At the crossroads of contemporary

Since the early seventies, the Community Darkrooms and Light Work have advanced the art of photography by fostering the skills of amateurs and professionals in a unique setting.
Photography by Jay Cox

TED WATHEN, War Memorial Coliseum, Syracuse, 1981. Chromogenic development print
ew York City installation artist Ernesto Pujol came to Syracuse earlier this year with several traditional color-print portraits of nuns. A month later—through the magic of digital imaging—he left with huge print images of the sisters for use in an upcoming project. For Pujol, the month-long visit to Syracuse was a blessing. Thanks to the Artist-in-Residence Program at Light Work—an SU-based, artist-run, nonprofit organization devoted to contemporary photography—Pujol had the time and resources to work on three projects and explore digital imaging. "Light Work is truly an artist-centered place, which is extremely hard to come by," he says. "It's a model program—one of the best in the country."

One person Pujol turned to for help with computer work during his stay was Mark Sottilaro '99, a computer graphics major in the College of Visual and Performing Arts. Sottilaro chairs the board of the Community Darkrooms, Light Work's sister organization that provides photography and imaging facilities for SU students and the public. "I see the Community Darkrooms as a place to meet other artists, interact with other students, and work with artists-in-residence like Ernesto," says Sottilaro, a work-study student for three years in the darkrooms. "It's a great benefit to see how other people and professional artists work. The diversity of projects you can become involved in is incredible."

It's also a locale where someone like Foloseke Somolu '99 can take a basic black-and-white photography class and continue to nurture an interest in photography. Somolu, an international relations major, joined the Community Darkrooms two years ago. Working in the lab, he says, allows him to slow down after a hectic day of classes. "It's a relaxed environment," Somolu says. "The developing and printing process compels patience because of the time it takes. Sometimes it's hard to find the time, but it's a nice break and enjoyable when I do."

Tucked inside the Watson Theater complex at the corner of Comstock and Waverly avenues, Light Work and the Community Darkrooms truly are a crossroads of contemporary photography. It is a place where amateur photographers and acclaimed artists might meet over negatives at a light table, where the hippest of technologies crosses paths with the standard steps for developing film, and where students and community members gather, exchange ideas, and learn from one another. "People are here," says Community Darkrooms lab manager Vern Burnett, "because they love it."

At the heart of all these matters is Jeffrey Hoone, Light Work's director for the past 16 years. Under Hoone's guidance, Light Work has achieved an international reputation for its support of contemporary photography. Along with its Artist-in-Residence Program—which annually brings 12 to 15 artists from around the world to Syracuse—Light Work awards grants to Central New York photographers, sponsors special projects, and produces fine arts prints, books, and numerous publications, including the award-winning Contact Sheet, which features the work of visiting artists. It also runs the Robert B. Menschel Photography Gallery in the Schine Student Center and the Light Work Gallery in the Watson complex, and mounts exhibitions in the Goldstein Student Center on South Campus. "We've always had a broad idea of what we think photography is and have always em-
braced different works, from documentary style to more conceptual and political works," Hoone says. "We try to pay attention to what artists are doing using the medium of photography."

Keeping up with contemporary photography is no small chore. But add to that having the darkrooms open 60 hours a week, managing a publications subscription program, and writing grant proposals, and you'd think the staff outnumbers Idaho's population. In fact, it's a four-person operation with Hoone, associate director Gary Hesse G'92, administrative assistant Mary Lee Hodgens G'91, and Burnett. They receive additional assistance from a handful of work-study students, interns, and graduate assistants. "I've always seen artists as problem-solvers," Hoone says. "Everyone who works here is an artist, so there's an interest and personal investment in what we're trying to accomplish as an organization."

Light Work operates on an annual budget of about $500,000, which comes from earned income (subscription and darkroom fees) and government- and foundation-supported grants. The Student Government Association funds the darkrooms, and the University provides significant indirect support with free rent and maintenance. And at a time when some arts organizations struggle to survive, Light Work continues to thrive and build its reputation. It received the prestigious Governor's Arts Award in 1989, and regularly collects grants from the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA), the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), and the Institute of Museum and Library Services. In January, the NEA awarded Light Work $40,000, the second largest NEA visual arts grant in the country.

