

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Elegant Images of Ancient Egypt

Stephen West · Wednesday, September 11th, 2019

Ever since its invention in the early 19th century, photography has been a way to describe the world, a form of scientific pursuit as much as artistic expression. And one of the earliest practitioners of photography as science was John Beasley Greene, a young American who learned the new technology in France and put it to use in the Middle East.

The [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](#) has just opened a fine exhibition of 90 of Greene's photographs from Egypt and Algeria. Using waxed-paper negatives rather than cumbersome glass plates, Greene's views of the desert and its ancient monuments are elegant and austere, with a soft and luminous sepia tone to the prints. They were designed to be an archaeological record of a lost civilization, yet they're also an impressive artistic statement.

Greene, who grew up in a wealthy banking family, studied photography under the French master Gustave Le Gray and traveled to Egypt at least twice, in 1853-54 and 1854-55. His plan was to document ancient monuments and their hieroglyphic inscriptions and present the work to a branch of the Institut de France. Back in Paris, he also published portfolios of his photographs for the general public.

His image of the Pyramid of Cheops in Giza (above), from 1853-54, is a model of simplicity. He divides the frame between a cloudless sky above and a landscape of the pyramid rising from rocky hills below. There are no people, no trees, no signs of life, nothing but the undulating hills contrasting with the strict triangular geometry of the pyramid.



John Beasley Greene, *Karnak, Hypostyle Hall, Northern Wall, Interior, No. 3*, 1854, Musee d'Orsay, Paris.

By contrast, *Karnak, Hypostyle Hall, Northern Wall, Interior, No. 3* of 1854 shows a jumble of standing and fallen columns, all inscribed with hieroglyphics, next to a stone wall on the right with a large image of a standing female figure. It's a much more complex composition, with odd angles, bright light, and deep shadows.



John Beasley Greene, *Giza, Sphinx*, 1853-54, Bibliotheque national de France, Paris.

Most of Greene's images are straightforward, almost scientific in their directness, such as *Giza, Sphinx* of 1853-54. Like his picture of the Pyramid of Cheops, this portrait of the Sphinx shows the

gigantic sculpture rising from a barren landscape, with a deep excavation hole in front and a distant pyramid in the background. The head is badly eroded, while the body is still encased in the rocky soil that preserved it for thousands of years. Again, there are no signs of life anywhere.



John Beasley Greene, *View of Houses in Cairo*, 1854-55, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal.

A few of the pictures in the show—and some of the most interesting—focus on 19th-century Egypt rather than the country's ancient monuments. Greene's *View of Houses in Cairo* of 1854-55, for example, features a jumble of multistory buildings with enclosed balconies that almost look like small houses themselves.

Greene traveled to Algeria in 1855-56 to document an archaeological excavation in the French colony. The show includes a few of his Algerian images, including striking views of the hilltop city of Constantine, though they lack the sculptural power of the Egyptian monuments.

Greene was clearly an energetic and talented young man, and if he had taken a full career's worth of photographs of the quality seen in this show, he might have been counted among the early masters of the medium, like his mentor Le Gray. Instead, sadly, he died in Cairo in 1856 at the age of 24.

Signs and Wonders: The Photographs of John Beasley Greene runs through January 5 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third Street, San Francisco. The show will be on view at the Art Institute of Chicago from February 8 to May 25, 2020. An extensive catalog is published by DelMonico Books-Prestel.

Top image: John Beasley Greene, Giza, Pyramid of Cheops, or Khufu, 1853-54, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., purchased as a gift of W. Bruce and Delaney H. Lundberg.

Trouble in Paradise



Lisa Reihana, detail of *In Pursuit of Venus*, 2015-17, Ultra HD video, 64 minutes. Image courtesy of the artist and New Zealand at Venice; with support of Creative New Zealand and NZ at Venice Patrons and Partners.

Western artists' exploration of the "primitive" world—think Gauguin in Tahiti, or Picasso's African masks, or John Beasley Greene in Egypt—gets a completely different treatment in an ambitious new video work by the New Zealand artist Lisa Reihana, now on view at the [de Young Museum](#) in San Francisco.

Reihana's *In Pursuit of Venus [infected]* reimagines an idealized French view of Polynesians after they were "discovered" by Captain James Cook on his voyages to the Pacific in the 1760s and 1770s. Based on Jean Gabriel Charvet's *Native Peoples of the South Pacific* of 1804-06—a huge, mural-like set of wallpaper that depicts frolicking natives in an island paradise—Reihana's video presents a much more skeptical view. (The video and the wallpaper are displayed in adjacent galleries.)



Joseph Dufour et Cie, printer, and Jean Gabriel Charvet, designer, *Native Peoples of the Pacific Ocean*, about 1804–06, block-printed opaque watercolor on paper, panels 8 and 16 reproductions by Garth Benton. Museum purchase, gift of Georgia M. Worthington and the Fine Arts Museums Trustees Fund; photograph by Randy Dodson; image courtesy of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

The French wallpaper, about 35 feet wide and made of 20 separate rolls of woodblock-printed paper, shows the Polynesians fishing in small boats, strolling along the shore, picking bananas from a tree. A group of three bare-breasted young women dance in a circle as if they're the Three Muses of ancient Greece. The nearest thing to violence is a group of four young men engaged in wrestling matches.

Reihana's 70-foot-wide projected video shows Cook's men, many in red-coated uniforms, as they explore an island and edgily encounter the Polynesian locals. With their ships anchored in the distance, the Brits pitch their tents, raise the flag, survey the scene through telescopes, stand at attention, paint pictures of the landscape, occasionally shoot their muskets. One sailor is flogged in front of others.

The Polynesians dance, practice fighting in pantomime, trade with the Brits, or dance with them, or threaten them with knives or spears. In one case, an islander stabs a British officer from behind, a reenactment of Cook's 1779 death by stabbing in Hawaii. A soundtrack of ominous music and garbled bits of English and Polynesian speech runs throughout the hourlong video.



Installation view of *Lisa Reihana: In Pursuit of Venus*, de Young Museum, San Francisco, 2019; image courtesy of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

The work combines a cast of actors in costume who are set against a painted background that evokes the French wallpaper's idealized landscape. Reihana's banana tree, for example, is as cartoonish as the one in the wallpaper. And the entire scene moves slowly to the left, with new figures and scenes appearing on the right, as if in an extremely slow cinematic pan. It takes about five minutes for the scene to change entirely.

It all adds up to a mesmerizing story, one that's undoubtedly closer to the historical truth than the utopian image in the wallpaper.

Lisa Reihana: In Pursuit of Venus [infected] and the accompanying French wallpaper are on view through January 5 at the de Young Museum, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco. They will be exhibited at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which jointly acquired the works with the de Young, at an undetermined date in the future.

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