



Cameras, Handwork, and Bodily Traces: Overpainted Photomechanical Images of Athletes and their Terrains

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Laura Millard's 2006 *Lac des Arcs* depicts the traces left by skaters on an ice rink. The digital photograph's surface is covered in handmade marks which serve as an index of the skaters and their motion over the ice. Millard's work combines contemporary and nineteenth-century techniques: her handwork recalls the practice of overpainting in the late nineteenth-century French sports press, where editors and photographers used drawing and painting to articulate the aesthetic and narrative importance of their photographs. Since its inception, overpainting's practice and analysis have lived at the margins of art and media history. Once a shameful technique to which critics and printers of photographs in the late nineteenth century turned a blind eye, and still a phenomenon that remains difficult to locate in archives, overpainting has re-emerged in Millard's work. This article argues that the artist breaks down barriers between media forms and revisits questions about what kinds of image technology can most holistically provide a window into reality. Millard's work makes clear that handwork can seemingly emphasize a photograph's indexicality — those factors that enable connections between representation and the world — of the subjects and movement that the camera captured, despite drawing over the top of indices of human movement.



In Laura Millard's 2006 *Lac des Arcs*, skaters have carved swirling lines across a hockey rink, turning the ice into a canvas (Fig. 1). The composition, however, is entirely devoid of athletes. Instead, the marks on the playing field are an index of the skaters and their motion over the ice. By photographing and then painting on top of the photograph of these cuts, Millard wrenches them from their makers while suggesting the physical impact that human agents can have on natural spaces. Combining contemporary and nineteenth-century techniques, the artist presents a heavily retouched photographic image of these traces of athletic movement across a terrain sculpted in direct response to the athletes' play. The result is a scene that buzzes with human movement without featuring a single figure all while maintaining a tenuous indexical relationship to human action.¹



Fig. 1: Laura Millard, *Lac des Arcs* (2006), oil on photograph mounted on dibond (aluminum), 101 × 152.4 cm. Image courtesy of Laura Millard.

The handwork amplifying the skaters' lines in Millard's work recalls the practice of overpainting in the late nineteenth-century French sports press, where editors and photographers articulated the aesthetic and narrative importance of their imagery. Retouching calls into question what a photograph really is, its purpose, and what it purports to present to a viewer. Overpainting is a form of retouching that involves drawing or painting on top of a photographic image. This article first demonstrates that, since its inception, the practice and analysis of overpainting have lived at the margins of media history. Once a technique largely deemed shameful, to which critics and printers of photographs turned a blind eye, and still a phenomenon that remains difficult to locate in archives, overpainting has re-emerged in Millard's work.² Like

¹ I thank the artist for speaking to me about her practice. Some of this article was adapted from my 2022 doctoral dissertation, 'Aestheticizing Sport: Representations of Athletes in France, 1881–1914', University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

² André Gunthert, "'Sans retouche': histoire d'un mythe photographique", *Études photographiques*, 22 (2008), para. 5 <<https://journals.openedition.org/etudesphotographiques/1004>> [accessed 20 August 2025].

Gerhard Richter before her, Millard breaks down barriers between media forms and revisits questions about what kinds of image technology can most holistically provide a window into reality.³ Capturing the appearances of bodies in action and narratives about their feats on film fixes them. According to critics like Alexandre Ken writing in 1864, to overpaint a photograph suggests that the camera missed, or even lacked, something in its initial shot.⁴ Retouching images prior to mass printing them thus removes the image even further from its referent and disrupts the indexical connection a real subject seems to have to its photographic image.⁵

Overpainting allowed the illustrated press to prioritize human action at the expense of extraneous details. Beginning around 1892, sports publications took advantage of the lack of consensus about what a true, naturalistic immersive experience looked and felt like in representational form to direct viewers' attention to bodies. The space surrounding athletic action became a frame and a setting in which to place the focus points of snapshots that situated a viewer in representational space. A 1900 layout from *Le Sport universel illustré* demonstrates how deep compositional space could combine with post-production editing to dynamically highlight athletic action (Fig. 2). But retouching always brought the subject back to the edge of the pictorial plane, reminding readers that total immersion beyond it was impossible. Retouching has resurfaced in the work of contemporary artists who see its applicability better suited to foregrounding

