

Digitalization changed all that. In photography, a digitalized image, which is recorded in a finite, albeit huge, number of pixels on an electronically sensitive grid, meant images could not only be endlessly manipulated, but recomposed—sautéed, stewed, stir-fried or blenderized—from pre-existing images stored in a computer. Photography could be, in other words, almost completely fiction.

The obvious and irresistible temptation for some photographers has been to dive right into the exoticism digital manipulation offers: science-fiction-like spectacle, exaggerated architectural and sociological ennui, and mysteriously melodramatic Hollywood-movie-like scenes. Subtle sensitivity and a sense of natural grace have been in short supply. Not so, however, in the photographic works of Jeffery Becton.

Becton, a cautiously articulate man whose undergraduate degree was in history, is severely self-critical in pictorial matters. He has a master of fine arts degree from Yale's rather unforgiving graphic design program, where he was taught by the likes of Alvin Eisenman and Paul Rand. "It was very difficult," Becton says, "because the only thing that came naturally to me was photography. . . . My thesis was a boxed set of portrait photographs. I probably got away with something." But Becton's broadly civilizing background in history, his boot-camp experience in graphic design, and his affinity for photography as a medium enable him to combine in his art a traditional adroitness in handling a camera (he takes his own source photographs), a skeptical respect for the power of the computer, and a deeply lived appreciation of the Maine landscape, both natural and man-made.

In 1976, Becton bought a very scenic property on French Camp Road on Deer Isle, and moved in two years later. At the time, he was shooting with both black-and-white and color film—doing a lot of portraits, and getting what audience and critical response he could by entering local and regional competitions. When the first commercial versions of the digital-photography program Photoshop became available around 1990, Becton began using them. He thereupon embarked on a twenty-five-year-project that he matter-of-factly calls "digital montage."

In his studio, where the tools are clean but the space cluttered, Becton proceeds in much the way he always has. "It takes almost nothing to interrupt your productivity," he says, "and I'm at a point where I am loath to change anything technical unless I'm convinced it will increase my creativity." Becton uses a large, flat-screen monitor to "feel" his way into a picture. He has no preconceived idea of where he's going, no formalist philosophy of composing and editing, and no conscious iconographic code.

On that last point hangs, perhaps, the lyrical solidity of Becton's work. He's of his time and place—his pictures exude "Maine" as much as any Marsden Hartley painting of Mount Katahdin—but is not bound by them.

Home and Away (2014) is a good example. It's one of Becton's most stunning and complex characteristically horizontal images, comprising a flopped iteration of another Becton photograph, Icebreaker (2014), in an antique gold frame on a weathered wall. Below, on a shelf, sits a cropped silver teapot and maybe sixty percent of

an octagonal Wedgwood plate with Chinese imagery. The composition—the jutting picture frame, the insurgent teapot, the escaping plate—is rigorous to the point of severity. But the blunt architecture of the arrangement is mitigated both by the visual cohesion of the weathered wall as background, and the interplay of strangely contrasting content.

The wall is actually the surface of a rusting ship's hull, which alludes to the distressed craft in the framed photograph-within-the-photograph, and, like the tea-service items and plate, carries an aura of the past. In Becton's work, however, this quality isn't simple nostalgia—there's no sepia longing for *The Way Things Were*—but rather a poetic affirmation of the photograph as memory: Once the shutter is snapped, once the images are digitally melded, altered and adjusted, once the work of art is electronically finished and the print is printed, their causes fade into the past.

Except that in Becton's work, they don't, entirely. Geoff Dyer, in his insightful 2005 book on photography, *The Ongoing Moment*, says that there is “a strange rule in photography, namely that we never see the last of anyone or anything.” With traditional single,unaltered images, the truth of that rule lies in the fact that the depicted people, landscapes, and artifacts stick around at least a little longer after the camera's shutter has clicked. In Becton's photographs, they return as dreams—somewhat gauzy, often (but not always) lighter-toned, but (and this is the supreme virtue of Becton's art) a psychologically much more resonant recombinant reality.

Some might say “surreality,” as in Salvador Dalí's famous description of his pictures as “hand painted dream photographs.” Becton flips this, by making what could be called “hand photographed dream paintings.” This distances his work from the lower levels of Surrealism that depend on weirdness, and elevates it to a level of pictorial beauty that's both locally grounded (there's nowhere else Becton's source material could have come from than the Maine he loves) and near-universally appreciable.

Finally, for the output of an artist who's quietly but intensely most at home in Maine and on Deer Isle, and who dislikes travel and major metropolitan art centers, Becton's photography is remarkably visually conversant with the work of other artists, particularly well-known photographers also working in large-format, digitally altered images. More to the point, he is also artistically at home on Deer Isle, paying almost sole attention to making his own pictorial ideas and aesthetic sensibilities find eloquent expression.

That the larger art world is late in paying close attention to Becton's work is at least in part due to the fact that Becton has none of the bombast and sensationalism that is practically *de rigueur* for our artistic era. Yet Jeffery Becton is a major artist. Relying on a traditional and exquisite sense of craft in the relatively untraditional medium of digital photography, his vision subtly opens us up to a new and different experience—one where the real and the beautifully imagined merge into one.

— Peter Plagens