

Self Portrait as a Drowned Man

by Katrina Dessavre

Montmartre, August 18th, 1839, 3 p.m.

The light, oblique and waning, filters through butcher's paper to reveal a body suspended in death but never decomposing. His hands are black, stained perhaps from the potassium iodide he used to submerge his negatives. Or just a shadow darkened by the brown-orange tint that casts a haze over all of his prints. Daguerre tries not to contemplate other, more grotesque possibilities.

He runs his finger over the table, collecting a thin layer of dust. Particles float in the dull light and he makes a mental estimate of their density. Two, three days at most. That's how long this darkroom has waited for the man who is now in the morgue, pale and stiff, embalmed by the waters of the Seine.

Daguerre takes the print and opens the door, covered with butcher's paper to soften the skylight. The small, bell-shaped studio nests in the attic of a farmhouse on the outskirts of Paris. He listens to the regular rhythm of meat being slapped into tenderness travel up from the kitchen.

Stepping under the skylight, he examines the print. The reverse is signed, M. Bayard, the same, presumably, who smiles vaguely at Daguerre with eyes closed, body tilted to the right and half-covered in cloth that dissolves into mist, like the sfumato of old master paintings.

There it is, the cloth, draped over a cabinet of various props, the busts and small statues that make the most patient subjects. He has seen their portraits before. Veiled in chemical stains and cloudy edges, they hide still another layer: jealousy, made palpable three weeks ago, during an exhibition raising money for the earthquake in Martinique. Bayard stood beside his still lifes, greeting Daguerre's

interest in his process with a cold, "but it doesn't matter, does it, since you're getting all the glory."

The pounding stops. He has given the kitchen maid ten francs for her indifference to his presence, but even that much was not necessary. "Takes up space and poisons the livestock," she says of Bayard and continues her work. Daguerre must get back to his. Back to the disjointed clatter of wagons and barbers in a city about to see its own reflection. The public unveiling of the daguerreotype - the name unsettles him still - begins this time tomorrow.

He pockets the self portrait, a rehearsal of death performed for the twelve minute exposure that now extends indefinitely.

Seize the light, arrest its flight, he repeats to himself.