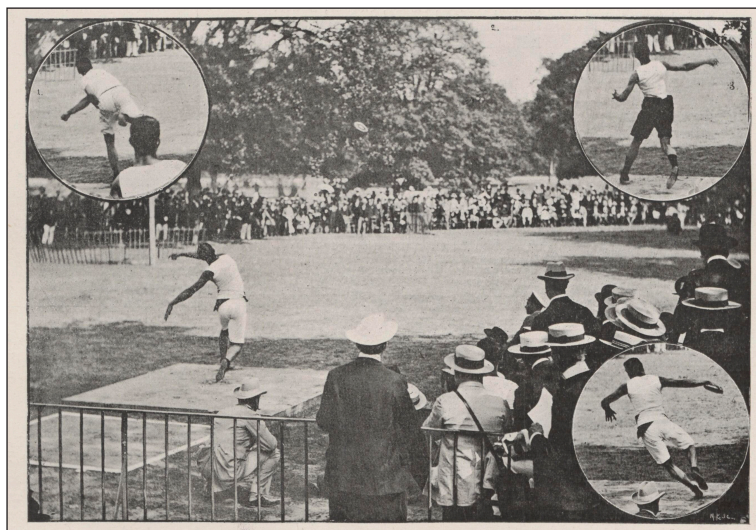


Fig. 2: Various, 'Sports athlétiques: les championnats du monde', *Le Sport universel illustré*, 21 July 1900. Gallica: Bibliothèque nationale de France.

³ Ibid., para. 4.

⁴ Alexandre Ken, *Dissertations historiques, artistiques et scientifiques sur la photographie* (Librairie Nouvelle, 1864), pp. 142–45.

⁵ Suren Lalvani, *Photography, Vision, and the Production of Modern Bodies* (State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 32–33, 84.

deep, real-seeming space over the direct and surface representation of human bodies.⁶ Overpainting in the sports press prioritized iconicity and narrative clarity. In Millard's work, naturalistic, enveloping space becomes more immersive thanks to the same technique. Her handwork invites viewers to see, feel, and more fully experience her subjects by adding back in fabricated, yet tangible and convincing, traces of being in the form of cuts in an ice rink and snowflakes speckled over a camera lens.

When an image claims to offer a window into a real moment, or a recreation of an instant of reality, the factors that contribute to its appearance become implicated in questions of truthfulness and the camera's reliability as a witness. What, for example, happens when a photograph fails to sufficiently resemble its subject and all the narrative complexities an editor hopes to convey? What happens when a photograph has been so heavily hand-edited to rectify the problem that it no longer betrays any trace of what initially stood in front of the camera?⁷ Late nineteenth-century press consumers were not versed in 'reading' an image marked by indexical traces of action.⁸ Most were instead accustomed to interpreting image-based signs and icons and had to be taught to grasp the indexicality of a subject with its icon or sign. When the camera failed to capture all the details that made a scene decipherable according to prior representational standards, handwork ensured that the culturally legible signs of a subject stayed intact, often in exchange for said subject's indexicality — that magical-seeming trace of a subject seemingly unique to photographic lenses. We can see this in Figure 2, where the subtle, lived differences in the athlete's body positioning would be lost to viewers without the post-production insertion of highlights and shadows upon his jersey and shorts.

In sports magazines, editors blurred the lines between photographs and paintings by painting on top of their photographs. Retouched areas on a sports photograph printed in halftone in the 1890s could ensure visual clarity and direct a viewer's attention to the most important aspects: bodies and signs of their movements through space. Images needed to be clear in small formats and greyscale; retouching ensured that no crucial details became muddled among trace-like displaced air or surrounding playing fields. Thanks to strategic outlines and highlights in the form of cross-hatching or ink washes, an athlete's environment and imprints of motion could recede into the background without disturbing the body's clarity. Such work could be masked by the

⁶ Other examples include Marie Carlados (b. 1991) and Susan Fenton (1949–2018).

⁷ Martin Lefebvre, 'Photography and Semiotics: Use and Purpose', *Critical Inquiry*, 48.4 (2022), pp. 742–73 (p. 742), doi:[10.1086/719852](https://doi.org/10.1086/719852).

⁸ Thierry Gervais, 'L'Invention du magazine: la photographie mise en page dans *La Vie au grand air* (1898–1914)', *Études photographiques*, 20 (2007), pp. 50–67.

halftone printing process, as ink and paint became part of the same printing plate as the initial photographic image. Printing allowed a retouched photograph's mixed-media additions to fuse into a holistic object that prioritized narrative clarity above all else. Any amplified or altered divisions between compositional devices were naturalized while maintaining a viewer's focus on human figures.

This article first introduces the practice of overpainting and its contentious implications for nineteenth-century critics and photographers. Contemporary print historian Tom Gretton has elucidated how several disparate material and logistical factors, including handwork, strategic layouts, and paper and ink quality, came together in the early illustrated press to compensate for photography's shortcomings in presenting legible information while maintaining an indexical imprint of action.⁹ Thierry Gervais and André Gunthert have argued that the early illustrated press used overpainting in its adoption of photomechanical imagery to remain familiar and legible to readers unaccustomed to machine-made images in print. My second section demonstrates how sports press editors overpainted to inject excitement and legibility into their pictorial content, despite the technique's tendency to wrench indexicality and motion from an image. As I then argue in the third section, overpainting's utility in navigating formal and narrative relationships between agents and their surroundings has found new life in Millard's mixed-media pieces. Her images recast the hierarchies between an immersive experience — one that transcends the typical visual interaction between viewer and artwork by inviting in more sensory stimuli — and body-centric narrative by prioritizing the former.¹⁰ Millard's work explores how photographs can function when viewers learn to read them as signs of something, as windows into the 'real' and/or as evidence of some physical phenomenon.¹¹ The final section demonstrates that, for Millard, handwork emphasizes, not detracts from, a photograph's indexicality — those factors that enable connections between representation and the world.¹² Her post-production additions to the photographic surface are not true indices of her subject, but instead recreate the traces of her subject's actual disrupted presence in

