

Photos steeped in history by Thomas Mezzanotte

By Abby Luby, Correspondent

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Painting with liquid light best describes how artist [Thomas Mezzanotte](#) creates his unique photographs which will be exhibited at the [Haviland Street Gallery](#) in South Norwalk starting on Friday.

Mezzanotte reaches back in time using a photographic process steeped in history, from a time when recreating an image required an intuitive sense of how light interacts with chemicals.

The older, multi-step process used today contrasts the high-tech digital "point and shoot" with one that is more organic and random, leaving more to chance.

With paint brush in hand, Mezzanotte slathers light-sensitive emulsion on paper or fabric, overlays a negative and exposes it to light. Random drips and strokes result in amorphous images seemingly born from the mystical convergence of science and art.

"There's a certain abstract expression quality to my work, since I'm painting as well as photographing," says Mezzanotte, who makes a distinction between collage and his work. "These are 100 percent photography and 100 percent painting."



Some of his recent work is inspired by the great French sculptor [Auguste Rodin](#) (1840 -- 1917). "I was looking at Rodin's watercolors and sketches which were studies for his sculptures and I found them phenomenal. I tried to replicate the marks and lines and I am in love with what I got," Mezzanotte explains.

There is a particular, living presence in these ethereal photographs. A woman lurches forward from a rush of black ooze, stretching from oblivion to the reality of sharp facial features. In another, a soft-focus nude is sliding

vertically, fast losing gravity with a momentary glance into the camera.

Mezzanotte finds even more artistic expression using the camera obscura, the ancient pinhole, light-tight box, whose small hole catches an image formed by a beam of light. Mezzanotte builds his own pinhole cameras that range in size from a few feet to 12 feet. The rectangular photograph of a man's feet taken with a pinhole camera is grainy, soft-focus and slightly distorted.



"The camera obscura is the very underpinnings of photography," says Mezzanotte. "You could make it out of a shoe box."

Shoe boxes are what Mezzanotte uses with great success when he teaches elementary and high school students basic photography and where youngsters learn how to construct and shoot with pinhole cameras.

Mezzanotte says the classes fuel his own creativity.

"I've been in love with the process and history of photography, and it's a passion that has evolved over 40 years. Playing with an alternative (photographical) process is great when working with kids. They make weird mistakes and you can't help but be inspired and get ideas."



Mezzanotte is a Bridgeport native and lives in Trumbull. Has been educated at the [University of Bridgeport](#), where he became the director of the Carlson Gallery in the late 1980s. He regularly teaches in schools across Connecticut as a Connecticut Commission on the Arts master teaching artist. Mezzanotte's work has been featured in solo shows in New York City and Connecticut, as well as in group shows across the country. He has won numerous grants and awards, including two individual artist grants from the [Connecticut Commission on the Arts](#). His work was featured in the book "The Art of Enhanced Photography" by [Rockport Press](#), and has been published in [View Camera](#) magazine.

An opening reception with the artist is planned for Saturday from 3 to 5 pm. The film "Mezzanotte Obscura," about the artist, by filmmaker [Lori Petchers](#), will be screened March 14 at 3. Petchers, Mezzanotte

and curator [Laura Einstein](#) will be on hand to discuss the film. The show runs to April 9.

The Haviland Street Gallery is at 22 Haviland Street in South Norwalk. Gallery Hours: Friday, 6 to 9 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 1 to 5; Wednesday, 3 to 5; also by appointment. For more information, call 203-852-6727 or 203-524-2897.