



Marget Long

12.12.2011 | Briana McKinnell



Light Years Ago, c-print, 40 x 30 in., 2011

The representation of history is the driving force behind artist, Marget Long's practice. She works in a wide range of mediums including, photographs, video and text. Most of her projects explore

the history of photography, such as “Bad Light,” which considers how we experience the use of flash in photography over the years through its technological advances. “\$pooky Photographs for Sale\$,” is a running series of photographs, many vintage from the early 1900s, found for sale online under the tagline of “spooky photographs.” In her most recent project, “A Daguerreotype Sideways: Re-visiting Mathew Brady’s Studio @ 359 Broadway,” Long also investigates the meanings behind the history of photographic space. Her innovative approach and explorations into the practice of photography, from its history to its present day interpretations, set Long apart from her contemporaries.

Long received a BA from Harvard University and an MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design. Her work has been exhibited both nationally and internationally at Anthology Film Archives, Exit Art, Art Institute of Chicago, Contemporary Artists Center, Cinders, American Cinémathèque, DGA Video in Los Angeles, and in a solo show at Safe-T Gallery in Brooklyn. She lives and works in New York.

Briana McKinnell: What initiated your romance with photography?

Marget Long: Funny you should use the word “romance” because lately I’ve been struck by how many of my projects veer towards the darker side of photography—its ties to modes of surveillance, violence and regulation of the body. Even with my project on Mathew Brady’s studio building—potentially a hyper-romantic site for a photographer—I was, in the end, most fascinated by the fact that Brady went bankrupt. How did one of the 19th century’s most vibrant commercial studios end up gutted and sold for parts by a team of lawyers? I guess bankruptcy – financial, emotional or otherwise — is the dark side of romance!

I’ve always been deeply attracted, even romantic, about cameras. The way they look and feel. The sound the shutter makes. You know, the mystery of the black box. Both my father and my grandfather were avid amateur photographers. My grandfather kept all his cameras, projectors and flash attachments in a narrow closet in the corner of his living room. As a very small child, I remember opening and closing that closet, over and over, just to look at that amazing stockpile of cameras.

BM: Essentially what drives your work? Where do you draw your inspiration from?

ML: This might sound pretty basic but I’m driven to communicate ideas, to share experiences, to pose questions about the world in which we live. I’m also quite interested in the bigger, trickier questions of photographic representation itself. How do photographs work? When do they fail us?

In the case of my most recent project, “A Daguerreotype Sideways,” I was presented with a difficult representational problem. I had access to Mathew Brady’s former daguerreotype studio—this

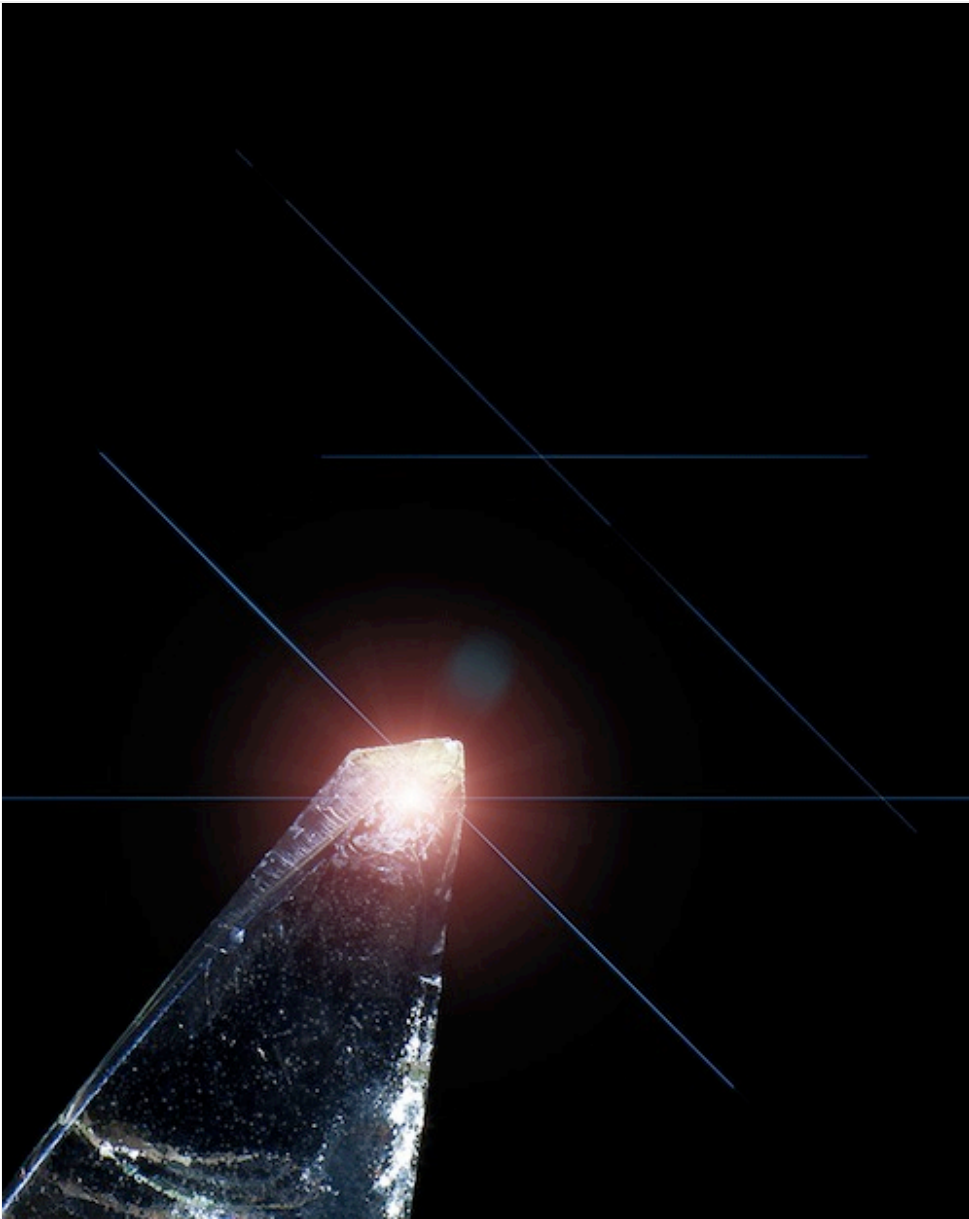
incredible site of artistic production—that now bears very few traces of that past. In some ways, the building was just another vacant industrial building in Tribeca, ripe for condo conversion. Yet as someone who works with photographs, I had all kinds of deep emotional, physical and intellectual responses to that building, particularly Brady’s skylight, which is still intact. How could I find a way to depict that space and that history with photographs? How can a photograph begin to describe what we experience when we step into a historic space? And to compound the problem, how does this pursuit change when so many iconic photographs had been produced in Brady’s studio, like the photo of Abraham Lincoln on a five-dollar bill.

