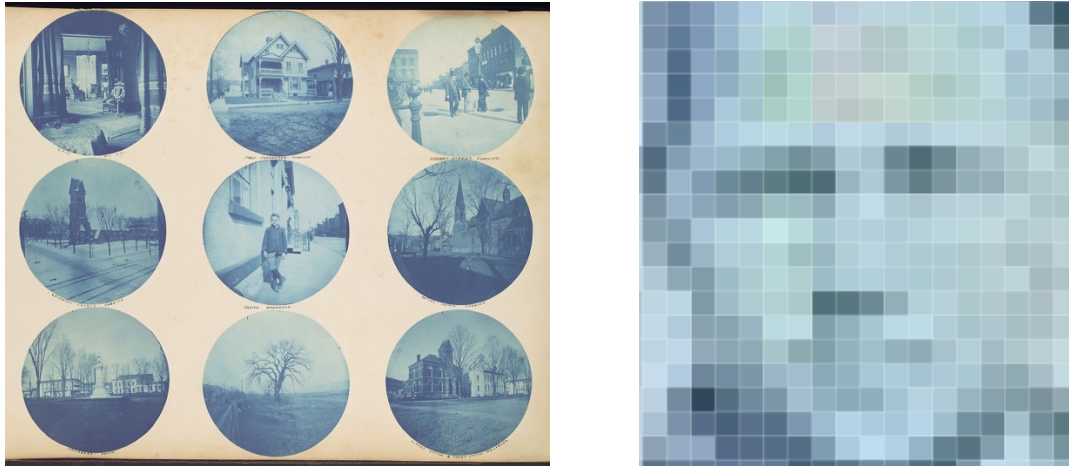


Squaring the Circles of Confusion – Exhibition Resource 1/3

These resources have been produced in support of the exhibition, 'Squaring the Circles of Confusion', hosted at RPS House, Bristol. For dates, further insights, activities and discussion points, visit <https://www.photopedagogy.com/squaring-the-circles-of-confusion.html>

To begin, an intriguing aspect of this exhibition is its title: **Squaring the Circles of Confusion**. The **Circle of Confusion** is a photography term which refers to the focussing process. A circle of confusion is created when an image is not perfectly focused. A square might also be associated with a pixel (related to digital photography) whereas a circle suggests an analogue point of light.



Left: Amateur snapshot, photographer unknown, 1890. The earliest Kodak images were printed in circular format. Right: A close-up of the middle image (left) - after it has been converted to digital format – now reveals its square pixels.

The phrase **to square a circle** is also a mathematical problem and a common figure of speech. It can describe an attempt to bring two very different things together that would normally seem to be unrelated or separate.

For discussion

- Why do you think the curator of this exhibition has chosen this particular title?
- What kind of photography/artwork might you expect to encounter within an exhibition titled **Squaring the Circles of Confusion**?
- Why are lenses nearly always circular and photographs rectangular or square?

Truth and Beauty, Squares and Circles

It might be argued that photography has two parents - science and art - and that photographs can be both factual documents and beautiful objects. These twin aspirations can be seen throughout the history of photography and are still in tension today.

Photographs are, in part, industrial images, the products of machinery, reliant on physics and chemistry. They can provide a remarkably life-like view of the real world. However, they are also artificial, flattened, abstracted versions of reality. Throughout the history of photography, its rational, scientific and documentary uses have existed alongside the imaginative, creative and artistic.

Activity

Prior to looking closely at the images on display, observe their various formats, shapes and sizes collectively, from a distance. Sketch these out as a series of basic shapes. What do you notice? Now choose one artwork and scrutinise it very closely. Is it possible to tell if it is a digital or analogue print (or something else)? What other squares or circles do you notice within the gallery space or within the works on display? How might you photograph (or draw) these in a 'truthful' way; how might you do this in a more creative manner?

For further information visit [photopedagogy.com/squaring-the-circles-of-confusion.html](https://www.photopedagogy.com/squaring-the-circles-of-confusion.html)

Squaring the Circles of Confusion – Exhibition Resource 2/3

Art, for Photography's sake

Photography has always had an uneasy relationship with painting. By the mid 19th century, painting was a well-established practice with a long history. Painters could belong to academies and were perceived as artists who created unique, high value, collectable objects. They could be rewarded handsomely for their talent and experience. By comparison, photographers were often viewed as craftspeople (rather than artists), reliant on technology for the production of their images. Photographs could be reproduced endlessly, were relatively cheap to buy and were perceived as mere 'copies' of nature.

