

## Photographing California with a camera as big as a truck



"North Harbor Drive at Marina Way, Redondo Beach," 2013; from "John Chiara: California" (John Chiara / Pier 24 Photography/Aperture)

October 26, 2017

By **Agatha French**

The most ubiquitous camera in use today, the iPhone, fits inside of our pockets. The largest of artist John Chiara's cameras, on the other hand, is big enough for him to step inside.

Transported on a flatbed trailer, that camera takes photographs the analog way; his book "John Chiara: California" (Aperture, \$65) presents a collection of these idiosyncratic images made in his home state.



"Western Canyon Road at Mount Hollywood Drive, Los Angeles," 2013; from "John Chiara: California" (Aperture/Pier 24 Photography/John Chiara)

Chiara built his first large-format camera in 1997. He wanted “a certain type of image that wasn’t available through commercial cameras, so I had to develop my own,” he told *The Times*. Instead of film, he uses large sheets of photographic paper that he exposes through a lens opposite — like a camera obscura, or a huge pinhole camera, or a large daguerrotype without sheets of glass.

Chiara’s custom cameras produce landscape and architecture photographs that exist outside of the realm of crystal-clear digital photography, and stress the art of process.

“It’s a different type of image that has a lot of the noise from the process, and from the camera and from the development,” he said, referencing “the drips from the chemicals and the tape that’s left on at the bottom” as examples of that visual “noise.”

Striation across a burst of bougainvillea draws attention to itself, reminding the viewer of the work and chemistry that went into creating it. The edges of the photographs are slightly wavy and uneven, an indication that the photographic paper is a physical thing that can twist and buckle. Among the pleasures of these photographs are their nuance and individuality. Unlike a film negative or a digital image that can be printed in many multiples, his photographs exist only in their original form (and the images that are taken of them, like this book).

Chiara’s process takes time, from scouting to developing. “I have to go and really spend time someplace before the work starts really happening,” he said. “It’s a matter for going out and really looking.” In conversation, he refers to the experience of shooting as an “event.”

“We were photographing the glare coming off the ocean recently in California,” he said of himself and an assistant. “That had a much shorter exposure because of how bright it was, so that was a minute and a half. Normally it’s 10 to 15 minutes.” He enjoys the anticipation, revelation and discovery.



"Topanga Canyon Boulevard at Pacific Coast Highway, Los Angeles," 2012; from "John Chiara: California" (Aperture/Pier 24 Photography/John Chiara)

The book itself took time to develop; the photographs in “California” span 18 years and were shot across the state, in San Francisco, Nevada City, L.A. and elsewhere, imparting the loose framework of a road trip.

In her essay for the book, Virginia Heckert, head of the department of photographs at the Getty Museum, writes that when photographing Los Angeles, Chiara took full use of “the expressive qualities of the vertical diptych, most notably to encompass the full height of the city’s ubiquitous but varied species of palm trees. The staggered effect of stacked panels more closely approximates the way we take in our surroundings than a single image can.” There were other technical challenges particular to the city: Because of the film industry, shooting permits are stricter and include an enormous still camera being towed around on a flatbed behind a truck. “What if I just had a regular camera? Or what if I had a canvas and was painting,” Chiara said and laughed. “Would I need a permit for that?”

"Chiara... does not strive for the same kind of picture-perfect, postcard scenes that have come to color our experience of many of these sites even before we visit them," Heckert writes of his departure from the ubiquitous commercial images of California. In describing his subject, Chiara echoed her sentiment. "I very much am interested in the history of this region and the photography that's been produced here," he said.



"North Harbor Drive at Herondo Street, Redondo Beach," 2013; from "John Chiara: California" (Aperture/Pier 24 Photography/John Chiara)

His photographs of Los Angeles — slightly washed out, sun bleached — are stark and familiar. They look the way that L.A. feels, like a heat wave mid-September, or the moment before your eyes adjust after taking off a pair of sunglasses. Other images, of different towns and regions, verge on the abstract.

For Chiara, the photographs in the book contain a "slight diary aspect," but his ambition is more outward-facing. He hopes that for the viewer, "the work can touch on a collective memory of place."



