



Article: Photography-Painted: Problems and Solutions in Handling, Display and Storage
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Photography-Painted: Problems and Solutions in Handling, Display and Storage

Diana Noemí Velázquez Padilla

Presented at the PMG session of the 2015 AIC Annual Meeting in Miami, Florida.

Abstract

This article describes the challenges in displaying and conserving *Mirando a través de algo que parece uno mismo* [*Looking through Something that Seems Oneself*], an artwork composed of eighty-eight acrylic-painted color photographs created in 2014 by the Mexican artist Luis Felipe Ortega. The conservation decisions involved in this project had to take conceptual ideas and the materiality of the work in account, and involved collaboration between the conservator and the artist.

Introduction

There are many ways of understanding photographs, and the painted photographic composite artwork asks for multiple readings simply through the method of creation. The duality of being a painting and a photograph also poses several challenges to its preservation, as is evidenced by a recent series of acrylic paintings by the Mexican artist Luis Felipe Ortega. While the final work is one composite object, the dual nature of its physicality poses challenges specific to both photographic materials and contemporary acrylic paintings, and poses several questions in regards to preservation and conservation.

The central idea behind the eighty-eight image work is that contemplation of image and time. The way that the work was assembled meant that the components did not have secondary supports, which caused issues regarding handling and exhibition. Adding to the challenge, it is important to Felipe Ortega that the texture and color of the applied acrylic paint films are perceived by the viewer without any barriers. Because of these particular requirements, two different proposals for the work's display were developed and considered.

Concept and Creation

The creation of *Looking through Something that Seems Oneself* can be divided into two major sections - concept and creation. An understanding of this is vital to making appropriate decision regarding materials for conservation and exhibition.

1. **Concept.** This set of images was originally created in 2001 for a different project, which was and through photographs and films. *Looking through Something that Seems Oneself* would take these images and reexamine and reinterpret them.

2. **Creation.** Felipe Ortega's concept was an exploration of the "possibility to generate an image-now, an image that comes from a story and has a story" (Ortega, 2015). Once the concept was defined, the photographic images were selected and printed. Felipe Ortega then altered the images, playing with time and observation through color and the layering of acrylic paint films (fig. 1). This intervention established the unity of the painted photograph.



Fig. 1. Artist's intervention upon the photographs

Assessing Risks

The conceptual and physical nature of the work leads to question relating to its conservation and preservation, some of which involve answers outside of the established practices.

This piece is a unique work of art, with no possibility of reproduction. This individuality could be an obstacle for its acquisition by certain institutions. Contemporary photography collections may often choose to buy two copies of a print, one for exhibition and one for long-term storage. This is not possible for *Looking through Something that Seems Oneself*. It was therefore necessary to thoroughly document the artwork and to have a number of preservation-related questions answered by Felipe Ortega.

Though the conceptual nature of the artwork is of great importance, it is also necessary to take in account the physicality of the work. Questions arise if evaluating potential risks. What could be a potential damage? How could the conceptual value be affected? What is the life expectancy of this work if continuously exhibited? What are the recommended environmental conditions? Are the paint films or color photograph more vulnerable an uncontrolled environment or minor accidents?

According to various studies, at temperatures over 20°C acrylic paint films become soft and capture dirt, causing changes to both color and texture. At temperatures lower than 10°C, it hardens and cracks. At the same time, it is also susceptible to shock, impacts, inappropriate handling and packaging, and to fingerprint marks. With the photographs the biggest challenge is represented by changes in image density produced by humidity and temperature fluctuations. What is unknown is how the presence of the paint film may affect the photograph, and vice versa.

Decisions made in regards to displaying *Looking through Something that Seems Oneself* should focus on providing the best possible system for exhibition and handling of the piece. However, the ideal way to preserve the work opposes some requirements of the piece and goes against the artist's intent and the concept of the work.

Proposals for Mounting and Display

Two proposals for the exhibition mounting of *Looking through Something that Seems Oneself* were developed. The first was proposed by the Marso Galería de Arte Contemporáneo (MARSO Gallery) in Mexico City, where the work was going to be exhibited. The second was developed by conservators, in consultation with Felipe Ortega.

1. Place each photograph into clear cases.

The goal of this housing was to protect the photographs from damage during exhibition and transportation. It would also prevent visitors from touching the surfaces or getting too close to the images. The main disadvantage of this proposal is that it places a barrier between the view, hindering a closer examination of the material and visual qualities of the work, which is an important part of the viewer's interaction with the work. For Felipe Ortega, this exhibition design substantially modified the intention of his work to an unacceptable degree.

