



CHUCK KIRMAN / STAR STAFF

Dipping back into 1800s techniques in her Moorpark darkroom, Lis J. Schwitters pulls a cyanotype print of the Ventura Pier out of plain water. Schwitters is one of three local photographers using 19th-century processes in a Museum of Ventura County exhibit.

Digital backlash

Photographers champion the magic and unpredictability of old-school techniques

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Alternative Photography

The exhibit, featuring work by Lis J. Schwitters, Isabel Gomes and Lawrence Gund, will run through July 6 at the Museum of Ventura County, 89 S. California St., Ventura (at the Santa Clara Street intersection). A related exhibit, "The Past on a Plate: The Photographs of John Calvin Brewster," will run through Aug. 17.

The museum is open from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesdays through Thursdays, Saturdays and Sundays; and 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Fridays. Admission is free. For information, call 653-0323 or visit <http://www.venturamuseum.org>.

For more on Schwitters, visit <http://www.lisjschwitters.com>. For more on Gomes and Gund, visit <http://www.isabellawrence.com/main.php>.

If a photograph is sometimes a moment that presents itself on the spot and requires a bit of old-fashioned touch, Isabel Gomes found herself in the right place with the right piece of equipment in Mexico several years ago.

Looking at cornstalks, no less. It was a stormy day, and the bluster sparked bursts of animation in these organized dead leaves.

"There was this whole field of cornstalks," Gomes recalled. "They looked like people moving and dancing."

The artist in her picked out a stalk and reached into her kit bag for ... not the latest 21st-century camera packed with extra gizmos, but one of the most basic pieces of photography equipment — a pinhole camera, something that maybe even Leonardo da Vinci would recognize.

That's right, a wooden box with a hole in it, so far back in photography's evolution that it doesn't even have those more recent fossils known as f-stops and shutter speeds; it's activated simply by lifting a lever that exposes the film to light. But Gomes knew that a pinhole camera's long exposure time would well capture the movement of the wind-driven stalks. "It also created an otherworldly distortion I so love," she said.

No, everything old isn't new again, but some 19th-century photography techniques and related art are on display through July 6 at the Museum of Ventura County, courtesy

of Gomes, husband Lawrence Gund and Lis J. Schwitters.

Photoshop be damned (and Gomes and Gund do just that) — this is photography taken back to the darkroom, a place where, as Gund put it, "a certain magic and unpredictability happens." The exhibit would draw ghostly nods from famed Civil War photographer Mathew Brady, renowned British portraitist Julia Margaret Cameron and western landscape photography giant Ansel Adams.

Gomes and Gund, a Ventura couple, tackle the pinhole camera and tintypes; Schwitters, a longtime Moorpark artist, adds blue and earthy touches to the exhibit as her work examines the photographic printing processes known as cyanotypes and Van Dyke brown.

It dovetails nicely with a

concurrent exhibit, running through Aug. 17, that looks at the art of John Calvin Brewster, a man billed as Ventura's first professional photographer and whose glass-plate negatives captured county life from 1874 until his death in 1909.

Ghosts and the fruits of toil

Although the Gomes-Gund-Schwitters exhibit trades on 19th-century nostalgia, Gomes thinks that the pinhole camera predates that era.

"This is what people like da Vinci and others would have used to create an image on the wall that they would have painted from," the 40-year-old artist said.

Gomes noted that a pinhole essentially is "a tiny little camera obscura with film in the back."

Working with a pinhole camera, she said, is labor-intensive; the long exposures can take anywhere from 10 seconds to half an hour, and then there's setting up and adjusting the tripod. But, Gomes said, "the images you get with it are so beautiful and tactile."

Tintypes,

which involve coating a plate with light-sensitive chemicals, are much different from pinholes. The plate can be tin (hence the name) or glass; Gomes and Gund use black aluminum.

Tintypes were popular in the mid- to late 1800s. Brady used them when he was documenting the Civil War; Cameron did so for her portraits, which greatly influenced modern photography.

Gomes and Gund, who run a wedding photography



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ISABEL GOMES

"This is what people like da Vinci and others would have used to create an image on the wall that they would have painted from."

ISABEL GOMES, speaking about pinhole cameras

business in Sherman Oaks, took a workshop on tintypes more than a year ago and were immediately hooked. They hope to open a tintype studio in Ventura soon.