⁹ Tom Gretton, 'Signs for Labour-Value in Printed Pictures after the Photomechanical Revolution: Mainstream Changes and Extreme Cases around 1900', *Oxford Art Journal*, 3.28 (2005), pp. 371–90, doi:[10.1093/oxartj/kci033](https://doi.org/10.1093/oxartj/kci033); and Tom Gretton, 'Le Statut subalterne de la photographie: étude de la présentation des images dans les hebdomadaires illustrés (Londres, Paris, 1885–1910)', *Études photographiques*, 20 (2007), pp. 34–49.

¹⁰ I understand *immersion* as an omnidimensional, enveloping, encircling relationship between viewer and artwork. According to Will Scrimshaw, immersion is a spatio-temporal phenomenon; an immersive artwork is marked by 'the instance of a meeting between artwork and audience'. Will Scrimshaw, *Immanence and Immersion: On the Acoustic Condition in Contemporary Art* (Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 1, 89.

¹¹ Lefebvre, pp. 742–73.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 743.

time and place while physically invading the viewer's real space.¹³ The results are scenes that invite multisensory immersion in ways that the sports press never could.

Overpainting in the nineteenth-century press

Photographs had technically featured in newspapers and magazines since the mid-nineteenth century. Prior to halftone, there were no options to directly print a photograph alongside text on a single page. In the most common process, an illustrator had to copy a photograph by hand onto wood, making an engraving based on a photographic image.¹⁴ Halftone printing was revolutionary for rectifying this issue.¹⁵ Halftone directly enabled the first illustrated sports magazines to publish photomechanical layouts, photo-essays, and features that eschewed textual page dominance in favour of almost entirely image-based stories.¹⁶

The human hand had long been seen as a necessary mediator between the camera and the page in the process of including photographs in magazines.¹⁷ Hand-rendering allowed engravers to correct any visual faults in the source photograph: blurred areas or overly cluttered backgrounds did not necessarily create problems since the engraver simply had to transform a multi-tonal image into a series of cross-hatched lines in the final print. Simplifying a complex image provided opportunities to pare down superfluous details and omit elements that detracted from the core contents of the source photograph. With hand-drawn engraving, final images could appear more clearly, devoid of too much tonal nuance or visual noise, most often in background details and landscape features.

It fell upon the engraver to mask any visible sign of hand intervention that might have been added at any point in a photograph's creation.¹⁸ Handmade engravings based on a photographic referent had blended two forms of image-making — manual drawing and photography — so seamlessly that it is still often difficult to discern the formal origin of an engraved press image.¹⁹ A significant repercussion of halftone was that the new process of translating a photograph to its printable rendering seemed to eliminate the need for a hand engraver. Where a hand illustrator had once manually

¹³ Laura Millard, conversation with the author, 17 October 2022.

¹⁴ Thierry Gervais, 'Witness to War: The Uses of Photography in the Illustrated Press, 1855–1904', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 9.3 (2010), pp. 370–84 (p. 374), doi:[10.1177/1470412910380343](https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412910380343).

¹⁵ Gianni Haver, *La Presse illustrée: une histoire romande* (Presses polytechniques et universitaires romandes, 2018), p. 49.

¹⁶ Wood engravings had allowed images to be published alongside text beginning in the 1840s.

¹⁷ Gervais, 'Witness to War', p. 374.

¹⁸ Thierry Gervais, 'L'illustration photographique: naissance du spectacle d'information (1843–1914)' (unpublished doctoral thesis, École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2007), p. 180.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

drawn tones as lines and decided which visual elements to simplify, amplify, or eliminate, the halftone screen could simply translate greyscale tone into printable dots. Importantly, a halftone print on newspaper did not betray textural signs of having been born of multiple mark-making techniques.

Gervais notes that photographs seemed jarring to many publishers because they looked different from more familiar types of illustration. He writes that while photomechanical imagery could be more descriptively efficient in terms of conveying factual detail, photographs had to fit established iconographical standards in the illustrated press to become aesthetically appealing.²⁰ And so, prior to printing, all photomechanical images in illustrated sports magazines were retouched by hand, either directly on the negative or on the plate onto which the source image was etched.²¹

Halftone challenged established understandings of representational technology. The technology simultaneously forced publishers and readers to reconsider the implications of prioritizing certain forms of reproduction over others. Prior to photography, few people understood the difference between what William Ivins termed in 1953 ‘pictorial expression and pictorial communication of statements of facts’. Photographs, according to Ivins, revealed the chasm between creating something and ‘making a statement about the quality and character of something’.²² In theory, photographs could present concrete facts, devoid of visible human commentary or value statements. Yet printing photographs was not as simple as removing the apparent signs of human intervention between the camera and magazine page.

