

# GHOSTS IN THE MIRROR



I was quite pleased with the special Blurb edition of the review of theatre/archaeology that Mike Pearson and I just published (good quality imagery, reasonable typography and layout) [Link] [Link]

So I ran up a new portfolio of my rephotographed daguerreotypes – “Ghosts in the Mirror”.



Ghosts in the Mirror by Michael Shanks

Here is how I describe the project:

The daguerreotype is one of the earliest of photographic media; the process was made available to the public in 1839. Images are formed in a camera on polished light sensitive silver-plated copper-on mirrors. These are not just simply early photographs. They are unique one-off images, and positive-negative—you have to catch the mirrored surface at the right angle, reflecting a dark background, for the image to appear. Millions were produced between 1840 and 1860. Most were posed portraits. Most of the names of the people in the relatively few daguerreotypes that survive have been forgotten.

Daguerreotypes are delicate, scratch easily, oxidize and fade. My archaeological sensibilities draw me to those that are damaged, discarded, neglected. A few years ago I gathered a collection of about fifty. All have lost their protective cases. Many appear blank at first glance. These degraded images are hard to find, even on eBay, because no one wants them, but then they are cheap when you do find them. All mine are the small standard sixth plate size—2 3/4 by 3 1/4 inches.

I wanted to share the experience of looking at these quite extraordinary things, though there is no substitute for holding them in the palm of your hand. I couldn't at first capture well with a camera or lighting technique the images left in the tainted mirrored surfaces. But then I discovered that my scanner picked up what you couldn't or could hardly see by just looking at the plate. Later I managed to get the lighting right and could catch the portraits in high magnification, and daguerreotypes are well known for their extraordinarily high resolution.

These are uncanny images. The people in the mirrored surface come alive again, portraits reincarnated through re-mediation, re-photography. If we consider that archaeology is work done upon the remains of the past, then these images are a kind of media archaeology.

So degraded, ruined, yet present, and even with the medium so conspicuously apparent, the image behind a veil of decay. I am reminded intensely of Adorno's aphorism—"the best magnifying glass is a splinter in the eye".

We sometimes think that the way to reproduce presence, a sense of of “being here”, is through rich immersive media. To the contrary, these tiny, almost opaque windows, or rather mirrors on the past, bridge the temporal gap between then and now through the faintest of traces.