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Rebecca Travis | On Sylvia Grace Borda's Camera Histories

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This is not a camera, stereo-viewer images, C41 digital photographs, 2013.

The only thing that's changed is everything

An essay by Rebecca Travis on Sylvia Grace Borda: Camera Histories

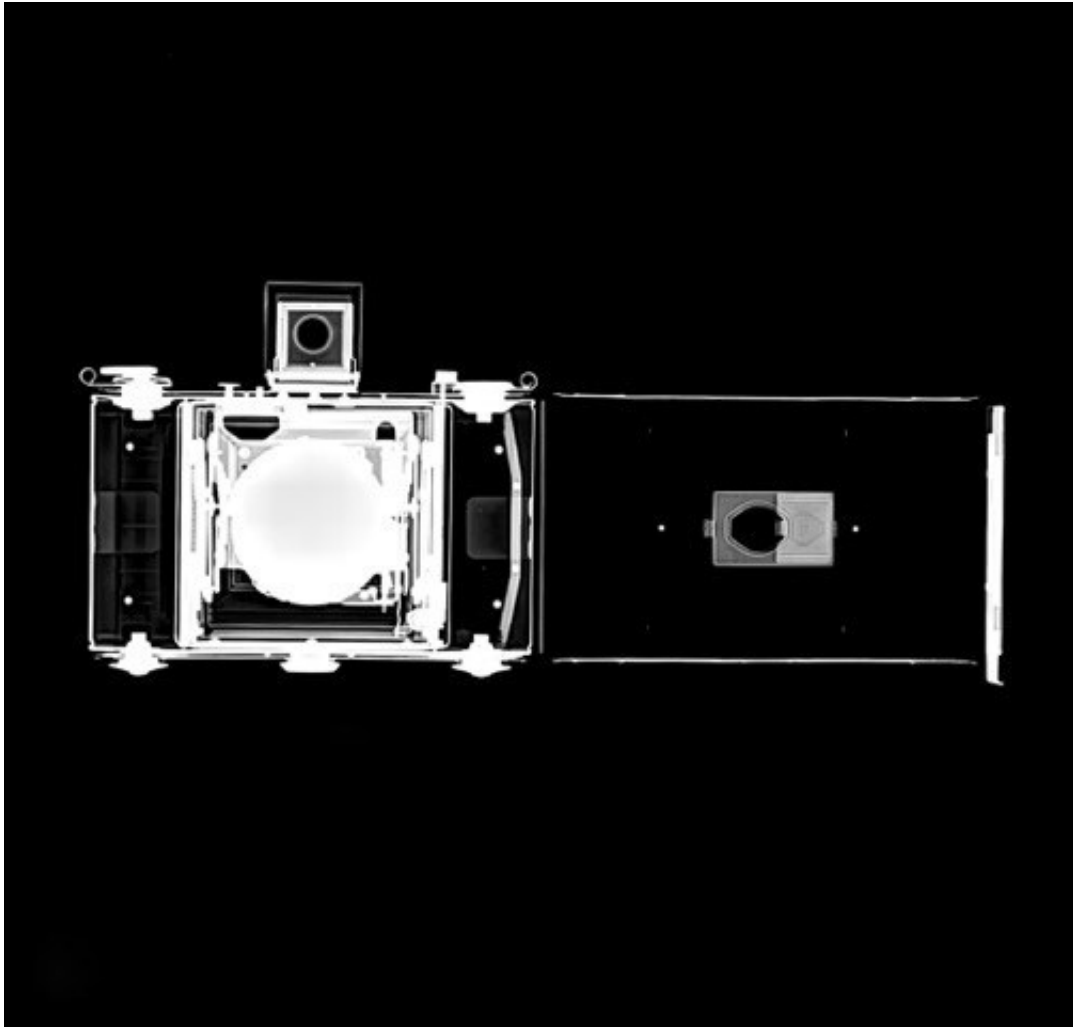
"The only thing that's changed is everything". So goes the tagline for the Apple iPhone 6S, just the latest in a long line of products released in the last decade that has categorically transformed the way in which we, as a general public, access and utilise photography. The immediacy and transportability of the camera phone and its technological leaps to equal the high definition quality previously only offered by a standalone camera has fundamentally altered our interactions both behind and in front of the lens. Smartphone adverts frequently focus upon camera quality and the ease of cataloguing and image distribution as a prime selling point, with the 6S in particular emphasising the ease in which images can be 'taken, found and shared' (a mantra, perhaps, for contemporary times).

