

BROOKLYN RAIL

“Sara VanDerBeek with Toby Kamps,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, May 2023

Art | In Conversation

Sara VanDerBeek with Toby Kamps



Portrait of Sara VanDerBeek. Pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui

At the heart of Sara VanDerBeek’s two-dimensional and installation-based work is a fascination with photography’s power as a form of mediation—between past and present, original and reproduction, and perception and thought. Her latest exhibition *Lace Interlace* at The Approach in London draws on her research into the work of early British photographers Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–79) and Isabel Agnes Cowper (1826–1911) at that city’s Victoria and Albert Museum. Cowper was the museum’s first female in-house photographer, creating its famous “guard books” featuring comprehensive collections of everything in the collection and was known for her skill in documenting lacework, which was a dying art at the onset of the industrial revolution. Cameron was famous for her soft-focus, romantic portraits of women, including Julia Jackson Stephen, mother of writer Virginia Woolf and painter Vanessa Bell.

ON VIEW

The Approach

Lace Interlace

April 21 – May 27, 2023

London

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Using digital, film, and mobile-phone cameras, as well as new ultraviolet-light printing technologies, VanDerBeek creates wall-mounted and freestanding photographic works that synthesize the technological and thematic visions of these two pioneering photographers. Mounted in frames and mats recalling both Victorian and museum storage racks, the layered, intricate images, manipulated and straight, reward slow, close study. In them, it is possible to connect photography's earliest days to our current, screen-based era.

The Garden, a pendant exhibition organized by VanDerBeek, features her own work alongside that of three recently deceased artists whom she counts as inspirations. The theme of the garden, as a space for both reflection and creation, unites a photograph by Sarah Charlesworth, a video by Shigeeko Kubota, and a drawing by Rosemary Mayer.



Installation view: Sara VanDerBeek: *Lace Interlace*, The Approach, London, 2023. Courtesy the artist and The Approach, London. Photo: Michael Brzezinski.

Toby Kamps (Rail): What do you say to people when they ask you what you do as an artist and as a photographer?

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Sara VanDerBeek: I have increasingly begun to describe myself as an intermedia artist. In my most recent works I've been exploring bridging still and moving images, installation practices and design. My new exhibition *Lace Interlace* at The Approach, in London, combines freestanding sculptural components that incorporate photographic works and wall-based photographic assemblages that reference architecture, design, and both analog and digital interfaces. My practice is still very much centered around photographic capture and a consideration of photography's role in collective perception, memory, and knowledge. I find the way that photography collapses space, time, and experience into an image to be fascinatingly complex and in need of further research and discourse given its increasingly significant role in our lives.

Rail: How would you describe the atmosphere you create in your exhibitions, which are really installations in and of themselves and often contain sculptural forms, freestanding two-sided images and, occasionally, moving elements?

VanDerBeek: I believe the physical experience of viewing art is very important. This gets complicated with photography because it is so screen-based. The elasticity and power of the photo-based image is incredible.

I'm accustomed to thinking about an image's production in relation to my original experience of its creation and that is giving way to a more combinatorial approach in which I'm creating a pictorial space independent from any sense of original scale, color, or space. Color is important for me. It can create a tone or atmosphere that can unify sometimes disconnected images. My color is influenced by the blue light of screens and the transitional light of dusk, a transformational time in between day and night when shadows turn blue and the remaining light is golden or pink. Other colors and tones come from working a lot with the found light where I'm photographing during the initial research process. That can be daylight, or, the existing lights at a site such as various museum settings that have a mixture of daylight and artificial, display light. This combination can create an intermix of colors that I manipulate during the printing process in collaboration with Julie Pochron, of Pochron Studios, an incredible artist and master colorist.

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Rail: Can you talk about your journey to becoming an intermedia artist and how that might connect to your family's artistic heritage? Your father, Stan VanDerBeek, was an important experimental filmmaker and multimedia artist; he coined the term "expanded cinema." Your brother Johannes is an artist.

VanDerBeek: I feel grateful and privileged to come from a family that respects art, as a professional endeavor, and one that also believes being an artist comes with a civic responsibility. I also need to emphasize my mother, Louise VanDerBeek's role in my development as an artist because, after my father died when I was seven, my mother, along with his first wife Johanna, was a great carrier of his artistic legacy. My mother was the one that encouraged me to pursue creative endeavors at a young age, in dance and art, and to go to Cooper Union, where I studied and where my father and my brother Johannes also studied.

