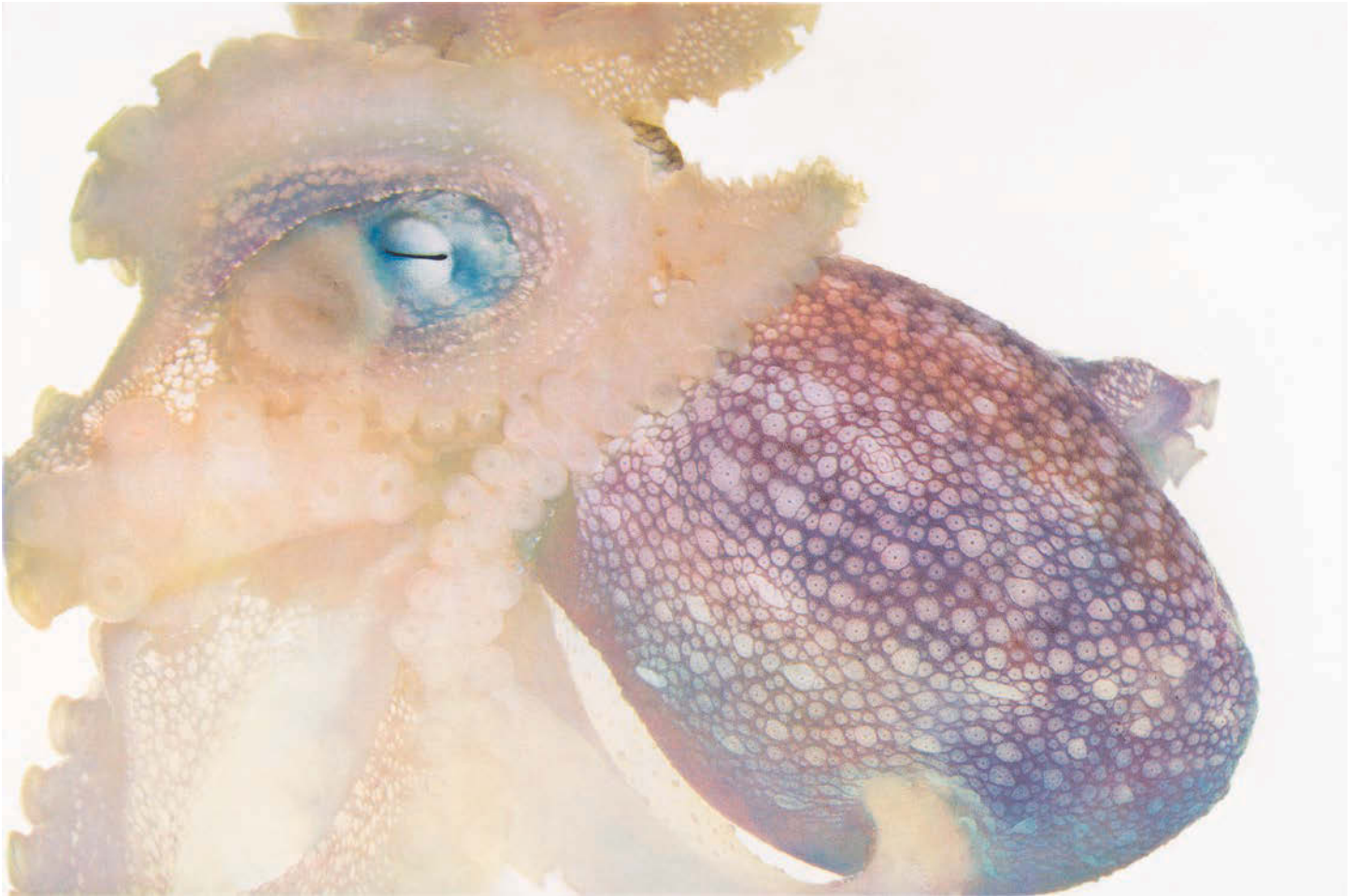


# Overview



Susan Middleton, *Day Octopus*, 2008. Color photogravure. Paper size: 27 x 33"; image size: 15½ x 23". Edition 30. Printed by Asa Muir-Harmony.

