

Artist Jerry Spagnoli explores realms in photography

By Tony Huffman

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Recently, I had the opportunity to visit the Richard B. Freeman Gallery at the University of Kentucky's Singletary Center for the Arts, where a new exhibit had opened featuring the work of the photographer Jerry Spagnoli.

This exhibition is a part of the R.C. May Photography Endowment Lecture Series that the center hosts every year. I ventured to the exhibit mainly to view Spagnoli's work concerning daguerreotype photography.

Daguerreotype photography was developed in the 1830s and is a form of photography where images are produced onto pieces of polished silver. Spagnoli first came across daguerreotypes at flea markets in the late 1970s and became smitten by the haunting sense of presence in the minutely detailed images.

The portraits — historically presented in tooled leather cases — have such a strong sense of embodiment that 19th-century writers from Hawthorne to Poe struggled to describe the quality. Jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes called them "the mirror with a memory," as if "the thing itself" was held captive on the daguerreian plate.

It was not until the mid-1990s that Spagnoli could uncover enough information on the process to develop reliable methods of creating daguerreotypes and dealing with the dangerous chemicals involved.

His series, "The Last Great Daguerreian Survey of the Twentieth Century," captures detail-filled scenes, from the architecture and bustling crowds of New York to significant current events, such as the inauguration of President Barack Obama. "These are private historical documents which are meant to convey my personal impression of the moment," he said. "When someone a hundred years from now looks at these images, I want them to feel that they are engaged with something personal as well as historical."

Having examined Spagnoli's daguerreotypes, I would say that they live up to their hype. His subject matter is average people performing habitual actions, but he is able to transform these dull figures into divine beings. People become specters, and the chaos of the world is captured, if only for a second.

In each of his works, there is a clear separation of space between our world (streets, sidewalks, people, etc.) and the celestial sphere.

The world we live in and know is black and white, but the sphere of the clouds is colored with a brilliant blue hue. This separation of realms seems to suggest that our life on Earth and the

projects we take on are insignificant and that only when we are able to pass unto another sphere do our actions begin to take on meaning.

Similarly, just as the sky is as a symbol in Spagnoli's works, so is the sun. The sun in Spagnoli's works serves as the bridge between the two worlds. It is the life-giving force that unites and sustains us, and it is the force that illuminates the actions of all. The sun is a celestial object that brings the mundane together with the divine.

In brief, I found Jerry Spagnoli's exhibit to be inspiring and thought provoking. Daguerreotype photography is a unique way of capturing the human experience. This revived form of art allows subjects to be captured over time and gives the viewer more than a glimpse. The observer is able to analyze the photograph and determine the origins and destinations of actions and thoughts.

Spagnoli's photographs are more than just a chronicling of people and places; they are stories that convey a message, and, depending on how you interpret his work, each photograph has several messages.

Collectively, I would say that his daguerreotypes are véritables œuvres d'art (or "true works of art").

The exhibit is no longer open at UK's Richard B. Freeman Gallery, but Spagnoli continues to exhibit his work across the country and engage in workshops. You can see his work at www.jerryspagnoli.com.