Rail: Can you talk about the evolution of your new work, *Lace Interlace*?

VanDerBeek: *Lace Interlace* builds off my recent series "Women & Museums" and the kinetic works that I've been exhibiting recently. The kinetic works very much connect to an interest in the ephemerality of dance and performance as an embodied experience. The relationship of performance to the camera's record of it is of particular interest. I am continually working through how that can be reimagined and realized via the creation of works that operate as both form, image and installation. *Lace Interlace* also reaches back to ideas in some of my first works in which I was using artifacts from my family home and images from my family's archive. These new works strive to interweave both the personal and the historical, the institutional, and the ephemeral.

During the development of this new work, I lost my mother. This experience brought forward many older memories of navigating the loss of my father and other important people in my life as a child and younger adult. In this it brought back a consideration of the complex interrelationship of photography and memory and the memorial use of photographic images. Given the collective loss of life during this ongoing pandemic, I have also been thinking about collective memory and its preservation in all its forms.

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Installation view: Sara VanDerBeek: *Women & Museums*, Metro Pictures, New York, 2019. Courtesy Metro Pictures. Photo: Genevieve Hansen.

Rail: Was your mother an artist?

VanDerBeek: She was. She also had progressive MS and was a single mother of young children after my father died, so she returned to school and pursued a Master's degree in Instructional system design—early online education. Additionally, she began to lose the ability to live independently, becoming wheelchair-bound in her fifties.

It's challenging at times for me to discuss this significant personal loss but I feel it's important to be open about grief and its role in my work. In the end, though, my new work as it evolves is centering around women, some known and many unknown and their ongoing engagements with emergent technologies from the beginnings of the modern period and on to now.

I feel we're in a situation parallel to the Victorians—a moment in which we're grappling with technology's increasing role within our lives, yet also completely enraptured and influenced by it. The body and the machine are more and more intertwined. And when I think about the body and the machine, I think about my mother, who needed the support of machines to

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live and towards the end of her life to stay alive. My sense of the cyborg as a meeting of the body and the machine shifted during my experience of her hospice, from the theoretical remove of art school discussions to a poignant and very personal experience of both appreciation and pathos.

Rail: You've said that you feel an ethical responsibility in your work with the photographic images, moving and still, especially in our screen-based era. And I wonder if you could also trace that back to your mother and father?

VanDerBeek: Yes, it came from my family. It came from our discussions about the responsibilities of the artist. My father very much believed in creating a new, shared visual non-verbal language. That's a significant part of the "Cultural Intercom," which is his manifesto connected to his *Movie-Drome*. It reflected his belief in the importance of artists engaging with technology and with the public, creating a new space for feedback. Today, questions of the ethics of the image continually come up for me, especially when I am dealing with images of the body, which I've begun to use again after working with abstraction for several years. The ethics of image usage of other artist's works in my work is also something I am returning to with this new work.

Rail: Early on, you made sculptures in order to photograph them, and then you would dismantle or reconfigure them and re-use them or throw them away. These were architectural shapes or environments that later started to become actual physical presences in your installations. More recently, you've been photographing works of art from antiquity, from non-Western cultures, or from anonymous or underrecognized makers, such as avant-garde ceramics. Can you talk about that arc from shooting your own creations to something like a Cycladic figurine from four thousand years ago?

VanDerBeek: I returned to looking at these figurative works of art and at encyclopedic museum collections as a form of communion—both with these objects from the past and with the public. Museums are a kind of interstitial space. My relationship with something like a Cycladic figure, which I photographed at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford for my "Women & Museums" series, tries to account for thousands of years of difference and distance. What I think is quite interesting about that example, is that these types of figurines were often depicted in early stages of pregnancy, and they were often buried lying down. But in museums they're always displayed standing up. They were originally polychrome; they're now presented as

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minimal, pristine objects removed from their spiritual use, their original polychromy, and their burial sites. All of these questions around the complicated nature of women's societal roles, both as a symbol and as a shared body, came about in my research for "Women & Museums."

Additionally, "Women & Museums" was informed by the experience of having my child, Lee, and wanting to return to figurative work after experiencing a radical change in my relationship to my own body. I understood and continue to understand that I did not have primary experience with these ancient cultures, nor with the more contemporary indigenous North American, Asian, and African cultures whose artifacts I am also picturing in these works. I worked through a lot of my concerns about how to capture and depict these objects with curators and staff, in particular Juan Lucero, at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts where I initially created and presented "Women & Museums." I wanted to try to present the multiplicity of female experiences, which is why I included objects from different times and cultures. When possible, I also try to speak to the museum site and the way in which these objects were collected, housed, and displayed. I tried to bring forward, in the image's toning and composition, a sense that my compositions are an interpretation and a very personal and subjective view.

