

Teacher's Resource

Justine Varga
Photogenic Drawing



AUSTRALIAN
CENTRE
FOR PHOTOGRAPHY



@acp.photo #acpexhibitions2017 #acpphotogenicdrawing

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The Australian Centre for Photography acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we work and live. We pay our respects to the Elders past, present and future, and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

Images

Installation images from Justine Varga's *Photogenic Drawing*. Courtesy and © Michael Waite / ACP 2017.

About the exhibition

Photogenic Drawing



Photogenic Drawing, Varga's first solo show with the Australian Centre for Photography, comprises a large-scale installation that confronts the visitor with photography's own peculiar means of production.

The process of making photographs is laid bare through a dense layering of test strips, pieces of photographic paper used during the printing process to determine the appearance of the final image. In that sense, this installation is an extension of Varga's work in the studio and the lab. These are the places where photographs are produced but also tested, transformed, rejected, reprinted, found wanting and destroyed. It's a place, in other words, where the ruined photograph is a commonplace, where the ruin comes first, where a photograph is ruined many times before it is declared whole and ready for public exposure. All this is a reminder of things usually suppressed in an exhibition of photographs; the processes of trial and error that take place in private (sometimes even in the dark, blindly).

Varga's test strips are also the culmination of the many years she has spent honing the craft of photography. Here she uses these strips as elements in a kind of drawing practice. Layering her test strips over an otherwise blank surface, she turns that surface into a textured sculptural experience, inviting the viewer to join her in an interrogation of the photographic process itself. She asks us to look at, rather than just through, the photographs she has made. Immersing us in photography's ruination, she implies that this is also the medium's origins, that there is always a scribbling in place even before the first mark is made, on a piece of film or anywhere else. A ruin, she implies, is a necessary corollary to all acts of representation, including her own.

About the artist

Justine Varga



Varga graduated with Honours from the National Art School in Sydney in 2007. In recent years her work has appeared in a number of important public exhibitions. In 2016, she was featured in group exhibition *Emanations: The Art of the Cameraless Photograph*, curated by Geoffrey Batchen for the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Zealand, a survey exhibition that included the work of over 50 artists from 12 countries, and also in *New Matter: Recent Forms of Photography*, a survey of the work of young photographers curated by Isobel Parker Philip at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney.

Varga was also nominated for the 2016 Shpilman International Prize for Excellence in Photography, an international juried award at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem. In 2015, her photographs featured in *Australian Art: Now* at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra and were also showcased at Paris Photo. Among several exhibitions scheduled for 2017, she has been commissioned to mount solo exhibitions at the Australian Centre for Photography in Sydney and Sydney Contemporary, Australasia's premier contemporary art fair.

Recently Varga was announced the recipient of the 2017 Olive Cotton Award for Photographic Portraiture for her work *Maternal Line*. In 2014, she was the recipient of the Australia Council London Studio Residency and was awarded the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia Primavera Veolia Acquisitive Prize. Varga has twice been given the juried Josephine Ulrick & Win Shubert Foundation for the Arts Photography Award, in 2013 and 2016. Earlier this year, Varga completed the Acme Associate Residencies Programme in London, with the support of the Australia Council and Create New South Wales.

Exercise 1

Exploring Process

Australian artist Justine Varga creates photographic works from an intimate exchange between a strip of light-sensitive film and the world that comes to be inscribed on it. Made both with and without a camera and often over extended periods, her photographs embody a particular intersection of time and place. These photographs come into being as a result of two interrelated processes. The first involves a series of actions, during which pieces of film are exposed and/or drawn on, handled, scratched, spat on and weathered, among other things. Each action is informed by the place and circumstances in which the film and the artist happen to be located. Exposed to light for periods of months and even years, these pieces of film are then processed before being printed at large scale in the darkroom.



FURTHER INFORMATION

Working with film: Despite the invention of digital photography in the 1970's and its subsequent rise in popularity, the practice of shooting on film has endured. Those who shoot on film appreciate both its lack of immediacy and its tendency to surprise, as well continued reference to materiality and the photograph as an object.