Beyond simply highlighting, erasing, or outlining elements in the composition, retouching also involved framing to direct the viewer’s attention. Retouching as a corrective measure helped a new media image seem more like a fine art illustration, with the evidence of its photographic origins softened. Overpainting involved skill for the process to be ‘successful’ — that is, invisible.²³ In cases where post-camera manipulation was evident, alterations fulfilled a specific purpose, such as providing visual relief or distraction.²⁴ A skilled overpainter had the power to enhance the value of a publication’s contents.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 186.

²¹ Heinz K. Henisch and Bridget A. Henisch, *The Painted Photograph, 1839–1914: Origins, Techniques, Aspirations* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), pp. 13–15.

²² William M. Ivins, Jr, ‘Prints and Visual Communication’, in *Photography in Print: Writings from 1816 to the Present*, ed. by Vicki Goldberg (University of New Mexico Press, 1981), pp. 391–93 (p. 391).

²³ Gunthert, paras 8–9.

²⁴ Clément Chéroux, ‘Les Récréations photographiques: un répertoire de formes pour les avant-gardes’, *Études photographiques*, 5 (1998), pp. 73–96 (p. 74).

Retouching provoked heated debates in the photography community in the mid- and late nineteenth century: whether a photographic image should be edited by hand prior to reproduction amounted to a question of what the surface of the image was. Some believed that photographs could be considered art only if a human hand intervened in the print, adding deliberate creative input onto an otherwise mechanical image. Ivins believed that a work of art is defined by its visible surface, which contains the traces of human interference.²⁵ His view that manipulating a print contributed to a photo-object's status as art is consistent with retouching guides published in the late nineteenth century that championed the artistic and utilitarian merits of the practice.²⁶ Yet those in favour of 'straight' photography — photographs made exclusively with camera technology — felt that media mixing damaged a photograph's integrity.²⁷ Overpainting could thereby act either as a positive enhancer or media corruptor.

For some critics, retouching was inherently dishonest. Successful retouching was intervention that negated itself — a well-retouched image erased any traces of hand manipulation.²⁸ The practice implied that the photograph was not actually a photograph and was instead a composite thing born of different language forms. Recalling Ivins's view, Joseph Pennell believed that the human hand was necessary in determining a work of art. But for others, like Paul Strand writing on the topic several decades later, much of photography's claim to the status of fine art rested on media purity, not mixing; retouching implied that either the camera or the operator was insufficient.²⁹ Despite the growing condemnation of retouching in art photography circles, the fact that published photographs were nearly always retouched is a reminder of the inherent hypocrisy in denouncing the practice.

Much early retouching in the press occurred where photography's limitations threatened to distract from a story. Overpainting could ensure that an image properly corresponded to its accompanying narrative. Yet some audiences were unwilling to believe in the total veracity of photographic images. With hobby photography becoming more widespread among the middle and upper-middle classes throughout much of Western Europe and North America, awareness grew of how malleable a camera-made image could be.³⁰ Practitioners began experimenting with techniques like dodging

²⁵ Ivins, p. 392.

²⁶ A. Courrèges, *La Retouche du cliché: retouches chimiques, physiques & artistiques* (Gauthier-Villars, 1898); and C. Klary, *Traité pratique de la peinture des épreuves photographiques avec les couleurs à l'aquarelle et à l'huile* (Gauthier-Villars, 1888).

²⁷ Vicki Goldberg, 'Introduction', in *Photography in Print*, ed. by Goldberg, pp. 19–23 (pp. 19–21).

²⁸ See Gunthert, para. 8.

²⁹ Ibid., para. 16.

³⁰ Mia Fineman, *Faking It: Manipulated Photography before Photoshop* (Metropolitan Museum of Art/Yale University Press, 2012), p. 27.

(casting a shadow over an area of a print during exposure to make an area lighter) and burning (exposing a section to more light to create an extra sense of darkness).³¹ These techniques are done during post-production but typically involve a stencil or other material with varying degrees of opacity. Overpainting joined dodging and burning to become part of a magazine's post-production toolkit for producing visual content that informed and entertained consumers.

Overpainting in the sports press

The late nineteenth-century French sports press was extraordinarily innovative in adopting new printing technology while simultaneously relying on established mark-making techniques long associated with painting and illustration. Combining handwork with the mechanical printing process made for dynamic layouts, with text and images balanced in unprecedented ways that foregrounded the image as a storytelling and entertaining device.³² The circular, episode-like additions to Figure 2's composition attempt to demonstrate a singular body moving through space across several seconds, alluding to some of the motion to which the live audience would have been privy. By editing photographs by hand prior to printing, publications could render their human subjects more legible and enticing to viewers off the field. Many of the earliest sports periodical images seem uncanny to twenty-first century eyes for how they look neither like photographs nor like handmade images: they are at once both, and neither. With retouching, these publications allowed viewers of magazine imagery to engage with sports in an entirely unprecedented, multisensory way.