Hoone, who received a Syracuse Post-Standard 1998 Achievement Award recognizing his contributions to the community, is heavily involved with the national arts scene as well. He often serves on NEA and NYSCA panels, has been a visiting artist around the country, and is a respected essayist on the art of photography. He also maintains a strong connection to the field through his wife, Carrie Mae Weems, an internationally acclaimed art photographer whom he first met through Light Work. "You have to be creative to come up with ideas, but in order to turn an idea into a work of art, it's work," Hoone says. "It's the same with running an organization. If you're not creative and don't know how to solve problems and make decisions quickly, you probably won't be very successful."

SU Trustee Robert B. Menschel '51, H'91 has collected and supported photography on a national level for nearly three decades. Currently chairman of the photography committee at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City and a member of the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, Menschel calls Hoone a "man of so many talents," citing his excellent eye for contemporary work and skills as a curator, photographer, writer, businessman, and arts...
advocate. "The key to success is a good leader, and Jeff is a unique, outstanding leader," says Menschel, whose gift to the University allowed Light Work to open the Menschel Gallery in 1985. "His selection of photographers is terrific—so many of them have gone on to important shows at major museums. He really makes

as the Robert B. Menschel Media Center. Richard Meier, one of the country's most prominent architects, is doing conceptual work for the building. "We're excited," Hoone says. "We've been working on the idea for about five years now and it's finally coming together. It's going to look a lot different." The project will double the 5,000 square feet now shared by Light Work and the Community Darkrooms, expand the computer labs and color printing facilities, and add a major exhibition space. "The program just gets better and better," Menschel says.

an important contribution to photography and the campus. Light Work is a program of national significance, there's no doubt about it."

In the near future, Light Work and the Community Darkrooms will receive one of the most substantial boosts in their history. The Watson Theater complex, which also houses University Union TV and radio stations WRP and WERW, is scheduled to undergo a major renovation beginning in 2000. It will be rededicated

Pioneering start
in a prep kitchen

Flash back to 1972, the year the Community Darkrooms was founded. The nation was at odds, caught up in the tumultuous times of the Vietnam War abroad and social unrest at home. Events rattled the nation's psyche more than ever before, thanks to the compelling imagery of video, television, and photography. Realizing the power of these media, students sought to add their own voices to the mix, an alternative to the mainstream. "The idea of being able to control and make images was very powerful," Hoone says. "There was no student center on campus, and students wanted a media center they could run on their own outside the academic parameters of the University."

Under the auspices of the University Union, a group of students led by Phil Block '73 and Tom Bryan '71 petitioned the University for a media center that would allow them access to photography and television equipment. The University approved the project and gave the group space in what was then a dining hall. The prep kitchen became the Community Darkrooms, a photographic facility that Block and Bryan pioneered, opening it to students and the community through a nominal membership fee.

David Broda '74, who calls himself the "oldest living Community Darkrooms member still in Syracuse," remembers the early seventies as a time when photography was reinvigorated as the works of noted artists like Alfred Stieglitz, Ansel Adams, and Dorothea Lange captivated a new generation. "That's what hooked us," says Broda, now a photographer with the University's Photo and Imaging Center who continues to assist Light Work and the darkrooms. "Across the nation there was a real trend for people getting into the arts to start working in the fine art photography area."
The Community Darkrooms became a true community, a vibrant gathering place for people who shared this interest. "We basically lived there," says Broda, who studied photojournalism and worked part-time at the darkrooms. "A group of us was completely immersed in photography. We'd be in there printing and showing each other photographs; we fed off each other. There was an incredible dedication—everyone was so self-motivated, interested, and wanted to learn. That's really the environment that created it all."

A year after the darkrooms opened, Block and Bryan started Light Work. It was an ideal time to do so. The NYSCA was young and looking to fund more Upstate New York arts activities. And throughout the country, artist-run organizations were cropping up as part of the "alternative space movement"—a response to a growing number of artists actively looking to develop and exhibit their work outside the realm of mainstream museums and galleries. "Light Work's original goal was to support artists working in photography," Hoone says. "We have certainly changed how we support artists and bring their work to the public, but the essential goal remains the same."

