

Buried Treasure

THE UNIVERSITY OF OREGON'S ART MUSEUM BRINGS ON A NEW CURATOR TO SORT ITS UNSORTED PHOTO COLLECTION

By Blake Andrews

“Each one of these is like a Christmas present,” Thom Sempere says as he pulls a photograph from atop a small stack of prints and lays it on the table before us. It’s an old gelatin silver photo dry-mounted under matting.

That much we know, but not much else — not even the photo’s provenance. The stack is unsorted and poorly catalogued, pulled at random from the large steel drawers that comprise the photo archives at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art (JSMA), where Sempere was named the museum’s first associate curator of photography this spring.

The print isn’t talking. It’s hidden beneath a protective sheet of acid-free tissue.

Sempere pulls open the matting on its hinges, then the sheet. Underneath is a vintage photo signed by the modernist master Paul Caponigro. It’s a chiaroscuro of deep blacks and rich grey tones mottled into a confusing abstraction. It takes a moment to resolve itself into reality.

Neither of us can quite make it out at first, until — ah, is it? — an ice mantle clinging to the side of a mountain? Yes, a gorgeous image!

We spend a few minutes absorbing the photo from all sides and angles. The mounting board is beginning to yellow, but the photo is in good shape. A label on the back — probably affixed during its last museum show — displays basic information. The label is accented with penciled handwriting, giving it a time machine quality. For a moment, we’re back in 1960.

Then just as quickly it’s 2019 again, and Sempere is writing notes in his organizer. He sets the photo aside and reaches for the next one.

One down, 1,999 to go.



THOM SEMPERE

For the next few months, Fridays will find Sempere repeating this task. Comfortably ensconced in the windowless gut of the JSMA, he’ll unwrap one mysterious present after another. His first task in his new job is figuring out just what the museum’s photography collection looks like. At this point, no one is quite sure.

Although the JSMA has acquired thousands of photos over the past several decades, no systematic hands-on assessment has ever been performed.

They sit in flat files inside the museum, some from past shows, some from donations or purchase. Mounting, matting and storage quality varies widely.

If you go to the Schnitzer’s website you will find these photos listed, each with a small JPG and some basic information. But for most of them, it’s been a good long

while since they were brought into the open and given a thorough appraisal.

To complete the task, the JSMA created this new position. Sempere is the first curator of photography, and the first of the JSMA’s curators to be medium-specific.

He’s got the bona fides. In fact, his path seems geared to the job requirements. He studied art history at the University of Michigan, capped with a BFA in photography from San Francisco Art Institute and an MFA in photography from the University of Washington.

Sempere has taught at San Francisco Art Institute, the University of California, Berkeley and at Stanford University. Most of his career was spent in the Bay Area, involved with the photo department of SF Museum of Modern Art, and later as founding director of PhotoAlliance in San Francisco.

Eventually he and his wife realized “we didn’t want to spend our final years in Richmond.” So in 2015 they escaped the rat race and came to Eugene, to be closer to his daughter and enjoy a smaller community.

“In 15 minutes I can be anywhere,” Sempere says of living in Eugene.

I’m scared to ask how the Bay Area commute compares.

Sempere began work here in April. After the first several weeks on the job, a few basics have emerged. The roughly 2,000 photos in the collection represent about 250 photographers. Of these, males outnumber females roughly three to one.

The vast bulk of the collection — perhaps 90 percent — is from the 20th century, and most are traditional gelatin silver prints. The collection includes scant holdings from local or Oregon-based photographers.

It’s a fine foundation, but some diversification is in order. One of Sempere’s primary curatorial tasks will be to guide future acquisitions. A major JSMA photography retrospective in 2021 will bookmark some of his initial efforts, so local shutterbugs can look forward to that.

But that’s a ways off. First, the museum’s collection must be developed.

And before that, Sempere must take stock of what’s already on hand. There are no shortcuts to the process. He’ll go through them print by print until he’s seen them all. 1,998 ... 1,997 ... 1,996.

