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Miller Arts Scholars

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Photographs and the Silver Window of Reality

Since photography's birth in 1826, it has perpetuated a troubled relationship with the concept of reality. Photography changes what we believe to be true, even though photographs are completely biased, easily manipulable, and portray the world in a fundamentally different way from the human experience. Yet still, some people refuse to sit for portraits because they believe the shutter will snap on their souls -- if you have ever come face to face with a daguerreotype, a holographic, three-dimensional, eerily-lifelike photograph -- you will understand why. They seem to harbor at least a small part of their sitter's ghost, the way they glint when you angle them and the likeness seems to rise off the surface of the coated pewter plate. Further still, the most significant of photography's medium-specific characteristics is its indexicality, leading one to believe that surely the medium contain some element of truth, if a prerequisite for a photo is some physically-existing subject matter in the material world. As abstract as a photo may appear, every single one comes into being via light bouncing off of objects that are *tangible* and existing.

In my ARTS 4900 independent study this semester with Professor Alice Bailey, I am seeking to uncover what truth in photography means to me through two means. First, I am thinking about it theoretically by reading and researching, and I plan to write a final essay on my philosophy of photographic truth by the end of the semester. Second, I am taking photos myself with a large format camera. The specific hypothesis that I am investigating is this: in the way that all photographs are lies, there is a specific type of film that is the most genuine depiction of truth that the deceit of photography can muster. The film type I am referring to is color positive, or slide film.

Instead of ending up with a negative that must be inverted through either printing or scanning, slide film produces a positive - it can be held up to a light source and seen without any obligatory inversion, enlargement, or other manipulation to make it clearly readable to the human eye. Color positive film can be shared and shown as it is, while negatives require an additional step that further removes it from the reality of the photographic moment, and inversions of those negatives are most often shown as prints -- never as the film itself, which I believe to be the genuine photograph. When you

look at a color positive slide, you are seeing the sheet of acetate that, during its glimpse of exposure to the world after subsisting in a reactive state of indefinite darkness, was physically connected by a string of photons with a subject now imprinted within.

It is crucial that I shoot with color positive film because of these theoretical ideas; however, my attempts at developing large format color positive film this semester have thus far gone unrewarded. The DIY development process destroyed my positives, leaving me frustrated and with nothing to show after my hours spent wielding a cumbersome view camera and moving the sheets of precious film through trays of chemicals in a pitch black room, then watching the images fade before my eyes when I turn the lights on. E-6 development is a long and difficult process compared to developing black and white film, and UVA's photo lab is not set up to properly accommodate it. For consistency in the appearance of my slides and the freedom of having more time and energy to devote to shooting film and writing (and to avoid the pitch in morale that occurs from watching the images on my film seemingly evaporate to nothingness), I have decided to ship my film off to a lab in New York to be professionally developed for me. It would be extremely helpful to receive a \$500 Miller Arts Scholar mini grant because I would then have money to cover the costs of buying film, shipment to New York, and the price of development. I have outlined my budget below:

Cost of 3 boxes of 4x5 Fuji Velvia 100	\$224.76
Fedex Ground shipment cost for 5 packages (1 shipment every 2 weeks for the rest of the semester)	\$89.45
Price of developing 60 4x5 E-6 sheets at Praus Production	\$240
Total	\$554.21

Three boxes of Fuji Velvia 100 contain 60 pieces of film; with my current plan, the \$500 minigrant would cover the developing cost for almost all but 14, which I would pay for myself (or perhaps try my hand again at DIY development, if I'm feeling brave!)

Since this project aligns with my ARTS 4900 independent study, the timeline involves the entire semester. I would buy the three boxes of film in bulk as soon as I were to receive the money, and the additional \$275.24 would be used gradually throughout the rest of the Fall semester as I ship film to Praus Production Inc. to get developed. All in all, I would greatly appreciate the support of a Miller Arts Scholar minigrant to alleviate financial pressure while I explore the use and theory of color positive slide film. At the end of this semester, my independent study will culminate in a final portfolio or showing of

my slides, either projected with light or mounted to a wall in Ruffin on top of a light box so my audience can see the positives as they were taken in the moment, without any further alteration or editing that increases the distance between the photography and its referent. Thank you so much for your time spent reading this proposal, as well as your consideration!