The result is a society driven, fuelled, obsessed by (predominantly) digitised images, while the camera object itself has been subsumed into other multi-functional technologies, appearing physically as little more than an icon on a screen and a discreetly planted lens. While these technological progressions have led to a democratisation of the medium, with the potential for almost anyone to achieve 'breathtaking' images (exemplified by another Apple ad strategy, the award-winning billboard campaign 'Shot on an iPhone 6') it has also led to somewhat of a crisis in visual art photography. How can we discern the amateur from the professional? How do we determine systems of 'value' in photography when it has become so ubiquitous? And, crucially, what will become, what *has* become, of the camera object?

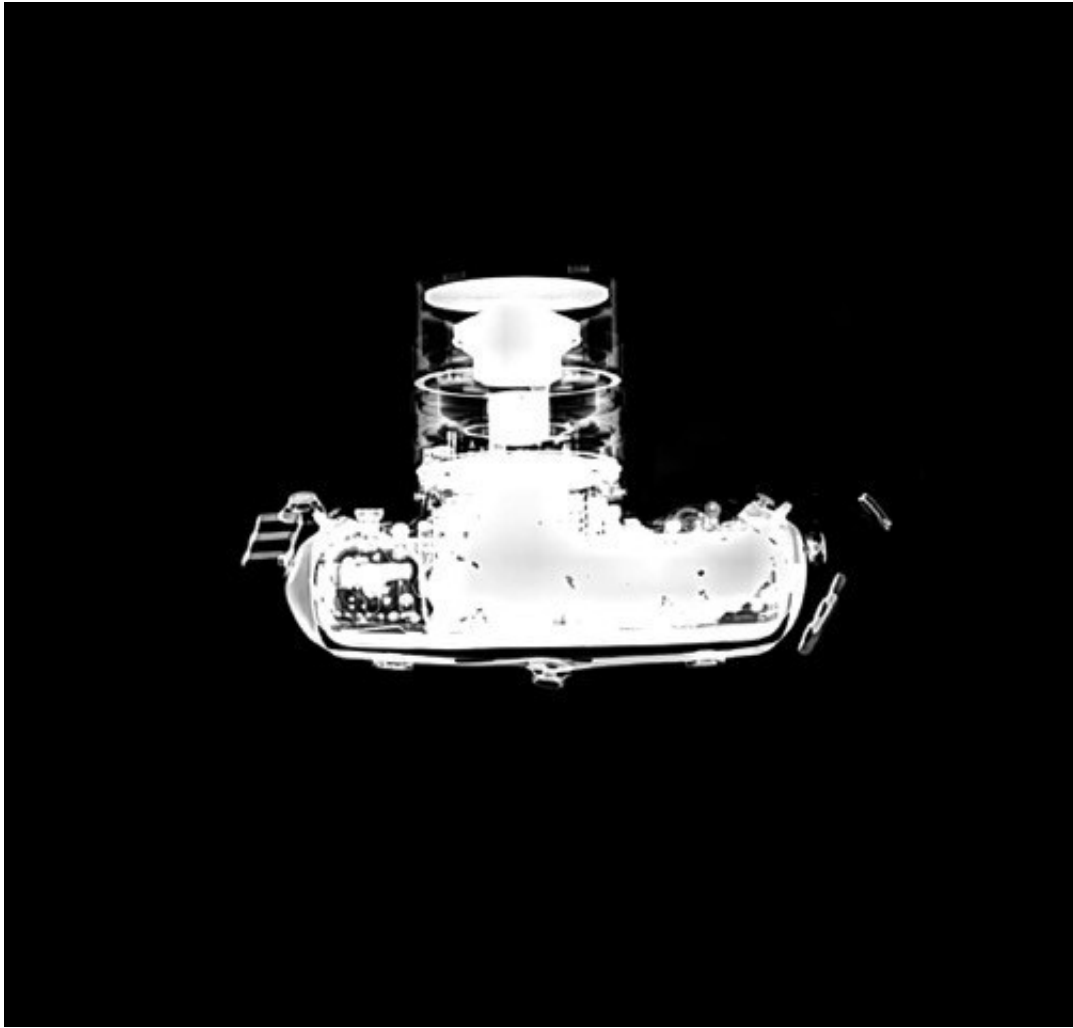




These questions and more are acknowledged and explored by Canadian artist Sylvia Grace Borda in *Camera Histories* – a suite of six bodies of work created between 2010 and 2015 that reflexively turns the subject of photography back on itself, by placing its physical apparatus front and centre. As the title suggests, the suite explores various histories of the camera object, employing traditional darkroom processes and optical devices alongside contemporary digital processes to create works that play upon nostalgia for analogue past (a sentiment seemingly mirrored by a world in which ‘retro’ filter effects and objects are increasingly sought after) while acknowledging the present, and ruminating on what the future may hold.



