

Jerry Spagnoli | Daguerreotypes

PHOTOGRAPHS AND TEXT BY JERRY SPAGNOLI

Steidl, Gottingen, 2006. Designed by Jerry Spagnoli and Sarah Winter/Steidl Design. Printed by Steidl, Gottingen. Trade edition of 2000 copies. . Photo-illustrated stiff wrappers. 56pp.,112 color illustrations. 11 1/2 x 11 1/2. \$40.00

Making daguerreotypes takes guts. The devotee must brave the tedium, trouble and toxicity of a reputedly temperamental technique; in addition, when you're working with one of the original pencils of nature, you can't help but find yourself digging around one of the taproots of the medium. What can you say that can hold a conversation with the patient, saturnine sitters of the 19th century? Jerry Spagnoli is obviously aware of the challenges, technical and conceptual, of daguerreotyping the present world. In fact, he makes a point of using his work as a time capsule, taking old themes and giving them a contemporary spin. The book is made up of four bodies of work and a conceptual statement: the residues of the explosions of firecrackers (the conceptual statement): dry landscapes: close-ups of bodies: New York life: and New York as it has changed since 9/11. Of course, his use of the daguerreotype medium limits his subject matter to relatively bright, slow moving or immobile scenes but Spagnoli enlivens his images by overexposing them, which gives them a lovely raft of tones,



including pure blue skies. Anyone who has ever tried to describe the look of a daguerreotype, with its illusive, jewel-like detail, will appreciate Steidl's reproductions, which at least manage to capture the mirrored crispness and inhumanly-precise definition of the polished metal images. Assuming the untitled images are in chronological order, one can track the photographer's process, or rather the photographer's accommodations to the process. The images start out using the familiar vocabulary of the archive: blotches, scratches, discolorations and the occasional thumbprint. Eventually, the

images become cuttngly clear and sharp, though the bodily close-ups are made with a minimal depth of field and a maximal optical distortion that recalls the great uncoated lenses of the past. To my mind these body pictures are the most purely beautiful part of the work, unencumbered by any baggage but the delight in slowing down and discovering. Many of the New York scenes seem to be conscious meditations on the passage of time, juxtaposing the woosh of moving people with the very stationary buildings. The photographs of the flaming World Trade Center towers, and the aftermath, signal a change in Spagnoli's seeing. The impermanence of this world suddenly takes on more weight. Perhaps Spagnoli's choice of the daguerreotype as a form lends his work some of the weight and juice of that taproot after all. PHIL HARRIS