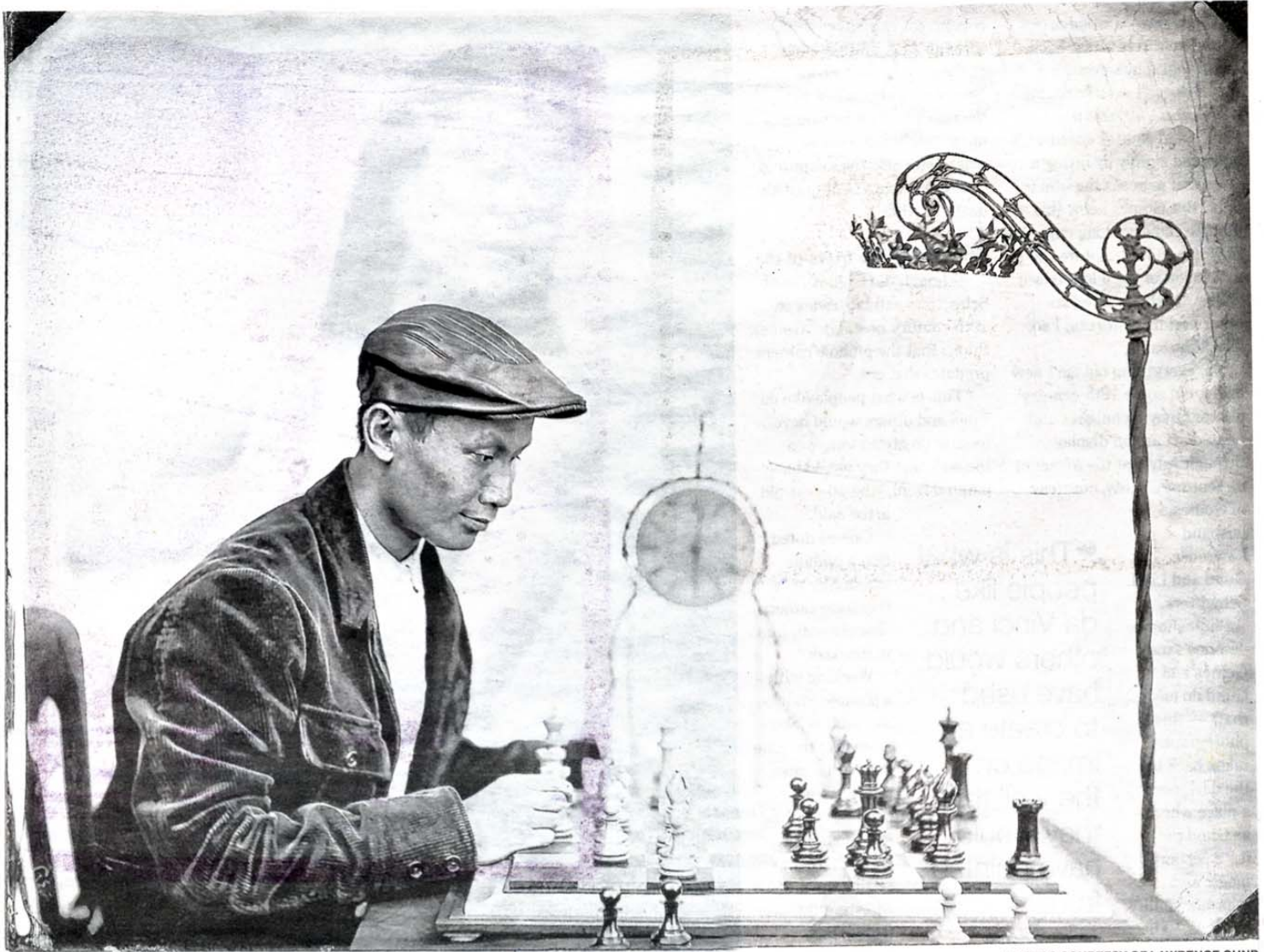
"Something about older photography captivates us," said Gund, 45, a former photojournalist who once snapped shots for the old Camarillo Daily News. "It interests us far more imagination-wise than digital."

Tintype examples in the exhibit include a Gund shot of a man playing chess against



Isabel Gomes used a tintype to take the above photograph. She thought that the woman's beauty contrasted nicely with the tarantula, which many consider to be an ugly creature. Gomes, left, used a pinhole camera to take the cornhusk photo that appears on the cover of this week's edition of Time Out.

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF LAWRENCE GUND

This photo of a man playing chess against an inanimate object, above, is a tintype, a photography process that was popular in the mid- to late 1800s. Lawrence Gund and his wife, Isabel Gomes, are so taken with the process that they plan to open a tintype studio in Ventura. At right, Gund holds a tintype, a photograph created by coating a plate with light-sensitive chemicals.



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an inanimate object. Gund, who holds a journalism degree from USC, also did a tintype portrait of a woman that plays off her skin and piercing eyes.

Gomes threw in a tintype of a woman wrapped in a sarong with a (dead) tarantula above her right breast. Gomes thought that the woman's beauty played against "what many would consider an ugly creature on her skin." The result, she said, makes for an "interesting contrast."

The old processes afford the couple the opportunity to, as Gund put it, get their "hands dirty in the darkroom again."

That chemical-mixing and emulsion ground is where that magic and unpredictability he loves occur.

