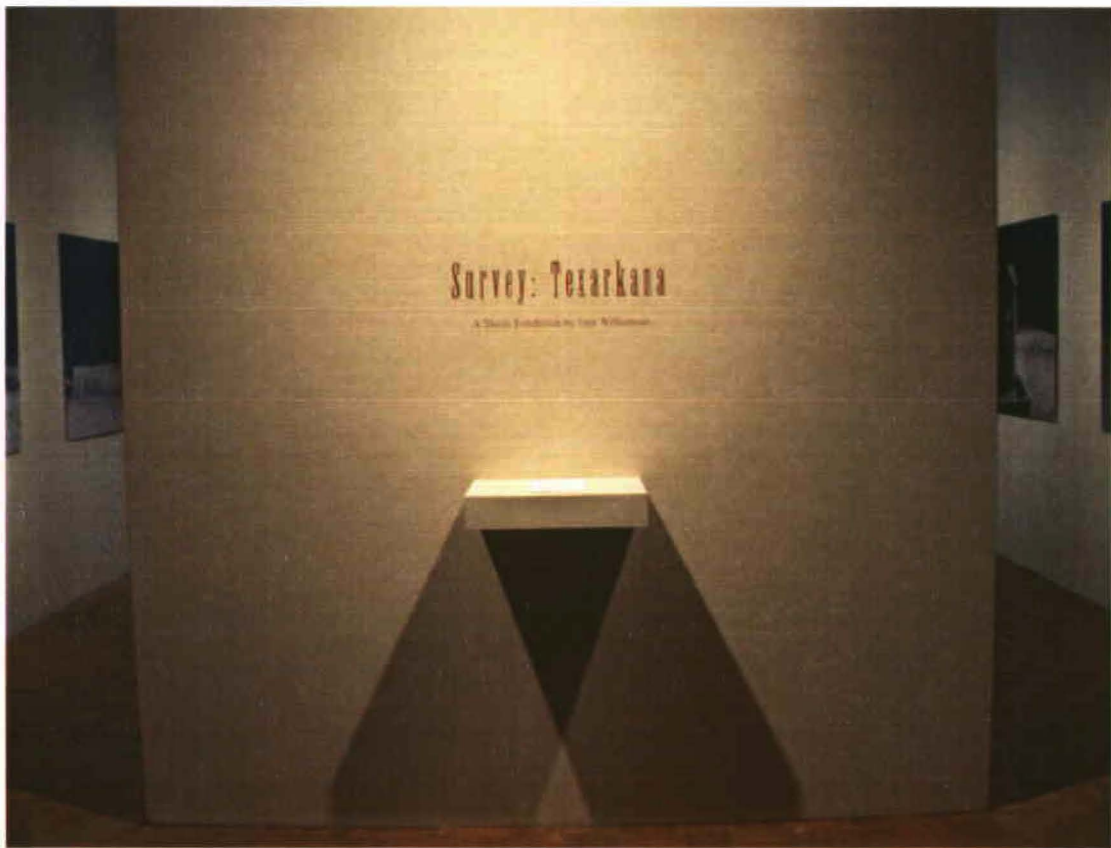
A 12'x16' projection spanned from wall-edge to wall-edge opposite the daguerreotype installation. The video tracked a light as it moved across a piece of floral wallpaper. The original footage was re-recorded several times and then filmed from a television set to produce a high level of degradation. The footage was edited using Adobe Premiere and then burned to a DVD. The video was projected from a LCD player connected to a DVD player.

