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INTERVIEW WITH PENELOPE UMBRICO: PLURALISTIC OROGENESIS

Portrait by Andrea Blanch

Andrea Blanch: How did your book come together?

Penelope Umbrico: I am working with a gallery in L.A. that is selling bits of it. The cover of my book actually has the documentation of the prints, so you can see the texture. Inside the book, I laid out the digital files. I made this digital collage of what the work would look like, if you printed it out and put it up on the wall. Aperture sells the addition that are in the book. The gallery is called Mark Moore. They're not a photo gallery. In the last five years, I've been getting grants in photography. That says more about photography than it says about me; the photo world is coming around, in a sense. It's understanding that digital media and photography and the impact of the internet is a big part of what photographers do now.

Do you think of yourself a photographer, curator or mixed media artist?

All of those things. I would say that I make art, and that my subject is often photography and the impact of photography on our lives.

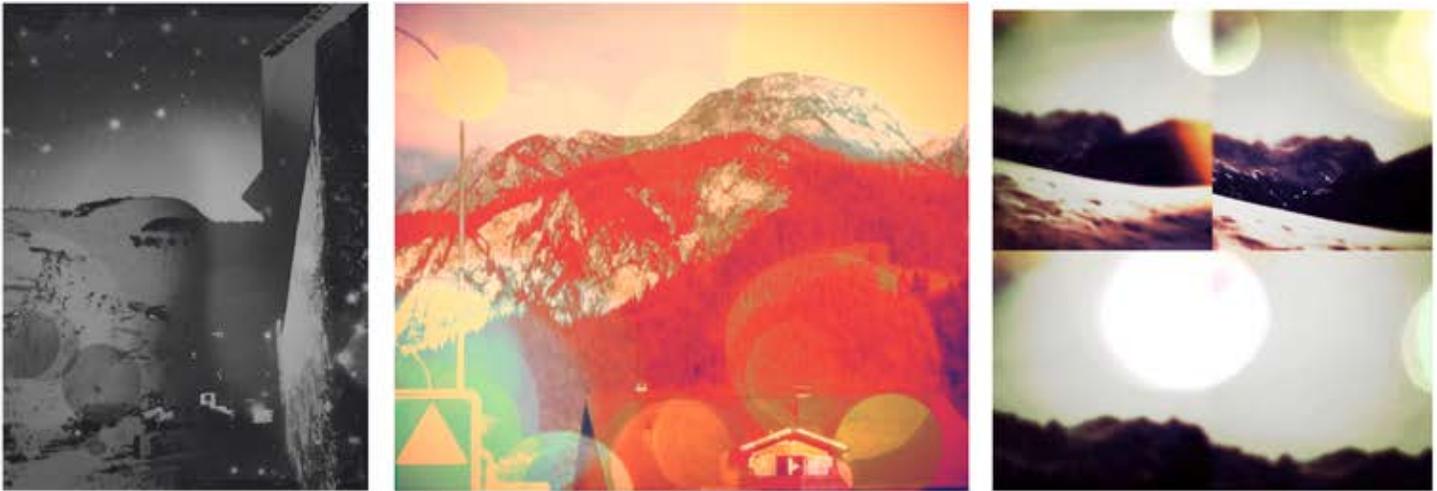
You teach at SVA. What are current trends with photography students?

There is no one direction that I can put my finger on. I teach undergrad and graduate. It was two years ago that I noticed I was more digitally adept than most of my undergrad students, in photography and Photoshop. This is a generation of kids who grew up so that their parents were taking photographs of them, and getting prints made, and then around their adolescence, stopped. Digital cameras were so ubiquitous that all the photographs became digital. A lot of them really felt this need for something material and were printing in the darkroom. The grad students didn't seem to have that same kind of need. It's the same as the discussion around black and white photography, where five years ago, you had to have a reason. This medium has become truly pluralistic.

I like that you don't have to always explain your techniques.

I always feel like I have to explain why. I am in the middle of this project that I started last year, called Mountains Moving. I've been doing work with Aperture because I'm really intrigued by a dialogue with an institution that is so much a part of the history of photography, and part of the canon. They have this series called The Masters of Photography.

They asked ten artists last year, for their 60th anniversary, to work with, or make an intervention into one of their books. I chose the whole entire series. I would start a dialogue between the master and the contemporary relationship of the master to photography now. I decided that the master is the most stable form of a photographer and the mountain is the most stable object that is photographed. They all happened to be male photographers. There was this dialogue between male and female, because I'm a woman, and I'm re-photographing these male photographs of mountains. I used about 530 filters, downloaded about twenty-seven camera apps, found fifteen mountains, and I generated about 6,000 images. Sometimes they'd be upside-down, and they'd be sideways. I loved that, if it's the most stable, it's certainly not anymore. I called it Mountains Moving because it's like they're moving distance and time. We hung eighty-seven next to the vintage prints, to make this relationship between the singularity of the original vintage print, and the multiplicity of my project.



Left: A Proposal and Two Trades (Winfried-Heininger), all images from Mountains, Moving: of Swiss Alps and the Sound of Music, 2013-2014, Center: A Proposal and Two Trades (Patrick Herschdorfer), 2013-2014, Right: A Proposal and Two Trades (Peter Mathis), 2013-2014

Do you think you teach students to see, or think?

Both. You can't see unless you're thinking, and can't think unless you're seeing. Do you find consumerism and today's visual dialogue to be linked? For sure, especially in terms of how we make images with cameras, filters and app. Then we put them online. When you're so reliant on corporations and institutions, to build the things that we're seeing with, you can't say that it's democratized. It's actually tyrannical. That's all connected to consumerism.

What relationship do you hope viewers have with your work?

I want people to be seduced by the work, and realize that their seduction points to something in themselves, and ask them to question that thing. I don't think I set out to do that, but that's what I always do. I'm equally seduced by the things that I work with.

Since this issue's about fantasy, what's your personal or latest fantasy?

World peace, no borders-people could travel, and not worry going through security lines and getting to the airport two hours ahead and with passports. That's the moment where the general and personal collide. It's the one moment in public space where your body is subjected to stuff in public, that's personal. There's something really disturbing about it.

Alright, I was thinking something else . . .
Like sex or something?

No, I didn't want any sex, no.
Let's see, I was lying in bed last night