The sports press was unapologetic about its use of retouching because the technique ensured a balance between legibility and a more holistic viewer experience.³³ Audiences and editors seemed to agree that a successful image lacked distracting imperfections or superfluous detail. Its human subjects were at once conventionally attractive and impossibly impressive, their actions and the results immediately striking, compelling the viewer to keep turning the page. Equally important to an image's success was its ability to enthrall a viewer. As this section explores, cameras could capture and fix an indexical connection to the subject, over which handwork could inject narrative clarity and further visual appeal.

Because retouching was so common and even accepted, if not ignored, in the press, many pages in sports publications betray visually obvious retouching. A feature on

³¹ David Präkel, *The Visual Dictionary of Photography* (Routledge, 2020), p. 93.

³² Gervais, 'L'Invention du magazine'.

³³ In 1903 *La Vie au grand air* asked freelance photographers to include a description of their works' contents to make the retoucher's work easier, effectively admitting to participating in the practice. See 'Entre-nous: aux photographes', *La Vie au grand air*, 21 August 1903, p. 574.

'Le Grand Prix de l'Aéro-Club' in Angers in a 1912 issue of the illustrated periodical *Le Miroir* is a photomechanical essay (Fig. 3). The story is printed on thin newsprint, a surface on which halftone leaves images of poor clarity and seems to demand hand intervention. *Le Miroir* uses this formal shortcoming to its advantage: that hand-editing is necessary for detail also invites readers to engage with the image in careful ways. Images and their captions guide readers in their interaction with different visual perspectives of the events and participants. Retouchers have focused their attention on the subjects, leaving the background terrain muted to better push the human figures and their apparatuses to the foreground. In the central image, figures in a car glance over their shoulders at the camera. Fine white lines highlight the men's head coverings and the car's rims, folded-down top, and steering wheel. These lines jump out from the page, appearing discordant with the softer tones in the car's body, the men's skin, and the background. Hand-drawn lines separate men from each other and from the machine and even more dramatically from the landscape behind them. Without these lines, the men's bodies and the car's outlines might be lost against fuzzy greyscale. These added details provide visual clarity. Here, human figures and their machines take visual precedence over the landscapes they inhabit thanks to strategic retouching.

Editors of the popular *La Vie au grand air* retouched photomechanical imagery to give consumers the impression of bodies moving as they might be witnessed in person, sensorially. To achieve this, the magazine ironically relied on the camera's shortcomings to depict the blurring that occurs when someone moves past the eyes too quickly to



Fig. 3: Various, 'Le Grand Prix de l'Aéro-Club s'est disputé à Angers', *Le Miroir*, 31 March 1912. Musée d'Art et d'Industrie de Saint-Étienne. Photo by author.

clearly discern them. By the late nineteenth century, though camera technology had advanced enough for shutter speeds to capture quicker-paced action than ever before, fast movement still risked producing fuzzy photographs. Yet this was a ‘fault’ that could be exploited to the magazine’s advantage. In an 1899 issue, a snapshot of a live horse race suggests bodily movement thanks to the camera’s deficiencies and with the help of hand-drawn intervention (Fig. 4). The two photographed horses are blurry, riding through a heavy fog. The background landscape provides a hazy suggestion of trees, spectators, and track. The riders’ bodies are outlined with sharp black lines. Against the horses blurred in a frenzy of speed, the riders seem to jump off the page. Their jodhpurs stand out from the dark saddles, and their caps, arms, and hands are crisply defined. The horses and background suggest movement so fast that the camera could not capture the action. That the jockeys’ bodies emerge outlined renders them flat, but the hand-editing that the magazine has added separates them from the action. Retouching helps distinguish the athletes from their surroundings, while maintaining the impression of misplaced air passing by the photographer’s lens.

The blurring that the camera captures in *La Vie au grand air*’s jockey feature is highly reminiscent of **Edgar Degas’s contemporaneous pastel drawings of race horses**. These images carefully attend to the textural details in the horses’ glossy coats and the bunching fabric of jockeys’ jodhpurs. But they eschew the minute detail that would



Fig. 4: V.G.A., ‘L’Arrivée du prix de l’avenir, dans le brouillard’, *La Vie au grand air*, 25 February 1899. Gallica: Bibliothèque nationale de France.

be lost to a viewer observing onsite. Degas's horses and riders are just hazy enough to approximate the impression of lived movement. Himself an avid photographer, the artist uses the specific qualities of pastel to enhance the soft contours of bodies in motion, blending into the surrounding grass and hillsides beyond.³⁴ Where *La Vie au grand air* embraced photography's limitations in capturing clear details in an action snapshot, Degas similarly uses pastel's imprecise ground coverage and gentle edges to mimic the variety of sensory stimuli caused by live motion.