BM: What artists inspire you, whether they are other photographers, musicians, painters, etc.?

ML: In his piece, *Some Rules for Students and Teachers*, John Cage wrote, “Always be around. Come and go to everything. Always go to classes. Read anything you can get your hands on. Look at movies carefully, often. Save everything—it might come in handy later.” I try to live like that. I go to see everything I can. I read a lot, everything from trashy novels, to *Cabinet Magazine*, to obscure camera manuals from the 1960s. I really enjoy queer performance, the recent collaborative work of Sharon Hayes and Brooke O’Hara (last spring, they did an amazing eight-hour rendition of Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*), Jibz Cameron (aka Dynasty Handbag), the legendary duo Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver, and the incredible work of Justin Vivian Bond, who inspires me to no end. Reading Martha Rosler’s writing on feminism, architecture and documentary photography were pivotal for me, as was the work of Deborah Bright and Penelope Umbrico, both of whom were my teachers at RISD. I’m indebted to the work of Johan Grimonprez and Mathew Buckingham, as they each present history as a subject open for unlimited play and critical inquiry. I also have an important on-going dialogue about historiography with my girlfriend, Carolyn Dinshaw, author of the book *Getting Medieval*. I find Pradeep Dalal’s wavering scanner-made tableaux of Indian subjects to be very moving. And Liz Deschenes optically-charged photos are just plain awesome. Finally, I admire the work of many younger artists like Miranda Lichtenstein, Joachim Schmidt, João Enxuto, and Daniel Gordon, especially his photographs of himself flying. Now there’s my kind of romantic.

BM: Much of your practice draws on the history of photography, what draws you so much to the past?

ML: History, for me, is a live thing and that, of course, includes the history of photography. It reverberates in the everyday. It’s both everywhere and nowhere—in the air, in my body, and then, poof, it’s gone. This elusiveness attracts me. As an artist, I feel it’s an open invitation to question how our histories get told and who gets to tell them. More generally, feeling the presence (or absence) of history allows us to think more expansively about the present moment and sometimes, in rare spark-like bursts, allows us dream about a better future.



Mathew Brady's Skylight, c-print, 20 x 16 in.

BM: Could you talk about your most recent project, *A Daguerreotype Sideways: Re-Visiting Mathew Brady's Studio @ 359 Broadway?*

ML: Sure. I've already talked a bit about that project but I should probably back up. In 2009, I gained access to the vacant building on lower Broadway that housed Mathew Brady's daguerreotype studio in the mid-1850s. Inside that five-story industrial building, Brady and his team of "operators" photographed thousands of people, many of whom were experiencing photography for the very first time. My access to the building wasn't exactly legal, so I had to work quickly and quietly. And even though rationally I knew that I probably wouldn't do jail time as a white woman trespassing with a view camera, I was quite jumpy the entire time I was in there. Dark empty buildings are surprisingly talkative!

I ended up taking direct pictures of Brady's skylight, making "Walk-in Portraits" under the skylight, as well as a set of "Visiting Cards" using discarded stuff I found inside the building. The visiting cards were based on a set of Brady cartes-de-visite that I discovered in my research between shoots. The skylight pictures started out as straight, representational images; the photos became more abstract as I further considered what it meant to stand under that glass. In the end, I wanted the photographs to emit the heat generated by that particular glass, both literally and metaphorically. I also wanted to refer to the skylight's intense brightness and its lasting optical impression, like the afterimages that float around under our eyelids even after we've turned away from something.

