

## 'Sunburns' illuminates with astonishing camera tricks.

By Leah Ollman, Special to The Times

Photography, literally defined, means writing with light, and light packs heat. Together, the twinned energy sources fuel Chris McCaw's astonishingly beautiful body of work, "Sunburns," at Duncan Miller.

The process McCaw devised to create the work is captivating. Each picture is a unique print, made in a large-format camera that the Bay Area-artist built himself using old, scavenged lenses. McCaw sets up his cameras in the desert or near the sea, aimed with the sun fully within the frame. He places photographic paper where film belongs, inside the camera's film holder. Exposures can last up to four hours. They produce an image that is a negative but that appears to be positive because the lengthy exposure time and the idiosyncratic behavior of the expired photographic paper cause a reversal of

values akin to the effect of solarization.

Further, the lens concentrates the sun's rays. Remember the old scouting method of starting a fire by using a magnifying glass? Over time, those focused rays burn into the photographic paper. In some of the images, the sun appears as a singed black dot. In other, longer exposures, the arc of the sun's rising or setting has slashed all the way through the paper, leaving a scarred absence outlined in scorched black.

McCaw's favorite part of the process, he states on his website, "is watching smoke come out of the camera during the exposure."

It's hard to pick favorites among the results. The images mesmerize in different ways. Some show just sea and sky as barely differentiated bands of gray, the water shimmering with light reflected

from a paradoxically dark sun. For some pictures, McCaw opens and closes the shutter several times, so the sun repeats as it rises, forming a string of coded dots, ascending notes on a scale.

McCaw uses a variety of photographic papers in different sizes, and they yield a rich range of tonalities and temperatures. One image looks as if it were drawn in metallic dust; another, in graphite or charcoal. Another, anomalous in this group, has the creamy sepia tones of the 19th century. The process reduces subjects—Joshua trees, palms, sea cliffs and mountain ranges—to silhouettes, giving McCaw's daytime photographs the moody, elusive quality of Whistler nocturnes.

Several pictures read as pure gesture: the slash of the sun's trail across a scaleless expanse, the fall of a luminous, silvery comet. Lucio Fontana's "Spatial Concept" paintings, their surfaces violated by punctures and slicing stabs, come to mind, as do Joe Goode's "Environmental Impact" canvases, pierced by shotgun blasts. McCaw's work too entails violation, but not violence, and the interruptions of the surface are inflicted not by the human hand but by natural (and chemical) processes, harnessed. The work feels more reverential than defiant, a homage to the creative/destructive powers of nature and the wholly explicable mysteries of the photographic process.

Accident and ingenuity conspired to bring these images into being. They are sculptural, painterly and photographic at once, tactile, expressive, physical traces of phenomena.

Over a pale San Francisco skyline, a thick excision weeps dry rust. Light writes and writes and writes, until eventually it erases.



'SUNBURNS': Snow near Lake Tahoe under sunlight is seen in one of Chris McCaw's works at Duncan Miller Gallery. The artist developed a complex process and built a unique camera using different photographic papers to collect the images.

**Duncan Miller Gallery**, 10959 Venice Blvd., (310) 838-2440, through June 14. Closed Sundays through Wednesdays. [www.duncanmillergallery.com](http://www.duncanmillergallery.com)