

How have photographers been inspired by art? A new exhibition intrigues **Michael Prodger**

Out of the ghetto

For 180-yeaars, people have been asking the question: is photography art? At an early meeting of the Photographic Society of London, established in 1853, one of the members complained that the new technique was "too literal to compete with works of art" because it was unable to "elevate the imagination". This conception of photography as a mechanical recording medium never fully died away. Even by the 1960s and 70s, art photography - the idea that photographs could capture more than just surface appearances - was, in the words of the photographer Jeff Wall, a "photo ghetto" of niche galleries, aficionados and publications.

But over the past few decades the question has been heard with ever decreasing frequency. When Andreas Gursky's photograph of a grey river Rhine under an equally colourless sky sold for a world record price of £2.7 million last year, the debate was effectively over. As if to give its own patriotic signal of approval, the National Gallery is now holding its first major exhibition of photography, *Seduced by Art: Photography Past and Present*.

The show is not a survey but rather examines how photography's earliest practitioners looked to paintings when they were first exploring their technology's potential, and how their modern descendants are looking both to those photographic old masters and in turn to the old master paintings.

What paintings offered was a catalogue of transferable subjects, from portraits to nudes, still lifes to landscapes, that photographers could mimic and adapt. Because of the lengthy exposures necessary for early cameras, moving subjects were impossible to capture. The earliest known photograph of a person was taken inadvertently by Louis Daguerre - with Henry Fox Talbot one of photography's two great pioneers - when he set up his camera high above the Boulevard de Temple in Paris in 1838. His 10-minute exposure time meant that passing traffic and pedestrians moved too fast to register on the plate, but a boulevardier stood still long enough for both

him and the bootblack who buffed his shoes to be captured for ever.

When Daguerre turned his camera on people rather than places the results were revelatory. Elizabeth Barrett Browning was so struck by Daguerreotypes that she rhapsodised over "the very shadow of the person lying there fixed forever". The fidelity of features captured meant that she "would rather have such a memorial of one I dearly loved, than the noblest Artist's work ever produced" not "in respect (or disrespect) of Art, but for Love's sake". If, however, her photographer followed the advice of Eugène Disdéri, who wrote in 1863 that: "It is in the works of the great masters that we must study the simple, yet grand, method of composing a portrait," she could satisfy love with both physiognomy and art.

What some pioneering photographers recognised straight away was that photographs, like paintings, are artificially constructed portrayals: they too had to be carefully composed, lit and produced. Julia Margaret Cameron made this explicit in her re-envisagings of renaissance pictures. Her *Light and Love* of 1865, for example, shows a woman in a Marian headcovering bending over her infant who is sleeping on a bed of straw. It is part of a line of nativity scenes that is as long as Christian art, and was hailed by one critic as the photographic equivalent of "the method of drawing employed by the great Italian masters". *I Wait*, 1872, shows a child with angel's wings resting its chin on folded arms and wearing the bored expression that brings to mind the overwhelmed cherubs in Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*. Such photographs were not direct quotations from paintings, but they raised in the viewer's mind a string of associations that gave photography a historical hinterland.

If Cameron and contemporaries such as Oscar Rejlander and Roger Fenton (who took numerous photographs of still-life compositions of fruit and flowers as well as his better known pictures of the Crimean war) were keen that their photographs should reflect their own knowledge of art, the links went both ways. In 1873, Leonida Caldesi published a book of her photographs of 320 paintings in the National Gallery, and her intended audience was not

just the public but artists themselves, for whom the photographs were both more accurate and more affordable than engraved reproductions. By 1856, thanks to Fenton's photographs, artists could study classical statues in their own studios.

It was perhaps in depicting the nude - such as Fenton's bestselling photo-

graph of the discus thrower Discobolus - that photography could repay its debt to art. Hiring a life model was expensive, and engravings were a poor substitute. Delacroix was one artist who "experienced a feeling of revulsion, almost disgust, for their incorrectness, their mannerisms, and their lack of naturalness". He praised instead the painterly aid provided by académies (books of nude photographs) since they showed him reality: "these photographs of the nude men - this human body, this admirable poem, from which I am learning to read". He even helped the photographer Eugène Durieu pose and light his models. And in 19th-century Britain and France, when pornography was illegal, photographs of the nude were in demand from customers who had no artistic interests.

