



HOUCK'S PROGRESS

2015

John Houck is among 19 artists and artist collectives included in "Ocean of Images: New Photography 2015," the latest in MoMA's series of exhibitions that take the pulse of the photographic medium in a given year. The current edition, focusing on imagery since the advent of the Internet, is the first under the direction of Quentin Bajac, the museum's chief curator of photography. Recently, the Los Angeles-based Houck shared his working process and some of his personal sources with Art in America. The examples selected here come from his series "L1 History of Graph Paper" (2013-ongoing), for which he photographs an object, or objects, and then re-photographs the results multiple times, complicating the image until he reaches a final composition. He calls the outcome 'a photograph of itself' Here and in the following spreads, Houck's final photographs are captioned, while the corresponding intermediary images are not.

JOHN HOUCK For me, the work comes out of a kind of jealousy of painting and the ability to have multiple perspectives in a single picture. I make part of the photo, step back, consider it, add another arrangement on top and build up my photographs in a very layered way. I like that my photos look digital, or like they could have been Photoshopped, but actually result from an entirely analog process that uses multiple successive photographs. The process is open to the contingencies of material. Digital tools like Photoshop offer the

fantasy that you can do anything, and that opens up too many possibilities. The digital approach doesn't have the resistance of the real world, of real materials, and that resistance has been very important to my process.

My work also comes from my background in architecture. Using cardboard and hot glue, we would make models and then light them and photograph them. In architecture school, I discovered that if you photograph a small model or sculpture, the image becomes, paradoxically, more dimensional than the 3-D original. You create a kind of space that you can enter psychically, because it's been flattened out. It becomes a depiction of a space, rather than an actual space.



The objects for "A History of Graph Paper" are things my parents have given me over the last five years—items they have kept from my childhood, like my stamp collection, my baseball cards, objects that were my grandfather's. This exchange corresponds with my telling them that I was seeing a psychoanalyst. I think it was our way of acknowledging that I've grown up and become my own person, separate from them. There's some "Get this stuff out of our house," but the gifts also show connection: "You were our child at one time."

My interest in psychoanalysis really started in the Whitney Independent Study Program. It was largely an intellectual interest at first—reading Freud, Donald Winnicott and Melanie Klein. I wanted to experience the process of psychoanalysis because I liked the intellectual discourse around it, but then within two or three sessions I realized that there was a lot more at stake than just the intellectual. It's been, I would say, the most important thing I've done for the making of my art, for my sensibility as an artist. The work of free association in psychoanalysis has opened me up to emotion and feeling in a way that I really couldn't anticipate. It allows me to be more relaxed in the studio and to be OK with failing and learning and working through ideas in a more spontaneous and playful way.

My dad served in Vietnam and got very interested in the American Indian Movement. He was quite politically radical. When he came back to the U.S., it was a really difficult time. People returning from Vietnam were not received very well, especially if you had a buzz cut and were fresh off a ship. So my parents moved to a reservation in South Dakota. I think my dad, who was a public schoolteacher, wanted to go away somewhere

remote. My parents lived there for a while, and I was born on the reservation. I think we left when I was about five years old, but while I was growing up we would go back all the time.

My mom saved very particular kinds of objects- things from my child hood and her family. And my dad saved items associated with the South Dakota reservation. He gave me beaded moccasins, amulets and different objects from his Lakota Sioux friends. He's very sentimental about wrapping them in fabric, putting them in these nice boxes, and presenting them to me that way. My mom gives family-based items in utilitarian materials, which is more about protecting the object and less about the poetics of presentation.



In one work, I photographed my grandfather's shaving brushes and an old glass jar from the 1950s that he kept them in. When I was small, I would play with those brushes. I loved them. They were like my first paintbrushes. My mom kept them for a while, and displayed them in the house. One day she brought them to me because she knew I really liked them. They were covered in bubble wrap. Formally, the bubbles on the wrap mimic the dimpling on the jar. I just loved that she had taken such care to put the brushes in bubble wrap bags. Very old objects wrapped like they were something new. There are two photos: one of the brushes in the bubble wrap and one where they've been removed from the bubble wrap and laid on top of a photo of themselves inside the bubble wrap.

It was an extraordinary experience to be born on the reservation, and it's part of who I am. When I go back to South Dakota, I'm amazed to see that the minute you cross over to the reservation the roads get rough and there are a lot of potholes. There are no banks and the sale of alcohol is banned, so on the border, just outside the reservation, there are many liquor stores and banks. We often think of the border between Mexico and us, but there are also largely autonomous regions within the United States with very distinctive borders. My parents were able to be on both sides of that divide. They had rancher friends on one side and Lakota Sioux friends on the other, and we went back and forth between these two cultures.



In the '90s and early 2000s, a lot of theorists were writing about cinema and large tableau photos. In the current moment, many artists are re-photographing photos. They make a photograph and then enter into a repetitive process. For me, this takes the form of an iterative process of arranging objects, photographing them, printing out a photograph of the objects, and then using that photograph as a backdrop to photograph the objects on top of a photographic depiction of themselves. This might happen three or four times, with the light and perspective shifting with each step. This act of re-photographing a photograph mimics what is happening in digital culture, like the feedback loop of social media. How do we, as artists, interrupt that? How do we find desire within this repetitive system of feedback, of making comments online, of taking a photograph and putting it on Instagram or Facebook?

