



the harvard advocate

1/2 a Pack of Firecrackers **by Dan Mach**

To all appearances, *1/2 a Pack of Firecrackers* (Jerry Spagnoli, 2002) looks more like the product of an artisan's woodshop than of a photographer's darkroom. And to some extent, it is. Available for public viewing in the Agnes Mongan Center of Harvard's Fogg Art Museum, *1/2 a Pack* consists of six varnished birch wood boxes. Crowning the top of each box is a broken sheet of anodized aluminum foil. A small, unpresuming drawer near the bottom of one side of the box contains a cased $1/4$ plate daguerreotype photograph of an explosion, created on the top of the box when a firecracker was ignited between the plate and the aluminum layer covering it.

Artists who produce daguerreotype photography today risk being accused of chintz and nostalgic glamour. The daguerreotype had its heyday at the dawn of photography, accounting for the vast majority of portraits and landscapes produced until the mid-1850s. Following the introduction of the ambrotype and other negative-based processes that allowed for easier reproduction of images, daguerreotype photography faded into obscurity. Despite their agelessness (a well-sealed plate will never fade or deteriorate), daguerreotypes, old and new, invariably look like Victorian antiques. An anachronistic aura surrounds both the eerily distant ghost-like images and their elaborate casings—functional necessities for the fragile plate surfaces that also lend themselves well to frivolous ornamentation.

1/2 a Pack, however, resists association with the collectors-item daguerreotypes extolled by antique auctioneers. In a 2003 lecture at the Art Institute of Chicago, Spagnoli claimed that he used the process "not because it is old, but because it is perfect." In fact, the process offers a crispness that remains unsurpassed by film-based methods. Spagnoli began with 35mm film, pushing the chemical limits of the medium with what he called the micro-photogram. Taking a microscope to the film surface, he enlarged human figures photographed at great distance. Magnified until the individual grains of the film emulsion were visible, the image became reduced to a spotty approximation (I don't think you want to use this word, since it means something very different in the next sentence) of the subject. Seen on a smaller scale, a finite collection of data is glossed and elaborated by our mental faculty of approximation. But when the same amount of data is blown up until the components of their composition lose their collective identity, exposed as isolated grains of silver, it reveals itself to be an incomplete reproduction. Spagnoli was looking at the trees, not the forest.

With daguerreotypes, this kind of procedure is simply not possible – the images are too sharp. Amateur photographers of the mid-nineteenth century would proudly take a magnifying-glass to their newly developed plates, counting freckles and cuff-buttons to demonstrate the precision of their art with the same obsessive attention to detail that led Spagnoli to count silver crystals in 35mm film emulsions. The directness of the process –the positive image is impressed directly onto the plate, bypassing the darkroom's switch from film negative to positive paper print – enhances the effect of truthfulness. From start to finish, the daguerreotype ties together image and subject.

In *1/2 a Pack*, Spagnoli has refined his claim that "the camera is the fundamental issue in photography, rather than the image." Inverting the usual construction of the camera obscura and exposing the plate on top of the birch box, he eliminates the active mediating role of the camera without denying its traditional presence. Outward display of the mechanism dominates the piece, yet that mechanism no longer operates between subject and image. The firecracker is destroyed, and the image itself, a wispy reflection of the violent explosion, is hidden within the box. Only the aluminum shrapnel, evidence of the process and its peripherality to subject-image transfer, remains to adorn the exterior.