

Exposure

Fall 2015
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The Society for Photographic Education

SPE is a nonprofit membership organization that provides and fosters an understanding of photography as a means of diverse creative expression, cultural insight, and experimental practice. Through its interdisciplinary programs, services, and publications, the Society seeks to promote a broader understanding of the medium in all its forms through teaching and learning, scholarship, and criticism.

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On the cover

Takashi Arai, A Maquette for a Multiple Monument for the Wristwatch Dug up from the Uenomachi, Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum #2, 2014, 49 daguerreotypes, 50 x 50 cm. Courtesy of the artist. Photo courtesy Mark Menjivar

See more of Takashi Arai's contemporary daguerreotypes beginning on page 4.

The Journal of the

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Victor Landweber's *American Cameras*: Referencing Art and Shifting Time

Mark Johnstone

"Why I Am Not a Painter" is a poem by Frank O'Hara.¹ In it O'Hara writes about seeing a painter friend at work and explores the differences, psychologically and conceptually, between using words and moving paint around. Similarly, Victor Landweber's *American Cameras* photographs make it clear that he is a photographer, not a painter. While this point may seem obvious, what complicates the correlation between painting and photography is how often Landweber references painterly ideas in his work. In 1983, he extended a series of Pop Art-inspired projects by photographing a collection of simple, made-in-America cameras from the 1940s and '50s. He says, "As with some of my earlier photographic projects from the mid-to-late '70s, I thought *American Cameras* a Pop Art project. I was thinking of Andy Warhol's Coke bottles and dollar bills and Jasper Johns' beer cans. I wanted to do that Pop Art thing but in a way that was entirely photographic."²

The fifteen photographs in the set are titled with the model names of the cameras, which evoke sly references to movies, implications of social status, and a variety of marketing hyperboles: *Brownie Starlet*, *Hopalong Cassidy*, *Lady Carefree*, *Ansco Panda*, *Bear Photo Special*, *Imperial Debonair*, *Duo-Lens Imperial Reflex*, *Tri-Vision*, *Capitol "120,"* *Cubex IV*, *Spartus Press Flash*, *Boy Scouts of America Official 3-way Camera*, *Beacon Two-twenty five*, *Ansco Shur Flash*, and *Instaflash*. Underlying these photographs and their titles is a subtext about 1950s American manufacturing and dynamic marketing, nostalgic pleasure, and, most significantly, photography itself. *American Cameras* underscores photography theorist Siegfried Kracauer's premise that the real subject of photography is photography.³ Landweber's cameras are a prime example of photography turned back upon itself, its tools, and, by implication, its methods.

A camera is inconsequential as an art object, but these photographs transform their subjects into revered objects. Landweber's seemingly innocent cameras are made to glow with hyperreal intensity. The Beacon Two-twenty five beckons as would an actual beacon. The Brownie Starlet becomes a star in its own right. They celebrate the mid-twentieth-century moment in middle-class American life when photography had become such an ordinary activity that cameras were fashioned for consumers as stylish accessories. As art historian and theorist James Hugunin has acutely observed, "Landweber considers this series a critique of the American market place, its products and promotions. Hence his slick rendering, a conscious borrowing from the conventions of advertising photography. Quoting the look of commercial photographic illustration, he slyly comments on how photography can enhance the mundane, arouse one's desire to possess the object pictured, even when the image of the promotion is a far cry from the reality of the product."⁴

Victor Landweber,
Hopalong Cassidy,
1983, Cibachrome (dye-
bleach) print, 16 x 20
inches. From *American
Cameras*. Courtesy of
the artist