2. Mount the photographs to aluminum plates, which could then be secured to a wall for display. Considering the importance of showing the material characteristics of the painted photographs, providing a rigid support structure was thought necessary for the safety of the objects. Aluminum was chosen as the mounting material because of its chemical resistance and light weight, but also because of its smooth surface finish (fig. 2). Also, there would be no physical barrier between the viewer and the art work.

An experiment was carried out using a sample test print and four modified photographs supplied by Felipe Ortega.

The experiment involved painting the sample print with acrylic, mimicking the surface textures of the original prints (fig. 3). The painted test print was then adhered to the aluminum secondary support. The laminating process was supervised at all

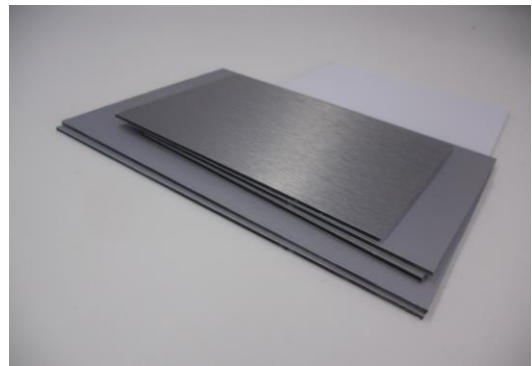


Fig. 2. Aluminum support samples

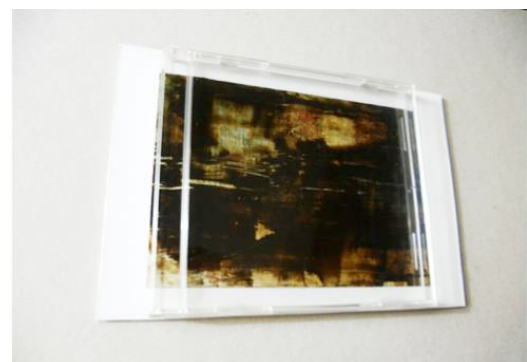


Fig. 3. Sample test print, imitating an original painted photograph

times in order to prevent any excessive pressure by the laminating machine rollers. The result was that the modified print was securely attached to the aluminum panel with no alterations in the surface textures of the print. The four other photographs supplied for testing by Felipe Ortega were mounted in the same way, all successfully. Ideally, the unmodified photograph would be mounted to the secondary support, and then modified with acrylics by the artist.

Felipe Ortega felt that this mounting system highlighted the visual and material qualities of the work, one of its main advantages. However, the disadvantages are the numerous possible damages to which the photographs would be exposed: scuffs, drops, abrasions, etc. Without any protective frames or cases, the photographs would also be susceptible to discoloration if the environmental conditions were unstable.

The final decision regarding the mounting system was made taking the advantages and disadvantages of each proposal in to account. It was decided that the eighty-eight painted photographs would be secured to the aluminum supports. Since adopting the new exhibition system, the work has been displayed in two different locations: an art fair in Bogotá, Colombia in November 2014 and in Mexico City in February 2015. It is expected that the private or public institution that ultimately purchases the artwork will provide appropriate storage facilities and exhibition conditions.



Fig. 4. The painted photographs on exhibit after being mounted to the rigid secondary supports. Courtesy of MARSO Gallery.

Final Considerations

The main difference between the two methods of exhibition was that the first did not allow the viewer to readily distinguish the physical qualities of the painted modifications and the printed photographs. Without this play of time and space, the viewer's understanding of the work would have been different. The first open, which would have provided more protection for the work, was more suitable in terms of conservation but no in terms of respect for the artist's intention. The requirement for *Looking through Something that Seems Oneself* is that the aesthetic and material be appreciated as completely as possible.

An important aspect of the decision making was the engaged involvement of Luis Felipe Ortega. With his input it was possible to evaluate results of mounting techniques and to make decision that respected the concept of the work. Preservation decisions always aim to provide the best possible condition for the artifacts, though it is not always possible to anticipate all of the potential risks.

My day-to-day job has consisted in collaborating with artists that produce works with diverse characteristics. Choosing materials and developing different preservation strategies is a great responsibility, but also an amazing chance to keep learning. Conservation decisions for new artworks with non-traditional materials and features are not simple and cannot always be guided only by traditional conservation principles and guidelines. It is important to consider the artists' opinions and the audience for the work.



Fig. 5. *Looking through Something that Seems Oneself* on exhibit. Courtesy of MARSO Gallery.

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Paper and Photograph Conservator

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