From the series 'Interrogations of a Camera', 2011-present, photograms by X-ray.



From the series 'Interrogations of a Camera', 2011-present, photograms by X-ray.

While a slip into full-blown subjective ache for the demise of physical objects would be easy, Borda treats her camera subjects with relative objectivity and coolness, in some cases even compromising their functions in order to achieve her imagery. In *Interrogations of a Camera* analogue models are subject to x-ray, a process that interferes with their light sensitive inner workings, in order to visualise them. The result is a series of fifteen monochrome photograms displaying the skeletal framework of camera bodies, as satisfying to regard as any technical drawing, with their minute details and elevations echoing those of architectural renderings. Printed at life scale there is a directness to the negative imagery, in which transparency is literally and figuratively key. The process is relatable, the subject obvious. The x-ray itself relates back to early photographic imaging, and yet the prints themselves are printed digitally, exemplifying Borda's traversing of old

and new, and reinforcing the attitude of practicality over nostalgia in terms of technological process.

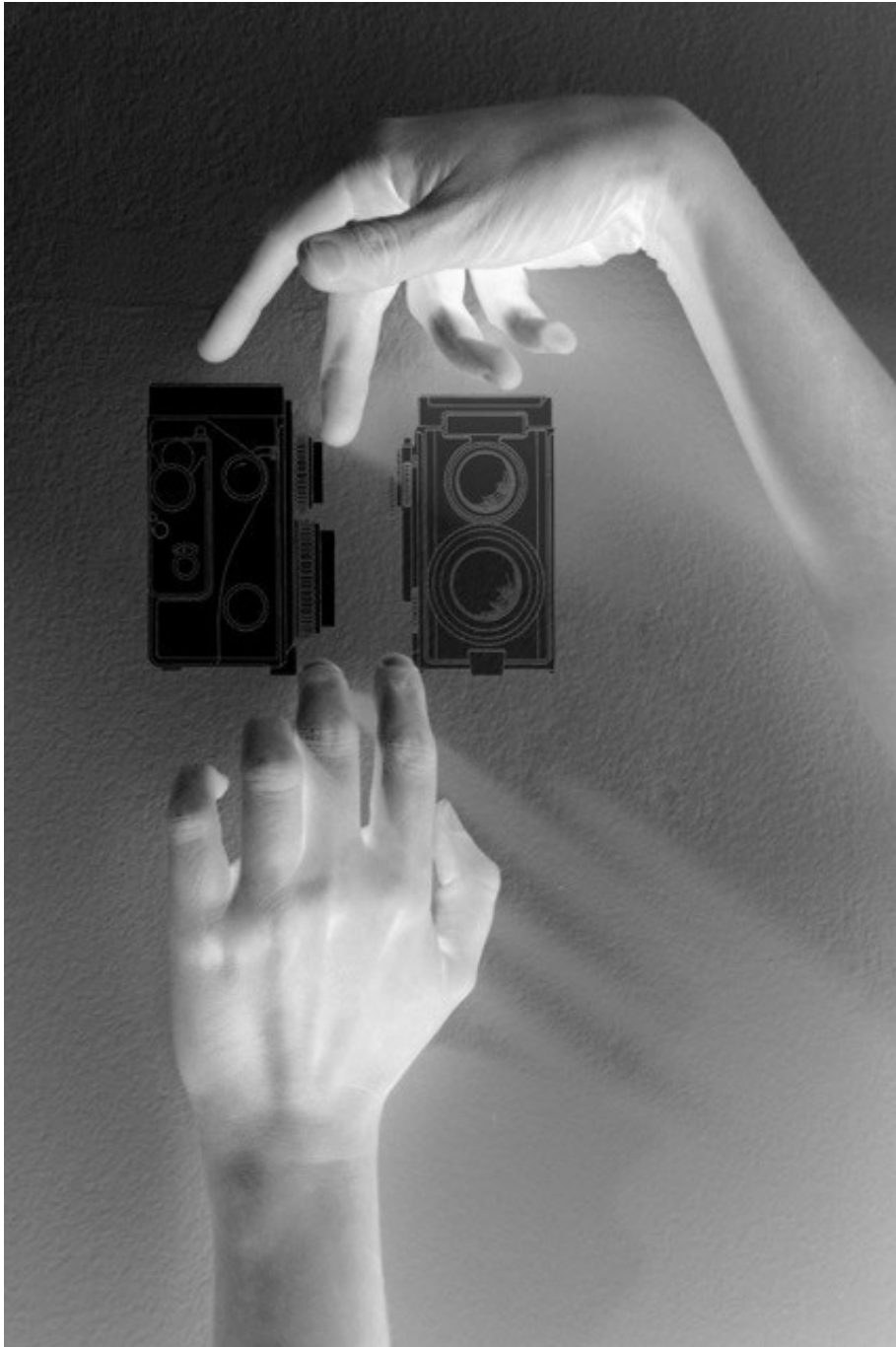


From the series "Seeing Technologies series" 2011-2015.

Seeing Technologies offers a softer, more tactile approach, while extending the monochrome negative aesthetic of *Interrogations*. In the series luminous hands present optical devices ('seeing technologies') and display methods used in photographic process.

