



NOIR BLANC

"Taking pictures is savoring life intensely, every hundredth of a second."
- Marc Riboud

True as it may be that photography is sometimes just "pressing a button," there's a rich assortment of possibilities when it comes to how and why you press it. We've all seen terrible photos, in fact, they're more likely to have inundated your life than the good ones. What with ads, social media and your own quick snaps of a birthday party, or a fish you caught last summer, or the moon two nights ago. Sometimes it's startlingly simple to forget the power of a truly great photograph, a captivating image worthy of the masses' admiration. There are plenty that snap to peoples' minds when they stop to consider some of the more deeply moving images they've seen. Some of the best photographs reflect some of the best of humanity, and the worst, no doubt. What would a conversation about extraordinary photography be if it didn't include stirring images of war, destruction and chaos?

But Noir Blanc isn't about war photos, or even *great* photos for that matter. Taking place to coincide with *Photo Shanghai 2015*, it's a simple tribute to the power of one basic type of photography: black and white. However, the Liu Dao collective has added its signature flair for the technologically dramatic. Yes, black and white photography *with a twist*. That twist of course being the infusion of LED animation. Many have questioned the validity of the type of work displayed here or whether it should even be referred to as photography. Our response is *yes, it most certainly should*. Art history is swollen with stories of art ahead of its time being dismissed by the establishment. We think we're in good company. Whatever you might consider this exhibition, it is a visual one that we encourage you to explore. And this right here, is a written one to accompany it. Just a little bit about how all this stuff got started in the first place, and where we'd like to take it.

Camera obscura is a term most people have seen or heard several times before. Whether it be the name of a band, graphic novel, website etc, or used for its actual meaning: the first version of what we now call simply a "camera"¹. Camera obscura is Latin for "Dark Chamber" and is an appropriate name since the first crude iteration of a photographing device was not much more than a bulky box with a hole in the side². This first version was used merely to get a temporary outline of an image, which would then be used to draw detailed drafts of an image. If you're tired of selfies, social media and instagram you largely have Thomas Wedgewood to thank, the man who (at an unknown date just before 1800) thought to develop a more permanent version of this process and, in doing so, invented the first camera³.

As most can imagine, photography was a huge hit. The only initial limitations on people were their imaginations (and of course the prohibitively high cost, and toxic chemicals such as mercury⁴, of most early cameras). Thanks to Louis-Jaques-Mandé Daguerre, inventor of the daguerreotype photo¹, the world was suddenly seeing itself in unimaginably precise detail⁵. All of what would traditionally have been word-of-mouth tales and big fish stories now had a visual reference to back-up or debunk those stories⁶. Although many photographers experimented with color as early as 1868⁷, it wasn't until Gabriel Lippmann's 1908 Nobel Prize winning technique that it became a feasibly reproducible process⁸.

The person who really took to Lippmann's ideas was George Eastman, founder of Eastman Kodak. In 1935 his company introduced the world to Kodachrome, the first affordable and reliable color film invented by John Capstaff⁹. This seismic shift in the availability of color photography would lead to a several decade-long cultural weaning off of black and white². Although that cultural shift from black and white to color doesn't have any exact landmark moment, it does have some notable markers. Many people would cite John Logie Baird's first color television transmission on July 3, 1928¹⁰. Others remember the shift as the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*¹¹, a movie that literally changes from black and white to color during the first 20 minutes. Whatever the root cause (or causes) were, once the public starting seeing images in color it led to a sudden burst of new technologies and event many experiments such as Edwin Land's³ during the late 1950's¹². More than that though, the world had gotten a taste of something seemingly magical and they wanted more.

While the technical side of photography's development is endlessly fascinating (hundreds of books have been written about it), the history of it as an *art form* is just as enthralling. Photography was displayed as early as 1859 in the Paris Universal Exposition alongside the accepted fine arts of painting and sculpture¹³. Taking place a mere twenty years after the medium's invention, this was a momentous first step. It is thanks to figures like Alfred Stieglitz who pushed for photography to be recognized as Art¹⁴, that events like Photo Shanghai can even take place today. Throughout its history, photography has continually redefined the concept of art. Once analog photography was accepted, pushback against photo manipulation (spearheaded by the Pictorialism movement¹⁵) was overcome, in the 1990s purists railed against any work that altered full-frame negatives, more recently digital photography has entered the fight. Hindsight allows us to question how critics could have ever questioned the merit of photography as art through each of these stages.