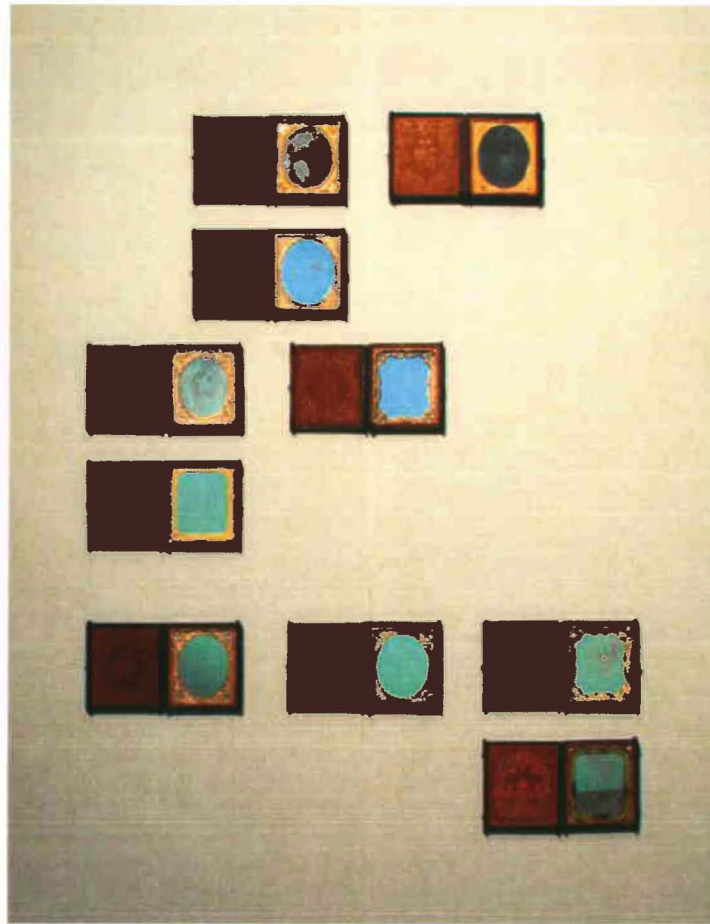
### C) Mural Prints

Four mural prints were installed on facing walls in the gallery space, with two murals on each wall. The murals depicted mundane Texarkana landscapes that were photographed at night using a 4x5 field camera to produce large, detailed negatives. Each mural was printed on 3.5'x5' fiber-based silver gelatin paper, and mounted on aluminum. From the left side of the gallery to the right, the order was as follows:

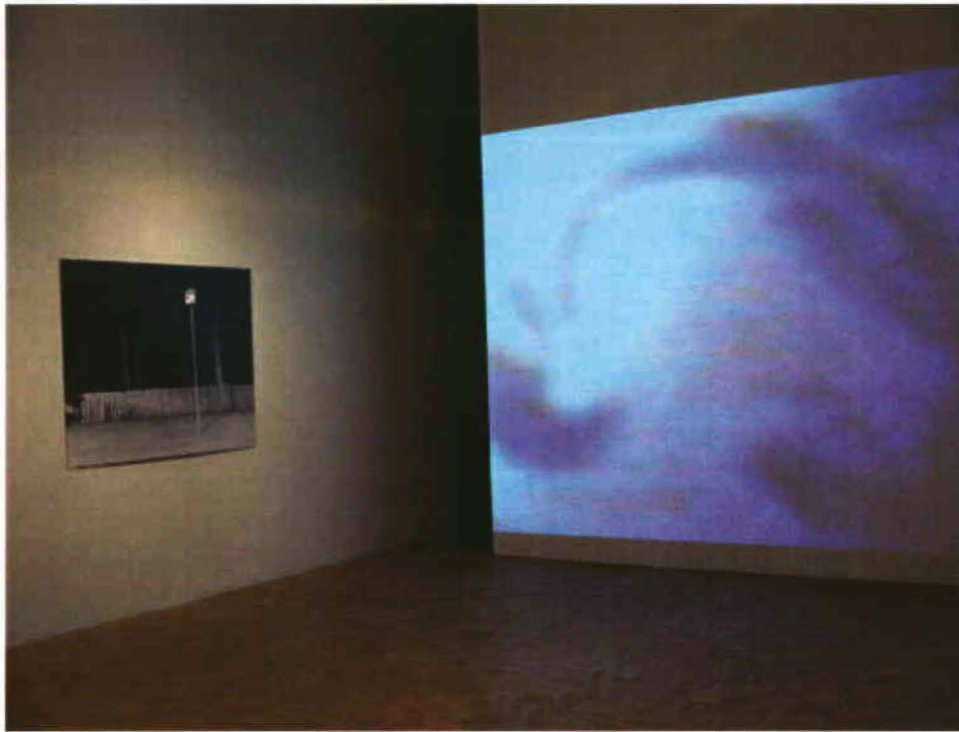
- 1) The chair.
- 2) The bird house.
- 3) The play house.
- 4) The gate.