The composition of the hands has the gentle, gestural air of those in Renaissance paintings, while the light harboured in the palms and emanating from the fingertips conjures thoughts of scientific progress and 'the Enlightenment'. These human elements are overlaid with historical diagrams of camera mechanisms and ephemera which detail the complexities of image processing and the experimental, temperamental nature of darkroom practice.

Both *Seeing Technologies* and *Interrogations of a Camera* muse on the terms 'negative' and 'positive', with film processing reliant on the former in order to achieve the latter. And yet, in Borda's works, the negatives stand alone. Photo negatives have become recognisable enough as an object in their own right, such that they are able to achieve their own autonomy, negating the need for a 'positive' and marking a shift in their status and inherent value. In the description of *Seeing Technologies* on her website, Borda also notes that:



From the series "Seeing Technologies series" 2011-2015.

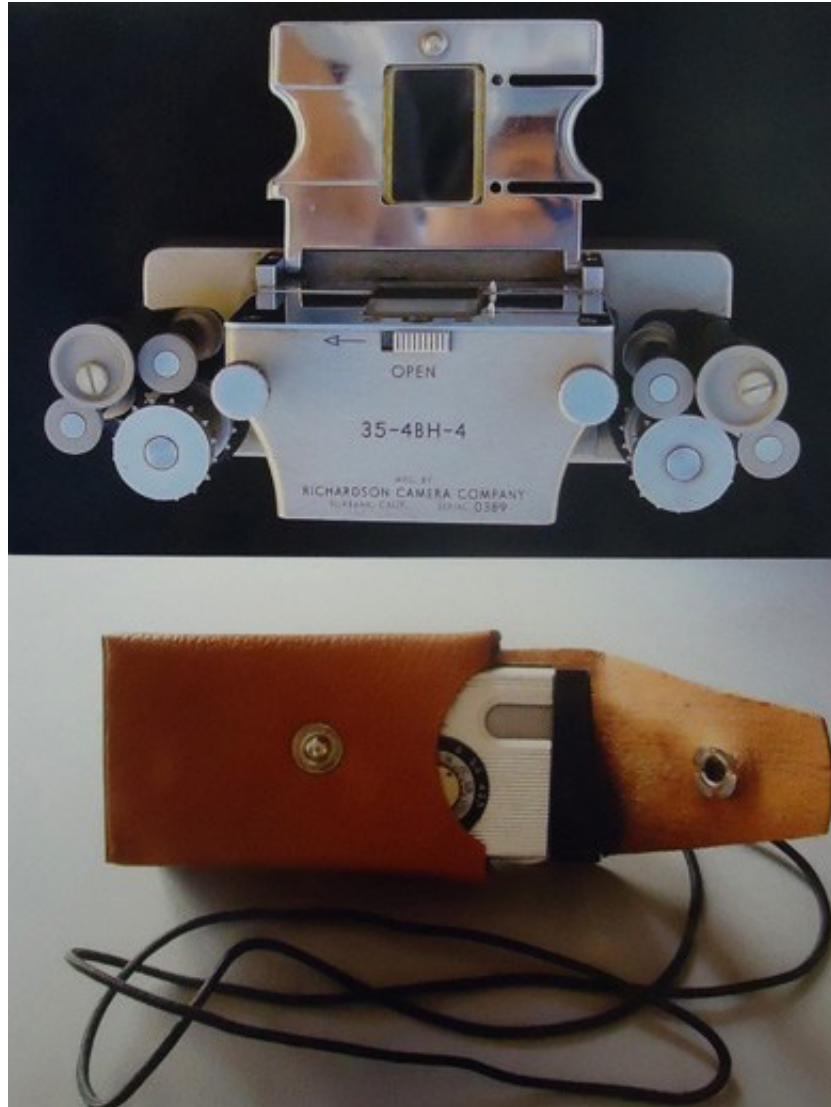
"Metaphorically the term 'negative' and 'positive' subtly reference and question which perspective the viewer may perceive as 'correct' in term of one's relationship to technology." This question of 'right' or 'wrong' looms large in photography. Analogue purists may be viewed as stubbornly out of touch, or as true 'artists' of the medium, while those willing to capitalize on technological advances may be lauded as forward thinking, or deemed as

