

Nina Katchadourian

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The Morgan opens new exhibition
exploring the diverse visual languages
of photography

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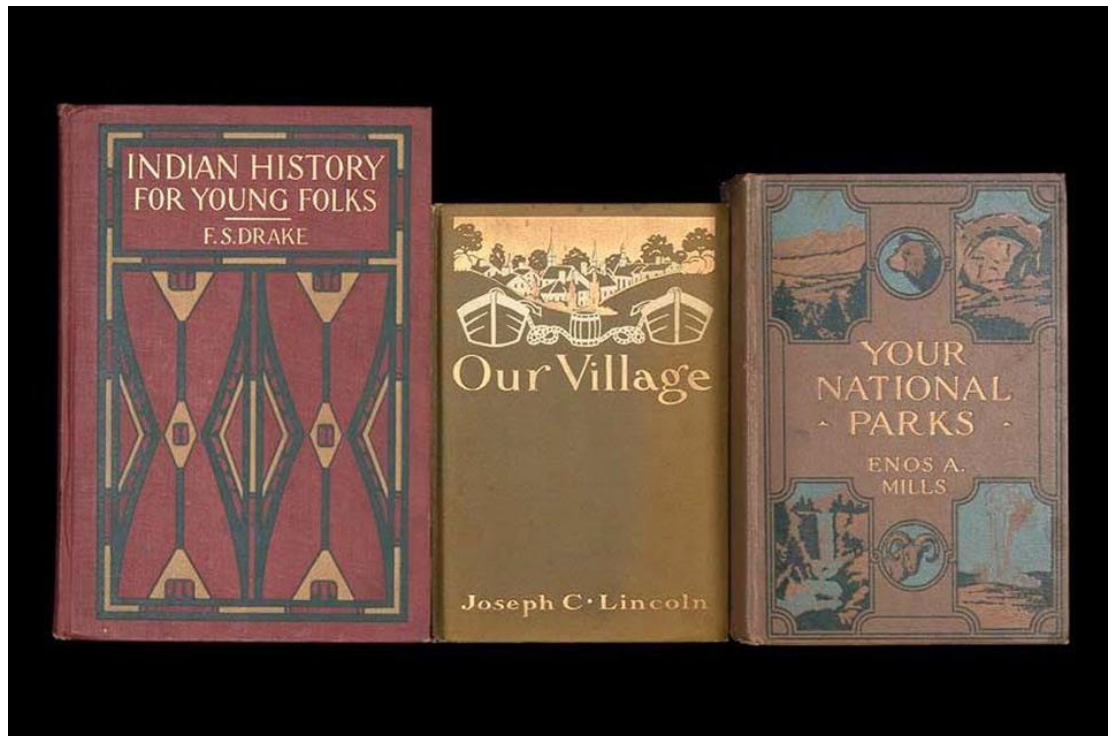
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Nina Katchadourian (American, born 1968), *Indian History for Young Folks*, from *Once Upon a Time in Delaware/In Quest of the Perfect Book*, 2012. Chromogenic print. Purchased by the Photography Collectors Committee, The Morgan Library & Museum.

NEW YORK, NY. — As its name declares, photography is a means of writing with light. Photographs both show and tell, and they speak an extraordinary range of dialects.

The Morgan Library & Museum explores the history of the medium as a lucid, literate— but not always literal—tool of persuasion in a new exhibition, *Sight Reading: Photography and the Legible World*. A collaboration with the George Eastman Museum, the show features more than eighty works from the 1840s to the present and reveals the many ways the camera can transmit not only the outward appearance of its subject but also narratives, arguments, and ideas. The show is on view through May 30.

Over the past 175 years, photography has been adopted by, and adapted to, countless fields of endeavor, from art to zoology and from fashion to warfare. *Sight Reading* features a broad range of material—pioneering x-rays and aerial views, artifacts of early photojournalism, and recent examples of conceptual art—organized into groupings that accentuate the variety and suppleness of photography as a procedure. In 1936, artist László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946) defined “the illiterate of the future” as someone “ignorant of the use of the camera as well as the pen.” The JPEG and the “Send” button were decades away, but Moholy-Nagy was not the first observer to argue that photography belonged to the arts of commentary and persuasion. As the modes and motives of camera imagery have multiplied, viewers have continually learned new ways to read the information, and assess the argument, embodied in a photograph.

