

EXPOSURES DAVID MAISEL

The Heart of the Art

DURING a residency at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles several years ago, I began to think about images that were created in the course of art preservation, where the realms of visual art and scientific research overlap. While taking photographs at the conservation department of the J. Paul Getty Museum, I became captivated by X-rays of art objects



"HISTORY'S SHADOW AV7," 2010



"HISTORY'S SHADOW GM5," 2010



"HISTORY'S SHADOW AB7," 2010

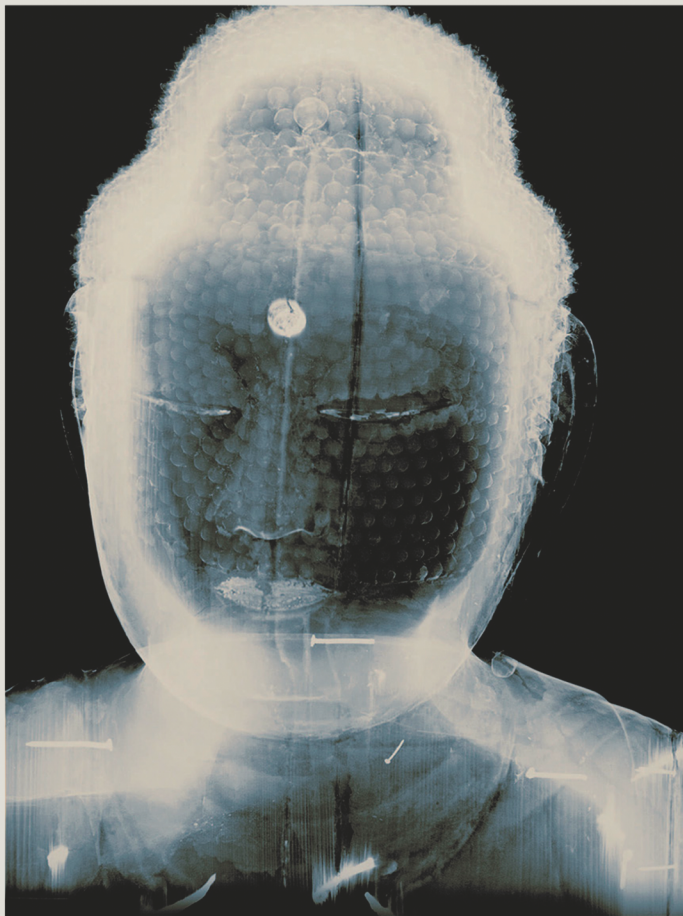
from the museum's permanent collections. These ghostly images seemed to surpass the potency of the original objects of art. They were like transmissions from the distant past, conveying messages across time, and connecting the contemporary viewer to the art impulse at the core of these ancient works.

My project's title, "History's Shadow," refers both to the literal images that the X-rays create as they are re-photographed, and to the metaphorical content informed by the past from which these objects derive.

Rendering three dimensions into two is at the heart of the photographic process. With the X-ray, this sense is compounded, since it maps both the inner and outer surfaces of its subject. The X-rays I photographed — both at the Getty museum and then at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco — were elements of previously existing archives made for the purpose of art conservation. Each was laid on a light box in a darkened room; the emanations of light were transmitted by long exposures onto color film, which was subsequently scanned to digital files that I work on using software to adjust the tonal range and to make certain that as much detail as possible is legible. I then adjust the scans to bring out colors latent in the original film and scans. Those colors intentionally reference cyanotypes, albumen prints and other 19th-century processes.

ONLINE: EXPOSURES

More of David Maisei's photographs from "History's Shadow" are online at nytimes.com/opinion



PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID MAISEL; "HISTORY'S SHADOW AB13," 2010

David Maisei is a visual artist whose book "History's Shadow" was published by Nazraeli Press.