For discussion

- What qualities and characteristics do paintings and photographs share?
- in what ways might the 'value' of an artwork be measured – and what factors could make a photograph more 'valuable' than a painting (or vice-versa)?



Left: JMW Turner, *Rain, Steam and Speed – The Great Western Railway*, 1844 (Oil on canvas); right: Susan Derges, *Tide Pool* (from series), 2016 (C-Type Print)

By the end of the 19th century, various photographers, with ambitions to create works of art, formed breakaway groups and societies (sometimes with their own exhibitions and publications) in order to champion a new kind of photography. The *Photo Secession* and *Camera Work* in the USA, *The Linked Ring* in the UK and *Nihon Shashin-kai* in Japan are just a few of the international organisations established to promote **Pictorialist art photography**. Camera Clubs across the world became spaces for developing and refining photographic skills, techniques and processes and celebrating the art (and science) of photography. The Royal Photographic Society is part of this rich history.

Activity

Some contemporary artists/photographers are drawn to the ideas and working practices of the Pictorialists. They are often interested in alternative processes that subvert digital technologies. Sometimes these artists combine digital and analogue technologies in their work, forging a link between the past and the present.

How might you use your camera to try to recreate some of the visual effects of painting and/or traditional photographic processes? You might consider:

Muting or enhancing colour settings; drawing attention to particular textural and surface qualities; photographing through crumpled or wet clear plastic, tracing paper or coloured acetate; experimenting with shutter speed and/or moving your camera (or self) whilst taking an image; adjusting aperture settings and focal points, deliberately shooting out of focus.

For further information visit photopedagogy.com/squaring-the-circles-of-confusion.html

Squaring the Circles of Confusion - Exhibition Resource 3/3

Artist Focus: Takashi Arai

Tomorrow's History began with a simple question: "Can we predict the future?" [...] After the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, I was shaken by the helplessly parochial standpoint of this country, which made me want to meet and directly hear what fourteen to seventeen year-olds, for instance, were feeling and thinking at the present moment.

-- Takashi Arai



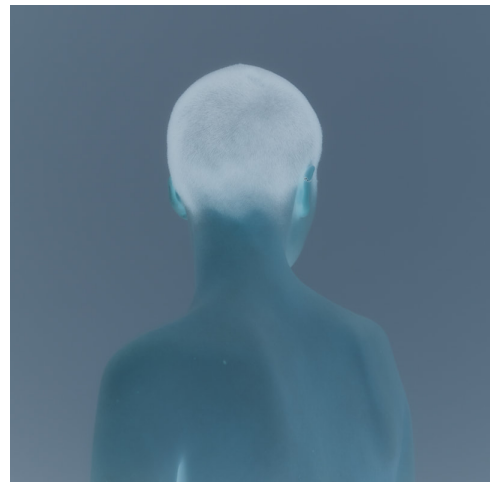
Inspired by a painting by German artist, Kurt Gunther (Portrait of a Boy, 1928), Takashi Arai has created Daguerrotype portraits of Japanese teenagers.

The Daguerrotype was the first commercially available photographic process launched in 1839. It requires relatively long exposure times and the image has been described as being "mirror with a memory" due to its highly polished, reflective surface in which the image appears to be both positive and negative simultaneously.

Takashi Arai embraces the Daguerrotype process aware of the presence of layers of time - the history of the process; the time involved in production; the time afforded with his subject as a consequence of the technology. It is this time to gather thoughts and insights from his subjects that Ari seems to particularly value.

Artist Focus: Céline Bodin

Céline Bodin's images borrow their compositions from 'Old Master' paintings. She uses deliberate obfuscation - heads turned away from the viewer or de-focussing the lens - to enhance a sense of the mysterious. Bodin is concerned with presenting the issue of gender stereotypes but in a way which forces us to look carefully and think hard. We grasp for clarity and definition but we are frustrated. The subjects are veiled. Bodin's pictures are in dialogue with the past, with pictorial traditions and notions of beauty.



Activities

Take a series of portraits of an individual. This might be a family member, friend or someone you know less well.

- **How might you slow down the process of taking a portrait to collaborate or connect at a deeper level?** For example, you might ask them how or where they would like to be portrayed or informally document them while you have a conversation. Alternatively, produce a sequence of images taken over a period of days, weeks or longer. Pay attention to how a person (and your recordings of them) can change with familiarity and understanding.
- **How might you obscure your lens or view, or pose or hide your model to create a more mysterious, dream-like or emotive portrait?**

For further information visit photopedagogy.com/squaring-the-circles-of-confusion.html