“Traditional narratives can be found throughout the Morgan’s collections, especially in its literary holdings,” said Colin B. Bailey, director of the Morgan. “*Sight Reading* encourages us to use a critical eye to read and discover the stories that unfold through the camera lens and photography, a distinctly modern, visual language. We are thrilled to collaborate with the Eastman Museum, and together unravel a rich narrative, which exemplifies photography’s deep involvement in the stories of modern art, science, and the printed page.”

THE EXHIBITION

Sight Reading cuts across conventional historical and geographic divisions. Featuring work by William Henry Fox Talbot (1800–1877), Eadweard Muybridge (1830–1904), John Heartfield (1891–1968), Lewis Hine (1874–1940), Harold Edgerton (1903–1990), John Baldessari (b. 1931), Sophie Calle (b. 1953), and Bernd and Hilla Becher (1931–2007; 1934–2015), among many others, the exhibition is organized into nine “conversations” among diverse sets of works.

I. The Camera Takes Stock

Photography’s practical functions include recording inventory, capturing data imperceptible to the human eye, and documenting historical events. In the first photographically illustrated publication, *The Pencil of Nature* (1845), William Henry Fox Talbot used his image *Articles of China* to demonstrate that “the whole cabinet of a ... collector ... might be depicted on paper in little more time than it would take him to make a written inventory describing it in the usual way.” Should the photographed collection suffer damage or theft, Talbot speculated, “the mute testimony of the picture ... would certainly be evidence of a novel kind” before the law.

A century later, Harold Edgerton, an electrical engineer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, used the pulsing light of a stroboscope to record states of matter too fleeting for the naked eye. *Gun Toss*, an undated image of a spinning pistol, is not a multiple exposure: the camera shutter opened and closed just once. But during that fraction of a second, seven bright flashes of light committed to film a seven-episode history of the gun’s trajectory through space.

II. Crafting A Message

The camera is widely understood to be “truthful,” but what photographs “say” is a product of many procedures that follow the moment of exposure, including page layout, captioning, and cropping of the image. During World War I, military personnel learned to interpret the strange, abstract-looking images of enemy territory made from airplanes. Their specialized training fundamentally altered the nature of wartime reconnaissance, even as the unusual perspective unique to aerial photography introduced a new dialect into the expanding corpus of modern visual language. An Example of an Annotated Photograph with Local Names of Trenches Inserted (1916), on view in the exhibition, shows that the tools of ground strategy soon included artificial bunkers and trenches, designed purely to fool eyes in the sky.

In László Moholy-Nagy’s photcollages of the late 1920s, figures cut out of the plates in mass-market magazines appear in new configurations to convey messages of the artist’s devising. Images such as Massenpsychose (Mass Psychosis) (1927) propose a new kind of visual literacy for the machine age. To contemporary eyes, Moholy’s collages seem to foreshadow cut-and-paste strategies that would later characterize the visual culture of cyberspace.

III. Photographs in Sequence

Photography’s debut in the late 1830s happened to coincide with the birth of the modern comic strip. Ultimately the narrative photo sequence would lead to the innovations that gave rise to cinema, another form of storytelling altogether. Exact contemporaries of one another, Eadweard J. Muybridge in the United States and Étienne-Jules Marey (1830–1904) in France both employed cameras to dissect human movement. Muybridge used a bank of cameras positioned to record a subject as it moved, tripping wires attached to the shutters. The result was a sequence of “stop-action” photographs that isolated gestures not otherwise visible in real time. Beginning in 1882, Marey pursued motion studies with a markedly different approach. In the works for which he is best known, he exposed one photographic plate multiple times at fixed intervals, recording the arc of movement in a single image.

