

Boy of Blue Industries: The Art of Wayne Martin Belger

By Jerry Currier | Education/Inspiration | Sep 1, 2007

All photos ©Wayne Martin Belger

The 10th-century Muslim mathematician, astronomer and physicist Ibn al-Haitham described the pinhole camera and invented the camera obscura (Latin for "dark chamber"), a precursor to the modern photographic camera.

In the centuries to follow the camera obscura was used as a drawing aid for artists and amateur painters. In the 1850s, a Scottish scientist, Sir David Brewster, was one of the first to make pinhole photographs and possibly coined the word "pinhole." Pinhole photography became very popular and extensively used during the 19th Century.

In the 20th Century, mass production of cameras and advances in film technology pushed pinhole photography into obscurity and potential oblivion. By the 1930s the technique was virtually forgotten.

The mid-1960s saw a renewed interest in pinhole photography and hinted at a renaissance in the field. Today, numerous sites devoted to the technique can be found on the Internet. Not only has pinhole photography found new adherents, there is also a resurgence of interest in creating pinhole cameras.



Deer Camera created by Wayne Martin Belger



Bighorn, shot with deer camera

While many pinhole cameras are simple boxes, Wayne Martin Belger, artist, machinist and photographer, designs and manufactures pinhole cameras that are functional photographic instruments, created with a specific subject in mind and at the same time are sculptured works of art.

Belger is a man who knows his own heart and who intends to express that knowledge regardless of outside commentary. Swimming against the powerful stream of popular notions, he brings his personal visions to reality.

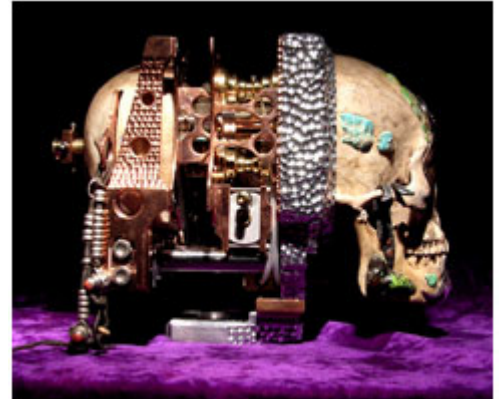
He states on his website <http://boyofblue.com>, "The creation of a camera comes from my desire to relate to a subject. When I choose a subject I spend time studying it. Then I start visualizing how I would like a photo of the subject to look. When that's figured out, I start on the camera stage of the project by collecting parts, artifacts and relics that relate to the subject."

Some of the materials that go into the creation of his cameras may include, "...aluminum, titanium, copper, brass, bronze, steel, silver, gold, mercury, wood, acrylic, glass, horn, ivory, bone, human bone, human skulls, human organs, formaldehyde, HIV+ blood... all designed to be the sacred bridge of a communion offering between myself and the subject."



***Yama Camera created by Belger,
front view***

Human skulls are incorporated in two of Belger's cameras. In a recent interview, he discusses one of them, a camera he calls "Yama." Yama is the Tibetan god of death. The camera is made from a 500 year old Tibetan skull that was blessed by a Tibetan Lama. It will be used to create a series of photographs in Tibetan refugee cities in India in the furtherance of Tibetan independence. "The photo series will be of a 500-year-old homecoming through the eyes of a Tibetan Lama," he says.



Yama Camera, side view

Another of Belger's cameras is built around a piece of steel from the South Tower of the World Trade Center, given to him by a rescue worker at Ground Zero with the comment, "Make an altar of this." He did. The aluminum casing for the camera has pieces from the Koran, the Bible and the Torah inset into the aluminum of the camera's body to symbolize the legacy of the prophet Abraham, shared by all three religions. The Bible and the Torah were from the late 19th Century, the Koran was from the mid-20th Century.

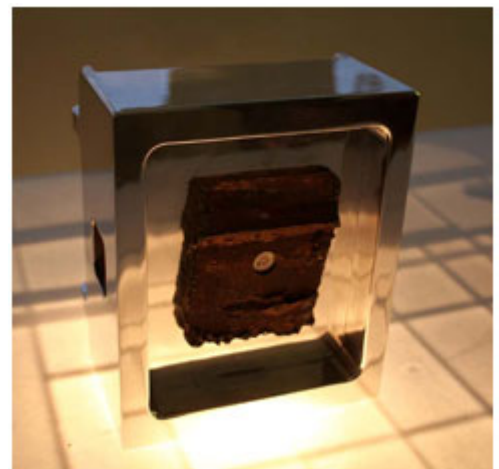
Belger's been using this camera for his "Sons of Abraham" series, picturing clergy holding their sacred books, outside their places of worship.