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Sara VanDerBeek, *Lace Interlace V*, 2023. UV Print on Plexiglas, Dye Sublimation Print mounted on Aluminium, Valchromat, Zinc Plated Steel. Diptych. Overall dimensions: 75 x 55 15/16 x 1 3/4 inches. Each screen: 75 x 27 x 1 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and The Approach, London. Photo: Michael Brzezinski.

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Rail: It sounds like you're presenting a counterpoint to the museum gaze, which can be anonymizing, idealizing, or alienating. Do you think about the male gaze?

VanDerBeek: Not exactly, yet somehow I do connect the idea of "society" to a gendered view. But I don't know if I think about it in such binary terms. It's amorphous and changes over time. I do bring up gender and my sense of my own gender as a woman all the time. With the "Roman Woman" series that I showed in San Francisco at Altman Siegel, I began to explore the role of color in ancient sculpture. I pushed some of the colors in some of my images, based on certain fragments of pink and blue pigments that had remained on the original sculptures. Other images, I pushed the tones toward hot pinks and colors that I considered a nineties Day-Glo Body Glove palette. They were reminiscent of that moment in my life when I first began to feel that gaze on myself. When I began to be body-conscious and aware that my so-called worth as a member of this patriarchal society was being evaluated in relationship to how I looked as much as what I achieved or created. That was also when I began to experiment with makeup—with self-idealization and adornment. In 2020 and 2021 I used makeup and paint in some of my pieces to adorn and disrupt images of ancient female sculptures. Makeup is an ancient practice and one that was once shared amongst all. I am fascinated with the contemporary rise of beauty and makeup as a means for expression and self-realization during a time of great disassociation with our bodies due to technology.

Adornment in art and architecture became artifice and decoration in the twentieth century and was often denigrated and feminized as a lesser form of art. I'm happy that movements such as Pattern & Decoration and publications like *Heresies* are being made more and more accessible via exhibitions and the internet. They were very impactful during my research for this new work. Beauty is important to me as a means of engagement and resolution to a work but I know in my want for my work to be beautiful there is also an innate recognition of the want for a larger audience to engage with it. It's reciprocal, this social and individual gaze.

Rail: So some of your work is a manifestation of a sense memory.

VanDerBeek: Yes.

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Sara VanDerBeek, *Lace Interlace V*, (Detail) 2023. UV Print on Plexiglas, Dye Sublimation Print mounted on Aluminium, Valchromat, Zinc Plated Steel. Diptych. 75 x 55 15/16 x 1 3/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and The Approach, London. Photo: Michael Brzezinski.

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Rail: I know that you were very close with Sarah Charlesworth and that she and the Pictures Generation artists were big influences for you. Can you talk about that?

VanDerBeek: Sarah is who I always think about when discussing beauty! I was just reading a book about Sarah this morning as preparation for writing about her work in *The Garden* exhibition that I organized to be presented concurrently with *Lace Interlace* at The Approach in their Annexe gallery. The book consists of forty different individuals creating a collective oral biography of Sarah, but it also has her voice in it. She speaks about her conversations with the photographer Lisette Model and the feedback she got from her when she was beginning to develop her own practice. I realized that she mentored me in a similar way, and I'm very grateful for it. I also always had the sense that Sarah was both of the Pictures Generation but then also outside it. She went on from doing her well-known "Objects of Desire" series to developing myriad different ways of working with photography. I really appreciated the fact that she was constantly searching for new ways of working, never staying in the same mode.

Rail: I see a similar restless energy in your work because you're always roving for ideas and adapting and changing things. Is that Sarah Charlesworth's legacy in your work?

VanDerBeek: Well, for me, I think it's less restlessness and more curiosity. Sarah would always talk about throwing ideas up against the wall—considering them deeply and then wanting to follow them through. The other thing I take—as something I aspire to—from Sarah is her generosity to those around her. I felt that in her work too. I think she was about using beauty effectively, and created images that were optically alluring or captivating, or visually vibrant and active, to bring the viewer in, to allow space for them to wonder and meditate on what this image was doing to them and how this act of picturing something impacts a viewer consciously and subconsciously.