## *A Photograph Printed as an Etching*

**Photogravures by SUSAN MIDDLETON** (with an Inserted Short History of How We Got Here)

by Kathan Brown

The octopus had been living in a pail of fresh seawater before being photographed, and had made its legs almost metallic in appearance and arranged its body spots into an orderly translucence. Against the white background of Susan Middleton's mini-studio on the deck of a research vessel in Hawaii, the creature became paler by the minute. Middleton, following her customary approach, searched for eye contact, and the animal draped its unruly legs, about thirty inches long, like a shawl over its six-inch long body. The Day Octopus, unlike most of its relatives, hunts by day, and its complex brain sends messages that constantly change its skin color and texture as it moves, camouflaged to be

nearly invisible, along the ocean floor and among coral reefs. I was surprised to learn that the Day Octopus is also called the Big Blue Octopus. A photo I found online showed a shimmering blue creature with irregular spots, frothy highlights, and craggy brown shadows looking quite unlike the animal you see here.

"Can you intensify the color just in the blue area around the eye?" Middleton asked the printers. Yes, they could do that, because the photo was etched into four copper plates and inked by hand. The plates hold pigment approximations of standard printing inks—yellow, magenta, cyan, and black—and are made from four positive transparencies we separated in a computer from



*Requiem*, 2008. Color photogravure. Paper size: 30¾" x 25½"; image size: 20½ x 16¼". Edition 30.

the original image. This was the first time we had tried to print photogravures in full, separated color, and I had hoped the process would deliver balanced color nearly automatically, as in normal printing. But if that was our goal, we shouldn't have started with an octopus. "The Day Octopus is a walking watercolor," Middleton said. "A diaphanous creature, a pinnacle of adaptability. A straight print of it wouldn't work. In fact, I adjusted the color before you even saw it." The original image was a raw digital file, so Middleton had processed it on a computer. "Similar to dodging and burning in the darkroom, which I almost always do," she said. "It's exciting to be able to use selective inking as well."

Nevertheless, making a straight-up full color print was something I wanted to try, and three weeks later with a different photo-

graph our three printers, with Asa Muir-Harmony in charge, were able to achieve that. The subject, a passenger pigeon whose species has been extinct for about a hundred years, is a museum specimen. A soft spot of cotton substitutes touchingly for eye contact, and thanks to the 8 x 10 color transparency that was the original photo, every feather is clearly defined. "This was the easy one," Middleton remembers, "It was clear from the first proof that it would be beautiful. Even the iridescence of the feathers is implied, and that black! A bullet-proof black that I've never seen in any other photo process."

The passenger pigeon's name comes from the French word *passager*, to pass by, and the birds historically traveled across America in flocks more abundant than those of any creature except



*Naupaka (Front)*, 2008. Color photogravure. Paper size: 29¼ x 26¼"; image size: 16¼ x 16¼". Edition 30.



*Naupaka (Back)*, 2008. Color photogravure. Paper size: 29¼ x 26¼"; image size: 16¼ x 16¼". Edition 30.

the desert locust. A flock could be as much as a mile wide and 300 miles long and take days to pass over. Clearly this bird was not popular. In fact, in 1703 a Catholic bishop in Quebec formally excommunicated the species. In 1823 Natty Bumppo, the hero of a novel by James Fenimore Cooper, decried the "wastey ways" of people who shot into the flocks felling hundreds of birds in a session.

By 1857 the Ohio legislature was called upon to pass legislation to protect the passenger pigeon, and the last individual, named Martha and residing in the Cincinnati zoo, died in 1914. In the first episode of *Star Trek* the main character likened the probable extinction of the inhabitants of a planet to the fate of the bird. *Requiem*, Middleton's title for her print, seems appropriate.

Susan Middleton has said she considers herself a portrait photographer. Her subjects are individual animals or plants, each one formally isolated against a neutral background—white, black, or gray. "Gray is the trickiest, no matter how you print it," she says. In Hawaii she photographed against a gray background two views of an odd little flower, smaller than its image in her print. It looks like half a flower, but actually has simply spread and lifted its petals to better expose its intimate parts to pollinating bees. In the backgrounds of *Naupaka (Front)* and *Naupaka (Back)* the four colors we used intermingle—you can see them individually if you look closely. Overall, however, the background appears "like gray felt," as Middleton observed. It contrasts in texture to the smooth translucency of the flower's petals.

The smoothness of the petals, the evident grain of the felt-like background, and the deep red-black outline of the leaf structure show the versatility of aquatint, the process that produces tones and colors both in ordinary etchings and in traditional "hand" or "grain" photogravures like these. The grain comes from dusting tree rosin onto the plate before it is etched. Its fine random pattern substitutes for the halftone screen used in other types of printing. Halftone screens can be used in photogravure, but aquatint enhances the special beauty of the process, a beauty that depends on the basic fact that visual differences in the print come from physical differences in the plate. The black area is etched more deeply than the gray, so it holds more ink. The lightly etched petals of the *Naupaka* flower hold very little ink; they appear smooth until you look at them closely and the fine light grain of the aquatint becomes evident.

