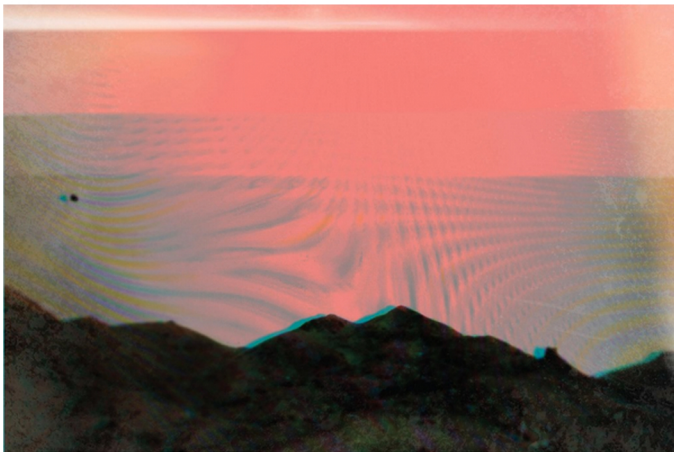




## Penelope Umbrico's "Mountains, Moving" photographs, now on view at Bethel University

Published on April 24, 2013 by Susannah Schouweiler in St. Paul



Penelope Umbrico, detail from the installation "Mountains, Moving: of George C. Poundstone 1926 – 2013." Courtesy of Bethel University galleries and the artist

**Penelope Umbrico's** exhibition, "Mountains, Moving: of George C. Poundstone 1926 – 2013," recently opened at Bethel University's Olson Gallery. Umbrico's work is an exercise in meta-photography – laying bare for examination the field's means of production, the aesthetics of its technologies and processes, by way of repeated iterations of the same mountaintop, originally shot in the early 20th century by pictorialist George C. Poundstone as he documented his travels around the world. Umbrico takes archival images and reproduces them through a variety of candy-colored filters using a selection of image processing programs commonly available to smartphone users.

The result is an installation of photographs of photographs and screengrabs of screengrabs – found, usually web-based images artfully distorted, cropped, bordered and remixed by way of 17 commonly available iPhone camera apps. Postcard prints of a select group of "Acceptable Mountains" are available for the taking on pedestals nearby. A glass-enclosed vitrine sits at the center of the room. At first glance, it looks to be filled with a collection of vintage hand-held cameras – in homage to the democratization of photography, perhaps. Look closer and you see it's a clever large-format photo: "136 Mini Film Cameras in the Smithsonian Institution History of Photography Archives With Old Style Photoshop Filter." In his exhibition essay, Minneapolis Institute of Arts' Curator of Photographs, David Little, writes: "Through the magic of today's photography, Umbrico stitched together each camera into a uniformed image on matte paper, creating what she calls a 'trompe-l'œil image' that hides the paper on which the images are produced."

In the aggregate, Umbrico's exhibition offers an arresting consideration of a medium in flux – where globally sourced images, high-quality cameras and a staggering array of auxiliary processing tools and filters are in the hands of anyone with a smartphone.

Looking through her images, I'm also struck by the inherently acquisitive nature of photography – the proprietary impulse behind the urge to get just the right shot. It reminds me of a grad school trip with my husband some years ago that took us to Northern India. Specifically, we passed through Agra and saw the Taj Mahal. While there, I remember our self-appointed guide physically maneuvering my husband to a spot in front of the famous landmark, directly in line with the reflecting pool, saying, "Here. This is where you want to take your picture." And from that spot, you'd indeed get precisely the photo of the Taj Mahal reproduced on virtually every website, in every postcard. What I remember most clearly about that moment is my husband's immediate bristling at the suggestion. There was never a question of shooting the Taj – "something so beautiful demands you take its picture," my husband says. It's that he wanted to lay a singular claim on the Taj Mahal in taking the photograph; he was determined to capture in his viewfinder something of his own from the site.

That's an impulse Umbrico captures deftly in her series of photos of photos – what she calls an "analog history of photography within the digital torrent that is its current technological manifestation."