Rail: Let's talk about the concept of an archive. You have gone around the world photographing works in the collections of art museums. You are one of the keepers of your father's archive. You also have a curatorial practice and worked for some time as a gallerist. So you have experience marshaling images and materials, not only in your own work but in public or research settings. What do you call your own collection of images, and how do you use it?

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VanDerBeek: I'm definitely fascinated by archives but I don't give my own archive much care. I had an amazing experience recently as an Artist Research Fellow working in the Joseph Cornell papers, the Nam June Paik Archive at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and the Lucy Lippard papers at the Archives of American Art. To see and work amongst these incredible collections created by these artists and art historians was a privilege and deeply inspiring.

I had a similar experience this summer when working with Erika Lederman and Lisa Springer at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. They opened up the museum's extensive photographic collection of early collection images by Isabel Agnes Cowper and portraits by Julia Margaret Cameron for me to research and photograph for *Lace Interlace*.

Rail: Your *Women & Museums* exhibition seemed drawn largely from your collection of photographs of works of art representing women that you made at museums around the world.

VanDerBeek: Yes, but I would say that it's a mixture of going back into some of my earlier images, like those I made during the residency I did with Fondazione Memmo in Rome in 2012, and then going again at the start of the project in 2018 to the National Archaeological Museum in Naples to re-photograph things specific to the new work. So, often, I'm creating entirely new images for these works rather than drawing from my archive.

Rail: Do you have a name for this store of your own images that we're talking about?

VanDerBeek: No, that's an interesting idea.

Rail: I imagine that using other people's art is hard because it comes with a responsibility to treat the original appropriately. There's also the pitfall that you might end up in an endless art-about-art-about-art corridor. How do you think through using another artist's creation—even one thousands of years old or anonymous—as a springboard for your work?

VanDerBeek: That was the interesting question I had with *Lace Interlace*. I was re-photographing photographs for the first time in a while. I have been photographing other artworks in the round in exhibition displays or in museum storerooms, but I hadn't done much re-photographing photographs since making my assemblages that were a mix of found imagery and objects. That's why Sarah Charlesworth came to mind a lot when I was working there

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with the V&A's Cowper and Cameron images. I kept thinking about her and our conversations around the idea of appropriation, a term which neither of us liked. Its use always felt too general. Sarah created a number of works about early photography. So, she's been very present for me as I returned to working with what can feel like direct excerpts from someone else's photographic work. This feels more poignant now, not just in relationship to losing Sarah, but also as I think about other figures that have been influential to me and are no longer here.

Rail: At the Minneapolis Institute of Art, *Women & Museums* included many actual historic, three-dimensional works of art. It puts your work in conversation with the actual things from the museum's collection.

VanDerBeek: Yes. I loved that experience and learned a great deal from working with an exhibition designer for the first time. *Lace Interlace* relates to the images and the design strategies we used for that exhibition, including arranging the collection objects that were on view alongside my photographic works.

In many ways, I feel we've advanced tremendously, and in other ways the perspective and preoccupations of the nascent stages of photography that I am exploring in *Lace Interlace* remain very present now. I try to be conscientious about questions of intellectual property and copyright—things that protect the artist when using someone's else's images. But then I appreciate and want to convey in my use of other artist's works a reverence. There is a collective aspect to any art's realization. This feels particularly resonant in my personal relationship to photographic reproduction since it is often many different people working together with me to help me create my work. In turn I feel much of the media we experience today is created collectively. I think that sense of collaboration via quotation, and via collective realization should be embraced and celebrated.

Rail: Can we talk about the extraordinary atmospheres that you conjure in your work? You've spoken about the early twentieth-century German art historian Aby Warburg's idea of the Mnemosyne as being one of your influences. This is about creating an associative montage of works of art of related styles and themes across world cultures and different eras. He called the connections within these groupings a "Pathosformel"—or kind of a formulation of shared sensibilities. How do your recent kinetic works figure in this vision?

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VanDerBeek: In my exhibition, *Chorus*, in 2021, at Altman Siegel Gallery, I had three kinetic pieces. They were double-sided dye sublimation prints, and they were hung from the ceiling. They were not mechanized. They would move in response to the air currents generated by the exhibition's viewers as they moved. And then they became participants in the intermedia performance work *Future Variations*, created in collaboration with Kamau Amu Patton, Alisha B. Wormsley, Jasmine Hearn and Miriam Parker. Miriam, an interdisciplinary artist, made them turn and spin via her dance movements around them, creating at times in the performance, a dynamic collage of image, motion and projection. That project, and *Chorus*, led me to the current free-standing screen works in *Lace Interlace*.