"Vereda De La Montura at Camino De Yatasto, Pacific Palisades, Los Angeles," 2013; from "John Chiara: California" (Aperture/Pier 24 Photography/John Chiara)



# BLIND SPOT

30

S15



Walead Beshty, Marco Breuer, John Chiara,  
Liz Deschenes, Rob Fischer, Joan Fontcuberta,  
Michelle Kloehn, Lyle Rexer, Roman Signer



John Chiara













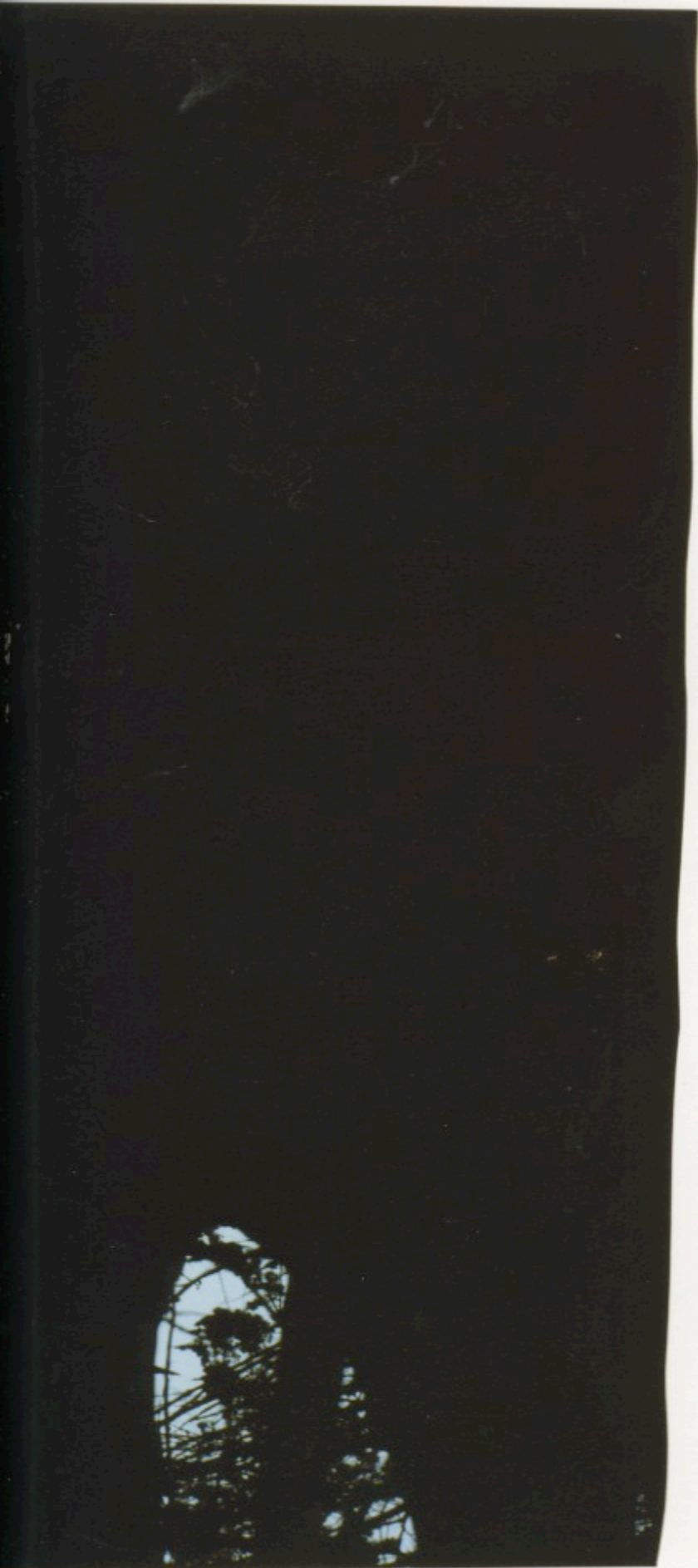












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# LENSCRATCH

Wednesday, March 20, 2013

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## John Chiara

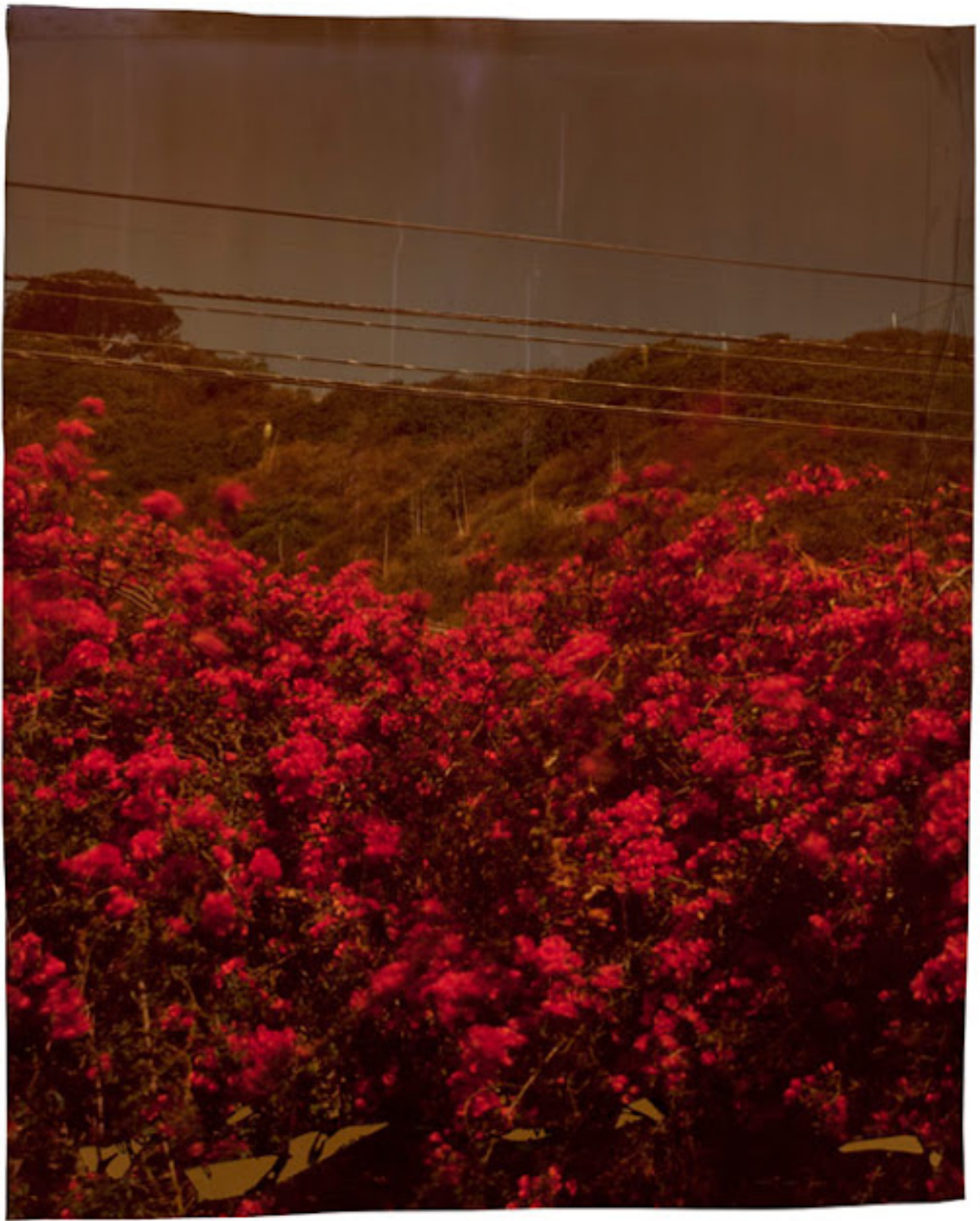
*John Chiara: Los Angeles*, at the well regarded Rose Gallery in Los Angeles from March 23rd through May 11, 2013 featuring unique Ilfochrome prints. A San Francisco-based artist, John pushes the boundaries of the photographic medium through his choice of process and the mastery of its possibilities. His giant cameras, which he designed and built himself, are transported to locations on a flatbed trailer to produce one-of-a-kind large-scale prints.



John's latest series of photographs is focused entirely on the city of Los Angeles. Though L.A. is one of the most photographed cities on the globe - a city built on image - and John's depictions of it are unexpected. His Los Angeles is neither idyllic nor sprawling urban hell. It is not a "city of glamour nor the spectacle of exploitation that it is often deemed to be". His interest lies with the psychological underpinnings of the city's development and the subtle ways these are revealed in the shifting landscape.

All Images courtesy, the artist, Thomas Von Lintel Gallery, New York and ROSEGALLERY, Santa Monica











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## SAN FRANCISCO

### John Chiara

ELEANOR HARWOOD GALLERY

Environmental concerns have had an undeniable impact on art about landscape, while digital technologies have similarly affected the dialogue around photography, breathing new life into hoary questions regarding the presumptive authenticity of the photographic image. John Chiara's highly crafted, unique Cibachrome prints address these topical concerns through intensely analog actions producing images of vaporous, sometimes acid-tinged apocalyptic beauty. Chiara's photographic process involves elements of both large-scale sculpture and endurance-style performance art. The artist builds clunky, toolshed-size cameras, which he lugs to unlikely vistas on a flatbed trailer; over the course of lengthy exposure times, he manipulates the ways in which light streams through the shutter, using his hands to cast shadows onto the Cibachrome paper (no film is used). Then he processes the print in a length of customized sewer pipe.

