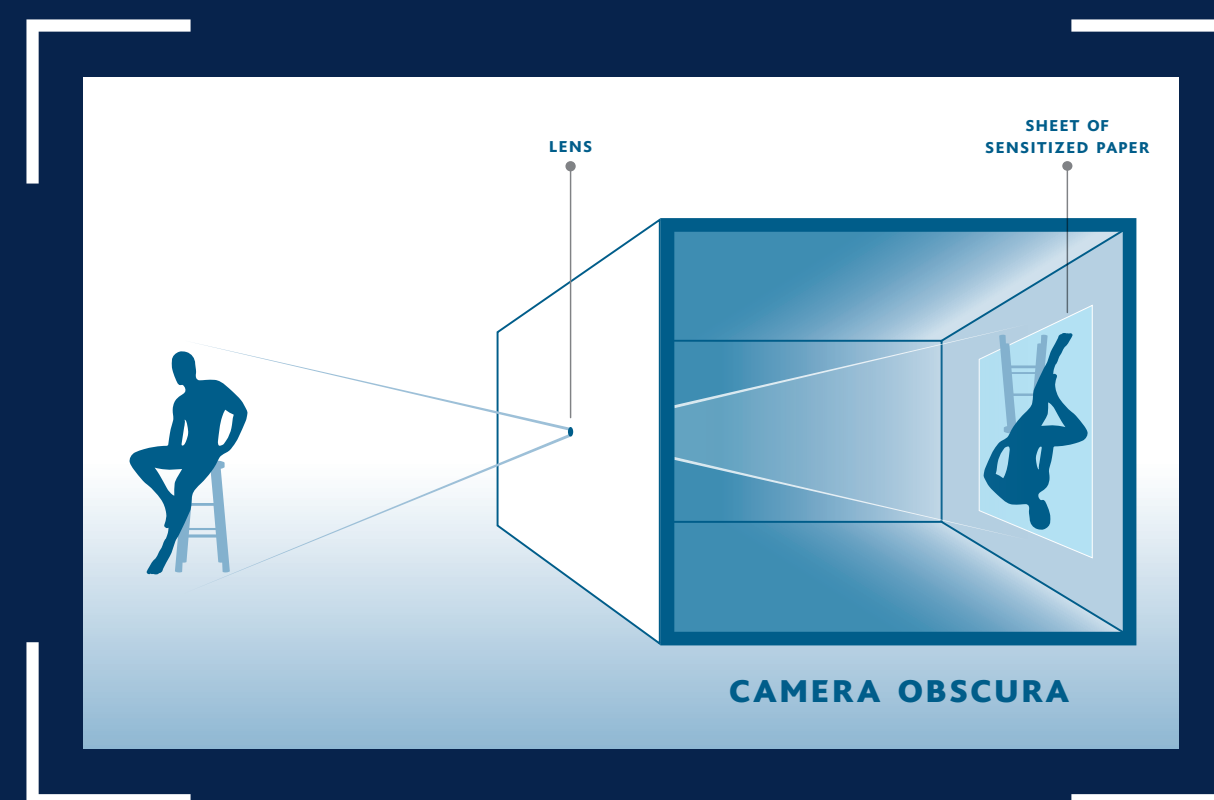


Richard Learoyd

IN THE STUDIO

For over a decade, Richard Learoyd (English, born 1966) has been using a room-sized camera obscura in his studio to create large-scale direct-positive prints characterized by mesmerizing detail and lush color. His subjects include figure studies and intimate portraits as well as still lifes of quotidian objects and dead animals.

Eschewing digital technologies, Learoyd's labor-intensive process is closely associated with the invention of photography. The camera obscura relies on the essential components required to make a photograph—a dark chamber fitted with a lens, sensitized paper, and light. After



arranging a scene in his studio, Learoyd walks into the camera and affixes a large sheet of silver-dye bleach paper onto the wall opposite the lens. Once exposed, the paper is fed into a color-processing machine attached to the camera. Since the resulting print is not enlarged from a negative or transparency, each photograph is unique and exceptionally sharp.

In 2010 Learoyd began working with a bookmaker to produce bound volumes of images cropped from larger photographs, with an emphasis on compelling details. Akin to a visual diary, these albums present partial memories of past studio sessions.

Learoyd was educated at the Glasgow School of Art in Scotland and worked as a teacher and commercial photographer for many years. He currently lives in Wiltshire, South West England, and has his studio in East London.



I often muse over what might have come about if [William Henry] Fox Talbot [English, 1800–1877] had not invented the means to reproduce photographic images as multiples; maybe a completely different way of seeing would have emerged, leaving photography as a more singular viewing experience, where the value of the photographic object was maintained.

—RICHARD LEAROYD in an interview by Peggy Roalf, *Aperture*, Summer 2010



FIGURE STUDIES

Learoyd's photographs of figures, either partially clothed or entirely nude against a plain background, emphasize the weight and mass of corporeal form. Occupying much of the frame and isolated before the lens, his models are presented with a focus on restrained poses, subtle gestures, and the sensuous qualities of physical imperfections.

The artist's preference for a shallow depth of field forces him to carefully maneuver each sitter into a position where the body is aligned with the focal plane, casting parts of it in hyperdetail. Areas of the body that are outside the focal plane appear softer in the print. Slight blemishes, long-faded scars, and wayward strands of hair—elements of a person's appearance often overlooked at a quick glance—become magnified and draw the viewer's attention. The paper's glossy surface heightens the variations in tone and texture of each subject's skin, hair, and nails.



STILL LIFES

For Learoyd, the studio has been a place where he can experiment with various subjects and refine ideas that he realizes in front of the camera. His still-life compositions concentrate on tactile qualities and the visual power of form and space, texture and weight.

Learoyd's subjects range from exotic fauna to common materials such as thread. In the photographs nearby, string is used to articulate the rigging of a miniature replica of a ship's masts (created in the studio) or to truss the body of a cuttlefish, producing intricate geometries. One work examines thread in its own right, emphasizing the complex layers of a colorful tangled mass. For his photograph of an antique mercury mirror, Learoyd focused his camera on the patina from the metal alloy (or foil) beneath the glass, revealing delicate designs that mimic a star-strewn night sky. In another image, he captured the contorted corpse of a flamingo set atop a sheet of glass, highlighting its brilliant plumage and unusual shape.



PORTRAITS

The genre of portraiture, with its ability to both reveal and obscure a person's identity, has been a subject of ongoing interest for Learoyd. He finds most of his models through friends or acquaintances and usually photographs them only once. There are a few sitters with whom he has worked repeatedly in the past decade.

Learoyd's models rarely confront the camera's lens directly. Each is positioned so that attention is focused on select details, often highlighting the residue of makeup that has not been completely removed or grime that has accumulated on the skin. Many of the sitters wear clothes found by the photographer at secondhand stores. Props such as a chair, a painted plinth, or a mattress allow the model to steady a pose long enough for Learoyd to make the necessary adjustments to the composition before an exposure. The spare environments eliminate distractions and encourage intense scrutiny of the subject's physical and psychological state.



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