



The photography of Henrieke Strecker and Maggie Taylor, on exhibit at Verve Gallery of Photography in a joint exhibition that opens Friday, May 17, forms a vivid contrast between two artists whose images are surreal, mysterious, and dreamlike. Both artists reference traditional photomechanical processes in their work, although they approach them in different ways and with different results. Taylor, whose photomontages are saturated, painterly visions of the sublime and the uncanny, combines original photography with old daguerreotypes and tintypes. Strecker's processes include photogravure, photograms, pinhole photography, and other alternative photographic methods that lend her work an atmospheric feel.

"I appreciate simple tools," Strecker told *Pasatiempo*. "These are my instruments. I often use the forest as a reflective muse. Thirteen years ago, in Germany, I lived for several months in a small, charming caravan, which was built in the '60s and looked like an egg, an ambulant home, a trailer, as you say here. I wanted to figure out how it feels to live simply. I did." At the time, Strecker occupied just 45 square feet amid beautiful country that stretched for thousands of acres. "I felt blessed, and, figuratively speaking, I have never left that place. I experienced the transitions of nature, three seasons: summer, fall, and winter, and its overwhelming beauty. I observed my inner chaos, digested the leftovers of decades, and tried to find balance and peace inside of me.

I learned from nature — thunderstorms, thick rains, hail, heavy winds, bending trees, snow storms. A question I asked myself very often is: What is really essential in life?"

Strecker's subjects reflect the simple beauty of objects with an abstract, ambiguous sensibility that might remind some of the work of the 19th- and early-20th-century Pictorialists, particularly in her pinhole work, made with her own hand-built cameras. "These are intimate images that rather whisper in a world that often shouts," she said. "Building upon the painterly tradition of early Pictorialism, I try to also distinctly enrich my images with a contemporary psychological depth. But when I was in my early 20s I was very much fascinated by German artist Max Ernst."

Strecker's working methods are always in service to the imagery, monochromatic visions that evoke an intimate mood. "When one talks too much about the process or technique, one runs the danger to demystify or even betray the work."

Sometimes, the mood is dark and haunting as in her *Homage à Goya* series, one image of which resembles some writhing, tormented beast, made all the more strange when one realizes the nature of the simple, organic materials used. "An artist friend once visited me in my studio in Germany, and saw some of my gravures, printed with my etching press, and then said,

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Above left, Henrieke Strecker: from the series *Homage à Goya*, 2006, photogravure, 6 x 4.25 inches; above right, *Untitled*, 2007, photogravure, 5.75 x 4.25 inches

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Maggie Taylor: *The burden of dreams*, 2012, archival pigment ink print, 15 x 15 inches

'Your work reminds me of Francisco Goya's *Los Caprichos*.' In my gravures there is often a subtle message embedded, maybe not available on short glance. I don't want to explain or document the world. They often refer to a human condition, even though, at first glance, they might look like simple studies of plants. The deeper I immerse myself in my work, which means to go deeper within myself, the deeper I move into the unknown."

Taylor's work also presents the viewer with layers of meaning, feeling, and mood. Her montages often have a dark undertone that is enhanced by the ambiguity of expression of people from old daguerreotypes that she infuses with the sensibility of an absurdist. Consider *The burden of dreams*, the staid portrait of a man whose dreams appear to burst from his head in a great cloud with a profusion of wild animal forms. Taylor is adept at building internal contradictions into her work, merging the prosaic with a sense of the mystical.

Entering the world of Maggie Taylor is like entering a fairy realm — beautiful, beguiling, and sometimes a little sinister, but her images can be peaceful and introspective, too. A photomontage called *Once* shows a small mouse gazing into a pool on a gently sloping hill. One wonders what the little mouse is thinking and whether, like Narcissus, he gazes at his own reflection. And in *Small boat waiting*, a skiff rests on calm, untroubled waters, but the image beckons and seems alive with possibility. Where the boat might take you is anyone's guess. Taylor signs copies of her recent retrospective publication *No Ordinary Days* at the May 17 reception.

Strecker's work is less narrative, and her photogravures are often quiet in tone. The etching process allows for singularity of vision — just the image, without any surrounding noise to take away from the pure experience of engagement with the subject. "Most of my images have no titles. I want observers to get in touch with the images so that they will find their own story. I would never name a breath. My wish is that my images are still breathing, even though the processes of exposure and developing are done." ◀

details

- ▼ *Henriette Strecker and Maggie Taylor*
- ▼ Opening reception & book signing 5 p.m. Friday, May 17; through June 22
- ▼ Verve Gallery of Photography, 219 E. Marcy St., 982-5009