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Christine Elfman Investigates Photography With Amaranth Juice and Roman Mythology

Posted By [Matthew Harrison Tedford](#) on Tue, Jul 19, 2016 at 8:30 AM



Christine Elfman, *Ash*, 2016.

<http://www.sfweekly.com/exhibitionist/2016/07/19/christine-elfman-investigates-photography-with-amaranth-juice-and-roman-mythology>

In the Roman myth of Diana and Actaeon, the goddess of the hunt grows furious when Actaeon, a young hunter, is found gazing at her while she bathes nude in a sacred grove. Diana transforms Actaeon into a stag and his own hounds prey upon and kill him for his transgression. The myth has been a popular subject in visual art for millennia, but in **Even Amaranth**, her solo exhibition at Wendi Norris Gallery, **Christine Elfman** transforms Actaeon's tragic demise into a parable for the plight of photographers.



Christine Elfman, *Torso of Actaeon I*, 2016.

For Elfman, photographers are like hunters, tracking that which is elusive and ever moving; even more, they are like wayward Actaeon, gazing upon something that is impossible to fully and definitively grasp. The photographer can only capture a fleeting moment and never in its entirety. To embody this photographic trait, Elfman used juice made from homegrown amaranth to develop several of her works. These photographs of sculptures are tinted red and yellow, resembling antique 19th-century photographs.

The amaranth, Elfman told me, is fugitive, and these images are continuously deteriorating, more sensitive to sunlight than your average photograph. There is something almost gothic (in the contemporary sense) about these somber images of disembodied torsos and hands and of Actaeon being devoured by his own dogs.



Christine Elfman, *Amaranth Extraction II*, 2016

In addition to the self-destructing images, "Even Amaranth" includes a number of wonderful and eerie landscape photographs. *Ash* (2016) depicts a small clearing in a wooded area with a hollowed out and charred tree at the center. The details are enrapturing; and the colors of fall and recent fires are melancholic. It is unlikely that Diana would bathe in such a location, but a hunter might stalk its next victim here, and one could imagine this as the site of Actaeon's death. In fact, Elfman says she chose to shoot locations that felt like crime scenes.

These landscapes are accompanied by a number of still-lives of dried amaranth plants, often clasped by floating sculptural hands. Here, the medium of the amaranth prints becomes the subject, glorified and beautified in a way that would be difficult for a bottle of typical photographic emulsion. This is yet another of the many mirrors which works hold up to the others in the exhibition. "Even Amaranth" is like a house of mirrors, and each photograph influences the others in myriad ways. There are distortions — parables, metaphors, ambiguity — but like the carnival attraction, these distortions give viewers a glimpse of angles that aren't always visible.

Even Amaranth, through September 3, at Gallery Wendi Norris, 161 Jessie, 415-346-7812.

photograph

CHRISTINE ELFMAN: EVEN AMARANTH AT GALLERY
WENDI NORRIS

By Glen Helfand



Christine Elfman, *Amaranth Extraction I*, 2016. Courtesy the artist and Gallery Wendi Norris

The fixed and fugitive properties of photography are poetically contrasted in Christine Elfman's exhibition of recent works, on view at [Gallery Wendi Norris](#) through September 3. She muses on the history of classical objects and the shifting landscape of nature and culture through groupings of silver-gelatin prints, pigment prints, a photogram, and anthotypes. The latter process, which involves using crushed flower petals as a photosensitive medium, is the source of the show's title and one of its key subjects and materials. Elfman has consistently used plants to create images that will intentionally fade and change in unexpected ways. For a number of the works here she used amaranth, a plant that yields gluten-free grain, but which also has more poetic roots—in ancient Greek it means “unfading flower,” and it is cited for its immortality in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The artist grew the plants herself on a boat docked in the San Francisco Bay, where she also exposed the images. Elfman's labor-intensive processes and materials have something in common with the practices at twee artisanal restaurants, but her images inherit a richness from their integrity.