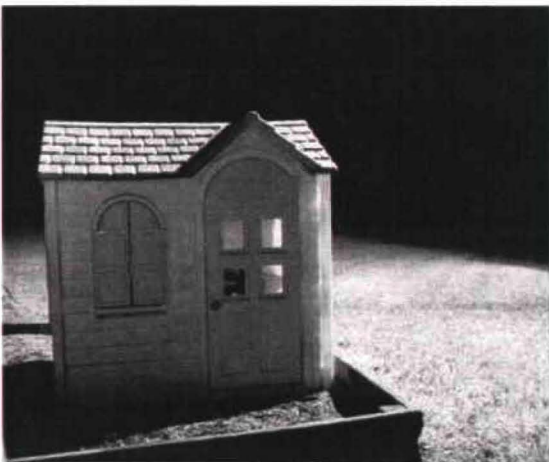
## Appendix B: Images











## Appendix C: Daguerreotype Process

The becquerel daguerreotype process, although less hazardous than mercury development, is nonetheless both fickle and toxic. Therefore, the following description is not intended as a manual for daguerreotype production, but is only meant to serve as a record of the contemporary production of an historic process.

### **Materials:**

99.9 % pure silver-plated copper, or silver plate.

Buffing paddle

Buffing wheel

Muslin buffs

Rouge

50g Iodine

8"x10" Fuming box

7.5 watt bug light

White matboard

Low contrast lith film positive

Rubylith film

Contact printer

250 watt bulb

500 watt blue photoflood bulb

Sodium Thiosulfate

Distilled water

1g Gold Chloride

Hotplate

Hairdryer

## **The Plate**

The daguerrotype is a positive to positive process; therefore your plate determines either your camera size, or lith film size. Plan accordingly. Your plates must be 99.9% pure silver, no exceptions. Theiss silver plating will plate copper for you, or you can order pure silver from Rio Grande. Theiss plates are smoother to begin with, and therefore require less buffing, but they can be reused a limited number of times if you make a mistake. Additionally, in retrospect I feel that pure silver yields a richer image, and is worth the extra cost and buffing time.

## **Buffing**

The plate must be buffed to a mirror finish. The smoother the finish, the richer the shadows. I used a buffing wheel with red rouge, buffing half the plate and then turning 180 degrees to buff the other half. I buffed each plate in this manner for about 10 minutes. Then I switched to a clean buff and buffed the entire plate in the same direction. You must finish buffing with a hand paddle. The buffing paddle ensures that all rouge is removed. If it is not removed, it will leave spots. The paddle must be at least as soft as the muslin buff, and my paddle was covered in silk velvet. Buff lengthwise and do not turn the plate. You want all scratches, buff marks, etc., to run lengthwise, so that the flaws will be less visible under light. Do not touch the plate, except at the very edges. If you must store it, make a box with soft felt dividers so it does not get scratched. Once the plate is fully buffed, it is ready for sensitizing.

## **The Fuming Box**

The fuming box is not commercially available. You must have it manufactured. It should be large enough to accommodate the largest plate you might use, and it must be light and fume tight. It must have a removable lid that screws up and down to clamp the board that holds the silver plate over the iodine fumes. I had my box manufactured, but you can

make your own by looking at antique boxes for ideas. Additionally, [www.newdags.com](http://www.newdags.com) has good pictures of boxes, as well as other daguerreotype materials.

