

Under the Sun: The Arizona School of Photography

The Steinfeld Gallery
March 7 to March 28, 2026
Reception March 7, 4PM to 8PM

Whenever the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government.”

— Thomas Jefferson

Under the Sun: The Arizona School of Photography brings together six photographers with MFA degrees from the School of Art at the University of Arizona’s graduate program – Photography, Video & Imaging (PVI). Their work has been shaped by study and teaching in that program and reflects a shared commitment to rigorous inquiry, experimentation and critical engagement fostered through university-based photographic education.

The School of Art’s PVI program has been ranked by U.S. News and World Report as third in the U.S.A for several consecutive years following institutions such as Yale University and the University of California, Los Angeles—schools with substantially larger endowments and resources. This sustained recognition underscores the program’s academic strength, mentorship, and national influence within contemporary photography.

Presented at a time when universities and education in general are under attack by the current administration, *Under the Sun* affirms the essential role of higher education in cultivating artistic practice and intellectual development. The works on view do not address this political moment directly; rather, the quality and range of their work stand as evidence of what education makes possible: conceptual depth, technical mastery and sustained artistic research. The exhibition highlights a lineage of teaching and learning that has shaped generations of photographers and contributed meaningfully to the field.

Artists –

Stephanie Burchett, MFA 2018

Daniel Cheek, MFA 2013

C. E. Fitzgerald, MFA 2018

Serge J-F. Levy, MFA 2015

Jacinda Russell, MFA 1999

Kaitlyn Jo Smith, MFA 2020

Joseph Labate, Curator

Art Matters

DISCLAIMER: The below opinions are mine alone and I do not represent the University of Arizona or the photography program in its School of Art or the artists presented in this exhibition.

The American president elected in 2024 and his oppressive administration have been, among a great many other targets, relentlessly assaulting education and art. Art matters. Always. But it becomes especially important in these disturbing times. Art gives form to experiences that are hard to explain—grief, joy, memory, injustice, transcendence. Where language becomes inadequate, art allows people to *see, feel, and recognize* shared meaning. It helps us understand ourselves.

When the world feels uncertain and troubled, art helps us breathe. It gives shape to feelings we may not yet understand. Art can hold difficult truths. In this way, art reminds us that we are not alone. It turns private emotion into shared experience and that shared experience builds connection and strength.

In difficult moments, everything can feel overwhelming and chaotic. Art creates space to pause and reflect instead of simply react. It helps us make sense of what is happening and can protect hope. It shows that beauty and meaning still exist, even under harsh conditions. To make art is to assert that life is more than survival or productivity. Art insists that imagination, beauty and expression matter—even, and especially, in times of crisis. To create something is to reclaim a sense of agency and dignity. Currently, art is not a luxury. It is resilience. It helps us endure, understand, and remain fully human.

Joseph Labate, Curator
Under the Sun: The Arizona School of Photography

Over the summer of 2025, I made more than 200 tintype photographs at Greeley Hat Works in my hometown of Greeley, Colorado. Established in 1909, the shop continues the tradition of crafting custom cowboy hats by hand for ranchers, rodeo and musical performers, and working people across the West and around the world.

I was drawn to the parallels between hat making and tintype photography — both trades that emerged in the nineteenth century, and both defined by a dangerous intimacy with materials. The earliest hatters and photographers worked with mercury, collodion, and silver nitrate. Each produced an artifact that captured identity: the hat a signature of the individual, the tintype a lasting impression of a person or place.

At Greeley Hat Works, each customer is measured with a conformateur, a nineteenth-century French device that records the exact contours of the head. The hats are shaped and sanded by hand, finished with a stamped leather band inside the crown. These photographs represent the tools and objects that bring the hats to life, the steamers, shapers, and irons worn smooth by decades of use, as well as portraits of the craftspeople who carry that history forward. The visual qualities of the tintype process, the unpredictable chemical marks, the extreme contrast between dark shadows and bright highlights — echo the physical character of the hat-making tools themselves, which are marked by years of use and wear. Both the photograph and the tool carry the evidence of their making on their surface. The process leaves a trace, and so does the labor.

My practice and teaching are largely rooted in documentary and digital image making, fast, immediate, and driven by the moment. In a world of fast fashion and faster images, we have grown apathetic to the act of making and the weight of what we consume. A custom hat takes weeks to produce. A tintype takes many minutes. Working with the people at Greeley Hat Works, we all waited together in anticipation for the image to appear — that collective pause returned the magic I fell in love with in the darkroom. In a world saturated with images, the slowness of the process felt like a radical act.