Photographs such as *La Vie au grand air*'s jockey image produced new meanings for viewers by presenting legible signs alongside recordings of their visual field. These consisted of imprints of the life and presence of subjects in motion directly on the camera lens.³⁵ The jockey image suggests the movement to which the photographer and camera were witness — a kind of visual accuracy. In countless other instances, blurring seemingly captures the air displaced by athletic motion, and soft haze in the background of a match holds the imprint of a restless crowd's jitters. But by freezing these lived instances in a snapshot, a photographer's desire to capture a moment witnessed in person created a new event dependent on its frame, one lacking all other sensory stimuli aside from the visual.³⁶

A press photograph possesses indexicality insofar as it maintains an imprint of its subject: light reflected off the water in a diving competition, or the smudge on a lens from dirt kicked up by a horse. By retouching a photograph, a publication stripped some of this indexicality away to enhance the subject's iconicity.³⁷ Viewers thus became privy to more viewing aids — more visual details than those available to anyone watching the original event live — but true, multisensory immersion was interrupted by post-camera handwork. Retouching made reading images easier while removing any reminders of one's multisensory, physical experience of movement in real life.³⁸ The resulting images rupture much of the lived connection to the initial events in question.

Retouching proved necessary to the illustrated sports press because it was a crucial means of differentiating human subjects from their fields of play, with the latter remaining firmly behind the subject in represented space. In *La Vie au grand*

³⁴ Carol Armstrong, 'Reflections on the Mirror: Painting, Photography, and the Self-Portraits of Edgar Degas', *Representations*, 22 (1988), pp. 108–41, doi:[10.2307/2928413](https://doi.org/10.2307/2928413).

³⁵ Lefebvre, p. 745.

³⁶ Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz, 'Introduction', in *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, ed. by Charney and Schwartz (University of California Press, 1995), pp. 1–12 (p. 7).

³⁷ Tom Gunning, 'What's the Point of an Index? or, Faking Photographs', *Nordicom Review* 25.1–2 (2004), pp. 39–49 (p. 41), doi:[10.1515/nor-2017-0268](https://doi.org/10.1515/nor-2017-0268).

³⁸ Rosemary Hawker, 'The Idiom in Photography as the Truth in Painting', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 101.3 (2002), pp. 541–54 (p. 545), doi:[10.1215/00382876-101-3-541](https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-101-3-541).

air, retouching adds iconic details to subjects whose forms risked becoming too far subsumed by the camera's technical limitations. Blurring could seem like an indexical trace of motion, and was an effect mostly unique to photography, yet it risked obscuring the narrative clarity of a sports subject. Retouching added intelligibility at the expense of this possible index, illustrating the difficulty of maintaining both in a single mixed-media periodical image.

Laura Millard's overpainting

Produced almost exactly one hundred years later than those in *Le Miroir* and *La Vie au grand air*, Laura Millard's images also make use of extra-photographic editing. If sports press imagery accepted the risk that retouching disrupted indexicality in favour of iconicity, Millard suggests that handwork offers a new way of forging a phenomenological connection between viewer and subject. To produce *Lac des Arcs*, Millard first directed skaters' movement across an ice rink before photographing the resulting shapes left on the ice. She captured these skated lines using a digital camera mounted on a drone, printing then enhancing the lines by hand. In manipulating her prints, the artist takes on the role of a *peintre photographique* — a 'photographic painter' — as described by the late nineteenth-century French retoucher Édouard Baldus in his attempt to define his profession. Baldus used paint applied with fine brushstrokes to add definition to his positive prints.³⁹ Millard extends this process by participating in the landscape's transformation in multiple registers: first as a choreographer and director, and then as a photographer and editor. Her image is a combination of seemingly unrelated media forms: directed performance, quick digital landscape photography, and time-consuming, delicate hand drawing.⁴⁰ Millard's overpainting combines increased legibility with a reversal of the relationship between human subject and landscape background. The results compel viewers to feel immersed in her captured spaces.

Millard overpaints with oil, acrylics, and watercolour directly atop the digital print, amplifying the appearance of cuts in the ice captured by her camera.⁴¹ Her mark-making emphasizes the alterations athletes have made to the terrain. The viewer is invited to believe in the holistic nature of the image as an object and the veracity of its contents — that these cuts are deep, that the ice has been defaced, and that humans

³⁹ Henisch and Henisch, p. 183.

⁴⁰ Millard, conversation with the author, 17 October 2022.