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Third Eye camera created by Belger

Many of Belger's cameras are controversial, such as the Third Eye Camera that he created "...to study the beauty of decay." He used the 150 year old skull of a 13 year old girl that was part of a doctor's anatomical kit. It was found, abandoned and forgotten, in an attic. In creating an altar to this lost child, Belger feels he is honoring her and her memory.



Sons of Abraham camera created by Belger

Most of us have seen those roadside memorials to people who have been

killed in automobile crashes. Belger created his Roadside Altar Camera to photograph these shrines that memorialize the dead. The GPS location provides the information which is used as the title for the images.



Bizbee, AZ, Roadside Altar

"Dragonfly," the camera that Belger was using when photographing the World Trade Center destruction was created as an altar for Cortney Clayton, a nine-year old Texas girl who was found dead, near her home, a year after she went missing. At the time Belger was working as a child recovery investigator and became close to Cortney's family during the course of the investigation of her case. When Cortney was found dead, it had a major impact on him.

Another camera incorporates the heart of a human infant. The heart was found in a garage that had once been an anatomy lab which had been closed since the 1940s. The heart inspired Belger to create the "Heart" camera, which he uses to photograph pregnant mothers. He recounts that this project also helped him "...explore my

relationship with my twin brother who died at birth."



Salton Sea, Roadside Altar

Some people may be dismayed at Belger's use of human skulls, organs, bones and blood. But his finished cameras and the images they produce demonstrate his obvious sensitivity to humanity and the human condition.



Dragonfly camera created by Belger, top view

Yemaya, is an underwater pinhole camera. One of the most esthetically pleasing of Belger's beautifully crafted creations, it is made from aluminum, acrylic, brass, sea creatures and pearls. He has incorporated an altar to the Santeria goddess of the ocean, Yemaya, in the inside back of the camera.

The images he has captured with this camera have an ethereal beauty that takes pinhole photography to a new and wondrous level.

Belger's on-site resume hints at his interests and skills: camp counselor, stock boy, professional treasure hunter, child recovery, rock climbing instructor, scuba instructor (Dive Master Training), L.A. Kings Pro Hockey team (mascot, Kingston), Anaheim Mighty Ducks Pro Hockey team (mascot, Wildwing), hockey player, studio musician, professional touring musician (Wicked Tinkers), artist, machinist, manicurist.

He is a photographer who has been crafting cameras and images for a number of years. His work seems to have solid roots in the past yet he doesn't hesitate to use modern materials and techniques all shaded by a sense of mystical wonder.



Tara, taken with Dragonfly



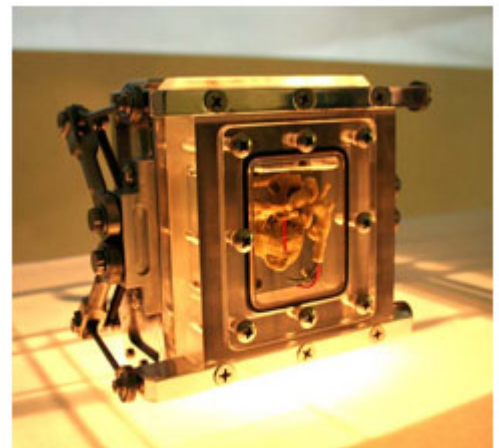
Yemaya underwater camera created by Belger, front view

JERRY CURRIER INTERVIEWS WAYNE MARTIN BELGER

Jerry Currier: You create cameras that are works of art in themselves yet fully functional photographic tools. On your website you mention that your parents were Catholic and that you, as a boy, were fascinated with the rituals and sacred tools used by the priests. If I may quote from your website, “I remember the days when mass was done in Latin. Magic language, magic practices and magic altars with their own ritualistic traditions are intriguing at 5 years old. Not knowing Latin, I relied more on visuals to receive the communication. The priest was using beautiful sacred tools and potions that were subject-created to bring me into communion with the subject.”

