

Overview



24th at Carolina (left variation), 2006. Photogravure on *gampi* paper *chine collé*. Paper size: 32-3/4 x 27-3/4"; image size: 23-1/2 x 19-3/4".
Edition 15. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

JOHN CHIARA: LANDSCAPES

By Dena Schuckit

John Chiara is a photographer. Check his bag of tricks! All the usual items are in evidence here: the camera, of course, and random darkroom chemistry. A couple of burning and dodging tools are included, as well as photographic paper. There is a camera stand in the kit, along with a selection of filters. We guessed that Chiara's large format, color landscape photos, often 60 inches in width, could translate into an impressive photogravure project in the Crown Point studio.

Mundane photography details, though, render a flat and one-dimensional view of this artist. Ask him for some classification

of what he does, and he's likely to respond that his activities are a sort of performance art, and that the resulting photographs can be seen as a documentation or byproduct of his interaction, on that particular day, with the people and circumstances encountered by him and his camera. "The photographs," he says, "suggest the activity of their creation."

Chiara and his camera do attract a certain amount of unavoidable curiosity. This camera of his is as big as my closet; four of us could sit comfortably inside. It is a huge, hand-made wooden box painted black and mounted on a flatbed trailer. A smaller box,



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cinched to the front with long nylon straps, houses the focusable precision lens. The whole construction is lugged along to shoots by a pickup truck and then parked right in position. Sometimes he jacks up one side of the trailer or the other to tilt the massive camera's view a bit up or down, but in general not much maneuvering is going to happen once the truck is parked. There is no such thing as a low profile, stealth shoot with this thing, and the photo sessions occur in local public places. Which means someone is always watching; today it's me.

John Chiara is a San Francisco artist. He attended graduate school here (at CCA), lives here, and is interested in documenting this place and the way it looks: its steep hills and multitude of small neighborhood parks and green spaces with their dramatic vistas; the grassy precipices over the urban order below; the undulation of the landscape rolling all the way to the sea; and the way the fog froths up and over the various peaks "almost," he says, "like an extension of the wavebreak." Photographing right into the sun, into bright glare, accentuates the aspect of landscape in his work. Trees and long grass dissolve as if into water, hills fade to white, light generally bounces and rolls around, creating welcome aberrations and surprises.

We pull up, this afternoon, alongside the exact Potrero Hill park view from which Chiara shot the material used in his Crown Point project to make the six photogravures shown here. The trees in these images actually do stand next to each other in a row and the color prints, hung together in the correct order, form one long

landscape shot. Chiara likes this spot, the way the trees divide the scene, and wants to make an image now that will be a unique photograph, rather than a photogravure printed in an edition.

Each John Chiara photograph is an original. The images are shot directly onto huge paper, at full size and without the use of any negative film, and (when he's working) at the rate of about one or two per day. Another image of this location means another whole day spent here. Chiara develops his photos by rolling them around in a big solution-filled tube adapted from a capped, plastic sewer pipe, 18" in diameter. It's laborious, this process, and an exercise in invention and patience.

The giant black box camera suggests an imminent performance, a puppet show on wheels, perhaps. There's even a little curtain across the lens window that remains until the lens box is hoisted into place. Chiara disappears into the box for long stretches of time, initially letting his eyes adjust to the darkness in order to make sure that the image is focused. The brightest parts of the image outside shine inside onto the back surface of the camera, upside down—this is just a big camera obscura. Chiara slides a white bit of paper around where the light hits in order to see the image more clearly before taping a large piece of photo paper to the back surface to begin a slow exposure. He then shimmies out of the camera through a 10-foot, makeshift, black plastic tube so that no extra light leaks into the box during his exit. He emerges, comically oozed from the camera, never knowing what's going to be waiting for him outside. It's a moment of suspense—will there



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be a vicious dog standing guard? A suspicious neighbor checking that his camera is not a methamphetamine laboratory on wheels or a portable bomb? Curious police approach, sometimes, and offer friendly advice for possible future project locations.

While the image is exposing, Chiara waves his hand back and forth before the lens, dodging here, burning there. The process is intuitive for him; he doesn't use a light meter or timer. The lengths of tape used to fix the paper to the back surface will expose along with the landscape and remain visible in the finished piece. Look, you can see them along the edges of this series of etchings. Chiara works by feel and by experience that he's gleaned from past shoots with this camera, and he has an experimental attitude more common to printmakers than to photographers. There is a raw quality to the results, achieved with accomplishment.

In order get his Crown Point project rolling, John Chiara channeled his spirit of experimentation. It was necessary to adjust major elements of his working process so that the end product of a day out shooting would not be a finished photograph on paper, but instead would be material we could use in the studio to create the many intaglio photogravure plates that are combined to make this new group of editions.