History though, isn't so much the theme of Noir Blanc, it's looking at the history in order to move towards the future. For Liu Dao, the stark contrast of the black and white photograph mixed with the pulsing splash of life provided by the LED animation within is something unique. These works are printed using the Diasec technique¹⁶, a classic face-mounting process used by greats such as Andreas Gursky¹⁷. This intermixing of high craftsmanship is something that might be the future of the genre. Alas though many

¹ Many other "types" sprung up shortly afterwards trying to improve upon Daguerre's methods. These include the Albumen print, Ambrotype, Tintype and Calotype. None were quite as successful as the daguerreotype though. This was mostly a testament to the Daguerreotype's quality but also a result of copyright and patent issues.

² Kodak would again have a landmark moment in photographic history in 1991 when they released the first commercially available digital camera: The Kodak DCS 100. The initial model had a retail price of 20,000 USD.

³ Edwin H. Land was an American scientist and inventor who co-founded Polaroid. He made endless contributions to the world of color film (and color theory in general) including numerous color filters for lens, instant film and of course the Polaroid instant camera.

have scoffed at mixing of genres no matter the level of quality, much the same way they scoffed at instant film and digital cameras, the same way they scoffed at Diane Arbus' freaks¹⁸ and Joel-Peter Witkin's strewn corpses¹⁹. The pioneering artists of photography have worked tirelessly to push the boundaries of art, and that is exactly what the artists of Liu Dao do with their work. Although we don't often take time to deliberately explain the specific meanings behind our artworks, let us try this time around to do just that.

These animations represent the little deviations from the occasional normalcy and complacency of day-to-day living. They are the moving narrative of the idea behind the work. The stoic contrast of black and white is much like life itself, simultaneously mundane but relentlessly gorgeous. Maybe these animations represent a new job, a new lover, a new bar or restaurant or a great book. Something that stands out... or did once. But the longer you look at one next to the other you start to wonder which is the real world. Is it the reliable landscape that surrounds you, unmoving and wholly indifferent to your existence? Or is it these bursts of life and spirit that demand our attention. Or could it be both? Is the real beauty of a life well lived some mix of these components. That's what Noir Blanc offers up, a captivating mix of the transient and the fixed. That intense hundredth of a second, waiting there forever, punctuated with bursts of novelty.

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Dates: From September 24th to November 17th 2015
Vernissage: Wednesday, September 24th, from 6:00 – 10:00 pm
Curation: Ryan Nimmo
Art Direction: Thomas Charvériat, Anto Lau
Scenography: Jean Le Guyader
Coordination: Yeung Sin Ching 杨倩菁 & Adam Hseih 谢昕
Venue: island6 Main, 50 Moganshan Road, building 6, 2F, Shanghai
Artist: island6 Arts Collective
Link: http://www.island6.org/NoirBlanc_info.html
Beer Sponsor: <http://www.duvelchina.com>

- ¹ <http://www.obscurajournal.com/history.php>
- ² <http://brightbytes.com/cosite/what.html>
- ³ http://www.wedgwoodmuseum.org.uk/learning/discovery_packs/pack/lives-of-the-wedgwoods/chapter/tom-wedgwood-1771-1805
- ⁴ <http://www.cycleback.com/1800s/earlyphotos.htm>
- ⁵ http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/dagu/hd_dagu.htm
- ⁶ <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=9R8DAAAAMBAlpg=PA641&pg=PA717&hl=en-v=onepage&q&f=false>
- ⁷ <http://photo.net/history/timeline>
- ⁸ http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/physics/laureates/1908/lippmann-bio.html
- ⁹ http://www.photographyblog.com/news/kodak_retires_kodachrome_film/
- ¹⁰ <http://www.historyofinformation.com/expanded.php?id=4690>
- ¹¹ <http://www.jsonline.com/news/waukesha/51361182.html>
- ¹² <http://www.ghuth.com/2010/05/05/edwin-land-s-theory-of-color-vision/>
- ¹³ [http://www.csus.edu/indiv/o/obriene/art109/readings/11_Baudelaire Photography.htm](http://www.csus.edu/indiv/o/obriene/art109/readings/11_Baudelaire%20Photography.htm)
- ¹⁴ http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/stgp/hd_stgp.htm
- ¹⁵ <http://theartofphotography.tv/episodes/pictorialism/>
- ¹⁶ <http://diasec.com/what-s-diasec>
- ¹⁷ <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/andreas-gursky-2349>
- ¹⁸ <http://beautifuldecay.com/2013/11/04/diane-arbus-photographing-freaks-costumes-wear-year-round/>
- ¹⁹ <http://www.salon.com/2000/05/09/witkin/>