A few of the works are portraits of the plant itself. *Amaranth Photogram I*, 2016, reveals a profile of flowers cascading from the end of a stalk. The image, tinted with the warm red of the crushed flowers, portrays the plant as a visceral entity and recalls Adam Fuss's photograms of animal entrails. That sense of embodiment is further suggested by two gelatin-silver prints, *Amaranth Extraction I* and *II*, both 2016, which capture stages of harvest. An armful of flowering stalks is photographed against a dark background, with only the plants and pale hands visible. There is some potential violence in this disembodied view—these pictures bring to mind Joel Peter-Witkin's nature morte photographs—but also a classical beauty, as Elfman includes a number of anthotypes of figurative sculpture. There are classical Greco-Roman torsos and images of Rodin sculptures that isolate the hands and faces of artists, in particular Auguste Rodin and Camille Claudel. They are dismembered yet bathed in the natural warmth of the plant-derived hues.

A similar ambiguity is communicated by inkjet prints of eerie landscapes. *Ash*, 2016, depicts a hollowed tree trunk, a dead object at the center of the frame that suggest something unsavory. Elfman's use of fugitive materials and various media printed at mixed scale adds layers of complexity, and poetry, to her exploration of the fleeting and the fixed.



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by Catherine Nueva
España
in News
Jul 15, 2014

Christine Elfman at Gallery Wendi Norris

Christine Elfman is a practitioner and teacher of photography, and her technical rigor is evident: images and diptychs convey both the essential and the ephemeral. In *Looking Back*, the play of light/shadow, background/foreground, and immediacy/mystery converge into a harmonious, if unsettling, whole. Paired with an anotype of a Grecian head, the piece is both portrait and diptych: the missing body of one and the partially covered face of the other encourages us to construct a memory or a narrative. The *Love Letters* diptych is similarly arresting in its austerity and open-endedness: do the unanswered letters represent the finite or infinite? As with *Looking Back*, and the other well-crafted pieces, an element of passing or lost time fills gaps but also leaves questions unanswered.

Fix & Fade feels timely: a respite from contemporary life and its virtual realities and surfeit of information. It is a show that invites contemplation, stimulates your sense of humor, and asks to be considered. The anotypes and silver gelatin prints, presented individually and in diptychs, convey serenity, elegance, and a certain aesthetic and material solidity – more fixed than faded, though she plays with decomposition and impermanence.

Christine Elfman, *Fix & Fade*, [Gallery Wendi Norris](http://www.gallerywendi.com), San Francisco, through 2 August 2014.

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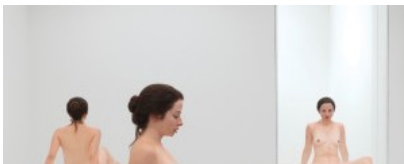


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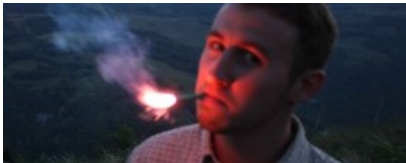
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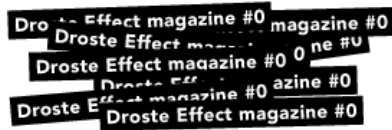
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Christine Elfman, Death Valley (Clamp: silver gelatin print, Salt: silver gelatin print), Fix & Fade, Gallery Wendi Norris, San Francisco



Christine Elfman, Looking Back (Veil: anotype, Looking: silver gelatin print), Fix & Fade, Gallery Wendi Norris, San Francisco