The cameras and the images you create seem to embody this same sense of magic and awe. The bio on your website offers some interesting insights into your personal philosophy regarding the creation of your photographic images, “The tools I create and work with are pinhole cameras. With pinhole photography, the same air that touches my subject can pass through the pinhole and touch the photo emulsion on the film. There’s no barrier between the two. There are no lenses changing and manipulating light. There are no chips converting light to binary code. With pinhole what you get is an unmanipulated true representation of a segment of light and time, a pure reflection of what is at that moment.”

Was this philosophy prompted by any specific event or series of events?



Heart camera created by Belger, back view



Reva, taken with heart camera

Wayne Martin Belger: There is one specific event that I feel had a lot to do with my current path. When I was 6 or 7 years old we lived in Southern California. A new family had just moved in down the street and they had a little girl with blond hair that was about my age. I remember meeting her and feeling really funny. She was my first crush, even though I didn't know what a crush was. Then one day her parents came over and told my parents how their daughter had been playing in the backyard on the swing set and had fallen off. She went into the brick wall behind her and broke her neck. They were going door to door looking for donations to help pay for her funeral. I remember hearing the conversation, then going into my room and asking God over and over to take me so she could live. At that moment I felt some kind calm connection to a warm familiar unknown. After that, I understood the drive of priests, imams, rabbis, sadhus, Sikhs, Santeros and other devotees to make beautiful tools, potions and altars as a bridge when questing to commune with that warm familiar unknown. At 7 years old, assembling elaborate altars in my backyard as a bridge to the unknown seemed natural.

Over the years I've studied many different questing systems. I like "questing systems" rather than "belief systems" because belief is stagnant. In my studies I became fascinated with alchemists and the alchemy of metal. To this date I have used 10 different metals and many relics in the construction of my cameras. All the cameras are

altars designed for the quest of and communion with the subject for which they were created.

JC: *An especially interesting aspect of your work is that the cameras are created with a specific subject in mind. You have said, "The creation of a camera comes from my desire to relate to a subject. When I choose a subject I spend time studying it. Then I start visualizing how I would like a photo of the subject to look."*

Could you share with Double Exposure readers how you decide on a subject? Is it shape, form or is the physical aspect only part of your decision? Is there a mystical element in your choice of images and the resulting cameras?

WMB: When it comes to my work I'm quite self-centered. My subjects are chosen purely on my desire to learn about them or learn about myself. An example of one subject direction I have focused on in the last few years, is important peripheral occurrences.

Important subjects with epic history that are seen and not acknowledged. For

instance, four people are in a car, traveling on the highway at 75mph, having a conversation. They pass a roadside altar with three crosses. All four people pass the altar, continuing their conversation without a bump in the dialog. Yet everyone of them, for a fraction of a second, saw the altar and thought, "What happened? Who was killed? When did that happen? Who put the altar there? Family? Friends? What is this feeling inside me?". The only evidence that the event was witnessed, is the car is now going 65mph! I wanted to learn about this peripheral occurrence so I made a camera to be in relationship with that subject. It has been a fascinating study of people creating beautiful altars to loved ones at the location of their loss. Creating something beautiful from something tragic, passion from pain and being involved with full spectrum that life is. It's also been a study of how people separate themselves from nature by hiding the natural process of birth and death. Separation from nature has also been the



Priest, taken with 9/11, Sons of Abraham camera

focus of the Deer Camera, Untouchable (HIV Camera) and the Heart Camera. With the Roadside Altar Camera, I have shot about 200 photos of altars. I now know quite a bit about this important peripheral occurrence.



San Francisco, taken with Third Eye camera

JC: You are quoted in an interview for *Pinhole Visions, The Art of Pinhole Photography* (<http://www.pinhole.com/archive/445>) that you're, "...really not into the word 'Artist'. It always seemed elitist to me, or used as an excuse to sleep on people's couches..." You also mention that you feel art schools always seemed silly. Have you had any formal artistic schooling or are you completely self taught?

WMB: I did walk through an art school once for a friend's graduation. That's as close as I got. A friend of mine that is a very famous painter went to a big art school. He said the main thing he learned in art school was how to rebel against art school. Luckily, he was able to pay back the \$100,000.00 in student loans. Most others are still struggling to do so. But they do have a degree that states that they are a "Fine Artist".

