

By Matt Damsker

DAGUERREOTYPES 1995-2004. JERRY SPAGNOLI.

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This collection of a decade's worth of daguerreotypes by Jerry Spagnoli reflects the artist's metaphysical passion for depicting light--not merely as an element of composition, but as the essence of reality. Indeed, in his introduction, Spagnoli offers an eloquent and somewhat mystical rationale for utilizing the prototypical medium of daguerreotype: "The image... is not in a steady state like other photographs. It is elusive, fugitive... it remains a potential image until it is presented under the correct optical/spatial conditions... and the light from a scene in the past strikes your eye like new." But in the end these images must speak for themselves, and so they do, powerfully and beautifully, as Spagnoli's meticulous scans for this handsome book superbly capture the metallic glint of the daguerreotype's unique silver-plate process.

At their most dramatic, as in shots of New York City sky and sun above skyscrapers, Central Park, or the East River, the azure and cobalt blues that result from intentional overexposure convey a dreamlike beauty seeping through the austere sepia of the daguerreotype. This effect, at its best in subtle yet startling slivers of blue light that activate the stolid architecture and solid geometry of the subject matter, makes a seamless connection between photography's beginnings and its postmodernist project.

This is especially true in Spagnoli's shots of desert rock formations, in which his alchemical auras take on an otherworldly grace. At the same time, his many close-up studies of the human body--hands, shoulders, faces in profile, folds of skin pressed and stretched--are textural tours de force in which the metallic charge of the medium blends with the living warmth of skin tone, hair, and human gesture. The result is a freshly invigorated way of seeing, struck like a flint-spark from photography's oldest form.

In every way, Spagnoli's "Daguerreotypes" is a triumph.