Chiara's finished works betray his lo-fi production and strategies of chance—which bring to mind nineteenth-century landscape photographers such as Carleton Watkins hauling bulky wet-plate gear up a mountain—and attest to the artist's command of materials. But while Watkins captured the pristine beauty of the untamed West in crisp, deep-focus images, Chiara's portrayal of the contemporary California landscape is layered in atmospheric hazes, flares, chemical glitches, harsh sun, and the ghostly outlines of the tape with which he adhered the paper to his camera.

The images are matter-of-factly titled after the Bay Area street intersections where they were made. *Grizzly Peak at Summit*, 2008, shows a woodsy canyon suffused with a washed-out blue and brown-tinged fog, and is reminiscent of an aura photograph. The upper section of the image features gently arching white shapes; although they suggest the supernatural, they are merely consequences of Chiara's film processing, painterly flourishes resulting from chemicals washing unevenly across the paper. The effect is easily explained, but appears mysterious.

A different sort of effect is the focal point of *23rd at Starr King*, 2008. The camera is positioned within hillside scrub—dry weeds blur the foreground—and trained on neighborhood rooftops, focusing on the glowing diamond shapes atop one building, which turn out to be angled solar panels. These elements seem to concentrate light in the image, in much the same way that the panels themselves generate electricity. If the idea seems too literal, and eco-consciously thematic, Chiara also generates quietly powerful visual tension through the burn of overexposure.

The prints float unglazed in white frames, but the surface of the paper is glossy enough to emulate glass. In their slickness, a striking

contrast to their slightly aggressive handmade quality, the pictures reflect the viewer; they appear to change with every slight shift of viewing angle. This occurs with particular force in *Mirador at San Pablo*, 2008, one of the show's largest works. It's a brooding, panoramic sunset-seen-through-the-trees image, with a simmering band of ocher at the center. Because of the darkness of the image, details of a neighborhood below the trees emerge only slowly, as the eye adjusts to the picture's darkness. The photograph attests to Chiara's remarkable ability to marshal light within a composition.

Another large work, *Lands End at 48th 2005/Starr King at Carolina* 2006, 2008, was displayed at table height, in the center of the room. A horizontal double exposure made in successive years—the paper was first exposed at one orientation, then flipped for the next—and processed later, the piece can be viewed from any angle. The work utilizes the artist's range of vocabulary—the bluish tone, the chemical glitches, the overlaid images of land and sea. The display method emphasizes Chiara's sculptural impulses, but, more provocatively, cuts the images free of gravity, allowing him, and us, to move more deeply into ambiguous terrain.

—Glen Helfand

John Chiara, *Lands End at 48th 2005/Starr King at Carolina* 2006, 2008, color photograph, 50 x 63".





# Overview



*24th at Carolina (left variation)*, 2006. Photogravure on *gampi paper chine collé*. Paper size: 32-3/4 x 27-3/4"; image size: 23-1/2 x 19-3/4".  
Edition 15. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

## JOHN CHIARA: LANDSCAPES

By Dena Schuckit

John Chiara is a photographer. Check his bag of tricks! All the usual items are in evidence here: the camera, of course, and random darkroom chemistry. A couple of burning and dodging tools are included, as well as photographic paper. There is a camera stand in the kit, along with a selection of filters. We guessed that Chiara's large format, color landscape photos, often 60 inches in width, could translate into an impressive photogravure project in the Crown Point studio.

Mundane photography details, though, render a flat and one-dimensional view of this artist. Ask him for some classification

of what he does, and he's likely to respond that his activities are a sort of performance art, and that the resulting photographs can be seen as a documentation or byproduct of his interaction, on that particular day, with the people and circumstances encountered by him and his camera. "The photographs," he says, "suggest the activity of their creation."