### **Fuming**

My box is large enough to hold an 8"x10"x3" pyrex dish, and it required 50g iodine to cover the bottom of the dish, which I then covered in cheesecloth to help spread the fumes evenly before clamping down the lid. I purchased the iodine through Ebay, but beware: iodine is a key ingredient in crystal methamphetamine, and the government tracks its sale very closely. To fume the plate, go into a darkened room and place the plate face down in its holder; then slide the holder into the box and over the iodine, and clamp the lid shut. The plate will cycle through various colors as it fumes, and each color will expose at different contrasts and times. Many people suggest using the second cycle colors, but I prefer the first cycle magenta/purple as the color with optimal contrast and detail. Fuming too little increases contrast and possibly fogging; fuming too much greatly lowers contrast due to the thickness of the iodine on the plate. Fuming the plate is very tricky, and humidity, temperature, etc., will factor into how long it takes to get the color you want. Fuming to first cycle magenta took about two to three minutes for me, depending on the temperature of the box. Once the plate achieves first cycle yellow, you will need to check it very often as it changes rapidly (as in every 10 seconds). To see the colors of the plate, use a bug light reflected on white mat board beneath the plate. Turn the plate so that you can see the reflection of the white matboard in it; this will help in accurately determining plate color.

### **Calculating Exposure**

The daguerreotype is a positive to positive process. You can expose in camera, with an ISO of about 1 or 2. Or you can control the process by making very low contrast lith positives, which is what I did. I used Arista film and Clayton's developer, diluted 1:11 to begin with. My positives had very high detail in both shadows and highlights. By using a densitometer I determined that the density of the shadows should only be 30% greater

than the highlight density in order for both areas to print. Generally I was more concerned with the midtones, with an optimum separation of no more than 20%. To calculate a good beginning exposure for an unknown positive, I used the densitometer to compare what I found to be the most important areas of the positive image to a similar area in a different positive with a known exposure time. This is a relative system with carefully controlled variables in order to reduce errors, which are both time consuming and very expensive.

### **Exposing**

In a room with a bug light or a dim darkroom light, sandwich the sensitized plate between the positive and the contact printer back, so that when you turn the printer face up the order should be: glass, positive (right-reading side up), plate (sensitized side touching the positive), then printer back. Newton's Rings may form from pressing two slick surfaces together, but they are not a nuisance at this stage. To expose, I used a 500 watt blue photoflood (dags are sensitive to blue light) hanging 12" from the contact printer surface. My exposures ranged from 7-17 seconds. Overexposure results in very thick highlight areas. Generally, it is better to slightly underexpose to keep the darkest shadows clear. The highlights can then be retrieved through the toning process.

### **Becquerel Development**

Instead of using acutely toxic mercury to develop the dags, I used the method Edmund Becquerel discovered in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which is to expose the plate under a dim red light for eight hours or more. My method involved removing the blue photoflood and replacing it with a 250-watt regular bulb. Then I opened the contact printer and removed the positive, and replaced the plate along with the back of the printer. (At this stage, Newton's Rings are problematic because they leave marks on the plate that show up during gold toning. I still do not know how to get rid of them. The best method would be to have the glass and plate separated.) Rubylith film taped to the top of the glass keeps the plate from becoming fogged by ambient blue lightwaves, and only allows red waves to penetrate. The plate must be allowed to remain in this stage for a minimum of eight

hours, during which time the plate must be kept cool by letting a fan circulate over the surface of the printer; otherwise, the plate will fog from heat. I have determined eight hours to be the minimum developing time for a strong image. Times greater than eight hours make the image warmer toned, but not stronger.