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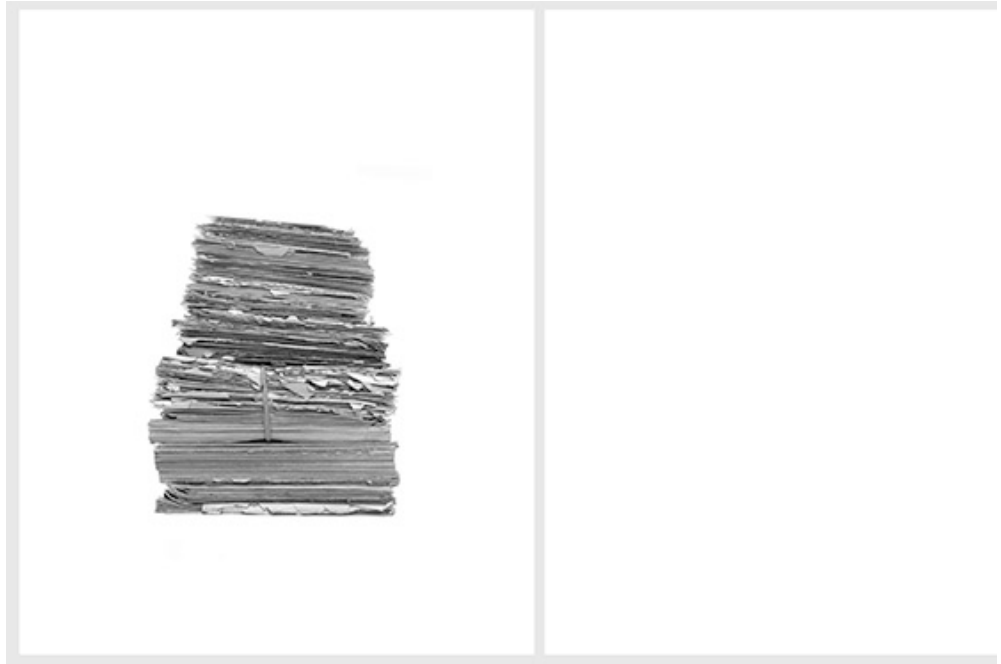
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Christine Elfman, Love Letters (All the letters she wrote to him: silver gelatin print; All the letters he wrote to her: silk print), Fix & Fade, Gallery Wendi Norris, San Francisco

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San Francisco Chronicle

SFGate

Christine Elfman's anthotypes reflect a murmur from the past

Kimberly Chun

Published 3:20 pm, Wednesday, June 4, 2014



Above: "Looking Back" (diptych), "Veil" (2014), "Looking" (2014). Below: "Pillars of Salt" (diptych), "Crone" (2014), "Back" (2011). Photo: Courtesy Of The Artist And Gallery Wendi Norris

"Don't look back," the works of Christine Elfman whisper to the viewer, even as the East Bay artist tussles with the delicate challenge of capturing both the durable and decaying.

Elfman makes anthotypes using plant extracts and sunlight in a process invented by John Herschel - who also discovered photographic fixer - and juxtaposes those light-sensitive images of ancient Greek sculptures with her silver gelatin prints of modern-day women in works included in her solo show "Fix & Fade."

"It's interesting making them because I don't know how long exactly it will take for an image to form - some pigments are more sensitive than others," she says of the anthotypes that bask on the deck of the sailboat she lives on in Alameda. "Every time I open them up to check on them, it's like opening an oven to check on a cake, only you're using a wood-fire oven, with no temperature gauge and a recipe that you can barely read."

San Francisco Chronicle

SFGate

We talked to Elfman, 32, from her boat in the Oakland Estuary.

Q: Tell me about these artworks' genesis.

A: I think they reflect my long-standing interest in photography as something that reflects our desire to capture things and something that reminds us of the inability or futility of ever really doing that. I tend to be inspired by photographs that are out of context or unknown, when you're reminded of all that is lost.

Q: How do these objects of antiquity fit in with your own past?

A: I had been working with flowers in the past - the image is created out of fading light-sensitive juices I extract from plants, so if the image was made of morning glory juice, I used morning glory as the subject. I was inspired by 19th century photographs of sculptures that seemed to be fading. Here is a sculpture that is such a symbol of permanence, and at the same time, it's amazing that these things have lasted for so long and have such an enduring legacy in mythology and literature. I wanted to use this subject to create a tension between a sense of monumentality and fading.

Q: You photograph a sculpture of Lot's wife - what does that story signify?

A: I think about nostalgia's place in contemporary culture. It seems like something that can be easily dismissed and is seen with a certain amount of wariness. I think it's interesting how there's a sense that it's something that we can be punished for doing, and it can be traced back through time, and we have these symbolic stories that relate to our view of nostalgia and what it means to be turning back to look at the past rather than the present.

If you go

Christine Elfman: Fix & Fade: Reception 6-8 p.m. Thursday. Through Aug. 2. 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday. Gallery Wendi Norris, 161 Jessie St., S.F. (415) 346-7812. www.gallerywendinorris.com.

