

# exposure



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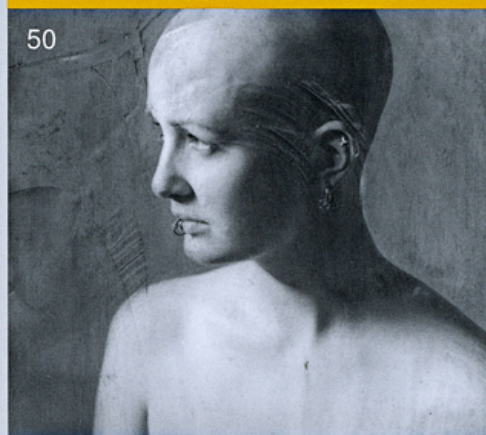
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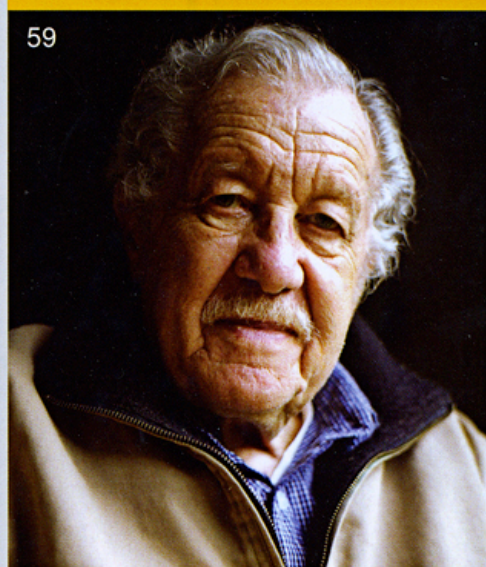
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## The Panoply of Adroitness: On Patrick Nagatani and His *Desire for Magic*

*Desire for Magic: Patrick Nagatani 1978–2008*

Michele Penhall, editor

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folds, 2 maps, 1 die cut

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*Space and time peculiar to the image is none other than the world of magic, a world in which everything is repeated and in which everything participates in a significant context.*

—Vilem Flusser<sup>1</sup>

*Each moment is all being, is the entire world. Reflect now whether any being or any world is left out of the present moment.*

—Dōgen Zenji<sup>2</sup>

The image arose as an intermediary of understanding, a node of interconnection, between the human mind and the absolute presence of the physical world. A desire for images to last, as seen through the phenomenon of perception, became essential in human expression; evidence marking the surfaces of rock in places such as the Lascaux caves. It allowed us to make sense of the physical world while imposing our mark upon it. The photograph, upon its invention, became a tool used, like text, to reinforce linearity, to keep progression in line. It allowed us to collect, in bits, what was “out there,” bringing us closer to that which was not immediately accessible. Used as records, photographs provide the illusion of concreteness, of actuality. In this way, images and photographs become history and life, informing our every action, our every gesture, reducing us to its producing and consuming somnambulate.

Yet there are those who see the nature of the beast and, at times, choose to work both with and against it. Looking through the pages of *Desire for Magic*, a collection of thirty years’ work from Patrick Nagatani, one sees the adept ability of an artist who has challenged prevailing notions of the photograph as bearer of Truth and keeper of Time while embracing elements of environmental, social, and ethnic politics with wit, dry humor, and playfulness. His ideas are intricate and elaborate, whimsical at times and pragmatic at others. As an artist he has utilized collage, found imagery, tableaux, and miniatures (both in front of the lens and as part of the finished object). He has constructed scenes and environments for the camera (allowing elements of construction and studio work to be visible) and painted, silkscreened, and taped on the photographic surface.

Nagatani began to question time and photography’s ability to represent it during an earlier body of work, the *Japanese American Concentration Camp* portfolio (1993–1995), which dealt with the temporal deterioration (both physical and in social and personal memory) of these camps across the country. In the work one can see the tragic character of a world driven by speed and disconnection. “My approach to the work has allowed me to be part historian, archaeologist, geologist, cartographer, photographer, and the Japanese-American *Sansei* investigating what has been a part of my cultural identity,” Nagatani explains. “At Topaz [Detention Camp in Utah], I found among the thousands of rusting nails a flattened and rusted tin truck. Close by a fully intact trilobite (from the Palaeozoic period) was discovered. The present and the past linked. I could not help experience, observe, and record without linking the past with the work.”<sup>3</sup>

“The ‘truth’ is illusive isn’t it?” Nagatani wrote to me. It is, especially when using a photograph as its grounding. *Cadillac Town Car, The Great Gallery, Horseshoe Canyon, Utah, U.S.A.* (1992/1999), depicts an archaeological excavation in gradations of black and white (Figure 1). Slightly out-of-focus pictographs adorn the rock face just beyond the sharp foreground where shovels and pickaxes lay scattered around a gaping hole. This place has been photographed countless times before, but never like this. What fills this excavated land, and its implications, is what is of interest here: a 1929 Cadillac Town Car. It is hard to imagine another photographer standing in this spot, photographing these pictographs with a clear sense of history and time, while buried beneath his feet lays an artifact capable of crumbling one’s concretized understanding of the world. This photograph, from Nagatani’s enigmatic series *Excavations* (1985–2001), displays a schism in the line of time as perceived through the lens of history. It is an image, and series, that challenges the legitimacy of photographic truth and our relationship to linear time.

