

Damaged Goods

I have many stories of destruction that haunt my artistic endeavors. I guess you could say I was first introduced to the concept of destroying records when I was a child. Like most children, I liked to color and draw; the recipient of these illustrations being my mother or father depending on who was winning the custody battle. I have a memory of sitting on brick stairs outside of a kitchen, I am not sure if I was upset or if I was crying; what I do remember is the response my mother gave me when I wanted to know why she was throwing my drawings away. She said she was throwing my drawings away because they were a fire hazard. I guess I had made a lot of drawings back then (then being pre-school), but I can't say this response to the value of my artwork did much to support my growth in this area. Strangely enough, my mother has since collected quite a few pieces of my adult art work...

Now that you are sufficiently cheered up, other stories of destruction bear mostly with my photographic practices. As a photographer, there are many steps used to insure the production of an archival end product (in terms of traditional methods of film and light sensitive materials.) The reading this week briefly mentioned a difference between 'fiber base' paper and RC paper, the nature of film base, and some of the various types of photographic material an archivist may come across. I am guessing when I say that most black and white images on paper that are still in good shape are probably in fact 'fiber base' images.

Fiber base is a type of photo paper that is used if you want your image to outlast the next few days, months, years, or decades. But using 'fiber base' paper is not enough; you also have to use the developing chemicals in particular fashions (precise temperature and time) to insure proper removal of damage causing chemical residues. This process requires more time commitment and much longer washing times in continually clean water (for about an hour-I will not go into the environmental impact here). As a photographer, I have made many fiber based prints with the archival goal in mind as I ran them through the process. Please keep in mind that this process only applies to black and white photography. I have also made many RC prints; RC prints are also black and white but are not archival and are mainly used for 'quick prints' and unfortunately for commercial purposes where time is a costly factor. RC prints may last up to 5 years or more; I have many that look as good today as they did when I made them in 1994. However, I also have some that turned brown or spotted (which I threw out) and some that looked kind of cool with their metallic sheen that I kept (sandwiched in between all the 'good' ones both fiber and RC.)

Color materials in the photographic process are less archival than their black and white counterparts and are even more sensitive to light and overall color shift (images from my childhood have already turned a distinctive orange color.) I have worked with the color processes for film, prints and slides and there is not an archival process with these materials as there is with black and white; however the Cibachrome process (prints from slides) is said to be the 'most archival' of the chemical color processes. Color chemicals are inherently bad for the environment and advances in digital printing processes have been a relief for many color printers. Digital images today are said to have a much greater lifespan over their traditional color contemporaries; and digital programs like Adobe have allowed photographers to salvage or 'restore' many damaged photographs. (see attached file for restoration comparison).

The reading brought up all these little reminders about the state of my photographic 'collection' and how badly I have kept it over the years. The negatives, fiber prints, RC prints, and color materials are all house together in boxes, folders, plastic sleeves, and so on; that have in their travels been stored in Montana winters, Nevada summers, and Floridian humidity. They are currently in an 'environmentally controlled' storage unit down the street (any bets about the environment?), with the best prints and slides sitting right beside me or under the bed with a constant temp of 74 degrees. I even have a large (30 x 40) unprotected (and yes, thus already damaged) color print hanging over my bath tub...

Water has been the biggest destructive element when it comes to my photographs. I have a series of images that garnered great success, but all prints except one were damaged in water. The prints were 30 x 40 color prints that were spray mounted on foam core, one was sold, one was donated to the school gallery, and the rest were in temporary storage while the HVAC was being replaced in my studio. The HVAC guys somehow set off the sprinklers or flooded the temp storage area and those prints were destroyed, the school gallery flooded due to heavy rains and the print they had was also destroyed. I lament the prints, but I hold fast in knowing that I still have the negatives for these images in storage and I was able to get smaller prints remade.

Another water story comes from having negligent neighbors. I lived in a small condo in Vegas that had a garage; I used the garage as a studio and storage area. I had stored boxes of family negatives and old negatives from my early photo studies along the back wall. I used to work in the garage/studio late at night with the door open and when the temperature was cooler (95 degrees as opposed to 110 degrees). I had not looked at those boxes since I placed them there in the spring, I lived in that condo until the start of the next year (winter). It was when I was accessing my packing needs for an upcoming move that I noticed the darkened wall and damp boxes. I found out that my neighbor had a leak in their bathroom sink that they were aware of, but did not fix. As a result, I had to throw away lots of stuff, but I also had to go through my negative boxes and see what could be salvaged. I had to separate what negatives I could and allow them to dry on their own, I had to make decisions about whether or not to even keep a good deal and ended up permanently removing recorded evidence of past boyfriends, parties, and events by the handful.

My last bit of destructive information is a bit shared from my adopted archive: the archivist there has had a lot of experience with photographic imagery and she said that the issue she encounters most often is bad processing on the part of the photographer or printer. No amount of preservation can deter bad processing from the get go; the only way to help stop it would be to re-photograph the image and make a new print or if the negative is in better shape, have a new print made from it. I have to agree with her, and my experience has shown that a good deal of photo lab work deals with restoring old photographs, reprinting old negatives, and shooting old images so that copies can be made when the negatives are not an option.

I hope this has helped a bit concerning photos, I could go on for many more pages, but you have more important things to do. If you have questions let me know.

PS-I found this place while surfing the High Museum's web site and thought I would share. I could only find the phone number and this web address, but the site was having issues. I bring this information to the class based on what I have learned concerning the art works of Leonardo de Vinci (how they were deteriorating during his life time because of his experimental paint use) and because of a great article in National Geographic years ago about restoration of the Sistine Chapel.

Atlanta Art Conservation Center

404-733-4589

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