

# 'Something blue under the sun'

19th century photo process gets fresh exposure

art

Sun prints by Lis J. Schwitters

Through Aug. 26

Borders Books  
Café Gallery in  
Thousand Oaks

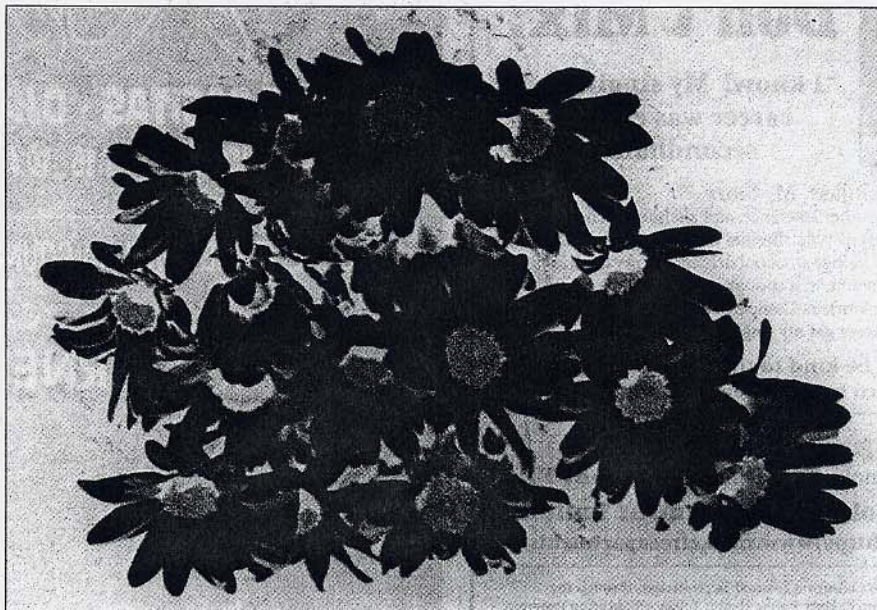
by Courtney Villanova

"When I finally accepted that there is nothing new under the sun, that is when I found my own voice." This epigram (author unknown—how's *that* for ironic?) ebbed and flowed across my consciousness as I surveyed Lis Schwitters' images. It probably occurred to me first because her art is literally made in part by the sun—but she also employs a process that comes from the very beginning of photography 150-odd years ago.

An initial, casual viewing of Schwitters' artworks could make one wonder whether they're photographs or prints. Actually, they're both.

Schwitters takes her own photos and applies to them a process in which objects or transparent photographic images are placed on chemically treated paper. Upon exposure to the sun, the uncovered areas darken and the unexposed areas are left white. Depending on the chemicals used, the result is a deep blue print called a cyanotype (yes, this is where architectural blueprints come from) or a brown (Van Dyke) print. Sun printing is the all-inclusive name for these processes, and its color alternatives are one reason Schwitters latched onto the medium. The blue conveys an earthy, indigo-dyed impression, while the brown is reminiscent of early sepia tone images.

Spontaneous, simple and relatively permanent and requiring no need for a darkroom, sun printing can seem like magic and has caught on with numerous artists these days. Although Schwitters is not alone in her explorations (I have seen several examples of sun printing on fabric, for instance), and although her subject matter is neither grandiose nor ground breaking, this collection of images is var-



Lis Schwitters' cyanotype "Thinking of You" is an example of her devotion to a relatively overlooked medium.

ied and absorbing. This is accomplished in part by technique and also by often cropping and framing the subject to emphasize pattern over form. Such is the case in a series of three-square-inch prints, whose subjects are vaguely familiar but unrecognizable, distilled into a pure graphic essence of shaded lines and squiggles.

This quality is well represented in several pictures of nondescript household objects. One such pleasing composition is called "Theme and Variation," in which a repeatedly curving metal shape (magazine rack? sofa spring?) casts its sinuous shadow in slanted sunlight. Schwitters takes her camera outside as well to capture the gables, doors and façades of venerable old buildings, images which—due to the sketchy, faded quality bestowed by the sun printing process—would not look out of place in a century-old photo album.

This uneven, distressed effect lifts these images out of the realm of day-to-day immediacy. We're used to seeing early photographs, with their cracks and scratches and worn edges, but Schwitters' works are imbued with a strong sense of history, illusory though it may be. This sense of timelessness extends to images whose subject matter is obviously contemporary, such as "A Blue Print for a Greater America." This aerial view of part of the Los Angeles Basin features

wall-to-wall concrete and buildings stretching off toward ghostly mountains on the horizon. Suddenly, I'm in the world of our descendants, who are puzzling over this quaint scene 100 years from now.

A similar feeling is evoked when looking at a couple of self-portraits done in Van Dyke brown. Schwitters' very long hair, the dim, dif-

fused light and the murky rendering of the images make it seem nearly incomprehensible that these could be pictures of the artist and not her great-great-grandmother.

A nice series of botanical images from Hawaii is included in this collection. The sun printing technique seems to work well with the graceful, organic shapes of

these leaves, fronds and gourds. This subset of works is the only one in which three-dimensional objects are used to create the image—an homage, conscious or not, to the original sun printers, who used plants, feathers and even lace to create the first cyanotypes, many of which are still extant.

