

# What Do We Expect Frames To Do

by Amanda Gluibizzi



*By framing his photographs in antique American frames, Jefferson Hayman strives to connect his photos of the present with the frames of the past.*

For some people, frames are mere supports for paintings and drawings—the structure that protects something more valuable. For others, a frame acts as a window, a possible way to further the illusion of depth into a painting. But can a frame be a time machine, transporting the viewer to an earlier time and place?

Jefferson Hayman, a photographer who uses antique frames to house his photos,

believes that frames can allow for a connection between the past and present. Hayman first gained experience with frames by working at frame shops while attending art school. He is currently one of the gallery directors at Eli Wilner & Co., a company in New York City which specializes in nineteenth and twentieth century American frames. Hayman also studied the Old and Modern Masters while receiving his BFA from Kutztown Universi-



*Photo 1: For his "From the Bridge," Hayman uses an early twentieth century American frame with a gilded liner.*

ty of Pennsylvania.

Through these experiences he was able to study the impact that frames had on his perception of artwork and recognized the importance and weight that an antique frame could lend to a picture.

When it came to his own photography, Hayman made the decision to use period frames to further the illusion of his photos as being taken and in another era. In many of his photographs, Hayman uses black and white to evoke the film noir of the 1930's, 40's, and 50's. By developing the film to render blacks that are velvety and suggestive, Hayman transforms scenes of the present into images of the past. The completion of the photographs with period frames further presses the illusion of age.

"From the Bridge," a photograph from 1999, recalls American artist James McNeill Whistler both in image and use of its frame (see Photo 1). A smoky sweep of Manhattan is revealed from beyond an expanse of water. As Whistler would paint a skyline seen from a distance and work with pictorial flatness as it sits on a line of liquid, Hayman reveals a segment of Manhattan that is recognizable because of its profile, yet suggests depth because of its rich black.

Whistler is well known for his frame designs for his own paintings, with the intent to complement the art. In that spirit, Hayman finds frames that possess the visual and physical interest to exist as objects themselves and then takes photographs to further that interest. In "From the Bridge," Hayman uses an early 20th centu-



*Photo 2: The profile of this 1890's American frame was used to make the viewer feel as if they were peering through the viewfinder of an early studio camera.*

ry American frame with a gilded liner to evoke Whistler's gilded designs and to bring to the photograph an element that reflects light rather than absorbing it.

The frame in "Self-Portrait in Las Vegas," continues Hayman's notion of a frame as a formal and conceptual reinforcement for the image in a painting or photograph (see Photo 2). Hayman suggests the Las Vegas of the 1940's as he stands

in his fedora before a classic Mobil gas station logo. In this instance, the profile of this 1890's American frame causes the viewer to peer through it as if it were the viewfinder of an early studio camera.

The diminishing levels of the profile lead into the image. Once inside the image though, the viewer follows Hayman's gaze and

Pegasus' trajectory out to the upper right corner of the photo and along the graduated steps of the frame. It is not just that the frame supports an imagined setting, it also accompanies the viewer's eye as it moves around the piece as a whole, progressing into and out of the photograph in varying degrees of speed depending on the portion of the frame being observed.

Whereas the frame in "Self-Portrait in Las Vegas" lends a sense of movement to the piece, the frame accompanying "Bottle" is focused on stability. The white outline of a bottle sits off center on a dark ground (see Photo 3). The nineteenth century American frame is finished in a dark stain and the profile slopes inward as it reaches the image. The solidity of the frame offsets the ghostly quality of the photograph and captures an image that seems to be in the process of dissolving.

This image calls to mind the early decades of photography when objects were photographed much as still-life objects were painted, with primacy given to the image. Those early photographs, however, could also suggest the mystical properties of the process. In trapping a disappearing object by a solid frame, Hayman echoes the conventions of nineteenth century still-life photography. He develops, as well, a clever play on the nature of the photography of ephemeral objects, in which the boundaries of the photo become the framing device that captures the object.

Hayman sees the photograph and its accompanying frame as a total art object that is rendered incomplete if one aspect is missing. He recalls that Edward Hopper would include labels on the backs of his pieces cautioning against the removal of the frames he had chosen. Hayman employs his knowledge of art and frame history to achieve the authenticity he desires in his work. His use of period frames furthers the illusion of age and helps his viewers to step into the world of his photographs. ■



*Photo 3: The solidity of the frame used for "Bottle" was chosen to offset the ghostly quality of the photo.*