

Cantor Arts Center

Solid Pictures: Photosculpture and the Making of Modern Likeness

First major exhibition to explore the overlooked technology that promised to revolutionize sculpture, invented by French artist François Willème in the mid-nineteenth century

September 17, 2026–January 18, 2027



François Willème, Unfinished photosculpture bust, ca. 1860. Oak and twine on base. Photo courtesy of the George Eastman Museum.

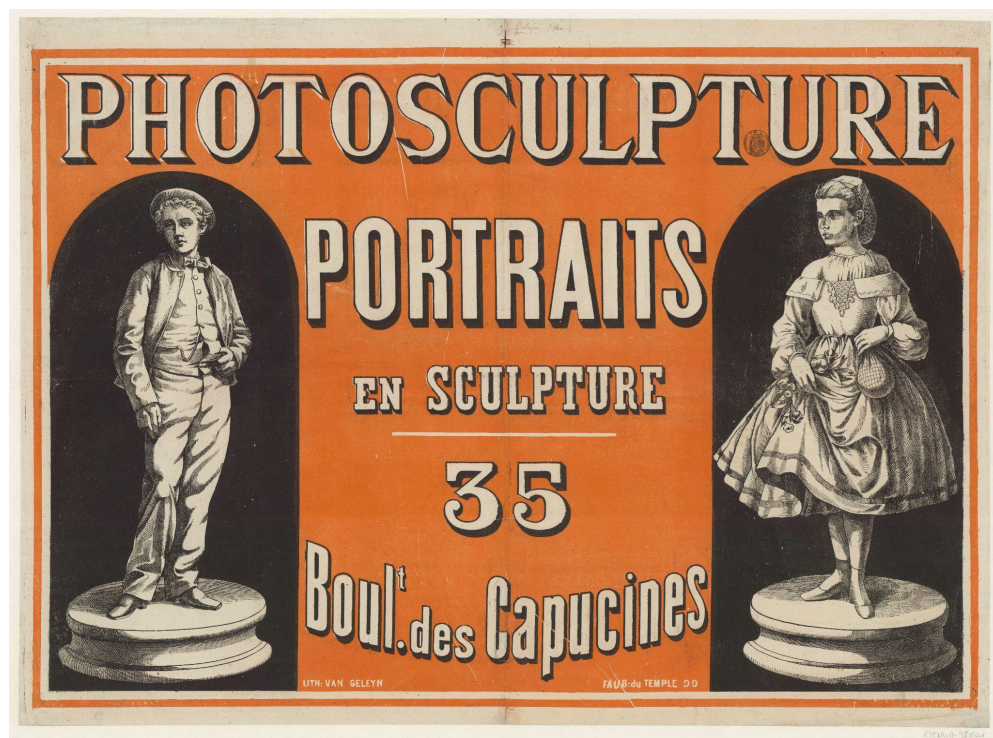
(July 23, 2026—STANFORD, CA) The **Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University** is pleased to present ***Solid Pictures: Photosculpture and the Making of Modern Likeness***. The major exhibition sheds light on a 3D modeling process called *photosculpture* developed by the young artist and inventor François Willème in Paris as early as 1859.

Curated by **Patrick R. Crowley**, Associate Curator of European Art, the exhibition brings together **twenty-six rare surviving photosculptures (including twelve from the Cantor's collection)** from both domestic and international lenders, including the George Eastman Museum in Rochester, NY; the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris; and the Patrimonio

Nacional of Spain. Supplementing the photosculptures are rare archival materials, including photographs, lantern slides, prints, and other historical ephemera such as advertisements and patent specifications.

Seizing on the novelty and runaway success of *cartes de visite* (collectible small format portrait photographs of ordinary people and celebrities alike) Willème sought to make domestically scaled portrait sculpture affordable for the burgeoning middle class of Second Empire France. Using an elaborate system of synchronized projection technologies and mechanical instruments, Willème and his assistants translated the photographic information of silhouette profiles into solid figures in a variety of media, promising them to his clients in as few as forty-eight hours at a fraction of the cost of traditional methods.

