

## **Encounters on Distant Mountains: Penelope Umbrico Meets Dr. George C. Poundstone, Sort Of**

*The landscape [for pictorialists] had become an inscape, a projection of the inner world of the photographer who, seeming to forsake the natural course of photographic vision—the progressive elucidation of appearances—had interposed between reality and its rendition the screen of his own subjectivity.*

– Pierre Apraxine, *The Waking Dream: Photography's First Century*

This exhibition, *Penelope Umbrico: Mountains, Moving; of Dr. George C. Poundstone, 1926-2013*, grew out of meetings between Penelope Umbrico, a New York-based artist and 2011 Guggenheim Fellowship awardee, and Dr. George C. Poundstone, an award-winning pictorialist and Chicago-based dentist. They met approximately a hundred times on the internet. You could say that they met on various photographs of mountains around the world. Dr. Poundstone visited the mountains in the 1920s and took pictures of them with a camera. Umbrico visited Poundstone's photographs of the mountains via scans on her computer in Brooklyn in March and April, 2013. She then captured and remixed them with an iPhone. The story of these meetings and the mountains revolve around cameras, places, websites, screens, apps, filters, and material photographs, and all that they imply at two different moments in time and history. Now, back to our main protagonists.

Dr. Poundstone and Umbrico have a distant relationship, to say the least. They never met in person. They could never have met: Dr. Poundstone died in 1938, decades before Umbrico's birth. But Dr. Poundstone remains very much alive at Bethel University thanks to a generous gift of his photographs and other archival materials from his widow. Dating from the 1920s and 30s, these include ten travel photo journals (each contains hundreds of 2" x 3" photographs from all over the world); 2,675 negatives; 750 autochromes (the first color process invented in 1907), and seven films. This output is formidable, especially considering Dr. Poundstone's full-time profession was not photography. He was a respected dentist who taught seventeen years at the Northwestern University dental school and served as the president of the Chicago Dental Society. Still, he carved out time to be a dedicated and serious amateur photographer with membership in the Chicago Camera Club. During his lifetime, he exhibited in pictorialist salons around the world from Minneapolis and Los Angeles to Tokyo and Paris.

Poundstone photographed in a pictorialist style and was part of a rich historical tradition of amateur photographers who formed societies since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century—the Linked Ring Brotherhood in London (1892), the Paris Camera Club (1894), the Photo-Secession in New York (1902) and other clubs that spouted up in American cities, including Minneapolis and his hometown, Chicago. Pictorialism has been largely marginalized within the history of photography. Even its most fervent and committed early advocate, Alfred Stieglitz, turned on the movement that he helped promote through his groundbreaking magazine, *Camera Work* (1903-1917).

Pictorialism, however, should not be overlooked, as much can be drawn from its interesting contradictions: its members were amateurs who formed elite clubs; it was a populist movement, yet it argued for the exclusive status of photography as an art; it wanted to position the photographic medium as unique, but based this idea on mimicking other media; its members experimented with a variety of papers and printing techniques, yet they selected the most predictable subjects---mundane landscapes, flowers, and portraits.

It is with one of these ordinary subjects, the mountain, where Umbrico begins a dialogue with Dr. Poundstone. In fact, her fascination with mountains precedes this encounter with Dr. Poundstone. She has been drawn to pictures of mountains, sunsets and other common subjects. She describes mountains as the “oldest subject, stable object, immovable landmark, site of orientation, place of spiritual contemplations.” Last year, she produced a series of mountain photographs, *Moving Mountains (1850-2012)*, based on photographs of mountains in *Masters of Photography*, a canonical text of analog photography. This current exhibition reinvestigates similar issues, particularly the relationship between a fixed subject (a mountain) and unstable photographic processes. In one of the works on view, for example, Umbrico rephotographed twenty-two scanned photographs of Dr. Poundstone’s mountains and then used multiple iPhone camera apps to reinterpret the images. The result is a mix of 85 artificially colored photographs (drawn from 22 Poundstone photographs) of different shapes, sizes and crops.