IV. The Legible Object

Some photographs speak for themselves; others function as the amplifier for objects that can literally be read through the image. In her series Sorted Books, American artist Nina Katchadourian (b. 1968) composes statements by combining the titles of books drawn from the shelves of libraries and collections. Indian History for Young Folks, 2012, shows three books from the turn of the twentieth century that she found in the Delaware Art Museum’s M.G. Sawyer Collection of Decorative Bindings. The viewer’s eye silently provides punctuation: “Indian history for young folks: Our village; your national parks.” Though at first glance it appears merely to arrange words into legible order, Katchadourian’s oblique statement—half verbal, half visual—would be incomplete if divorced from the physical apparatus of the books themselves.

V. The Photograph Decodes Nature

As early as 1840, one year after photography’s invention was announced, scientists sought to deploy it in their analysis of the physical world. Combining the camera with the microscope, microphotographs recorded biological minutiae, leading to discoveries that would have been difficult, if not impossible, to obtain by observing subjects in real time. Similarly, the development of X-ray technology in 1895 allowed scientists to see and understand living anatomy to an unprecedented degree. Such innovations not only expanded the boundaries of the visible world but also introduced graphic concepts that would have a profound impact on visual culture. In other ways, too, nature has been transformed in human understanding through the

interpretive filter of the lens, as seen in *Sight Reading* in the telescopic moon views of astronomers Maurice Loewy (1833–1907) and Pierre Henri Puiseux (1855–1928) and in the spellbinding aerial abstractions of William Garnett (1916–2006).

VI. The Photograph Decodes Culture

The photograph not only changed but to a great extent invented the modern notion of celebrity. Modern-age celebrities live apart from the general public, but their faces are more familiar than those of the neighbors next door. Since the mid-nineteenth century, viewers have come to “know” the famous through accumulated photographic sightings, which come in formats and contexts that vary as much as real-life encounters do. In four images that would have communicated instantly to their intended viewers in 1966, Jean-Pierre Ducatez (b. 1970) portrayed the Beatles through closeups of their mouths alone. The graphic shorthand employed by Jonathan Lewis in his series *The Pixles* is of a more recent variety, but he, too, relies on the visual familiarity conferred by tremendous celebrity. Each print in the series reproduces the iconic art of a Beatles album cover at life size (12 x 12 inches) but extremely low resolution (12 x 12 pixels). Like celebrities themselves, perhaps, the images look more familiar to the eye at a distance than close-up.

VII. Meaning is on the Surface

Photographs are not just windows onto the world but pieces of paper, which can themselves be inscribed or otherwise altered in ways that enrich or amend their meaning. The group portrait *Joint Meeting of the Railway Surgeons Association, Claypool Hotel, Indianapolis* (1920) is contact printed, meaning that the negative was the same size as the print. After the portrait sitting, the photographer appears to have presented the developed film to the sixty-four sitters for signing during the three days they were assembled for their convention. The result is a document that unites two conventional signifiers of character: facial features and the autograph.

VIII. Photography and the Page

News of the world took on a newly visual character in the 1880s, when the technology of the halftone screen made it practical, at last, to render photographs in ink on the printed page.

Among the earliest examples of photojournalism is Paul Nadar’s (1820–1910) “photographic interview” with Georges Ernest Boulanger, a once-powerful French politician. The article’s introduction explains that the photographs were printed alongside the text in order to provide evidence of the encounter and to illustrate Boulanger’s dynamic body language during the conversation.

IX. Empire of Signs

The plethora of signs, symbols, and visual noise endemic to cities has attracted photographers since the medium’s invention. Their records of advertisers’ strident demands for attention, shopkeepers’ alluring displays, and the often dizzying architectural density of metropolitan life chronicle sights that are subject to change without notice. The photographer’s perspective on contemporary social life—whether it is anecdotal, as in John Thompson’s (1837–1921) *Street Advertising from Street Life in London* (1877), or haunting, as in Eugène Atget’s (1857–1927) *Impasse des Bourdonnais* (ca. 1908)—is embedded in each image.