Chiara and his camera do attract a certain amount of unavoidable curiosity. This camera of his is as big as my closet; four of us could sit comfortably inside. It is a huge, hand-made wooden box painted black and mounted on a flatbed trailer. A smaller box,





*24th at Carolina (center)*, 2006. Color photogravure on *gampi paper chine collé*. Paper size: 32-1/2 x 27-1/2"; image size: 23-1/2 x 19-1/4". Edition 15. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

be a vicious dog standing guard? A suspicious neighbor checking that his camera is not a methamphetamine laboratory on wheels or a portable bomb? Curious police approach, sometimes, and offer friendly advice for possible future project locations.

While the image is exposing, Chiara waves his hand back and forth before the lens, dodging here, burning there. The process is intuitive for him; he doesn't use a light meter or timer. The lengths of tape used to fix the paper to the back surface will expose along with the landscape and remain visible in the finished piece. Look, you can see them along the edges of this series of etchings. Chiara works by feel and by experience that he's gleaned from past shoots with this camera, and he has an experimental attitude more common to printmakers than to photographers. There is a raw quality to the results, achieved with accomplishment.

In order get his Crown Point project rolling, John Chiara channeled his spirit of experimentation. It was necessary to adjust major elements of his working process so that the end product of a day out shooting would not be a finished photograph on paper, but instead would be material we could use in the studio to create the many intaglio photogravure plates that are combined to make this new group of editions.

The end product of a day out shooting for one of his photogravures was a full size positive of the image on film. To this end, the photographic paper he normally exposes taped to the inside of his camera was swapped out for large sheets of negative film. He exposed several sheets of this film, one at a time and from the exact

same vantage point, with the camera completely static. For each of these exposures, one crucial detail (focus, length of exposure, position of the sun, etc.) received some slight tweak. Because of slight variations in shooting conditions, every individual sheet of film tells the exact same story but with some area of the image playing a more dominant role than in the other transparencies. Each sheet would cooperate harmoniously with the others when sandwiched together in perfect register or alignment, and would also retain some degree of individual personality.

In the photogravure process, each exposed and developed sheet of negative film is converted first into a positive film (through a contact exposure) and then, over the course of a few days in the Crown Point darkroom, into an etched photogravure plate. One sheet of film equals one intaglio plate. Every one of the plates is inked in a separate combination of colors and tones and they are printed all together. This accounts for the color separation apparent in the prints.

Chiara developed the colors composing the *24th at Carolina* triptych over the course of his two weeks spent in the Crown Point studio. The shades of blue, yellow, and black are the result of countless proofs, pulled in a myriad of colors and combinations, from the etched photogravure plates. Under Chiara's direction, Emily York (the additional Master Printer participating on the project) and I inked each plate—first in one color and then in another—hanging a new proof on the wall every time. The resulting succession of proofs pinned to the studio wall would recount a





24th at Carolina (left), 2006. Color photogravure on *gampi* paper *chine collé*. Paper size: 32-3/4 x 27-3/4"; image size: 23-1/2 x 19-3/4". Edition 15. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

cinched to the front with long nylon straps, houses the focusable precision lens. The whole construction is lugged along to shoots by a pickup truck and then parked right in position. Sometimes he jacks up one side of the trailer or the other to tilt the massive camera's view a bit up or down, but in general not much maneuvering is going to happen once the truck is parked. There is no such thing as a low profile, stealth shoot with this thing, and the photo sessions occur in local public places. Which means someone is always watching; today it's me.

John Chiara is a San Francisco artist. He attended graduate school here (at CCA), lives here, and is interested in documenting this place and the way it looks: its steep hills and multitude of small neighborhood parks and green spaces with their dramatic vistas; the grassy precipices over the urban order below; the undulation of the landscape rolling all the way to the sea; and the way the fog froths up and over the various peaks "almost," he says, "like an extension of the wavebreak." Photographing right into the sun, into bright glare, accentuates the aspect of landscape in his work. Trees and long grass dissolve as if into water, hills fade to white, light generally bounces and rolls around, creating welcome aberrations and surprises.

We pull up, this afternoon, alongside the exact Potrero Hill park view from which Chiara shot the material used in his Crown Point project to make the six photogravures shown here. The trees in these images actually do stand next to each other in a row and the color prints, hung together in the correct order, form one long

landscape shot. Chiara likes this spot, the way the trees divide the scene, and wants to make an image now that will be a unique photograph, rather than a photogravure printed in an edition.

Each John Chiara photograph is an original. The images are shot directly onto huge paper, at full size and without the use of any negative film, and (when he's working) at the rate of about one or two per day. Another image of this location means another whole day spent here. Chiara develops his photos by rolling them around in a big solution-filled tube adapted from a capped, plastic sewer pipe, 18" in diameter. It's laborious, this process, and an exercise in invention and patience.