Oh well. For a photo buff like Sempere, there are worse chores. ■

NORTHWEST CANOE TOUR

Renting Canoes, Kayaks and SUPs at Alton Baker Park
Paddle the Canoe Canal!
Friday, Saturday & Sunday
11am to 5pm
Plus Tours & Custom Programming
www.canoetour.org
or 541-579-8990

BROADWAY

METRO

43 W. BROADWAY
(541) 686-2458

REGULAR ADMISSION \$9 ADULTS \$8 STUDENTS \$6 SENIORS \$6 BEFORE 4PM
OPEN EVERY DAY
FOLLOW US ON FACEBOOK AND TWITTER!

JUNE 7-13

THE TOMORROW MAN
FRI-TUE 11:00 1:05 3:10
5:15 7:30 9:30
WED 11:00 1:05 3:10 5:15 9:30
THU 6/13 11:00 1:05 3:10 5:15 7:30 9:30

ROCKETMAN
DAILY 11:00 1:40 4:20 7:00 9:30

THE BIGGEST LITTLE FARM
FRI 11:00 1:10 3:20 5:30 7:45 9:45
SAT 11:00 1:10 3:20 5:30 7:45 9:45
SUN-MON 11:00 1:10 3:20 5:30 7:45 9:45
TUE-WED 11:00 1:10 3:20 5:30 7:45 9:45
THU 6/13 11:00 1:10 3:20 5:30 7:45 9:45

BOOKSMART
FRI-SAT 11:50 2:25 4:45 7:15 9:30
SUN-MON 11:50 2:25 4:45 7:15 9:00
TUE 11:50 2:25 4:45 7:15 9:00
WED-THU 11:50 2:25 4:45 7:15 9:00

ROLLING THUNDER REVUE: A BOB DYLAN STORY BY MARTIN SCORSESE
PREMIUM ADMISSION
TUE 6:00

DECONSTRUCTING THE BEATLES: THE WHITE ALBUM
PREMIUM ADMISSION
WED 7:00

METROarts OPERA
PREMIUM ADMISSION
THE ROYAL OPERA: FAUST
SAT 11:00
THU 6/13 6:00

METROarts GALLERY
PREMIUM ADMISSION
WATER LILIES OF MONET
SUN-MON 7:00

DAVID MINOR THEATRE

TIX \$7 SENIOR & STUDENT SUNDAYS \$2 OFF

762-1700 | 180 E. 5TH AVE
DAVIDMINORTHEATRE.COM

\$3 TUESDAYS

JUNE 7TH - 13TH
*SAT/SUN MATINEE ONLY (\$5 TIX)

*SHAZAM! - 2:40 PM *WOMAN AT WAR - 3:20 PM

TOLKIEN 5:00 HAIL SATAN? 5:15 HIGH LIFE 6:50

FUNNY COMEDY TALK LAUGHS

LONG SHOT 7:05 THE BIG LEBOWSKI 8:50 US 9:20

BIJOU ART CINEMAS

6/6-6/13

492 E. 13th Ave
541-357-0375

MOVIES THAT MATTER

bijou-cinemas.com

Serving the Eugene Community for Over 35 Years!

ALL IS TRUE (PG-13)
A portrait of William Shakespeare (Kenneth Branagh) during the last three years of his life, as he leaves London and returns to his family in Stratford-upon-Avon. Co-starring Judi Dench and Ian McKellen.
Friday - Sunday
11:30 am, 1:45, 4:00, 6:15, 8:30
Monday - Thursday
1:15, 3:35, 5:45, 8:00

THE SOUVENIR (R)
A shy film student begins finding her voice as an artist while navigating a turbulent courtship with a charismatic but untrustworthy man. The best reviewed movie of the year. Written & directed by Joanna Hogg.
Friday - Sunday
11:00 am, 1:30, 4:00, 6:30, 9:00
Monday - Thursday
1:00, 3:30, 6:00, 8:30

Local beer, wine and cider... & now kombucha on tap!

TICKET PRICES: MATINEE before 5pm \$6
ADULT \$8 | STUDENT \$7 | SENIOR 62+ \$6 CHILD age 12 & under \$6