Rail: Can you tell me more about the relationship between these two projects?

VanDerBeek: Yes. *Chorus* involved looking at ancient bodies and forms of adornment. But instead of colorizing the images as I had done with *Roman Woman*, I applied paint and refractive pigments to the images. I was thinking about a bodily gesture, my own, being captured in the work—through the act of painting. I also cut the edges of some of the works in reference to early photographic works that I had begun to look at while developing *Chorus*. For *Lace Interlace*, I built off this and studied nineteenth-century English photographers in more depth. A lot of times early photographs, due to the nature of the glass plate, or the lens's focal capabilities or the paper they were printing on, would have irregular edges, which I found fascinating and beautiful as both expansions and disruptions to the images.

The Victorian era in Europe and America had a great interest in the classical era and the Renaissance but also in the newly emergent scientific discoveries and technological advancements of its time such as photography. The “guard books” I photographed at the Victoria and Albert Museum as part of my research were compiled with images of everything photographed within a certain year of the museum's operation. It was newly forming during the years in which Isabel Agnes Cowper was the official museum photographer. These books included many images of ancient figurative sculptures, textiles, laces, architectural fragments, and decorative objects amongst other things.

Cowper's images were careful and detailed studies but their organization in these books was eclectic and more akin to a hectic computer screen or a scrapbook. These books felt very much like the beginnings of the digital interfaces we're interacting with now, cascades of images and all kinds of known and unknown connections arising from their temporal arrangements.

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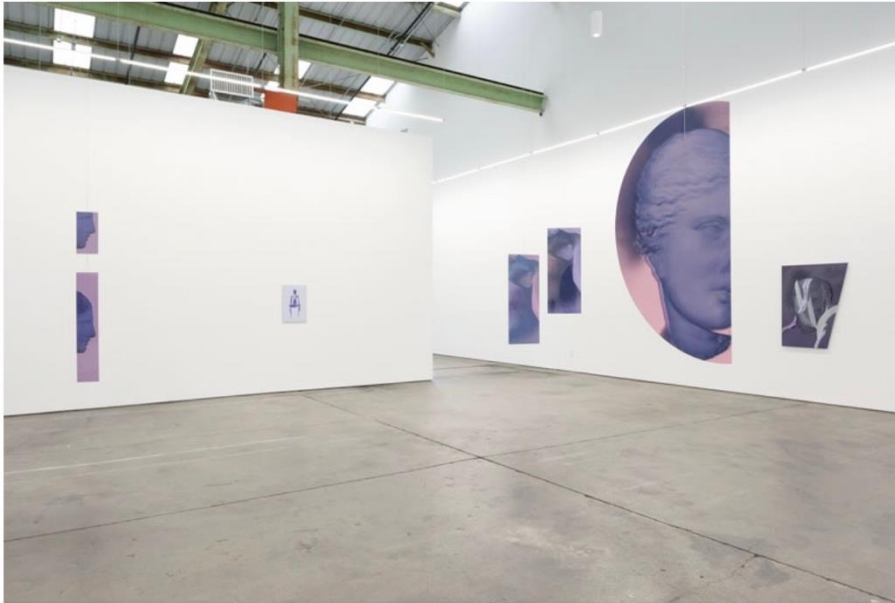
Sara VanDerBeek, *Lace Interlace VII*, 2023. UV Print on Plexiglas, Valchromat, Zinc Plated Steel Diptych (floor standing screen) Overall dimensions: 75 3/16 x 40 15/16 x 22 13/16 in. Each screen: 75 x 27 x 1 1/2 in. Courtesy the artist and The Approach, London. Photo: Michael Brzezinski.

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Installation view: Sara VanDerBeek: *Chorus*, Altman Siegel, San Francisco, 2021. Courtesy Altman Siegel.

Rail: What do you mean?

VanDerBeek: I suppose you could say the guard books were in a sense proto internet. Once photography got beyond its early stages it exploded into the larger public consciousness and became an extraordinarily powerful new medium for capturing attention and sharing information. Yet it was also from its earliest stages highly subjective and frequently manipulated, composited, and de-contextualized.