Hoone, a Syracuse native who studied photography and ran his own artists' space in San Francisco, learned to foster that mission when he joined the Light Work staff in 1980. After returning from the West Coast, he met Block and Bryan through the darkrooms. By that time, they had decided to pursue other interests and recruited Hoone to help out at Light Work. After training under each one separately for a year, Hoone found Light Work in his hands.

Now in its 26th year, Light Work has hosted numerous exhibitions, published 100 issues of Contact Sheet, and welcomed more than 250 participants to its Artist-in-Residence (AIR) Program. As a parting gift, each artist donates a sample of work to the Light Work Collection. The collection now counts more than 1,800 images, all of which are recorded on a searchable computer-image database and CD-ROM. The vast holding also reflects Light Work's commitment to embracing diversity—both in work style and in the ethnicity, gender, and cultural backgrounds of the artists.

Each year, Light Work receives more than 300 applications for its 23-year-old AIR Program. Into a cardboard box they go and, as a rule of thumb, they're combed through once the box is filled. "We're pretty flexible—there are no deadlines," Hoone says. "That way if artists have timely projects, we can respond to them, instead of saying, 'Oh, yeah, we have an opening in 2003.'"

How are artists selected? There is no pat answer, but Hoone's instincts seem to be a guiding force. "I may not be clear on what the person is doing, but I recognize when we should pay attention," he says. "We want visiting artists to take risks."

Renee Cox '79, a visiting artist in 1996, sees the program as the perfect answer for artists who need to get away from the demands of everyday life and focus solely on their work. "The program is not complicated or stressful in any way. They hook you up with an apartment and a key to the darkroom," the New York City resident says. "You're always working on borrowed time, so this is an escape that allows you to throw yourself into your work headfirst."

The time allowed Cox to dig into her archives, make prints of some negatives for the first time, and work on an ongoing series about Jamaican men. "It's very good to be in situations where you are with like-minded folks," she says. "Everyone inspires everyone else in some way."

Inspiration can also lead to exploration—a vital component for any artist who wants to continually develop. On her most recent project, for instance, Cox shifted from her long-standing interest in black-and-white to color with digital imaging. The reason? She decided to portray herself as Raje, a quintessential superhero who does such things in photos as emerge from a box of Uncle Ben's rice. "My work is often politically motiva-
ed and, as a conceptual artist, I use whatever medium I need to use to get the message across,” she says. “With Raje, I created fantastical situations, so it had to be digital.”

In 1997, Light Work lecturer and exhibitor John Pfahl ’61, G’68 stalled on a project, so he called the folks at Light Work for help. He had photographed landscapes in England, Wales, and Italy, concentrating on areas captured by artists from the Picturesque movement of the late 18th century. Among the scenic locations were places visited by William Henry Fox Talbot, one of the inventors of photography. Unhappy with most of the photos, Pfahl wondered whether he could use computer imaging to create photos that looked like watercolor paintings. “It goes back to the beginning of photography when people wanted to reproduce scenes,” he says. “I thought, ‘What if all these watercolor artists had computers and cameras back then?’”

One problem: Pfahl is physically allergic to computers—using them actually makes him sick. Another: He had no computer expertise. But by working with associate director Gary Hesse on the computer imaging parts, Pfahl succeeded—creating a print that was essentially a mix between photograph, watercolor, and computer image. Light Work ultimately published Permutations on the Picturesque, a portfolio of Pfahl’s prints funded by its Endowment Fund for Mid-Career Artists. “It was great because it was an untested work that probably no one else would have printed,” Pfahl says. “Light Work was the only place where I could have done this.”

Hesse believes Light Work’s willingness to take chances benefits not only the artists, but also the students and community members who use the space. “The exposure to different ideas changes the way you think and work,” he says. “When I first came to SU as an MFA student in the art photography program, I had no desire to touch computers. But being in a space with access to computers encouraged experimentation, and changed the way I worked.”

