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Lumen Prints as Gradient

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LUMEN PRINTS AS GRADIENT

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in the Art, Studio

Sonya Naumann
Thesis Mentor

Spring 2018

All requirements for graduation with Honors in the
Art, Studio have been completed.

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For many contemporary photographers there is a tendency to push aside the past and try to find a new path into the future. In doing so, older techniques can often be overlooked. I decided to delve into the process of making lumen prints for my research project in hopes of discovering the beauty of a traditional method of image making.

Lumen prints are a photographic process in which there is no lens involved. To create a lumen print, one takes a sheet of unexposed black and white photographic paper and puts an object on top of it, often something of an organic nature such as a flower, and then places the paper in the sun. At first glance, lumen prints appear to be determined by chance. However, many factors determine the outcome for the lumen print, most significantly the paper type. I focused on the reproducible aesthetic of lumen prints that could be created under differing combinations of paper and light manipulation in order to get the aesthetic results I desired. I decided to test both fiber-based and resin-coated papers to see the ways in which they differed. My first prints were made with resin-coated paper and I was excited by the impression of the flower onto the paper, as it contained delicate details and multiple colors. Unfortunately, the results with the fiber-based paper were far less exhilarating. I was disappointed with the outcome of the fiber-based paper, as the result was simply a white silhouette of the flower without the intricate details that were created with the resin-coated paper. Additionally, I found that I preferred prints made on sunny days. When the sun is out the colors are more vibrant whereas on overcast days the prints become browner. In order to make the prints archival, they must be put into fixer, which bleaches them and changes the color. In other words, you are unable to see the final result until you fix them. Once this is done, there's no turning back. It became my goal to use my favorite flower, the strawberry begonia, to create similar outcomes but with various hues. I decided to make a gradient from light pink to dark purple in order to challenge myself with learning how to use light. I found that both exposure time and type of sky that day determined the hue of the image. After more trial and error, I was able to create a gradient with the strawberry begonias.

Through working with lumen printing, a traditional, but largely abandoned photographic process, I have learned that one can still find new ways to explore it and create beautiful and fresh imagery. It was a challenge to get a grasp on how the paper variety, type of light, and also flower selection determined the outcome. I am glad that I used multiple paper types because, if I used only fiber-based paper, I feel that I would've lost interest in this process early on as I was not nearly as drawn to the results with this paper, especially on overcast days. I look forward to opening up to various types of traditional and alternative methods in my future practice.