

# Galleries: A picture-perfect time for pictures at Haverford

By [Edith Newhall, For The Inquirer](#)

POSTED: October 30, 2011

There's no better time to meander through Haverford College's leafy campus than the present, when the leaves are crimson and orange and three of the college's five art galleries are simultaneously putting on their own brilliant displays.

It's also an opportune moment to immerse yourself in photography, which happens to be the medium of choice through early December at the Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery, the Atrium Gallery in the Marshall Fine Arts Building, and the Magill Library's Alcove Gallery.

The railroad is king again in the shows at the Atrium and Alcove galleries - "Walker Evans in Color" at the former (Evans shot many a train, you'll be reminded) and "The Railroad in the Landscape" at the latter, both organized by Haverford professor of fine arts William Earle Williams. The Cantor Fitzgerald's "Through the Plain Camera: Small and Shapely Pleasures in Contemporary Photography," of works by five contemporary photographers, has nothing to do with trains, but its curators, Sarah Kaufman (Haverford College '03) and Rebecca Robertson (Bryn Mawr College '00) are former students of Williams.

Evans famously put down color photography as "vulgar," but the 32 color photographs of trains in the **Atrium Gallery**, taken by Evans for Fortune magazine in the 1950s for photo essays documenting the decline of the American railroad, are as plainspoken and eloquent as any of his black-and-white images. Only color film, you realize, could have caught the enduring appeal of the boxcar, its flat, familiar brown, maroon, or yellow (some minimalist painters have to have borrowed from these), and its stylish logos - Great Northern, Wabash, Northern Pacific, and Atlantic Coast Line among them.

*(10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays through Fridays, 12 to 5 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays, through Dec. 4.)*

By contrast, the **Alcove Gallery's photographs** (by early and contemporary photographers), which Williams culled from Haverford's own collection (of which he is curator), depict the railroad and its trains in the landscape of the American West. In the show's 19th-century prints (William Henry Jackson, A.J. Russell, others), transcontinental travel is being promoted and celebrated; in its contemporary images (Mark Ruwedel, Scott Connorroe, others), rail travel is edging towards obsolescence.

*(9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Mondays through Fridays, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays, through Dec. 4.)*

The **Cantor Fitzgerald's "Through the Plain Camera"** brings together the works of Jessica Backhaus, Elizabeth Fleming, Vita Litvak, Christian Patterson, and Shen Wei, all of whom the show's curators, Kaufman and Robertson, deem to be heirs apparent to the snapshot manner of photography championed from the late 1960s onward by the late John Szarkowski, the Museum of Modern Art's influential curator of photography.

Looking at the works in this exhibition, you quickly realize that the prevalence of staged photography has made it difficult to discern the real thing from the constructed and Photoshopped, and how challenging it must be to identify and shoot the surprising, fresh, indelible image when working in the shadows of such snapshot masters as Lee Friedlander, Stephen Shore, and Gary Winogrand. But these five young photographers have snared some very compelling pictures and have also developed distinct individual styles.

Backhaus, a German based in Berlin and the oldest of the five by two years (born in 1970), has the most recognizable aesthetic. Her large color close-ups of a faucet and a bar of soap, candy-colored plastic clothespins on a windowsill, and a crumpled green tea can on a sidewalk display an eye perfectly attuned to serendipity.

There's a touch of the macabre in Elizabeth Fleming's close-up photographs of a child lying on its back, naked from its chest up, with blue ink or paint drawn on an eyebrow; a sink with a repulsive-looking melting red Popsicle in it; and an anonymous gray sofa with a dark stain on one of its seat cushions. Fleming, a Philadelphia-born photographer based in New Jersey, is at her best, I think, when she suggests no overtly creepy narrative, as in her pictures of dust bunnies under a bed and trash tied up in a clear plastic bag.

Interestingly, the youngest of the five, San Francisco-based Litvak (born 1980 in Moldova), stands out as the truest heir to her American elders (Shore, in particular), with her image of a chunk of ice sitting on a stone wall; a stand of flamboyant trees intercepted above by telephone wires and behind by an illuminated red brick wall that could pass for a glowing electrical light; and a palm tree at night, lit from the bottom, its trunk glowing like a neon sign.

*(11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays through Fridays, 12 to 5 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays, through Dec. 11.)*

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