

COLLECTOR DAILY

Jean-Pierre Sudre @Gitterman

By [Loring Knoblauch](#) / In [Galleries](#) / March 17, 2016

JTF (just the facts): A total of 31 photographs, variously framed and matted, and hung against white walls in the main gallery space. All of the works are vintage gelatin silver prints, some with chemical toning and mordantage processing, made between 1950 and 1992. All of the works are unique. Exact size information was not provided on the checklist. (Installation and detail shots below.)

Comments/Context: As the machined perfection of software-driven digital photography pushes more and more contemporary photographers to rediscover the joys of forgotten chemistries and overlooked processes, it is contextually important that the histories of these often arcane techniques are remembered and appreciated as well. In understanding how these approaches can be employed in new ways, we must also ensure that we are rooted in how they were used to begin with. This survey show of the work of Jean-Pierre Sudre does just that – it reintroduces superlative examples of Sudre’s mordantage process and then places them in the larger context of the aesthetic choices he made during his artistic career. It’s an exhibit that gives us both the “what” of the innovative and obscure process and then surrounds it with the “why” of the evolving artistic intent.

Mordantage is effectively a bleaching and etching process. It begins with a gelatin silver print, which is then subjected to bleach and acid washes which leave the surface etched in relation the amount of silver deposited on the original. The resulting prints have an intricate textural topology, almost bumpy, in some cases etching all the way down to the paper itself, with a level of meticulous detail impossible by hand. Sudre went on to add color to these works via chemical toners and oxidized developers, in one instance finding a way to add both orange and blue in the same work (the techniques with which he accomplished this remain a bit of a mystery).

Like most chemical processes, mordantage isn’t inherently interesting in and of itself – it’s how the process is leveraged that leads to its compelling uniqueness. This show does a fine job of walking us through the progression of Sudre’s work, guiding us through a step-by-step chronological build up of how Sudre’s thinking was evolving, pointing out the exact moment when the mordantage process became necessary to achieve his aesthetic goals, and then following along as he expanded on it further in the subsequent years.

Starting in the 1950s, Sudre began by pointing his camera down at nature, getting up close to see tiny droplets frozen in ice, the wispy edge of feathers, and the all over density of dew caught on spider webs. Soon he transitioned to a more scientific angle, growing micro crystals on glass, and

using the results as negatives. These experimental images are reminiscent of fields of transparent ice cubes or crackled fingers of frost, with vertical striations and watery flows captured in cross section.

It was at this moment (in the late 1960s) that Sudre wanted to push these compositions further, and the mordançage process offered him a way to introduce new emotional nuances to these increasingly dense, maze-like enigmas. Folding the prints over and doubling them, he created mirrored effects and vaguely representational forms out of his scientific abstractions, tapping into a more psychedelic and mystical mood. A heart, a brain, a sun, other floating orbs and triangles are given mystery by the tinted colors and tactile surface; many are titled *Apocalypse*, adding yet another layer of swirling ominous uncertainty to images that already seethe with crackled lines and knotty clusters of wrinkles.

By the late 1970s, Sudre was beginning to use the mordançage as a textural backdrop (almost like a horizon or land form) for symbolic inclusions, combining cliché verre images, photograms, and appropriated illustrations into aggregate compositions. Natural forms like plants, butterflies, and dragonflies hover amid the degraded surfaces, with line-drawn mechanical cogs and etched moons giving new meaning to floating layers of brown and blue chemicals. To my eye, this all gets a bit precious by the end of his career, the ponderous weight of his natural mysticism feeling a bit heavy handed.

In the end, it's the best of Sudre's early 1970s mordançage abstractions that are the cornerstone of this show. They offer repeated nose-to-the-frame moments of true astonishment, where tiny lines fragment out in impressively unfathomable density and detail. For collectors of abstract photography, especially those who are balancing the chemical innovators of the 1970s with the renewed efforts of contemporary practitioners, Sudre's mordançage works offer examples of unique and unexpectedly impressive technical mastery.

Collector's POV: The works in this show are priced between \$5500 and \$8000, with intermediate prices at \$6000, \$6500, \$7000, and \$7500. Sudre's work has little secondary market history, so gallery retail remains the best option for those collectors interested in following up.