Willème filed his first patent for the process in 1860 and, a few years later, founded his business as a joint-stock company, with a sophisticated marketing campaign to match, buttressed by endorsements and capital investments from minor celebrities and heads of state. Although his work was centered in Paris, the exhibition tells an international story about Willème's novel process, including his prolific work for the court of Isabella II of Spain and the purchase of his patent in other countries like the United States, where the industrial applications of photosculpture were enthusiastically advertised in a post-Civil War landscape.



A. Van Geleyn, Photosculpture, portraits en sculpture, 35 Boul[var]t [sic] des Capucines, 1866. Lithograph, 30-5/16 × 42-1/8 in. (77 × 107 cm). Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département Estampes et Photographie. Photo: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Despite its promise to mechanize the more tedious work of sculptural modeling, photosculpture remained deeply dependent on skilled labor: artisans were needed to refine delicate surfaces

and carve intricate details such as hair and lace, completing the work by hand. Eventually, the business became deeply overleveraged. Commercially, the project ultimately failed to gain the traction needed to sustain the enterprise, and Willème was forced to tender his own resignation in 1867, with the company filing for bankruptcy soon afterwards.

Although Willème was ultimately unsuccessful in his venture, others astutely grasped the stakes of his achievement that would have profound consequences for the applications of scanning, machining, and printing that are so ubiquitous today. Big ideas about art, technology, politics, business history, intellectual property, and fashion converge in these modestly sized objects that have the power to change the way we look at the nineteenth century as much as the world we live in today. *Solid Pictures* brings together these important artifacts of the not-so-distant past to reveal the historical richness of our contemporary world. A key selection of contemporary works of art makes these connections explicit, including artists **Kelly Akashi, Ed Catmull and Fred Parke, Aria Dean, Matthew Angelo Harrison, Oliver Laric, Mark Leckey, and Charles Ray.**

A **lavishly-illustrated catalogue** accompanying the exhibition introduces four new essays by the curator as well as Emerson Bowyer (Chief Curator at the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth), Martina Droth (Paul Mellon Director of the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven), Megan R. Luke (University Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art History at the Universität Tübingen, Germany), and Anne McCauley (David H. McAlpin Professor of the History of Photography and Modern Art, Emeritus at Princeton University).



(L) Attributed to Huston & Kurtz, Glass negative of Ulysses S. Grant posing for a photosculpture, c. 1867. 3¼ × 5 in. Shirley Historical Society, Massachusetts. (R) François Willème (French, 1830–1905). Portrait of Matilde de Aguilera y Gamboa (detail), c. 1865. White bisque porcelain. 16 7/8 x 11 1/4 x 14 3/4 in. Robert and Pauline Sears Fund, Cantor Arts Center, Stanford University, 2021.94

ABOUT THE CANTOR ARTS CENTER

Serving the Stanford campus, the Bay Area community, and visitors from around the world, the Cantor Arts Center provides an outstanding cultural experience for visitors of all ages. Founded when the university opened in 1891, the historic museum was expanded and renamed in 1999 for lead donors Iris and B. Gerald Cantor. The Cantor's collection spans 5,000 years and includes more than 40,000 works of art from around the globe. The Cantor is an established resource for teaching and research on campus. Free admission, tours, lectures, and family activities make the Cantor one of the most visited university art museums in the country.

VISIT THE MUSEUM

Cantor Arts Center
328 Lomita Drive at Museum Way
Stanford, CA
T: 650-723-4177
<https://museum.stanford.edu/>

Monday: 11:00am – 6:00pm
Thursday: 11:00am – 8:00pm
Friday: 11:00am – 6:00pm
Saturday & Sunday: 10:00am – 5:00pm
FREE ADMISSION

PRESS CONTACT

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