I'm very fond of a picture I made later in my studio of a small shard of the Brady skylight glass that I found in the building. My concept was to make the most idealized photograph possible of that glass, to give it the star treatment. In the end, I think the picture is pretty funny. A curator who visited my studio referred to it as a photo that might appear on a Pink Floyd album cover. That reading made me very happy.

BM: How did you first hear or learn of Mathew Brady?

ML: In the standard way, by reading one of the many the canonical accounts of photo history. Mathew Brady figures prominently in the canon, particularly his Civil War photographs, which he and his assistants took in the aftermath of various very bloody battles. They developed those photos in a portable, horse drawn darkroom. Early on, I was less aware of Brady's portrait work, his staggering output of daguerreotypes (and later Ambrotypes) of presidents, senators, and ordinary citizens-of-means.

In my teaching, Brady was always one of the go-to people for talking about the reliability of photographs as documents. This idea that photographs have always been staged and manipulated can sometimes really bother beginning students who, somewhat romantically (there's that word again!) flock to analogue photography in search of something stable, or images that they can trust. I can really relate to my students' impulse to find something fixed, stable or material in photography. Photographs are now mostly untouchable bits of screen-matter—backlit apparitions that live in "the cloud" and fly endlessly by us on our screens. The speed at which they're made and disseminated is an amazing thing, but it also makes me (and a lot of other people who care about these things) wonder how well these images can be absorbed, considered or analyzed when they're coming at us so fast and furiously.



Tintype Photo Cute Boy Spooky Hidden Mother Under Sheet



Christina Ricci - 8 x 10 in.

BM: Please tell us more about \$pooky Photographs for Sale\$. What is the concept behind the project? What role does time play?

ML: That's kind of a crazy project. It began as a daily activity, as a slightly OCD warm-up exercise that I did in the morning before I prepared for "real work." I chose the search category "spooky photographs" somewhat arbitrarily but eBay was an important part of the formula because of its function as the ultimate clearinghouse for man-made stuff, especially photographs.

It's become a simple matter of moving pixels from one on-line space to another. I drag the images and texts from eBay's search window across my desktop and into a window on my website. In that short digital trip an entirely new context and possibility for reading is opened up. You get a publicity photograph of Christina Ricci and

then a photo of a boy and his “spooky hidden mother” in a Victorian tintype. To me, this is one of the most intriguing things about the on-line world—how these bizarre new categories spring into being; how the internet is constantly corralling so-called like things. I’m interested in what these kinds of instant archives can tell us about our culture and, more importantly, the kind of ready-made material they provide us as artists. For now it appears that “spooky photographs” are usually old photos of old women. “Spooky photographs” are also photos in which women appear without men. People of color, no surprise, also figure in the “spooky” category quite often.

One unexpected side-effect of this project is that the eBay sellers—there seem to be a few regulars that specialize in “spooky photographs”—have started marking up their photographs with random texts, I suppose, to keep people like me from using them without paying. (The sellers are predisposed to use the “Marker Pen” font in lime green, which is extra-amazing.) So the archive is being re-shaped even before it comes to me based, at least in part, on my actions. That’s where your very astute question about time comes into play. What you get from these re-aggregations is a representation of time and space that is fantastically whacked-out—it’s not linear, it’s not regular and it’s clearly not finite. These strange temporalities are, of course, already present nearly everywhere on the internet. “\$pooky Photographs for Sale\$” only highlights them and thankfully, for my procrastinatory purposes, the material is infinite.



Walk-In #1, c-print, 20 x 16 in., 2009

BM: What do you find to be the biggest cliché in photography these days?

ML: I love clichés and photography is chock-full of them, no matter where you turn. Sunsets. Kittens. Young women splayed out in a threatening landscape. I look at clichés as aggregated data or information. They can tell me a lot about a culture and its aesthetic values at any given moment. Plus they can be really quite funny!

BM: What are you working on now? Future projects?

ML: I'm working on a text and image book about the Sylvania flashcube, a space-aged photo flash device that was revolutionary in 1965 and obsolete by 1975.

BM: Currently, what's the greatest challenge you face in your practice?

ML: Probably the same things that challenges most other working artists, time and money. Money buys you time to think, time to work, time to figure out how to navigate the many newly available distribution channels for your projects. And of course it takes time to earn money.

[add this](#)

[Subscribe](#)

[Become a fan on Facebook](#)

[Follow us on Twitter](#)

Recent Entries

[Asger Carlsen](#)

[Brea Souders](#)

[Marget Long](#)

[Kathryn Garcia](#)

[Rafaël Rozendaal](#)

Categories

[Artist Profile](#)

[Book Review](#)

[group show](#)

[Interviews](#)

[Portfolio](#)

[Random](#)

[Review](#)

[This Week in Stock Photography](#)

[Archives](#)