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REVIEWS NEW YORK

"Anna Atkins Refracted: Contemporary Works"

New York Public Library

By Zack Hatfield

Thomas Struth, *Canyon, Anaheim* (detail), 2013, C-print, 83 3⁄4 x 106 3⁄4".

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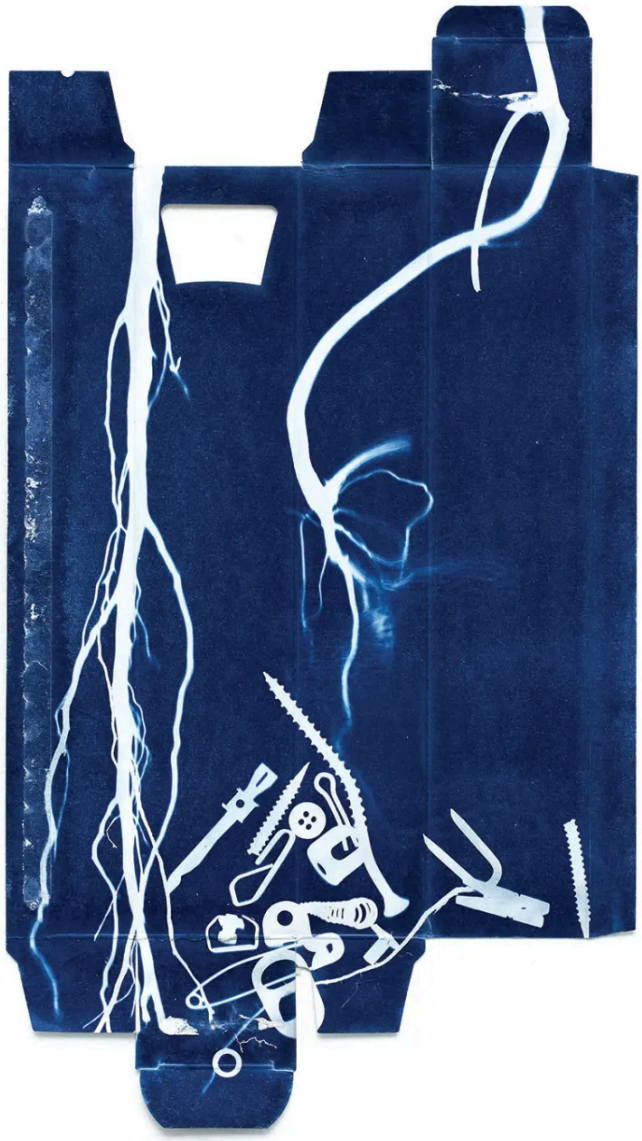

Roy Arden, *Hoard 2*, 2018, cyanotype on cardboard packaging, 12 × 6 3⁄4". From the series "Hoard," 2018. From "Anna Atkins Refracted: Contemporary Works."

Anna Atkins, the Victorian botanist widely considered the first female photographer, created thousands of cyanotypes depicting white negatives of flora, often seaweed, suspended in atmospheres of Prussian blue. She made the pictures in the service of science, each one a spectral ode to the bounty of life and to what was then an innovative photographic technique. Like those of so many women of the time, Atkins's breakthroughs fell into obscurity; she was "rediscovered" in the 1980s. The New York Public Library's exhibition "Anna Atkins Refracted: Contemporary Works"—curated by Joshua Chuang and Elizabeth Cronin and staged in tandem with a cozier, astutely researched display of Atkins's photograms—gathered nineteen artists informed by her legacy. While the contributors

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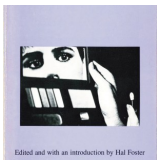

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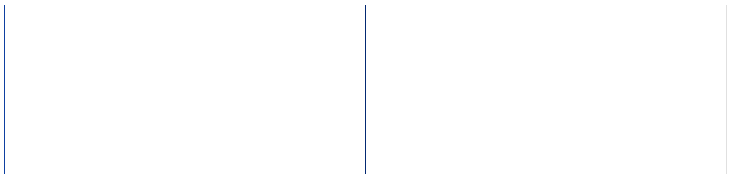
to "Refracted" ended up having little in common with Atkins (most make nonrepresentational images, prize visual poetry over science, and actually identify as artists), the show succeeded in offering an oblique survey of recent cameraless photography, much of which expressed anxieties about loss, climate change, and the medium itself.

For *Sun/Screen/Scan*, 2018, Penelope Umbrico scanned smartphone, tablet, and computer screens while leaving the copier's lid ajar. The leaked light made visible the sundry human traces left on her subjects such as fingerprints, scratches, and dust. In homage to Atkins, Umbrico then applied Photoshop's cyanotype filter to the scans. The outcome, a large and ethereal mosaic depicting panes of dark, grimy glass, indicated the downright unnaturalness of contemporary vision. This was echoed in Alison Rossiter's *Compendium*, 2018, for which she developed an array of expired photo papers from 1898 to 1919. Bearing light- and temperature-based blemishes and at times resembling monochromes or spirit photography, Rossiter's rectangular portraits of nothing were one of many works circumscribed by absence. These also included María Martínez-Cañas's ghostly "X-Ray" photogram series, 1999—gray, vaporous abstractions made in the shadow of a friend's death—and Kathleen Herbert's beautifully titled sound/video installation *Everything Is Fleeing to Its Presence*, 2018. In the latter, a pair of monitors cycle through various azure abysses reminiscent of cyanotype plates as we hear anecdotes recounted in voice-over—including one about a chemist and the "divine" experience of touching the gilded pages of Atkins's *Cyanotype Impressions* (1843)—along with essayistic passages concerned with "light-induced loss," personal erasures, and Atkins's blue: a shade "so deep it has seeped through to my skin." (The color, Herbert suggests, is perhaps akin to that of Homer's famous "wine-dark sea.") The work, with its mesmerized obsessiveness and easy mixture of mundanity, science, and majesty, was a smart way to open the show.



While Atkins used a novel medium to catalogue the natural world, some of these artists resort to older technologies to address its current perils. Ulf Saupe's arch cyanotype series "Res Navalis," 2017–, for example, inventoried another ghostly marvel now ubiquitous underwater: a fluttering plastic bag. For his 2018 series "Hoard," Roy Arden coated deconstructed cardboard product packaging in emulsion, onto which he made photograms of found objects—in them, the roots of trees tangle with

man-made litter such as buttons, can tabs, and nails to form a droll microcosm of the Anthropocene epoch.

Without a clear argument to make, "Refracted" risked lapsing into a hall of curiosities. But the mutual concerns of the artists, the majority of whom were women, lent the exhibition an unexpected cohesiveness. And the show's emphasis on the strategies of chance, patience, and collaboration with nature provided solace inside our internet-based image culture aquake with shareability and artificialness. I keep recalling the pair of large-scale photograms from Kunié Sugiura's "Pressed Specimens" series, 1991–99, which the artist created by softly pressing living plants onto sensitized paper with sheets of glass, taking special care not to kill them. The images themselves are ordinary, but the gesture itself, suffused with a gentle mercy, warmed the entire exhibition.

Atkins, with her cyanotypes of dried algae, fern fronds, and flowers, quietly showed us an earth worth discovering. These artists, just as quietly, showed us one worth saving.

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