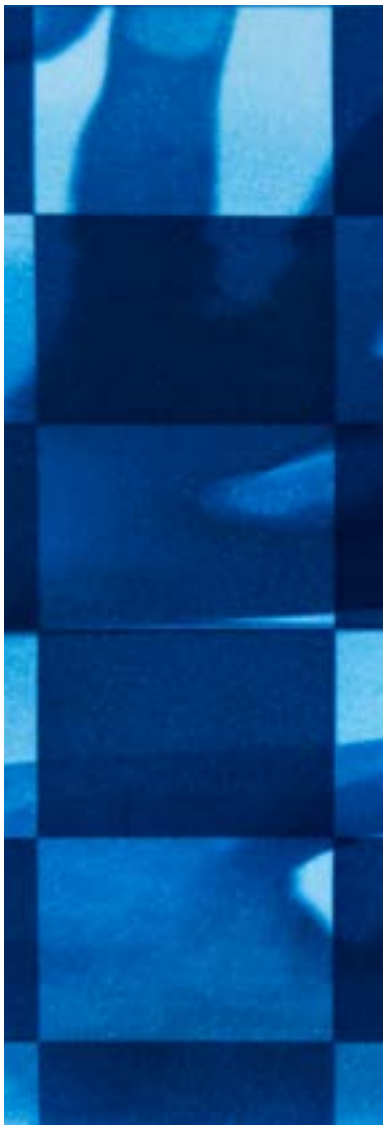


Cyanotypes in a Digital World.

Integrating Modern Technology

Author & Photo: Mattie Bell

Introduction

TEXT
Mattie Bell

PHOTO
Mattie Bell

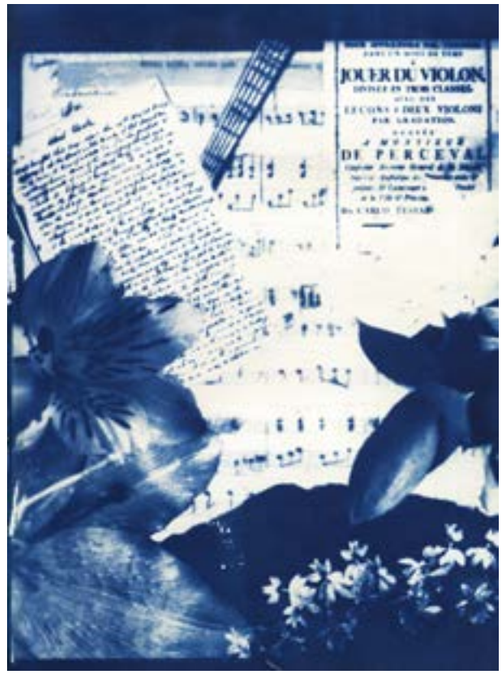
Photography education today exists at the intersection of tradition and innovation. Digital technology has changed how we capture, manipulate, and share images. Historic photographic processes can offer an irreplaceable tactile and experimental experience for our students. Integrating digital tools with alternative processes provides a unique opportunity to capture the attention of contemporary learners while immersing them in the physical aspects of photographic creation.

Despite a growing body of research on photography's role in developing visual literacy, much of it focuses on analysis and interpretation rather than production. My goal is to bridge that gap by exploring how hybrid approaches, combining digital and historical photographic techniques, can enhance students creative process and critical thinking. The outcome will be a look at how digital process and cyanotypes can be used by educators to implement these methods effectively in the classroom.