Drawing with light: The word photography developed from the Greek words *phōtos* (light) and *graphé* (drawing) together describes the process of drawing with light. Varga extends the notion of light and drawing in her work, incorporating both the physical act of scratching, drawing and marking film in her practice.

Marking time: Varga's work investigates the notion of 'the decisive moment', exposing film over long periods of time to capture more than an instant but a memory, a narrative later compressed into a single frame.

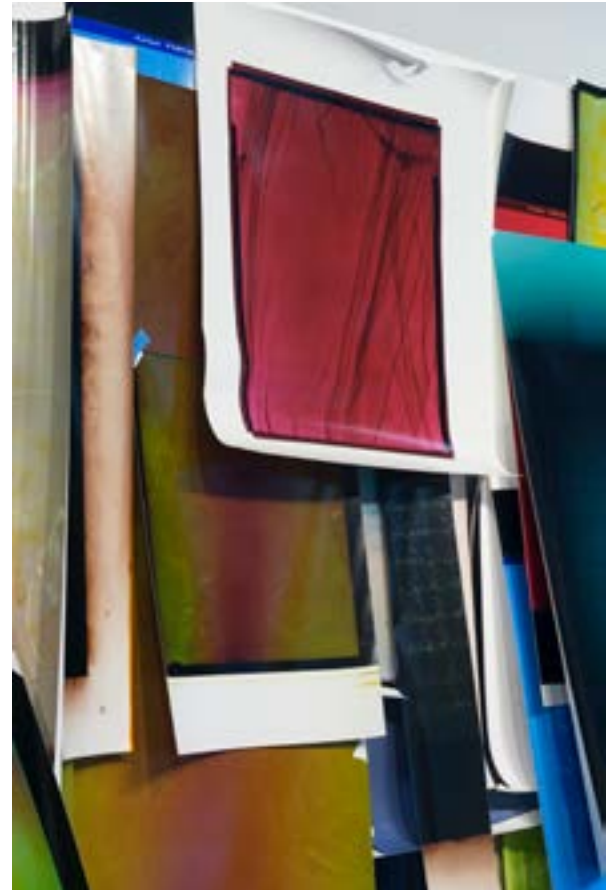
Exercise 1

Cont.

QUESTIONS

From what you have experienced in the gallery and read about the exhibition and the artist please answer the following:

- What do you think the artist is making reference to with the title of the exhibition *Photogenic Drawing*?
- Unlike other exhibitions the work displayed in *Photogenic Drawing* sheds light on the process of art-making. From your experience of the exhibition how would you describe the artist's approach to making work?
- Each work exhibited is an original handprint of the negatives. Looking carefully at the works and their slight variations, what elements of the work are being tested and refined by the artist, and in what ways?
- Discuss Varga's practice using the Postmodern Frame. Consider her work in the broader contemporary art context and consider her use of the photographic medium in relation to painting and drawing.
- Varga's work explores the historical traditions of analogue photographic practice in a contemporary context. Using the Conceptual Framework discuss the relationship between the artist, artwork and audience.



ART MAKING

Consider the process of trial and error made evident in Varga's exhibition *Photogenic Drawing*. Working exclusively on a single image or negative, ask students to consider the multitude of ways that the final work could be presented. Exploring scale, colour, cropping and external materials students will develop an understanding of photographic practice as a series of decisions and experimentations.

Exercise 2

Photographic Installation

For many years artists and curators have been working with the possibilities of presenting photographs as an installation. In *Photogenic Drawing*, artist Justine Varga draws on the sculptural properties and inherent curl of large scale darkroom paper to create an installation that reminds audiences of the materiality of the photograph, whilst shedding light on the artist's process of trial and error.

The dense layering of test strips and darkroom prints represents the passing of time, hours spent developing and experimenting, in addition to the passing of time captured by each individual negative.

The installation serves as evidence of artistic labour, compressing time and place for audiences to interrogate the photographic medium and its process.