The giant black box camera suggests an imminent performance, a puppet show on wheels, perhaps. There's even a little curtain across the lens window that remains until the lens box is hoisted into place. Chiara disappears into the box for long stretches of time, initially letting his eyes adjust to the darkness in order to make sure that the image is focused. The brightest parts of the image outside shine inside onto the back surface of the camera, upside down—this is just a big camera obscura. Chiara slides a white bit of paper around where the light hits in order to see the image more clearly before taping a large piece of photo paper to the back surface to begin a slow exposure. He then shimmies out of the camera through a 10-foot, makeshift, black plastic tube so that no extra light leaks into the box during his exit. He emerges, comically oozed from the camera, never knowing what's going to be waiting for him outside. It's a moment of suspense—will there





*24th at Carolina (center variation)*, 2006. Photogravure on *gampi* paper *chine collé*. Paper size: 32-1/2 x 27-1/2"; image size: 23-1/2 x 19-1/4". Edition 15. Printed by Dena Schuckit.



Potrero Hill, San Francisco, 2006.



John Chiara, Potrero Hill, San Francisco, 2006.





24th at Carolina (right), 2006. Color photogravure on *gampi* paper *chine collé*. Paper size: 32-3/4 x 28"; image size: 23-1/2 x 19-3/4". Edition 15. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

clear story documenting the evolution of these prints on the way to their final, satisfactory destination.

On the bright day that I am in the field with Chiara we have already tied up the photogravure project. I'm tagging along for a regular photographic shoot at the same scene. We're in a public park inviting attention with the hulking camera construction, yet the labor feels intensely private and solitary. A quiet stillness characterizes the view here, a sense that is reflected in both Chiara's photographs and in our photogravures. Both exude a contemplative calm, uninhabited by people. The only confrontation happening now is at that place where the bright light meets the foggy looming of haze off in the distance; the only real drama is the blinding beam flashing off the windscreen of an old parked car. Yet there is, in the work, some degree of tension—this could be in part the consequence of an intentional avoidance of documenting sites that are just plain pretty. Summer has parched the overgrown grass visible in the foreground, and, as far as I can tell, there is no place to sit down here to enjoy the view. A dog-walkers' route, this is really more of a protected, uncultivated urban plot than a park. It's a scruffy, unpretentious triangle of land shoved into Potrero Hill's steep perimeter until it nearly slips right off into the impressive view below and beyond. Chiara stares out there and idly, by second nature, burns in the exposing bottom bit with a few waves of his hand in front of the lens. Or he sits in the darkness within. He spends a lot of time alone on these days. The photographs are moody and mysterious and gorgeous and inviting, "but with an

edge," he likes to think. It's landscape photography to him, only more psychological.

Considering that this artist received his first real camera at the age of seven from his father, who was a photographer, and that he has had nearly life-long easy access to one darkroom or another, he *would* know his way around photographic equipment. He invented his own processes when regular photographic processes seemed to him to be producing images that felt too objective and homogeneous. (He realizes now that he inadvertently reinvented the daguerreotype camera.) Chiara intentionally cultivated a working environment where he would take on constant collaboration with circumstances of luck. Light, weather, temperature, and guesswork are only a few of the conditions influencing the outcome of his work, along with a certain physical awkwardness that can be the upshot of engaging in super-sized materials. The happy accidents, embraced aberrations, and controlled chaos generated by this set-up make for an image that can appear unearthed and historical. Areas are blown out while others are saturated with rich darks or unexpected hues. Blinding flashes and orbs of reflected light from sun spots or moisture in the air exacerbate a sense of transition; one might even call this transitive quality sublime.

The dreamy fading in and fading out that occurs as edges of objects disintegrate into oncoming glare or inky darkness generates a hazy void which invites the viewer to fill in the blanks; the large scale of the images invites space for this kind of viewing. The images look a little familiar, like some memory that you can't quite





*23rd at Carolina*, 2006. Photogravure on *gampi* paper *chine collé*. Paper size: 22-3/4 x 26-1/2"; image size: 16 x 20-1/2". Edition 15. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

grab hold of, but without any nostalgia or longing. A particular kind of subjectivity motivates this artist. The work might, Chiara suggests, remind you of some photographic recollection, or maybe some photographic movement. "But when you get up close," he adds, "I hope that it actually refreshes you as something current or new."



John Chiara and printer Dena Schuckit in the Crown Point studio, 2006.

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