

Susan Burnstine looks at two photographers who use alternative processes to achieve contemporary imagery

In last month's column, I discussed two photographers featured at Photolucida in Portland, Oregon. At the event, there was an inspiring amount of photographers working with alternative or handmade processes. Perhaps two of the most memorable artists working in that arena were Heidi Kirkpatrick and Leah Macdonald, both of whom are in tune thematically but vastly different in process and style.

Portland based photographer Heidi Kirkpatrick uses photographs to transform found objects into playful pieces of art. Her images reveal a view of the world experienced by women and she prints them on film positives which she mounts within or on found objects such as vintage tins, blocks, boxes, copper plates, dominos and children's toys. These wonderfully unique pieces can be handled, arranged and adorned on a table rather than hanging on a wall, allowing each object to possess its own unique interactive charm.

Kirkpatrick created her first three dimensional piece 10 years ago using appropriated images of female relatives. In 2004 she moved away from that approach and began to photograph her own personal vision, which resulted in her current body of work. The banner title for the photo object work is *Lost and Found* and there are several chapters. *Souvenirs* depicts women cramped in vintage souvenir boxes. *Cigarette Butt* focuses on an image of a woman's rear-end placed over myriad illustrations ranging from flash cards to cook books to music scores and biology books in ashtrays. *Plates* is reminiscent of 19th century tintypes, as the imagery is mounted on copper and brass plates. And *Specimens* uses film positives layered over *Gray's Anatomy* pages housed in small metal-hinged boxes, referencing cased images of the 1800s.

Kirkpatrick has struggled with a



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fair amount of physical pain in her life and feels that by dissecting *Gray's Anatomy* and using it in this latest project it has helped her to work through her anguish. When creating the image, she prints the photograph on a film positive in the darkroom, develops it in trays, selects a page from *Gray's Anatomy* then works on the pairing until she finds a combination that visually stimulates her.

Kirkpatrick will be part of the 40th

anniversary exhibition at Panopticon Gallery in Boston, Massachusetts, on view until October 31 and is currently working on her series *Plates*, *Specimens* and *Mah Jongg* tiles.

► heidirkirkpatrick.com

Philadelphia based photographer Leah Macdonald depicts the inner lives of women in

photographs but arduously exercises these visions via the use of hand painted encaustics over silver gelatin prints.

Macdonald's current series, *Soliloquy*, emerged from feelings of fragility she experienced in her personal life. As in all of her work, she photographed the series with a 4x5 camera, which she enjoys using because she feels that it sees the way she sees.



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Macdonald confesses she has always been a bit of a rebel in the darkroom. When studying photography in college she never dusted or cleaned her negatives like her fellow students. Instead, she relished pouring dirt on them or scratching finished prints on a gravel driveway. When she began melting wax on her photos in college, she recalls she was instantly hooked on the process.

Macdonald feels that the most interesting thing about her relationship with encaustics is that the results can't be duplicated. She explains, 'I cannot repeat my performances. Every time I make a body of work, I solve problems, open new doors and the medium and I interact differently. It is really exciting.'

She also feels that beeswax is a perfect metaphor for human skin. She explains, 'It is soft and flexible and can be healed if it gets hurt or I make a mistake.'

Macdonald draws inspiration for all of her work from childhood memories, tragedies and traumas that formed her. She began photographing



© Leah Macdonald



© Leah Macdonald

Soliloquy in an empty apartment last winter and titled the first portion of the work *Thin Ice* as she felt she was personally skating on thin ice in her personal life at the time.

With this series, she acknowledges that she was far more undirected and random in her process than with previous successes, such as *Female Fairytale* or *In My Body*. At the time she felt more relaxed producing this work, thus the connection between her models, ideas, printing and painting came together seamlessly and allowed her to create the drama, intrigue and softness she envisioned for the series.

Remarkably, Macdonald is legally blind in her right eye yet has precise vision in her left eye. She confesses, 'Being visually impaired has physically shown me a world of blur and also made me incredibly open minded to other ways of doing things.'

She recalls that her favourite thing she learned in school was when one of her teachers told her, 'It is actually your weaknesses that are your greatest assets.' Subsequently, she's embraced her imperfections and frequently photographed solely by focusing with either her right or left eye.

EXHIBITIONS
USA

DAYTONA

Southeast Museum of Photography

Douglas Kirkland

Until February 12, 2012

► smponline.org

LOS ANGELES

DNJ Gallery

Benjamin Lowy, Storylines

Until November 2011

► dnjgallery.net

M+B Gallery

Matthew Brandt

Until October 29

► mbart.com

NEW YORK CITY

Pace/MacGill Gallery

Richard Benson

Until October 22

► pacemacgill.com

Robert Mann Gallery

Elijah Gowin: Into The Sun

Until October 22

► robertmann.com

TAMPA

Florida Museum of Photographic Arts

Duane Michals

Until November 6

► fmopa.org

Macdonald has had a number of solo exhibitions this year and is currently working on a new untitled body of work that focuses on the female figure.

► leahmacdonald.com

Susan Burnstine Photography

► susanburnstine.com