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## The Camera's Secrets: Ricardo Valverde's Visionary Images

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Seeing a Ricardo Valverde photograph can easily lead one to consider what photography really is and what it means. We usually think photography captures the truth of a moment or a scene. Not true. It is actually a subversive medium. The invention of photography changed how we see the world. It disrupted history. In many ways, photography is the great-grandparent of today's proliferating digital technologies.

Photography is the use of an apparatus, a tool, a machine to take pictures and that fact forever transformed how humans see the world. Vilém Flusser, the philosopher of photography, wrote that what we think are faithful reproductions of reality are not faithful at all but are instead dependent on the tool: "The Gestalt of space-time surrounding the scene is prefigured for the photographer by the categories of his camera. These categories are an *a priori* for him. He must 'decide' within them: he must press the trigger."

The trigger is the thing. In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag wrote, "To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them that they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as a camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a subliminal murder - a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time."

I was reminded of the revolutionary and subliminally murderous role of photography when I visited an exhibition of Valverde's work at the Vincent Price Art Museum at East Los Angeles College called *Experimental Sights, 1973-1996*. Valverde worked in Los Angeles for most of his brief career. There is something of Vivian Maier, the street photographer, about him. Like Maier, his main daily work was not about photography per se. She was a nanny to the children of the wealthy and took her camera with her wherever she went and photographed people and scenes she encountered.

Valverde, as Ramón García explains in his excellent monograph on the artist, "Worked for the Department of Water and Power (DWP) in the city of Los Angeles--as a meter reader, in collections and delinquent accounts, and as a commercial service representative." As García notes, Valverde "managed to carry his camera with him as he walked on the job." And that job "permitted his surreptitious art making." Secret art.

In the catalogue for the show, we see that Figure 15, *Untitled*, ca. 1971, is of a scratched, burned, and hand-colored 35 mm color slide, which seems like two burnt out eyes as in gaze, perception, hole, opening, aperture, or the eyes of the storm. Was this an intentional early assessment by the artist of the visual vocabulary of photography -- that a photograph or the act of photographing can literally sear your vision?

Valverde was of his time and ahead of his time. In his documentary style photographs, he captured a Los Angeles that no longer exists. We see the streets he walked as a DWP worker. But, later, living through the after-effects of brain surgery for a tumor, he created mixed media works that stand the test of time and transcend their moment of creation. Today, 20 years later, when one looks at his *Urban Nightmare* pieces from 1994, there is a stark prescience of the 21st century's extreme dislocation and fragmentation. García calls them "surrealist disaster zones," and images "made ghostly by the abstraction of scratches and effects of paint on surface."

Sometimes a show about an artist arrives at the right moment. Seeing Valverde's work in 2014 seems to be one of those times. In *Sanctity, 1973/1991*, an eerie mixed media work, Valverde gives us life as shadowy presence and the show's curator Cecilia Fajardo-Hill writes that the artist violates photography's "sanctity." What happens to work that violates, that pulls the trigger? Is it a "soft murder" or perhaps a form of artistic suicide? As García says at the end of his monograph, "Does it become a phantom, a nebulous cipher of history that has taken on another life to become an image that is accomplished and realized, but is never to be finished?" Perhaps, yes, because life itself is never finished, never complete, always almost there but never arriving and then gone.

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