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The Franken-Camera Project

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The Franken-Camera Project

From the sublime to the ridiculous, Professor Kevin Strandberg transforms pieces and parts into sculpture and art.

Story and art by KEVIN STRANDBERG



Strandberg with one of his "monsters" — which is both a sculpture and a working camera. Key parts of his Franken-camera project were supported by the Transforming Lives campaign's endowments that support faculty and student research and artistic initiatives.

Hello, my name is Kevin, and I am a compulsive tinkerer.

By all accounts I have always been very adept at taking things apart. Neither crib nor playpen could hold me as a toddler. Moments after I was buckled into my child harness and leashed to the clothesline, I would pull a Houdini. Often I would take apart alarm clocks or other mechanical devices just to get at the little gears, which I would spin atop my school desk. Later I learned to put things back together — sometimes in their original form and sometimes according to my own design. My family was not very well off. Making things from scrounged parts was a necessary skill for us. If wanted to have a bicycle, I had to build one. It was that simple and that complex.

Nowadays, I can't stop myself. I take everything apart and put it together in a new way. Sometimes the motivation is to improve on the original design of something, from antique Italian motorcycles to a renovated 100-year-old building on Bloomington's west side. Other times I

concentrate solely on conceptual and aesthetic notions: the result is an assemblage or a found-object sculpture. In either case, I love the focus that deconstructing and reconstructing objects provides. It offers an escape from a hectic, even hostile, world.

Inside the Ames School of Art's sculpture studio you might find some recent examples of this incessant tinkering. My students have dubbed them "Franken-cameras" — I don't know if it's because these cameras/sculptures look a bit scary or because I resemble a mad scientist when combining all the odd bits and pieces to bring these one-of-a-kind creations to life.



"The complexity of this piece just blew me away when I saw it. It had all these overlapping matrices of diagonal lines. It's freezing cold, in the middle of a blizzard, the billboard paper is peeling off, but it says HOME, and I thought it was an interesting dichotomy. There's also an unplanned element: the beam of light coming down from the upper-right. That's the exciting thing about film photography for me; there's always a surprise.

I can trace my passion for cameras back to the 1960s, when my older brother smuggled me into a showing of Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up*. The film had some brief nudity and was banned by the nuns in my school, which was all the motivation I needed to see it. The plot involves a fashion photographer in mod London who finds himself in the middle of a murder mystery. Never mind Vanessa Redgrave's bare breasts; I was transfixed watching David Hemmings'

character try to solve the mystery by blowing up his negatives until the prints become enormous black grains, barely readable as images. The movie made me want to be a photographer. Eventually, I bought a Nikon F camera just like one used by Hemmings' character.

Despite all the research and development done by camera designers, their products often don't feel right in the hand or they don't function exactly as a photographer would like them to. That was my experience with the Nikon F. It was a revolutionary camera that was also an ergonomic nightmare. Its most irritating aspect was that you had to completely remove its back to load film. Nikon introduced the F2 to address this, but it remained awkward to load. Eventually my tinkering yielded a solution to this flaw.

Though my early camera modifications were simple ergonomic tweaks, it emboldened me to take more drastic measures. I began modifying larger-format cameras like the Graflex XL, which had been engineered for military use in the Vietnam War. The modular nature of these cameras allowed for easy dismantling and re-integration of dissimilar parts. An added bonus: the increase in negative size naturally yields sharper images, as they don't need to be enlarged as much.

I should add that I am a wide-angle lens freak. Maybe it is the "look" that they give to the image. Maybe it is just that they have such an extended depth of field that focusing is not necessary. In the case of several of my Franken-Graflexes, I simply re-machined lens tubes fitted with super-wide lenses, and the cameras stayed set on infinity.

Rebuilding cameras on a larger scale opened another horizon for me: I began considering them not just as photographic tools that produce artwork, but as sculptural objects in and of themselves.

For a long time, I have contemplated the form of cameras beyond their function. Perhaps it's my Scandinavian heritage, but I tend to believe that all utile objects need this aspect to be part of their design. Often it is the design and finish that truly make an object of desire. Since cameras are objects that connect our eyes, our minds and our hands, they possess a strong tactile aesthetic. Many of my later Franken-cameras were created with this aesthetic in mind. Still, I didn't abandon function for form: Most of these cameras are fitted with a high-resolution German or Japanese large-format lens capable of producing razor-sharp negatives.



“The initial image was taken during the spring semester of 2011 while I was the director of IWU’s Spain Program in Barcelona. After purchasing a used panoramic camera, I found out that it was missing the requisite neutral density center filter. Without this filter, the outer edges appear darker than the center of the frame. However, I found when I used the camera vertically, this effect is less pronounced. Over time, I became enamored with the look.

“The print itself is a photogravure etching by Jonathan Higgins at Mannekin Press in Bloomington. Jonathan is one of only a few modern printers who can successfully produce such prints.”

Although we are now decades into the digital age, I continue to make photographic prints from black-and-white film. My loyalty to the darkroom process is partly because of all the unpredictable and exciting things that can happen when light hits film. And though the tasks of developing and printing are often onerous, that moment when a latent image gradually appears in the developer tray is nothing short of magic every time. Because of their unorthodox designs, my Franken-cameras can yield even more surprises.

Some of those surprises were on display earlier this year in a solo exhibition at the McLean County Arts Center. Entitled *The Franken-camera Project: From the Sublime to the*

Ridiculous, the show featured 14 modified and/or completely redesigned and rebuilt photographic film cameras, along with photos I have taken with them. Two of the objects were newly created sculptures that are also fully functional medium-format cameras. With funding from an Artistic/Scholarly Development Grant provided by Illinois Wesleyan, I also published a book I am using to promote what I hope will be further exhibition of this show across the country. A sampling from the exhibit and book was chosen for this article.



“The Jack O’ Camera is truly the union of my two obsessions — sculpture and photography. I built it starting with a 1970s-vintage wooden display case. The camera is fitted with a portrait lens and a Polaroid back and is mounted on a rolling stand constructed from a 1960s TV antenna and an old metal stool. I cast an aluminum jack-o’-lantern, painted it, and put it on the top. I use the old VW car horn to knock people out of the usual ‘say cheese’ mindset and try to capture them in an almost vulnerable state.”

Artist's biography: Kevin Strandberg is a professor of photography, sculpture, and glass as well as the director of the Ames School of Art. After earning a B.F.A. from the University of Minnesota and an M.F.A. from the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, he worked as a graphic designer before launching his teaching career. Strandberg's work has been exhibited in juried shows across the country and is held in a diverse group of corporate and personal collections (including two chefs in Barcelona and a music critic in Moscow).

To read Kevin Strandberg's book, The Franken-Camera Project, [click here](#).

To watch a video of Strandberg giving a tour of his exhibit at The McLean County Arts Center, [click here](#).