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Co-curator's statement

Making Pictures from Plants: Contemporary Anthotypes

Rhode Island Center for Photographic Arts, Providence, RI

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Magical and engaging, anthotypes are photographic images made using light sensitive juices extracted from crushed flower petals, berries, and leaves. The plant-based emulsion is applied to artist's paper, dried, then exposed to the sun for days, even weeks. This technique was developed ca. 1839 by Sir John Herschel, the British astronomer who contributed much to the beginnings of photography. Herschel benefited from the research of peers and predecessors, notably the pioneering Scottish scientist Mary Somerville, who studied the effects of light on plant juices. Herschel had hoped to find a viable form of color photography but the time-consuming, unpredictable, and ultimately unstable anthotype proved commercially impractical and was abandoned. Almost two centuries later this once neglected process is experiencing a renaissance – embraced by photographers intrigued not only by its aesthetic possibilities, but also by its sustainability. Another characteristic of the anthotype is its impermanence. Ultimately the jewel-like colors fade. Their gradual disappearance over time provides an alluring metaphor.

I first discovered anthotypes in 2013, thanks to experimental Polish photographer Paweł Kula. We were both in Poznań, Poland, attending the opening reception for *Stan Rzeczy/The State of Things*, an exhibition of work by eight photographers working with antiquarian photo processes. Five of us were American, and three were Polish. (Paweł Kula is included in *Making Pictures from Plants: Contemporary Anthotypes*, as is Marek Noniewicz, who co-curated *Stan Rzeczy*.) Paweł's mysterious, even mystical, video *Anthotype/short story* was playing in a room hung with his brightly colored images – anthotypes! I became curious about this 19th century plant-based practice and began making my own anthotypes in 2019. There was very little contemporary information available – a chapter here or there, and importantly Malin Fabbri's helpful manual [Anthotypes: Explore the darkroom in your kitchen and make photographs using plants](#) (2011). I wanted to know more about contemporary anthotypists. I wanted to meet them and see their work in person, to exchange ideas. I wanted to know why they were working in anthotype: beautiful, challenging, problematic. What better way to accomplish this than to curate a show?! (As far as I know, there has been no other group international show devoted to the anthotype in New England – if anywhere.)

I reached out to photographer and gardener Mary Kocol, also exploring anthotypes since 2019, and we decided to co-curate an exhibition. David DeMelim, Gallery Director at RICPA, offered his exhibition space, as the show dovetails with his interest in historic, handmade photo-processes. We invited national and international anthotypists to participate and included our own work. We sought out 21st century “takes” on the anthotype. We wanted to know: how are contemporary anthotypists going beyond the curio cabinet wonder of this archaic process? How

do other photographers acknowledge, accept, or deny the fragility and the ephemerality of the anotype? Do they fuse 19th century technology with 21st century methods? Do they exhibit the actual anotype or a digital facsimile? What questions are they asking that can only be answered with the anotype? Or is the anotype simply another avenue for the timeless human pursuit of beauty?