



### About this Teaching Resource:

This packet features artwork from *Dan Estabrook: Wunderkammer* which was featured at the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art at the College of Charleston from May 14 – July 17, 2021. This packet is intended as a tool to help you look at art with your children/students. You can prepare for your inquiry-based discussions by reviewing the background information provided. Then use the Questions for Viewing below and artwork reproductions to look closely, think critically, and respond to the art together. Extend your investigations with one or more of the suggested activity ideas. In general, questions for younger audiences are listed first followed by progressively more complex ideas. Feel free to adapt the suggested activities according to the age group you are working with. We encourage you to check out the [Halsey Institute's blog](#) for articles related to the show, as well as interviews with some of the artists.

Share your teaching stories with us! If you use these materials, let us know by email at [halsey@cofc.edu](mailto:halsey@cofc.edu)

## About the Exhibition:

The work of Dan Estabrook oscillates between image and object and back again. Using antiquated forms of photography, such as salt prints and tintypes, Estabrook examines the objecthood of photography and its ability to represent the truth. He often combines multiple tintypes or adds metal to his images, further commenting on photography's connection to reality. His sculptural works become recreations of his photos, further blurring the line between image and object. Interested in the studio as a site for fabrication, Estabrook's sleight of hand in creating still life tableaus asks viewers to reconsider why things appear as they seem.

Dan Estabrook was born and raised in Boston, where he studied art at city schools and the Museum of Fine Arts. He discovered photography in his teens through the underground magazines of the punk-rock and skateboarding cultures of the 1980s. As an undergraduate at Harvard, he began studying alternative photographic processes with Christopher James. In 1993, after receiving an MFA from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Estabrook continued working and teaching in Illinois, Boston, and Florida, eventually settling in Brooklyn, New York.

Estabrook has continued to make contemporary art using the photographic techniques and processes of the nineteenth century, with forays into sculpture, painting, drawing, and other works on paper. He has exhibited widely and has received several awards, including an Artist's Fellowship from the National Endowment of the Arts in 1994. A documentary on Estabrook and his work was produced in 2009 for Anthropy Arts' Photographers Series.

## Curator's Essay:

### ***The Real Lives of Images: Permanence and Whimsy in the Art of Dan Estabrook***

By Bryan Granger, Halsey Institute director of exhibitions and public programs

The work of Dan Estabrook oscillates between image and object and back again. Using antiquated forms of photography, such as salt prints and tintypes, Estabrook examines the objecthood of photography and its ability to represent the truth. He often combines multiple tintypes or adds metal to his images, further commenting on photography's connection to reality. His sculptural works become recreations of his photos, further blurring the line between image and object. Interested in the artist's studio as a site for fabrication, Estabrook's sleight of hand in creating still life tableaus asks viewers to reconsider why things appear as they seem.

Estabrook's interest in photography stems in part due to the medium's relationship with physical objecthood. In the earliest days of photography, images were created directly on physical surfaces such as tin, copper, or glass. In this sense the photograph existed as a physical object, much like an oil painting on a canvas. Each of these antique photographic methods created a unique image—one that could not be replicated like a photograph from a negative or even a digital image. Conceptually, the earliest photographs were much unlike their contemporary counterparts.

This distance between antique and contemporary photographic methods forms a basis for exploration in Estabrook's work. In *The Mirror*, 2018, Estabrook uses a cut tintype, featuring an image of a mirror being held by two hands appearing from off frame. For the surface of the mirror, the artist has placed a piece of silver-plated copper, which not only represents the mirror but functions as one. With this piece of silver-plated copper, Estabrook nods to one of the earliest photographic technologies, the daguerreotype, which used the same material for its surfaces. Along with the mirror surface, the artist has included two 1869 3-cent pennies, relics made of metal from the age of the daguerreotype, much

like the photographic works themselves. The combination of these objects—a tintype, a mirror, and coins—further comments on photography’s connection to the physical world.

In the earliest days of photography, such specialized processes initially required photographs to be produced in a studio, and Estabrook’s work explores the role of the studio in terms of a site for production and manipulation. In his series *Platonic Solids*, 2020, the artist endeavors to represent vital physical elements through sculpture and photography. Taking its name from a group of regular polyhedrons theorized by Plato, which correspond to naturally occurring crystalline structures found in physical substances, the series presents a studio stage set for each photograph<sup>1</sup>. Each of the six works in the series features a different polyhedron corresponding to its eponymous natural substance, and the sculpture is flanked by relevant props, such as burnt charcoal for fire and clay for earth. The repetitive use of the stage setup—along with varied background drapery—points to the use of the studio in the history of photography. With his *Platonic Solids* series, Estabrook uses sleight of hand, allowing these onerous photographic methods to explore the natural world, despite being confined to a studio.