Hopalong

Cassidy



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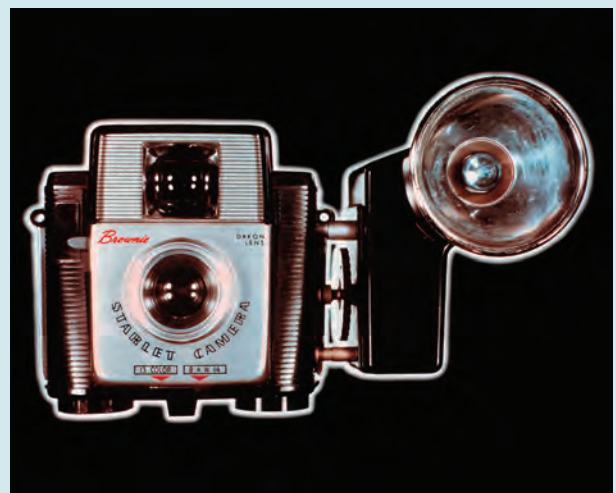
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Landweber is very measured in his commentary about this work and thinks before speaking about it. Such is also his approach to making photographs. His projects gestate and evolve as part of a process of invention and discovery.⁵ In his gleaming 16 x 20 Cibachrome prints, the halos around the cameras make them look like holy relics. They are elevated and recast as iconic celebrities. But wait! Not really! Such simple consumer cameras are surely poseurs. These are not the cameras for serious photographers and photojournalists, but are intended for casual amateur snapshots. Instead of offering options for controlling focus and exposure, their appeal is as decorative talismans, meant to confer and exude fashionable status, like a necktie or a piece of jewelry.

Landweber's treatment of these cameras parallels the manufacturer's original marketing ploy with a presentation that promotes desire: large glossy prints (which were as much a luxury in the 1980s as they were in the 1950s), which take advantage of Cibachrome's deep blacks and silvery highlights to which he adds glowing halos and a dash of red. His pre-digital, pre-Photoshop method involved hand-made masks, backlighting, and multiple exposures. He explains:

I wanted to separate the cameras from the black background and came up with a technique for rimming them with light. I cut a black-paper mask a little larger than the outline of the camera and positioned the camera and the mask together on a light box, such as one used for viewing slides. I made the mask by positioning a photographic enlarger at the same height as my camera lens and printing a photogram of the camera. I then sandwiched the photogram with a piece of black velour paper and cut out a slightly larger shape than the image of the camera. I placed the black paper mask and the camera together on the light box and gave two exposures: one for the camera, which was front illuminated, and one for the light coming through the mask, which let me stop down the lens and filter the color of the glowing outline for the best effect. As one indicator of how photography has been transformed by several decades of digital photography, it's now so easy to produce an "outer glow" in Photoshop, that the possibility has become routine.⁶

I reference three time periods in this essay: the first is roughly the decade of the 1950s, when most of these cameras were made, the second is the early '80s when Landweber created the images,



Above, top to bottom:

Victor Landweber, Ansco Panda, 1983, Cibachrome (dye-bleach) print, 20 x 16 inches. From *American Cameras*. Courtesy of the artist

Victor Landweber, Brownie Starlet, 1983, Cibachrome (dye-bleach) print, 20 x 16 inches. From *American Cameras*. Courtesy of the artist

Opposite, top to bottom:

Victor Landweber, Lady Carefree, 1983, Cibachrome (dye-bleach) print, 20 x 16 inches. From *American Cameras*. Courtesy of the artist

Victor Landweber, Beacon Two-twenty five, 1983, Cibachrome (dye-bleach) print, 20 x 16 inches. From *American Cameras*. Courtesy of the artist

Victor Landweber, Tri-Vision, 1983, Cibachrome (dye-bleach) print, 20 x 16 inches. From *American Cameras*. Courtesy of the artist

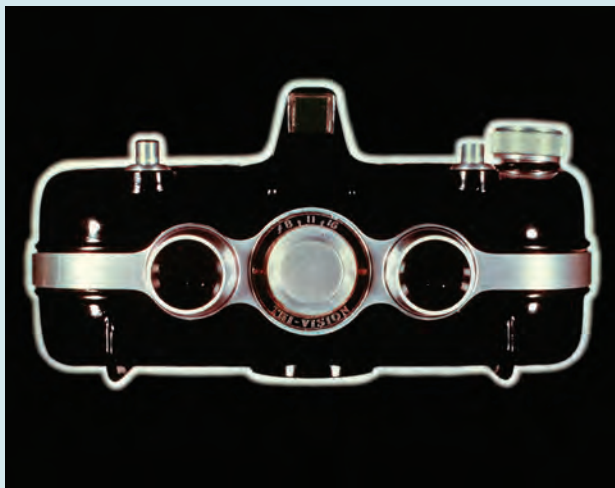


and the third is our present time and the publication of this essay in 2015.