There is more ink quantity in the outlines of the flower than in its petals; there is more ink in the background of *Requiem* than in the body of the bird. That would not be true if the images had been printed any other way.

Photogravure is the only photographic process—darkroom-, digital-, or press-based—that is not printed from one surface to another. In photogravure you print from the depths of the plate, not the surface. To print a photogravure plate, you fill it with ink, wipe the surface clean, and then under great pressure mold damp paper into the plate to pull out the ink.

A photogravure always has a distinctive presence on a wall, but because of the hand wiping process and the fact that ink is embedded in the paper rather than sitting on the surface, the ink cannot be glossy. I don't find this a drawback, but according to photographer and printer Richard Benson who organized a show called *Photography in Ink* for the Museum of Modern Art in New York, "Gloss always wins because it can carry a blacker black and shows finer detail." In the same paragraph, however, he speaks of "the magical matte surface of hand gravure" and likens its black to "the black surround in a monarch butterfly's wing."

Take a close look at Susan Middleton's *Passenger Pigeon*, the black and white gravure of the front side of the bird also shown in *Requiem*, to see if you think gloss could improve the black or the fine detail (I don't think so). But gloss is not the point—Benson says we "should avoid comparing such different things side-by-side." He does compare ink jet printing favorably to gravure, however, since both are matte surfaces. Again, you can be the judge whether such a comparison is merited. (By the way, ink jet normally prints with mostly fugitive dyes. It is now capable of more permanent "pigment prints" but the ink used in ink-jet must be thin and is on the surface. The ink in a photogravure is full-bodied and made only from pigment and oil, proven lightfast over centuries.) In New York, I saw the show that Benson assembled. The examples of gravure were limited to historic ones, by Alfred Stieglitz for example.

"OK," I can almost hear you asking, "Why aren't there more color photogravures in museums and in the marketplace?" The short answer is that not many photogravures have been made in fully separated color—at Crown Point Press or anywhere else. Black and white gravure now is well developed technically, and it is our experience that it appeals especially to conceptual artists. To them, photography is an accepted tool and photogravure is a handsome and versatile way to print photographs.

Susan Middleton's photogravures fall into the category of documentary photography, somewhat new to us at Crown Point. To catch up, I consulted an enlightening little book called *Photography: A Very Short Introduction*, by Steve Edwards (if you want a copy, you can order it from the Crown Point Bookstore online). Edwards talks about the appearance in 1880 of the Kodak camera (named for the sound its shutter made), and quotes photographer Alfred Stieglitz lamenting that "every Tom, Dick, and Harry could without trouble get something on a sensitive plate." Stieglitz with his photographs, his magazine *Camerawork*, and his



*Plain Rain Frog*, 2008. Photogravure printed on gampi paper chine collé. Paper size: 15 x 17¾"; image size: 8 x 11¾". Edition 30.

gallery 291 did everything he could to keep photography in place as a fine art, including resurrecting the process of photogravure. But it turned out that the masses loved to go into the country and make art photographs with their Kodaks, and some photographers in order to distinguish themselves from the masses made photos that imitated paintings or etchings, a movement called pictorialism. Over time, however, many artists took on what our contemporary John Baldessari has called "the language of the realm," and gained respect for the photograph as a document.

Stieglitz shifted gradually, Edwards says, from being "pictorialist-in-chief," to exploring "the seeming paradox of the picture in the shape of a document." About thirty years later, Walker Evans, as I learned from Roberta Smith in *The New York Times*, described his own work as "lyric documentation" and called Stieglitz's photographs "decadent lyric." Ansel Adams, about thirty years after that, said Evans and his colleagues were "not photographers but a bunch of sociologists with cameras."

Eventually, pursuing the documentary line, we arrive at revered photographers of recent and contemporary times, Eugene Atget, for example, or William Eggleston, who (according to Edwards) "tend to emphasize the means of depiction over what is depicted." This approach changed "documentary" to something called "medium specificity" and photographers were not the only artists interested in it. (The exploration of flatness in painting is medium specific.)

