In the Blink of an Eye

Time Stands Still: Muybridge and the Instantaneous Photography Movement
February 15–May 16

Muybridge's early stop-action photographs of Leland Stanford's trotters were not only popular with other photographers, but also inspired a number of paintings and drawings—some of which are included in this exhibition (Abe Edginton Trotting at a 2:24 Gait, 15 June 1878, albumen print, mounted as a cabinet card, 10.5 x 21 cm, from the series The Horse in Motion, Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts, Stanford University, Stanford Family Collections).

A method of accurately recording movement eluded artists for centuries. However, the invention of photography in 1839 offered hope of capturing a moment too rapid for the eye, and establishing events independently of memory, without the intervention of painters and sculptors. Moments of existence might now be preserved objectively by mechanical means.

The unique capability of photography to stop time fundamentally transformed visual perception. Time Stands Still: Muybridge and the Instantaneous Photography Movement is the first major exhibition to tell this compelling story, through 172 rare photographs, proofs, and negatives as well as related drawings and paintings. These works are drawn from the extensive Muybridge collection at the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University and from collections around the world. The show was organized for the Cantor Arts Center by Phillip Prodger, now assistant curator of prints, drawings, and photographs at the Saint Louis Art Museum. Prodger’s catalogue provides a wealth of information on Eadweard Muybridge and the instantaneous photography movement, which he describes as “founded and

Ottmar Anschütz was one of a number of photographers who were influenced by Muybridge’s experiments and significantly expanded his results. Employing the latest advances in camera lenses and photography chemistry, Anschütz produced images that surpassed Muybridge’s in clarity and detail (Storks in a Nest, 1884, nine albumen prints, about 9.4 x 13.9 cm each, Museum Ludwig, Agfa Foto-Historama, Cologne).
orchestrated by a loosely officiated community of like-minded people. It was what might be described as a vernacular movement—a grassroots upheaval, organized around a singular wish: to freeze motion in time.”

The first two of the exhibition’s six sections examine Muybridge’s predecessors, active in the 1850s and 1860s, and their attempts to record instantaneous events. However, photographic technology could not freeze rapid action until Muybridge’s work in the 1870s, which is examined along with the contributions of contemporaries inspired by his pioneering efforts. Especially important was his invention of the zoopraxiscope, which transformed still images into short animated loops, seminal for the birth of cinema. Concluding the show is a gallery of paintings, drawings, and sculptures drawn primarily from the CMA permanent collection. The work of Edgar Degas and Thomas Eakins, two artists inspired by photography in general and Muybridge’s motion images in particular, provides insight into the broad interest of artists in capturing movement and spontaneity, fixing an event in a thin slice of time.

Born in England in 1830, Muybridge immigrated to the United States in 1852, arriving in San Francisco three years later. Variously known as Muggeridge (birth name), Maybridge, and Maybridge, around 1866 he obliterated his former guises, occupations, and prior names, when, at the age of 36, he took up photography and became recognized as one of California’s best landscape photographers. Six years later he was challenged to photograph a horse in motion by Leland Stanford, president of the Central Pacific Railroad, who had been governor of California during the Civil War and a U.S. senator. A successful breeder of racehorses, Stanford was fascinated by the problem.

Proctor, in his well-researched catalogue, dispels the popular myth that Stanford had bet a large

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The ability of instantaneous photography to record objectively an ephemeral event was particularly appealing to scientists. Documentary images could be analyzed and shared easily with others.
To make Dog Named "Dread," Walking, Muybridge used the newly developed collotype process, in which the original images were transferred to glass plates. This resulted in some decrease in sharpness, but allowed the images to be enlarged, thus revealing details not visible in the actual-size contact prints (25 October 1885, gelatin silver on glass interpositive plate, manufactured by J. B. Holt Company, from the series Animal Locomotion, Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts, Stanford University).

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sum of money on the hypothesis that all four hooves leave the ground together in the gait of a galloping horse. Stanford wanted to use photographs to analyze this movement, and photography had yet to record successfully events too quick for the naked eye, due to the technological limitations of current cameras and film.

Muybridge and Stanford began a remarkable, though sometimes difficult, collaboration. His initial success at rendering motion was interrupted in 1874 when he killed his wife’s lover, Major Harry Larkyns, after learning that Larkyns had fathered the son, Florido, that Muybridge had been raising as his own. His lawyers argued for justifiable homicide; Muybridge was acquitted in a highly publicized trial. He then spent two years on a photographic trip to Central America before resuming his association with Stanford in 1876.

Two years later, now at Stanford’s new horse farm in Palo Alto, Muybridge perfected his technique for instantaneous photography, thanks in part to his patron’s funding and company technicians. He built a track and bank of cameras, making it possible to examine the incremental movement of animal legs in sequential photographs. The collaboration of Muybridge and Stanford ceased in 1881 in a dispute over credit for this achievement.

In 1884 Muybridge moved to the University of Pennsylvania, where he greatly expanded his investigations. In two years he added some 30,000 photographs to his archive, which was fashioned into 781 plates and published in 1887 as Animal Locomotion, recording a wide range of human and animal movements and activities.

Muybridge’s extraordinary combination of artistic skill and intellectual energy is easily appreciated in these images. His motion photography has deeply influenced art, science, and popular culture.

■ Tom E. Hinson, Curator of Photography