

Review Penelope Umbrico's skewed digital vision

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Penelope Umbrico, "08_IMG_6628," 2014, Fuji Crystal Archive paper. (Penelope Umbrico)

The further we move from traditional technologies, it seems, the deeper the pull to revisit them. Penelope Umbrico’s digital prints at Mark Moore were created on a smartphone but look like old-fashioned photographic accidents.

Plagued — indeed, overwhelmed — by light leaks, misalignments and color gels gone awry, they are striking evidence of a collective nostalgia for our vanishing analog past.

The “accidents” were created using a slew of preset filters from widely available smartphone apps. Umbrico snapped the images — all reproductions of a famous Ansel Adams print — on her phone and then ran them through filters with names that range from incredibly specific (“Polaroid Polysulphide Gold Toner,” “Filter Daido Moriyama1”), to friendly (“Bob,” “Lemonade”) or quirky (“Plankton,” “Artsy Fartsy”).

Layering filter upon filter, the results go way beyond replicating what might have happened in a single instance inside a camera or a darkroom. Instead, Adam’s image of Mt. Moran becomes a cipher, a template for endless variations.

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Shot through with inexplicable beams of light, tinted unnatural shades of cyan and magenta, or stuttering across the surface in multiple, discontinuous slices, this symbol of sublime nature becomes a technological playground.

Manipulation is not only the means but the subject of the work. By piling on the effects, Umbrico highlights the extent to which we fetishize the past.

Yet despite the sheer number of filters — Umbrico fills a letter-size handout with their names in tiny, tiny type — the results feel purposeful.

Sometimes they are sublime: strong washes of color or light give the craggy surfaces of the mountain a glaring intensity or a hyper-real glow. In an odd way, the prints are a continuation of Adams' project, framing moments of awe and wonder in a landscape. It's just that the landscape is no longer a mountain range but a range of apps, available at the touch of a finger.

It's worth noting that among all the filters Umbrico employs, none re-create the look of digital accidents: the discontinuous striations that signal file corruption or the obvious pixelation caused by too much compression. The apps are designed to make our digital photos look like messed-up analog ones. Not only do they mimic a waning technology, but they home in on its frailties — the errors that reveal its grounding in the physical world.

It seems we miss that connection; not enough to bring it back, of course, but enough to create a digital reminder of what we have lost.

Still, the show isn't entirely focused on the past. It also features a 3-D image of Mt. Moran, displayed on an iPad. Rotating effortlessly under the fingers of the viewer, it was created in collaboration with digital artist Thomas Storey from a Google Earth image of the actual mountain.

Adams may be the inspiration, but his particular vision isn't at issue here. Our image of the mountain is no longer based on light beaming through a ground glass, but on data beaming through a satellite.

Mark Moore Gallery, 5790 Washington Blvd., Culver City, (310) 453-3031, through Nov. 8. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.markmooregallery.com

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