I grew up in the 1950s and early '60s with black-and-white television, roller skate keys, hula hoops, a black Schwinn bike with fat tires that I rode everywhere, and a Brownie camera. As kids growing up in the Midwest, Landweber and I shared a cultural context. He was from Iowa and I from Missouri, and both our fathers were in the sciences. He got his first camera at twelve, and, as he is a bit older than I, I was given my Brownie at about the same time period, on my seventh birthday. He photographed a collection of sea shells using a close-up lens, and I posed my dog Pal around the house.



In the 1950s, the process of using one of these cameras was quite different from taking or making photographs in 2015. The film (typically wider and shorter than a 35mm roll and backed with opaque paper) was packaged in a foil pouch in a cardboard box. You removed the film, made certain that the last roll in the camera had been fully advanced, and opened and removed the camera back. You took out the exposed roll, licked and stuck down a paper tab to keep it tightly shut, and moved the empty spool over. You then broke the paper band holding the new roll, placed it in the camera, inserted the paper backing into a slot on the now empty spool, advanced it a bit to make certain that it was being drawn forward, closed the back of the camera, and continued to advance the film knob until the number "1" appeared in the little red exposure counter window on the camera back. By that time, you were "locked and loaded," and ready to look through the viewfinder (it was usually square). If you followed Kodak's instructions, you had the sun at your back or, if indoors, used a single-shot flash bulb. You framed—or, more accurately pointed the camera at—your subject and pressed the shutter release. Most of these cameras were designed to be "foolproof." There usually was little or no ability to control focus or exposure, and useable negatives depended on the wide exposure latitude of the Verichrome Pan film that Kodak recommended for such cameras. Simply put, these were the 1950s version of what Kodak had been selling since the late nineteenth century and were an early form of the "point-and-shoot" cameras that later became popular in the 1970s and early '80s.



I have several cameras like these in my personal "cabinet of wonders," along with several empty cans of Dektol, and other outdated

photographic ephemera. An empty D-76 developer can holds my pencils and pens next to the computer keyboard on which I am typing this essay, and nearby a huge HP Designjet printer is nestled against the wall. Slightly behind that is a poster announcing a schedule of twelve exhibitions of Landweber's *American Cameras*, which traveled between 1987 and 1989.

I first saw Landweber's photographs of cameras in 1984. I was mesmerized by them. They were stunning, commercial-like, but not commercial, immaculate, glowing icons. I knew then that I liked them, but it has taken me thirty years to fit them into the context of what has gone on in photography and art since then. *American Cameras* emanates directly from the art and artists that Landweber saw, thought about, and encountered while living in Los Angeles in the 1970s. Other artists and photographers were incorporating photography into works that broached ideas about a larger world of art: Robert Rauschenberg's *Combines*, Robert Fichter's exploration of image-making and printing possibilities, Ed Ruscha's and Wallace Berman's merger of Pop imagery and photography, John Baldessari's fusion of concept and form. Landweber, whose projects span a broad range of art-world references says, "If anyone inspired me to think that a photographer could work both diversely and coherently, it was Robert Heinecken."⁷

