

Jerry Spagnoli And The Mysterious World Of The Daguerreotype

January 10, 2007

By Anthony Lasala

In the January issue of PDN, our profile on photographer/artist Chuck Close and his new book of daguerreotypes, *A Couple Of Ways Of Doing Something* (Aperture, 2006), highlighted his relationship with photographer Jerry Spagnoli. While trying to master the intricate and tricky process of creating a daguerreotype, Close turned to Spagnoli, who is about as near to an expert of the daguerreotype as one find in the 21st century.

Recently Spagnoli produced his own book, *Daguerreotypes* (Steidl, 2006), a publication that includes his brilliant images of the human body as well as street scenes from his home in New York City. In an interview with PDN, the articulate Spagnoli describes the art of the daguerreotype, his work with Chuck Close and how the daguerreotype is far from being antiquated and can even be compared to the cutting edge technology of today's LCD screens.



What first led you to work with daguerreotypes?

Just seeing a daguerreotype was sufficient. If you have ever seen a really good one you know that feeling. I can remember the first time I came across one was in one of those photo flea markets in New York. It was one of those tables filled with cameras and there was a box full of cases and I opened one of them and there was this flawless daguerreotype in it and I was just amazed. My first thought was like when you look at a Faberge egg— that this is beyond anyone's capability. But I immediately thought that someone made this in the 19th century, how hard could it be? Well, I found out later how hard it was. But I was inspired immediately and felt I wanted to make something like that.

What were you primarily working on before that?

I think a lot of people assume that I came to daguerreotypes from doing alternative processes and historical processes but I have no interest in any of those. I was a street photographer working with 35mm Leica and a 5x7 view camera on the street. What interested me in photography was the way it represented the world accurately, but as soon as you kind of abstracted that viewpoint of the world you ended up with these kinds of stories, these allegorical or metaphorical things that go on. I was fascinated by that operation — that you could go out without any particular intention or control over a situation and extract little stories. That was my main interest: the verisimilitude of the medium and the idiosyncratic content that ended up occurring once you made a photograph, which is what made daguerreotypes perfect for me. Because they are so realistic and so persuasive in communicating the subject directly and at the same time so idiosyncratic and subjective and illusive even — manipulating the plate in order to see it. For me it was the exact medium for dealing with the particular issue of objectivity and subjectivity in the same image.

You make a difficult process look almost easy. Was it tough to master and what were some of the largest challenges you faced?

It took a long time just to find out enough of the rudiments to get started. I saw that first image in 1979 or 1980 and I went down and found some reprints of the old manuals and I looked through them and I couldn't really figure out what they were talking about and then you come across the chemistry which is profoundly hazardous. So I just put the book back on the shelf. My original plan was to actually wait until I was 70 years old, so I didn't have any time left anyway, so it didn't matter if I injured myself with the chemicals. I had it all strategized — I'm not joking.

But I persisted and there was a 19th century survey at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the very last image was a daguerreotype of an odalisque and I looked at the date and it was 1970 or so. So I realized someone could make this now and it can be managed. But it was difficult. Today it's a little easier to find out the process because I do workshops and other people are free with the information, but back then there was nothing like that. But I kept mentioning my interest to dealers of daguerreotypes and somebody told me that there was someone in New Mexico making them and he told me about an article that had been written that described how to do it with the safe version. That was around 1994.

As far as getting good at it, it's a constant oscillation. It's a very simple process in its parts. You don't have any formulas to speak of. You're working with pure chemicals and their interaction. But there are all sorts of mysterious things that can get in the way of these very simple elements interacting with each other. So periodically you would end up with disastrous results. When I was starting in the first three years or more I had a success rate around 30 percent. There were times that I couldn't get a decent plate for months and I had no idea what was going on. So after all of that the biggest achievement I have made technically is being able to recognize a problem and fix it quickly. I still have occasional disasters, but they are less extreme.

What was the first image that you took?

In the grand tradition of first images, it was out the window of my studio in San Francisco. You don't want to have to go out if you are experimenting with a big view camera, so you just point it out the window – that's good enough.

What makes your specific approach to daguerreotypes unique?

It's unique because I came up with it more or less from scratch and in so far as I started out trying to make it as easy as possible, and then discovered over the years that I had to put more and more pieces back into the puzzle that I left out originally. When I first read the old manuals, it seemed that I could streamline it. And since I was using modern technology – a jeweler's wheel to polish the plate and other things like that – I was rather casual about obeying some of the rules in the beginning. And some of the old manuals skipped over some of the steps not because they weren't important, but because they were so obvious. So over time you end up with a unique approach because your technique grows according to technique and discovery. But what I do is extremely close to the 19th century technique. I'm certain that there is nothing that I do different except for certain kinds of electric devices that I have access to. There are certain things that I have done with the anatomical studies and the portraits I worked on with Chuck using a strobe. That is something you couldn't make in the 19th century because when you get that close to a subject, the movement that's forced on the subject by simple blood pulsing through their body will blur the image. So to get that kind of close focus and sharpness you have to use a strobe.

