



MAUREEN MINEHAN

Maureen Minehan used a “real” camera to create “Ethereal Jetty,” above, while Paul Moore needed only a smartphone to make “End of the Line,” below. A show at the Torpedo Factory Art Center asks questions about artists’ vision and the gear they use to express it.

Some artists can just phone it in

BY MICHAEL O’SULLIVAN

The exhibition “Diverging Mediums: Photography vs. iPhoneography,” which pairs images shot on iPhones with ones from more traditional cameras, raises a couple of interesting questions: What makes a photograph art? When is a camera not a camera? And what is the definition of “artist”?

That last question is the most interesting one in this small but worthy show, sponsored by the Torpedo Factory Art Center’s Art in Public Spaces program and on view in the center’s Studio 9. (Enter through the main doors, walk straight ahead and you’ll see it on the left.)

The side-by-side hangings spotlight different themes: texture, color, black-and-white, architecture, landscape, the human figure, etc. Works by acclaimed local photographers such as Min Enghausser are shown alongside works by members of Pixels, a California-based group of iPhoneography enthusiasts. Photography snobs will be tempted to try to pick out which ones were shot on an iPhone without looking at the labels.

Sometimes it’s easy. The telltale square format and fake faded snapshot border of Therese Brown’s untitled landscape, for instance, are a dead giveaway to the picture’s Hipstamatic provenance. Other times it’s a little more tricky.

I would have pegged Ramona Gillentine’s “Dreams of Steel Decay” for the fine-art photo, not something shot on an iPhone, for its relatively rich, black-and-white tonal range. But I’m not so sure that this guessing game is the real point. Or at least the only point.



PAUL MOORE

To be sure, there’s an implicit comparison here. “Photography vs. iPhoneography” sounds like a smackdown, and to some degree it is. Which medium is better? You could argue that photos shot on an iPhone are at a disadvantage in this context, because we’re looking at them printed on paper — the traditional turf of fine-art photography — and not the glowing little glass screens on which we’ve become accustomed to seeing them and for which the technology was designed.

There will be partisans on both sides.

Maureen Minehan’s “Ethereal Jetty” is a terrific photo. But so is “End of the Line,” Paul Moore’s black-and-white shot of an abandoned train. Does it matter that Minehan used a Canon 7D, a “real” — albeit digital — SLR, and that Moore simply whipped out his phone? Shouldn’t the proof be in the picture?

Brown, for her part, uses a variety of cameras in her artmaking, including several different Polaroids, a plastic toy camera, a pinhole camera and an assortment of more expensive professional models. Her iPhone is just one tool in her toolbox.

Some purists may find fault with iPhone photographs on technical grounds. The print of Maia Panos’s “Sophia by the Sea,” for example, looks great on my computer but grainy in the gallery.

But you know what? It doesn’t look any grainier than an antique photograph from the heyday of pictorialism, the early photography movement that celebrated hazy photos — precisely because the blurriness made them look more like paintings.

And maybe that’s the show’s real point: Pictures taken with an iPhone aren’t inherently better or worse — just different — than



ELODIE HUNTING

Elodie Hunting used an iPhone for “If She Would Be”; the photo is both portrait and metaphor for the hidden self.

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORK

All of the iPhoneographers in “Diverging Mediums” were invited to answer a list of questions, including whether they considered their pictures art. (They all said yes.) As for what they liked about the iPhone, many cited the device’s ubiquity. Because it’s your mobile phone, it’s always with you if the creative spirit should arise.

That spirit is key for artist Elodie Hunting, who writes that her enigmatic photo of a veiled woman, “If She Would Be,” came out of an uncontrollable urge. “It was the image itself that knocked on my door,” she writes. One of eight frames that Hunting shot with her iPhone — using natural light filtered through a window, just before sunset — the photo is both portrait and metaphor for the hidden self. It’s simultaneously erotic and chaste.

Like many of her peers, Hunting is a recent and passionate convert to iPhone as an artmaking tool. Although her husband is a photographer, she has had little formal training in the medium. Her picture is evidence that it’s not the hardware that matters as much as the eye behind the phone.

— Michael O’Sullivan

those taken with a camera. Maybe it makes sense to give the art form its own name, along with its own identity, its own standards and aesthetics.

It is, after all, its own thing.

In the end, “Diverging Mediums: Photography vs. iPhoneography” isn’t so much a contest as the beginning of a conversation.

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DIVERGING MEDIUMS: PHOTOGRAPHY VS. IPHONEOGRAPHY

Through May 31 at the Torpedo Factory Art Center, 105 N. Union St., Alexandria. 703-838-4565, Ext. 4.
www.torpedofactory.org/galleries/APS/DivergingMediums.htm.

Hours: Open daily 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Thursdays until 9 p.m.

Admission: Free.