Esoteric means of picture making within an artistic realm

We have here an abstract dark blue image. It could be a landscape of a quarry, shot from a plane or on the contrary, speaking on a nanoscale, it could be the view of some unknown surface as seen through the lens of a microscope. It is neither of these two suppositions but rather; it is a Polaroid of 24k gold leaf, whereby the perceived cobalt color is in fact gold: photographed in a state of reflecting its direct surroundings. The photo has been shot using a macro lens so as to magnify the very surface structure of the gold leaf thereby completely altering its perception.

Why use Polaroid film, and especially the unusually large format of 10 x 8 inch (25 x 20 cm) to photograph gold leaf? For nowadays, Polaroid photography is an outdated and esoteric process for picture making and yet, the autonomously constructed images that it produces still remain a mysterious procedure; a chemical process which immediately transpires without the interference of a human hand. Ulrik Heltoft, the artist who made the photograph, is interested in prefabricated structures as the basis for image productions. Exploiting such structures he creates strange images containing concealed meanings.

Only through the title, 24K, do we deduce that it is gold. Gold, one of the most durable metals, is represented in this work through a medium whose sustainability has a poor reputation. Unlike its resistant subject, the image will disappear over time when shown in daylight. But much like its photographed subject, the 10 x 8 inch format film is also quite valuable since it is no longer produced and its quantities are diminishing. It is because of this rareness that a Polaroid film of this format is worth as much as the gold that it represents. This picture of gold leaf is therefore a strange image: a metaphor as well as a paradox.

One of the pioneers of photography William Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1877) used this strategy of metaphor and paradox not only to show in his prints the technical implications of his inventions but also demonstrate cultural and philosophical meaning. As Geoffrey Batchen has suggested, all of
Talbot’s pictures have metaphorical meaning. In 1839 Talbot chose lace, an object strewn with voids, to use as the subject of the photo that demonstrated his invention of the negative-positive procedure, which makes reproductions, called ‘positives’, from the same negative. In theory the picture can be mass-produced to an endless amount of ‘positives’. Yet, with this process the positive presented black lace threads instead of white, which for Talbot was a weird result. Also in this same period, the introduction of Jacquard cards in England improved the mass manufacturing of lace. These punched cards were in fact the ‘zero’s and one’s’ for steering the looms and thus the production of lace was ‘computerized’ for the luxury market. As ideas, these two inventions, ‘positive-negative’ and ‘punch cards’, are conceptually very close to each other and come together in this picture of lace.

Ulrik Heltoft (DK, 1973) is an expert in all kinds of specialist technologies that use film and photography. His collection includes NASA equipment, rare slide projectors and special monitors, as well as professional scanning and printing facilities. His art goes beyond a fetishist desire of using esoteric instruments and valuable objects. His interest lies in the new possibilities that arise when scientific and mechanical processes are applied within an artistic aim.

Harold (Doc) Edgerton (1903-1990), an engineer by profession, became famous in the fifties for his pictures documenting phenomena which occurred too fast for the naked human eye to see. He did this by using high-speed cameras and stroboscopic lighting so as to capture for example, the splash of a milk drop at the instant it momentarily takes on the form of a crown. This is a literal translation, an illustration, of his inventions. An older, more poetic example is that of the very moment a football player’s foot strikes, and even penetrates the ball upon kicking. There’s also the delicate ‘Mrs. Laurence Webster with her Hummingbirds’ that catches the hovering creatures in a rare moment of brief motionlessness. As a viewer, these documented moments belonging to the everyday are more accessible to identify oneself with.

Heltoft plays a subtle game, finding new exemplary combinations of technique and object, where the outcome of his experiments is open for the imagination to delve into the strange and unexpected as
with his series of icecap photographs entitled ‘white-outs’, realized with the original, mythic Hasselblad 70 mm lunar surface camera. In the skillfulness of the artist lies the promise to fulfil the viewer’s desire for perfection.

The artist’s strategy and procedure for picture making seems objective and rational but it is also nonsense – a ridiculous treat. Following rules as strictly as possible, the brave protagonists in his work appear, in a rather humorous way, pathetic. In the short film Zero-Sum-Gain, a man seems to search for something missing from his pocket; perhaps a coin or maybe gold. In the end only pocket dust is found.

---

ii Ibid, page 167-169 gives an interesting account of the experimental use of lace for photogenic drawings by Talbot, the introduction of Jacquard cards and the adoption of these cards by Charles Babage for the plan for the Analytical Engine.