Sometimes you run into some photo cranks that say I should improve the process. I'm incredulous. How can you improve on a daguerreotype? All I want to do is something as good as they did back then.

Did you ever suspect that you would go this far with the daguerreotype?

During the period that I was having the huge failure rate I knew no one would do this and go through this much trouble. The reason I was able to do this was because I had a lot of free time. I was doing fine art work but I was making a living doing intermittent editorial work in San Francisco. So I was able to have large periods of time to beat my head against this technology. It occurred to me that if I got to the level that I wanted to get to, that people would be interested. That wasn't the motivation but I thought about it.

Where do you see daguerreotypes and this process in the future?

I think the daguerreotype process is often mistakenly looked at as an antiquated method. In the 19th century no theoretical understanding of it was ever developed. It was purely a practical and commercial thing. I think the daguerreotype was abandoned before it was even understood. So what we have now is a medium that for all intents and purposes is brand new. And updating this, I think there's a similarity to the daguerreotype surface and an LCD screen that is going to become more intriguing over time. LCD screens have some of the same mechanical relationships to light that a daguerreotype does, except that with an LCD screen you have a moving matrix of color particles with light being forced through them. What you have there is a very active optical surface. With a daguerreotype being similar to that, I think that in the future, with people becoming more and more habituated to seeing their images in LCD screens and less on paper, that when they look at daguerreotypes they're actually going to resonate stronger with them. That's because they are going to recognize the liveliness of the daguerreotype surface and they are going to see how dead an actual photograph really is as an object. The main reason I'm interested in the daguerreotype is it's the medium that gets me the closest to the representation of the world within the camera.

And I hate the idea of people thinking I'm doing antique processes. You get people who say 'Do you do portraits?' And I say, 'Yeah.' And they say, "So do you provide the costumes or do I have to bring them?"

Your studio is specifically designed to handle the process of daguerreotypes. How long did it take to build it and what did it entail?

In San Francisco I put a studio in my space in 1994 and when I came back to New York City in 1998 I got a studio in Chelsea and put in all the equipment. It's actually very simple to set up once you know how to do it. And by the way, Chuck likes to make jokes about

poisoning pigeons and the like, but the fact is I was very attentive to the ecological and environmental issues. All of my equipment is sealed, the developing unit is in a fume hood and that is in a sealed container. I've had a number of occasions to do a large amount of work on a particular day and I've put mercury safety badges inside the duct of the fume hood and they registered with no exposure. So it's a tight system.

How did you connect with Chuck Close?

He contacted me in 1999. He had an interest in making daguerreotypes a few years before and he had no success. He contacted a couple of guys who were doing the process and they weren't able to deliver a large plate or consistent results and he kind of gave it up. But he was involved with the Art Institute of Chicago and they were collaborators in this project where they were trying to make holograms and daguerreotypes. I knew a dealer in Chicago who connected me to Chuck and he came over and we did some testing and he liked what I could do and we went from there.

How did that collaboration go and what did you take from your work with him?

I think he and I were extremely in sync with our ideas about the potential of the medium. So I don't think he learned anything from me and I don't think I learned anything from him. I think we were already there. I think the medium provided a place for us to work together and I think we both have an appreciation for the refined depiction of surfaces that the daguerreotype presents – it is obviously the best photographic medium for skin. It provides your eye with a tactile experience of the surface of the body and I think that's what attracted both of us.

What were some of his images that you were impressed with?

I think it's fantastic to have the retinue of subjects that he had available. It's just wonderful to be able to do portraits of these very interesting people who all have a very distinct sense of themselves, one might even say a practiced sense of themselves. So whenever you do a portrait of someone like that, this is collaboration. You don't want someone who is not fully present – and because of the kinds of people we were shooting we ended up with a series of portraiture where everybody is thoroughly there and they provide a richness to their expression. It has occurred to me that this is why some of the portraits from the 19th century are interesting and some are bland. I'm not sure if it was the sitter or the photographer that made it so.

What are you currently working on?

I should have a series of books coming out. I have a book coming out next year which is work I did from 1990-1994. It's black and white, grainy, 35mm work from the street. I blew up small portions of the frame – hand gestures and certain things I took out of context to recontextualize bits and pieces in order to assemble a quasi-narrative out of it. It should be out next year through Steidl. I'm also shooting another book now that is in color and has some daguerreotypes in it.