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# Michael Eastman and Chris Gustin transcend photography and ceramics

By Dana Self

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Michael Eastman



"Untitled Cactus #9"

Details:

Michael Eastman:  
*Succulent  
Palladiums* and  
Chris Gustin: *New  
Work*

Through June 21 at  
Sherry Leedy  
Contemporary Art,  
2004 Baltimore,  
816-221-2626

Palladium prints are beautiful and exotic entities — not unlike the succulents in **Michael Eastman's** images.

Palladium prints are characterized by their beautiful, soft, velvety shades of gray. Images made through this process are extremely rich and detailed; think of early Steichen, Stieglitz and Weston photographs.

Eastman is a well-known St. Louis photographer whose work is in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Art Institute of Chicago, among others. Making a palladium print takes a lot of work — typically the process requires negatives the same size as the images — but Eastman overrides this cumbersome step by combining the vintage printing technique with digital imaging.

According to gallery owner Sherry Leedy, Eastman shoots in color, using a medium-format camera — Eastman says color film conveys three times the visual information as black-and-white — then creates a high-resolution scan of the negative. He then digitally enlarges the negative for printing. Almost 200 years span the distance between the two technologies that Eastman combines.

He created this series to draw attention to the need for a Desert House at the Missouri Botanical Garden and to demonstrate the beauty of some endangered species of succulents and cacti. Palladium photography's gorgeous tones provide the perfect vehicle. "Untitled Cactus #9" is one of

the most enigmatic images. The plant's curly fronds create an abstract and dense forest of shapes — it feels as if we could enter this mysterious realm of texture. Eastman also capitalizes on the beauty of light as expressed through the chemical process: Tiny strands of fiber on the cactus seem to be slivers of light itself.

New work using an old technique also characterizes the ceramics of **Chris Gustin**, whose work makes an excellent companion to Eastman's. A Kansas City Art Institute graduate now working in Massachusetts, Gustin makes vessels that similarly suggest his happy embrace of the past.



The vessels in this exhibition are hand-built coil forms. Employing this slow and deliberate process, Gustin forces attention to the hand of the artist and the body — his and ours. The pots are large, in some cases more than 3 feet tall. They slump and shrug and feel weighed down by their own bulk. They have dimples that suggest belly buttons and other geographies of the body, meant to provoke a physical reaction or even an emotional one.

The interiors of these open vessels are as important as their exteriors. "The skin of the clay holds the invisible interior of the vessel," Gustin notes in his artist's statement. "How I manipulate my forms 'around' that air, constraining it, enclosing it, or letting it expand and swell, can allow analogy and metaphor to enter into the work."

He uses delicate and subtle glazes, mostly grays and browns and blues that seem to match the feel of the palladium prints. Many of the vessels have a matte finish that makes them feel even more natural and plush, also like Eastman's work. Both artists use antiquated methods to gorgeous effect.