My formal training came from my parents. I was gifted with a family that never viewed my ideas, desires or

motivations as strange, wrong or undoable. With the knowledge that anything is possible at a very young age, a strong desire to investigate life and dreams and the motivation to do so is normal. I've always had the desire and support to investigate the infinite spectrum that life is and I was given the tools to do so. One of my favorite tools was an encyclopedia set that my Mom ordered when I was 4 or 5 years old. Every month a new book would show up. What was in the books ended up being the primal sparks of what I do today. I remember reading about wizards and alchemists and deciding, "That's what I want to be when I grow up." Interestingly in an article about my work in the September 2007 issue of B&W Magazine, the author Richard Pitnick stated, "The decidedly gothic apparatuses embody Belger's philosophy of the camera as a kind of alchemical resonating chamber, where space and time, matter and memory intermingle and are transformed by light to reveal the threshold of eternity." I guess sometimes old sparks start fires...

JC: *The images you capture seem to look back to simpler, seemingly more innocent times. Is this just a result of the application of pinhole technology, or do you make a conscious effort to emulate the past?*

WMB: The pinhole does give (depending on the focal length) a beautiful natural vignetting that has the feel of vintage photography. I have a collection of a few hundred vintage photographs, so I'm sure that has had an impact on what is aesthetically pleasing to me. During the shoot of a subject I don't really try to emulate the past as I'm trying to be with my subject in the now. In the darkroom I do try to blend what is aesthetically pleasing to me, like vintage photography, if it works with the subject. But with every photo the priority is keeping the integrity of the subject.

JC: *Your on-site resume indicates that you have had many varied interests. Professional treasure hunter and manicurist stand out as examples. Do the experiences provided by these multifaceted interests affect your choice of subject and camera?*



Rylee, taken with Dragonfly camera

WMB: Sometimes, but not often. The Dragonfly Camera was definitely created from my experience with child recovery. I usually don't go back into the arenas of my previous experiences. They all offered amazing building blocks in my personal history and all those blocks are used in whatever I'm doing. But if I feel I've learned what I wanted to in that interest or subject, I'm usually looking for the next journey.

JC: *I wonder if you could give us some insights about your thinking and the reasons for the creation of the two "skull" cameras?*

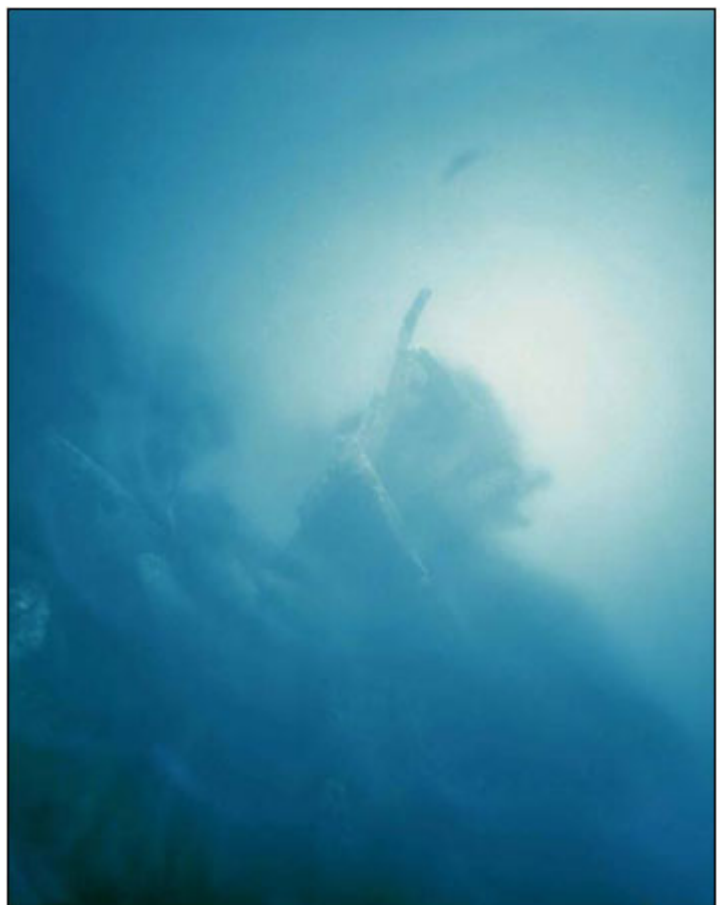


Brahma, taken with Yama camera

WMB: With the first skull camera (the Third Eye Camera) the skull was part of a med student's study kit from the turn of the century in England.