Finally, four mandalas appear in this exhibit, widely varied in subject matter and featuring a hypnotic, kaleidoscopic symmetry.

"Looking Beyond the Lips of Desire" has an atmospheric feel, like a basilica dome, with leaflike lips floating upward through a holy vault of space and the sky peaking through from above. "Hors D'Oeuvres" is a dizzyingly repetitive array of \$100 bills laced with money-related slogans. Meditating upon mandalas is an ancient method of transcendence; the more obsessive among us can contemplate the mantra "It's all about the Benjamins" as we attempt to count the number of them in this piece.

This is a time in which aesthetics (come on; say it—*beauty*) is suspect in our art. These days, the truly bold and brave act might be to declare one's love for a method, material or medium of art-making and to explore every corner and dimension of it. Schwitters' unabashed focus on visual fulfillment results in subtly soulful work, and her passion for sun printing continues a seminal, yet long obscure, photographic tradition. ■

## on exhibit

### art galleries

**AMERICAN COMMERCIAL BANK**  
Current exhibit: *Mary Faces: A Show of Portraits*, a juried competition through Sept. 7. 155 S. A Street, Oxnard. 483-4542.

**ARTVENTURE**  
Current exhibit: John Korman's watercolors. Ventura Harbor Village. 1575 Spinnaker Dr., Suite 107. Saturday and Sunday, noon-5 p.m. 382-1569.

**BORDERS BOOKS CAFÉ GALLERY**  
Current exhibit: *Sunprints*, photographs by photographer and printmaker Lis J. Schwitters, through Aug. 26. Gallery hours: Friday and Saturday, 9 a.m.-Midnight; Sunday-Thursday, 9 a.m.-11 p.m. 125 West Thousand Oaks Blvd., Thousand Oaks. 497-8159.

**BUENAVENTURA ART GALLERY**  
Current exhibit: *Annual Merit Award Winners Show*, featuring the artwork of members of the Buena Ventura Art Association, through Aug. 25. 700 E. Santa Clara St., Ventura. Hours: Tuesday-Saturday, 11 a.m.-4 p.m. 647-6641.

**CAMARILLO ART CENTER**  
Current exhibit: *Ventura County Scenes*, an open juried show of two-dimensional art created at locations in Ventura County by the Tri-Counties Plein Aire Painters, through Aug. 25. Hours: Saturday and Sunday, 1-4 p.m. 3150 Ponderosa Dr., Camarillo. 445-7061.

**G. CHILDRESS GALLERY**  
Current exhibit: *Love, Luck, Vision, Mischief*, new work by Ojai artist Carmen Abelleira-White, through Sept. 29. 319 E. El Roblar, Ojai. Gallery hours: Monday-Saturday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. 640-1387.

**THE HEAD SHOP**  
Current exhibit: Palm mask display by Julia Garcia, through September. Hours: Tuesday-Sunday 10 a.m.-7 p.m. 586 E. Main St., Ventura. 652-1311.

**MICHAEL KELLEY SALON**  
Current exhibit: *Parallel Vision*, new modern art by Anna Parris and Lynn Marie Greaves. Tuesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, 8 a.m.-6 p.m.; Wednesday and Thursday, 10 a.m.-8 p.m. 67 Glenn Drive, Camarillo. 445-6448.

**NATALIE'S FINE THREADS**  
Upstairs Gallery current exhibit: Textile assemblages by Holly Charlton, and pastels and acrylics by Jane McKinney, through Aug. 25. Gallery hours: Tuesday-Saturday, 10:30 a.m.-5:30 a.m. 596 East Main St., Ventura. 643-8854.

**OAKS AT OJAI**  
Current exhibit: New works by San Francisco artist Bob Larkin, through Sept. 15. 122 E. Ojai Ave., Ojai. 646-5573, ext. 131.

**OJAI ART GARDEN**  
Open air art gallery featuring more than 30 artists. 236 W. Ojai Avenue, Ojai. Open every

Sunday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. 646-6118.

**OJAI CENTER FOR THE ARTS**  
Current exhibit: *Plein Aire Painters 3rd Annual Art Show*, through Aug. 29. Gallery hours: Tuesday-Sunday, noon-4 p.m. 113 Montgomery St., Ojai. 646-0117.

**PURPLE IRIS**  
Current exhibit: Watercolors by Stephanie Elise, Wendy Lefkowitz and Teresa Beyer. Monday-Saturday, 10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m.; Sunday, noon-4 p.m. 440 E. Main Street, Ventura. 641-3407.

**RIVE GAUCHE GALLERY**  
Current exhibit: Local artists, featuring oil paintings, mixed media, photography, mosaic and painted furniture. 339 W. El Roblar, Ojai. Hours: 10 a.m.-6 p.m.

**STUDIO CHANNEL ISLANDS**  
Current exhibit: An invitational featuring paintings by John Nava, Michael Dvorscak, Jack Reilly and photos by Donna Granata, John Nichols and Mike Moore. Through Aug. 25. University Drive, Cal State Channel Islands University Campus in Camarillo. Gallery hours are 12-3 p.m. Thursday through Saturday. 383-1368.

**ZOEY'S CAFÉ**  
Current exhibit: *Mosaic Vision*, showcasing the work of Simone Turner, through Oct. 7. 451 East Main St., Ventura. 652-1137. ■