⁴¹ Jennifer Rudder, 'Glam North (and South)', in *Glam North: Doris McCarthy and her New Contemporaries*, ed. by Jennifer Rudder and Alexander Irving (Doris McCarthy Gallery, University of Toronto Scarborough, 2014), pp. 5–9 (pp. 8–9), <<https://doris-mccarthygalleries.utoronto.ca/media/pages/publications/essays/glam-north-and-south/72da5f546c-1618203580/glamnorth.pdf>> [accessed 15 August 2025].

can so easily leave harsh signs of their presence — in part because of the historical associations viewers have made between photographs and truth.⁴² Early photo-retouchers working with halftone plates added and erased elements of an image prior to printing while minimizing signs of their interventions. As a conglomerate of a photograph and drawing or painting, the resulting object could make an altered or fabricated story about athletic action seem factual. Millard dismantles the visual power dynamic championed by the illustrated sports press between human foreground and natural background. She overpaints to draw attention back to the playing field, making clear how vulnerable such spaces are to human activity. Millard's embrace of textural difference and clear evidence of combining multiple media forms, each with different time demands, pushes human intervention back into a supporting role. Nature takes centre stage. Human alteration, first of space itself, and then of a mechanical print, serves to enhance nature's presence, not minimize it.

Millard is not the first contemporary artist to use retouching to direct attention towards immersive natural spaces and away from human actors while relying on handwork to alter the physical make-up of a photograph. Since its inception, overpainting had been marked by fastidiousness for the sake of clarity and value in works of art and the press. In 1984 Gerhard Richter reimagined the practice as spontaneous and divergent in his *Übermalungen* (overpaintings) series.⁴³ Richter experimented with the combination of photograph and handwork, suggesting an exciting range of theoretical possibilities open to artists willing to combine mechanical images of unpopulated spaces with handwork. In Richter's work, as in Millard's, the natural world remains in constant tension with human actors. For both artists, these formal and experiential divergences between photograph and paint are to be celebrated, not hidden as they were in the sports press.

Each of Richter's *Übermalungen* is a photograph onto which paint is smeared, squeegeed, dripped, and scraped, seemingly at random. The artist occasionally intervenes by hand, further scratching away at the multilayered surface. Susan Laxton and Aline Guillermet suggest that Richter reconsidered photography's relationship to chance while adding paint to aesthetic ends.⁴⁴ He celebrated nature's unpredictability while asserting his ability to alter, even tame, represented natural space using materials that predate the camera.⁴⁵ These works are an extension of the artist's process of

⁴² Lalvani, p. 2.

⁴³ Susan Laxton, 'As Photography: Mechanicity, Contingency, and Other-Determination in Gerhard Richter's Overpainted Snapshots', *Critical Inquiry*, 38.4 (2012), pp. 776–95, doi:[10.1086/667424](https://doi.org/10.1086/667424).

⁴⁴ Aline Guillermet, "'Painting like nature": Chance and the Landscape in Gerhard Richter's Overpainted Photographs', *Art History*, 40.1 (2017), pp. 178–99 (pp. 179–80), doi:[10.1111/1467-8365.12225](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8365.12225); and Laxton.

⁴⁵ Guillermet, p. 181.

bringing painting and photography into dialogue, using the specificities of one to reveal the truths in the other.⁴⁶

Richter's painted photographs play with the tension between the quickness and chance that cameras invite and the deliberateness required by painting.⁴⁷ The two techniques mirror each other in his work, at once determining the other's appearance and referencing each other's forms. Richter tried to relinquish his painterly autonomy by allowing his photographs to guide a seemingly random application of paint, inviting painting to invoke the supposed impassivity of the camera.⁴⁸ Scraped and smeared paint in brown and cream invades a mountain vista in *Fextal, Piz Chapütschin* (1992), recalling a snowstorm in its sudden horror and destructiveness. Paint emulates nature's brutality in its form and the eclipsing effect it has on the composition. Applied by hand, paint does not enhance the landscape image below it, nor does it 'fix' or improve the photograph's details. Instead, it reifies the subject while smothering the composition on which it sits.

Richter's *Übermalungen* are neither wholly abstract nor figurative, suggesting that nature and the artist's options for capturing it in different media might themselves resist imposed organization.⁴⁹ In his *Fextal, Piz Lagrev* of 1992, thick paint falls over the top of photographed boulders covered in snow. These globs of pigment are violently disruptive of the photographic object. Paint also seems highly unnatural in its perfect roundness and harsh colouring amid the organic imperfection of the captured landscape. Richter's marks testify to the presence of the artist working with industrial materials, randomly yet deliberately altering the landscape photograph below. The incursion of these paint drips into the existing composition forces an acknowledgement of humans' inability to leave a natural space alone. The artist allows his painted marks to have the final 'say' in the image, asserting brutal human dominance over both the camera and its natural subject.

Richter directs attention to nature's spontaneity and draws parallels between photographic automatism and a dispassionate way of painting. In *Lac des Arcs*, however, Millard's camera captures a highly staged scene in which skaters have just left swirling marks on the ice. These marks are hypnotic and suggest informality, but their crispness betrays how deliberately they were made (these were evidently adept athletes). Like Richter's overpainted works, Millard's compositions are deceiving in their subject and form. In both artists' work, the camera seems to capture unarranged scenes by chance. But both Millard and Richter organize and choose their landscape subjects with care before layering several media forms over an extant photograph.