### **Processing**

The image must be fixed by removing unexposed iodine with a weak solution of 15 grams sodium thiosulfate to 1000 ml of distilled water. Non-distilled water will tear away the image. You do not need to add sodium sulfite, as the clearing solution must be used within several hours of its use. The solution must be poured through a coffee filter to remove any particulate matter. When developing, the plate must be fully submerged in the solution at the same time, or marks will form on the plate. Agitate gently for twice the amount of time it takes to clear the plate, usually about four minutes. The plate must then be rinsed for at least five minutes in clean water. Do not use distilled water, as it will tear the image. Although it was recommended, I do not think spring water is good, either, and therefore used tap water. The faucet should not be placed directly over the plate, as running water will leave marks when the plate is toned. After rinsing, place plate in a holding bath of clean water before toning.

### **Gold Toning**

Toning makes the plate less fragile, changes the color of the plate, and also increases the overall density, especially in the highlight areas. Toning is an irreversible process, after which the plate cannot be buffed down to remove the image and start over. You may think you have removed the image, *but it will come back!* This is especially true of silver plated copper, because it cannot be buffed down enough to remove the gilding without exposing the copper. Therefore, think carefully before toning. If your image is poorly exposed, do not gild it, but instead rebuff and start over. With a pure silver plate, you can redo the process ad infinitum, but with silver plated copper, you have two, or possibly three chances. If you decide to gild, you must mix a two-part solution. Part A is 1 gram

gold chloride to 500 ml of distilled water in a clean glass jar. Gold toner is very easily contaminated, so be mindful of this fact. Part B is 4 grams sodium thiosulfate to 500 ml of distilled water, and can be mixed just before toning. Mix equal proportions of Part A into Part B just before toning, strain through a coffee filter and then pour into a clean glass tray that is large enough to hold the plate, but not too large because gold is very expensive. The solution must be heated over a hot plate or skillet until it is bubbling and steaming, around 200 degrees. Tilt the tray and submerge the clean plate so that it is covered by the solution at the same time; if it is submerged unevenly, the flow will leave marks. Move the tray around the skillet so that it tones evenly. It will turn a dark purple first and then gradually clear. It is fully toned when all the highlight areas are no longer purple. This takes around ten minutes. During toning, ugly spots may show up; sometimes they will go away with further toning, sometimes they won't. Newton's Rings and any other flaws incurred during the process such as poor buffing, residual rouge, plate wipes, and contamination, will show up during toning. After toning, rinse the plate for ten minutes in gently circulating water. To dry, tilt the plate and use a hairdryer to chase water droplets from the plate. If this is not done uniformly, it will leave water spots, and you must submerge the plate in water and try again. Be aware that a dry plate is not the same color or density as a wet plate, whether toned or untoned.

### **Preservation**

The daguerreotype plate is silver; thus it will tarnish or oxidize over time. It will also corrode if it comes into contact with certain contaminants (such as iron). It should be matted in an acid free manner, and kept out of the open air and humidity.

### **Conclusions**

The daguerreotype process is not easy. Every mistake shows because the plate is the final product. You must go slowly and methodically through every step, taking care to notice changes in the plate. Even then things happen that simply cannot be accounted for. Also, as with every alternative process, this process is subject to variations due to temperature,



humidity, and other unknown factors, making it difficult to anticipate changes when working in an environment other than the one I have specifically outlined.

### **Resources**

As of now, there are very few daguerreotypists. Daguerreotypists like to say that many more people have climbed Mount Everest than have made daguerreotypes in the modern age. The digital revolution has made wet photography, and certainly alternative photographic processes, nearly obsolete. Nevertheless, to me even my worst daguerreotypes are worth the trouble. I could not have made them without these resources.

[www.newdags.com](http://www.newdags.com) is an excellent resource. Many thanks to Charlie Schreiner for his patience and help.

*Coming Into Focus* edited by John Barnier has a very good section on becquerel daguerreotypes by Gerard Meegan. While I do not agree with everything he has written, I believe it is due to the inherent fickleness of the process as opposed to faulty information.

Masako Nitz made my excellent fuming box. She is almost certainly the only person on the island to have made one.

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