

Ben Cauchi's Photographs Turn Everyday Objects into Occult Metaphors

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Ben Cauchi's eerie, technically impressive images are quizzical objects created to exploit the nostalgia of bygone eras. Rather than using still photography as a documentary tool or an illustration of the truth, Cauchi carefully stages his photographs and mines historical techniques. In "Echo Chamber," he's assembled a series of ambrotypes—an obscure mid-19th-century wet-plate photograph process—that reveal the fluid, mystical nature of the everyday, a kind of alchemy the artist has become notorious for.

In the era of Photoshop and high-definition smartphone cameras, some artists have turned to older, more time-intensive techniques. The Berlin-based Cauchi, who has used wet-plate processes almost exclusively since 2002, has taken the practice to extremes, mastering a number of early emulsion techniques including tintype (photographs made on thin sheets of metal) and cyanotype (which produce cyan-blue negative images). In 2010, he commissioned the construction of a bellows camera, used to capture negatives on a chemically treated glass plate so large it produces images that measure 20-by-24 inches.

Cauchi has said that "the mechanical side of photography has never really appealed to me anywhere near as much as the alchemical." Throughout his career, he has paired such alchemy with carefully staged studio setups and lighting schemes that mine the otherworldly impressions characteristic of his techniques, often photographing simple self-portraits or windows surrounded by halos of light.



In "Echo Chamber," the scope of Cauchi's explorations is hyper-specific: the doors and windows he curates are almost geometrically identical. But this simplicity is deceptive, as commonplace objects take on a character that borders on religious. In *The idle argument* (2015), a door and a window, bathed in the brightest of spotlights, appear to be in conversation. A simple square in *White light* (2013) brings to mind the heavenly and sinister character of an occult text. The results are familiar yet uncanny scenes, images that appear as if in a dream or filtered through the hazy filter of memory.

—Molly Osberg

BEN CAUCHI: ONE'S OWN GREY – CHLOÉ WOLIFSON

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The ease with which it is possible to skim through seemingly limitless photographic imagery daily makes it equally easy to forget the profoundly analogue, experimental, and physical nature of the medium's origins. The type of viewing experience that Ben Cauchi's photographic work commands is remarkably different to the way most photography is viewed in 2014. Using an adapted 19th Century wet-plate technique, Cauchi makes unique photographs on black Perspex or glass (an approach more akin to displaying an original negative than a print). The resulting works take absence as their subject, leading the viewer down hallways and into corners, asking many questions and suggesting few answers. In *But only disaster lay ahead* (2013), one's gaze is directed down an empty passage, possibly that of an apartment building. The relatively clinical appearance of the interior belies the drama of the work's title. The hall retreats into murky shadow, however beyond it a rectangle of light waits expectantly to be occupied, perhaps by a figure or other figment of the viewer's imagination.

The rounded and shadowy corners of these compositions create a central viewpoint akin to that of the human eye. Even the occasional chemical mark appears, like dust floating on a cornea. Rarely do we consciously acknowledge our viewpoint to be this soft-edged; in Cauchi's work the effect is to insidiously draw the viewer into the scene, and consequently into the plate it is embedded within. In *The portal* (2013) a room is lit by sunshine streaming through a tall window above a radiator. A rectangular form, possibly a door, stands in the centre of the space. It is blacker than black, to the point of confusing the viewer's depth perception. Physical and psychological spaces converge as substance becomes void, or vice versa. Of all the works in the exhibition, *That which can be seen is not all there is* (2013) makes the most direct reference to early photographic culture's preoccupation with illusion, and experimentation with the strange alchemy of the medium. A square support is covered in a decorative brocade cloth, upon which a white handkerchief can be seen, standing to attention, defying gravity. Wisps of light cross the centre of the composition, and seem to animate the cloth, so it appears like a flickering flame atop a candle.

Cauchi's photographs are objects. Sure, they portray images (you can probably see one or two near these words), but those images are contained within and inextricably linked to the physical properties of an object. It's possible to imagine, when peering into the velvety layers revealed through these inky, reflective surfaces, how magical photography must have seemed to its early creators and viewers – the wonder, danger and seeming impossibility of having captured part of the world in a two-dimensional object. They are pixels' polar opposite, a reminder that entering a gallery space and taking the time to experience that tug-of-war between yourself and an artwork is as vital and rewarding as ever.

THE DOMINION POST

Cauchi's presence found in absence

MARK AMERY

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It begins well. Approaching City Gallery's survey of 10 years of Ben Cauchi's photography you are greeted by a line of nine small, framed photographs of spot-lit white gloves. They are empty of hands yet bear the marks of use, like spent balloons or prophylactics. At a distance they seem to be waving hello: A series of frames from some old stop-motion animation. I am reminded of the way many cultures, Maori included, that marked their presence with a painted hand on the entrance to a cave.

Photography has always been about the capture of presence. In Cauchi's case it is the presence to be found in absence. Take the gloves, for example. A room Cauchi shows us is never empty. It is a place of light, dust and the past's residue, which the camera, containing time, captures. In this survey we are presented with many worn rooms, in which wrinkled backdrop sheets are sometimes hung. They are like memento mori, remembrances of mortality, spaces and props with which we might meditate on our existence. Photography as metaphysics, if you like.



Ben Cauchi's Self Portrait with Lamp, part of his exhibition The Sophist's Mirror at Wellington City Gallery.

Each image is also about the very fabric of the photograph itself, its worn, warm edges and marks. Cauchi is refreshing not because he uses antique photographic technologies - processes you need to look up, ambrotypes, tintypes and wet collodion on acrylic sheets - but because he actively explores photography itself. He engages with its magic, revelling in its mysteries and teasingly revealing the props behind the illusions. In theatrical vignettes he is a scientist cum magician with light, dazzling us with something as simple as a floating cloud of smoke one moment, then the next a failed experiment where all that remains is a graveyard of spent matches.

The exhibition is titled The Sophist's Mirror. A sophist is someone who deals in clever but false arguments - someone who deceives through philosophy. The mirror here looks back at Cauchi and us, sometimes laughing, asking us to question what we see. You could say it speaks to a contemporary lack of faith, yet the way we still look for things to believe in.

The work recalls early photography as a time of magic, when people looked for what mysteries might be caught in the camera's chamber. It is a mystery lacking from most image-making today.

The gloves are covered in the stains of the fluids Cauchi uses. In ways like this the artist is the presence in the photographs - something we never doubt in a painting. The exhibition is full of self-portraits of one kind and another, Cauchi's own meditation on his space and place in the world - earnest yet playful. In its soft sombre hues, self-expressionistic solemnity, dramatic use of light and flickering wit I am reminded of the painter Tony Fomison. Certainly, more than any contemporary photographer.

Cauchi subverts a whole modern history of photography as recording landscape and incident. It is a subversion full of poetry, humour and, sometimes, conceptual moves as smart as any other contemporary installation artist.

You can tell I am a fan. Which is why it is all the more worrying that I did not enjoy this exhibition.

A strong Cauchi show would not leave me dulled by earnestness and austerity, longing for a comfortable seat. It is three rooms where one would have sufficed. It feels over-stretched, the works too paced out and overstocked, full of repetitions. For every great work there is a minor one. There is a lack of the intimacy these works warrant. A recent excursion into large lightjet prints feels like early experimentation rather than notable. As a relatively young artist, Cauchi perhaps is not ready for a show of this size, with little journey to be shown. This is an occasional City Gallery fault - stretching out big to fill large spaces, leaving artist and viewer stranded.