

[to Article](#)

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John Chiara's camera obscura captures big picture

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When John Chiara photographs the [Golden Gate Bridge](#), he hauls his gear out to the Marin Headlands, sets up facing east, then climbs inside the camera and pulls the trapdoor closed behind him.



An hour later, he climbs back out with an image vast and deep enough to capture both bridges plus the skyline and the hills, set against a foreground of shimmering bay water. The picture cannot be reproduced, and neither can the camera, which fits in a black wood and foam box 8 feet wide and 5 feet tall. A lens the size of a magnum Champagne bottle is at the front, and a giant sheet of color photography paper is at the back, with room between for Chiara, who is 6 feet 2 and 220 pounds, to squeeze himself in like the Great Houdini.

The Big Camera, as he calls it, is a 21st century version of an 18th century camera obscura, and he drags it around like a 19th century portrait maker. Instead of a horse-drawn wagon, the Big Camera rides on a truck-drawn flatbed trailer. Once he's parked, the camera stays on wheels as Chiara sits in complete darkness manipulating light filters to get the shade and mood he wants.

"The way it functions is very much like a daguerreotype box camera," says Chiara, 40. "It's like shooting and doing the darkroom work all at the same time, rather than separating them."

To make each picture takes half a day, plus another half day to process it in a drum the size of a small concrete mixer. To see each picture takes an appointment at Pier 24 Photography, the enormous gallery beneath the Bay Bridge on the San Francisco waterfront.

"Here," the show that opened in late May and runs at the gallery until Dec. 16, features work by just about every important photographer who either lived in the Bay Area or shot it. Represented are Robert Frank, Robert Adams, Diane Arbus, Dorothea Lange, Garry Winogrand and Lee Friedlander, mostly from the vast collection of Andy Pilara, the gallery owner and photography benefactor. Among the 642 photos by 34 artists, the four photos by Chiara are the most mysterious.

They share a rectangular room in the gallery with Peter Stackpole's black-and-whites of the Bay Bridge under construction on one long wall and Richard Misrach's color exposures of the Golden

Gate Bridge on the other. Book-ending these are Chiara's work, each bridge represented by a diptych, 13 feet wide and 4 feet tall. Upon entering the room, they look so dark that you can't make much of them until you get close.

Once they come into focus, you see that both bridges are in both diptychs. The one that highlights the Golden Gate was taken from Point Bonita, as far west as he could get and still see the bridge. The one highlighting the Bay Bridge was taken from above the Caldecott Tunnel, which is as far east as he could get.

The images are printed directly on the positive. There is no negative. What he takes out of his camera is what is on the wall, with ragged edges still showing marks from the tape that secured the film to the box.

"When I first got the assignment, it was kind of daunting," Chiara says, "because the Golden Gate Bridge is one of the most photographed landmarks of all time."

But nobody could shoot it his way because no one else has his equipment.

"The more I build and create my own primitive technology," he says, "the more I understand what is possible from it."

The Big Camera is not the biggest camera Chiara has built. Twelve years ago when he moved into Developing Environments, the city's oldest artists' colony, in the Mission District, he made his loft into a camera he could live inside.

"I did macro-photography," he says. "The lens came 25 feet into the space, and images would project on the kitchen wall."

When working with a camera that size, the subject matter is limited. So he downsized the camera to something he could hitch up and pull. He leaves before daybreak, and once he is parked at Point Bonita, it takes two hours just to put the camera together. Then it takes an hour to get the lens focused where he wants it. Then the fog rolls in, postponing the whole affair.

"The process that goes into making the image is all part of the event," he says.

Another part of the event is police visitation. He's just finished setting up around 8 in the morning, when he hears a knock on the side of the Big Camera.

Throwing open the trapdoor, he falls out of the box at the feet of park police officers eager to hear his explanation.

Then he fishes around for an official permission note he has from the office of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

"Sometimes the note would work, and sometimes it wouldn't work," he says. "They were really paranoid about it."

Here: Through Dec. 16. Pier 24 Photography, S.F. Admission is free by online appointment. www.pier24.org. "Science of Sight: Alternative Photography" through July 16 at Haines Gallery, www.hainesgallery.com. "Views of San Francisco" through June 25 at Crown Point Press, www.crownpoint.com.

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