

Janelle Lynch: Endless Forms Most Beautiful

In its processes and concepts, photography abounds in opposites: negative and positive, digital and analogue, micro and macro, shadow and light. Following this pattern of polarities, let me posit that there are broadly two pathways in photography. The first locates outer circumstances, reporting on the world as interpreted through the precision of the lens. It pivots on a moment and seeks information, detail and proof. The second journeys towards inner conditions, translating elements of the world to represent the artist's perception, often through unconventional or experimental techniques. It traces ongoing cycles and gravitates towards the intangible, illusive and unseen. Janelle Lynch has trodden this second visionary pathway in a career spanning twenty-five years. Her practice embraces a form of close looking that is cumulative, enriching and transformative. The visual elegance of her images is equalled by the expressive presence of the artist that we sense behind them.

Lynch is best known for her landscape photographs, using a large format camera, producing 8x10-inch negatives, to produce colour images with an immersive and meditative quality. She used these methods to create a previous series, *Another Way of Looking at Love*, that was shortlisted in 2019 for the Prix Pictet, the award for photography and sustainability, and exhibited by the Victoria and Albert Museum. Six prints from this series were later acquired for the museum's permanent collection. In this work, the intricate forms of the natural world act as metaphor to consider the emotional, social and environmental consequences of disconnection – and simultaneously, our inherent need for connection. Lynch has continued and extended these themes into her present series, *Endless Forms Most Beautiful*. But in addition, she has introduced elements that extend her practice, exploring 'cameraless' photogram techniques using cyanotype paper, alongside crafted black and white prints. These techniques are chosen by the artist not only for their beauty; but because they also broaden the possibilities of expression.

The cyanotype process was invented by the astronomer Sir John Herschel in 1842. But it is the botanist and pioneering photographer Anna Atkins – who created stunning botanical images throughout the 1840s and 50s – who has become its touchstone practitioner. The process uses paper coated with a light-sensitive solution produced with ferric salts. To make a print, without using a camera or a negative, an object is placed directly onto dry paper and exposed to sunlight for some minutes. The image is fixed by washing the paper in water. It appears as a white negative silhouette on a blue (cyan) coloured background. The simplicity of this process belies its magical and defamiliarizing effects.

In her work, Lynch channels photography's early experimental history. She harnesses the cyanotype and photogram's visual qualities with a contemporary edge and does so with particular formal elegance. To an extent, the artist must relinquish some control and work more intuitively with this process, for much is open to chance and only becomes fully visible once the paper is developed. Since the images are made in direct contact with objects, their scale remains one-to-one. In *Endless Forms Most Beautiful*, recognizable traces of botanical and bodily shapes co-exist with fantastical impressions. New and abstracted forms are generated by the process, through overlapping, movement during exposure, or by light passing through or around objects. Human, plant and animal forms are conflated by their similar, sensuous shapes. In this silent, still, floating or submerged world, something animate is implied by the torsion of lines and a light that seems to emanate from the paper. As with X-rays, Lynch's cyanotypes appear to give insight into the hidden, inner workings of life. Cyanotype photograms are evidential marks that are simultaneously mysterious echoes of a

moment. Each print is unique, a collaborative dance of time, light, touch, paper, chemistry, water, organic objects – and the body, mind and presence of their maker.

Lynch's camera-made black and white images in this series, each titled *Witness*, speak of the different perceptions and markings of time as it is collapsed into one image: a web caught in the light against trees; a driftwood sculpture on windswept dunes; gems of dew clustered on grasses. Her titles for the cyanotypes – such as *Metamorphosis*; *Sprite*; *Emergence*; *Remains*; *Beyond* – carry mythological and alchemical associations. Her works inhabit the Romantic tradition, in which we half-perceive and half-create the world through our own senses. They also prompt questions about the limits of photography to record and convey experience. How might a photographer hope to capture the invisible? The answer is perhaps through what is implied rather than what is fixed. Through the photograph as a record of an attempt rather than a conclusive result. And, in Lynch's case, through a patient, attentive, intuitive immersion in nature. Through emblems, signs and circling round the centre of meaning. The art lives amid the ambiguities.

Martin Barnes
Senior Curator, Photography
Victoria and Albert Museum