⁴⁶ Hawker, p. 544.

⁴⁷ Laxton, p. 778.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 779.

⁴⁹ Guillermet, p. 188.

Emphasizing indexicality in the twenty-first century

Millard's 2013 *Snow Tree* demands phenomenological engagement by harnessing overpainting to mimic photography's indexical potential in maintaining a true optical connection with its object (Fig. 5).⁵⁰ A hazy close-up shot reveals tree branches heavy with snow dissolving into crystalline shards. The composition evokes the sensation of having snow fall onto and around one's head during a winter hike. Millard has overpainted individual dots in colourful paint atop the print, with each handmade mark physically extending out of the photographic surface and mimicking a single snowflake in a kaleidoscope of flurries. The camera has captured the repercussions of human activity in a wintertime environment drastically altered by bodily movement. Overpainting brings the disrupted snow swirling above the camera's lens closer to the viewer by merging mechanical imagery with tactile interventions. These are the snowflakes that might have fallen directly onto the camera, leaving a physical trace of their presence that would remain on the print. While digital editing could easily remove such indexical 'flaws', Millard's post-production handwork adds back substitutions



Fig. 5: Laura Millard, *Snow Tree* (2013), oil, watercolour, and acrylic on photograph, 76.2 × 101 cm. Image courtesy of Laura Millard.

⁵⁰ 'On Existential Graphs, Euler's Diagrams, and Logical Algebra', in *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. by Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur W. Burks, 8 vols (Cambridge University Press, 1931–58), IV: *The Simplest Mathematics*, ed. by Hartshorne and Weiss (1933), pp. 341–97 (p. 359).

for these accidental reminders of the subject's physical presence in the world, albeit in a three-dimensional, and fabricated, way.

Millard's handwork normalizes the appearance of human-made marks in the landscape. Despite the textural differences between print and paint, the combination of media forms comes together to create a holistic composition. Richter's overpainted photographs juxtapose thick, jarring paint with serene, and flat, pastoral landscape photographs. His painterly invasions are obvious for how their form and materiality differ from the objects over which they are superimposed. Millard's overpaintings, however, are subtler in how they merge media forms on a single surface. In *Lac des Arcs* and *Snow Tree*, paint does not drown out the photographs. Paint seems slow and trepidatious in its incursion onto the print, emphasizing and supporting the image's subject matter rather than allowing its distinct formal qualities to smother those of the digital image. The print refuses to be subsumed by slow handwork and paint. Despite the unavoidable signs of change, the landscape itself also refuses to be obfuscated. Millard seamlessly merges pre- and post-camera manipulations onto a single surface. In so doing, she forces viewers to confront how casually we alter our environments for the sake of recreation.

Millard's works, and the overpainted sports press images they recall, are at once photographs and textured paintings, while also being neither. This interstitial status between media forms in the contemporary artist's work is a clever play on nineteenth-century debates about media purity. Then, critics struggled to categorize photographs altered by hand: were they more artistic for having been redrawn, or impure for having seen different forms of mark-making?⁵¹ But overpainting allowed editors of the early sports press to visually differentiate athletes from their terrains. Millard appropriates the technique to do the opposite: her handwork undoes the separation between nature and playing field, simultaneously emphasizing and erasing signs of damage to outdoor spaces. Her work adds back marks that mimic traces left by the subject interacting with the lens, giving the viewer access to the scene in an intimate, immersive way.

Editors of sports photographs used their handwork in a supporting role, enhancing the appearance of an athlete's performance and clarifying how they inhabited their spatial surroundings. Press overpainting in the earliest sports photojournalism harnessed tensions between media forms to make an image 'work' in a particular, often narrative, way. In Millard's work, the subject is the tangible effect that sports leave on land and the pictorial space into which viewers can immerse themselves. Millard reasserts traces of human action, using divergences between media forms to mirror

⁵¹ Jordan Bear, 'Index Marks the Spot?: The Photo-Diagram's Referential System', *Philosophy of Photography*, 2.2 (2012), pp. 315–34 (p. 316), doi:[10.1386/pop.2.2.315_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/pop.2.2.315_1).

and re-enact the clash between nature and fast-paced action. The result requires the viewer to slow down when encountering the tactile work, questioning what has been captured by the camera and which elements have been added by hand.⁵² The artist mediates between the choreographed scene and its photographic representation by physically emphasizing those indexical traces the viewer should encounter to 'enter' into the image's space. Her marks intricately respond to signs of human activity. The impact of human movement across space is far from subtle, but Millard's delicate handwork reminds us how much we take the results of our incursions for granted.

⁵² Millard, conversation with the author, 17 October 2022.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