Umbrico’s process of cutting, recropping and reusing an image is surprisingly related to Dr. Poundstone’s approach to photography; he wrote an instructional essay on how to extract more than seven photographs from a single negative, and reworking negatives was a widespread practice for Dr. Poundstone and other pictorialists. But there are important distinctions in intention and notions of authorship. Dr. Poundstone conforms to Apraxine’s above description of a photographer who sought to communicate the artist’s “inscape” through the various printing processes. Apraxine interprets the unique material qualities of pictorial prints as a “screen of his [the photographer’s] subjectivity.” This description is a common leap in logic: the artist’s mark as a metaphor for authorial presence and creative power (i.e. the unconscious in Surrealism and individualism in Abstract Expressionism.) If Poundstone intended such a subjective expression, why choose (without a bit of irony) a subject so common as mountains? Do mountains possess an inherent symbolic profundity? Umbrico’s riff on Dr. Poundstone’s photographs suggest a more straight-forward assessment; perhaps Dr. Poundstone enjoyed the collective act of taking pictures of mountains and transforming a common subject into an uncommon, aestheticized object through malleable printing techniques. In short, a deep inner subjectivity seems to be a stretch.

Umbrico starts her photographs from a different point than Dr. Poundstone, one removed from her subjects as sites. She surfs websites rather than traveling the world to visit sites. From her static location in front of a computer screen in Brooklyn, she eliminates the indexical relationship of photography to place. In this

sense, distance circumscribes the relationship between the two photographers. Some of their separation can be measured in years, but the absence of the site can never be breached. Umbrico always begins with a site experienced second-hand through symbolic images (pictures of mountains). In another set of images on view, for example, she includes the borders of Dr. Poundstone's photographs, noting the space between their physicality as prints and her appropriation. A white boarder reinforces this contrast. This underscores the idea that Umbrico's starting point is the image (the photograph already taken) not the place. Yet it acknowledges Dr. Poundstone's engagement in the printing process.

While distant in terms of subject and site, both photographers pursue meaning through a photographic process. Poundstone works the surfaces of his prints and reuses negatives to emphasize his authorship and command of a craft. He seeks to humanize the camera as a machine. Umbrico uses various camera apps from an iPhone to manipulate coloring, light, and other aspects of the image. She reprograms the image foregrounding the mechanical non-touch of software engineering. By translating, riffing, remixing, reinterpreting, she calls attention to the "instability" of Poundstone's mountains and to the parameters of image production today. Dr. Poundstone might appreciate Umbrico's process-based approach, but not the mechanical sheen of the photographs.

Apraxine associates pictorialist manipulation with an artist's "inscape." But Umbrico's photographs are not psychological, emotive, or sentimental. Her translations of Dr. Poundstone's mountains via technologies make no attempt to mark subjectivity in the traditional sense. Her "screen" has little or no relation to personal expression. The photographs are closer to materialist images that represent rather than reflect meaning. They represent the possibilities and limits of various technologies of vision. According to Umbrico, some of the pictures photographed off screens, for example, "create a fantastic moire effect - the computer's screen conflicting with the iPhone's screen." She often leaves a digital trail of pixelated surfaces---a new image-pattern that is unique to our age.

A vitrine in the exhibition holds photography's little culprits, handheld cameras, that one could argue undergird the dialogue between Umbrico and Dr. Poundstone. Handheld cameras made photography portable, flexible, and accessible for the amateur photographers; they were the new tools for spies, perverts and the genuinely curious. They shifted attention from the craft of photography to the fleeting moment, the snapshot of life. But they also made photography populous, too easy and too plentiful for those seeking to prove the artistry of the medium. These precursors to the iPhone enabled photographers to snatch a piece of the world for themselves and share it with others. Umbrico discovered these mini-cameras in deep storage of the Smithsonian's American History Photography collection. They were carefully tagged and archived, but they were lifeless---all of their potential to picture the world was blinded by the location. The camera are reminders of how quickly 'new technologies' become yesterday's news without

compatibility to new social conditions. Through the magic of today's photography, Umbrico stitched together each camera into a uniformed image on matte paper, creating what she calls a "tromp l'oil image" that hides the paper on which the images are produced. Fitted neatly into the vitrine, this illusion is amplified further. There are no mountains, no winding paths, no forests, and no flowers, but I believe Dr. Poundstone and his colleagues might give it an award in their camera club. They may have asked for a little more blur or touch. But the pictures of "real" cameras and technical acumen surely would have won them over.