A parallel universe

For Syracuse University students—particularly those in the College of Visual and Performing Arts’ art photography program and the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications’ Department of Visual and Interactive Communications (VIC)—Light Work and the Community Darkrooms are a boon. Although VPA and Newhouse have their own lab facilities, their photography students often head to the Community Darkrooms when those labs are closed or during deadline crunch times. Many students enjoy the atmosphere and feedback they receive from community members and artists. They gain experience through assistantships, internships, and work-study jobs at the two organizations, learn about contemporary artists through exhibitions at the Light Work and Menschel galleries, and can display their own pieces at the Light Work Gallery. “For our program, it’s great to have this parallel universe of activity that our students can tap into,” says art photography professor Michael Recht. “It’s definitely a bonus to have this kind of resource on campus and it’s been terrific since it started.”

Art photography major Lauren Braun ’99 joined the darkrooms as a sophomore and has served on the board for the past two years. Working there, she says, helped her progress. Last semester, for instance, Ajamu, a visiting artist from England, took time to critique her work. As a sophomore, Braun received assistance from the staff with a Schine Center solo exhibition. “There are always people passing through, and everyone is open to comments and suggestions,” she says. “It’s a good outreach—a lot of professional photographers work...
there and I got a lot of feedback."

As an intern, art photography major Melissa Walker '99 helped put together a CD-ROM of the Light Work Collection. Like Braun, she believes the contact with a community of photographers is invaluable for developing as an artist. "I was there constantly through the four years," she says. "It's a great place to do work."

As Recht points out, Light Work is one of the few state and federally funded organizations nationwide that operates within art photography and educational contexts. "It's an accomplished organization that is one of the hubs for photographic activity," he says. "They've always been very cooperative with us and we have so many different kinds of ties to them. In a sense, we're aimed at the same target."

The Light Work Collection is an extraordinary resource for the department's photographic history, theory, and criticism classes, and the Menschel Gallery is like having a "small photographic museum right on campus," Recht says. "They have some fine shows there. Our students really get the opportunity to see what contemporary artists are doing."

Students also get to meet artists at Menschel openings and through lectures. Not only that, but the Light Work Gallery hosts separate annual shows for seniors in Newhouse illustration photography and photojournalism and VPA art photography programs. "It's always a nice group show of our students' work," Recht says. "It gives them the opportunity to participate in the full activity of planning and installing a show."

Anthony Golden, chair of Newhouse's VIC department, sees the darkrooms as a common ground, where students from the VPA and Newhouse programs and others meet. "Both disciplines essentially use the same kind of equipment and sit next to each other in the darkrooms," he says. "It's important for our students to see the VPA students' work, so they understand art photography and photographic artists."

On the technology front, Golden says Community Darkrooms is an asset when VIC is considering new equipment. "When we were ready to buy a digital color printer, we went over there and talked to them about how they had integrated the one they have into their lab," he says. "It allowed us to find out what they'd learned about it."

Illustration photography major Angel Tucker '99 organized Newhouse's senior show at the Light Work Gallery in March. "The shows are always fun. I've seen past Newhouse shows every year since I was a freshman," she says. "Now it's our turn. Gary (Hesse) is always very helpful, which is good, because I know tons about photography but don't know much about hanging exhibitions. It's a great learning experience."

During her three years here, MFA art photography student Callia Thompson G'99 found a home at the darkrooms. She used the facilities, served on the board, worked there during summers, and also taught classes. "There are so many different situations you can involve yourself in there," she says. "You meet different people, talk about each other's work, talk about show and exhibition opportunities, and the bulletin boards are full of opportunities that art photographers can take advantage of."
Most important to Thompson was the chance to teach Community Darkrooms classes and workshops. "It allowed me to develop as an instructor and enrich my teaching ability," she says. "I was able to take that back into the University community."

Last semester, she used that expertise to design a VPA undergraduate digital art photography course. Last summer, Thompson, former darkrooms lab manager John Freyer, and Mark Sottilaro taught a pinhole camera workshop to local children. "We had a blast working with these kids," Sottilaro says. "They didn't have any access to photography. We took them into a different world where they made a camera and could see their images later on that day. It was pretty fun."

Sottilaro, who also teaches classes at the darkrooms, focuses most of his attention on multimedia work. He realizes computers can be daunting, but knows darkrooms classes like Introduction to Adobe Photoshop can ease people into using them in their work. "My main concern, and one of the darkrooms' too, is bringing together traditional visual arts and new computer arts," he says. "A lot of new computer-based art is about multimedia interactivity."