I had a doctor look and she said the skull was female and about 13 years old. Before she came to me, she was in an attic in England for about 80 years with a lot of other bones. I had the skull for about 4 or 5 months before I had a clear vision of the subject we would investigate together. The subject focus for the Third Eye Camera has been the beauty of decay. Light and time enters at her third eye, hitting the film inside. I surrounded her third eye with silver and gem stones so she is seen as, and feels beautiful. The photos from her have been amazing. Things end up on the negatives that weren't there during the shoot. In one photo of a decaying boat in San Francisco bay, a child's

face can be clearly seen in the upper right hand corner of the photo. In another, a spider web pattern around a fountain in New York. I'm never really sure what we'll get on the negative.



The latest camera made from a skull is named Yama, after the Tibetan god of death. In Tibetan Buddhism, Yama will see all of life, Karma is the “judge” that keeps the balance. Very different from the Western view of death. I bought the skull from someone in Beijing. I talked to a Lama at a Tibetan organization in San Francisco before starting the project. We talked about what I wanted to do with the project and how I was a little spooked about buying a skull that was probably pillaged from a Tibetan Monastery. The way he looked at it was that the skull had the same value as an insect’s dried out exoskeleton blowing around in the desert. There was once a soul inside, but now that soul’s journey is continuing, the skull and the exoskeleton have been left behind. After our conversation, I was still a little spooked. So he said he would take the skull from me and send it to their museum in Dharamsala, India. A little over a year later I called just to say, “Hi,” and he mentioned to me that they still had the skull and that it might be a good time for the project. So he sent it back, with a blessing and a prayer shawl, and I began. The subject focal point is exodus as seen from the eyes of a 500 year old Tibetan.

Valiant, taken with Yemaya camera

Yama’s eyes are cast from bronze and silver with a brass pinhole in each. The pinholes are placed exactly where the skull’s pupils were. Inside a divider runs down the middle of the skull creating two separate cameras, resulting in a stereo camera. A finished contact print, mounted on a copper plate, is inserted into the side of the camera. A copper and brass stereo viewer is mounted in the optical department of the skull to view the copper plate and see what Yama saw in 3D. It is the closest thing to looking through someone else’s eyes.

JC: *I see you are a Master Diver. Did any specific diving related event influence your decision to make an underwater camera?*

WMB: Well, diving on TV. About three years ago I was watching a National Geographic program that showed scuba divers diving beneath a frozen ocean. The still ice on the ocean’s surface didn’t allow the sun’s rays to flicker below, removing the distinctive signs of underwater photography. Leaving the divers hovering in a vast void surrounded by what could have been any medium of space. Fascinated by the image of the “void,” I wanted to recreate that image within my own work. Without the ice cap the only way this could be done is was with long exposure times, letting all the sun’s rays blend together. This quest led to the creation of “Yemaya”, the first (that I know of) underwater 4”x5” pinhole camera. It’s also the world’s most impractical camera. The first photo it ever shot was on the deck of a sunken ship at a depth of 105 feet. To get that one photo required two deep dives at 105 feet, two tanks of air, about four hours of swimming in 56 degree water and a healthy case of nitrogen narcosis at the bottom of the ocean. But the photo came out beautiful. I think the effort was well worth it.



Wayne Martin Belger with his old camera

By the way, I will be touring with this camera all over North America. A year ago I did a photo shoot in the Kelp Forrest Exhibit at the Monterey Bay Aquarium. The shoot/dive was open to the public and had great response. Everything went so well at the Monterey Bay Aquarium and the photos came out so beautiful that I now have 18 public aquariums throughout North America wanting to book me for photo shoots inside their exhibits. I have also been talking to a couple of publishers about a book on the project. I’m looking to start the shooting within the next 4 months if the funding for the whole project works out. My website, <http://boyofblue.com>, will have the shooting schedule for the dives. So check the site occasionally to see if the project is coming to an aquarium near you!

JC: *You have also been a hockey player and a mascot for two professional hockey teams. This leads me to ask a tongue-in-cheek question:*

Have you any plans to create a camera to photograph a hockey related subject?

WMB: Hmm...maybe I could do something with all those teeth I found on the ice....