



A half-century documented by camera

Light Work celebrates 50 years of community and progress

BY NATALIE RIETH

After enduring the brisk and snowy daily walk to Light Work during her 2012 residency, artist Aspen Mays would open the doors to a studio full of exuberant warmth. Syracuse University students stopped in to make use of Light Work's printing and photography equipment, and past artists-in-residence would often visit to work on prints for exhibitions. "It just felt like this amazing open door to folks who had come before," Mays says.

Mays is one of more than 100 artists whose work is featured in "50th Anniversary: Selections from Light Work Collection," a celebratory exhibit on display at the Everson Museum of Art until May 14.

Since 1973, the nonprofit photography organization Light Work

has supported more than 400 emerging and underrepresented visual artists — including Laura Aguilar, Cindy Sherman and Wendy Red Star — through its Artist-in-Residence program, grants, exhibitions, publications, community-access facility and more. Director Dan Boardman, himself a former artist-in-residence, credits much of Light Work's development over the past 50 years to the needs and ambitions of the artists who have worked in its facility.

"Whatever their interaction might be with Light Work, all of these programs have come out of listening to what artists need and then growing to meet those needs," Boardman says.

With each artist who stays for the month-long residency, Light

PHOTOS: JULIE K. HERMAN



Work's team develops connections, ponders their practice and personal vision, and helps them create or make new discoveries. The result is a meeting place for artists and a catalyst for artistic development and collaboration, Boardman says.

"The culture of Light Work is one of pride, dignity, love of the aesthetic and of helping artists develop their craft," former artist-in-residence Meryl Meisler says.

During her residency in 2019, Meisler was determined to rekindle her fine art printing skills. She dedicated most of her time to working in Light Work's darkroom and, with the staff's guidance, fell in love with both the process and the look of black-and-white gelatin silver prints. The residency solidified Meisler's distinct style, but also gave her the opportunity to experiment at her discretion, she says.

To celebrate the end of her residency, Meisler shot "Test Strip Queen" in Light Work's lighting studio. In the self-portrait, Meisler wears a train-style dress and crown fashioned out of the test strips she collected during her month there. As she posed

under bright, fashion shoot-style lighting, the Light Work team helped position her regal paper attire. Meisler, whose work is typically like a time capsule of bustling New York City life, says this was her first time using a studio setting, or creating anything like "Test Strip Queen."

"I mean, it's a dream setting," Meisler says.

The roots of one of Mays' ongoing series of photographs — a method of creating photographic prints without the use of a camera — originated in Light Work's darkroom. She says the project was inspired by fellow photographer Dave Broda, who shared old darkroom tools and encouraged her creative process. "It's known as a sort of coveted residency because it's so supportive," Mays says.

Beyond the encouragement Mays received from faculty while in residence, she says Light Work has been committed to maintaining an ongoing relationship as her career continues to develop. Two years after her residency, she was given the opportunity to exhibit "Newspaper Rock" in Light Work's Kathleen O. Ellis Gallery and make a catalog publication, with the support of its staff.

"As an artist, that's the sort of stuff that is incredibly valuable in the development of your career," Mays says.

The artworks displayed in Light Work's anniversary exhibition were chosen to include as many diverse voices as possible and display the trends and developments practiced by program artists throughout contemporary photography, Boardman says. The exhibit highlights a blend of acclaimed and lesser-known artists, as well as a variety of styles and creative approaches to photography. Nearly 150 pieces were selected from Light Work's permanent collection of over 4,000 works of art. These works were either fully made, printed or finalized in Light Work's studio.

"[A work in the collection] could be very different from the final piece that they showed later on with a completely developed idea," Boardman says. "It's kind of a window into an artist's practice."

The Everson exhibit features works of art from Light Work programs Artist-in-Residence and Grants in Photography, which are awarded to artists to encourage project development. It also includes a comparison of the organization's first decade and most recent decade, Syracuse-set photography and a chronological display of 50 featured works.

"Visually, it's going to be striking," says Steffi Chappell, a curator at the Everson, which celebrated its own 50th anniversary in 2018. "And I think people will probably be surprised to see some of the earlier artists that they worked with, and how significant their careers have grown to be today."

While viewing this timeline display, Boardman says, viewers can see how artists have embraced and challenged technological advancements through the years. While many past works were printed in black-and-white and at no larger than 16 by 20 inches, most items in the collection dated later than 2000 are larger-scale prints. Museumgoers may also notice a revival of older techniques in recent years. For example, artist Claire A. Warden experiments with darkroom chemistry to create abstract and figurative works related to her identity and lived experiences.

The exhibit also features "Embracing Eatonville," a documentary-style collaboration by acclaimed artists Dawoud Bey, Lonnie Graham, Carrie Mae Weems and Deborah Willis that was originally shown at Light Work in 2003. These works provide a diverse glimpse into both the spirit and the sociopolitical landscape of Eatonville, Florida, the oldest black-incorporated

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Director Dan Boardman

town in the United States.

"The soul, the collection here is so diverse and so rich," Boardman says. "Makers are doing things from every corner of photography you can imagine and coming from every walk of life you can imagine. It was truly joyful to find work to put in the show."

Light Work's anniversary exhibit also includes a section dedicated to images that display different perspectives on the culture of Syracuse and the Central New York area, like a 1983 photograph by Anthony Hernandez that documents a few locals resting on benches in Columbus Circle. Displaying this exhibit in downtown Syracuse broadens community access and also celebrates an area where many Light Work artists have captured images, Boardman says.

"If this isn't people's first engagement with Light Work," Boardman says, "I hope they take a lot of pride in the fact that it is right here in Syracuse."