For the Light Work and Community Darkrooms staff, the inevitable connection between photography and computer arts poses an ongoing challenge. It means they must move with the evolution, continuing to explore the future while remaining connected to the past. "There are still people who want to do things the way they were done 100 years ago and others who want to do things very cutting edge and high tech," Hesse says. "We try to deal with these issues simultaneously—we don't want to lose sight of where photography has been or where it's headed."

Cultivating a community

Evidence of this juxtaposition is readily apparent. Consider Digital Allegory by Martina Lopez, a recent Meneschel Gallery exhibition that fuses old-time monochromatic portraits with surreal landscapes. Then wander through the Recent Acquisitions show at the Light Work Gallery. In one work photographed by John Freyer, performance artist Saiman Li, painted yellow, strolls past tourists at Niagara Falls. In another, Nancy Floyd presents several portraits of women and their firearms. Others show abandoned theaters, scenes from India, a folk artist, and an old barber chair in a dilapidated state penitentiary.

A step away is the entrance to the Community Darkrooms. Nearly 200 people pass through here each semester. In a rare quiet moment, look around at instructions mounted on walls, bulletin boards weighted with information, and all of the equipment for black-and-white and color printing and digital imaging—computers, scanners, processors, and printers, not to mention pre-mixed chemicals. Amateur photographer Robert E. Burdick G'51, a longtime darkrooms member, believes the atmosphere and services are unique, supporting a process of continual learning through classes and interaction. He's taken and taught classes and regularly uses the facilities on Tuesday afternoons. "Black-and-white is my major interest, but I've learned how to do color printing and I'm beginning..."
to work a little with the computer,” he says. “Can’t ignore it.”

A few moments with lab manager Vern Burnett, a veteran professional photographer, can prove insightful for even the most inexperienced of amateurs. “Dust is a killer in photography,” he says, emphasizing the importance of a clean lab. More tips follow: “You have to get the lighting down. You have to know how to finish.” He talks about subject matter, light, shooting, processing, spotting, mounting, framing, writing, and exhibitions. “People will come in here and have no idea how to roll film,” he says. “In five weeks they can have something on the wall, mounted and behind glass. It’s great for their self-esteem.”

On a Monday evening, a beginners black-and-white photography class starts with the basics of film rolling. “I always wanted to take a photo class, so I decided to give it a shot,” says Dan Majka of Nedrow. “I look at it as a continuing education side of my life.”

Soon, Majka and a handful of other students are developing film, discussing photo subjects, and offering advice. Questions fly back and forth as they huddle around the deep sinks, monitor water temperatures, watch timers, and go from one chemical to the next. “Don’t be nervous about developing your own film. It’s good to see how it happens,” says instructor Willson Cummer, a professional photographer from Syracuse. “The one thing that will screw it up is if you add the wrong chemical at the wrong time.”

Before long class members emerge from the developing rooms, holding up strips of negatives before settling at a light table for closer looks at images of dogs, trees, landscapes, and buildings. “If you have dark areas and light areas, you’re fine,” Cummer says. “If you can’t see images, you’re in trouble.”

Not much trouble on this night. After cutting negatives and inserting them in sleeves, they enter the darkroom to make contact prints. Cummer shows them how to use the enlargers and do different time exposures before they gather around a row of trays filled with chemicals. A sheet of photographic paper goes into the developer tray—presto!—images appear. “It’s neat,” says Hills Davis of Syracuse. “I want to learn how to do this as an art.”

Jennifer Johnson of DeWitt eyes a contact sheet filled with pictures of her English springer spaniel. “I’ve always wanted to shoot black-and-white,” she says. “The prints can be very artistic.”

Class members collect their prints and move on to the next steps—a 10-minute wash followed by a run through the dryer. It’s a seemingly ceaseless activity that generates and proliferates a sense of excitement and community. And as they discover the wonders of photography together, they experience a deeper connection to this place.

After all, through their programs, the Community Darkrooms and Light Work draw people together from around the globe, whether they’re first-time film developers, experienced amateurs, budding professionals, committed artists, or Contact Sheet subscribers who have only seen Syracuse on a map. “The idea of community is important to us,” Hoone says. “We work with and serve many different communities, so no matter how people enter our programs, there is an attachment to a community.”