Medium specificity remains alive today in the big manipulated digital photographs populating museum walls. "The vicissitudes and paradoxes of the medium itself are the subject of much recent photography," writes Peter Plagens reviewing in *Art in America* an exhibition of what he calls "photoids" at the Met. And another review, this time of a book, speaks of "the resolute constructedness of photographs" and says (this made me laugh) that photographers "by saturating the photograph with signs of intention, raise the possibility of overcoming photography's ontological incapacity as a medium of art."



*Passenger Pigeon*, 2008. Photogravure printed on gampi paper chine collé. Paper size: 23 x 18½"; image size: 15 x 11½". Edition 20.

But, as Edwards says, "many artists don't give a damn about characteristics peculiar to the medium, and care even less about a convoluted art-photography." Photography, because of "its simple power of recording" is a tool for conceptual artists, and is also useful to other artists "who became particularly engaged with contemporary life." Those artists use the basic approach of documentary photography, with plain and direct form, to make their points. Edwards quotes Ed Ruscha, speaking about the snapshot-like-photos in his *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations*, saying his photos are "not arty." Ruscha went on to remark that he thinks "photography is dead as a fine art. It's only place is in the commercial world, for technical or information purposes."

This brings me back to Susan Middleton. "I consider myself a portrait photographer," she says. "My subjects are plants and animals, and I hope to evoke an emotional response." I told Middleton that I love the small photogravure of the Plain Rain frog, a South

African native, cocky and vulnerable at the same time.

"He is our blessing," Middleton replied. "With only a little adjustment of ink density, his portrait was perfect right from the start. In this photogravure project, we've taken several different pathways, but always achieved a final image that we think is truthful and really beautiful." I was struck that in interviewing this artist the talk repeatedly turned to her subjects, and to the medium as the best way to present them.

John Baldessari's remark about "the language of the realm" was made to David Bonetti in an interview for *The San Francisco Examiner*, July 15, 1990. *Photography: A Short Introduction* by Steve Edwards was published by Oxford University Press, 2006. Roberta Smith's article in which she quotes Walker Evans and Ansel Adams was in *The New York Times* on February 6, 2009. Peter Plagens's review of the show at the Met was in *Art in America* in February, 2009. The book review that spoke of photography's "ontological incapacity" is by Robin Kelsey, reviewing Michael Fried's "Why Photography Matters" in *Artforum*, January, 2009.

SUSAN MIDDLETON is a photographer specializing in portraits of animals and plants. She has been photographing rare and endangered species since 1986, and her work, with collaborator David Liittschwager, is collected in four books, two published by National Geographic Books and two by Chronicle Books. The working process developed by Middleton and Liittschwager is documented in an Emmy Award-winning National Geographic television special *America's Endangered Species: Don't Say Goodbye*, 1997. A book of Middleton's photographs with text by Mary Ellen Hannibal, *Evidence of Evolution: Darwin's Cabinet of Curiosities* will be published by Abrams in September, 2009.

In pursuing her work, Middleton has traveled across the United States and has lived for extended periods in Africa and Hawaii. She is a certified diver and has accompanied scientific oceanographic expeditions. She generally isolates animals and plants in studio-style settings with plain backdrops, constructing what she calls "mini-studios" for live creatures photographed in the field. Biologist Edward O. Wilson has commented that "[her] remarkable portraits speak to the heart. In the end, their kind of testimony may count as much toward conserving life as all the data and generalizations of science."

Susan Middleton was born in 1948 and holds a BA in sociology with a minor in art from Santa Clara University, California. She apprenticed in photography by working as an assistant to Richard Avedon. Middleton chaired the department of photography of the California Academy of Sciences, San Francisco, from 1982 to 1995. In 2006 she produced a thirty-minute documentary film focusing on animals and plants of the northwestern Hawaiian Islands.

Middleton has said that she isolates her subjects from their environments so we can perceive them as individuals, "each in its own right." Many locations where she shoots are in remote and difficult terrain, and often she must wait long periods for an animal to become comfortable in



Susan Middleton with printers Asa Muir-Harmony, Ianne Kjørli and Emily York (back to camera).

the setup she creates for the photo. "When I photograph an animal, I always wonder how we, as humans, are known by that animal," she has said.

Her photographs have been exhibited in many museums, among them the American Museum of Natural History, New York; the National Academy of Sciences, Washington, DC; and the California Academy of Sciences, San Francisco. Her work is in the collections of those institutions and the Center for Creative Photography, Tucson; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and the Honolulu Academy of Arts, among other public collections. She makes her home in San Francisco, California.

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