The variance in *Excavations* is in the existence and actions of the two main characters, Nagatani the Photographer and Ryoichi the Archaeologist, one of which we know is rooted in the physical world and the other evidenced only in text. The fervor in which he has worked on the many projects in his oeuvre may lead one to think there are multiple Nagatanis at work. And perhaps there are; when questioning the linearity of his scientific thinking, Ryoichi writes, “Perhaps if one can bend or loop time, two positions in time that meet might exist simultaneously and physically together,” as if the linear thread of time was starting to unravel and Nagatani and Ryoichi were one and the same, existing simultaneously because of this crosshatching of time.<sup>4</sup>

This is indicative of Nagatani’s layered work, which always launches into different paths of inquiry and revelation. Throughout his career he has been interested in photography’s ability to “re-present” and “re-represent” things; that is, to feed representations through an apparatus in order to reapply meaning; to shift a subject matter’s initial



Figure 1. Cadillac Town Car, The Great Gallery, Horseshoe Canyon, Utah, U.S.A., 1992/1999

context so as to present a new perspective or point towards an element that may have been missed originally; or to visually unfold the notion that images are as fluid as a rushing river, as tangible as fog. As Walter Benjamin wrote, a “magician and surgeon compare to painter and cameraman. The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web.”<sup>5</sup>

In *Ryoichi and Sid, Albuquerque, New Mexico* (2005) we see Ryoichi’s<sup>6</sup> torso as he clasps his pelvis area (Figure 2). To his left hangs luscious, red velvet drapery; to his right a near life-size anatomy chart. He is centered in the frame, bridging the scientific and the theatrical. Wearing an open man’s kimono, he reveals a scar from belly button to pubis and a stoma. Ryoichi frames the area with his hands as a neon green light, representing love and a sense of responsibility according to the fourth chakra, bathes his skin. This piece has the affect of theatre, as if Ryoichi and his companion, Sid (the name he gave his stoma), have just stepped out from the curtain to reveal what is normally hidden: the chromotherapy session aimed at healing. Yet the charade is pierced by the actuality of photographic

representation and the viewer’s recognition of the subject, his scar and stoma, as existing in the physical world. In this way, the artist also becomes the surgeon, laying bare the transient and ultimately fragile nature of the body and the futility of our attempts at controlling and transcending it. Nagatani the cameraman is also the magician and surgeon (and painter, sculptor, director, subject, historian, and storyteller).

This is the affect of Nagatani’s work, which often balances on the edge of absurdity: a brilliant tangentialism that is a testament to his story-telling ability and visual acuity. In his most well-known work, *Nuclear Enchantment* (1988–1993), he points to his cultural heritage and experience as a third generation Japanese-American, the history of nuclear activity in New Mexico, and its impact on contemporary social, environmental, and political spheres. In *Trinity Site, Jornada del Muerto, New Mexico* (1989), Nagatani constructs a scene filled with subtlety that builds to an uncanny sense of horror. The Enola Gay bomber flies over a group of Japanese tourists (Nagatani among them) engulfed in the reddish aura of nuclear fallout, snapping



Figure 2. Ryoichi and Sid, 2005

pictures in front of the Trinity Site Monument at the White Sands Missile Range. The artist peeks around a tourist and addresses the viewer. As Flusser wrote, "Images are supposed to be maps but they turn into screens: instead of representing the world, they obscure it until human beings' lives finally become a function of the images they create."<sup>7</sup> The tourists' lives, in this case, are truly a function of the image. Yet in this work the screen is broken, thanks to the artist who, as one of the tourists, consciously addresses the viewer in this ironic scene. This is an act of photographic *satori*.

Throughout his career, Nagatani has been working for *satori*, or total awareness and clarity, beyond the merely photographic. This practice is driven by an incredible mind and work ethic. "I often get interested in an alternative idea while working on current pieces, which usually is production work at the time in that the full visualization of concept has been realized," Nagatani explained. "What I do is write or sketch these future possibilities in my journal to embrace at the appropriate time in the future." His willingness to follow subtle moments of clarity or sparks of interest had me wondering if these ideas or paths had ever led to a dead end. "Dead ends have happened but it is often the reason for the dead end that is most interesting—and also the ability to recognize that it is a dead end—that is engaging and promotes other ideas."