lacking in integrity. With so much of Borda's focus in the *Camera Histories* series being centered around value, it is interesting to consider that the complex power dynamics between analogue and digital processes are in perpetual flux. As if to recognise this and rise above these somewhat futile disputes, in each of the thirty-six prints in *Seeing Technologies* the light is focused around the hands, reinforcing that the real power – in technology, in art – is reliant neither on analogue or digital means, but is fundamentally placed in the hands of the human creator.

The tensions between professional and amateur practice – a tension fuelled and enabled by the ubiquity of the smartphone camera, accessible user-friendly app software and the ability to widely share images with an online audience – is most explicitly explored by Borda in her series *Cameras and Watercolour Sunsets* (2010-present). The watercolour sunset epitomises the realm of the amateur 'Sunday painter', and following suit, photographs of sunsets have fulfilled the same role for lens-based media, so much so that the subject is now entrenched in cliché, mired with kitsch associations. Borda straddles both of these 'sunset mediums' by pulling images of amateur watercolour sunsets from online auction sites and digitally collaging them with non-professional images of retro cameras, also drawn from selling websites.

In each case Borda positions the lens of the camera over the sun in the watercolour, creating a composite image in which photography literally eclipses painting. This brings to mind the 19th century academic and painter Paul Delaroche's now iconic claim following the invention of the daguerreotype that "*from today painting is dead!*" But it also promotes a more self-reflexive consideration of photography's own precarious position. The sun has already set for the outdated camera models in Borda's composites, and given the retraction of the physical camera object, apparatus and process, and the distance we therefore feel from the 'act' of taking a photograph, are we entering a domain in which the proliferation and distribution of the *image* eclipses the *act* of photography itself? The series also calls up the vaguely insidious feel of surveillance, with the camera lenses obliterating the sun and dominating the landscapes. When viewing the series, they seem to 'stare' directly back, unblinking, all-seeing, reflecting a world in which global surveillance from satellites to traffic cameras, to footage taken on personal devices, has

become an everyday occurrence.



From the series 'Memento Mori', 2013

A playful musing on the 'death' of photography as we once knew it can be found in Borda's series *Camera Still Life - A Memento Mori* (2013). Once again the artist draws on the ready-made amateur imagery of online auction sites, collecting 'still life' images of cameras and photography equipment for sale. The resulting finds, paired or grouped together for display, offer a visualisation of the redundant cameras being objectified into a non-functional item, with the apparatus taking on a sculptural quality. Taken using digital cameras, the images reinforce the shift in status of analogue cameras. They have moved into the domain of creative, hobbyist items rather than essential tools. By titling the series

'A Memento Mori', Borda once again alludes to the art historical canon but also, more presciently, to Susan Sontag's notion from her seminal essay collection 'On Photography' that "all photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability." It's almost as if Borda, in this regard, is positioning the digital to take heed of its own vulnerability: even as it plays a part in the documentation and secondary selling of its technological ancestor, one day, it too will be outmoded.



From the series 'Memento Mori', 2013

This is not a camera (2013) is an evolution of the *Memento Mori* series which sees Borda turn the digital lens towards her own collection of film cameras, photographing them using image formats popularised by online seller galleries. The multiple perspective profile and head-on images of the camera subjects recall the criminal 'mug-shot' (offering a visual 'interrogation' of another kind to the x-rays in her earlier series). Using diptychs of adjacent images from these 'mug-shots', Borda creates stereo cards that can be positioned in a stereo-viewer to optically create a three-dimensional entity. It sees the

'lifeless' documentation images rendered as sculptural objects or artefacts to be explored, with the virtual space created echoing the ungraspable entity of the virtual marketplace.