Estabrook’s forays into sculpture echo this conceptual exploration of photography. With *To Reach You, Two*, 2015, plaster cast hands on found stands in their own vitrines are connected by a long strand of hair. The hair serves to break the isolated nature of the sculptures in their vitrines. Typically, sculptures and other anthropological artifacts on view in a museum are confined to their cases; here, Estabrook connects the two objects, giving them life outside their usual environments.

Estabrook’s work serves as an exploration of how works of art exist in the physical world, and how artists can manipulate them to make them appear different than what they represent. His use of antique photographic techniques reconnects the medium to the natural world, and it helps remind us that the plethora of images that bombard us each and every day are reproductions—either via a matrix of digital pixels or a film negative. His use of props and references to the studio also illuminate photography’s beginnings, allowing us to realize how the medium has drastically changed since its inception.

## NOTES

1. Platonic Solids, as theorized by the philosopher, consist of three-dimensional volumes whose faces are not only identical, but are regular, meaning that all their sides are of equal length and all angles are also identical (for instance, an equilateral triangle). Note that Estabrook’s *Non-Platonic Solid* features a three-dimensional volume whose constituent faces are not regular. Unlike its Platonic counterparts, it stands alone on the wooden studio table.

## Questions for Viewing:

Take time to look through the entire exhibition slowly. Close your eyes and describe the artwork from memory. Why did you remember what you remembered? Why did you forget what you forgot? How would you describe this artwork to someone who has never seen it?

When you look around the exhibition, you will notice that there is more than photography on display. The other objects are props Dan Estabrook used in past photographs he has made. Why do you think he wanted to display these as well? Do you think the other objects are sculptures AND photo props?

Look at *The Mirror* - What part of the image is a tintype photograph and what part is not? How can you tell? What is the relationship between the photograph and its other material? How does the non-tintype material change the photograph?

Look at *Killing A Rabbit* - Keeping the title of the piece in mind what do you believe the cut out is meant to represent? Why do you think Dan Estabrook chose to create negative space here? Would you describe this image as a three dimensional or two-dimensional image? Why?

Look at *A Head of Venus* - Which area of this piece would you classify as representing reality? Which area would you declare is not representing reality? How do these two elements interact with each other? Why?

**Reproductions of the artworks in this section have been included at the end of the packet. You can also view the pieces online by [clicking here!](#)**

## Suggested Activities:

### Portrait Activity

- Gather random materials around the house that you would like to photograph
- Arrange your materials in a way that looks like a human form, whether that be a face or body. Bottle caps can become eyes, rocks you have collected on hikes can become arms, and your bedside lip balm tube can become a mouth.
- Photograph your materials with a mobile phone to look like a portrait. Does it look like you?
- Now edit your image. You can do this with the editing features on your phone, or if you have social media photo editing apps, use those! If not, move the objects around and then take another photograph. You can even use the pen/marker feature of your phone to add further details.
- Post the image to your social media or use it as your new profile picture. You can also print a copy of your portrait!

### Miscellaneous Interactions

- Find 4-5 miscellaneous objects which have no connections in their purpose or function. Your items should have some sort of motion, function, or plasticity.
- Organize these objects in a way where their functions interact with each other
- Photograph your compilation of these objects.
- Rearrange objects into another random set of interactions.
- Photograph your new compilation of these objects
- Compare your two photographs. Notice how the reality of functionality can change with what you apply it to. How randomness becomes order through imagination.

### Mirror Activity

- Find a mirror that is easily maneuvered.
- Take your mirror outside and lay it in the grass so that the reflective side is facing the sky
- Take a picture
- Notice how your photograph projects two realities simultaneously. Grounded vs. baseless, rooted vs. wavering, solid vs. gas. How are they alike? How are they different? How does their interaction create room for imagination?
- Move your mirror to another spot. Somewhere where the reflection will look drastically different than what's behind the frame/mirror.
- Take another picture
- Notice how your photograph projects two realities simultaneously. Grounded vs. baseless, rooted vs. wavering, solid vs. gas. How are they alike? How are they different? How does their interaction create room for imagination?

## Mad Lib Story

Instructions: Walk around the gallery and look at one piece at a time. With each piece choose a word that corresponds with the blanks in the mad lib below. Do this until all of the blanks in your mad lib are complete. Then, read your mad lib out loud.

