

John Opera
Statement

The anothotype prints I have been making since 2011 harken back to the earliest moments of photography's history, and even its prehistory. During the mid-1800s, it was discovered that pigmented solutions derived from various flower and fruit extracts are light-sensitive enough to be used as rudimentary print emulsions. In the nineteenth century, as today, this process takes up to three weeks of exposure in direct sunlight to render an image. Its inventor, Sir John Herschel, perhaps best known for inventing cyanotype and fix for silver-based images, turned to the garden as a site of experimentation for studying the properties of light and photosynthesis. It seems he hoped that this research would reveal answers about rendering color in a photograph and its corresponding chemical reactions. I find this to be a profound allegory regarding the alchemical qualities of photographic image formation and its complex relationship to the physical experience of how humans see the world.

The anothotype portraits I started in 2015 as a casual inquiry have grown into a diverse archive of college students I've taught or advised. Now the project contains approximately 70 portraits. At first I didn't really have a clear objective except the desire to return to using a camera to record something around me that I felt was meaningful. The prints are made from various flower and fruit extracts that are light-sensitive enough to be used as rudimentary print emulsions—an instance of nature recording nature. All of the images are rendered in reds and violets derived from the material sources of the emulsions: blueberries, pokeberries, beets, and chokeberries. Soberingly, the prints can completely fade in a matter of a few years; however, I find the fugitive impermanence to be a useful conceptual layer that enriches their presence and time in the world. As new subjects are added to the archive, earlier ones fade and disappear. Their instability and slow erasure complicate not only their value as art objects but also their function as documents of a subject that existed in a specific time and place. Presented at 1:1 scale, they are encapsulated in their own photographic universe, yet seem somehow equivalent to the viewers who encounter them. The collection is a complete work of art, displaying an ebb and flow of recording and erasure, challenging the linear, compartmentalized notions of time that underpin the framework of Eurocentric, dualistic thinking.