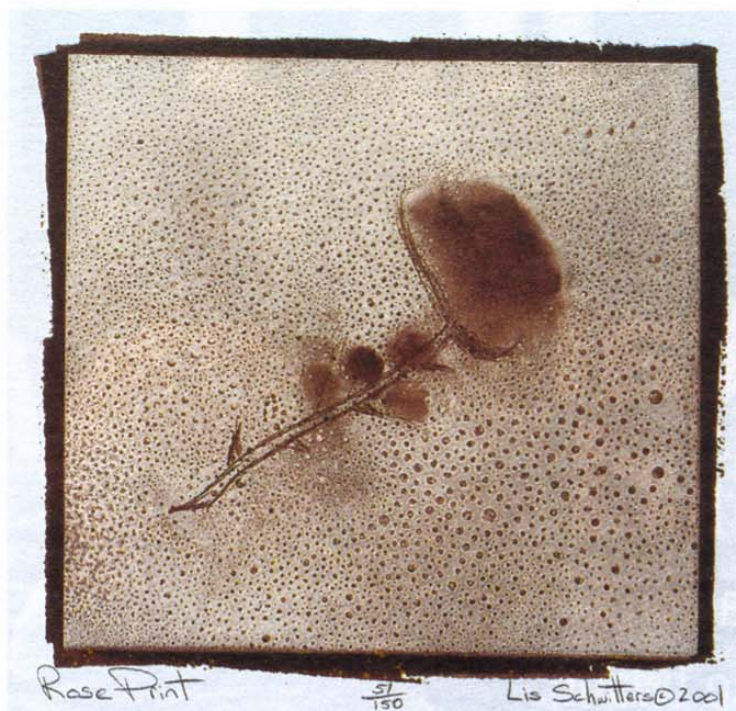
"Whereas," he said, "if you put it in Photoshop, you can make it so perfect that, to me, it's not a real photograph."

The darkroom also appeals to Gomes, who has a fine arts degree from back East, studied at the Brooks Institute in Santa Barbara in the early 1990s, and worked as a photo assistant in Los Angeles before she and Gund started their business in 1997.

"In this digital age, we are drawn more to the purity and essence of photography," she said.

"Something about older photography captivates us. It interests us far more imagination-wise than digital."

LAWRENCE GUND, 45, a former photojournalist who once snapped shots for the old Camarillo Daily News



Lis J. Schwitters used an actual rose to make the print, above, which used the Van Dyke brown process and another 1800s-style known as *cliche verre*. At right, Schwitters bathed Las Vegas in blue, using the cyanotype printing process, in this shot taken from the city's Stratosphere Tower. She has titled the print "A Blue Print for a Greater America."

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View A 8/10 Lis Schwitters ©2000

Adams, as Gomes noted, was one who knew his way around a darkroom. It was also Adams — bound to be a concert pianist until Yosemite and other gorgeous places swept his career into lens land — who once famously said a photo negative is the score and the print is the performance.

"It just seems like the life and soul has been sucked out of photography," Gomes opined. "We really love the hard work it took to make these images. You should have to work hard to get an image."

Blues and browns

Schwitters, like Gund a former photojournalist, also is no stranger to the darkroom or Adams' observation about prints, given her cyanotypes and Van Dyke browns.

Cyanotypes involve coating paper with chemicals and exposing that

to ultraviolet light, either the sun or special bulbs; Schwitters uses the sun.

The process yields a "blue print" (hence the name). Cyanotypes can use camera negatives or just objects, among other options. Schwitters processes her prints in plain water.

She bathed a monkeypod leaf in blue for the exhibit. Another image, titled "A Blue Print for a Greater America," shows a view of Las Vegas taken from the Stratosphere Tower.

Schwitters, 44, first tried cyanotypes in junior high school.

"It's so simple and so fun," she said. "You can use it on fabric, and a lot of quilters use it to incorporate floral designs or family photos."

Van Dyke brown, by contrast, is more complex. As the name implies, it adds brown tones to an image; it is named after a 17th-century Flemish painter whose work was

bathed in brown.

Sir John William Herschel is credited with adapting both it and cyanotypes to photography in the mid-1800s — all stemming, Schwitters noted, from his desire for a way to copy his mathematical notes perfectly.

Van Dyke brown also involves coated paper and an ultraviolet light source. It adds chemical treatment, including silver nitrate for the desired brown effect. Like cyanotypes, it can use negatives or just objects.

In some applications, it can also produce a more intense effect, almost like a painting brush stroke. Schwitters likes the byplay that produces.

"Where is the medium going — is it painting or photography?" she said, placing herself as viewer. "It's blurring most people's perceptions of photography."

A rose print in the exhibit added an 1800s-style *cliche verre* technique,

in which the image was etched into painted acrylic, given the Van Dyke treatment and then exposed to the sun, producing the desired result on the light-sensitive paper.

Schwitters has a degree in photocommunications and worked as a photo technician at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena as well as Warner Bros. Studios and Paramount Pictures.

As her career ran its course, Schwitters said it was time to "explore the art department side of me." She likes intersections where art and science converge.

For all their dips into old school, Schwitters, Gomes and Gund say the exhibit also offers a contemporary feel. The various photographic blooms stem from many places, and here lies the growth of life-giving light, chemicals, hard work, inspiration, fun and the still-echoing past.



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Liz J. Schwitters holds up a negative of the Ventura Pier that will be imprinted on this piece of chemically coated, light-sensitive paper.