

Australian photographer John Pollard FRPS died in 2018, leaving behind not just a grieving family and a substantial legacy of photographic work in public and private collections, but also an eclectic collection of books representing his varied interests over his life. In this on-going column I hope to stimulate interest and reflection on various aspects of photography based on perusal of John's collection of books. In the process I also aim to periodically shine a light on John's career and his practice.

The Artistic Obsession – Gum Bichromate

John Pollard was clearly fascinated by the schism of the Photosecession and in particular the way that those Pictorialist photographers created ways to put art and craft back into their photography; his book collection has remarkable coverage of the great Pictorial practitioners. Pictorialist photographers tended to follow the artistic models of their time, as seen in the early composites of Rejlander which drew upon Academic painting.

The greatest impact, however, came from the *Tonalist* and *Impressionist* movements, which emphasized the treatment of light. Stieglitz, for example, borrowed the Tonalist use of soft focus to create a sense of 'atmosphere', stating that *'Atmosphere is the medium through which we see all things. In order, therefore, to see them in their true value on a photograph, as we do in Nature, atmosphere must be there. Atmosphere softens all lines; it graduates the transition from light to shade; it is essential to the reproduction of the sense of distance. That dimness of outline which is characteristic for distant objects is due to atmosphere.'* Steichen, too, became celebrated for his use of Tonalism.



The Onion Field by George Davison

Impressionism was equally influential upon the Pictorialists, notably George Davison who utilized a variety of camera and printing techniques to achieve an Impressionist effect. Davison's photograph 'The Onion Field' (also known as 'An Old Farmstead') became one of the most significant and controversial works in the debate between

Pictorialism and 'Straight' Photography. Although awarded a medal at the 1890 annual exhibition of the Photographic Society of Great Britain (now the RPS), the work ignited a fierce debate, with *The Amateur Photographer* magazine negatively noting that it 'marked the advance and influence of what may be termed the "school of foggy photography",' while, in contrast, *The Times* found that, 'Perhaps no more beautiful landscapes have ever been produced by photographic methods...atmospheric effect is admirably rendered, and, looked at from a suitable distance, the picture gives a wonderfully true rendering of the subject.' In discussing Davison's controversial exhibit *The British Journal of Photography* began by stating that 'This photograph will probably be the battle-field for the two conflicting sections of photography which the progress of time has brought so prominently forward: the battle between those who champion 'straight' photography and those who explore a more impressionistic aesthetic – often summed up as 'dark grey fuzzy photography.'

Pictorialism as an active movement declined around 1915 as some of its key advocates such as Stieglitz and Steichen turned to 'Straight Photography.' This was a style that rejected the manipulative techniques of Pictorialism and instead sought to produce uncropped images with a

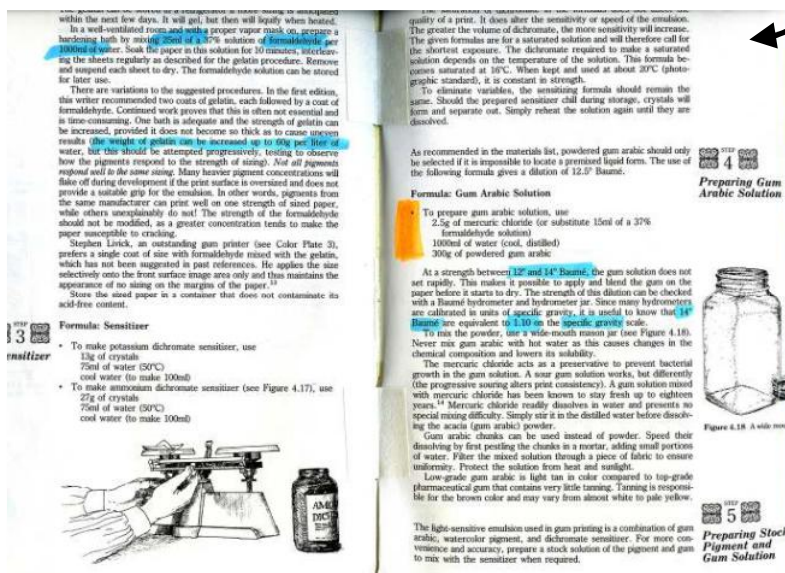
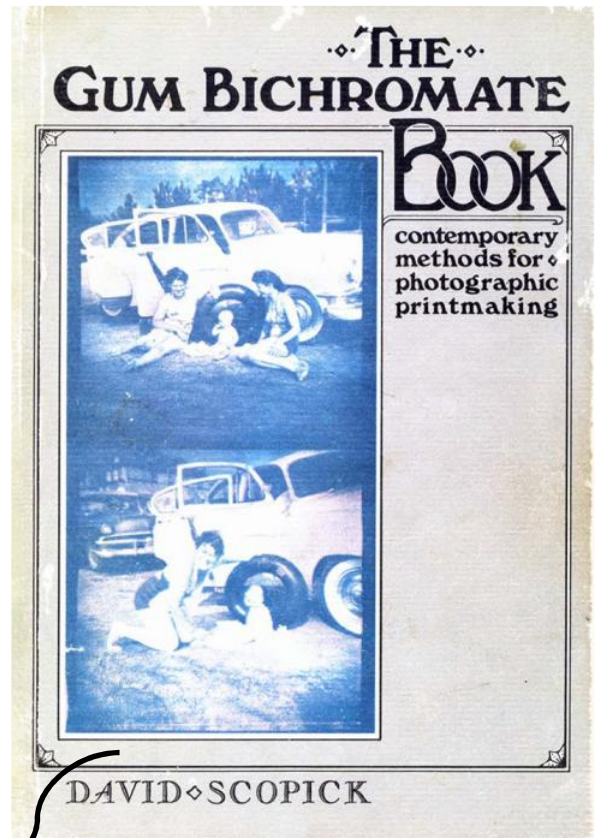


Spirit of Endurance by Harold Cazneaux

sharp focus and high contrast between colours. The movement also had a modernist interest in geometric shapes and structures. Developments in Straight Photography in the US were paralleled by the New Vision photography movement in Europe, which was led by Moholy-Nagy and linked to the Bauhaus.