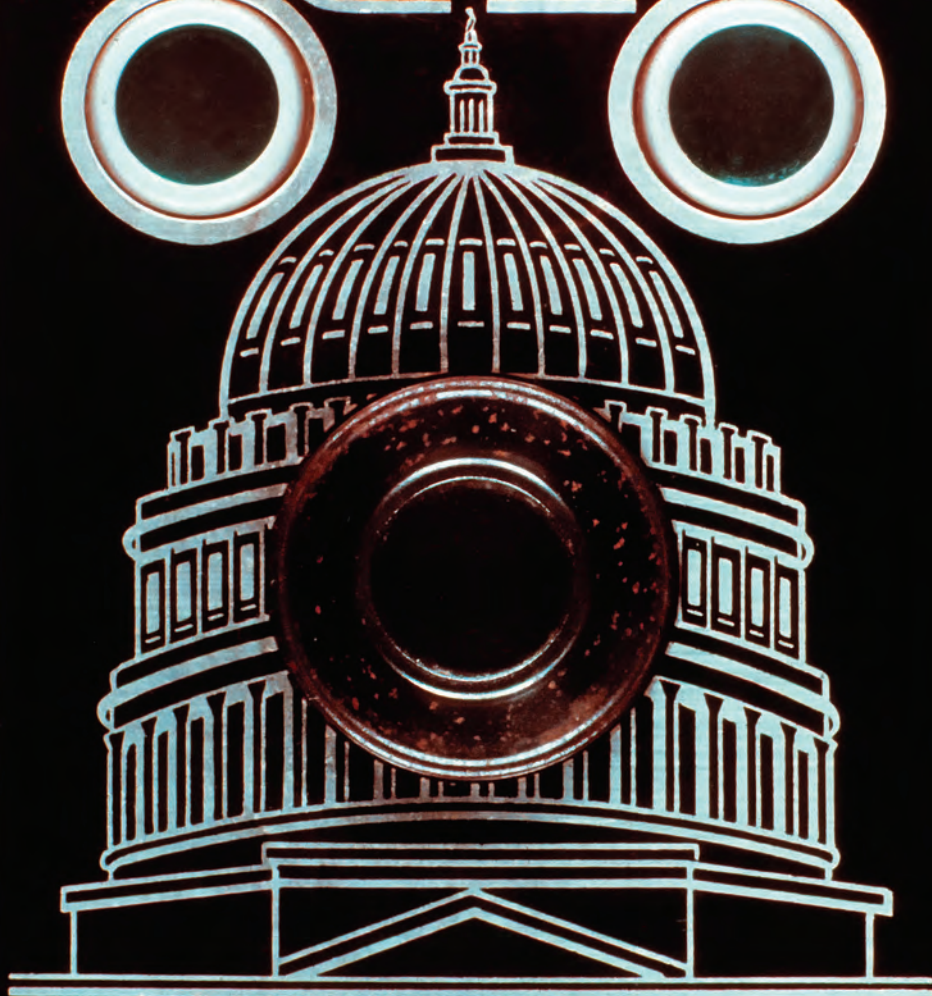
Today, these images twist and turn in the face of personal remembrances as well as social, cultural, and photographic references. I can only imagine what someone born in 1983, now in their thirties and fully invested in digital photography, would think of them. For Landweber, who was forty when he made these images, it would have been like recalling photographs from the 1920s. To remember a vision of life in the 1950s is to reclaim the past, so odd and distant from today. To fully appreciate *American Cameras*, it is worth remembering, or learning about, how life was lived in the 1950s and how ordinary people made photographs before the ubiquity of automatic digital cameras. Landweber's beautifully rendered images, anachronisms and eye-candy nuggets, can connect viewers to a place and time that mutates from the 1950s to the early 1980s and on into now.

Victor Landweber is a photographer and publisher living in Berkeley, California. His photographs have been exhibited in more than forty solo and two-artist shows and over one hundred group exhibitions. His photographs are in more than eighty public collections and appear in more than fifty books and other publications. While living in Los Angeles (1969–1987), he curated six exhibitions for the Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies, shown at the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art and the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery. His company, Landweber/Artists, has published a series of limited-edition portfolios of photographers' works, most recently *Recto/Verso* (1989) (Robert Heinecken) and *Auduboniana* (1998–2001) (Landweber's own photographs). www.landweber.com, victor@landweber.com

Mark Johnstone is an author, curator, educator, and public art advocate. He has authored essays for over fifty books and catalogues; more than 350 for periodicals; and been the curator of more than eighty exhibitions at galleries and museums in the United States, Europe, and Japan. While living in Los Angeles (1977–2004) he administered the Public Art Program for the City of Los Angeles and was vice president and exhibitions curator for Security Pacific Corporation. His writings are in special collections at Colorado College and the Center for Creative Photography. markjohnstone@twc.com

Victor Landweber,
Capitol "120", 1983,
Cibachrome (dye-
bleach) print, 16 x 20
inches. From *American
Cameras*. Courtesy of
the artist