FURTHER INFORMATION

Printing process: Working across science and art the process of printing in the darkroom provides the artist with opportunities for experimentation. Many test strips and prints must be created, reviewed and refined before the final work is created.

Colour and film: Film photography is popular among many photographers for its ability to capture a surprising variation in colour palettes. Some brands of film are known for emphasising certain hues, and photographers will often choose a particular brand based on its palette in accordance with the subject matter they are shooting. Varga has spent many years trialling with colour, film types, markings, exposure lengths and chemicals to achieve the desired result.

Installing the work: Installing an artwork is usually a collaborative process involving several people: the artist, a curator, conservator and a crew of installers. Visual aesthetic, audience interaction and preservation of the work all need to be considered. Some contemporary artists view the installation of their work as a part of their practice, participating in or installing their work themselves.

Exercise 2

Cont.

QUESTIONS

From what you have experienced in the gallery and read about the exhibition and the artist please answer the following:

- Describe the installation. What elements of the exhibition do you respond to most and why? How does the method of display impact the audience's engagement with and interpretation of the exhibition?
- Can *Photogenic Drawing* be viewed as a single body of work? Justify your response.
- What message do you think the artist is trying to communicate about the medium and the artistic process?
- When a work is installed by the artist, consider the role of the curator. How does this exhibition differ from other photographic exhibitions you may have seen? How would you display this work if you were the curator?



ART MAKING

Research the following photographic installations, Erik Kessels' 2011 exhibition, *24hrs in Photos* and Penelope Umbrico's 2006 *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr*. Consider what they have in common with *Photogenic Drawing* and how they differ. Create a work consisting of multiple works that makes reference to the abundance of images created and shared daily.

Exercise 3

Cameraless Photography

Varga works directly with light sensitive material. Cameraless photography requires the artist to work with the raw materials of photography, film and light. Rather than mediating the process of artmaking through a camera, this analogue practice allows the artist to investigate and mark the fabric of a photographic image through a chemical process. A photogram is a form of a cameraless photograph, predating the development of the camera. A 1:1 negative image is revealed through its direct contact with a light sensitive material. Lens-less techniques have been used since the invention of photography itself with Henry Fox-Talbot first using the term “Photogenic Drawings”.



FURTHER INFORMATION

Portraiture: History is full of examples of non-representational photographic portraits, Varga’s recent win of the Olive Cotton Portraiture Prize sparked heated debate about the definition of portraiture.

“The fact that Maternal Line is a cameraless photograph – that a camera was nowhere involved in its making – should not be controversial. To argue that photography requires a camera is to assert a very partial or selective view of the medium’s history and its contemporary iterations – one that favours the idea of photography as technological observation rather than an embodied process.”

[Shaun Larkin, *Why I chose the ‘spit and scribble photograph’*, The Guardian, 2017](#)

“I wanted to somehow capture more of the essence of who she was and through the gesture of her mark and the trace of her hand. What I love about the way I’ve recorded my grandmother is that, in a way, it’s timeless. She’s not a young person or an elderly person. I’ve just captured actually her and for me when I look at that I have a direct connection to my grandmother, the person rather than the exterior of the person.” [Justine Varga, *Art Controversy*, ABC, 2017](#)