Dan Estabrook entered a/an (adjective) reality. In this reality he saw all sorts of (adjective) objects. He couldn't believe his eyes, so he began to photograph them. He looked into one of his photographs and (past tense verb) into it. When he did, he opened a portal to a new reality. In it was a/an (adjective) sculpture a few feet away from him. He photographed it and when he looked at the photograph, he noticed a/an (object) coming out of it. He (past tense verb) the (the previous object) out of the sculpture. When it fell to the ground it made an enormous (onomatopoeia). From the sound the reality shook and began to fall apart. When the ruckus began, Estabrook dropped his camera causing it to take a picture with flash. CLICK. All that was left was a/an (adjective) photograph laying on the ground. In that photograph was a/an (past tense verb) Dan Estabrook next to a (adjective) sculpture.

## Related Readings available through our partners at the Charleston County Public Library:

*Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs* by Sally Mann

*Miss Peregrine's Children* series by Ransome Riggs

*Austerlitz* by W. G. Sebald

*Woolgathering* by Patti Smith

*On Photography* by Susan Sontag

*Hoax: A History of Deception: 5,000 Years of Fakes, Forgeries, and Fallacies* by Ian Tattersall and Peter Nevraumont

*Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder: Pronged Ants, Horned Humans, Mice on Toast, and Other Marvels of Jurassic Technology* by Lawrence Weschler



## Related Readings that are available through the Hoopla Application (browser and smartphone) with Charleston County Public Library:

*Miss Peregrine's Children* series by Ransome Riggs

*On Photography* by Susan Sontag

## Related Readings available through the College of Charleston's Addlestone Library and PASCAL:

### Books

*Seizing the light: a social & aesthetic history of photography* by Robert Hirsch

*World history of photography* by Naomi Rosenblum

*Miracle of Analogy: Or the History of Photography, Part 1* by Kaja Silverman

*100 ideas that changed photography* by Mary Warner Marien

*Film Photography Handbook* by Monika Andrae and Chris Marquardt

*Photographic Possibilities: The Expressive Use of Concepts, Ideas, Materials, and Processes* by Robert Hirsch

*Salted Paper Printing: A Step-by-Step Manual* by Christina Z. Anderson

*Transformational imagemaking: Handmade Photography Since 1960* by Robert Hirsch

*Photography: beyond technique: essays from F295 on the informed use of alternative and historical photographic processes*, conference proceeding  
*Primitive Photography: A Guide to Making Cameras, Lenses, and Calotypes* by Alan Greene  
*Photography and the arts: essays on nineteenth-century practices and debates*, conference proceeding  
*The American tintype* by Floyd Reinhart  
*The scenic daguerreotype: romanticism and early photography* by John Wood  
*American and the daguerreotype* by John Wood  
*The print before photography: an introduction to European printmaking, 1550-1820* by Antony Griffiths  
*Faking it: manipulated photography before Photoshop* by Mia Fineman  
*Feeling photography* by Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu  
*Cyanotype: the blueprints in contemporary practice* by Christina Z. Anderson  
*The museum of illusions: optical tricks in art* by Céline Delavaux  
*Masters of deception: Escher, Dali & the artists of optical illusion* by Al Seckel  
*Visual Deception: From Camo to Cameron* by Paul Martin Lester and Marjorie Yambor  
*New Dimensions in Photo Process: A Step-by-Step Manual for Alternative Techniques* by Laura Blacklow  
*Photographic Object 1970*

## **Articles**

["Masters of the Tactile" Columbia, a magazine of poetry and prose.](#) 2005  
["Photographic Manipulation and Photographic Deception" Aisthesis. Batori](#) 2018  
["Species of the Kinetic Sculpture" Idil: sanat ve dil dergisi / Ozer](#) 2017  
["Anamorphic Experiences in 3D Space: Shadows, Projections and Other Optical Illusions" Nexus network journal / Symeonidou](#) 2016

## Artwork Images:

Reproduced below are images of the artworks referenced in the “Questions for Viewing” section. You can view more images of the pieces on the *Wunderkammer* exhibition page of our website by [clicking here!](#)



*The Mirror*, 2018  
Cut tintype, silver-plated brass, and two 1869 3-cent nickels  
19" x 15" (framed approx. 24" x 20")



*Killing a Rabbit*, 2019  
Cut totypes  
14" x 17" (framed approx. 20" x 24")





*A Head of Venus*, 2012  
Gum bichromate with watercolor and gouache  
15" x 12" (framed approx. 18" x 15")