

# R | A | M

## **RAM Showcase: Patrick Nagatani**

January 31 – October 12, 2024

*I am interested in how the photograph is also recognized less as a window on the “real,” and far more as a malleable picture space—constructed and contrived for the purpose of examining representation rather than reality. I am interested in the potential of photography to tell a story.*

Patrick Nagatani (1945 – 2017) was an artist committed to investigating the possibilities of photographic technology. Employing hand-coloring, multiple printings, and constructed scenarios, Nagatani built his photographic narratives through props, careful direction, and image manipulation. In addition to challenging the “truth” associated with photography, he touched on social, cultural, and personal issues, including nuclear power, myth-making, Chromatherapy, Japanese Americans, and the self.

A faculty member at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, Nagatani obtained his MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles, and worked in Hollywood special effects for some time on movies such as *Blade Runner* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. He was encouraged toward photography through a college drawing class. He went from creating photographic, technically precise drawings to understanding the emotional power available through photography-based image making.

RAM was gifted over 30 works by Nagatani in 2022. Comprised of pieces spanning multiple decades—specifically 1977 through 2006—the archive features various types of photographs, including 20 x 24 Polaroid prints created with a relatively rare Polaroid camera. This exhibition debuts selections from the archive in stages—consecutively showcasing the *Nagatani/Ryoichi Excavations Series*, *Chromatherapy Series*, and works related to nuclear power

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## **Artist Statements by Patrick Nagatani:**

### ***Excavations Series (1985 – 2000)***

The Nagatani/Ryoichi Excavation project is built around a narrative that offers an account of excavations undertaken by an enigmatic Japanese archaeologist, Ryoichi. In 1985, Ryoichi and his team received a set of maps which were interpreted as pointing to sites scattered throughout the world. The sites were in areas with significant archaeological or historical remains—Chaco Canyon, Herculaneum, Stonehenge—or with monuments to our own technological age—The Very Large Array, Kitt Peak National Observatory. The archaeologists spent the next fifteen years secretly excavating the sites excavated by Ryoichi's team. I present evidence of an alternative past, one in which a Jaguar automobile was ceremoniously buried within the foundations of the Observatory at Chichen Itza in the Yucatan, and a Ferrari emerges from a volcanic shroud at Herculaneum. My field photographs are the only record of Ryoichi's excavation campaign that remains.

My photographs of Ryoichi's excavations present a temporal paradox—evidence of an automobile culture which seems to parallel that of our own twentieth century, but found in widely disparate places and times. I follow Ryoichi's single-minded, almost obsessive campaign until the team confronts the last site. We read and come to know "deep history"—past before written record—from archaeological sequences read as text. The maps, the site plans, the careful record of successive layers of habitation—photographed, these elements of archaeological evidence insist on their truthfulness as scientific discourse and photographic record. I layer the elements we accept as scientific record to construct an alternate reading of the past, and alternative stratigraphy of truth and illusion. With this project, I hope to challenge us to examine the ways in which photography creates, recreates, or supports a particular history. I want to consider what we accept as evidence and why. I hope to orchestrate our understanding of the archaeologists' quest and suggest that it may have meaning for our own approach to the unknown.

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## ***Chromatherapy Series (1978 – 2007)***

In 1978, while living in Los Angeles, I found a small publication published in 1975 by Mary Anderson titled, *Colour Healing: Chromotherapy and How it Works*. This began my interest and research into the practice of "color healing." Mary Anderson in her introduction goes on to state, "*Psychologically we are all affected by color. This book explains a revolutionary new method of healing by which the rays of colored lamps are applied to diseased organs of the body, with amazingly beneficial results.*"

So for over a quarter of a century, I have gathered research on the "medical" practice of colored light healing. Influential in making some of my images has been the 1878 text of Edwin D. Babbitt, *The Principles of Light and Color: The Classic Study of the Healing Power of Color*. In the early twentieth century, The Spectro-Chrome ideas of Dinshah P. Ghadiali are illustrated in his book *Let There be Light*. This information along with the writings of Faber Birren (*Color Perception in Art*), have fueled the initial images in this work.

I am intrigued with color healing and growth through colored rays because of the existence of duality between colored lights used in this ancient medical practice and the phenomena of light as the essence of photography and color as a translator of that essence... I am not a color healer, I am a color imagist. I am interested in making images that theatrically depict colored light healing and, stated in frank terms, I am interested in creating cinematic narrative images that are medical like depictions of Chromotherapy. I have made a career of working in the directorial mode of artistic photography. With this work, I hope to juxtapose social, sexual, and political issues along with new theories in anatomy, astronomy, biology, physics, and medicine, within the overlay of color and light as healing and growth mechanism, and color and light as photographic tool.

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## ***Nuclear Enchantment Series (1988–93)***

The historical, as well as the contemporary, development of the nuclear industry, as well as its impact on [New Mexico] has been my prime emphasis of investigation. A concern of this work is to promote a dialogue with and about the contemporary/historical landscape of the state that contains the most extensive nuclear weapons research, management, training, and testing facilities and organizations in the United States.

My intentions are to raise public consciousness about the effects of New Mexico's nuclear industry which continues to grow despite the damage it has already caused and will continue to bring to the state. The series, *Nuclear Enchantment*, attempts to awaken the many New Mexicans who still believe nuclear power poses no threat and that defense spending promotes the economy. Culturally and geographically connected to Mexico, it is perceived by the elite powers as a place that can be abused and even reduced to rubble.

Are we a society so blinded by the powers of science that we will continue to support a destructive industry rather than seeking alternative solutions? Many of the photographs in *Nuclear Enchantment* are of actual sites presided over by a cast of ancient mythic figures. I hope that they are captivating and enigmatic. I want them to remind us of the spiritual poverty of the technical age. In some of the work I use figures from the great nineteenth century Japanese woodblock artist Hiroshige whose art commented on Japan's transition from ancient Shintoism to Westernization—a path that ultimately led to Hiroshima.

## ***Nagatani/Tracey Polaroid Collaborations (1983–89)***

The collaboration began in 1983 when Nagatani was offered two days use of a 20 x 24 inch Polaroid camera. He was a photographer, Andrée Tracey was painter, and they occupied studios in the same Los Angeles building. Tracey's sensibilities coalesced with Nagatani's ideas and set design experience, and with this alliance, their collaboration was launched. [They used] aspects of photography, painting, installation, and performance. Working in a theatrical way, [they] expanded the boundaries of large format Polaroid 20 x 24 inch photography. The recurring theme through much of this work is the threat, the chaos, and the consequences surrounding a nuclear episode. Both artists appear as actors in elaborately constructed and intensely colored images which are peppered with irony and humor despite the darkness that the work forecasts.