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DANIEL CHEEK
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ARTIST STATEMENT

Working in national, state, and local parks, as well as public lands, I am looking at the historic and contemporary ways people travel through and experience the outdoors. I am interested in authentic experiences and the ways we directly interact with our surroundings. I believe that through interpretation of the ways we experience places that are considered natural, we learn more about how we want to live in our own environment. When we want to experience nature, we often drive to the nearest park, when we have made our way past the parking lots and visitor centers, we are guided by trails and signs and guardrails. My work looks at this experience and how these types of things may affect our view of what nature is. Where does nature begin and where does the built environment end? What does it mean to be “out in nature” versus just being outdoors?

C. E. Fitzgerald
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I never imagined myself making self-portraits. Somewhere along the way that all changed. I placed my camera on a tripod, disrobed and stepped in front of the lens.

I think about place more than I think about my body. I am drawn to certain spaces like a moth to a flame, or a naked mole to a cholla.

There is an awkwardness to many of my pictures, a distilled version of life reflected back at me. Total desperation. Pure vulnerability. That is what I am aiming for.

Veni, Vidi, Flevi

(I came, I saw, I wept)

If I could step back far enough, I'm sure I could see the earth falling off its axis. There's no need to measure how many meters a glacier has receded, nor personally witness Texas-sized garbage islands floating in the ocean: I hear fewer birds, I see plants marching toward the poles, and I can smell the brown particulate hovering over the remote horizons I walk upon.

Civilization is dying, yet somehow humans persist. With each search, swipe and like, black holes of innovation swallow more pieces of our humanity. Landscape falls in there too; it's a hungry abyss where nothing is spared.

The tea leaves frown upon our future.

A world where everything—plant, animal, rock formation—was granted citizenship might be slower: perhaps slow enough to give us the time to adapt to our human mistakes. Yet if we granted plants their rightful personhood, we would realize we are pillorying our people. I hang my head even lower in grief for the injustices imposed upon fellow animate beings who share consciousness and feeling.

When I look at how we treat each other, it is no wonder how we treat the non-human world. When I look at how we treat ourselves, it is no wonder how we treat each other. So now I travel to the places where my apologies can be heard, alone, with the citizens of the world I believe in.

Serge J-F. Levy

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Art Department, 2013 – present
Jacinda Russell

I was born into an Art Department and have spent all but three years of my life there. My father was a painting and drawing professor at Boise State University where, as a child, I watched him grade, helped him rearrange drawing chairs to face the modeling stand, and stared out the windows while he completed administrative tasks. Later, I would attend the same school, switch my major from creative writing to studio art, and enroll in the courses of the professors who had known me since birth. I moved to Tucson for a graduate degree and after seven years as an adjunct instructor, obtained a tenured photography position.

It was not long before I noticed history repeating itself in the stories my father told and those that I witnessed firsthand. In 2013, I began documenting 66 years in an Art Department from the perspectives of the student and the professor. In *Under the Sun*, straightforward photographs of the pedagogical environment depict emptiness as a blank slate for creativity, what remains after moving to a new building, an early retirement, a loss of voice, and a resignation.

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My interdisciplinary studio research examines the socioeconomic impact that emerging technologies have on America's working class. Drawing on my rural upbringing and youth spent in the Rust Belt during the Great Recession, my practice explores the intersections between work and worship. Through both traditional photographic means and the implementation of automated technologies and machine learning, my practice challenges the authority of algorithms while fostering a dialogue around humankind's current and future relationship to work.

On display are a selection of photographs from the series *Antithesis of a Revelation* (2018-25). *Antithesis of a Revelation* wrestles with the cyclical nature of grief and a newfound understanding of family. A revelation is an unveiling of something unknown. Its antithesis is a conscious act of concealment—to deliberately hide or obscure information. Set against a leveled midwestern horizon, this work weaves together nearly a decade of lived reality with my own internal imaginings in an attempt to cope with my parents' separation and the loss of my childhood home. By intertwining the biblical stories of my youth with personal narratives and familial lore, *Antithesis of a Revelation* offers a cathartic examination of what it means to simultaneously grow together while drifting apart.