

## Artists revive old methods and invent new ones to bring wonder back into photography

By Robert Everett-Green  
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The earliest photographers were like magicians, who caught images of the material world on blank surfaces without pencil or paint. Georges Méliès, who made some of the first motion pictures, actually started as an illusionist, and used his camera to amaze.

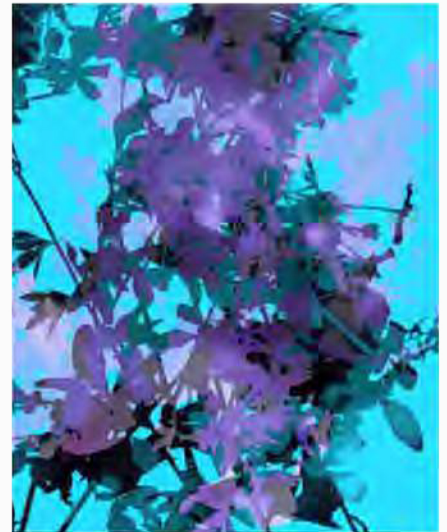
Now, of course, anyone can snap pictures with a cellphone, and add them instantly to a stockpile of online imagery more likely to exhaust than astonish. Even Photoshop's tricks have ceased to amaze, while undermining photography's strongest boast: that it shows the world as it really is.

Some artists have responded by bringing materiality and wonder back into photography. They have returned to messy and sometimes erratic forms of photo-chemistry, reviving old methods or inventing new ones. Their works often don't look like photography as we know it, and don't intend to. Like old-time illusionists, these artists challenge us to figure out how the magic was done.

Mariah Robertson's works at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (MOCCA), for example, have the look of exuberant abstract paintings. Vivid colours swirl over each other in non-repeating patterns, in one case literally pooling in a heap of paper on the floor. But Robertson's colours all come from the reaction of chemical washes to her light-sensitive photographic papers.

Ryan Foerster, also at MOCCA, uses a similar process, sometimes also burying his pictures temporarily or leaving them out in the rain. The idea is to allow natural or accidental transformations to work on a scarred and textured surface that may look more like geology than photography.

Both artists are represented in Part Picture, a group show that is a must-see part of the Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival. The exhibition, curated by Brooklyn-based photographer and critic Chris Wiley, also includes some James Welling prints made from photograms – simple camera-less images captured by exposing an object on light-sensitive paper. A similar process was used in the 1850s by botanist Anna Atkins, one of whose images figures in Past Picture: Photography and the Chemistry of Intention, a concurrent MOCCA show of mostly historic photos assembled with the National Gallery of Canada. Welling alludes to Atkins with his choice of subject – plants – but also uses colour filters and digital superimposition to achieve a look that recalls painting or silk-screening. Past Picture also includes abstract photograms by Man Ray and Share Corsaut, a Canadian working with vintage techniques in the 1980s.



Chromogenic print mounted on Dibond aluminum by James Welling.