In America, I've always thought this occurred around the time of the Civil War with its rising industrialization, warfare, and exponential increase in the use of daguerreotypes. Many who were to go to war would make daguerreotype portraits knowing the portrait may possibly become memorial. Codifying photography's mnemonic aura.

Because we now live large parts of our lives through screens, we've come up with new ways to capture attention and convey information but also to explore memory and loss—some of this feels grounded in this foundational photographic relationship and some of this feels machine learned or generated. But it seems like it could be helpful given we struggle in America with mourning to understand further our relationship to imaging and mediation as a means of processing loss. Now I'm just freestyling here—

Rail: Please!

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VanDerBeek: *Chorus*, like many of my exhibitions including *Lace Interlace*, was about movement—narratively through its focus on women throughout history and around the world but also a movement between live and mediated experiences.

This is all to say that for me creating an atmosphere in an exhibition and the accompanying meditative space it may encourage is about trying to manifest memories, thoughts, and images that encourage new paths of imagination.

Rail: Can you discuss your thoughts on photography as a tool of mediation, which is a term that comes up often in writings on your work?

VanDerBeek: I think of photography as something like a threshold between you and experience. Most everything now has an element of interpretation and mediation. Whether it's this Zoom conversation or the great industry of self that is being proliferated on social networks. And then I think of it in formal terms as a toning and how I alter my images. These are all forms of mediation and interpretation.

Rail: You also make room for melancholy and loss, which, as Susan Sontag and others have noted, is baked into the photographic medium.

VanDerBeek: Sontag's writing is very important to me, and so are artists dealing with the topics Sontag was addressing in *On Photography*, like Moyra Davey and Liz Deschenes. Their ideas are also tied into my conception of mediation.

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Sara VanDerBeek, *Mother*, 2023. UV Print on Plexiglas, Zinc Plated Steel. 24 x 10 in. Courtesy the artist and The Approach, London. Photo: Michael Brzezinski.

Rail: Mediation seems to be one of your primary subjects.

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VanDerBeek: As I layer fragments to create a new whole, what I want to do is not to access any original moment but make something resembling a visual parable for how our memories are organized and how we live and relive things through these networked connections that are physiological as well as computational. Mediation for me goes back to ancient sculptures, and Warburg's idea of the mnemonic, and also goes forward to loosely connected constellations of information and images gathered and generated anew through artificial intelligence or other assistive technologies. I'm striving to realize works in photography that look to its history but also address this current moment of continual mediation.

Rail: Are you yourself a medium? Are you perhaps using the camera to look for the ghosts of culture, somewhat like the spirit photographers who looked for photographic traces of their sitters' psychic energies in the nineteenth century?

VanDerBeek: I grew up in a Victorian house in Baltimore from the 1860s, so that may be why I have an interest in Victorian things. Now, at mid-life, I'd say I'm reopening to the larger cosmos. I do really like the idea that the medium of photography can act as a "medium between past and present." The Victorians truly thought for a time there was a possibility that photography could connect to the spiritual realm.

Rail: Can you tell me more about how you engaged the work of Victorians Isabel Agnes Cowper and Julia Margaret Cameron for your *Lace Interlace* project?

VanDerBeek: Erika Lederman, who works at the Victoria and Albert museum and is currently writing her doctoral thesis on Isabel Agnes Cowper, got in touch with me after reading about "Women & Museums." She proposed that I come look at Isabel Agnes Cowper's work. I have always discussed how women were involved from the onset of photography, but until I learned of Cowper I didn't fully understand the extraordinary professional level at which women were operating. I also learned that Julia Margaret Cameron, another photographer I'm looking at in this project, was working at the museum around the same time as an artist in residence. Cowper was the official museum photographer. Both were mothers and were working with photography at times in their lives similar to mine.

What I found most interesting were their differences. They were at two ends of the spectrum. Cowper tried to picture the museum's objects objectively. I focused on her very detailed images of lace intended for use in the cataloging of the collection but also in educational books that were used by women working in the lace industry. Cameron created very romantic portraits of women in her life including her extended family.

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One photograph that I focused on was one of fifty portraits Cameron took of her niece Julia Jackson Stephen, the mother of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell. Stephen was a well-known figure in London, posing for many Pre-Raphaelite painters and strongly encouraged her two daughters to be creative. I had used this portrait before in a work of mine from 2008 entitled *Four Photographers*. I had used a reproduction of it in my work and it was impactful to view and work with an original print. Stephen died quite early in her life leaving a great loss for her children, especially impacting Virginia Woolf who was thirteen.