When it came to landscape photography the new medium appeared just as the impressionists were beginning to work in the open air. Some commentators saw photography's real challenge to painting as lying in its ability to capture what the photographer and journalist William Stillman called in 1872 "the affidavits of nature to the facts on which art is based" - the random "natural combinations of scenery, exquisite gradation, and effects of sun and shade". Another practitioner, Lyndon Smith, went further, declaring landscape photography the answer to the "effete and exploded 'High Art',



Exploding myths ... Ori Gersht's *Blow-Up Untitled 5* and (below) Fantin-Latour's *The Rosy Wealth of June*

and 'Classic' systems of Sir Joshua Reynolds" and "the cold, heartless, infidel works of pagan Greece and Rome".

Being new was a laborious business, however. Eadweard Muybridge, the British-born photographer who first captured animals in motion and as a result ended the old painterly convention of showing horses running with all four legs off the ground, was primarily a landscape photographer. His pictures of the Yosemite wilderness, for example, involved carrying heavy cameras, boxes of glass negatives, as well as tents and chemicals for a makeshift darkroom, up mountains and through forests. Monet's painting expeditions by contrast required only paint and canvas.

Early photographers had no option but to negotiate their own engagement with painting their modern descendants can call on nearly two centuries of photographic history. It is a point the exhibition makes by combining old and new. So when a contemporary photographer such as Richard Billingham photographs an empty expanse of sea and sky in Rothko washes of slate blues and greys (*Storm at Sea*) he is referring to a heritage that encompasses both the monochrome tonality of Gustave Le Gray's atmospheric photographic seascapes of the 1850s and a painting such as *Steamer on Lake Geneva*, *Evening Effect*, 1863, by the Swiss artist François Boccion.

The point is made across the different media. A brittle portrait of a suburban couple from Martin Parr's 1991 album *Signs of the Times*, for example, is contrasted with Gainsborough's *Mr and Mrs Andrews* of 1750. Both are images of possession and entitlement, the latter displaying landowners at ease amid their fields and woods, comfortable with both themselves and their station, the former a couple posing stiffly in their sitting room.

Meanwhile a 19th-century flower painting by Henri Fantin-Latour is the starting point for Ori Gersht's fragmented blooms, *Blow Up*. Gersht froze his flowers with liquid nitrogen before exploding them with a small charge and photographing the petals turned to flying shards. Among the nudes, Richard Learoyd's *Man with Octopus Tattoo*, 2011, is placed next to the gallery's 1819-39 painting of *Angelica Saved by Ruggiero* by that connoisseur of bodily curves, Ingres. The appeal of flesh and its sinuosity is timeless.

The curators of the National Gallery exhibition have avoided using many of contemporary photography's biggest names (there is no Andreas Gursky and no Cindy Sherman for example), and nor do they include photorealist painters such as Gerhard Richter or Andy Warhol. Their choices are largely less celebrated figures as if to show how deep is the seam of photographers still working with the long visual past. When in 1844-6 Fox Talbot published his thoughts about photography he gave the book (the first publication to contain photographic illustrations) the title *The Pencil of Nature*. This exhibition lays out what photography's founding father could never know: how the camera has also always been the pencil of art.

Seduced by Art: Photography Past and Present opens at the National Gallery on 31 October.

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Painting seen through a different lens

A landmark show hangs photographs with Old Masters. Rachel Campbell-Johnston compares and contrasts

Seduced by Art: Photography Past & Present National Gallery

★★★★☆

Painting and photography have long danced a pas de deux, yet painting has consistently been accorded the lead role. Photography, as the latecomer arriving on the art stage less than two centuries ago, has too often been seen as a cultural also-ran.

It has had to work hard to show that it possesses more than merely documentary merits; to prove it too can capture those higher flights of the imagination that the more established fine-art disciplines are assumed to have attained and, as recently as the 1960s and 1970s, it was still segregated off in a self-contained “photo ghetto” as one of

its most innovative practitioners, Jeff Wall, once put it.

But now it comes out of the ghetto at last. That is why *Seduced by Art*:

Photography Past and Present is a landmark exhibition. For the first time, the National Gallery’s hallowed halls of art history, until now a preserve principally of painting, are hosting a major photographic exhibition.

It will hardly be surprising to admirers of the contemporary who, over the past 30 years have regularly seen photographic pieces by such artists as Craigie Horsfield, Sam Taylor-Wood or Richard Billingham included in — and, in the case of Gilbert and George, Douglas Gordon or Wolfgang Tillmans even winning — the Turner Prize. It will not amaze those who remember a Cindy Sherman image selling for \$3.9 million last year, her world-record-setting price for an individual photograph — only for that record to be broken a few months later

when Andreas Gursky’s picture of a misty river Rhine went under the hammer for a staggering \$4.3 million.