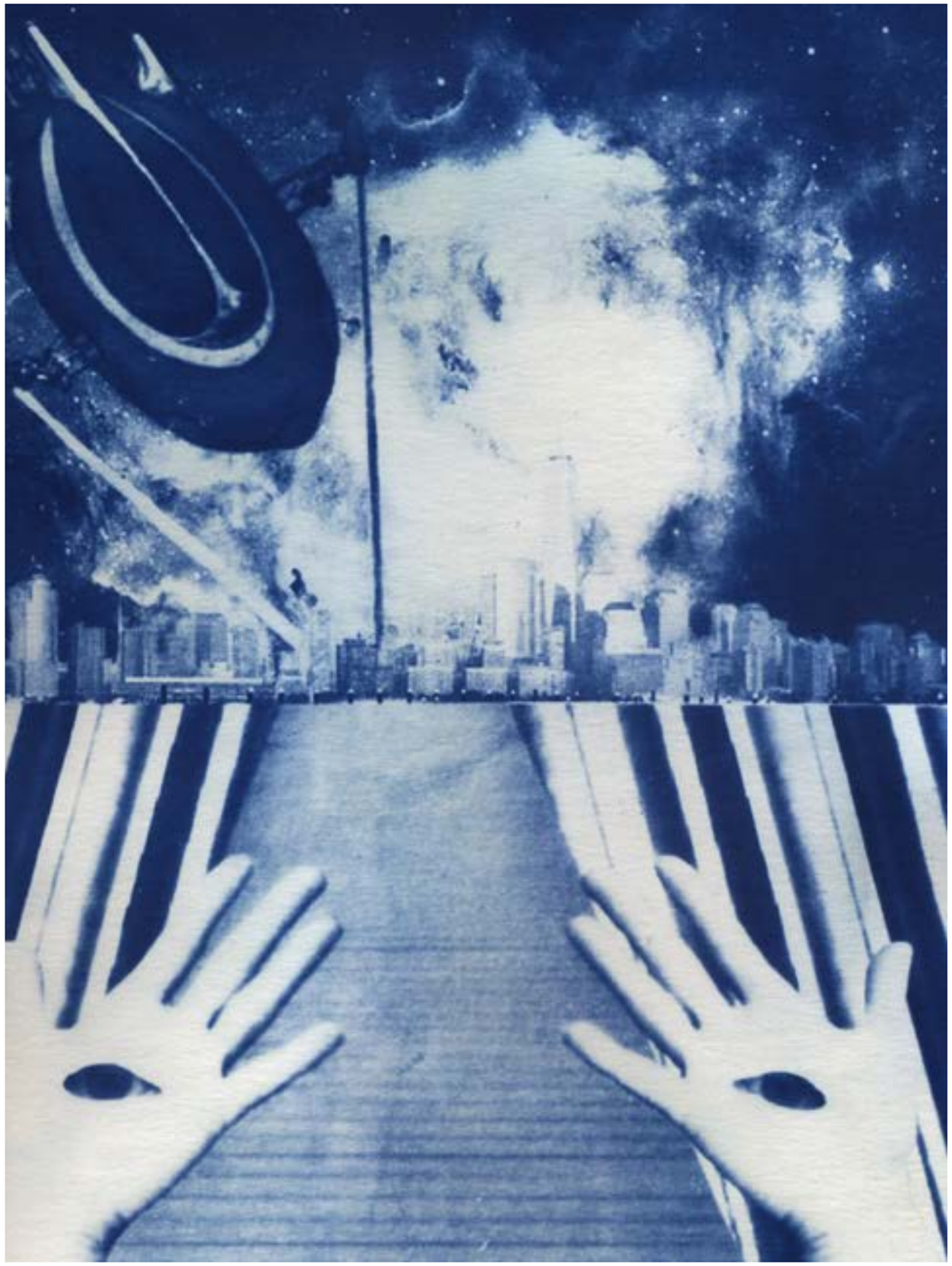
Part II: Hybrid Processes in Photograpy

Cyanotype, one of the earliest photographic printing methods, involves coating paper or fabric with a photosensitive solution and exposing it to UV light. When combined with digital negatives, images printed on transparency film, it bridges the gap between digital and analog photography.

This exercise encourages students to engage with fundamental photographic principles, such as contrast, negative space, and composition. The physical process of making a print reinforces their understanding of photographic exposure and tonal range, while reflecting on their creative decisions helps develop analytical skills.



Sudent Examples from the Surrealist Collage Cyanotypes lesson plan. Top Row R & L: Valerie Sacerdoti and Insha Hadwani. Bottom Row R & L: Gabrielle Goodson and Cooper Hill.



Lesson Plan: Surrealist Collage Cyanotypes

TEXT
Mattie Bell

PHOTOS
Student Work - Sophie Greenhalgh

Lesson Plan: Surrealist Collage Cyanotypes

Grade Level: High School (9–12)

Duration: 5–6 class periods (50 minutes each)

Standards: Georgia Standards of Excellence for Visual Arts (VAHSSCPA, VAHSVAMC, VAHSPACU, VAHSRE)

Big Idea

Exploring surrealism through alternative photographic processes expands students' understanding of both art history and expressive possibilities in mixed-media compositions.

Essential Question

How can alternative photographic processes, such as cyanotypes, be used to create surrealistic art?

Learning Target

Students will create a surrealist-inspired cyanotype collage by combining transparent objects, cut-out images, and found materials on treated paper, understanding the chemistry and history behind the cyanotype process.

Success Criteria

- Students can explain the basic cyanotype process and how to work with UV light exposure.

-Students can identify and incorporate principles of surrealism (e.g., juxtaposition, dreamlike imagery).

-Students create a cyanotype collage that demonstrates thoughtful arrangement, contrast, and cohesion.

Materials Needed

- Pre-treated cyanotype paper or cyanotype solution (to prepare the paper)

- Transparent and semi-transparent objects (e.g., feathers, leaves, lace)

- Surrealist Digital Collage printouts on transparency film

- Scissors, glue, and collage materials (magazine cut-outs, thin papers)

- UV light source (sunlight or UV lamp)

- Water for rinsing prints

- Drying area or racks

Lesson Outline

Guiding Question: How can we use the cyanotype process to create surrealist art that surprises and engages the viewer?

Work Period (30–40 minutes)

Preparation: Demonstrate setting up materials on cyanotype paper, experimenting with transparent objects, cut-out images, and found materials to build a composition that conveys surrealist ideas.

Step 1: Arrange objects and collage elements on the paper before exposing to light.

Step 2: Explain exposure timing (2–10 minutes depending on sunlight or UV light).

Step 3: Rinse prints in water and set aside to dry, allowing blue tones to develop.