A pursuit of a virtually explorable, three-dimensionable image is at the centre of Borda's most recent body of works within the *Camera Histories* suite – *Farm Tableaux Google Street View* (2013-15). The series directly deals with landscape imaging and furthers Borda's investigations into surveillance and the public and private domain by forging alliance with one of the biggest purveyors of global image distribution – a somewhat unlikely collaboration with Google Business Street view photographer, John M Lynch.



Rondriso Farm, Farm Tableaux, Surrey, BC, Canada Sylvia Grace Borda in collaboration with Google Trusted Photographer, John M Lynch

Borda's subject of choice – farming – may also seem an unlikely one. Borda rationalizes this shift in subject matter (*Farm Tableaux* is the only series within *Camera Histories* that does not physically image the camera itself) by seeing farming and pastoral imagery as

being entrenched in romanticism, and like camera imagery, due a contemporary reassignment of value. In order to do this, Borda and Lynch set out to capture images of farmers as they go about their daily routines, using the multiple-perspective imaging available through Google photography to capture them from various perspectives in the same scene. The imagery of the farmer and their wider contextual surroundings are then uploaded and hosted through the interactive Google Street View format, allowing viewers to virtually explore beyond the initial camera frame into a three-dimensional pictorial environment. Despite its outer appearance as a fully contemporary photographic process, there are elements of the series that directly link to the medium's history. In order to create the images, Borda requested that the subjects in the photographs stand motionless in predetermined poses for periods of up to half an hour in order to be captured by the Google cameras, a contemporary echo of early Victorian photographic portraiture in which subjects had to hold a static pose for lengthy periods.



Medomist Farm Ltd, Farm Tableaux, Surrey, BC, Canada Sylvia Grace Borda in collaboration with Google Trusted

Photographer, John M Lynch

To date two strands of the *Farm Tableaux* works exist, the first shot in British Columbia, Canada and the second in Finland in 2015. The mundane, working nature of many of the *Tableaux* poses are the antithesis of the flashy, snapshot images readily dispersed via image sharing formats, distributing instead a view of 'honest' work. Though, as the subtitle of the Finland series '*Mise-En-Scene*' suggests, the images, in their highly staged, almost choreographed nature are also quite the antithesis of intuitive documentary photography. The series is a prime example of Borda's embrace of both photographic history and its contemporary potential in a technologically enabled, expanded context.



Install shot from Sylvia's show at SLP: Camera Histories, November 18th 2013 to February 8th 2014, image: Iseult Timmermans.

Echoing the progression of photography itself, Borda's *Camera Histories* suite evolves from monochrome (*Seeing Technologies, Interrogations of a Camera*), into colour; from historic, hand-drawn optical diagrams to pioneering work (the first of its kind) with Google Street View. It offers a rational look at the state of the camera object and its place

in contemporary existence but (in spite of some of the titles) does not mourn its everyday loss. With her many nods to art history, to painting in particular and the tropes of sunsets, the vanitas and the pastoral, it seems pertinent to return to Delaroche's exclamation. Because painting, of course, did not die. Artists instead sought to reinvent the medium, challenging the existing conventions that defined it and opening up an ever-expanding field. Photography is already splintered into many different genres, and unlike painting, is not necessarily being out-evolved by another medium, but by itself.

Photography, therefore, finds itself in a position of immense strength. It is a medium with increasingly fluid boundaries and, as technological progress continues, the more history, context and subgenres photography will have to draw upon and reinvent itself. *Camera Histories* does not seek to provide answers to the questions that define our contemporary relationship to the camera, rather it presents a fresh lens through which to see, and question those ties. The only thing changing may well be 'everything' and this makes artists such as Sylvia Grace Borda's practice all the more prescient. She asks that we consider and acknowledge the past, embrace the technological means of the present and use it to ask questions of the future.

Sylvia Grace Borda's work can be seen on [her website](#).

Rebecca Travis is a British writer and editor currently based in Toronto, Canada. Her reviews, interviews, and essays have been published in *Canadian Art*, *C Magazine*, *Dazed Digital*, *Apollo Magazine*, *Photomonitor*, *Momus* and *Aesthetica Magazine* among others. She is currently Editorial Manager of the online contemporary art magazine "this is tomorrow."

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