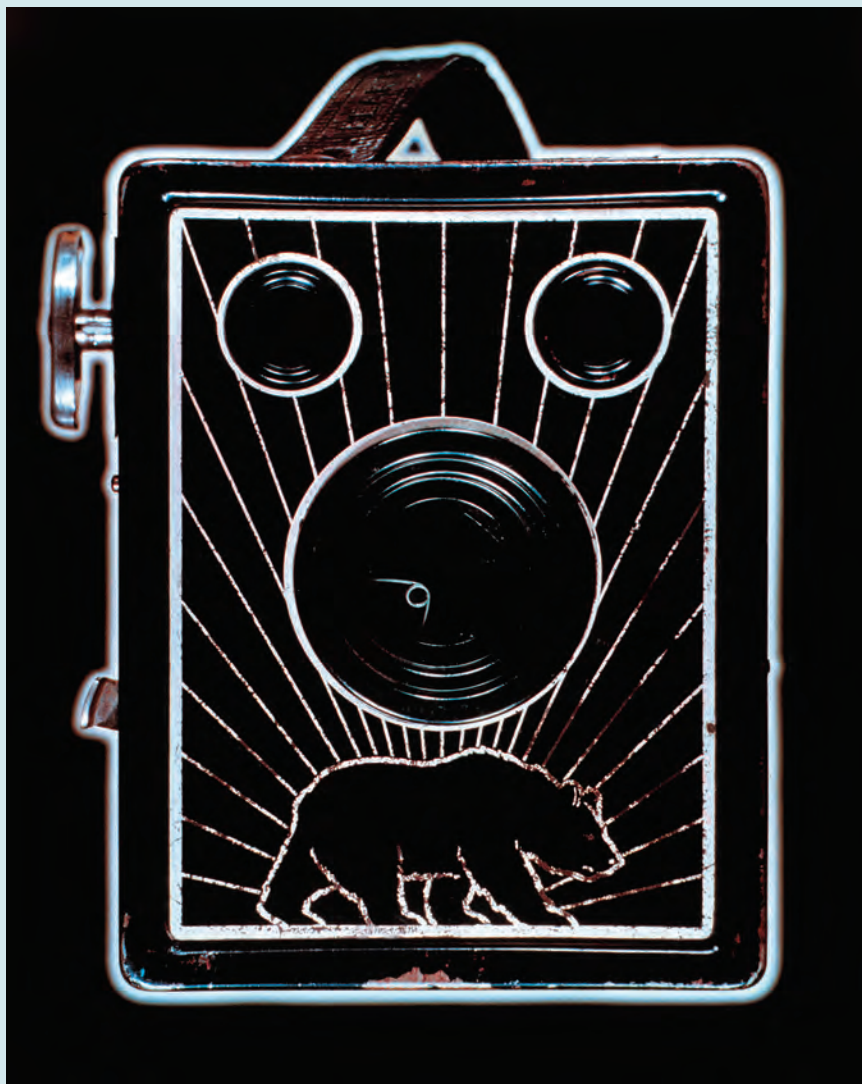
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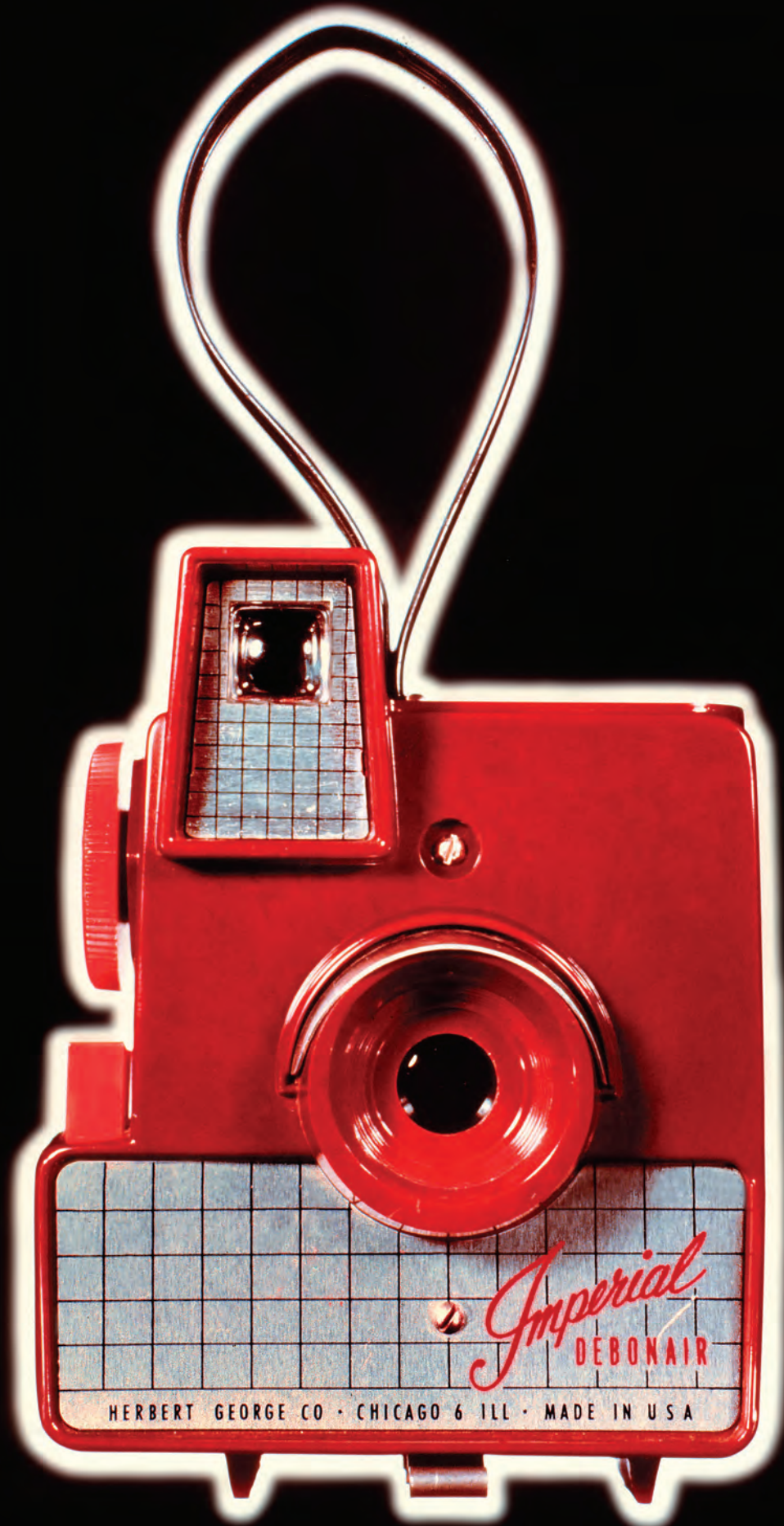
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Victor Landweber, *Bear Photo Special*, 1983, Cibachrome (dye-bleach) print, 16 x 20 inches. From *American Cameras*.
Courtesy of the artist

1. Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 261.
2. Victor Landweber, e-mail message to author, November 11, 2014.
3. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. 4–23.
4. James Hugunin, "Recent Work: 1976–1984," in *Victor Landweber Photographs, 1967–84* (San Diego: Museum of Photographic Arts San Diego, 1984), p. 19.
5. Landweber continues in his 2013 Artist's Statement, "Since encountering the art of the late 1960s and early 70s, I've wanted to apply what I could learn from looking at and thinking about art to my personal photographic projects... In the late 1970s and early 80s I carried a small camera and photographed in color in Los Angeles. Although I didn't speak of it this way at the time, I sought out subjects that I could photograph as if works of art. I now think of these color photographs as prologue to my recent project, "Photographs of Things That Look Like Art" (2008–ongoing). See www.landweber.com (accessed June 4, 2015).
6. Victor Landweber, e-mail message to author, November 11, 2014.
7. Victor Landweber, telephone conversation with author, February 26, 2015.

Opposite: Victor Landweber, Imperial Debonair, 1983, Cibachrome (dye-bleach) print, 16 x 20 inches. From American Cameras. Courtesy of the artist



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