Nonetheless Pictorialism continued to be a preferred technique of many local and regional camera clubs, especially in Australia, as late as the 1940s. Perhaps the best known example was Harold Cazneau's 'Spirit of Endurance'. Cazneau published many articles on the aesthetic possibilities of Pictorialism and its development in Australia.

In a 'Blast from the Past' in the 1960's there was an explosion of interest in alternative modes of photographic printmaking, leading to a revival of interest in pinhole cameras, platinum and Gum Bichromate prints, and oil and bromoil pigment processes. In 1965 Jerry Uelsmann argued that by using 'Post-Visualization' photographers could revisualize their images via darkroom manipulations. His works from this time were composite images created in the darkroom; some art critics started to call this *Neo-Pictorialist* whilst others described it as *Post-Pictorialism*. After falling out of common use for an extended period of time, a resurgence in Gum printing began again in the 1970s through the writings and work of a new generation of artists such as David Scopic. This was Pollard's natural habitat, bringing together his skills in etching and printmaking with his lifelong obsession about creating art through photography.



In the mid-1890s, Frenchman Robert Demachy had revived and refined the technique of Gum Bichromate to allow for the introduction of colour and brush-like effects into photographs. The Gum Bichromate process involved applying pigment – Gum Arabic – and potassium bichromate to the paper. When developed under light, the Gum Bichromate would remain pliable for a period of

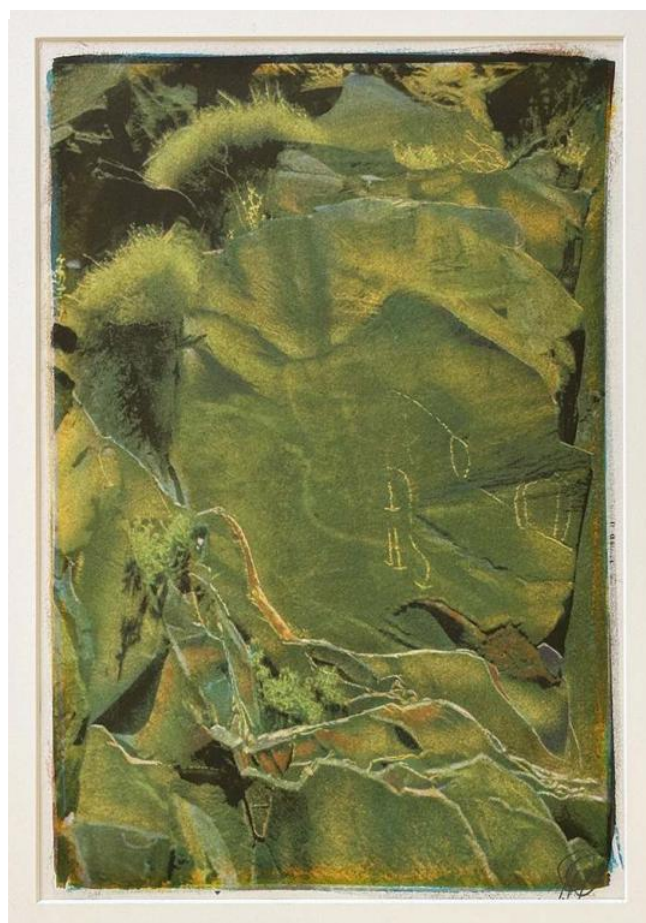
time, allowing the photographer to manipulate the surface of the photograph to create various painterly effects. Photographers often favoured particular colours, as seen in Robert Demachy's preferred orange tones and Steichen's (and John Pollard's) use of blue-green.



John had in his book collection both the original 1978 version and the 1991 second edition of David Scopic's book 'The Gum Bichromate book.' Scopic is a Canadian photographic artist and Professor of photography at the Ontario College of Art in Toronto; he became a close friend and collaborator of John. Many complimentary adjectives are used to describe Gum Bichromate such as expressive, delicate and inspiring but experienced practitioners might use different terms – temperamental, elusive, tedious and dangerous! To master the technique as John Pollard did required great tenacity and skill. John's copy of Scopic's classic book (see previous page) is so well used that it is taped together at the spine and heavily annotated with notes. John Pollard undoubtedly overcame the myriad pitfalls encountered in the process and

became a Master of the Gum Bichromate process with many beautiful works to his name, two of which are reproduced here. He held a number of solo exhibitions of his Gum Bichromate prints in Australia and Internationally.

Readers seeking contemporary advice on the Gum Bichromate process should consult '*Gum Printing: A Step-by-Step Manual, Highlighting Artists and Their Creative Practice*' By Christina Anderson, Routledge 2016.



On this page: two of John Pollard's Gum Bichromate prints