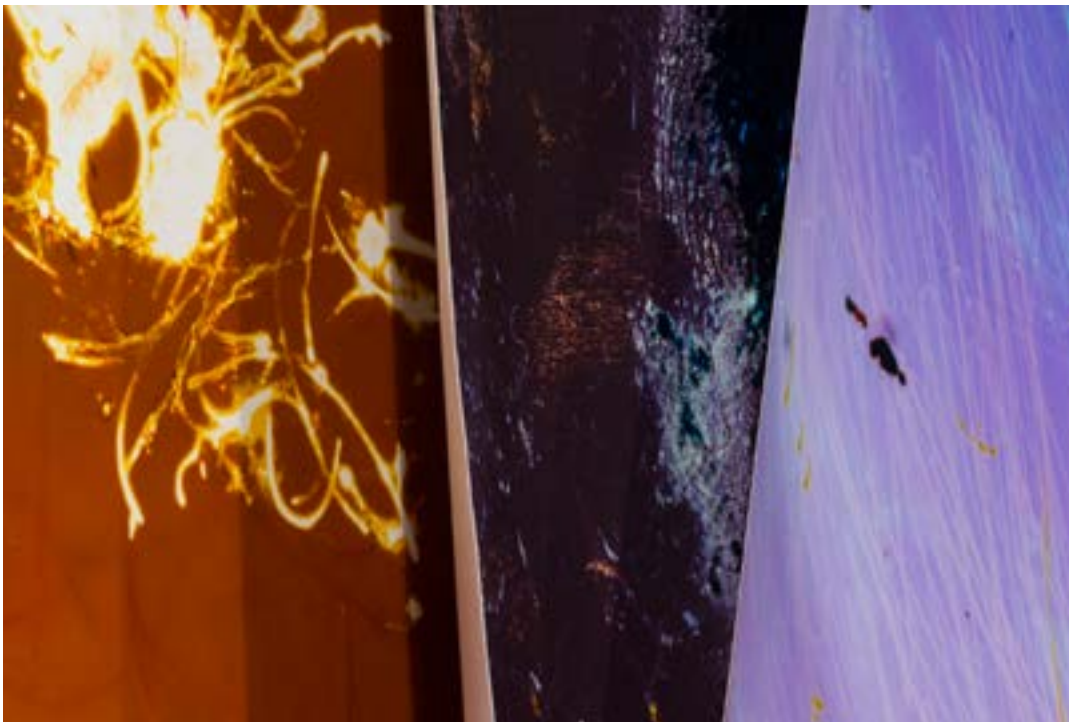
Exercise 3

Cont.

QUESTIONS

From what you have experienced in the gallery and read about the exhibition and the artist please answer the following:

- Discuss the texture and materiality of cameraless photography. What is revealed and concealed through this process?
- Discuss how cameraless photography is different from a photograph produced using a camera. Consider the subject's proximity and connection to the negative, and why an artist might utilise this historical process in their practice?
- How do we define ownership of an artwork or idea? Is being physically involved in the process of making important? Can you provide other examples of artists who don't physically create their own works?
- Justine refers to some of her work as contemporary portraiture. What is your definition of portraiture? Does Justine's work fit with your definition? Can you formulate an argument that affirms Justine's work as portraiture?



ART MAKING

Consider the use of layering and external materials in Varga's process of making art works. Using the cameraless process of photograms create a self-portrait by experimenting with a variety of materials to create a non-representational portrait. If you don't have access to a darkroom, make a Sunprints. Sunprints need only sunlight and water.

The Australian Centre for Photography

About our schools program

The Australian Centre for Photography offers a variety of programs and workshops for both students and teachers. Gallery explorations, workshops on digital photography, darkroom practice, lighting and photo-editing are all available and can be tailored to the needs of your students.

Our programs are developed by our experienced team of photographers and educators to align with curriculum outcomes, and to connect your classroom with the world of photography in exciting ways:

Teacher Professional Development

Artist Insight allows teachers to share and learn ideas and practical classroom strategies that connect the work of contemporary Australian artists with the NSW and National Visual Arts curriculum.

Workshops

We can create the perfect workshop experience to match your students' skills and interests. We can also send one of our experienced and dedicated educators to your school for an engaging and informative photographic workshop covering a range of interests and practice.

School Tours

Students and teachers can experience our latest exhibition with educational tours from our experienced educators and curators. The ACP also provides Education Kits to accompany school visits to promote critical-thinking and enhance curriculum outcomes.

School Memberships

School Membership offers an exclusive range of benefits and opportunities for schools, staff and students.

Visit our website for more details acp.org.au

Contact Marisa Seeley, Education Coordinator at m.seeley@acp.org.au today to schedule your next visit with the ACP.