I did several days of in-depth capture at the museum in their photographic archives. During this same trip, I also went to various historic artist homes in England, including Charleston, the former home of Vanessa Bell, and Derek Jarman's Prospect Cottage. Both were influential to my approach to this new work in different ways.

I tried to synthesize all of this into these new works that I think of as screens. Each is titled *Lace Interlace*, and they're paired and arranged in a site-responsive manner in the gallery. They contain architectural references and references to the layering of images specific to the guard books as well as the Victorian use of shaped mats. But they also try to translate the variety of textures, material experiences, and details that I was photographing during my overall research process. They're toned in colors related to the albumen prints Cowper and Cameron made and they have a strong focus on pattern inspired by lace.



Installation view: Sara VanDerBeek: *Lace Interlace, The Approach*, London, 2023. Courtesy the artist and The Approach, London. Photo: Michael Brzezinski.

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Rail: What colors are those?

VanDerBeek: That's a kind of mauve, or sometimes it's more sepia. The highlights are quite warm, but the colors of these historic prints have shifted over time, too. Sometimes they're faded in incredible ways.

Rail: Where did the title *Lace Interlace* come from?

VanDerBeek: Once I returned to my studio, I was trying to work through how these digital images I had made of early albumen prints made from glass plate negatives were going to work. I started to consider the movement from the print to the screen upon which I was reviewing the digital images. I considered rephotographing the screen to increase my final image's resolution and in turn became inspired by the interlacing pattern of the images on the screen. I've taken this idea and expanded it, combining these images with others taken with a medium format film camera as well as images captured off the screen using the live photo feature on my iPhone.

Additionally, in my research process for the show I saw a simultaneous confluence and conflict of the body and the machine as it evolved in lace manufacture and this to me was not only paralleled in the development of photographic reproduction, but foundational to our contemporary society's complex relationship with photographic images.

Mechanical weaving of lace and other textiles via card driven looms in the 19th century is increasingly cited as the origins of early computational programming and design, as envisioned by Ada Lovelace and Charles Babbage. So the term "Interlace" for me also becomes symbolic of the ongoing impacts of mediation and computational processing upon individual and collective memory.

Rail: You've used unusual shapes in the mats around your images.

VanDerBeek: Yes, early photographers used a lot of oval and semi-circular mats.

Rail: Was that because lenses vignetted and lost resolution around their edges in those days?

VanDerBeek: Many of these shapes were due to the nature of the lens and the possible irregular chemistry. You would have clarity in the center, and then it would drop off around the edges. But I wonder also if it came from historical cameos.

Rail: You've also introduced new UV printing technologies in *Lace Interlace*.

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VanDerBeek: I was thinking that I am inspired by the past and may want to be a medium myself in some ways, but I also very much want to engage with our current moment. Because I felt like Cameron and Cowper were working at the vanguard of photographic technology, I wanted to work with its equivalent now. That's why I chose to work with UV printing technology. This, to me, feels as though it will continue to advance and become a significant printing method similar to the albumen or chromogenic processes of the past.

Rail: What are the advantages of UV printing? What sets it apart?

VanDerBeek: I should say that I work with digital and with film. I work with it all together because we can do that today. Each technology has its own strengths, and in combination with each other, they can create an extraordinary range of effects. But the advantage of UV is that the pigments have been cured with ultraviolet light. So the light that can possibly destroy traditional prints is used to set the color in place.

Rail: So it's ultra-archival?

VanDerBeek: Yes, and it can be printed on many different materials. And those may be the more or less archival part. It is used in both fine-art photographic printing and commercial printing. And on a nano scale it's being used to print memory patterns on computer chips. It's tied into our information technologies in many different ways. I thought it was important to try to weave—to interlace—this process into this work.

To see so much of the early evolution of photography from the Victorian era gives you a new perspective on our digital realm too, which is also still in its early stages.

Rail: It sounds like you're taking the past and kind of giving it an accelerative boost, sending it into posterity with new understanding.

VanDerBeek: My hope is that future iterations will look at how textile manufacturing, computer science, and digital imaging are part of a technological continuum. I've planned a research trip to MIT this summer to capture the memory ropes that were woven by contracted female textile workers for the first computer systems developed at MIT for the Apollo mission. I want to continue this development of the connections I have begun to realize between the body, memory, and the machine.

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