

AgH20

by Lauren Bon

This essay originally appeared in the 2013 exhibition catalog for *AgH20, Lauren Bon & the Optics Division of the Metabolic Studio* at the George Eastman House International Museum of Photography & Film in Rochester, New York.



LA Aqueduct at Jawbone Junction, June 11, 2011. Gelatin silver print.

Dr. John Murray's photographs, which he shot and developed while traveling through India in the late nineteenth century, made a distinct impression on me. It was 2009. I was visiting the George Eastman House archive during an exhibition of my work from *Not A Cornfield*. The tradition of travel photography captured me.

So, too, did the question of how to communicate the nature of the places upon which the Metabolic Studio focuses—places that are incapable of supporting life: social, political, or physical brownfields. Often the experiences of place are indescribable in simple terms. They include a thirty-two-acre abandoned train yard; a one-hundred-mile dry lake bed; Mount Whitney's relationship to Los Angeles, 250 miles away; ubiquitous dust; mosquito infestations on Los Angeles Department of Water and Power rehydration projects; the experience of 9/11 for those of us who were not in Manhattan when it happened; and the Bonus Army rebellion and its relationship to the Occupy movement.

Murray's photos brought me to his India, to his journey, and to his process. A man, a camera, a limited supply of film and paper — Murray's works are more than just the images we see, they are an index of their moment in time.

Informed by their efficacy, I designed the *Liminal Camera* to address the monumentality of our complex brownfield subjects. The Owens dry lakebed struck me the minute I saw it. Driving fast along US Highway 395, the treacherous dust does not distort the beauty you see through the windshield. But leave the car and walk this lakebed. Drive out on one of several roads built by the City of Los Angeles. Stop the car and then walk. Walk as far as you can, alone if possible. The sunlight makes the compacted white silica extremely bright. The sound of your own breathing and walking fill the vacuum-like space. You find yourself standing in the middle of what was once a magnificent lake.

Tucked between the mighty Eastern Sierra and the Inyo Range, the Owens Lake was part of a glacial-time network of interconnected bodies of fresh water that traversed the landscape and supported a vast array of life. The grizzly bear was at the top of the food chain, and the native people – the Paiute – lived at peace and in balance with the animal. All this was changed by the discovery of silver in 1860.

Much could be said about silver mining – its relationship to the Civil War, to Westward Expansion, and to the building of the railways; about American Exceptionalism – but suffice it to say that silver mined from the Owens Valley area provided the raw material for the twentieth century as we know it. The silver saved the US from the massive national debt that over-investment in railroad building had incurred, and it provided the metal required by photography and, later, by the motion-picture industry. While writing that quintessentially American fairytale, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, L. Frank Baum was certainly aware of the importance of silver. Dorothy's slippers in the book, the magic slippers with the supernatural power to deliver us, are emphatically silver.

No city in the United States owes its lifeblood more to silver than Rochester, New York. Silver from the Owens Valley was sent to Rochester, made into film stock, and then shipped back across America to Hollywood. And that is how the West was made – at least, that is how the West we see on film and television was made.

Rochester and the Owens Valley are intimately connected; and the ruination of their great water bodies – by chemical pollutants in the case of the Great Lakes and via the desiccation of Owens Lake—are related to the effluence of silver-driven industries. When silver mining in the Eastern Sierra gave way to water mining, the water meant growth for Los Angeles. Both extractive industries, silver and water, transformed the Owens Valley until the majesty that glacial time provided became an unnatural desert, coated in poisonous dust. *Silver Lake with PPG* associates these two ruined watersheds, East and West.



Silver Lake with PPG, October 24, 2011. Gelatin silver print.



PPG, June 12, 2011. Gelatin silver print.

Later, on the edge of the treacherous ruined-lake moonscape, new industry arose to extract silica from the dry lakebed. A ruin left by that industry, the Pittsburgh Plate Glass (PPG) factory, has become the Metabolic Studio's hub. *PPG* is one of the *Liminal Camera's* first photographs. The PPG ruin is a photographer's muse, the Greta Garbo of buildings, a photographer's dream. This is where I have been working on a film for the last several years, and where the team known as the "Optics Division" came to be. Here, too, our

newest camera, *Silo Cam*, has been made from one of the towering silos that you can see in the photograph *PPG*.

In 2010 I directed a film action inside *PPG*. It was a film shoot that lasted three days, during which time we quite literally made every aspect of a film, including the cameras and the soundtrack, and developed, edited, and screened the film. I had been working on *Silver and Water*, a film about the aforementioned extractions and confluences, and I had already shot several scenes on high-definition video, before I realized that I was actually less interested in content than in the making of film, and in the film's indexical relationship to landscape.

To prepare for the *Three-Day Shoot Out*, I studied with Robert Schaller of the Handmade Film Institute. Robert joined us beside the dry lakebed and trained us to develop film using materials scavenged from the dry lakebed—the very matter of the landscape itself. Tristan Duke was also at the *Three-Day Shoot Out*, and his formidable skill set, when partnered with that of printmaker Rich Nielsen, photographer Josh White, and inventor Guy Hatzvi, gave lift to the work on exhibition today.

In the year following the *Shoot Out*, the Optics Division of the Metabolic Studio built the *Liminal Camera*. Part of a lineage of travelling cameras that harkens back to Dr. Murray, the *Liminal Camera* is composed of a repurposed shipping container mounted on the back of a truck; its large-scale photographs are both shot and developed inside the container.

The process of making and using the *Camera* is intimately connected to the process of documenting the work of the Metabolic Studio. The photographs currently on exhibition at George Eastman House are from the *Liminal Camera's* first photographic tour, the *Flag Tour*. Between Flag Day, June 14, 2011, and Veterans Day, November 11, 2011, we traversed the United States with the *Liminal Camera*, taking photographs along the way at locations that are directly related to the Metabolic Studio's signature projects.

The process of taking these photographs is performative. As with the *Three-Day Shoot Out*, our location shoots are constructed around a three-day timeframe. We arrive on location with the *Liminal Camera*, photograph our subject, develop the imagery inside the camera, and exhibit it right away. We often jest that we have made the world's largest instamatic camera!

The *Liminal Camera* suggests that we are at a threshold. As Rilke said, "One world gone, another yet to be born." Being inside the *Camera*, seeing its subject inverted on photographic paper as large as the shipping container wall, is a profound experience. Like a shared journey, the experience builds mutual adjectives for all who participate. The Optics Division and I are grateful for the opportunity to exhibit our work at the George Eastman Museum. From the beginning, curator Alison Nordström has been on the journey with us, and Kodak is, of course, a critical subject. George Eastman House itself has

been an inspiration, and the city of Rochester is like no other when it comes to locating an audience for the work we are showing here, *AgH2O*.

—Lauren Bon

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