



pho'to·graph (fō'tō·gráf), n. [fr. Gr. *phōtos*, light + Gr. *graphē*, draw]

1. A drawing made with light. 2. A picture or likeness obtained by photography.

Charlotte Sullivan for a time thought of herself as a hybrid floater, the soon-to-be-discarded name of her many faceted website. She sees her hybrid work as an artist infused with or moving into other disciplines—philosophy, sociology, commercial design, cultural studies. The floating part may be changing. She may always be torn between the life of an adventurer and a deep devotion to place, but her avoidance of commitment is on the wane, as it is for many of her budding generation.

She has always considered photography central to her practice as an artist. For her it is a conceptual tool. She needs it to document what she is doing for people who are not there, and with it she is recording ideas and experiences not just objects. She also treats it, as the Greek derivation of the word suggests, as a form of drawing with light, something she wants to preserve in the face of our digital age. She had a friend take time-elapsed photos of her riding a bike at night which allowed her to draw in the landscape with a flashlight. One goal of this exercise was to document the place where she lived in an innovative way. In addition, the experience of traversing several locations looks similar but at the same time is strangely nuanced—as you pay attention to the differences in the journeys, your sense of safety or adventure subtly shifts.

Richard Wagner's god Wotan muses that "deeds never done before are what occupies my mind." Charlotte feels the same way. And yet there is something culturally embedded in her most provocative ideas. Take used coffee cups. She pulls the shots, takes the pictures, and washes the dishes. Looking at the unwashed, amazingly varied, empty cups, a friend and collaborator, Wythe Marschall, writes up fortunes—for the person who drank the coffee?—we're not sure. One fortune reads: "Death straight up. 'Death' implies not physical death but spiritual death and rebirth. The second element is key: something within you longs to get out. What have you been holding back?...Only action tempered by wisdom will get you through this year." At first the fortune seems, like horoscopes in your local paper, alarming and omniscient, but then you realize it is totally vague and general, everything is qualified and you can take it in any number of ways. You might as well read the weather report and wonder if it's really going to rain at 5 o'clock, or not. Such is popular culture—it's funny that way.

Or take the dress labels with made-up women's names, preposterous but somehow in our late capitalist world enticing, reassuring. A Jessica London design is surely right up there with a Susan Bristol ®. New York City thrift shops had to be combed to produce the hundreds of examples of this phenomenon that the artist has discovered. She mocks our consumerism while making a feminist statement, as she draws on her memory of the columns of men's names at the bottom of the U.S. Constitution. Where in history can you find such rows of women's names? The laughable women's names on dress labels are a conflicted answer to that question.

Charlotte Sullivan's work brings up a problem as old as photography itself: in what ways is it art? From seeming to be straightforward, a record of the drama of the obvious, photography has moved to a position as one of the most creative and elastic art forms practiced today. Scans of dress labels, used coffee cups, a bicyclist riding at night through a landscape—the artist wonders: what do these things really look like? Or what would an activity look like if I could actually see it? And finally, how does the purposeful assembly of these ideas and images in an art gallery alter our understanding of the world we live in?