



# The camera's beau

By Cynthia J. Drake

At 9 a.m. on a Saturday morning in May, sweat is sliding down Al Wildey's face in a pitch-black cargo trailer parked on some railroad tracks.

He creeps around the trailer's cramped 6-by-10-foot quarters getting into position and squinting at the front wall of the dark interior.

Once his eyes adjust to the darkness after coming in from the sunny day outside, the image comes bright and tack sharp on a Plexiglas sheet hanging in the trailer: a circular upside-down image of several curvy utility poles in a parking lot, with a residence hall in the background.

This is what it feels like to be inside of a camera. A camera obscura, to be precise.

Wildey, chairman of CMU's art department, has built this camera obscura – one of the oldest known forms of human-created image – to teach his students about photography's beginnings. The camera obscura, Latin for "darkened chamber," is essentially a pinhole

in a darkened box that projects an inverted image on whatever is in front of it.

Camera obscuras can be made out of materials as simple as an oatmeal box or as elaborate as a free-standing building. Wildey's version is 1,000 pounds with wheels and Dollar Store lenses at each end. It can be towed to a variety of locations for teaching and shooting different scenes.

It also has the unintended effect of attracting campus police when it is parked in various locations around campus. Wildey gets a lot of weird questions. Does he have horses in there? And why is he parked on the railroad tracks?



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The answer to the last question is that Wildey uses the camera obscura to create his own original artwork. Here by the railroad tracks, he has the perfect shot of a group of utility poles that arrived on campus in the past year.

He chooses transitory subjects like utility poles or yield signs to comment on the constant changing of the world around us.

“I want to show how the ordinary is pretty extraordinary in our lives,” he says. “These poles are so big and new, they are these weird things that are thrown into our environment. I want people to take notice of what’s here and enjoy it.”

Wildey takes his images inside the camera obscura with a digital camera and then applies digital effects in Photoshop. He then sends the image to a printing company in North Carolina to be printed onto sheets of aluminum, a reference to 19th century tintypes, photographs that were printed on metal.

There is a name for the trend of artists looking back to old technologies for inspiration, the “antiquarian avant-garde.” Wildey’s take on this, however, is that the antiquarian avant-garde isn’t avant-garde enough.

He’s on a mission to question our whole concept of reality.

In April 2003, a photographer for the Los Angeles Times covering the Iraq war took photos of a British soldier directing a group of Iraqi civilians to seek cover, including a man who was crouching and holding a small child in his arms. Against the newspaper's ethics code, the photographer created a composite of two photos, combining the best visual elements of each into one image. He was fired for his breach.

Newspaper officials went on record saying that the photographer had violated the newspaper's trust with its readers.

Colin Crawford, director of photography for the LA Times, told the Poynter Institute: "If our readers can't count on honesty from us, I don't know what we have left."

But in fact photography itself is one of the oldest deceptions. At its core lies a tool that humans have used to record a perception of their world. But the perception is not reality.

"All of this is a fiction, it's a story based in reality."

– Al Wildey

The human eye sees the world in circular form. It can also detect three dimensions, that is, we can sense the distance between objects, and we note subtleties of lighting, tones, and shadows. When we look at a tree in the sunshine, we observe the highlights on the leaves. We see blades of grass in shadows.

But the camera flattens that image and crops it into a rectangle, makes it into something new. Nowhere is this more striking than when you first walk into a camera obscura. After the door closes and your eyes adjust, a hazy image appears that looks like a slide show. You observe the sharply recreated details of the sky, the way the bricks on the building in front of the camera are clear and detailed. But a thought nags at you –it doesn't seem "real."

Humans are so used to seeing photographs that they have, over time, associated them with reality. We use

phrases like, "The camera doesn't lie" to describe our relationship to photography as a documentation of real life. Photography's trick is made easier by the fact that humans want to believe photos themselves to be an objective document of reality. In fact, they are not.

"The biggest challenge is that photography is not the same as human vision," says Wildey. "Photos are not objective documents. They are fictions."

Wildey, who has been studying photography since 1979, says there is a grammar of photography, a syntax that allows photographers to make images that are more truthful.

Dodging and burning techniques have long been used in the darkroom during the printing process to decrease or increase exposure on areas of a print to achieve a certain level of lightness or darkness. It is generally acceptable for photojournalists to use such techniques.

Other forms of image manipulation have become easier and less detectable with the advent of digital editing programs like Photoshop, for which Wildey was a volunteer beta tester in 1990.

And this is where the line between reality and fiction blurs even more.

It is now easier than ever to add or remove visual content, pixel by pixel. In about 10 hours, Wildey has manipulated his camera obscura image almost beyond recognition. He starts by inverting the image, then desaturates the colors. He warms the cool black and white image into nostalgic tones by converting it to a duotone. He moves pixels around, smoothes out the cracks in the pavement, softens the sky. Then he deletes a building, moves an electric pole to a new location.

"All of this is a fiction, it's a story based in reality."



... phrases like, “The camera doesn’t lie” describe(s) our relationship to photography



**W**illey is not trying to replicate reality with his art – he is trying to create a dialogue about what photography is and is not, and how photographers and artists have straddled the boundary between “reality” and “fiction” for several centuries.

On one side he has history: the camera obscura produced image, the duotone colors, the printing process that references 19th century tintypes. On the other side, he has all that the 21st century brings to photography: the digital camera, Photoshop.

In the space between exists his subjects – propane tanks, satellite dishes, electrical boxes – temporary inhabitants of a world that will inevitably change and erase their existence.

“I want people to focus on what was so beautiful in that space,” he says. “The ordinary is pretty extraordinary in our lives. It’s right here before us – these visual narratives are all worth thinking about.”

Inside the camera obscura, that transitory world exists for fleeting moments on Plexiglas. Trees bend in the wind, cars whiz by. Everything is flattened by the camera and glows bright with the available sunlight.

Willey watches as the camera interprets its own version of reality. ♦