The end product of a day out shooting for one of his photogravures was a full size positive of the image on film. To this end, the photographic paper he normally exposes taped to the inside of his camera was swapped out for large sheets of negative film. He exposed several sheets of this film, one at a time and from the exact

same vantage point, with the camera completely static. For each of these exposures, one crucial detail (focus, length of exposure, position of the sun, etc.) received some slight tweak. Because of slight variations in shooting conditions, every individual sheet of film tells the exact same story but with some area of the image playing a more dominant role than in the other transparencies. Each sheet would cooperate harmoniously with the others when sandwiched together in perfect register or alignment, and would also retain some degree of individual personality.

In the photogravure process, each exposed and developed sheet of negative film is converted first into a positive film (through a contact exposure) and then, over the course of a few days in the Crown Point darkroom, into an etched photogravure plate. One sheet of film equals one intaglio plate. Every one of the plates is inked in a separate combination of colors and tones and they are printed all together. This accounts for the color separation apparent in the prints.

Chiara developed the colors composing the *24th at Carolina* triptych over the course of his two weeks spent in the Crown Point studio. The shades of blue, yellow, and black are the result of countless proofs, pulled in a myriad of colors and combinations, from the etched photogravure plates. Under Chiara's direction, Emily York (the additional Master Printer participating on the project) and I inked each plate—first in one color and then in another—hanging a new proof on the wall every time. The resulting succession of proofs pinned to the studio wall would recount a



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clear story documenting the evolution of these prints on the way to their final, satisfactory destination.

On the bright day that I am in the field with Chiara we have already tied up the photogravure project. I'm tagging along for a regular photographic shoot at the same scene. We're in a public park inviting attention with the hulking camera construction, yet the labor feels intensely private and solitary. A quiet stillness characterizes the view here, a sense that is reflected in both Chiara's photographs and in our photogravures. Both exude a contemplative calm, uninhabited by people. The only confrontation happening now is at that place where the bright light meets the foggy looming of haze off in the distance; the only real drama is the blinding beam flashing off the windscreen of an old parked car. Yet there is, in the work, some degree of tension—this could be in part the consequence of an intentional avoidance of documenting sites that are just plain pretty. Summer has parched the overgrown grass visible in the foreground, and, as far as I can tell, there is no place to sit down here to enjoy the view. A dog-walkers' route, this is really more of a protected, uncultivated urban plot than a park. It's a scruffy, unpretentious triangle of land shoved into Potrero Hill's steep perimeter until it nearly slips right off into the impressive view below and beyond. Chiara stares out there and idly, by second nature, burns in the exposing bottom bit with a few waves of his hand in front of the lens. Or he sits in the darkness within. He spends a lot of time alone on these days. The photographs are moody and mysterious and gorgeous and inviting, "but with an

edge," he likes to think. It's landscape photography to him, only more psychological.

Considering that this artist received his first real camera at the age of seven from his father, who was a photographer, and that he has had nearly life-long easy access to one darkroom or another, he *would* know his way around photographic equipment. He invented his own processes when regular photographic processes seemed to him to be producing images that felt too objective and homogeneous. (He realizes now that he inadvertently reinvented the daguerreotype camera.) Chiara intentionally cultivated a working environment where he would take on constant collaboration with circumstances of luck. Light, weather, temperature, and guesswork are only a few of the conditions influencing the outcome of his work, along with a certain physical awkwardness that can be the upshot of engaging in super-sized materials. The happy accidents, embraced aberrations, and controlled chaos generated by this set-up make for an image that can appear unearthed and historical. Areas are blown out while others are saturated with rich darks or unexpected hues. Blinding flashes and orbs of reflected light from sun spots or moisture in the air exacerbate a sense of transition; one might even call this transitive quality sublime.

The dreamy fading in and fading out that occurs as edges of objects disintegrate into oncoming glare or inky darkness generates a hazy void which invites the viewer to fill in the blanks; the large scale of the images invites space for this kind of viewing. The images look a little familiar, like some memory that you can't quite



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Potrero Hill, San Francisco, 2006.



John Chiara, Potrero Hill, San Francisco, 2006.



23rd at Carolina, 2006. Photogravure on *gampi paper chine collé*. Paper size: 22-3/4 x 26-1/2"; image size: 16 x 20-1/2". Edition 15. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

grab hold of, but without any nostalgia or longing. A particular kind of subjectivity motivates this artist. The work might, Chiara suggests, remind you of some photographic recollection, or maybe some photographic movement. "But when you get up close," he adds, "I hope that it actually refreshes you as something current or new."



John Chiara and printer Dena Schuckit in the Crown Point studio, 2006.

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