Kimberly Chun scampers with corgis in Berkeley. E-mail: 96hours@sfchronicle.com Twitter: [@kimberlychun](https://twitter.com/kimberlychun)

<http://www.sfgate.com/art/article/Christine-Elfman-s-anthotypes-reflect-a-murmur-5529271.php>

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Loupe

**Journal of the
Photographic
Resource Center**
at Boston University



A Digital Legacy: Christine Elfm

by Janelle Lynch

Contemporary photographers are exercising an enhanced freedom to realize their visions, as seen in the work by Jesseca Ferguson, Michael Kolster and Richard Sobol, featured in this issue. Today's image-makers are liberally experimenting with the latest tools and materials, introducing new working methodologies and revitalizing historic practices. Technological advancements have energized the field and are inspiring innovation that evokes the spirit of the medium's early years.

Allison Nordström, Curator at George Eastman House and juror of the PRC's 2012 juried exhibition, recently explained, "It seems the digital turn has expanded the field for photographic artists. In addition to the new technologies, artists can now draw from all the media, methods and imagery of the past, suiting the way of making an image to the desired look and implications of the work."

As Nordström alludes, another outcome of the technological developments is the revival of alternative processes—a return to a handcrafted, more intimate approach to making images. I asked Dan Estabrook and France Scully Osterman, both

Janelle Lynch is a large-format photographer, teacher, and freelance writer about photography based in New York. The PRC recently exhibited work from her monograph, *Los Jardines de México* (Radius Books, 2011). Forthcoming exhibition venues include the Southeast Museum of Photography, Daytona Beach, FL and Robert Morat Galerie, Berlin.



Mark Osterman and France Scully Osterman, *View from Talbot's Grave*, from *The Light at Lacock* series, pigment print from photogenic drawing negative. 38 x 48 inches. © Scully & Osterman, Courtesy of Tilt Gallery, Phoenix, AZ.

Artists can now draw from all the media, methods and imagery of the past, suiting the way of making an image to the desired look and implications of the work.

Allison Nordström
Curator, George Eastman House

master practitioners and teachers of alternative processes, about the renewed interest.

Estabrook said, "I do see a hunger in young artists that may be related to the rise in digital media, or it may be related to the fact that something is being lost as we watch it disappear—that chemical photography, even the black and white print, is

really a dead technique."

Scully Osterman said that she finds some people choosing alternative processes because, "They think that it's going to be what makes their work interesting. We understand why our students fall in love with it—we try to push them further." She also sees students choosing them for the same reasons that she and her husband, Mark Osterman, did for their own practices in the early 1990s.

"You're making everything, it's very tactile, you have ultimate control and, in some ways, there's serendipity, which plays a role. Every time you handle it, you're affecting the final outcome. Every step

an in Context

is visual. It's a sensual process. But the process is just a tool. The image is what's most important. Finding the right marriage is essential."

Mark Osterman is also the Process Historian at George Eastman House where, for the last ten years, he has been researching 19th century processes ranging from Niépce's heliographs to gelatin emulsions. To Osterman, "Every one of them is magical. A digital image is also magical. They all require things that are beyond our scope to understand."

Christine Elfman is a San Francisco-based artist who employs an innovative approach to her work, using historic materials to contemplate timeless themes. Elfman took her first alternative processes course as an undergraduate at Cornell University in 2003. Following that, she worked for a year as Scully Osterman's intern, assisting with workshops and tutorials at Scully & Osterman Studio in Rochester, NY. Today she uses the wet-plate collodion and anthotype processes, painting, film, as well as emulsion-based and digital photography to investigate remembrance and the desire to preserve the ephemeral.

In *Storydress II*, Elfman explores the relationship between photography and memory, which have been inextricably linked since the medium's inception. The series was inspired by Elfman's relationship with her great-grandmother and her autobiographical reminiscences, old family photographs, as well as found images of anonymous people for sale at flea markets.

During my conversation with Elfman, she described an experience looking at photographs with

I felt compelled to make photographs about the feeling of wanting to remember and wanting to be remembered, all the while embracing the constancy of change."