To any who take an interest in photography the “But is it art?” debate has been over for many years. Now, the National Gallery also acknowledges the fact. However, in *Seduced by Art*, the curators don’t bother to rehearse the succession of arguments that point out the already obvious relationships between painting and photography as they have been drawn over some 180 years. Rather, arranging the show in a series of thematic galleries — portraits, the figure, tableaux, still life and landscape — they focus on works from the first and the last 30 years of the medium. They juxtapose the historical and the contemporary and leave out everything between.

Two broad swaths of argument may be followed. One looks at the way photography’s earliest practitioners —

such as Julia Margaret Cameron, Oscar Gustav Rejlander or Roger Fenton —



learnt from the pictorial language established by painting and hence, when they took their portraits, posed their nude figures or composed their landscapes, appealed to associations already lodged by art history in the minds of their viewers. Rejlander, for example, quotes directly from Raphael when he poses two chubby little children like the pair of putti in the *Sistine Madonna*. Cameron's 1865 *Light and Love* is less direct, but this image of a mother in a Marian headcloth bending over a sleeping baby stirs up memories of innumerable Renaissance mother-and-child compositions.

A second broad strand of argument follows the many ways modern-day photographers looked not only to Old Master paintings, but to the work of the photographic pioneers who preceded them. Horsfield, for example, brings to his photographic portraits that same atmospheric darkness, that same brooding sense of inferiority that the great Spanish master Velázquez

achieved, but at the same time, through the downcast gaze of his sitter, alludes to Cameron's photographic precedent.

There are some wonderfully vivid pairings of old and new in this show — not least those that may be found in the main rooms of the gallery where Billingham, Horsfield and Richard Learoyd offer contemporary responses to canvases by Constable, Degas and Ingres respectively, which hang in the permanent collection. Downstairs, in the exhibition, Gainsborough's elegantly boastful 1750 portrait of Mr and Mrs Andrews, a pair of fashionable landowners, is satirically aped by Martin Parr in his 1991 *Signs of the Times*, in which a couple pose in the carpeted sitting room of their suburban home. That most dramatically magnificent of Greek marbles, the serpent-wrestling Laocoön (present only in photographic image) finds its contemporary counterpart in a Richard Learoyd study of a man with an octopus tattoo across his torso.

But it is where the resonances are less literal that this show discovers its

greater depths and wider evocations. Wall's foray into art history with a large-scale colour photograph of a smashed up interior, *The Destroyed Room*, finds both a compositional and atmospheric influences in Delacroix's *The Death of Sardanapalus* — a painting after this work by Frédéric Villot is hung here. But, because what Wall offers is so far from the sort of spot-the-difference comparison that any more direct interpretation might present, it opens up broader aesthetic possibilities, challenging perceptions of photography as a primarily imitative medium. Highlighting the power of colour and tone and undercutting assumptions that what he shows is real by revealing his wrecked room to be a studio set, he explores how the historical can be given a new contemporary currency.

Similarly, Henri Fantin-Latour's 1886 still-life of a rose bowl finds a fascinating precursor in the strange, almost eerie fixity of an 1865 photograph by Adolphe Braun and a dramatically innovative successor in an image by Ori Gersht. Fighting to find his own way of replicating the constantly shifting fascination of a painting, captures on camera that moment when a fixed arrangement is blown apart in a tumult of coloured fragments.

There is constantly shifting conversation between the images here. An exhibition that, to be frank, looks at first glance like a dreadful jumble of pictures, dwarfed for the most part by the grandeur of their display space and lacking the sense of grand climax the central gallery usually brings, gradually grows into something that feels like far more than the sum of its parts.

This is emphatically not a show of "big hits". There are no images by such currently highly fashionable photographers as Andreas Gursky or Wolfgang Tillmans. But conversations spark off ideas that gather pace — there is a pronounced feminist slant, for instance — and spread outwards. How can a photograph claim its place not only as a replica, but also as an object in its own right? Where are the

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boundaries between truth and fiction? What is the role of the viewer's imagination? How can a photograph capture a sense of time passing? These are the sort of questions that this show encourages us to ponder. They lead not only into a freshly enlivened understanding of art history, but also towards an exciting new appreciation of current possibilities.

Seduced by Art: Photography Past & Present, National Gallery, London WC2, Oct 31-Jan 20.
nationalgallery.org.uk



Top, the Destroyed Room photographed by Jeff Wall in 1978; right, The Death of Sardanapalus, painted by Frédéric Villot in 1844; above, a Madonna and Child by Julia Margaret Cameron

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COURTESY THE ARTIST, RMN-GRAND PALAIS (MUSÉE DU LOUVRE) / JEAN-GILLES BERIZZI



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