

ART

# Ghost in the Machine

At ClampArt, Brian Buckley  
conjures myth from chemicals

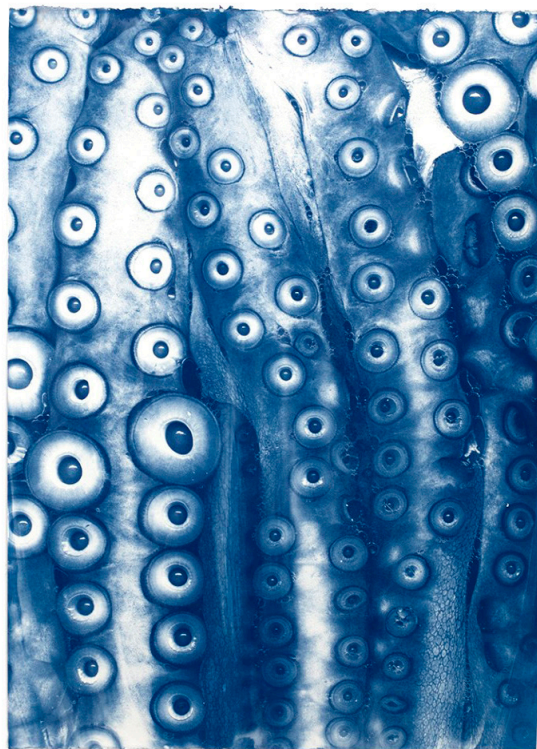
BY R.C. BAKER

In our age of instant, effortlessly distributed snapshots, we might forget that photography was once a laborious, magical-seeming art form. The visceral chemical interactions that created an early photograph echo Genesis in the Bible: “Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, ‘Let there be light.’” Indeed, for roughly the past two centuries—before the advent of pixels on screen—photographs were born of light striking surfaces coated with exactly applied emulsions until ephemeral forms slowly (sometimes excruciatingly so) coalesced into a landscape, portrait, animal, or any other subject that lenses have been pointed at.

The rich blue tones of the cyanotypes in Brian Buckley’s exhibition “Ghost Ship” conjure a sense of ancient waters ravaged by the gods. Dark waves in 2017’s *Another Strange Island* seem ready to engulf the viewer, the craggy isle on the high, distant horizon offering dubious refuge—of a piece with a title implying characters on a daunting adventure. Buckley’s father taught Homer’s *Odyssey* at City College, and the classic Greek tale is referenced in this show through images of battered statues, sailboats, frayed strands of rope, and sea monsters. The cyanotype method was invented in the mid-1800s and uses a blend of iron solutions painted onto paper or cloth to produce, when exposed to light, a broad range of cyan tones (architects’ blueprints are one of the longstanding examples of the process).

Buckley (born 1969) employs sponges, brushes, and other tools to apply multiple coats of the chemicals to the watercolor paper, leaving evidence of individual hardwork throughout these roughly two-by-two-and-a-half-foot prints. In *Samos Figure* (2017), scratches across the headless statue’s torso imply a rough journey from antiquity, a mood enhanced by the deckled edges of the watercolor-paper ground. The wavering tentacles surrounding the gelatinous body in *Octopus (Ascend)* cast spectral shadows, the bulbous creature seeming to glow from within as it drifts across a midnight-blue background, implying those fathomless depths where sunrays go to die.

Early on, the cyanotype process was sometimes used for “shadowgraphs,” in which objects would be laid upon the treated paper and exposed to light, creating negative silhouettes. In 1843 the English botanist Anna Atkins published *Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions*, the first photography book ever printed. (The swooping lines and intricate traceries found in Atkins’s studies might recall for some viewers Terry Winters’s nature-based “Schema” drawings of the 1980s.) In *Untitled (Ghost Ship VII)*, Buckley expanded on Atkins’s innovations by placing a sailboat model on the prepared surface, the long exposure achieving a sense of three-dimensionality through subtle shadows and fading forms, a pale vision welling out of the gloom like the *Flying Dutchman* in a dream. Buckley learned his craft in commercial labs in New York’s photo district, where, for



The deep blue sea:  
*Leda* (2017)

decades, artists had slides of their work developed, fashion photographers could quickly turn around contact sheets, and ad designers were able to obtain four-color proofs 24-7. Since the rise of jpegs, only a few survivors remain of the dozen labs that once ranged from Chelsea to the Flatiron district, a bygone landscape of light tables, and hulking processing machines that smelled of developer and fixing baths. But Buckley’s expertise in analog techniques—mixing chemicals, saturating paper, exposing

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contact prints and photograms—brings this world back, lending his imagery a physical intimacy beyond the surfeit of raw information and superfluous detail that is the specialty of our digital age.