Christine Elfman

her great-grandmother that evoked Roland Barthes' personal account, in *Camera Lucida*, of engaging in the same ritual following his mother's death. Elfman's and Barthes' quests, however, are conceptually distinct. Elfman's is a contemplation of the universal desire to remember and be remembered, despite life's ephemeral nature, while Barthes' is an ontological investigation of the medium and a meditation on the absence inherent in it. What binds them is the emotional intensity of their respective pursuits, as well as their steadfast confrontation with loss.

"My great-grandmother was unable to clearly see the photographs because she was losing her sight, and she couldn't remember every detail, even if she had been able to see the images. It was difficult to remember who it was, where it was, or when it was. It was a bitter-sweet experience for both of us. Her advancing blindness revealed the underlying futility of the attempt to capture things in time. I felt compelled to make photographs about the feeling of wanting to remember and wanting to be remembered, all the while embracing the constancy of change."

Elfman recorded and transcribed her great-grandmother's stories, then shredded them—leaving some text in tact—to make a dress for the



Christine Elfman, *Cabinet Card #1*, from the series *Storydress II*, 2008, albumen print from wet-plate collodion negative, 4.25 x 6.5 inches.
© Christine Elfman, Courtesy of the Artist



Christine Elfman, *Untitled #1*, from the series *Storydress II*, 2008, albumen print from wet-plate collodion negative, 6.5 x 8.5 inches.
© Christine Elfman, Courtesy of the Artist

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Center Weighted

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presented the third Master Lecture of the spring, discussing SSP's role in monitoring human rights abuses in Sudan and Syria by utilizing satellite imaging. Raymond analyzed some of SSP's recent images, which can often be quite beautiful despite featuring horrific atrocities. Additionally, his talk outlined the relationship between human rights advocacy and photography. The use of satellite imaging is literally changing the face of war photography in the 21st century.

The Staying Power of the Photobook

Building on the momentum of the Indie Photobook Library's exhibition and Book Night at the PRC (both held in the fall), the PRC decided to expand programming based around the photobook by inviting Harvey Stein, a well-known New York City-based photographer and author of six photography books, to present a workshop at the PRC. On April 21, Stein discussed information needed to create a convincing presentation to a publisher and other pertinent topics in a morning seminar. During the afternoon session, Stein worked specifically with ten individuals, evaluating each participant's book project in a small, interactive group setting.

Workshop Assistantships

Last fall, the PRC began a new program to give emerging photographers the opportunity to work closely with master photographers through our Workshop Program. For our regularly scheduled workshops, we seek assistants who will serve as a representative of the PRC and the right-hand person of the presenter. These assistants not only handle administrative and audio/visual tasks, but they also photograph the workshop and write commentary for the PRC's blog (www.bostonphotographyfocus.org).

This program has been quite a success, and as a result, the workshop assistant positions have become quite competitive. We'd like to thank our most recent workshop assistants from the fall and spring: Paris Visone, Andrew McFarland, Stephanie Robb, David Finks, Bruce Wahl, and Michael Ruggiero.

Christine Elfman

Continued from page 27.

life-size sculpture she constructed using plaster casts and papier mâché. Although it's a female figure, it doesn't necessarily symbolize her great-grandmother, but perhaps the viewer, or Elfman herself.

Storydress II epitomizes a recent statement by Ariel Shanberg, Executive Director of The Center for Photography at Woodstock. "Photography has been freed from the responsibility of 'depicting images' and 'telling stories.' Increasingly, artists are exploring the ontology of the processes and establishing new languages. This dialogue within alternative practices is one of the great legacies of the digital revolution."

To create *Storydress II*, a poignant meditation on ephemerality, Elfman's grandfather built her a replica of an antique 6.5 x 8.5 inch field camera. With it, Elfman made wet-plate collodion negatives and then gold-toned albumen prints that she burnished onto antique cabinet card mounts. That was the most common process for portraiture in the 19th century. Appropriately, albumen prints tend to fade over time.

In addition to Barthes' writings, Elfman cites as influential to her practice Early Renaissance paintings of Mary Magdalene, Ingmar Bergman's and Andrei Tarkovsky's films, and the artist Tacita Dean's multi-disciplinary practice. Elfman also acknowledges the importance of her own work among conservators at George Eastman House and the Image Permanence Institute. "There I became interested in how I could make something that was about the desire to preserve things and the inherent futility in that. I think of it as taking time to make things that time takes away."

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