Nagatani is a careful gardener and patient thinker. As the waves (ideas) come in he takes notice and marks the pages of his journal, as the weeds (dead ends) spring up, he carefully pulls and buries them back into the soil. These waves and weeds fill the pages of *Desire*

for Magic; his early collaboration with Andrée Tracey<sup>8</sup> would steer him to *Nuclear Enchantments* and *Novellas*; his work on the *Japanese American Concentration Camps* would reroute him to *Excavations*. In his early body of work *Cathedrals*, he first experimented with masking tape, a material that would become his focus in *Tape-estries* (1982–2008), a series in which Nagatani meticulously tears masking tape and "paints" it onto his photographs. He allowed himself to work with no expectation or end goal, a practice he calls the "zone of no-thought," which frees Nagatani from time as he repeats his *mudra* (pull, tear, press, pull, tear, press, pull, tear, press) until his fingers begin to hurt. I imagine he is working on *Yakushi Nyorai—The Healer* (2004). In *Yakushi Nyorai*'s left hand he holds the jar of medicine, which is filled with every piece of crumpled tape Nagatani has pulled from the image, and as the artist raises his hand to place another piece of the tape, *Yakushi Nyorai* encourages the artist by saying "do not worry, keep on going" as his right hand sits in the *mudra* position, meaning "no fear" (Figure 3).

It is possible to understand the totality of Nagatani's thought and practice through Dōgen Zenji's statement:

The way the self arrays itself is the form of the entire world. See each thing in this entire world as a moment of time. Things do not hinder one another, just as moments do not hinder one another. The way-seeking mind arises in this moment. A way-seeking moment arises in this mind. It is the same with practice and with attaining the way. Thus the self setting itself out in array sees itself. This is the understanding that the self is time.<sup>9</sup>



The excitement of Nagatani's work, and this monograph, comes from his exploration and play; there is always something new to discover, whether a subtlety hidden in the shadows, the grand narrative of a body of work, or the totality of his oeuvre constantly renewing itself. This collection is evidence of the complex yet steady mind and heart of a master. It is a panoply of adroitness that will undoubtedly continue as the artist meanders on. Duchamp once wrote, "The artist acts like a mediumistic being who, from the labyrinth beyond time and space, seeks his way out to a clearing."<sup>10</sup> Nagatani has reached this clearing several times over and yet he always decides to head back in, one who knows of the intrinsically veritable nature of work itself. It is important to focus on this collection as an infinite garden of forking paths, and if I can offer any advice to the reader, it would be to follow the ingenious method of Senhor Jose in Jose Saramago's *All the Names* and tie Ariadne's thread around your ankle before you head into the amazing registry that is Nagatani's *Desire for Magic*.

—Colin Edgington

1. Vilem Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, (London: Reaktion, 2005), 9.
2. Kazuaki Tanahashi, ed., *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dogen* (San Francisco: North Point, 1985), 77.
3. Interview with the author, February 2011. All Nagatani quotes are from the interview unless otherwise indicated.
4. "Ryoichi's Journal," in *Desire For Magic* 99 (plate 50); translated, 235.
5. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Hannah Arendt, ed., *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 2007), 223–24.
6. According to Nagatani, Ryoichi in *Ryoichi and Sid* from *Chromatherapy* is—and is not—the same Ryoichi from *Excavations*: "No not the same. Yes the same. Ryoichi came first in the Excavations as the Japanese Archaeologist.... later, I started using my middle name (Ryoichi) for work. 'Fictive certainties'... Sid is the name I gave to my stoma. He still has the name." Interview with the author.
7. Flusser, 9–10.
8. *Nagatani/Tracey Polaroid Collaboration 1983–1989*.
9. Tanahashi, 77.
10. Marcel Duchamp, Michel Sanouillet, and Elmer Peterson, *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Da Capo, 1989), 138.

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**Qiana Mestrich** is a fine art photographer who uses the camera as a way to connect spiritually to life. Her work is largely autobiographical and explores themes of fear, identity, and family history. In 2007, the desire to mesh photography and her professional experience in the web and social media led her to launch *Dodge & Burn: Diversity in Photography History* (<http://dodgeburn.blogspot.com/>), profiling photographers of color who have been "dodged" from the art scene and "burned" in art history. She lives in Brooklyn, New York, with her husband and newborn son, and is pursuing an MFA in the ICP-Bard Program in Advanced Photographic Studies.

**Matthew Murray** has had an interest in abandoned sites since he was a child, but started documenting them a decade ago while researching the decline of the state hospital system. Murray is in the MFA Fine Art Photography program at Rochester Institute of Technology. He has lectured on abandoned spaces and mental health history for Preservation Pennsylvania, Milton S. Hershey Medical Center, and others, and his work has been featured in several publications including the *International Journal of Arts and Humanities* and the *United Nations Chronicle*. He has worked with a wide range of organizations ranging from the Mercer Museum to the United States Air Force. Currently he is putting together a book of the sites he has visited.  
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**Stephanie S. Turner's** research focuses on representations of biotechnology in popular culture and narratives of extinct and cryptic species. She has published "Imagining a Cloned Messiah: Science, Religion, and Nationalism at the End of Time" in *The Journal of Popular Culture* (2009); "Negotiating Nostalgia: The Rhetoric of Thylacine Representation in Tasmanian Tourism" in *Society and Animals* (2009); and "Open-Ended Stories: Extinction Narratives in Genome Time" in *Literature and Medicine* (2007). In one of her current projects, she is studying photography of natural history museum taxidermy. She teaches scientific and technical communication at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire.